The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society Newsletter

40 years of Adventurous Birding

No. 81 Spring 2006

The front cover shows the group photograph of the 40th anniversary dinner and the cake made and decorated for the occasion by Val Kersley
The President and Val Kerlsey cut the cake (top) and the President addresses the AGM

All drawings in this publication have been provided by Robbie Robinson unless attributed

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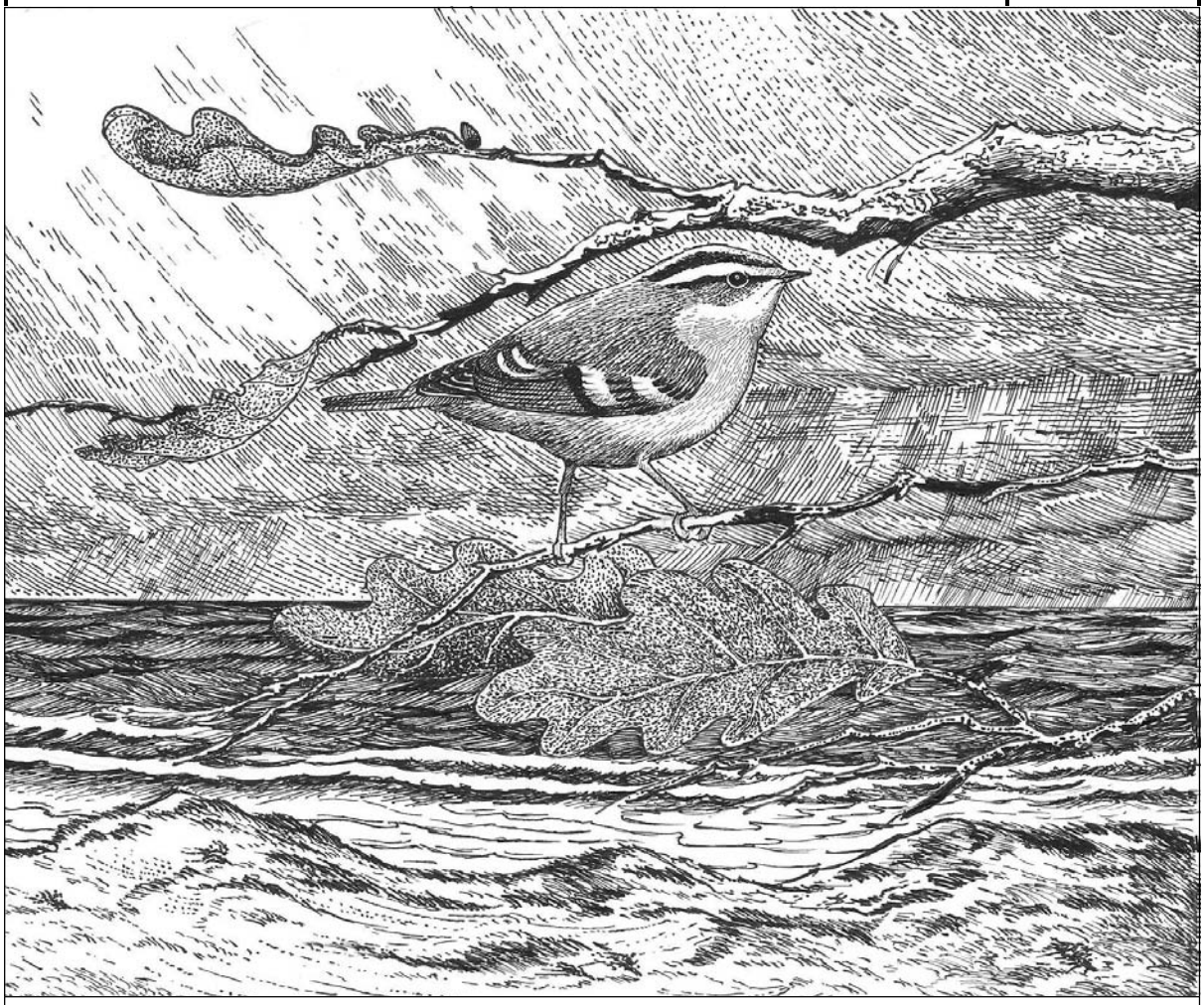

Pallas's Warbler *by Ken Baldridge* - Winner of the 2005 Artwork Competition

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Membership Secretary: Flt Lt M Hayes RAF
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Newsletter Editor: Sqn Ldr R Yates RAF (Retd)
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Ringing Co-ordinator: Mr C P Wearn

Notice Board

1. Have You Changed Your Name or Address?

If so, have you told the Membership Secretary?

A form to notify changes is enclosed with this Newsletter.

2. Goods for Sale.

An order form for RAFOS goods is enclosed with this Newsletter. Please note orders should go to John Wells

3. Use of Email for RAFOS Business.

To keep postage costs down, RAFOS mailings are limited to 3 per year: the 2 Newsletters and 'The Osprey'. Usually any other fliers accompany one of these mailings. However, sometimes matters arise that need to be notified sooner than can be done by waiting for the next regular mailing. One answer would be to use email .

The Membership Secretary holds e-mail addresses for many members, but not all are current. People move from one Internet Service Provider to another, so addresses can quickly be out of date.

If you have changed your e-mail address but not notified the Society, please advise Membership Secretary as soon as possible.

Similarly if you have given an e-mail address to the Membership Secretary but do not wish to receive e-mails about RAFOS activities, please let him know.

His e-mail address is **mikeva@hayes56.freeserve.co.uk**

From The Editor

This is my swan song as Editor of your Newsletter, a job I have thoroughly enjoyed over the last eight years or so. During that time, improvements in technology have made the actual production process much easier, and I hope you will agree that the reprographics Centre at Innsworth, who have been our printers for the last few years have enabled us to produce a quality publication.

All this would be not much use however without the efforts of those members who have ensured a supply of consistently interesting and on occasion instructive articles on the subject of birding. It is worth mentioning that I have been approached by the editor of the Journal of the Wildlife Sound Recording Society who wishes to reprint an article by Mike Blair from RAFOS Newsletter No.77 in their magazine. Mike is one of several regular contributors who have made it easier to fill these pages, but new blood is always welcome. On behalf of my successor, Dick Yates, can I ask you all to let him continue to receive such a variety of articles?

I have previously acknowledged the work done by Robbie Robinson in illustrating the Newsletter to such a high standard. This is particularly noteworthy, bearing in mind that Robbie tends to be given very short notice of the articles to be illustrated, yet manages to produce a succession of beautifully drawn images to grace the pages of this publication. I could not relinquish the role of Editor without giving him my heartfelt personal thanks for the way that he has improved the content of the Newsletter over many years.

My decision to relinquish the role of editor was brought about by the need to re-shuffle the committee following the resignation of our FALO for family reasons. The intention, as signalled in the minutes of the AGM, was that I should assume this role. This meant however that the post of Secretary would remain vacant with me acting as a stop-gap. However, the premature retirement from the RAF of our Chairman, Group Captain Jerry Knights, has meant that we needed to find a serving officer to take over this post. At the last Committee Meeting it was therefore decided, subject to ratification at the next AGM, that Wing Commander Clive Watson should become acting Chairman, I would continue to act as Secretary for a full term, and that Jerry Knights would take over as FALO, a post that he is particularly qualified to fill.

This can only be a stop-gap solution, and your committee could really do with some new members, particularly from among those currently serving in the RAF. Any offers?

The after effects of our 40th anniversary continue to be reflected in this edition with the text of the Chairman's speech at the anniversary dinner. This was a memorable evening, and the Officers' Mess at Brampton did us proud. It was the first time in many years that I found myself in the role of 'Mr Vice' proposing the loyal toast. The only problem was persuading members to leave the dining room after the meal; perhaps the conversations were too good and the seats too comfortable.

I have published a letter from Mrs June Stagg, the widow of Arthur, who was an enthusiastic member of RAFOS over many years and a regular contributor to the Newsletter. Arthur was awarded the prize for Best Written Article for the vignettes on birding over the years that appeared in the last Newsletter. He is sadly missed by his

family and friends, including those in RAFOS.

John Wells's article on WINTER DUCK gives an idea of the problems of organising a RAFOS Expedition in the current climate of lack of Service support for such activities.

On a personal note I have been away on another couple of birding trips with volunteers from Slimbridge. A trip to WWT at Arundel took place last October, where they now use electrically powered boats to travel through the reserve's waterways. Being almost silent, these boats give great views of the wild water birds as they glide along. It was also fun to watch a pair of Peregrines irritating a large flock of corvids over a neighbouring ridge. They appeared to be doing so out of sheer devilment. Whilst in the area we visited Pagham Harbour and the RSPB Reserve at Pulborough Brooks. Both new to me but great birding sites.

Last month another group from Slimbridge went North to the Solway Firth, staying in a farm house on the WWT Reserve at Caerlaverock. This meant we were woken every morning by the large flock of Whooper Swans on the lake outside our window. The conservatory of the house overlooks an area where the wardens put out peanuts under stones and smear honey on a fallen tree to attract badgers. It certainly works, and it was fascinating to see these mammals no more than 2 metres away. On the last night we were there, the badgers were joined by a Roebuck that also had a sweet tooth. At Caerlaverock it was heartening to see flocks of 30+ Yellowhammers, birds we never see at Slimbridge these days. The fields around the reserve were alive with large flocks of Barnacle Geese, which reminded me of our last trip to Islay. However, the birds that winter on the Solway are a different population from those on Islay. Those at Caerlaverock breed on Svalbard whilst the Islay-wintering birds do so on Greenland.

Obviously whilst we were there the opportunity was also taken to visit other birding sites along the Solway Firth, including the Nith Estuary, RSPB Mersehead, Southerness and Carsethorn. At Carsethorn we saw a sizeable flock of Greater Scaup. A Lesser Scaup was present at Caerlaverock during our stay.

Lunch on the way up and back was taken at the WWT Reserve at Leighton Moss. Here apart from good food at a reasonable price we saw Tree Sparrows on the feeder just outside the visitor centre.

In the autumn, I found a dead Greenfinch in the garden bearing a BTO ring. I sent the details off and was intrigued to learn that the bird had been ringed near Barrow-In-Furness in July 2004 as a juvenile. It had never occurred to me that small resident birds might migrate over 200 km; perhaps I am too naive for my own good.

One thing that I have found since I retired from paid employment is how easy it is to become over-committed to voluntary activities. I should have listened to that old sweat my Dad who always advised me never to volunteer! I only hope that I can continue to find the time to fill the post as your Secretary adequately. I look forward to meeting you at one of the Society's field meetings or hearing from you. I can be contacted by email at:

wgfrancis@btinternet.com.

Please continue to support Dick Yates as Editor as well as you have me. His contact details are given inside the back cover of this Newsletter

Good birding and all best wishes for the future

Bill Francis

Arthur Stagg

At the AGM in November 2005, the prize for Best Written Article was awarded posthumously to Arthur Stagg, to recognise the quality of the articles that he had contributed to the 40th Anniversary Newsletter. The award, a £20 book token, was sent to Arthur's widow, June, with a letter of sympathy from our Chairman. Her reply is reproduced below.

Dear Group Captain Knights

Thank you for your letter received yesterday 30th November 2005.

It was with great pleasure that I read how my late husband had been awarded this year's Best Written Article award for his vignettes of the past for the 40th Anniversary Newsletter.

I am delighted to receive the prize of a book token on his behalf and will most certainly give careful thought to a suitable purchase.

My Grandson Garrett in the United States is showing a keen interest in wildlife and in particular birds. As you can imagine this delighted Arthur and he had begun to encourage him in this field

I am sorry you personally were not aware of Arthur's passing. It happened so suddenly in Mallorca. With many Spanish legal matters to attend to at such a time the task of informing people of the tragic news was left to various members of the family.

I am very fortunate in that friends in RAFOS do keep in touch which is such a comfort. I value their friendship greatly.

Arthur is greatly missed by my-self and our family. I can truthfully say that my life has been made the richer for knowing such a man.

Thank you again for your kind words. Please also thank the RAFOS committee for awarding Arthur with this honour.

I send Christmas greetings to you all and my sincere good wishes for a happy and healthy 2006.

Yours sincerely

June Stagg

RAFOS 40TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER –19TH NOVEMBER 2005

TEXT OF THE CHAIRMAN'S SPEECH

President, Station Commander, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. I believe it is appropriate to say a few words to mark our 40th Anniversary. First, why are we celebrating 40 years and not waiting until 50? It is of course because none of us can stem the march of time and those of you who have been part of this family from the beginning should take every opportunity to get together and celebrate. Another 10 years seemed too long to wait.

I am reminded of the words of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Freer, who was our President when we celebrated 25 years in 1990. He said that he thought it was always natural that the RAF would form an ornithological society. That the members of a flying service would be captivated by the supreme exponents of the art of flight and would wish to study them. More perceptively, he also hoped that, in the next 25 years, sensible conservation policies would help preserve these wonders of nature for our children and grand children. Conservation has brought great successes in the 15 years that have passed since then, but there have also been failures. Particularly the pressures that have seen big declines in the numbers of long distance migrants and the populations of woodland and sea birds which are not even fully understood, let alone yet turned around. No doubt we could discuss it all night, and we probably will.

RAFOS was born when our founder Flight Sergeant Frank Walker set the wheels turning by calling his like-minded friends and contacts to a meeting, our first AGM as it transpired, on 23 October 1965. Lord Shackleton agreed to be our first Patron, Air Commodore Burns the first President and Squadron Leader Fred Hudson was the first Chairman (both the latter had RAF Regiment connections but I don't know what to make of that). Charles Bridgeman was the first Recorder (he was already retired from the Service, but went on to undertake early Bird Control trials for the RAF). Flight Lieutenant David Wright designed our logos, and Wing Commander John French was the first Treasurer (famous for the birdstrike reports that he translated from Russian Publications). From that initial beginning, interest rapidly grew and sub-branches were formed in several locations overseas. Perhaps the most successful and also one of the shortest lived was in Singapore, and this began on 11 August 1967. They were deeply into bird ringing, achieving a total of nearly 9000 ringed of 240 species during their 29-month existence (and that included 23 new species that they added to the Singapore list).

All this was brought home to me recently when Mike Hayes was trying to track down some of our older and presumed "Lost" members. He received charming letters of stories from the past and many good wishes for the future from those too old and frail to take part in active birding any more. It made me realise that this Society is just like a family, with each generation succeeding the one before.

Nevertheless, as important as it is that we keep faith with our history, it is equally important that we focus on the future. Throughout these 40 years, RAFOS has always preferred to contribute to the scientific knowledge from which sound conservation policies emanate rather than spend our time organising self-indulgent ornith-holidays. We must have goals and projects that are meaningful. Because of the undeniable fact that we are an ageing population and have few new members joining the Society it is even more important

that we provide a recognisable contribution to science.

Recently, I attended a Logistics Conference whose keynote speaker was Air Chief Marshal Sir Brian Burridge, Commander in Chief Strike Command who was once my station commander and for whom I have huge respect. Brian Burridge reminded the audience that this country lacks any enemy, excluding terrorist threats, and thus everything we are involved with in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan is optional. Such out of area operations do not contribute directly to national defence and, in order to secure our future when the MOD is in direct competition for funds with all the other departments of government, our watchword should be to remain relevant.

It is the same for RAFOS. Only through quality science will we remain relevant. And we must do so whilst accepting that our membership comprises largely retired servicemen. It is actually a great strength that these are the people with the time and energy to undertake the work. We must resist dressing our studies up as pseudo-military expeditions and proceed down the route of self-supported and self-funded field study. A significant element of this is commercial sponsorship and we are most grateful to BT, to Air BP, to the Maersk shipping line and recently IFS Defence (Industrial & Financial Systems) for their support.

Returning to our history, you will have seen our fantastic 80th Newsletter that did such a wonderful job of pulling together those threads from the early days. It is amazing how pivotal were the roles of Frank Walker and Eddie Shackleton. I not yet met the elusive Frank Walker, a visionary seemingly destined to wander the planet since leaving the Service and currently resident somewhere between Portugal and British Columbia. But at least I know what he looks like from the picture of the now 80-something year old in the most recent Newsletter. Did you see how, once a Warrant Officer always a Warrant Officer; he hasn't forgotten how to stand to attention for a photo call. And if anyone needed proof of Frank Walker as a visionary then you need look no further than his article in our very first Newsletter. There he was already thinking beyond his newly-formed RAFOS to suggest that the successes of the ornithologists in places like the island of Gan, where Army and RAF servicemen went out to watch birds together before any society was formed, might provide a sign post for the future. That perhaps RAFOS should merge with the other societies to form a joint services bird watching society. Even now, 40 years later, this is too much for you the membership to stomach.

Eddie Shackleton I knew personally and had the pleasure of travelling with him as his aide in a Hercules to the High Arctic where we stayed at the US Base at Thule in Greenland. And from that aircraft the next day he once again saw Mount Oxford on Ellesmere Island that he had named and first climbed as a young student when on a sea ice sledging journey from the ship where he over wintered in Arctic waters in 1934. And I watched him cry with emotion because he never thought he would see it again as an old man. He was gentle and sensitive, but a born leader, like his father. Eddie Shackleton's support of RAFOS was passionate and unswerving. And this was demonstrated when, on our behalf, he clashed with both the MOD and the British Sovereign Base Authorities in Cyprus over the decision in 1985 to allow the building of a sewage plant on the northern shore of the Akrotiri Salt Lake; a plant that has never been built.

The earliest version I can find of our constitution dates from May 1989 when Sir Peter Harding was our President. In those days our aims were broadly the same as today with the addition of "to assist in the prevention of bird strikes on RAF airfields" a role that later became the sole purview of paid professionals. But now we have recently negotiating the help of the RAF

Tactical Imagery Wing to assist the British Trust for Ornithology and the Central Science Laboratory in their study of the populations of waders that winter in the middle of The Wash and Morecambe Bay. These are too distant for telescope study. That imagery, whilst contributing to one of the Government's key environmental indicators, the health of our wild bird population, might also have relevance once again to the bird strike avoidance programme of work, and a Tornado from RAF Marham flew that sortie at low tide on Thursday last week. We wait to find out how good the pictures are, but it gave me the feeling that we have now come full circle from where we began all those years ago.

It was also Peter Harding who first wrote to encourage all of us to recruit new members quote "not only for their enjoyment but for the good of the environment and our Service". And so I was proud of the enthusiastic way that the TIW at Marham agreed to fly the task when they are so busy with real operations.

