Ornithological Society Newsletter

Little Bittern by George Candelin

Web Site: http//www.rafos.org.uk

No 86 **Autumn 2008**

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Patron

MRAF Lord Craig of Radley GCB OBE MA DSc FRAeS RAF

President

Air Vice Marshal Martin J Routledge BSc MRAeS RAF

Vice Presidents

Air Chief Marshal Sir John Gingell GBE KCB (Retd)
Air Chief Marshal Sir Joe French KCB CBE FRAeS RAF (Retd)
Air Marshal Sir John Baird KBE DL MBChB FRCPE FRCSE FFOM D Av Med FRAeS (Retd)
Air Marshal Sir Edward Gordon-Jones KCB CBE DSO DFC (Retd)
Air Marshal Sir Charles Pringle KBE MA FEng Hon FRAeS (Retd)
Air Commodore AC Curry LVO OBE (Retd)
Air Commodore A C P Seymour (Retd)

Committee

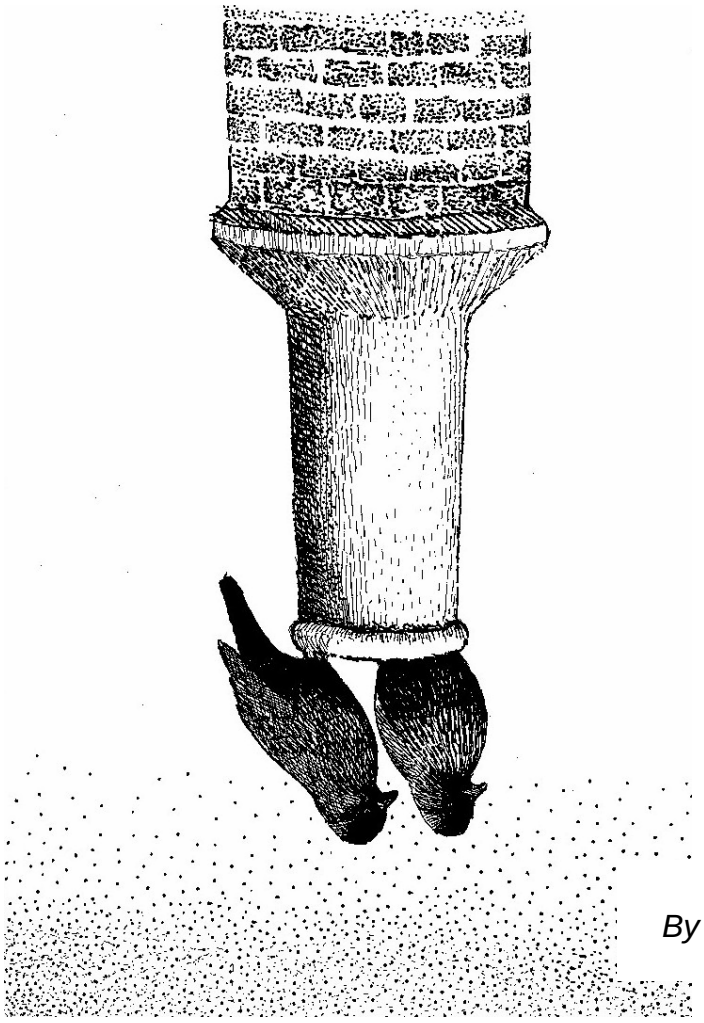
(As at 20 August 2008)

Chairman: Wg Cdr C Watson MBE MSc MCIPS MEI RAF
Secretary: Mrs J Knight
Treasurer: Mr C J Sparks MBE FinstLM MBOU
Membership Secretary: Sqn Ldr M Hayes RAF
FALO/Expeditions Member: Gp Capt J C Knights FRGS MRAeS (Retd)
Journal Editor: Situation Vacant
Newsletter Editor: Sqn Ldr R Yates (Retd)
Publicity Member: FS J Wells MITSC
Production & Distribution Manager: Mr C P Wearn
Librarian: Flt Lt I Grove RAF
Webmaster: Mr G Candelin

Ex Officio Members

Scientific Adviser: Dr A G Gosler Dphil FLS MBOU
Ringing Co-ordinator: Mr C P Wearn

CONTENTS LIST



Jackdaws
By Ken Baldridge

All other illustrations in this issue of the Newsletter were by Robbie Robinson unless otherwise acknowledged.

Editorial

This month we have a bumper edition of the Newsletter so many thanks to everyone who submitted items for publication. We have 2 long reports from the Cyprus Exped in Apr/May and from this year's Winter Duck. You have got to admire the dedication of those Winter Duck guys; Cyprus is great – but northern Scotland in darkest February!! We also have reports on the June Expedition to Kintyre, the Society's contribution to the 2007-11 Bird Atlas, and on Burhham Overy.