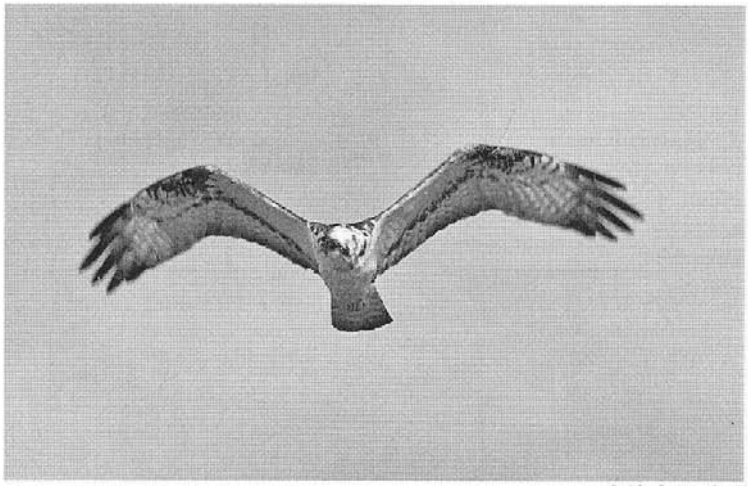
I also found a tri-fold flier from the days when Warrant Officer Chris Sparks was Secretary and Sqn Ldr Brian Withers the Membership Secretary. Here I noted that, in those days, there was the opportunity for members to enjoy, and I quote "convivial company at an annual gathering in the London area to review the work of the Society, to hear how that year's expeditions fared, and to enjoy a buffet supper" – so no change there then!

Before I sit down, I should like to thank BT again for their kind sponsorship of this evening's dinner and also to thank the Station Commander for his permission to hold both this dinner and our AGM in the wonderful surroundings here at Brampton. Likewise, the Mess Manager, Tony Middlemiss and our chef, Hayden Miles, for the excellent meal and service this evening. Thanks also to our President and our guests for their continued support.

And finally, to all of you for just being RAFOS. From those of you in the front line who unswervingly give of your time and energies to run the committee appointments and provide scientific advice. And those who provide written or artistic contributions to our publications. And those who regularly organise, attend or support our field activities, to those who just want to meet old friends. **You are the real RAFOS and I'd like you to be upstanding and join me in a toast…… to the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society**.

Editor's Note: BT have agreed to sponsor the Society to cover the cost to RAFOS of production of *The Osprey*.

Rutland Osprey and Wildlife Cruises 2006



©Chris Lythall

Following a very successful first season of cruises, we are offering the unique opportunity to watch Ospreys and other reservoir wildlife from aboard the Rutland Belle in 2006.

Cruises start with an introductory talk at the Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre at 3.45pm and the Rutland Belle departs from Whitwell Harbour at 5.15pm.

Cruises cost £12.50 per person and will take place on:
Sat 29th April,
Wed 10th May, Wed 17th May, Wed 31st May,
Sat 10th June, Wed 21st June,
Sat 1st July, Wed 12th July, Sat 22nd July,
Wed 2nd August, Fri 18th August, Sat 19th August, Sat 26th August.

For more information or to book, please speak to a member of the Osprey Project team at the Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre
tel: (01572) 770651, e-mail: osprey@rutlandwater.org.uk
Places are limited so please book early to avoid disappointment!

GAVIA IMMER – SEEK THE DIVERS

RAFOS – "WINTER DUCK 4 (2005)" - NW SCOTLAND

By John N Wells

After a four year lay-off, the Society was asked by the BTO, through Martin Godfrey at the BTO Wetlands Unit, to revisit the NW coast line of Scotland during Feb 05. The aim was to undertake WeBS survey work on the sites that we had previously recorded in 98/99, 99/00, and 00/01. 'WINTER DUCK' had always been popular with a small band of willing and eccentric people who can take harsh, wet and cold weather conditions during the depths of winter in remote NW Scotland. To be honest, once you are up there the weather becomes secondary to the birds and the survey. You just get used to it - well it is only for a week, and you keep telling yourself.

The idea of running another visit had an appeal now I was back on committee, I also felt I had some spare capacity to lead it this time, as Martin (Godfrey) and Jim (Bryden) had both left the Service since the last visit in the winter of 00/01, and without a serviceman as lead, it would take some sorting! I knew I would be in for a busy time organising it, but little was I to realise how 4 years of neglect would cause such a massive amount of work rebuilding bridges as time erodes the contacts, changes in RAF Adventurous Training (AT) policy, sponsorship needs, Health and Safety regulations etc – these were all to come into play to keep me fully occupied 7 days a week between Sep 04 to Feb 05. Early February was when we finally got on the road. The dates were set at 4-12 Feb and we were off and running on "WINTER DUCK 4" (2005).

The usual willing band of RAFOS individuals were to come out to play, namely Jim Bryden, Martin Wightman and Gerry Bilbao - all stalwarts from the 3 previous visits. These guys simply know their stuff and the appeal of the survey and teamwork fits in well with what we are good at. Other team members included both Kevin Cairns and myself attending on our third trips and we were joined by Stan Christophers ('ex County Recorder' of Cornwall Bird Reports and Chough-key player). Stan, who is a retired policeman from Cornwall was on his second trip, alongside the new 'teamies': Gp Capt Jerry Knights (the Chairman) on his first ever RAFOS outing, together with the new FALO Sqn Ldr Ian Drake (from DLO Endsleigh), and Miss Maggie Sheddan from Scottish Seabirds, who is new to RAFOS and had made contact through Martin Godfrey whilst up at Cape Wrath with AOS. Mr Steve Heather is a long time supporter of CORNISH CHOUGH and Scottish survey work under Tony Marter. Also with us was Terry Carne again a Chough 'activist'. Terry is a serving officer in the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary and release from work was critical as he had always wanted to come north to see the birds he had been forced to listen about from all the others (mostly Stan) whilst doing the rounds of local birding in Cornwall. From Lossie came Tom Dewick, who runs his own Bird Control Company - Airfield Wildlife Management. Therefore, that's the team introduced – now comes the article.

Background

'WINTER DUCK' has always prided itself on the area we can cover with two or three teams in the week. We felt in 00/01 that we had achieved such a lot, but over that particular week we had been affected by bad weather north of Ullapool. The new areas at the northern tip of the mainland had helped offset this disappointment. By adding the third team and basing them near Cape Wrath

at Faraid Head range hut was a good move in survey terms, and we wanted to keep a large team as financially viable this time. If we could get 15 interested surveyors then we could accommodate them all at RNE Aultbea before splitting the coverage up into 3 areas. The teams covering the smaller areas would return later in the week, to the main base at Aultbea and mop up any survey areas needing additional work. So this was the plan. Further into the planning stage Jim had come up with a revised plan. Set up a middle overnight base north of Ullapool, to keep the driving down to a minimum, save fuel, save effort and tiredness on the driving, especially with potential snow and frost and icy roads.

Team 3 would cover the northern sea lochs as done in 00/01 and maybe add a few extra if time, weather and vehicles permitted. As it transpired Martin Godfrey had to cancel due to work commitments, thus we needed Ian to lead this team with the help of Maggie. She had worked the Cape Wrath area on numerous occasions in her line of work for Scottish Seabirds, (she collects dead birds wrecked on the shore-line for further investigative work). Maggie knew John Ure the warden at Faraid Head so we could book the accommodation there without any hassles, a call to Cdr Bill Jones the RN base commander finalised the arrangements and set up Team 3's base.

Team 2 would cover Ullapool to Kinlochbervie and Team 1 would stay put at Aultbea and survey the lower third; Loch Broom to Loch Ewe. This would only then leave the huge expanse of Loch Carron to include Loch Torridon – (get the maps out we are talking a lot of ground to cover here). How we achieved this would be to ask Team 3 to do Loch Broom on their way back from Cape Wrath, free up Team 1 to go south with the others now spare from team 2's completed coverage, split the vehicles up as best able to take the high passes at Applecross up The Pass of the Cattle to Loch Kishorn and Carron the other side. We in fact did it – clockwise and the other way round – but we did it! Albeit in two days.

So there we have it; 4 main operating areas, 3 lots of accommodation and Teams 2 and 3 returning back to RNE Aultbea once they have done as much as possible on their respective areas. Not a bad plan even if I say so!

Now let's go back a few months; RAFOS had agreed £300 towards the survey, but we needed cash badly – we had never attempted to pay our own way in full before! We had always attracted AT status; with it, (AT), comes vehicles and agency cards for fuel, also you get your rations paid for through the RAF as you are effectively on duty.

Now if you haven't noticed and you have been on another planet or somewhere else lately, the forces are gradually, no let's say quickly becoming eroded into a smaller 'joint' service, an all encompassing force with very tight budgets and financial constraints that are cutting deep into how we as a bird watching society can operate. After the concerted effort to obtain AT status for our activity, and failing by a long chalk, it was now obvious that bird watching (albeit in a cold wet and a harsh environment) counted for NOTHING! The RAF PEd people do not want anything to do with us. Rightly or wrongly we now have to operate as a self-funding, self-supporting agency – for want of a better descriptor. Our exploits cannot be paid for from the public purse anymore – this was a big shock to the system and a BIG hurdle for 'Duck 4' to overcome. How to tackle this was to tax both Jerry and I considerably. We would have to fall back onto the Society, but that comes later.

Vehicles

With no MT and fuel we thought the best way was to learn the lessons from Cornish Chough and hire the Units PSI van ASAP, this I did from Wyton and lo and behold a trump card came to the top of the pack! Wyton/Brampton Stn Cdr; Gp Capt Nigel

Beet had just taken ownership (on behalf of the PSI) the keys to a new Ford Transit 12 seater minibus. It only had 1,400 miles on the clock. This little beauty would come on a half price offer: £255 for the week – a bargain. Now for a second vehicle!! This is where we drew a blank; Ian tried Ensleigh through the MT at Corsham – no joy. We tried the web and local Budget hire firms etc and they were going to be in the region of £800 plus indemnity insurance, so what now? Ian looked at Land Rover Discovery's - Jim and I looked at the web again. We could do it but it was going to take some extra cash from somewhere!! Just to hire a minibus was going to cost us £700 or in the region thereof. Not including the fuel to put in it I may well add.

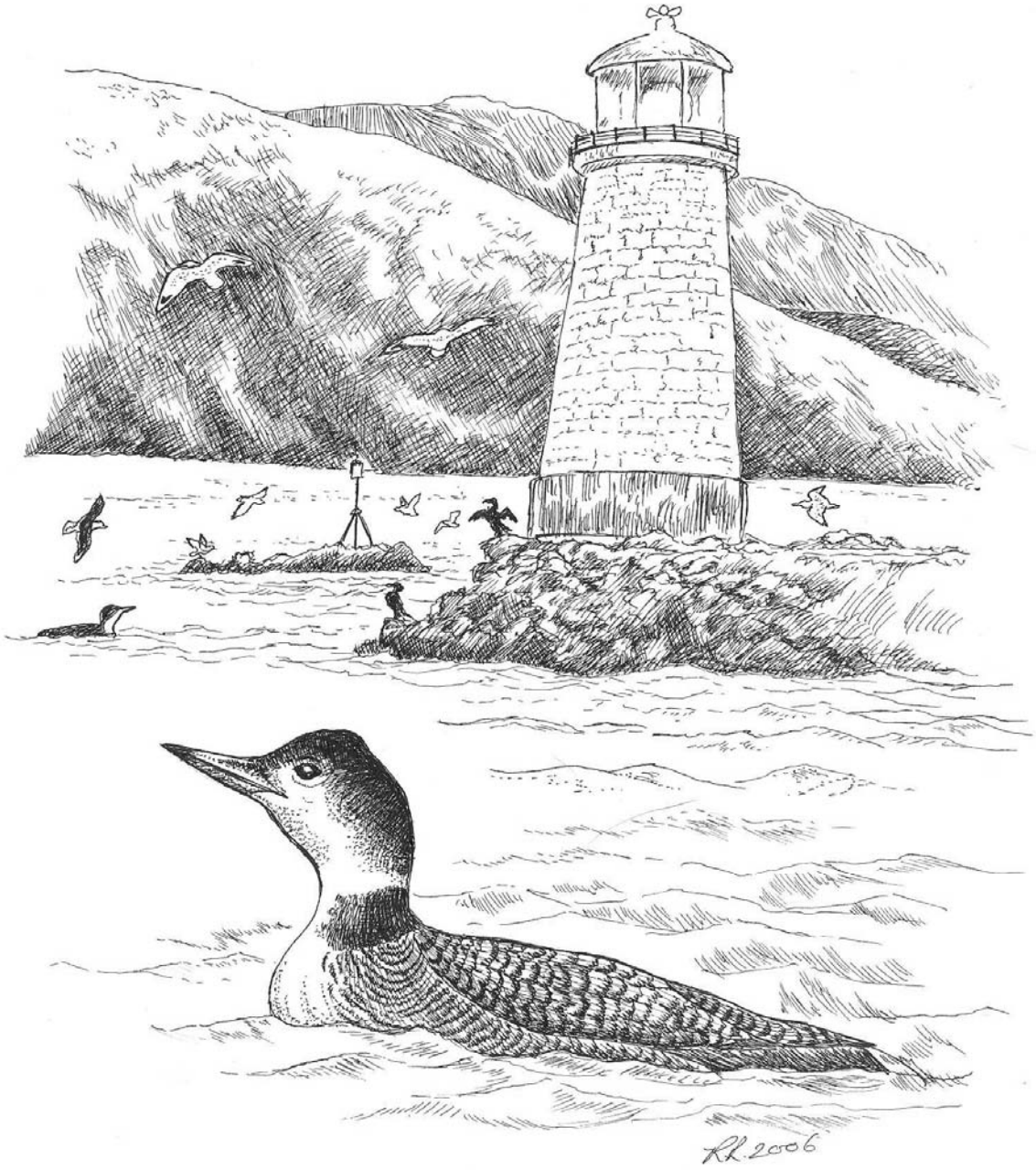
Help - 'Come in BP'

At the Committee meeting in Oct 04 the Treasurer – Wg Cdr Clive Watson gave me a contact for BP – Mr Mark Kennedy. BP International had been approached by RAFOS for OzEx04, and they had supported us to the tune of £4,000 no less! This time we needed their help and we needed to move fast if we were to get this venture on the road. So I wrote a letter explaining the work we had planned and gave it a week, a month, 2 months and then sweated – I had heard nothing! Call them and see - we had nothing to lose. Yep, Mark would support us, excellent or what! A £500 cheque was to follow he explained, just send him the invoice he needed – brilliant. Now what - we still had no van, but we had money to pay towards it.

Best to speak to units I thought – get another PSI Van from somewhere, a good time of year February, very quiet you would think - well you would be wrong. You bet your life it wasn't quiet, they were all booked out to go to the continent skiing!! Wittering's Minibus was booked, and every where else was either off the road or booked, or it was too far to go and get it to collect it for our trip. A mate in the office suggested Cottesmore. We contacted Cottesmore, but it was PSI policy that the van was not to be hired to personnel off unit. So a call to WO MT Flt, the vehicle controller smoothed the way. Still it was a bit pricy - £550 for 11 days hire. Let's speak to the OC PSI see if we can get it cheaper, so we spoke to the Sqn Ldr, and no way was the reply! It had operated at a loss last year! Full price or not at all he explained. Nice. How do we get it? How do we pick up Martin, Stan, Terry, Ian and Gerry in the South West – all logistic questions to sort? I booked the van and we scratched our heads. Still the costs were mounting. Best we ask Jerry for ideas! This is where the Chairman came to the rescue – Lets ask Central Funds via the Station Commander for help, good idea we all thought, but time was marching on, it was now 3 weeks before Christmas, the AGM had long gone and we would need another £900 minimum!!

Some long evenings after work and some long distance editing and correcting of the letter to Service Funds was done by e-mail, mobile phone, whilst the Boss was down at Andover, then onward by fax to a hotel somewhere in the Cotswolds. Between us both, we put in some extra work to make a case for RAFOS to draw some funds from Trenchard Memorial Funds or the Sports Lottery for the field study. We had had a case drafted and in the post by 1st Dec. Sleep easy they would give us the money – "Not on your Nelly". OC Accounts at RAF Brampton phoned me back – our letter was in the wrong format, OK, change the content – write it iaw the JSP or it would go nowhere.

So, I spent the next couple of days whizzing between my place of work and Jerry's topping and tailing the content. Between us we had it back to the SHQ at Brampton and signed by the Stn Cdr on the 9th Dec. Thereafter, we could sit back and enjoy Christmas – well maybe. It was around that time that WO1 Steve Micklethwaite (the controller of the base at RNE Aultbea) emailed to say that the toilet block and



Great Northern Diver

showers at Aultbea had been condemned under a Health and Safety order and we were unable use them. Now we had two dilemmas – no Main Base and no second van! This quandary only lasted a short while, Steve phoned me back inside the week to say they had 4 Caravans we could hire at the base. These were under control of the Central Amenities Fund (CAF) at HMS NEPTUNE and had been installed since our last visit to Mellon Charles (the village RNE Aultbea was located). So he promised me a fact sheet and we were all back on.

The team also had a couple of other problems to overcome – we still had no overnight accommodation booked for the evening of our first day's drive from England and we definitely needed the cash from Central Funds for food and fuel. Added to that Jim had still to book accommodation for Team 2! Christmas was looming and we were all holding our nerve that it would fall into place. The fact sheet arrived, the caravans sounded ok, clean and cosy – well maybe – we shall see. The old Nissen huts we had used on the three earlier trips were fine-warm, dry and the gas heaters were excellent at drying wet overcoats and leggings out from a day in the field. Let's hope the caravans could be likewise.

Into the New Year then – I asked The Boss to speak to HQ PTC, perhaps he could lever a decision our way? The answer he got was not as we expected: - because we only had 4 servicemen (2 others had withdrawn by this stage) we were only entitled to Trenchard Memorial Fund (TMF) - funding and this was to be a maximum of 9% of the total of the funds we were likely to spend! So from asking for £900 we were to expect £70.20 no more and no less…….Oh dear. What now then?

Nice Treasurer!

Time to speak nicely to the Committee, I sounded out Wg Cdr Clive Watson again (the Treasurer), he hinted we needed to make a good case to stand any chance. There was a Committee meeting due early in the New Year - on the 20th Jan and a spreadsheet was required to outline the need for extra funding from the Society's coffers. We knew the funds were there, but we also knew we were in new territory by self-funding a comprehensive week's work, with previously uncharted territory on estimates on fuels costs and food was to be by self catering on all of the meals. The need was high so we pushed on and asked for the minimum we felt we needed - £700.

The Committee met at Wyton and Jerry, as Chairman left the reins to me to state the case on behalf of 'Duck 4'. As the Chairman and rightly so, he was now 'off the case' so to speak – well at least for the discussion in Committee. I was on my own – as the leader. It was up to me to make the case otherwise it was cancel the trip or go with a single vehicle and smaller team or pay a good deal more on our personal contributions, but that would almost certainly bring withdrawals from the team. This option had been discussed and we felt we would all pay a little more, but when all said and done this was no jolly jaunt and paying too much under fairly harsh accommodation was not ideal. Reducing team strength would have affected survey coverage-a tricky call, but money was vital now. The team were briefed about my request. As it stood we had all paid £50 as a personal contribution (PC). I have never been so tense at a Committee meeting ever – it was like now or bust!

The Treasurer and the others all listened to the case that I put to them. With lots of warm smiles all around the room I could see I was amongst friends – why the worry – the Committee had agreed my funding!! Fantastic - another £580 was offered and the Committee stated that the PCs would have to be increased a further £10 to £60 to offset the extra £120. We had done it – we were on – at a considerable cost to the Society though (£880). We were in new ground now - my estimates on fuel, food and accommodation

were to be vital if we were to stay inside budget set at £2,200.20. I sent out the news via my regular News Update to the team via email. Maggie was sent her letter via surface mail. The extra PC would be collected as cash and used for shopping and groceries once in the field.

A-La-Carte

Stevie Heather had been around my house to sort the bank account signatories and consent form in November and he had offered to be the trip Chef. We took him up on his offer and at the beginning of January we compiled a menu, and he went to do all the shopping locally to ensure we had everything. I arranged the fresh vegetables from the local farm shop and he built up the dry rations as he went about his normal shopping, before the one last big shop for all the essentials. A phone call one evening from Steve – went along the lines of "Can you get me 3 or 4 cool boxes"? He had come up with a complete brainwave; as there were 3 teams at dispersed sites, and the fact we got there late on the Saturday, why not pre-cook 4 main courses, freeze the main meals and take them up in the cool boxes – brilliant!!

We sorted a menu and Steve did all the hard work; beef stew, Spaghetti Bolognese, beef curry, and a filled pasta dish were prepared in his kitchen for the team. He then segregated each meal into 2 or 3 airtight containers. Having ready cooked meals; a-la-carte was considerably easier once up there - well it was for us as evening preparation time was cut considerably. Steve had already done all the hard work, like compo rations but tastier and homely. What more could you ask for? And jolly nice they all were too - more on the food later.

Accommodation

Jim was on the case in respect of the Team 2's accommodation booking. He had found a nice little private B&B that was centrally located in his teams' survey area at Elphin. The proprietor would take 4 people for 2 nights, self catering for £100 – a bargain. Jim ran it by me, before booking and gradually the plan was coming together. All we needed now was some accommodation for the trip north's overnight stop from England. On past 'Duck' encounters, we had done Travel lodges and B&B, but this came at a cost, so Jim researched hostels in the Newtonmore, Kingussie and Aviemore area. One nice lady suggested we try Pine Cottage as she had heard that military people stayed there overnight whilst on the hills, so why had we not heard about it? So after a few probing calls to RAF Kinloss Mountain Rescue team we had the contact for Pine Cottage at CAF HMS NEPTUNE-Mr Terry Heaney. It was owned by the same people that did the caravans at RNE Aultbea! Spooky or what! This cottage had passed into the hands of the Navy [and/or military] for their use many moons ago and was just what we were after; cheap accommodation where we could all set up for the night, go for a drink of an evening and not upset anyone as we returned. Also it would be manageable as all (ten of us) rose early the next day. At £6 per head for the night it was a bargain! So that was booked, the paperwork duly arrived and completed and the smile was returning to my little face.

Next we got Jerry as the third signatory on the Bank account. Got the cheque book through and started paying the bills. We held off with Cottesmore PSI and drove a hard bargain before admitting defeat. £550 was such a lot to pay for a weeks hire we felt, but gone were the days of doing these things on a shoestring! We paid Neptune for the caravans at £200, not bad we felt but maybe we were to regret this decision later!

The fuel issue would be tense; we needed to drive one wagon to Martin Wightman's at Yate near Bristol to collect Martin and the SW contingent before we could think about the next leg north.

'Start - Ex'

I took Thursday 3rd as leave, to allow time to travel to Yate and Martin and Hilary offered Stan, Terry and I a bed for the night for an early start on the 4th. On the drive across to Marty's I called in at Slimbridge for an hour at the new centre, but missed Bill Francis as it was his day off, which was a pity. I then went on to Martins for 5, to meet up with them after work. After a super meal, the two Cornish lads arrived and unpacked. We had a great evening at Marty and Hilary's before it was time for some rest before the field study trip in earnest.

Up bright and early, Stan said he had heard a **Goliath Nightjar** overnight – churring away from the guest room it. It could only have been me! We were on the road by 07.15 heading for the collection RV of Ian and Gerry from the Officers Mess car park at Innsworth. Stan and Terry followed closely behind as Stan had decided to leave his daughter's car on base, safe for the week. The two lads were there waiting for us with kit piled high. The lads did the intro's and off we set, keeping one ear on the radio reports, as a pile up on the M6 was to affect us, Marty and I decided to best divert on the M54 up the A41 away from the M6 at J14 Stafford, where a tanker had overturned.

It cost us about an hour or so, but at least we kept moving as we joined the M6 at Newcastle-under-Lyme & Stoke. Contact with the other team was made and Jerry and Steve were well on track up the east side of the country. In fact they were well ahead of schedule and were likely to have to phone ahead to get Jim and Maggie earlier to their respective RV points.

Jim made the RV about ¾ hr early and the lads pulled over for a break and a green tea for Jerry. Maggie got an early call as she was still packing and doing some housework, which quickly got abandoned as she headed for the bus. Her ticket was purchased to meet up with the team near the A1.

Newtonmore Bound

We were passing Carlisle, making good speed as the other team were now well inside Scotland. They were most likely to make Newtonmore ahead of us so having the 'key chit' copied in both wagons paid off. We were south of Perth as the guys were pulling into the village of Newtonmore a good hour ahead of our team. The Wyton wagon was speedy and very comfortable to drive by all accounts. The keys were duly collected from 'the diner' after a little confusion (the Neptune details stated collection from a Hotel in town) and the team were all set. When we arrived the others had already unpacked sleeping bags, rolled out kit, and were busy chatting away in the front lounge as our wagon got to the cottage. They were chomping at the bit for a meal and a drink. It was all coming together – introductions were hastily made as our overnight wash kit and personal belongings were strewn from the back of the van and into the dormitories. The place was dated and basic, but perfectly adequate for RAFOS for the night.

Off to the pub then as soon as we were all sorted. We came across a hotel that had just that day opened for meals – the proprietor couldn't believe his luck as a party of 10 filed into the bar! Sky TV had the 1-day cricket match on, between South Africa and England, so as well as trying to explain the laws of the game to the locals who were completely perplexed by the game, we managed to fit in eating our meal. Alongside the meal we washed it down with the familiar taste of a pint of 80 Shillings – we were well on our way. It was going to be a good trip, you could just sense it.

Goliath Nightjar

Up bright and early there was a rumour or two about that fabled breed of Nightjar was heard overnight in Dormitory No 4 – no one was owning up to it – funny old thing that. Having the snorers in one room has to be the future, I think. The team wanted an early

Waxwing

kick off, so we were up at 06.00, downstairs into the cramped washing facilities slipping and sliding in the shower room on the wet red tiled floor. Martin and I made a grab for the sinks as the two of us nearly did ourselves serious injury as we fought for our balance slipping and sliding around. Come Dancing has nothing on the pirouettes seen by this team! Where's Natasha Kaplinsky when you want her! From the shower cubicle could be heard the be-devilled squeals of horror. Terry had just turned on the taps and was making the loudest screams as the cold water kicked-in. Q. Was he the biggest, bravest and toughest Detective Sergeant (DS) Cornwall Police could offer us this week?

All the chores were sorted, floors mopped lounge tidied and down the diner by 07.00 opening time for breakfast. We were in the car park before the lights were even switched on and the doors opened. The two young foreign girls were taken somewhat by surprise as we all traipsed in, a weird band of 9 guys and a blonde, all wanting an assortment of breakfasts before they could even catch breath. The toasts and butters got mixed up with Gerry's order supposedly going to Jim, Jim offering it across to Gerry then Gerry's turning up as an extra plate? Confusion reigned! Nothing new on a RAFOS trip then! Jerry stepped in to chat to the waitresses practising his best Polish to the two lassies. The girls were stunned! Someone talking their own tongue in deepest Scotland was good to see. Jerry jumped at the chance to practice his foreign language technique for a while. The orders were paid for, and we were all extremely satisfied with our meals. The two lassies were appreciative of his efforts as farewells were exchanged.

Not every day you get to practice your Polish skills is it? Into the vans we dived as rain was falling sharply. The planning for Capercaillie was agreed in the car park and shouted between the wagons. Grantown-on-Spey was the RV, for a chance of 'Caper'.

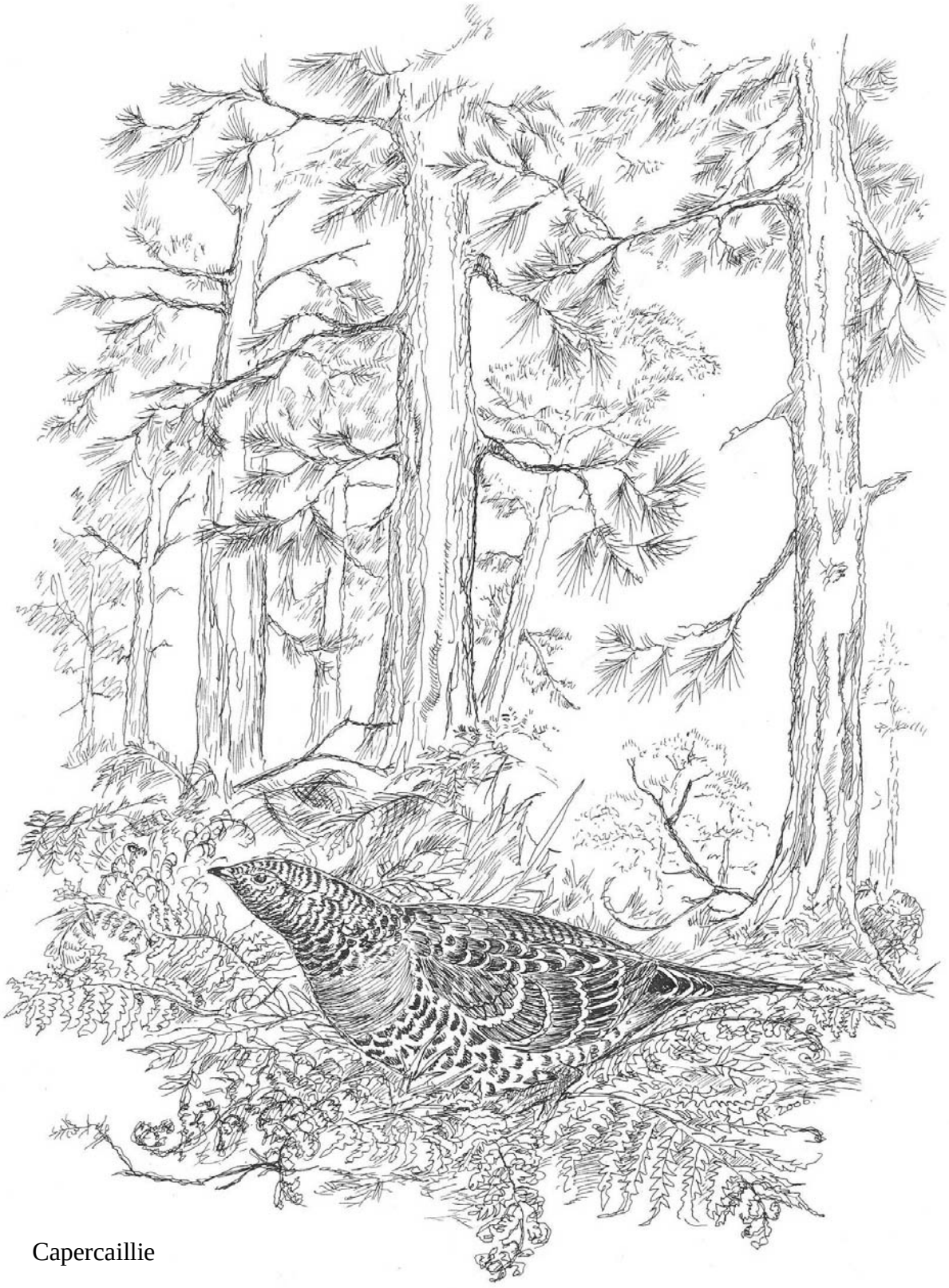
On the drive up to the Grantown-on-Spey Golf Course we pulled over sharply, from the front seat of the front van I had located a **Waxwing** feeding up on a cotoneaster right in front of the vehicle, the guys behind got the message as we all got super views of it before it took off into the adjacent gardens. At the forest edge the team then set about our first real look for **Capercaillie, Crested Tit** and any other pine forest species we could lay our eyes on! Things started well with **Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Blue** and **Great Tit** calling when we got out of the vehicles and put our wet weather gear on. Some 400 meters into the woods we had our first encounter of **Common Crossbills**. 4 birds alighted high up in the Scot's Pine above us. 3 were showing and calling well and the 4th (a bright male) had a distinctly different call, one which Stan was certain it was that of a **Parrot Crossbill.** Views were difficult, but as the 4 birds took flight and called again it was distinctly different to the 3 others.

What 'a caper'

We spread out through the Scots pines in the deep heather and bilberry looking for 'Caper' and Jim was lucky enough to disturb a female as she fed up near a densely covered ridge. Sadly no others got views – apart from views of her left behinds - a pile of freshly laid 'Caper' droppings that is. On the walk out of the forest a few team members saw **Crested Tit.** Gerry, Jerry and I saw **Goldcrest** and **Common Redpoll** all mixed in a party of 'small stuff' moved through ahead of us.

Back in the van after a healthy mornings walk through the wood, it was decided that the old book shop in Inverness would be a good place to look around. With its open log fires and vast array of books it is a book collectors dream. Time was tight but those who wished got an hour or so shopping before we headed to Tesco's for the fresh rations. The hour was just long enough for us all too lose Jim somewhere in the city, for Terry to buy an expensive LED head torch and for Terry to locate Jim in Black's, thankfully as time was now moving on a pace. We had pre-arranged to meet Alasdair the Caretaker at RNE Aultbea at 16.00. Needless to say he had been and gone – he doesn't hang about. Kevin had acquired the keys from him and not a lot else. The gas heating was obvious by its absence and the lights were tripped off in the wardroom. As we arrived Kev was already there in 'pole position' as the best caravans were settled and booked! Not a bad move considering, all things being equal he did make it to base camp first, but he had travelled the shortest distance. First come first served! We were to regret that move. Some unloaded all the personal kit and the others unloaded the catering essentials and Marty and I got on with prepping the evening meal. The food storage area was stacked as the caravans were agreed or argued over whichever takes your fancy! We (Team 1: Jerry, Gerry, Stan and I) were left with the ancient one adjacent to the stream. Let's just say it was past its best! Mould and damp prevailed. (The same went for all 4 vans by all accounts). The windows wouldn't close and the draughts were enough to cut a man off at the knees! The loo seat had seen better days and stood up against the wall, and to use the loo you needed to be a dwarf! Stan had to sit at 90° or his knees hit the shower cubicle. The taps would turn 360° as you turned them on and the smell of damp was everywhere. Not for the meek this trip.

Martin and I had the meal ready by this stage; the others had spent a couple of hours busying themselves cleaning the vans to their liking and the Nissen hut which we were to call 'the wardroom'. This was also in need of a serious spring clean before we could eat



Capercaillie

off the tables. Kevin, Jim and Maggie had set to and had made it presentable by the time Alasdair had returned to welcome us and turn the heating and electric on! The table tennis table was used as the map table and after an hour or so we were set up. Steve's beef stew was looking just fine bubbling away as Martin and I had the pudding agreed. That evening after the meal we discussed the survey methodology,

debriefed the BTO survey forms and mapped out the coverage of headland and lochs for those new to the work. Survey areas were agreed and team plans set amongst ourselves. The two teams moving north needed to take provisions for their 2 or 3 days away from the main base plus additional rations if the weather closed in. Extra cash was agreed with each sub-team leader, – all of this eating into our evenings time. The trip to the pub was hastily cancelled as it was just too late, in fact it was never brought up in conversation, we were that busy. By the time we had all got our tasks sorted it was time for a nip of Jerry's malt whisky (or 3 if your name s Kev!) before we called it a day and headed off for the luxurious surrounds of a draughty caravan for the night. It was literally freezing in there. After what was a sleepless night listening to the howling gale buffets the sides of the caravan it was soon morning and things needed sorting for breakfast.

Routine

The breakfast and sandwich making soon got into a routine with most of the 'old sweats' putting the plan together. Breakfast comprised the usual healthy option – yes the standard greasy fry-ups; Stan and Terry had also brought along their the latest craze in Muesli – a traditional conversation point of the SW Team, and very nice it was too 'Eat Natural' a very healthy option of pumpkin seed, sunflower seed, dried vine fruits and hard 'rice crispies' is the best we could muster between us! They were like rice crispies – but harder, funny old thing that - plenty of roughage for the team to chew on. Stan kept back another very useful healthy eating (well lets say laxative) option, some form of apricot bar that kept you regular but we won't go there! The 'sandwich team' had the Burgen bread and fillings sorted nice and early, as Sunday morning was the time we needed to split into 3 teams for the drive north for Teams 2 and 3. Everyone was on the road bright and early at first light, if not before. Jim, Steve, Terry and Martin headed out with the Wyton Wagon. The Cape Wrath team utilised Kev's own Land Rover, the Cape being the RV for Tom who was making private arrangements from Lossie.

The Nissan huts at Mellon Charles are laid out in a big square, so we were a tad surprised to see Jim drive out turn back on himself and set off back to the galley – apparently they had forgotten their team's rations for the 2 nights stay at Elphin – just a small oversight. Eh lads? Maggie had ensured her team had everything they needed and Ian and Kev crammed themselves and the spare cookers and all of Maggie's allotted rations into Kev's Land Rover. She admitted that she might not be able to cook anything but at least if she had it with her – the lads could!

Team 1 had a full day too – we set off for Red Point and up through Port Henderson to Melvaig for the day. Quite large stretches of open sea off the main headland south of Loch Gairloch, approximately 12 miles of coastland. The idea was to cover just enough area for a day's full survey without having to 'push it' and possibly feel pressurised to finish and under record.