In addition, we have several reports on trips made by members to various parts of the world and one or two other topical items, so I hope that there is something for everybody.

Dick Yates

Ringing Course 8-10 Aug 08 *Photo: Tony Crease*

L-R: RAFOS President, AVM Martin Routledge; Dick Yates; Roger Dickey (AOS) and
Colin Wearn

NOTICEBOARD

AGM 2008

The 2008 AGM will be held in The Spitfire Auditorium at RAF High Wycombe on Sat 15 Nov 2008. Please see the flyer sent out with this Newsletter for full details.

RAFOS FIELD ACTIVITIES FOR THE REMAINDER OF 08 AND EARLY 09

3 – 5 Oct 08	Portland
24 Oct – 2 Nov 08	Cornish Chough
2 Nov 08	Chew Valley
16 Nov 08	Post AGM Field Meeting (Venue TBD)
4 Jan 09	WWT Slimbridge
6 - 14 Feb 09	Winter Duck 8
3 - 6 Apr 09	Burnham Overy
Apr 09	Chew Valley
9 - 16 May	Islay Mist
May/Jun	Kintyre or Mingulay (BTO survey)

OVERSEAS BIRDING TRIPS

If you enjoy going overseas to see birds please read Peter Tithecott's open letter offering to organise birding trips for members on page 51 of this Newsletter.

RINGING COURSE

As you can see from the previous page, after 4 years of trying, Colin managed to get the Ringing Course underway at Catterick over the weekend 8-10 August. Mind you we couldn't get any nets up on the Saturday because of rain, so a bit of field work in the morning and a visit to Theakston's Brewery in the afternoon saw the day off nicely.

Foxglove Covert is a super place and I will be asking Tony Crease to write a short piece about it for the next Newsletter. In the meantime, if you are in the Catterick area please drop in, it is open most days. You can also see it at www.foxglovecovert.org.uk.