We actually started slightly further south at Red Point this year as we located a turning point further down the track. This led to the beach, where we sheltered in the dunes out of the strong wind. As we walked towards the dunes Stan and Gerry caught sight of our first **Glaucous Gull,** as it took of with about 30 **Herring** and a few **Greater Black-backed** and the obligatory **Black-headed Gulls**. So quite a good start to the day and the survey proper with a 'white winged' gull on our very first day and on the very first sector – it bode well for the week. It would make a difficult article to read (and write) if I tried to remember all the records as they happened, plus it would be a bit unfair on the other two teams as they like us had good birding days mixed in with the routine of the survey work. So for the sake of the article I'll just try and recall the interesting and funny bits from

here on in. I will give some totals to give you a feel for the survey work and criteria. I hope it doesn't distract from an interesting read anyhow here goes……..

The first day for our team (Team 1), went very well, although the end of the survey was somewhat rushed as the light was fading fast. We had 6 very large sectors to cover and in sector 4 was the 'hotspot' of Loch Kerry, more of that later. The first day's totals for our team were on a par or maybe slightly higher on the diver front than the last visit. Both Gerry Bilbao and I were in the same team covering the same areas so we had a good idea how the first day went in comparison to 2001, plus we had copies with us of the previous WeBS form that I luckily copied back then and kept for my own interest, in case I made it north again as either joint leader or leader.

In Sector 1 about 1mile* stretch of open coast we had seen 17 **Great Northern Divers,** 18 **Eider, 47 Great black backed Gull** 1 **Snipe,** 1 **Buzzard**, 1 **Curlew,** plus 16 other typical species; **Shag, Cormorant, Raven, Guillemot, Razorbill, Long-tailed Duck, Common Gull, Snow Bunting, Ringed Plover, Redshank, Black Headed Gull.** In sector 2 at South Erradale we located our only **Reed Bunting** for the week, three male and 1 female. Sector 3 held all the usual listed above plus 8 **Long-tailed Duck** and the first **Meadow Pipit.**

Loch Kerry

Loch Kerry (by name) forms a small corner on the map of the Gairloch, the forest along the roadside leads to Kerry forest and the river is likewise named. Anyway it's not far from Charlestown and as the road winds out of the forest on the right is a small turning down to the private Salmon hatchery. Down the single track road to the buildings are about 30 round young salmon pens alongside the loch. The outfall is taken from the site by a large diameter pipe that runs into the loch some distance away, over the rocks. Here there is a swirling mass of birds all fighting for the tight confines of where (we guess) waste from the pens are flushed out to the main loch. The gulls are a throng of circling white, all the heads passing through the fixed scoped view from left to right in a frenzy, all fighting for pole position. Once there, time is of the essence as the pressure of the flow of water pushes them to the back where the circular route starts again. Mostly they were **Herring Gull, Common Gull Black-headed Gull** and the odd **Greater Black-backed Gulls.** On that first survey day Stan and Gerry were keen to hone the ID skills for all the rarer gulls likely to be seen during the week. After a scrupulous look through all the birds, no rarities were located, but everything was counted and logged for the survey. Impressive totals; 140 **Goldeneye** and 120 **Mallard** were feeding in the sheltered bay out from the waste pipe. The numbers were to rise steadily throughout the week. From Loch Kerry in Sector 4 we had the fishing quay at Charlestown, part of the large bay in Gairloch and the coastline from Big Sand on the NW side up to the northern point at Melvaig to cover in the afternoon. It was going to be a long stretch so we pushed on and covered large but well viewable areas with good clear skies and powerful scopes. Team 2 were surveying North of Ullapool this day and Team 3 were up at Cape Wrath by now commencing their survey areas. It's difficult to write their individual days activities not being involved so I'll summarise some of their key sightings.

Elphin Team

Jim, Martin, Terry and Steve had a good two nights stop at Elphin. The central location fitted in nicely with the travel plan and the location afforded some extra survey areas close to 'home' on the run back of an evening. Jim and Martin knew the survey areas well and could plan times and distances to get all of their survey sites covered inside the two nights and the days either side. By all account the accommodation was more than adequate at both of the other bases; the

Glaucous Gull

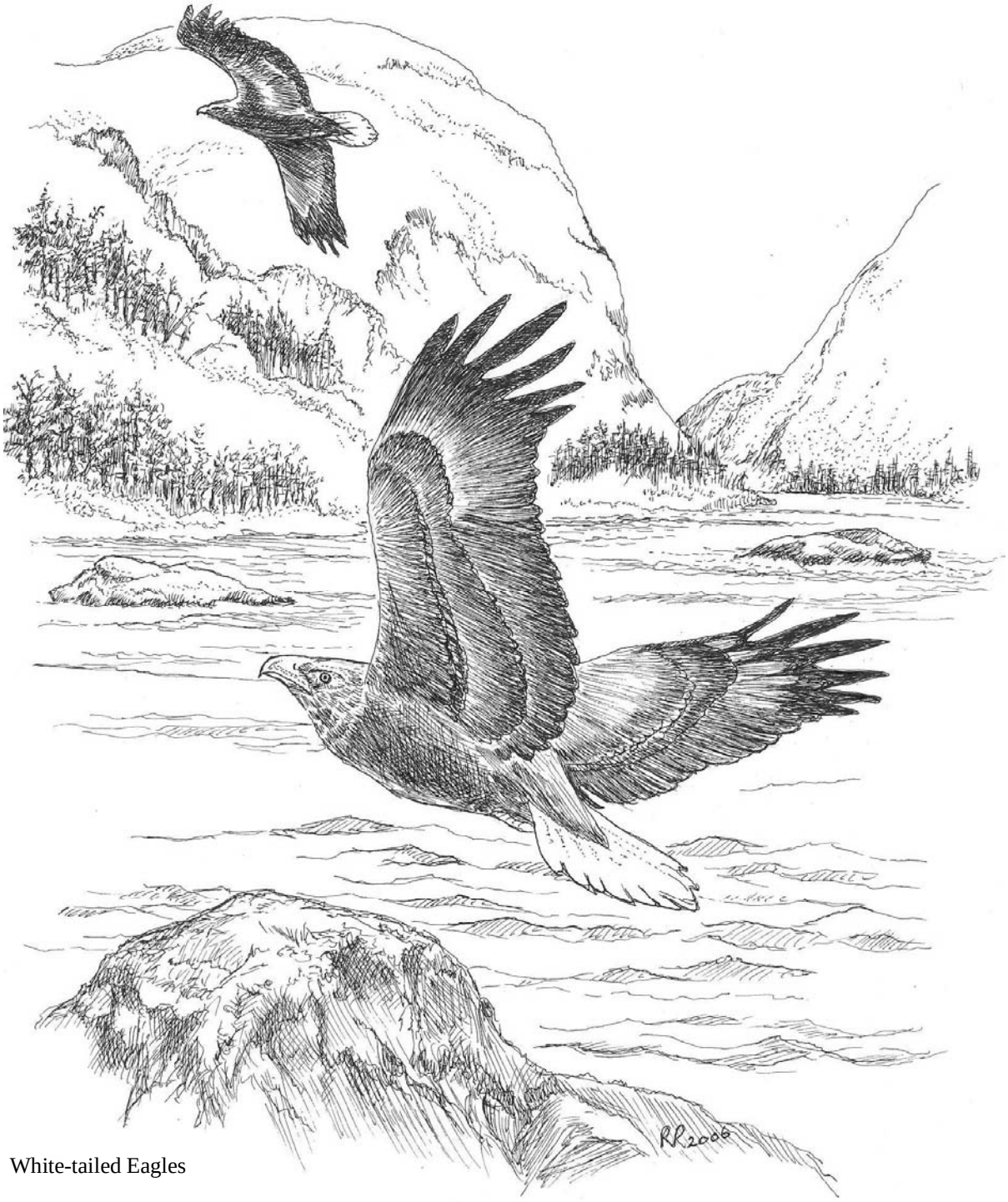
B&B provided all the space and luxury associated with a private house, lots of room to cook their own meals. Birding highlights for Team 2 included a pair of **White-tailed Eagles** flying relatively low right over the top of their van! Up near Strathan on the 8 Feb Steve Heather called out a flock of 5 **Eurasian Bullfinch** of the sub species *Pyrrhula Pyrrhula Pyrrhula* which showed particularly well, as they moved through a hedgerow in a tight flock. Steve took some video footage for the record and all the team agreed they fitted the descriptions shown in Collins Field Guide. There was only one

minor fracas; Terry had stopped to film some of the glorious views from a suitable lookout whilst filming a black faced local ewe took a liking to him and butted him in the nether regions! Hope the editing went ok Tez! Steve also had many minutes of excellent video footage, but likewise had fun editing out the many expletives as splendid view of birds make for extra work editing out scurrility from his video work.

Faraid Head Team

Kevin, Ian, Maggie and Tom arrived safely up at Faraid Head range hut (just East of Cape Wrath) to be met by John Ure the warden up at the range. He made them welcome and the bunked accommodation with its spacious surroundings went down well with the newcomers – perhaps even, a tad warmer than our salubrious surroundings at Aultbea! This team were to share an evening's entertainment with the Army, with a Scottish regiment on exercise. Whereupon Maggie was overhead (after the event) to say they were all lovely wee lads but way too young! They were heard muttering "why the hell on earth would anyone want to go that far north and in such bleak areas just to see birds"! But after some persuasive chat from our team they did understand some of the reasoning behind it all. Still they had no option to talk birds, when you consider Kev Cairns was up there in the same vicinity! Maggie toyed with the idea of 'mothering' one or two of them, as they looked a wee lost away from their Mums!! No doubt she would have got an offer had she verbally put the offer to them! Ian and Tom made inroads into Kevin's Whisky by all accounts. Tom and Ian reciprocated by buying plenty of Red wine. They brought enough back with them to Aultbea to make us all feel green with envy - but we had Jerry's best Glenmorangie to tipple. Now there's a tale, on the first evening Jerry kindly brought his favourite malt to the wardroom where he invited us to a glass as we all got chatting and down to the serious business of how to undertake 'the work'. Kevin got into the swing of things in his outgoing way, merrily helping himself to Jerry's bottle without further ado – or invitation, a tad presumptuous we felt, seeing as not that many of the team had actually met the Chairman before!! Not that it got commented on by Jerry of course, but Kev made up with plenty of his own purchased blend later in the week. Not quite in the same price league as Glenmorangie, but hey SAC's are on a somewhat different pay-scale! At the gathering Maggie being a total health freak (in the nicest possible way) provided the rye crisp bread complete with Melon seeds!! A new combination that - Whisky and Crisp bread, but hey, it was healthy!!

Once all the three teams were back, it was time to share sightings over a beer before a well earned kip. Tom met the two other teams for the first time for many of us, though he had done some very early survey work for RAFOS previously with Jim Bryden. That evening we cooked off Steve's Spaghetti Bolognese. The chef's special was eagerly awaited by the teams. You have to picture how dark it was outside the portakabin – pitch black in fact! The lads were called from the ward room 'to come and get it' Terry fills his plate and rushes outside and across the small corner of grass taking the short cut away from the path he trips and drops his meal in the darkness outside. Some of the others come out – head torches blazing, just in time to too see Terry scraping hands full of 'spag boll' off the turf and back onto his plate. Once inside the ward room he's picking grass out of his meal for the next 20 minutes or so. Still he wasn't wasting any, not with Terry's appetite! Terry learnt the lesson that this was not the best time to leave your head torch in the caravan. £25 well spent there then!!! Back in the fold, the Faraid Head team were making light work of a bottle of red wine or three over a chat with everyone. Mind you, they did share some out to those of us who had no access to shopping during the day's survey. It was a great evening's chat - social and a very warm atmosphere as we were all well chuffed with how the survey had gone so far. No bad



White-tailed Eagles

weather to hamper us and no accidents to speak of. Ian and Marty filled out copious stacks of survey forms before the team split for the night. Poor old Ian was left to complete the bird log (systematic list) on his own. Thankfully I gave him a hand, or else he would have been there all night I reckon. There were stacks of sightings outside of the survey form to complete, before it was lights out as we stumbled into a very cold caravan at 00.30 freezing the brass monkeys off my brass monkeys!!!

The Haunting

Over breakfast Terry had described this "banging or knocking" sound that he had heard against the side of the van during the night. It was no joke he exclaimed "either part of the van was coming apart or there was

something else more sinister moving around the field during the night". After a bit of fault finding after breakfast some simple detective work had found the culprit. The van was parked near this gnarled stunted tree which when pulled to extreme distances managed to strike the caravan. It just shows how strong the gales were the night before were though. Terry somehow managed to restrain the branch for future night's kip. The gales the night before were horrendous, if not a little on the scary side, a few of us over breakfast had considered it was not far from blowing the caravans over on their sides. Let's not be silly here this was a grave consideration, there had been destruction along these lines for everyone plainly to see in the villages as we drove through. Caravans turned to matchwood lay in gardens littered all around the place. From the inside of the caravan it felt like you were swaying on a rough sea in a boat, it was that bad. At one point during the night, I felt that uneasy about the situation I even considered a 'site move' to sleep in the wardroom on the floor. At least it would have been warm and safe!

Breakfast Quandary

As we gathered in the galley for breakfast sharing experiences about the gale last night, Gerry had lined up the mugs and had dropped a tea bag in each, awaiting the saucepan of boiling water. Once scalded the brews were gratefully accepted - all bar our crotchety 'copper' Jim; he had been out of the galley up at the wardroom and had come back to find someone had added milk to his brew. Accusations flew around like darts, quote "Who's put *!+"$%$** milk in my Tea!! No one was ever brave enough to own up the fault or even consider confronting our northern friend. Well would you be at that early hour? You needed to have either need a very sharp wit or just be plain stupid! Civilian life has mellowed him somewhat but he can still be pretty fierce. His bark is worse than his bite! From the back of the galley came Steve's repost: "Oh just get on with your porridge you old Jock" as he tried desperately to make light of it. We just left him stew with his tea! Now then, who was the guilty party?……Well maybe we can mention it now, (as time has passed somewhat) eh Gerry?

That morning on our survey, we were passing the Post Office at Inverewe, so we stopped by for some 'messages' (Scottish for shopping). We needed bread and milk and other odds; Jerry needed a head torch battery, I needed some post cards and some serious hand crème as my hand were in tatters from the tin washing and open air field work. Once back in the van I had a quick tidy up as Jerry was still in the shop. To keep the van in some semblance of order we always have a carrier bag tied to a seat. Gerry passed it forward so I emptied the front ash tray of paper and took Jerry's used tea bag off the dash! As he got in he shouted in exasperation: "Where's my tea bag!" Anyone would think it was a catastrophe! As it turns out Jerry drinks green tea and utilises the same bag throughout the day. The rest of us looked around perplexed - we had never heard the Chairman ever raise his voice before, let alone shout at us! I put my hand up – explaining that it was I – the guilty party. I was just tidying the van and had put it in the waste bin. Let's just say that Jerry was not best pleased. I had tried to rescue the situation, but I had binned the only green tea bag on his possession that day! The other Gerry offered one of his collections of many 'normal tea bags' to take the 'heat' out of the situation! Novel 5-10 minutes that was. Furthermore, it was one which the others found highly amusing, after we had shared it around the rest of the team at my expense. I managed to quell my enthusiasm as I tidied the van for the rest of the week. Mind you it was sorely tempting to do it again to repeat the trick, just to see what would have happened!

On to some more birding highlights; Stan, Jerry and Gerry picked out a 2nd winter **Kumlien's Gull** in the harbour at Ullapool

on 9 Feb, with a second bird being located at Loch Kerry on the afternoon of the 11 Feb. This time I was with the guys on survey; we had popped in on our way back from the Torridon area. This bird was showing characteristics of a 1st winter, but it was devilish hard to pick out amongst the hordes of other gulls. Surprisingly, once you became familiar with its head colour and its tendency to behave differently from the others you made it out quicker and easier. Even so, without the expertise of the serious 'gull watchers' this bird would have eluded the lesser mortals amongst us!

The Cape Wrath team: Maggie, Ian and Kevin located one of only two **Merlin** seen during the week. The first was seen at Loch Caladail on 7th Feb. These boys also collected the only confirmed views of **Yellowhammer** for the week at Rough Haugh, an area we hadn't visited on previous WD trips as it was south of Loch Erribol. It is in a valley which was picturesque and well worth the circular route; picking out small lochans and watercourses on their way back to base. Another surprise was the paucity of **Pied Wagtails**, we only saw 1 individual all week, it was searching for midges and flies around a farm at Mungasdale, just down the road from the 'Eagle watch' lay-by for Gruinard Island. The prize for 'top-tip' must go to the nice old boy we met at Kerry one afternoon. He let on that a few of the local fishermen had seen one or two **White-tailed Eagle** on the top-side of Longa Island (in the northern most reaches of the Gairloch), from their favourite vantage point they would pick off passing **Fulmars** from a rock on the northern side of the island. We had quite a discussion with him, and the old adage; local knowledge certainly paid off. We recce'd how to best view the location from the coast late that afternoon, deciding that the best vantage view point was from the slipway at Big Sand harbour. That evening after call-over it was agreed that a free day was called for, as we had done the lion's share of the survey, with just one or two areas to visit in what was now better weather. The teams split into 3 areas of choice for a day's general 'obs' and counts of unusual 'stuff' and we all agreed to phone in if there was any activity from the eagles, as one or two of the team needed better views or film footage.

Our team; Jerry, Stan, Gerry, and I were at Big Sand slipway viewpoint from early light and after an hour or so of **Diver, Gull, Golden Plover** and **Ringed Plover** counting the Eagles were proving elusive. We were about to make alternative plans for the next part of the day, when Stan caught sight of a bird coming in from the NW corner of the headland (some 4 mile or so away!) heading across to the Island. Quite some way off, so it was some pick up! It soon came into view, showing immense size and structure compared to the **Greater Black-backed Gulls** accompanying it, from a 'safe' distance?

The bird landed on the island about half way down the right hand side luckily – our side some 1 to 1½ miles away. As it came across I called out that I had noticed it had a wing tag – possibly two, but between us all we weren't certain of the left upper wing, whether it was a tag or just feathers lifting with the drag over the wing coverts. The right upper wing tag was unmistakable as it was on the side nearest us, but it was unreadable in flight. Once landed it was a different matter, because it stayed put for about twenty minutes which afforded us time to call in the other 'fairly local' team of Ian, Maggie and Kevin, who were about 6 miles away having checked Mellon, Udrigle for **Little Auk,** they were now at Loch Kerry and shortly heading across to us. After some hasty U-turns and redirections they eventually made it to us, by which time the Eagle was well in scope - about ½ mile away on the SW tip of the Island nearest us. We all clearly made out the RH wing tag now: {*The details of the bird and its ID tag have been withheld at the request of the BTO ringing team].*

Some took field notes while others got their

film footage. Kevin had tried to use his digiscope but distance was against him. Suddenly the Juvenile Eagle took flight heading across to the mainland. We were excitedly calling out to Ian to get some still photos as it banked and turned to come directly towards us- as if to come and get a closer look! The bird was less than 200 meters away now, and we were all frantically buzzing around, it was headed straight towards us and went directly over our heads at less than 30 foot - absolutely tremendous. What a spectacle, the bird being in its element and completely at ease it glided and flapped silently heading along the shore of Gairloch before some powerful wing beats took it high into the massive range of snow-capped mountains behind. We kept our scopes trained on it, as it disappeared against the dark mountain side. Being scattered with snow on the sides of the mountains, it was difficult to make out, eventually disappearing by merging into its background it was gone for the day.

We all excitedly gathered round discussing how brilliant the views were, for many this was their first sighting. Maggie had been to the NW coast on many occasions and had not seen the birds. We all agreed, realising how incredibly honoured we were to get such close views. Stan compared video footage with Jerry, who had also tried some camera shots as it flew head on to us. Ian had some still photos 'in the can' hopefully to save for the AGM or slide library.

'End Ex'

Whilst out that last survey-free day we purchased some smoked haddock that the Post Office at Laide had kindly ordered for us earlier in the week. We had done something similar in 2001, and this time it went down just as well! Stevie poached it slowly in milk and with some fresh potatoes and white cabbage, smoothly washed down with a glass of the northern teams red wine; we were well pleased with our efforts for the week. The night before we made our way back south to England we had a busy couple of hours breaking camp which included the essential cleaning duties. We always pride ourselves on leaving the place as habitable as possible and in a better state that when we find it! Maggie set to with a couple of the lads and blitzed the Galley. It looked spotless. We shared out the remaining rations, tidied the caravans, swept out the ward rooms and completed the survey forms for the week before heading off to the pub. The nearest pub is some 4 mile away in Aultbea village. The locals had been friendlier on this occasion, but saying that, we didn't stray into their bar this time! The hostess was pleased to see 11 boys and a blonde for ale and whisky and no doubt trebled her normal Friday takings. Marty kindly did the honours behind the wheel and it was an excellent evening amongst friends - just like old times on many an expedition I know that many readers will recall. The next morning, we headed out safely at 7 am all tasks completed. Alistair the caretaker had dragged himself down to say cheerio and take back the keys. He's a bit work shy-but on our side, no doubt grateful to see the place getting some use by the military. After all, the military do need to use the place or we will lose it forever.

The three teams split their various ways at and we were all on the road again, the wagons heading out to respective destinations. Over the weekend we all safely made it home. The Cornish pair got dropped off for their car, which was safe on camp at Innsworth. Gerry and Ian also alighted at Innsworth .Marty put me up for the night before I drove the wagon back on the Sunday to Wyton and Cottesmore on the Monday. Stan and Terry made it safely back to Cornwall. And the Scottish team all got home OK. Jerry, Steve, Maggie and Jim took the east coast back, again nothing untoward happened which is the best way to report in.

Goldeneye

BTO Feedback

Marty, Ian and I did some tidying of the survey forms before we submitted them to the BTO. I can report from the meeting that (The Chairman) Jerry and myself attended later in May at The Nunnery, that we were made very welcome and they think very highly of the work we have done for them. The area covered was amazing, the BTO team were very pleased that we had managed a re-visit and added some additional survey areas. In fact this was the most extensive area covered out of the 4 surveys, assisted by good weather and a willing team. In the meeting with the BTO we discussed possible financial assistance. But WeBS is purely voluntary, but we can be assured we will get support in all areas of the survey, even consideration to laptops and digital recording will be the future of the survey. Perhaps not best placed in a wet and windy caravan!

The BTO also discussed other RAFOS assistance with The Birds on Estuaries enquiry and the possible use of RAF aerial imagery and or photography. This will be covered elsewhere. Needless to say WeBS is so much the better for the work done in the NW of Scotland by the RAFOS team.

We will be back for more divers and eagles sometime soon!

Press Release
IFS DEFENCE SPONSORSHIP FOR WINTER DUCK

IFS Defence has announced its sponsorship of the RAFOS "Winter Duck" expedition that annually contributes to the BTO's important national survey. The Wetlands Bird Survey (WeBS) seeks to record the UK's populations of over-wintering wildfowl - part of a key Government Indicator: the health of our wild bird population. Without RAFOS input the survey would be incomplete.

IFS Defence is a leading supplier of Enterprise Resource Planning systems for the defence industry, providing armed forces, defence manufacturers, and in-service support organisations with the means to improve combat readiness and maximize asset lifetimes and thus to reduce costs. The changing geopolitical landscape has dramatically altered the requirements for armed forces over the past 15 years and IFS Defence helps meet this challenge as OEMs fight to reduce the delivery time of new weapons systems and optimise their availability in the field. Its complete lifecycle-management solution, IFS Applications™ empowers industry to become lean in their design and build processes, which in turn allows armed forces to effectively manage fleets of assets to ensure efficient and reliable logistics support in distant theatres through one integrated solution. Visit **www.ifsdefence.com** for more.

So as IFS is driving the market to co-exist with its partners and offer the customer reduced risk, freedom of choice and faster payback, RAFOS is partnering with the BTO to provide that last piece in the UK's WeBS jigsaw. And partnership is what it is all about these days.

Gp Capt Jerry Knights, RAFOS Chairman, accepts sponsorship from Graham Grose, the Business Development Director, IFS Defence.

ICE COLD IN LIMOUSIN

by

Bill Francis

In early March 2005 a party of volunteers from the WWT at Slimbridge visited our former Volunteer Co-ordinator (Anna) at her new home near the French city of Limoges. It was a motley crew that assembled from various directions at Bristol Airport for a flight to Bergerac on 8th March. The flight was uneventful and we collected our three hire cars from AVIS at the airport and set off for our gîtes at Château Bellegarde les Fleurs, close to the village of Châteauneuf le Forêt. As it turned out, each car took a different route and some of us were delayed by a student demonstration in Bergerac - a typical introduction to France?

The rest of the drive was relatively uneventful, although the car carrying two ladies and myself was involved in a bit of a contretemps at a tollbooth on the autoroute. Having just arrived in the Euro-Zone, we had no small change, and the automated booth would not accept any of our credit or debit cards. Apparently the French banks have a different system to us (and most of the rest of the world!). So we had to reverse out of one gate, much to the annoyance of the driver queuing behind us, and try another. The same thing happened, so we tried a third, where after some incomprehensible instructions over a loud speaker, we managed to get the machine to accept a €5 note and give us change.

The drive from Bergerac to the Château Bellegarde les Fleurs took well over two hours, and the light was beginning to fade when we arrived. We had been warned to bring warm clothing, but on our way we had watched in disbelief as the scenery became more and more snowy. By the time we arrived, snow blanketed the whole countryside, although the roads were clear. On arrival we were met by our landlady Nicole van der Vlist, a Dutch friend of Anna's through their shared French language classes. If her French was to the same standard as her English, she had little to learn!

Château Bellegarde les Fleurs started life as an elegant château, but had been used as a sanatorium for TB sufferers for a long time from the 1930s onwards. As a result, large verandas had been added to the front of the building and it is the owners' intention to remove these and other additions to return the château to its original appearance. Needless to say there is a lot of work to do, but they occupy a pleasant modern house in the grounds until their accommodation in the chateau is habitable.

The château has extensive grounds, and apart from a formal garden and camping field there is a large area of woodland and a lake with semi-domestic ducks. Our accommodation in a neighbouring block was roomy for the nine of us, most people having a twin bedded or double room to themselves. The sitting rooms of the two adjoining gîtes we used were heated by wood-burning stoves, but the unheated bedrooms were a bit Spartan in the prevailing weather conditions. That said, we were made very welcome, the gîtes were well equipped and the surroundings were exceptional.

On our first evening, Anna joined us and we tried a restaurant in Chateauneuf le Forêt where 'le chef' (a rather forbidding lady who ran the place) obviously ruled her staff with a rod of iron. The food was good, but quite pricey, so we decided to try somewhere else the following night.

After a good night's sleep, some of our number, very public spirited, drove into

Red Kite

Chateauneuf le Forêt to buy fresh baguettes and croissants for our breakfast and packed lunches. Other supplies had thoughtfully been purchased by Anna before our arrival. After breakfast, we explored the woodland close to the chateau, finding an interesting variety of species, including **Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapilla,* **Marsh Tit** *Parus palustris* and **Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus*. Later we set off to see Anna and her husband at their home at St Germaine-les-Belles, close to the motorway we had used on our journey north.

Their home consists of a small cottage with an adjoining byre and a large ramshackle barn beyond it. Work was progressing on the cottage, but much remained to be done. The house is on the edge of the village over-looking a valley, and the passing bird life looked promising. One particular sighting was a close-up of a magnificent **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* as it glided past up the valley below where we stood.

That evening, we visited a restaurant run by a Brit in a village with the unprepossessing name of Domps, close to our gîtes. Nicole was keen to try the food, with a view to using them to cater for events at the Chateau, so she joined us, along with Anna and her husband. The only choices of menu were vegetarian or non-vegetarian, but the atmosphere, (as well as the quality and quantity of the food provided in a four-course meal at the price of €11) decided us to make this our eatery for the remainder of the visit. We were never disappointed.

The following morning (10th) the party split – those wanting shops visiting the city of Limoges, whilst the more dedicated birders headed past the city for a recommended location further north. On arrival at the start of the planned walk however, we found the snow was too deep for walking boots so we retraced our journey, finishing up at Bussy Varache to the South East of Limoges. Here we walked through the village and down towards the river. On the uphill return one of us spotted a raptor, which was identified as a **Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus.* We were also lucky enough to see a group of three **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* with two Red Kite soaring on the same thermal.

On the following day (11th), our last full day at the Château, we again visited the woods of the estate in the morning, and a lucky few saw **Crested Tit** *Parus crustatus* in the grounds of the Château. Until that day the weather had generally remained cold and occasionally threatened snow, but that afternoon the sun came out and swiftly warmed things up. It was then decided to walk from the Château to the neighbouring village of Besunieras, the road passing between farms, houses and orchards as we did so. Here we came across a variety of birds, all enjoying the brighter weather, including a small flock of **Cirl Bunting** *Emberiza cirlus,* **Short-toed Treecreeper** *Certhia brachydactyla* and **Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus Martius.* Another visit to our restaurant was enlivened as we left by the sound of migrating **Common Cranes** *Grus grus,* migrating overhead.

Saturday dawned clear and cold, and we set off for Bergerac after saying our farewells to Anna and Nicole.

On the way some of us sampled the facilities of a French motorway service area. What a difference from those in the UK! The place was spotless and the food good, fresh and cheap.

The journey to the airport was completed successfully and we all arrived in good time to check in for our flight back to Bristol. Here the party split and we went our separate ways. If we go again it will be later in the spring!

The web site for Château Bellegarde les Fleurs is at:
www.bellegarde.info.chateau.bellegarde@wanadoo.fr

Crested Tits

PANTOMIME AND THE OLD SCHOOL TIE

(BrandEx05 – the RAFOS expedition to Brandenburg, 5-26 May 2005)

Mike Blair with additions and editing by Jon Orme

Brandenburg is the north-easternmost State in the Federal Republic of Germany. It stretches from the Baltic south towards Dresden in Saxony and surrounds the city-State of Berlin, once more the nation's capital after the collapse of East Germany. The River Oder forms much of the Brandenburg border with Poland, wending its way across the Polish western plains and draining a huge catchment area. The Brandenburg landscape has been formed by multiple glaciations, many of which reached their southern limit across the region. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw an immense programme of excavation undertaken for canal projects, to obtain minerals and to extract building materials, gravel and ballast. Today, the central district of Uckermark alone has 124 officially designated lakes!

The gently rolling landscape has many ancient habitats in hidden locations and more have been created by industries that no longer exist. The advent of efficient industrial agriculture has had only limited effect due to the nature of the land, which makes it costly to clear and cultivate. Biodiversity has been preserved because conservation policies, supported by reasonable budgets, already existed. This approach received popular support because of the success in managing the vast and very acidic mineral pits which predominate in southern Brandenburg. The biologists showed that many acid-tolerant plant species were evolving to cope with these extreme conditions. These gradually created 'islands' of reduced acidity in which less tolerant plants could survive and now even the most acid pits are regenerating. This conservation department has created the most successful recycling economy in the world and this has resulted in a thriving and profitable 'appropriate technology' industry.

Problems still abound. Since the Wall came down people have been forced to seek work elsewhere as old traditional industries closed. The loss of 28% of the overall population (54% of the 18-30 age group) has reduced the impact on the environment. There has been an improvement in air quality as the old and unsafe industries disappeared. High remaining unemployment (over 30% in some towns) has slowed regeneration and created new pollution black-spots. The landscapes are incredibly varied and attractive and increased tourism, especially from outside Germany, would help the economy,. The mystery remains why such a bird-rich environment has escaped the attention of the UK bird watching fraternity. It costs little to reach Brandenburg and living costs are less than in western Germany. Return air fares from UK can be as little as £40, internal train and bus services are reliable and easy to use and cheap. In late May, it is possible to see on the same day: Marsh, Aquatic, River, Savi's, Grasshopper, Icterine and Barred Warblers, Wryneck, Red-backed and Great Grey Shrike, Common Nightingale, Thrush Nightingale and Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Crane and White-tailed Eagle

From 2002, RAFOS had been in discussion with Martin Flade, who works in the Brandenburg Government Environmental Office as a Project Leader. Quite apart from his work, Martin is at present editor of *Vogelwelt*, the leading ornithological journal in Germany, and was the man on the spot in the 1990s when the **Aquatic Warbler's** main breeding area was discovered in Belarus (over 20,000 singing males). Martin lives in the eco-village of Brodowin, a little north of his office in Eberswalde, and in any spare hour carries out local bird surveys and other research. The environmental and forestry administration offices decided upon two areas where line-transect survey work would

be useful, and a number of target species were designated. Martin arranged our accommodation, decided the preferred survey period and provided working maps. A number of species, such as Middle Spotted Woodpecker breed early and would be largely silent in May, and others are late migrants, so no three-week period is ideal. As it happened, the uncharacteristically late 2.5m snowfall in March had severe effects on early breeders and a huge weather complex stretching south to the Mediterranean and east to the Crimea delayed the majority of returning migrants. The March snowfall allowed the Brandenburg conservationists to find a den of **wolves** that had recently re-colonised the area from Poland. They had either swum the wide Oder or crossed by one of the relatively few bridges.

I drove out to Brodowin on 4 May in reasonably leisurely fashion, spending two nights in the Netherlands. Fortunately the predominating rain clouds en route parted to give warm sunshine in Berlin. I planned to pick up Jon Orme and Pete Evans at Berlin Schönfeldt airport that evening, but initially I had to head north to our first lodgings in Wrechen. Martin recommended an interesting route to Wrechen and drove with me a few km to show me a Common Crane on its nest within 20m of the road. However there were road works 'Gesperrt' (Closed) on the route, the 'Umleitung' (Diversion) clearly indicating a southward detour. At almost any other time of year, the winding trip through the forest and around a large resort lake would have been charming, if slow. However, this was Ascension Day which is traditionally the day that young fathers are entitled to ignore their normal responsibilities. There were at least 3000 drunken cyclists riding all over the road! An additional problem was that I was following three large Mercedes limousines driven by elderly Germans terrified of getting their paintwork scratched. In clear stretches, they would accelerate to the next bend only to brake sharply in case they turned over at 20km/hr.

I lost almost an hour on my journey to Wrechen, but eventually came to a handsome, but dilapidated building, rather large for a hunting lodge but not large enough to be a true Schloss (castle). Slightly to its left on a mound that eased into a forested hill was a long, two-storey building, beautifully restored, formerly stables. Between them, I could see an enchanting tree-shrouded lake, the Wrechensee. This idyllic place was BrandEx05's first home. Several guests sat at tables outside the accommodation and a young woman was clearly in charge. As I walked up, I asked a rather scruffy elderly man in red dungarees, carrying a hoe, whom I should talk to. In German he said, 'I'm only the gardener here – that woman up there is the boss, and she gives me hell!' It wasn't until I had spoken to the young woman, Petra, that I realised that I had been fooled. The scruffy gardener was her husband Eberhardt Kube, who is the German equivalent of Marcel Marceau. Indeed, in June he and Marceau were to revive a world-famous mime (pantomime in German) routine to a long sold-out audience in Berlin. Herr Kube, we were to find, was a man of many accomplishments and an acute observer of people.

Our accommodation in the former stable block was splendid, although the wooden stairway up to the first floor had clearly been rescued from a building whose floors were slightly lower. It tilted backwards, which made it disconcertingly difficult to climb carrying my bags, my brain kept telling me to adopt the same false vertical as the banister supports. Dumping my bags, I headed for the autobahn just beyond the local city of Prenzlau, and soon was at the Berliner Ringstraβe, the M25 equivalent. I arrived at Schönfeldt just when Pete and Jon's flight was due to land. They had landed early and it was only five minutes before they appeared. On our stroll to the car in the warm sunshine, a harbinger, we thought, of things to come was the sight of a **Hoopoe** perched on top of a light tower. The total number of Hoopoes seen on BrandEx05 remained stubbornly at

one.

Arriving at Wrechen, we went into dinner in a large ground-floor room in the 'Schloss'. The floor was covered in straw and the walls by plain drapes. This became a stage set for performances in which the diners, including us, were unwittingly the dramatis personae supporting the host's, Herr Kube's, leading role.. It was sheer joy to watch Eberhardt Kube at work, playing the roles of host, raconteur and conversation director. He missed nothing, and though he spoke mostly in German, you didn't need to understand a word to enjoy his razor-sharp timing. His effortless development of routines from his guest's conversation was the gift of a true performance artiste.