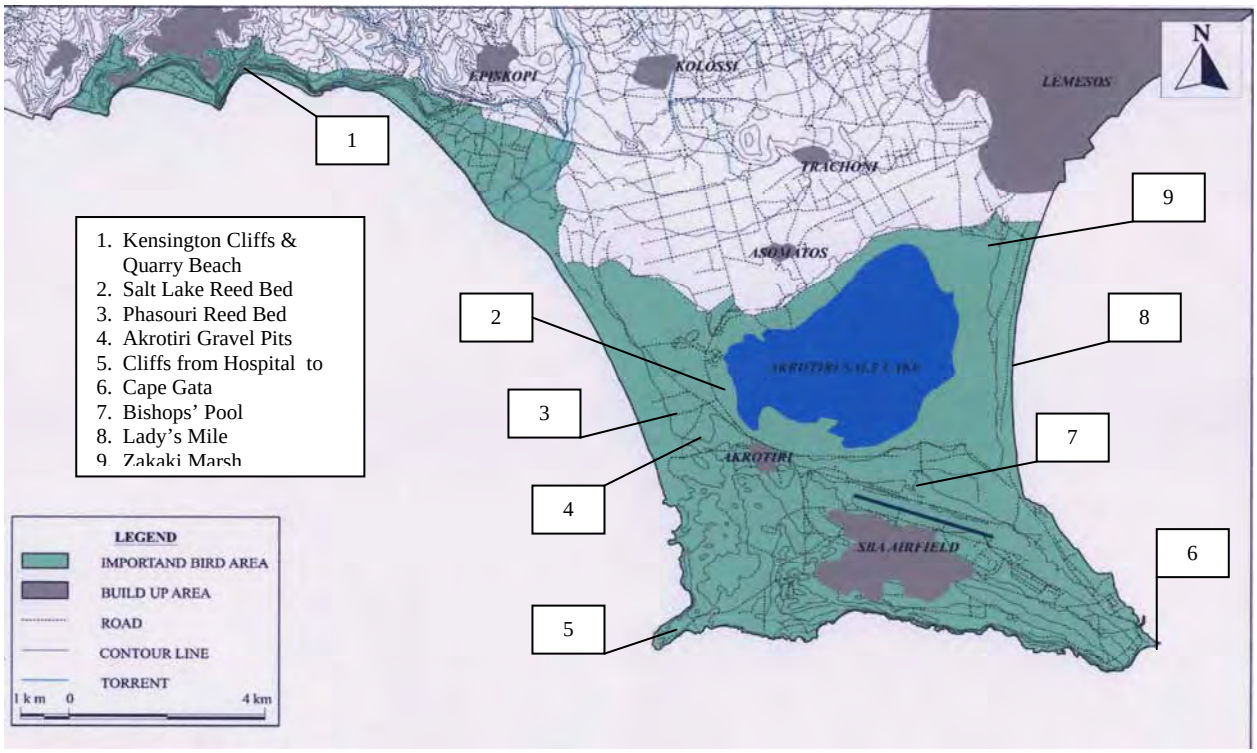
EXCYPSURV-08

By Dick Yates, Mike Blair and Colin Wearn

Between 7 Apr and 16 May 08, 32 RAFOS Members and Associate Members took part in ExCypSurv 08. You may recall from my article in Newsletter 83 that the aim of the Survey was to gather meaningful and verified data on the birds, their habitat, feeding and breeding habits within selected sites on the Akrotiri Peninsula to assist Birdlife Cyprus and the Sovereign Base Area (SBA) Conservation Office in devising a practical and sustainable conservation management plan for the area.

SITES

The main observation sites, shown on the map below, were the wetlands at Phasouri Reed-bed and Zakaki Marsh, the Bishops' Pool and Lady's Mile; and we visited the cliffs on base and at Kensington/Quarry Beach and the Akrotiri Gravel Pits on an ad hoc basis. The ringers established ringing sites in the Bishops' Pool area, at Phasouri Reed-bed, on the track round the northern end of the Salt Lake and near the old Akrotiri village church just on the edge of the Gravel Pits.



METHODOLOGY

We monitored the 3 major sites, Phasouri Reed-bed, Zakaki Marsh and Bishops' Pool from 0700 -1100 and again from 1500 -1800 almost every day. Zakaki Marsh was only monitored in the morning because by afternoon we were looking directly into the sun. The other areas were monitored on a more ad hoc basis. Recording at the 3 major sites was done every 30 minutes and at the other sites a Casual Record Reporting Form was used, noting all birds seen. Call over was held at 1300 daily when records from that morning and the previous afternoon were put into the database, which was based on the Birdlife Cyprus format. I believe that we achieved the aim and in the process 2674 birds were ringed and over 4000 observations were made of approx 200 bird species. A formal report will be published by the end of the year, but this is an account of how it went.

WEATHER

Cyprus was, and still is, in the grip of a serious drought. The last decent winter rain and snow had been the winter of 2004/05 and last winter had been particularly dry. Most of the reservoirs were extremely low, Kouris Dam about 9% full and Asprokremnos only about 6% being the worst. When we arrived much of the Island looked like it usually does in mid May and by the time we left it was looking like late June. Indeed, just before we departed the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) Government concluded a deal with Greece to provide them with fresh water. This was to be shipped at the rate of 500,000 cubic metres a day for 160 days and would be pumped directly into the Yermasoyia Dam. The problem here of course is that as the weather gets hotter the water evaporates almost as fast as it can be pumped in. However, despite the drought, all the main observation sites held quite a lot of water at the start of the survey; this was to change markedly by the end.

But I digress, for the duration of our survey the temperatures were typical for the time of year; April gave daytime highs of around 20-22°C with nights around 10°C; progressing into May the daytime temperatures rose to 25-28°C and the nights around 15-20°C. However, the winds were a problem on most days. Westerlies are the prevailing winds in the spring, but this year they were stronger and more constant than normal. This made birding difficult on some days and the ringers had particular problems with high winds. Most days were bright and sunny and rain was almost non-existent.

ADMIN & ORG

Akrotiri Education and Environment Centre

The centre was established in Akrotiri Village by the SBA Administration, and the Centre Manager, Thomas Hadjikyriacou, and his staff work tirelessly to inform and instruct the people of the local area in the meaning and practicality of conservation. Their work with the children and schools of Limassol has been particularly valuable and if you are ever in Cyprus please call in and meet Thomas and get to know about the work that he is doing. We were allowed to use the centre whenever we wished and we held meetings there and used their IT facilities. In addition, it was Thomas who found us our local accommodation.

Accommodation and Food

Four apartments had been rented in Akrotiri Village. Each apartment had 2 X 2 person bedrooms, a bathroom and a mostly fully equipped kitchen. These were not luxurious but met the requirement and at £10 per head per night were reasonably priced. Our Landlords were very helpful and managed to get us most of what we needed. As for food, most nights we ate out in one or other of the many tavernas and restaurants in the village. Prices were reasonable but are starting to increase, as they are worldwide. For those choosing to eat-in groceries were available at a well-stocked little supermarket also in the village.

Transport

We were very fortunate in that our stated aim for the survey tied in very neatly with many of HQ BFC's environmental responsibilities and objectives and we agreed to work in support of these and provide all our data to them to help build their environmental

plans. As a result we were given the use of 2 Safari long-wheelbase Land Rovers. These proved to be invaluable and left us with sufficient funds to hire a further 2 vehicles for getting the ringers plus 3 observer teams out to their operating areas. Our thanks go to Nicholas Nicolau who provided these 2 additional vehicles at a greatly reduced daily rate. It has long been said that an exped prospers on the availability of transport and for Cyprus 08 we had ample and prospered.