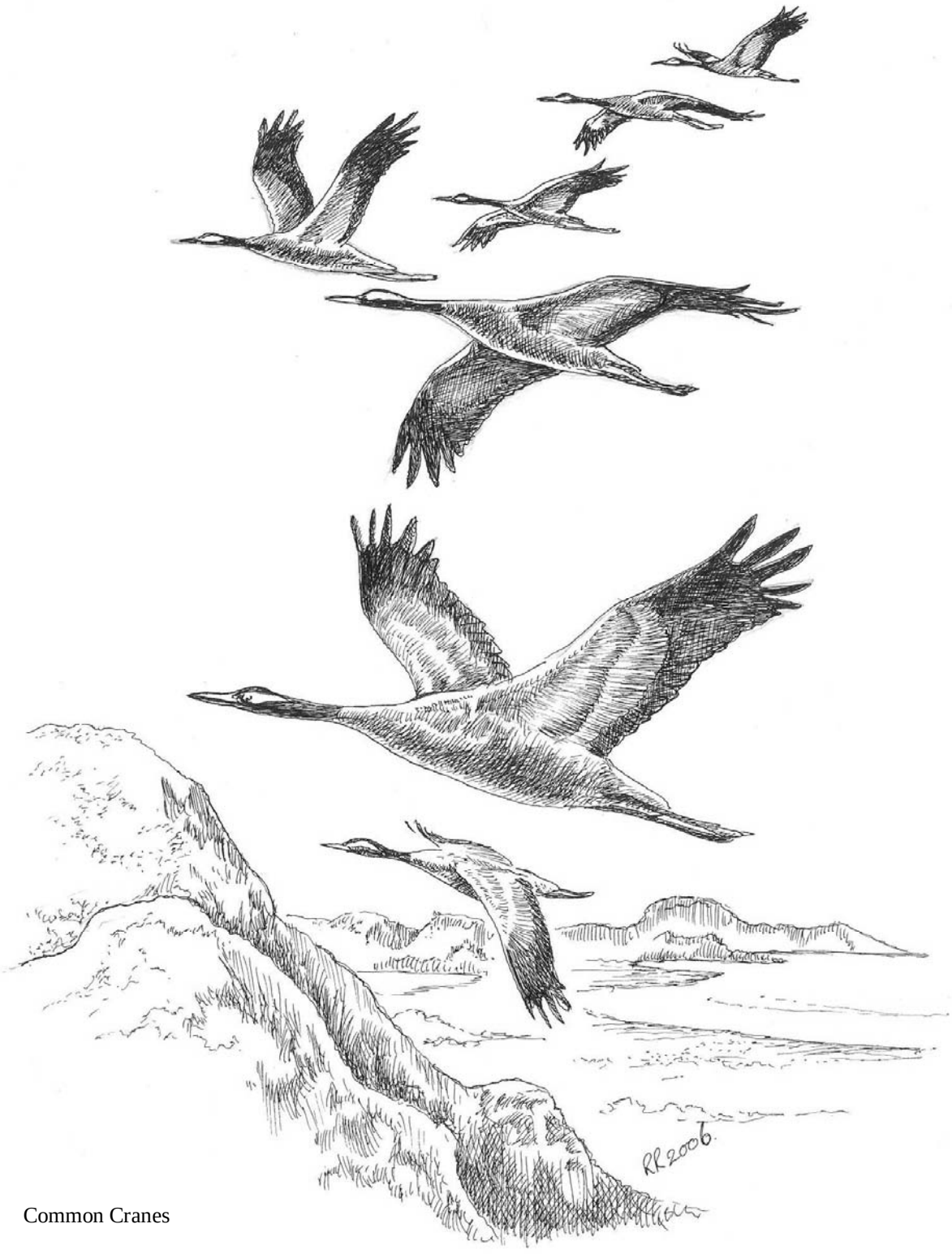
The next day, we woke to singing **Golden Orioles** resident in the woods behind us and on an island in the lake. Unfortunately it had rained during the night, the temperature had dropped, and it started raining again at breakfast. Nevertheless, we explored the local area in between spells of rain over the next few days, finding, amongst other things, very pale, long-winged **Common Buzzards**. These so lacked distinctive under-wing markings that they seemed to be Short-toed Eagles, because of their upper chest markings! **Wood Warblers** sang in almost every wood, even at 5°C – Jon's mobile phone had a thermometer which showed no increase for most of the next week!

The poor weather conditions held up migration, but just to experience the countryside of the Uckermark was worth the trip alone. Amongst rolling fields there are many intriguing woodlands and streams wending between richly-vegetated and bush-shrouded banks. There are huge heath lands in the south. Lakes and wetlands of all sizes dot the landscape, and access is nearly always possible.

The alluvial Oder plain on the German side of the border is a rich agricultural landscape, but even here there are wetlands where **Bittern** and **Crakes** abound. The flood plain between various flood prevention and control bunds comprises a series of wet grasslands; these enclosures in winter host hundreds of thousands of wildfowl and water birds. It is a year-round bird watching Mecca.

In spring, **Aquatic Warblers** arrive to take up territory which, in 2005, was easily accessible. Follow the signs towards the nearby Polish border from the city of Schwedt. Park in the car park on the left just before the houses finish and before crossing the wide relief drainage channel, walk across the first bridge to the bund on the far bank of the drainage channel (the Polish border is across the main Oder channel, another 2km further on). Turn left and walk for up to 3km along the bund, searching for Aquatic Warbler on your right. Explore each pathway into the grassland (the first actually loops back to the bund). Expect also to see **Common Crane**, **White-tailed Eagle, Black Stork** and thousands of **Great Cormorants**. The grasslands abound with **Yellow Wagtail** which are the blue-grey headed subspecies with the prominent white supercilium. In bushy areas, **Red-backed Shrike** contest the best perches, sometimes in association with **Barred Warbler**, while **Common and Thrush Nightingale** tend to be less visible but much noisier. Amongst the taller marsh vegetation, **Bluethroat** and **Marsh Warbler** claim their territories with song and vigorous flight. The shorter thick grass clumps are ideal for **Aquatic Warbler** that tends to sing from near the top of strong stems with just the head protruding. The broad buff supercilium and median crown stripe match the grass patterns so well that it is difficult to see until the head is turned while singing, the pinkish, quivering gape becoming suddenly prominent. The habit of swivelling the head while singing tends to deceive observers into thinking the bird is moving. In areas of shorter grass, the territorial 'broken-backed' flight is distinctive as it zips in sharp but shallow undulations from clump to clump.

Our second expedition base was 60km



Common Cranes

southeast from Wrechen at Stegelitz in the Old School House (die Alte Schule'). It was owned by Wolfgang, a delightfully eccentric character who also was a superb chef. When we arrived Wolfgang discovered that he was over booked by two places although he didn't let on at the time. Sue and I were therefore given the very comfortable back room of a nearby small cottage, not realising until we moved in that it was Wolfgang's house! Through the kitchen, there was a broad glass door on to a wooden patio that overlooked the slope below. This was a very civilised place to enjoy a beer whilst awaiting the transit flights of **Lesser Spotted Eagles** from the distant forest.

Julian was to depart soon after our arrival so the first thing to do was to explore locally on foot. Sue, Simon and Dave strolled to the nearby lake and found a convenient bench from which to scan the reed beds. One of them happened to look behind just as a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** was approaching at low altitude, you can imagine the scramble to turn round and get the bins on it! It was a major lifer for Simon, and every time he recollects the occasion, the eagle gets lower and lower.

We found an extensive area where many singing **River Warbler** could be observed. In the last few days we recorded **Great Grey Shrike**, seeing the startling 'wingover' display, where it zooms vertically, turning on the spot just before the stall.

The German bicycles seemed strange to those of us accustomed to UK machines. The flimsy-looking single-geared models were 'sit-up-and-beg' types resembling those proudly owned by 1940s parents and grandparents, all had back-pedalling brakes. The handlebars were narrow and it was difficult to maintain a straight line at slow speed. This resulted in tyre marks that resembled the artistic path a pair of drunken unicyclists. I was usually left with the bike that the others had sussed out as better suited to a circus or museum and on one occasion took an involuntary trip into the forest! Much local exploration was done on these machines at Wrechen and Stegelitz.

There are so many memories from BrandEx05. Among my favourites was the sight of a **White-Tailed Eagle** diving into reeds, where, out of our sight, it was 'bombed' over 30 times by a Marsh Harrier. It eventually took off carrying something which was probably part of the harrier's mate that was attacked while roosting, it was probably too early for nesting. Another was a male **Montagu's Harrier** flying parallel to the car, only some 15 metres away.

The following hardy souls attended for periods of between 8 and 14 days: Sue Fleming, Pete Evans, Jon Orme, Julian Quail, Simon Dennis, Adrian Haywood, Dave Thomas, and Ian Drake. I was present for the whole 30 days.

The hospitality was superb, the food terrific (both places provided us with ample packed lunches) and Martin Flade's organisation was excellent. We all carried an individual authorisation to allow us into places open only to forest workers. This turned potentially awkward situations into amiable meetings!

I was sad to leave 'the Old School', but on the way home Sue and I were spending a few days in Slovakia to prepare for a reconnaissance in 2006 for the 2007 RAFOS expedition. We were thus not too sad, but that's another story.

For further information on either Slovakia trip, contact me on **blair@dialstart.net** *or 01263 714 065.*

A WINTER WEEKEND IN ARAGON

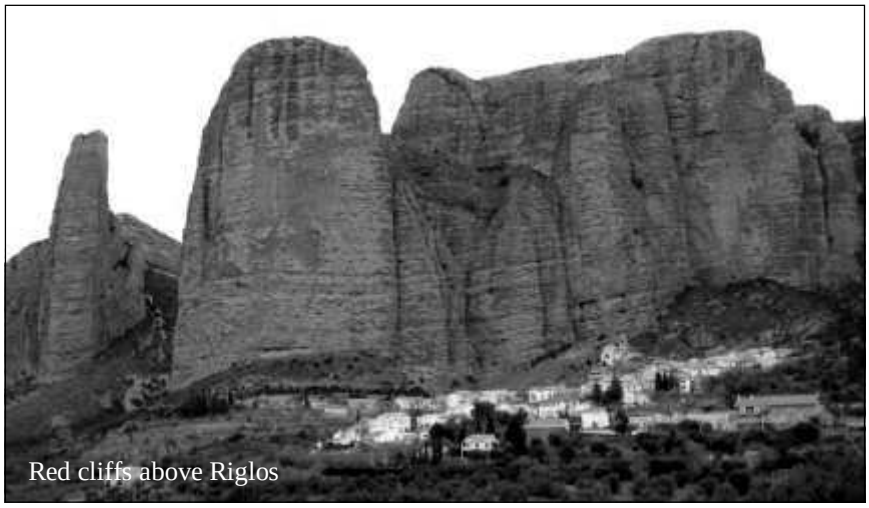
By
John Le Gassick

Last August whilst visiting the Bird Watching Fair at Rutland Water I was attracted, like a moth to the guttering flame, to a stand displaying a poster of a **Wallcreepe**r. This magical bird has for may years now been my particular favourite ever since I was lucky enough to enjoy good views of a pair one cold February morning on a rock face in Happy Valley at Episcopi. At this stand I met the proprietor of the Boletas Bird-watching Centre, Josele Saiz, the sort of jovial individual that one immediately takes to. He told me that all of his tours for the next year were fully booked but if I could make up a group of four or five people we could enjoy a weekend at his house in Loporozano to the north of Huesca and he would guarantee good views of **Wallcreeper** and **Lammergeier**. In addition he promised excellent cuisine and some fine wine and a chauffeured drive, in his four-wheel drive vehicle, to all the best birding spots on the plain and also a trip up into the High Pyrenees. What more could an old bird watcher ask for!

Luck was on my side and I managed to find three other like-minded people, all of them members of the RAFOS: Bob Frost, Iain Mac Kenzie and Tony Lack. On the Internet in October I booked four return flights from Stanstead to Zaragoza for 1p each way, with airport taxes the cost was £25.33 each. The cost of the weekend excluding flights was £350 each; it may seem expensive but that was for full-board, with picnic lunches and we covered approximately 560 miles over the four days with a very knowledgeable and affable guide. The Boletas Guest House was very comfortable and warm, the temperatures

Josele Saiz & Group

outside were very similar to those in the UK with a light overnight ground frost. There was an area of high pressure over the region which meant that there was quite a lot of mist or fog on the plain but once into the hills the visibility was good. Esther, Josele's partner, was an excellent cook and prepared very nice evening meals supplemented with good wine. Every evening before dinner we held a call-over and discussed our itinerary for the next day. We were out birding from first light at 0830 to dusk 1830 each day. We had a respectable total of 85 species, but it was the quality of the sightings rather than the number. 'Boletas' by the way is the local name for Egyptian Vulture. Not a lot of people know that.


Red cliffs above Riglos

Bob had submitted a "wish list" of all the birds that we wanted to see and we achieved nearly all of our targets. The notable exception being **Snow Finch** *Montifringilla nivalis.*

Day One

We were met at the airport by Joseles and his four wheel drive and before we knew it we were en-route to a place where we would see **Eurasian Eagle Owl** *Bubo bubo.* During the short journey we saw **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia,* this was a bit of a surprise to us all as shortly before our visit we had watched Michael Portillo's programme on Spanish Wild Life where we had seen thousand of storks heading across the Straits of Gibraltar to winter in Africa. Apparently more and more are over wintering in this region, many staying at their breeding sites. On one journey we counted 30 birds. Another unfamiliar species seen on this first excursion was **Spotless Starling** *Sturnus unicolor,* most appropriate! They were in large mixed flocks with the familiar **Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*. At Jusibol we had unusually good views of **Eurasian Eagle Owl**, considering that it was early afternoon, as it roosted in a small cave. Here we had the only sighting of **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus,* a fleeting glimpse of, fortunately, a male bird. Another good record from this area was fifteen or more **Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* with a flock of **European Serin** *Serinus serinus*. After a short break for some lunch at a roadside café we continued on to La Sarda Gurrea in search of another wished for species, namely sand-grouse. After much searching we were rewarded with good views of a small group of five: four **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* (the logo of OSME) and a single **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** *Pterocles alchata* flying in tight formation. Our next port of call was Monte Arigon, where a large wind farm has recently been built, this area yielded another flock of twenty five **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**. Another good bird for us was **Calandra Lark** and from these two areas we had a count of over thirty-five. We then set off for Loporzano stopping once we were in the locality, in the shadow of the ruined Monteargón Castle and as the light faded we saw two **Black Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucura* and a **Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius* on the Sandstone Cliffs. After a stop for a quick beer in the self-help village café we were soon moving into our comfortable double rooms. By this time it was completely dark. Our visit coincided with the Feast of Saint Sebastian and every

village, however small, appeared to have a bonfire in its centre and we were told that the delicacy enjoyed at the celebration was tripe!

Day Two

After a substantial continental breakfast at 0800, which included cornflakes, home made yoghurt and plenty of toast, it was off again in the vehicle. One of the delights for me was the huge flock of **Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocoax* that passed overhead Boletas every morning at first light, leaving their communal roost for feeding areas on the plain, over 500 birds calling to each other, a truly wonderful spectacle. Our first destination was the Mallos de Riglos the impressive red sandstone rock face above the village of Riglos and the wintering area of our number one bird **Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria*! This trip was a great success and we had good views for a long period of both **Wallcreeper** and also the very attractive **Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris*. Two other records of note from this location was firstly a group of over a hundred **Eurasian Crag Martin** *Hirundo rupestris* and secondly as we were looking through our telescopes at the Gallego River, well below us in the valley we saw a raptor in mid-stream. Closer inspection revealed a **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* standing on what at first we thought a small boulder but was in fact a large (salmon sized) fish upon which it was lunching! Eventually we descended from Riglos and enjoyed our picnic lunch from a view point beside the road. Looking back at the hills we were amazed at the number of **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** *Gyps fulvus* rising on the thermals above the cliffs, there were four separate groups each containing between thirty and fifty birds. My only

Wallcreeper

Alpine Chough

experience of this bird was the small, declining, colony on the cliffs at Episcopi that were sadly decreasing due to the lack of carrion. In this part of Aregon flocks of sheep and goats in the mountains were a very rare site and road kills of small mammals almost non- existent. How does this colony manage to thrive even over-coming the EECs strict new rules on the disposal of domestic animal carcases? After lunch we drove to Santa Cilia where on the hillside there is a vulture feeding station where a carcase is placed from time to time on the hillside. Here among a dozen Griffons we were to see another of our requested "must see" species the **Lammergeier** or **Bearded Vulture** *Gypaetus barbatus*. Here in the mist we had reasonable views of two birds, not the beautifully plumaged full adult but dark immature birds, we watched their rather feeble attempts at bone dropping. You need more altitude my son! Towards dusk we drove to the large Sariñena Lake where local naturalists were carrying out a count of **Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* . En-route we saw a flock of nineteen **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* and by the lake to round

off a truly excellent day a flock of eight **Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla.*

Day Three

Once again at first light we set off, today we were going up to the High Pyrenees - a long drive and the roads were very busy with snowboarders and skiers heading for the mountain tops. The plains were again quite misty, but once we gained a little height it was brilliant sunshine. We went right to the top and there was a notable lack of bird life, although I did manage to video, through a telescope, a **Chamois** *Rupicapra rupicapra* grazing unconcernedly on the mountain side. The border between Spain and France at Portalet was completely unmanned and here we had good views of ten **Alpine Chough** *Pyrrhocorax graculus.* It was very cold here but fortunately we were made welcome in the small border café that had a roaring log fire and plenty of warming drinks to thaw us out.

The lady at the café told us that every day the Snowfinches came to feed on her balcony at around 4pm, but as this was some four hours away we decided, reluctantly, to descend from the peaks and go in search of **Black Woodpecker** *Drocopus martius.* We stopped for a picnic lunch in the square of Santa Serena de la Serós, beside the ancient picturesque church. Whilst eating our baguettes a look skywards over the hills revealed yet again flocks of **Griffon Vultures** circling on the thermals. After lunch we started upwards to the top of the ridge, our destination San Juan de Lapeña. We heard **Black Woodpecker** but unfortunately did not see it. It was the same with **Crested Tit** *Parus Cristatus,* whose distinctive call was heard on several occasions but all managed to keep out of sight! We did however have excellent views of four **Common Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra* and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopus Major* before setting off back to a rather misty Loporzano. The Crossbills perched for a time on the roof of the Monastery, something not seen very often.

Day Four (The Final Day)

Today of course we would end up at the airport at Zaragoza, hopefully in time to catch our homeward flight departing at 1315L. We packed our bags into the car and then drove down a nearby narrow lane and right on cue we saw a group of four **Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia*. These very attractive buntings were also very obliging on this cold frosty morning and we had excellent views through the telescopes. We then proceeded to the sandstone cliffs that we had visited on that first magic evening. Once again our luck held and we had good views of **Black Wheatear**, **Thekla Lark** *Galerida theklae*, a bright male **Dartford Warbler** *Sylvia undata* and the "icing on the cake" a **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* sitting on the overhead wires. This was a new species for me. We then set off for the Ebro Valley Steppe quite a long drive but in the general direction of Zaragoza. En-route as we ascended toward the steppes we had nice views of another eight Rock Bunting, honestly they are like London Buses! When we arrived on the plain visibility was not good and we were beginning to think that our luck had eventually run out when from right beside the track a flock of five **Little Bustard** *Tetrax tetrax* took flight. They obligingly settled within telescope range and we watched them feeding, though for birds that are so bright in flight they are remarkably well camouflaged once on the ground. Our final sighting here was of two **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** and then we had to dash, traffic permitting, to the airport. As in all good fairy stories this one has a happy ending and we made it in time to catch our flight back home.

www.boletas.org

Ref: Collins Field Guide *by Mullarney, Zetterstrom, Svensson and Grant*

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO—MAY 2005

by

Dick Yates

In May 2005 Daphne and I spent 3 weeks birding in Trinidad and Tobago. We had a marvellous time, saw some 220 species and visited some truly magnificent places. We planned the trip ourselves and booked it through *Wildwings* who were very helpful. We included a 6 day 'birding package' staying at Pax Guesthouse on Trinidad. For this we had the exclusive use of a guide who was excellent and we undoubtedly saw many more species than if we had gone it alone.

We started our trip with 5 nights at the Cuffie River Nature Retreat on Tobago, transferred to Pax for 7 nights and then had 5 nights at Asa Wright. If you only have a week in Trinidad this is the place to stay, it is not the cheapest but it is the best, and a full range of trips, with expert guides, to all the best locations can be arranged. Finally, we returned to Tobago for 4 days R&R at Blue Waters near Speyside.

Travel. We flew with BWIA and inter-island with Tobago Express. Travel was a bit chaotic at times but we made it in the end. One tip, if flying into Trinidad and transferring straight on to Tobago you must collect your luggage on arrival in Port of Spain. They will tell you that it is checked through all the way, but it isn't. If you don't pick it up you will go without it! On Tobago we hired a car for one day and Newton George, a local guide, for another. He is excellent value. On Trinidad we had our guide's car for the 6 day package and didn't need any other transport. We went on a turtle watching trip from Asa Wright.

Tobago - Cuffie River. This is a beautiful spot, very peaceful and relaxing. It is in a forest setting and there are local walks. If you stay for 4 nights you get a complementary afternoons birding with the lodge's own guide Desmond. If you do stay for 4 days or more you will need to hire a car to get to see the other good places on the island. The lodge has comfortable rooms, good food and an excellent swimming pool. As this was our first taste of the Caribbean all the birds were new and exciting but the **Blue Crowned Motmot** *Momotus momota*, **Rufous Tailed Jacamar** *Galbula ruficauda* and the **Rufous Vented Chachalaca** *Ortalis ruficauda* stand out; the first 2 for their plumage and the last for its awful voice which wakes you every morning around 0430. This was also our first encounter with hummingbirds and the **White Necked Jacobin** *Florisuga mellivora*, **Rufous-breasted Hermit** *Glaucis hirsute*, **Black-throated Mango** *Anthracothorax nigricollis* and **Copper-rumped Hummingbird** *Amazilia tobaci* were beautiful. Common birds were **Tropical Mockingbird** *Mimus gilvus*, **Gray Kingbird** *Tyrannus dominicensis*, **Smooth Billed Ani** *Crotophaga Ani*, **Shiny Cowbird** *Molothrus bonariensis*, **Orange Winged Parrot** *Amazona amazonica*, **House Wren** *troglodytesaedon* and of course the ubiquitous **Bananaquit** *Coereba flaveola*, which was the only bird we saw on every day of our trip. **Blue-gray Tanager** *Thraupis episcopus* and **Palm Tanager** *Thraupis palmarum*, one of which was nesting in a plant pot on our balcony, were also common as was **Yellow Bellied Elaenia** *Elaenia flavogaster* and **White Tipped Dove** *Leptotila verreauxi*.

Day 2 and we had a great day out with Newton George. He picked us up at 0640 and before we left we had seen **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** *Nyctanassa violacea*, **Piratic Flycatcher** *Lrgatus leucophaius* and **Green-rumped Parrotlet** *Forpus passerinus*. En route for Gilpin Trace we

stopped to see a male **Barred Antshrike** *Thamnophilus doliatus,* **Southern Lapwing** *Vanellus chilensis,* **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis,* **Laughing Gull** *Larus atricilla,* **Pale-vented Pigeon** *Columba cayennensis* and **Bare-eyed Thrush** *Turdus nudigensis*. You need to get to Gilpin Trace early as it becomes a very popular walking venue after about 1100. Best birds there were **Collared Trogon** *Trogon collaris,* **Red-legged Honeycreeper** *Cyanerpes cyaneus* and **White-tailed Sabrewing** *Campylopterus ensipennis*; almost the whole population of this species was wiped out during hurricane Flora in Sep 63 which caused widespread devastation on Tobago. Thankfully the population has recovered somewhat today. Other good birds included **Chivi** or **Red-eyed Vireo** *Vireo chivi,* **Yellow-legged Thrush** *Platycichla flavipes,* looking for all the world like a blackbird, **Rufous-breasted Wren** *Thryothorus rutilus*, **Plain-brown Woodcreeper** *Dendrocincla fuliginosa* and **Blue-backed Manakin** *Chiroxiphia pareola*; and what a super little bird this one is, bright red head, vivid blue back and the rest of its suit is black. We found them again later at a lek and watched fascinated as a pair of males bounced up and down on a low branch trying to impress a non-existent female. The morning continued with **White-necked Thrush** *Turdus albicollis,* **Stripe-breasted Spinetail** *Synallaxis cinnamomea,* **White-fringed Antwren** *Formicivora grisea,* **Plain Antvireo** *Dysithamnus mentalis,* **Fuscous Flycatcher** *Cnemotriccus fuscatus* and **White-throated Spadebill** *Platyrinchus mystaceus*.

By 1030 it was getting busy so we decided to move on. As we came out of the forest another group of birders were watching a magnificent pair of **Great Black Hawk** *Buteogallus urubitinga,* our only sighting of this bird on the trip. We made several other stops during the remainder of the day seeing **Golden-olive Woodpecker** *Piculus rubiginosus,* **Cocoa Woodcreeper** *Xiphorhynchus susurrans,* Scrub Greenlet *Hylophilus flavipes,* **Yellow-breasted Flycatcher** *Tolmomyias flaviventris* and **Crested Oropendola** *Psarocolius decumanus,* whose huge woven bag nests hung from the trees. A stop near some cattle got us **Giant Cowbird** *Scaphidura oryzivora* and the stunning little **Ruby-topaz Hummingbird** *Chrysolampis mosquitus*. The final stop was near the outlet of a small river where we saw **Caribbean Martin** *Progne dominicencis*; and on and around the rocks not far off shore were **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster,* **Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus* and **Sooty Tern** *Sterna fuscata*.

On the 3rd day we hired a car and birded the area round Crown Point airport for about an hour seeing **Ruddy Ground Dove** *Columbina talpacoti,* a few **Eared Dove** *Zenaida auriculata,* a trio of **Red-crowned Woodpeckers** *Melanerpes rubricapillus* and more Green-rumped Parrotlet. We stopped right on the beach on the way out and saw about 25-30 **Magnificent Frigate Birds** *Fregata magnificens* using the wind to keep station, a flotilla of **Brown Pelicans** *Pelecanus occidentalis* each with its attendant Laughing Gull ready to snap up any escaping morsels, several Brown Booby's and a pair of **Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo,* fishing for their lunch. We then drove round to Pigeon Point, now very commercialised, and apart from sharing our sandwiches with a party of **Carib Grackle** *Quiscalus lugubris* there was not much else of interest so we moved on to the Bon Accord Treatment ponds. We couldn't get in but it wasn't a problem; birding from the road outside the wire was easy.

On and around the settling ponds were about 30 **Black Bellied Whistling Ducks** *Dendrocygna autumnalis,* half a dozen **White Cheeked Pintail** *Anas discors,* several **Anhinga** *Anhinga anhinga* and **Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* and we spotted one **American Purple Gallinule** *Porphyrula martinica*. But it was the herons that impressed. **Great Egret** *Ardea alba,* **Black Crowned Night-Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax,* **Little Blue Heron** *Egretta*

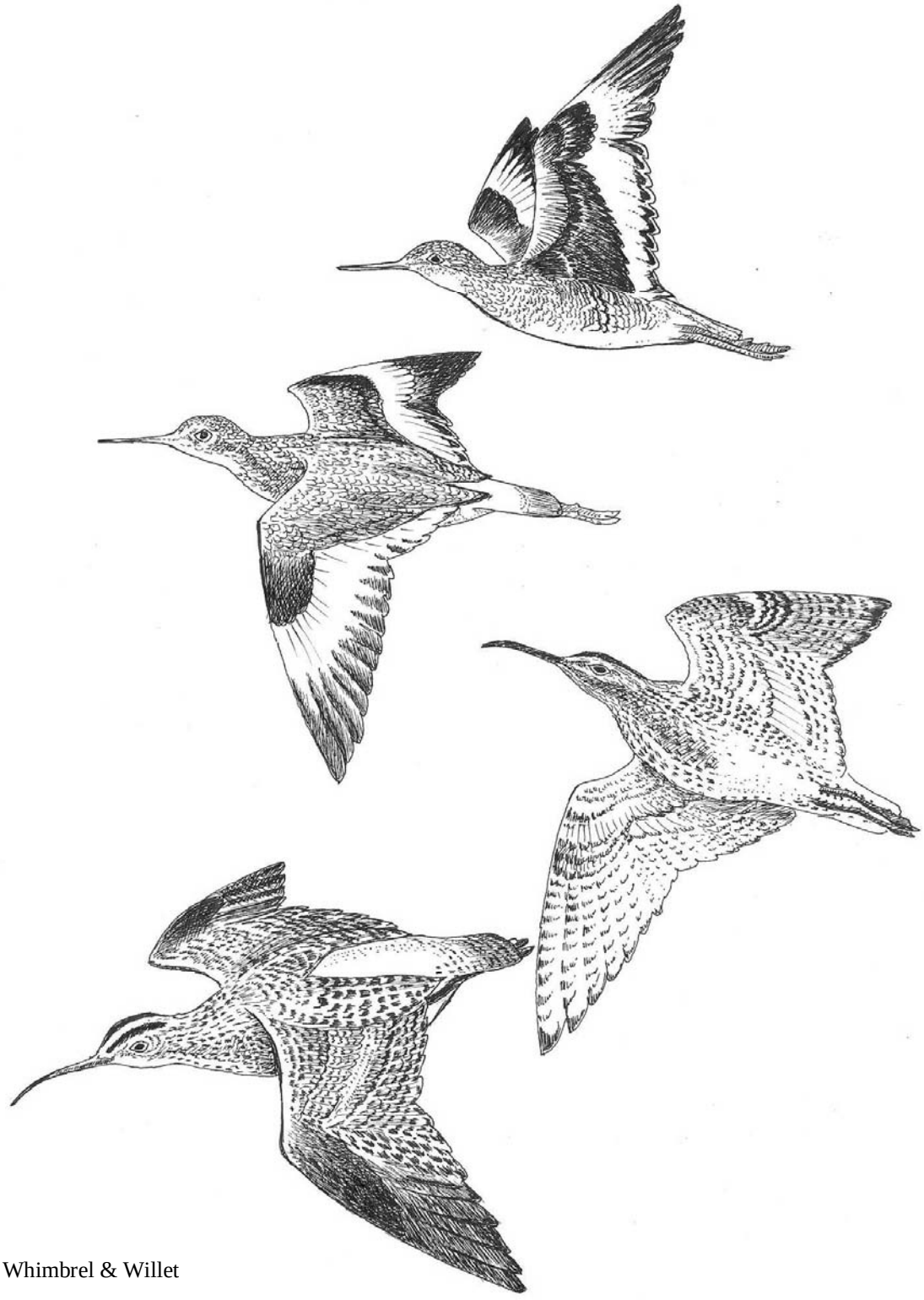
caerulea, **Tricolored Heron** *Egretta tricolor*, **Green Heron** *Butorides virescens* and one enormous **Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias* standing I estimated at about 4 ft tall. In addition, **Wattled Jacana** *Jacana jacana* and Southern Lapwing inhabited the creek opposite. Alongside the Anhinga, which was hanging its wings out to dry, were a few **Neotropic Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax brasiliensis* and a **Least Grebe** *Tachybaptus dominicus* plumbed the depths regularly seeking tasty morsels. In the meantime Carib Martins and **Short Tailed Swifts** *Chaetura brachyura* hawked for insects overhead and just as we were about to leave, a pair of **Greater Yellowlegs** *Tringa malanoleuca* graced us with their presence.

We ended the day with a visit to the Arnos Vale Hotel for afternoon tea and bird feeding, a pricey experience at £12 for 'tea for 2' plus a few small cakes, but the hummingbird display was worth the entrance fee. Black-throated Mangos, Copper-rumped and Ruby Topaz Hummingbirds put on a special show darting between the nectar feeders with the sun glinting off their iridescent plumage. They were accompanied by a crowd of Eared Doves and a noisy and unruly brigade of Bananaquits. Other attendees at the feast included Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Palm, Blue-Gray and White-lined Tanagers, Shiny Cowbirds and a rather old and sedate Orange-winged Parrot that shuffled around on the floor collecting 'whole cakes', he didn't bother with the crumbs.

Trinidad - Pax Guesthouse. The following morning we flew to Port of Spain and were taken to Pax for the start of our scheduled birding package. Pax is located on the edge of the Northern Range at 800ft in the cooler heights of the Mt St Benedict Monastery Estate. It boasts some 140 species in the 600 acres of the estate and there are good walks for those seeking exercise. I will try and give a brief (thank the Lord I hear you cry) account of our activities and if anyone would like a fuller account I can e-mail my diary to you.

Kenny, our guide, picked us up at around 0630-0700 on most days, and on Day 1 it rained all morning, but we pressed on and visited the Wildfowl Trust at Pointe a Pierre. The Trust is within the grounds of Petrotrin, the state owned oil company, and after a little local difficulty getting in, we set off to walk round the lake. The water birds here are a mixture of penned ones for the breeding programme and others that have been released but still hang around taking advantage of the free food. **Muscovy Duck** *Cairina moschata* is in evidence along with Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, Common Moorhen, Wattled Jacana, Purple Gallinule and Striated **Heron** *Butorides striatus*. Next up a **Ringed Kingfisher** *Ceryle torquata*, a migrant from South America and not commonly found. We also got super views of **Red-capped Cardinal** *Paroaria gularis* another uncommon migrant, **Boat-billed Flycatcher** *Megarynchus pitangua*, almost identical to **Great Kiskadee** *Pitangus sulphuratus* apart from its huge bill, **Yellow-hooded Blackbird** *Agelaius icterocephalus*, **Grayish Saltator** *Saltator coerulescens*, **Cocoa Thrush** *Turdus fumigatus* and an over flying **Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* complete the new bird list. A feature of this whole area is the brilliant array of trees in full bloom making a riot of purples, reds and yellows. After lunch we headed off to Waterloo, a coastal area to the south of the Island, with extensive mudflats and a great spot for gulls, terns and waders.

Our first glimpse was of a raft of roosting birds consisting of **Black Skimmers** *Rynchops niger*, **Royal Tern** *Sterna maxima*, **Large-billed Tern** *Phaetusa simplex*, a juvenile **Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis* and Laughing Gull, while the diminutive **Yellow-billed Tern** *Sterna superciliaris* hawked the inter-tidal flats. There were plenty of waders present too, **Semipalmated Plover** *Charadrius semipalmatus* and **Semipalmated Sandpiper** *Calidris pusilla*, **Willet** *Catoptrophorus*



Whimbrel & Willet

semipalmatus, Greater Yellowlegs and **Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus.* Great Egret, **Snowy Egret** *Egretta thula*, Little Blue Heron and Neotropic Cormorant were also present. Further along the coast we picked up **Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*, **Spotted Sandpiper** *Acitis macularia* and **Collared Plover** *Charadrius colaris*. We also saw **Common Black Hawk** *Buteogallus anthracinus*, **Gray-breasted Martin** *Prigene chalybea*, **White-winged swallow** *Tachycineta albiventer* and a very smart **Pied Water Tyrant** *Fluvicola pica* in his black and white livery.

On Day 2 we headed for the Aripo Agricultural Research Station to look for savannah type birds getting there around 1030, about ten minutes behind the rain. We sat in a retired cowshed to sit out the downpour and managed to pick out **Red-breasted Blackbird** *Sturnella militaris*, **Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* and our second Ringed Kingfisher. When the rain eased we moved and our next bird was **White-headed Marsh Tyrant** *Arundinicola leucocephala*, a very smart chap in the same livery but different pattern to the Pied Water Tyrant. The next new bird was quite a recent incomer, **Grassland Yellowfinch** *Sicalis luteola*, so recent that it has not made it into any of the books on T&T birds yet and we found it in the birds of Venezuela. Next came **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** *Tyrannus savana*, a male with his rather excessive tail feathers, a Piratic Flycatcher, **Gray Hawk** *Buteo nitidus* and **Striped Cuckoo** *Crotophaga naevia*.

It had been raining on and off all morning so we agreed to move, via a roti shop, to Manzanilla Beach where we would have lunch. Having shared our chicken curry and roti with the local dogs we set off down the road that divides the Nariva Swamp from the sea. The first sighting was of a **Pearl Kite** *Gampsonyx Swainsoni*, a very smart little raptor no more than 8 inches or so long. We continued down the marsh/sea interface and found **Yellow-headed Caracara** *Milvago Chimachima*, **Silvered Antbird** *Sclateria naevia* and **Black-crested Antshrike** *Sakesphorus Canadensis*, two real skulkers. A bit further along, sitting on a stalk over a river, was a **Green Kingfisher** *Chloroceryle Americana* and 2 minutes later Kenny heard **Pygmy Kingfisher** *Chloroceryle aenea* and used the tape to call in. This is a wonderful little bird, perfect in every detail and the colours depicted in Richard ffrench's guide do not do it justice. This was definitely my bird of the day.

While waiting for the **Red-bellied Macaws** *Ara manilta* to come to roost, which they normally do about 1730, we took a look in some local rice fields, and a good job too. We saw more Water and Marsh Tyrants, Yellow-hooded and Red-breasted Blackbirds, **Yellow Oriole** *Icterus nigrogularis* and **Yellow-chinned Spinetail** *Certhiaxis cinnamomea* and finally a pair of **Pinnated Bittern** *Botaurus pinnatus*. To cap it all we then spotted some Macaws going into a grove of palm nut trees a couple of fields away and careful scoping gave good views of these rare birds having a snack before going to roost. Having seen the Macaws we decided to call it a day but stopped when Kenny spotted a pair if **Yellow-crowned Parrots** *Amazona ochrocephala*. On the long drive home we stopped to watch a pair of **Swallow-tailed Kites** *Elanoides forficatus* flying majestically overhead.

At 0630 on Day 3 we set off for the Northern Range following the Blanchisseuse Road. It would prove to be a very productive day yielding 63 species of which 28 were new to us. Early sightings included **White Hawk** *Leucopternis albicollis*, Silver-**beaked Tanager** *Ramphocelus carbo*, with the most extraordinary gape that I have seen on any bird, a well camouflaged **Scaled Pigeon** *Columba speciosa*, a lovely bird with a broad green necklace dotted white, Rufous-breasted Wren and **Southern Rough-winged swallow** *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis* hawking along the road. A string of new and wonderful birds followed at various stops along the way.

Tropical Parula *Parula pittiayumi*, **Golden-fronted Greenlet** *Hylophilus aurantiifrons*, and **Violaceous Euphonia** *Euphonia violacea*, a beautiful little bird with a bright yellow forehead, throat, breast and belly and slaty grey back and wings, **Violaceous Trogon** *Trogon violacues*, **Blue Dacnis** *Dacnis cayana* and a lovely little **White-chested Emerald** *Amazilia chionopectus*. A high flyover by a pair of **Double-toothed Kite** *Harpagus bidentatus* had us craning our necks, but it was soon eyes down into the leaf litter for **Black-faced Antthrush** *Formicarius analis*, a tiny chicken-like bird, **Gray-throated Leaftosser** *Sclerurus albigularis* and a very smart **Great Antshrike** *Taraba major* showed up to complete our Antshrike collection. **Euler's Flycatcher** *Lathrotriccus euleri*, **Pale-breasted Spinetail** *Synallaxis albescens*, **Bay-headed Tanager** *Tangara gyrola*, **Turquoise Tanager** *Tangara mexicana*, a splendid little **Golden-headed Manakin** *Pipra erythrocephala* and a **Slaty-capped Flycatcher** *Leptopogon superciliaris* completed the morning list.

We stopped for lunch at a forest warden's cottage and this also proved to be a top spot. Apart from the Silver-beaked Tanagers nest in a small bush, we saw **Sooty Grassquit** *Tiaris fuliginosa*, **Hepatic Tanager** *Piranga flava*, **Speckled Tanager** *Tangara guttata* and while I slipped to the car to get a book I missed **Golden-crowned Warbler** *Basileuterus culicivorus* which Daphne got good views of. Then came the bird that really gave me the run around, **Rufous-browed Peppershrike** *Cyclarhis gujanensis*. I could not get the bins on this tyke! I chased him round the house from bush to bush, but eventually after about 15 minutes he stayed still long enough for me to pick him up. More of the birds we had seen before followed, but on the way home we found **Channel-billed Toucan** *Ramphastos vitellinus* after much neck craning and searching the tree tops; and **Lineated Woodpecker** *Dryocopus lineatus*. Now that's what I call a woodpecker - a big bird with bold black and white markings, a red head and crest.

Day 4 saw us visit Arena Forest, a lowland forest, in the morning and Waller Field in the late afternoon for night birds. Our first stop was on the edge of the forest for a calling **Masked Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis aequinoctialis*. Having located and watched the singer for a few minutes we spotted several raptors in the distance, **Plumbeous Kites** *Ictinia Plumbea*, an all-grey bird with dark red patches in the wing. In a nearby tree hung the pendulous nest of **Yellow-rumped Cacique** *Cacicus cela* and it wasn't long before the occupant turned up; a black and yellow bird half-way between a Yellow Oriole and a Crested Oropendula. So into the forest proper, and soon we heard **White-tailed Trogon** *Trogon viridis* calling and we swiftly located them, a magnificent sight and probably my bird of the day. The next new bird was **Long-billed Gnatwren** *Ramphocaenus malanurus* and we had a merry dance tracking it down. Almost immediately a flash caught my eye and there was the smallest bird I have ever seen, a **Little Hermit** *Phaethornis longuemareus*, just over an inch long without the tail. About 5-10 seconds worth and then it was gone. As we continued our journey 2 rather plump partridge type birds flew across the road in front of us**, Little Tinamou** *Crypturellus soui*, a shy bird and apparently not often seen. The remainder of the morning brought **Ochre-bellied Flycatcher** *Mionectes oleaginea*, **White-bellied Antbird** *Myrmeciza longipes* and a pair of **Squirrel Cuckoo** *Paiya cayana* clattering about in the tree-tops; and at last excellent views of **Purple Honeycreeper** *Cyanerpes caeruleus*. Finally, we went off to find a **White-bearded Manakin** *Manacus manacus* lek and we watched these super little black and white birds strutting their stuff with associated wing clicks. That completed the morning activity and we returned to Pax, setting off again at 1630 for Waller Field for night birds plus a few.

On arrival we had to negotiate with the security guards before heading for a stand of Moriche Palms, apparently a good stake out for the rare Moriche Oriole from about 1700 onwards. En route we passed a roost of literally hundreds of **Black Vultures** *Coragyps atratus*. They were still quite active but were obviously settling in for the night; an impressive if somewhat sinister sight. A little further we spotted a small dove pecking around among the grass tufts at the edge of the old runway, it was a **Common Ground-Dove** *Columbina passerina*, and as so often happens with birds called 'common' it is anything but. Arriving at the Moriche Palms we spotted several **Fork-tailed Palm-Swift** *Reinarda squamata* overhead and then picked up **Sulphury Flycatcher** *Tyrannopsis sulphurea*, yellow front with brown back and wings that often frequents Moriche Palms and Yellow-breasted Flycatcher. Finally a movement in a nearby bush caught my eye and when it was finally tracked down it turned out to be the diminutive **Southern Beardless Tyrannulet** *Camptostoma obsoletum*.
Quite a few of the more common species put in an appearance and we had a splendid 20 minute diversion watching up to 8 Red-bellied Macaws feeding in nearby trees and flying between them. But the Moriche Orioles did not show up. It was getting dark and time to move on to look for the night birds. **Common Pauraque** *Nyctidromus albicollis* and **White-tailed Nightjar** *Caprimulgus cayennensis* proved to be easy enough to find but the **Tropical Screech-Owl** *Otus Choliba* gave us the run around until we finally tracked him down and got good views in the spotlight.

Our 5th day saw us in the Caroni rice fields. These fields are no longer productive and provide a wonderful environment for wildlife. Giant Cowbird, Yellow-hooded and Red-breasted Blackbirds, a **Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus* and Pinnated Bittern were all early sightings and then Daphne spotted this large bird with rather laboured flight in the middle distance - **Limpkin** *Aramus guarauna*, one of our target birds for the day had turned up on cue. We scoped several more, both in flight and on the ground, before I called 'raptor'. It was the much sought **Long-winged Harrier** *Circus buffoni*, and he, for it was a male, came straight towards us and flew almost overhead with that wonderfully relaxed flight that harriers have - a magnificent sight and definitely my bird of the day. We still had a fair bit of the morning left so we returned to Waterloo to look for waders. Despite the high tide leaving little roosting area we found **Western Sandpiper** *Calidris mauri*, **Black-bellied Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*, our Grey Plover, and **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus*. Finally, **Saffron Finch** *Sicalis flaveola*, and on the way back to Pax a quick stop at Caroni swamp brought us **Clapper Rail** *Rallus longirostris*, driven close to the shore line by the high tide.
Late afternoon was to be our boat trip into the Caroni swamp but before we even left the guesthouse car park we had found **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl** *Glaucidium brasiluanum* and **Trinidad Euphonia** *Euphonia trinitatis*. Then to the boat and our ever so young looking boatman Sean. A very pleasant trip into the swamp yielded **Greater Ani** *Crotophaga major*, **Common Potoo** *Nyctibius griseus*, **Bicolored Conebill** *Conirostrum bicolour* and **Straight-billed Woodcreeper** *Xiphorhynchus picus* before we arrived at the much vaunted **Scarlet Ibis** *Eudocimus ruber* roost. It was very pleasant sipping rum punch and watching the sun go down as the water lapped against the boat. But, as it was the breeding season most of the adult birds were away in the breeding colony and the roost was restricted to non-breeding adults or immature birds, many not yet in full plumage. But there was still a couple of hundred or so and to see them coming in to roost was a great sight.

For our last day it was planned that we should try to see Common Piping Guan – *Aburria pipile.* But the site is more than 3 hours drive each way and I didn't want to spend most of my last day travelling from A

to B and back. So we settled on tasking Kenny to find us some more forest birds, and as we hadn't been to the Aripo Forest I suggested that we try there. We set off at 0630 heading out past Arima Village and up into the hills. New birds today consisted of the tiny **Bran-colored Flycatcher** *Myiophobus fasciatus*, **Forest Elaenia** *Myiopagis gaimardii,* super views of **Long-billed Starthroat** *Heliomaster longirostiris* and a brief look at **Black-tailed Tityra** *Tityra cayana*; we got much better views of a pair later on. Then a raptor came into view and we saw our first **Zone-tailed Hawk** *Buteo albonotatus* and overhead another raptor – Osprey, where did he come from? We parked the car and walked, nay staggered, up a very steep hill but it did give us the beautiful **Blue-chinned Sapphire** *Chlorestes notatus,* good views of a pair of Black-tailed Tityra and finally **Tropical Pewee** *Contopus cinerus*. We had several other previously seen species but today's new birds brought our trip tally to over 200. That was the end of our stay at Pax and the following morning we transferred to Asa Wright.

Asa Wright Nature Centre & Lodge. Situated in the Arima Valley the accommodation is very comfortable, the food is excellent and the guides are friendly and helpful. We spent 5 nights at the lodge and only ventured on one trip to go turtle watching. Your day starts on the famous balcony where it is claimed that you can see 25 species before breakfast, and I'm sure you can but I didn't count. On our first afternoon we picked up 2 new species **Green Honeycreeper** *Chlorophanes spiza* and **Gray-fronted Dove** *Leptotila rufaxilla* and got really close up views of **Purple** *Cyanerpes caeruleus* and **Red-legged Honeycreeper** *Cyanerpes cyaneus* as well as White-necked Jacobin and White-chested Emerald.

Day 2 started on the balcony and we had barely got our first cup of coffee when someone called that they had **Ornate Hawk-Eagle** *Spizaetus ornatus* in the scope; our first new bird of the day was perched in full view on a tree about 300m in front of us. After breakfast we gathered for our orientation walk with one of the guides. After Golden-headed Manakin, Blue-crowned Motmot and the White-bearded Manakins on the nearby lek we gained our second new bird of the day **Bearded Bellbird** *Procnias averano*; and a singularly handsome looking creature he is with his white body, brown head, black wings and a profusion of black wattles hanging from his throat. He also has a very loud BOK call, and it is the very devil to locate the caller. After about an hour our guide left us and we decided to walk the Bellbird Trail. Here we got our next 2 new birds **Red-crowned Ant Tanager** *Habia rubica* and **White-shouldered Tanager** *Tachyphonus luctuosus*. For the rest of the day we relaxed and explored the gardens and at tea time Daphne went to stake out a Vervain (verbena) bush for **Tufted Coquette** *Lophornis ornate,* and she found one. She called me and I got onto it too. It is minute and very smart, but it doesn't stay still for long, 10 seconds or so feeding on the flowers in a particular bush and it is off like a little rocket to the next one, so you need to be quick to get onto them. This was a very pleasant and relaxing day after the running around of the previous week and quite productive, we got 43 species of which 5 were firsts. On our second full day we really relaxed and I spent most of it practising my digiscoping techniques, with limited success.

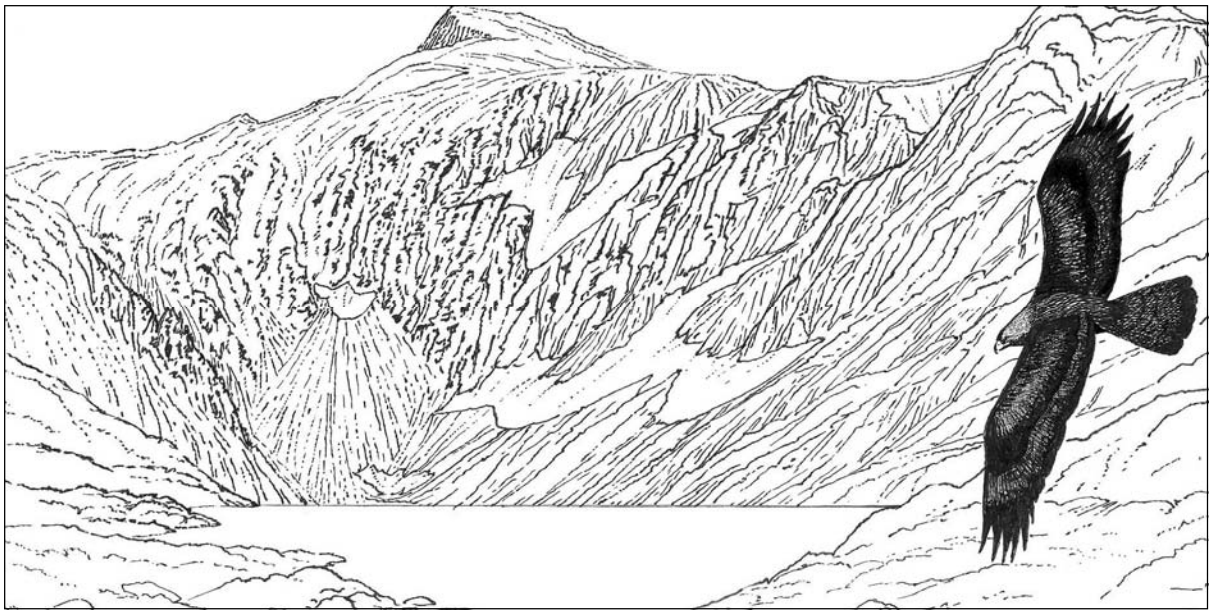
We decided day 3 would be a bit more energetic and after breakfast we birded the road up to the main gate. Our target was Green Hermit *Phaethornis guy*, which one of the guides told us he had seen on the heliconias growing along the drive. We didn't find it! However, we watched a good number of birds we had seen before including a pair of Streaked Flycatchers obviously nesting near the top of a nearby tree. On the return trip we spotted **White-flanked Antwren** *Myrmotherula axillaries*

another first. We had booked a turtle watching trip to Matura beach for the evening so a siesta was in order. We left at 1630 with our driver Ramdas, a very experienced local birder. En-route we saw our second Zone-tailed Hawk, **Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*, Black Vulture, Smooth-billed Ani, Cattle Egret and **Tropical Kingbird** *Tyrannus melancholicus*. On the road to the beach Ramdas spotted some Howler Monkeys in a tree so we stopped to watch. Then we heard a woodpecker drumming, Daphne spotted it and Ramdas confirmed my assessment of **Crimson-crested Woodpecker** *Phloeoceastes melanoleucos*, one we were after. Finally, in failing light, on grassland just behind the beach we saw **Barn Owl** *Tyto alba*. When it was completely dark we walked, with guides, along the beach to watch a female Leatherback Turtle excavate her nest hole with amazing care and precision and when it was 'just so' she laid her eggs. She then moved away and after digging 2 decoy nests she dragged herself back down the beach to the sea - an amazing experience.

On the balcony next morning we had **Chestnut Woodpecker** *Celeus elegans* and **Lilac-tailed Parrotlet** *Touit batavica* and after breakfast we set off on our guided walk to Dunstan's Cave to see **Oilbird** *Steatornis caripensis*. These really are crazy-looking birds, the size of a Rook with a metre plus wingspan flapping around in a dark cave. Just outside the cave entrance was a **Chestnut-collared Swift** *Streptoprocne rutila* on its nest. That afternoon on the balcony someone called **Blue Dacnis**, I had just got onto it when one of the guides identified it as **Swallow Tanager** *Tersina viridis*, quite a rare bird and bonus for our last day at Asa Wright.

The following morning we transferred back to Tobago to Blue Waters Hotel near Speyside. Next day we took a boat trip out to Little Tobago to see **Red-billed Tropicbird** *Phaethon aethereus*. There were several flying around and we found one bird on its nest near the summit of the hill. Also present were **Roseate Tern** *Sterna douhallii*, Sooty Tern, **Red-footed Booby** *Sula sula*, Brown Noddy, Magnificent Frigate Bird and Caribbean Martin. Our last 2 days were spent exploring the local area seeing plenty of good birds but no more new ones.

This was a wonderful holiday and birding trip and I can recommend T&T as a birding destination. Our final tally was 223 species. I can provide my detailed diary and a full list of species seen if anyone is interested.



Golden Eagle *by Ken Baldridge*

Pictures from WWT

A New Fund-raiser for the WWT?

(The sign actually reads 'Wetlands Discovery Centre')

Jane Russell (honest!) using my 'scope—why do I look so worried?

THE RAFOS NEWSLETTER

is published twice per year and the Editor welcomes all contributions.

Guidance for Potential Contributors.

- **The length of the article does not matter** - there is always room for shorter items, and a variety of short articles is preferred to an epic novel.

- **Illustrations are always welcome.** Pen and ink line drawings reproduce best. It is now possible to reproduce colour photographs effectively , but these are confined to the front and back covers to keep reproduction and collation costs down.

- **Please send written items as soon as you can**, as this spreads the load on me and, more importantly, on our hard-working Illustrator-in-Chief, (Robbie).

- In producing this Newsletter MS Publisher is used, and it can be a bit fussy at times. **Please send any pictures separately, preferably as .jpg files, rather than building them into a word processed document. Also Publisher does not easily import spreadsheets, footnotes and tables, so please try to avoid using them.**

- **The editor looks forward to receiving written contributions in the following formats, listed in order of preference:**

  1. **By e-mail** as an attachment. MS Word will import from most mainstream word processors. If in doubt, use Windows Write, but almost anything will work (but please tell the editor what it is!). Strongly preferred. **Please avoid fancy layouts – see above**.

  2. **On a floppy disk** The same hints on content as for email apply.

  3. **As typed copy**, black on white so that it can be scanned into a PC.

  4 **Hand-written** (least welcome!!).

- Illustrations are relatively technology-proof. Please send them well packed to the address below - **and please let the editor know if you want them back.**

Closing date for items for Newsletter 82 is 1 August 2006

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Please note that opinions expressed in articles in this Newsletter are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society or its committee.

Similarly the appearance of an advert does not imply any recommendation.

Greater Kestrel *Falco Rupiclaides*
Picture by Mike Hayes
Namibia, September 2005

White-tailed Eagle *by Dickie Duckett*
Winner of the 2005 Photographic Competition - Best Picture