Arrival

I arrived in Cyprus on 31 Mar and Mike Blair on 2 Apr. We set up residence in one of the 4 flats and started collecting kit and generally getting ready to start the survey the following Monday. Fg Off Mark Blower had been appointed as our POC and I met up with him on day 1. He provided me with passes for everyone, which, when presented with a passport, gained access to RAF Akrotiri. Getting these passes en-masse saved a lot of time that would have been wasted in queuing up individually. Throughout the whole 6 weeks Mark was superb and his organisation made life very easy for us. Mike and I also visited Dr Ian Davidson-Watts, SO1 Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) at Episkopi. He had agreed to be our official sponsor and made our visit possible. We also picked up the Land Rovers and collected some kit from the Garrison Quartermaster at Epi. In fact everybody we met at both Akrotiri and Episkopi was extremely helpful and made every effort to ensure that we got what we needed. By Friday 4 April we were all set and over the weekend of 4-6th Apr Team 1 arrived; 8 ringers, under the direction of Tony Crease, and 6 observers; me, Mike, Jon Orme, Peter Evans, Cedric Cooksey and Dave Munday.

THE BIRDS

Team 1

On Sunday 6th Apr we held a general briefing for Team 1 and Alan Crabtree, the Birdlife Cyprus Ringing Co-ordinator, came down to brief Tony Crease and his team, so by Monday morning we were all ready to start. The ringing operations will be covered later in this report, so this section deals with only the observer's activities. We started by recording all birds seen at the 3 main wetland sites, Zakaki Marsh, Phasouri Reed-bed and Bishops' Pool, usually twice a day. Common species were Little Grebe *Tachybaptus rificollis*, Coot *Fulica atra*, Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*, Little Stint *Calidris minuta* and Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* and these were seen daily. Ferruginous Duck *Athya nyroca*, one of our target species, were also present at Phasouri and Zakaki and were seen almost daily but disappointingly, there was no evidence of breeding.

The Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber* that winter on the Salt Lake normally stay around until mid to late April but this year they departed early due to the drought; however, we did see a few, about a hundred or so, from the 14th to 17th and then a flight of about 50 on the 22nd, after that not one.

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, was seen regularly during the first 2 weeks mainly at Bishops' Pool and Phasouri and less often at other locations. Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* appeared at Phasouri in the first week and continued to be seen in small numbers until early May. Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* were seen in smallish numbers throughout April but had completed their passage by early May and Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* and

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* were in evidence for the whole period with numbers peaking in late April/early May. Most of the winter visiting ducks, Teal *Anas Crecca*, Pintail *Anas acuta* and Gadwall *Anas strepera* had left by mid April but a small number of Garganey *Anas querquedula* and Shoveler *Anas clypeata* stayed around for the whole period. Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, usually a feature at Phasouri, was only present in ones and twos until early May but there were often several days between sightings; only one Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* was seen overflying Akrotiri Village on 10th Apr.

Night Herons at Phasouri Reed-bed *Photo by Ian Grier*

Other resident species were recorded regularly, Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Chukar *Alectoris chukar*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, which seemed to me to be far more abundant than I remembered, as well as the background species such as Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*, Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Great Tit *Parus major* etc. Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* was seen in suitable locations and one brood was noted to have fledged 4 young from a nest on the cliffs at Tunnel Beach. Jackdaws *Corvus monedula*, were plentiful on the cliffs and the ubiquitous Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* was almost everywhere.

These were busy days for Team 1 but it wasn't all work; on the middle Sunday we visited the theatre at Curium and then on to Anoyira Village for a Lamb Kleftico lunch.

We are all now fully prepared, or we should be, for that 'Jon Orme' moment. The first of ours came at call over on day one. The previous week Mike and I had persuaded our landlady that we needed a kettle and it had arrived that morning – brand new. The team arrived for call over and, flushed with the success of his toast making at Burnham Overy, Jon volunteered:

"Shall I put the Kettle on?" Good idea was the response. We continued the call over until someone said: "Where's the tea Jon?" We then noticed he was standing by the sink with this little plastic switch in his hand. "What happened?" was the chorus. "It's the on/off switch" he said, "I pushed it down and nothing happened so I did it again, same result, so I tried it a bit harder and it came off in my hand"

Over the piece other things came apart in Jon's hands, the door handles to his room came off – both of them, and in the local kebab shop he was cutting a piece of lamb and his knife broke in half; these things just happen to Jon!

But back to the birds. Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* came through in small numbers throughout with Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* appearing about a week later. At Phasouri a pair of Spur-winged Lapwings *Hoplopterus spinosus* was in residence for most of the survey but there may have been too much disturbance for them to breed. On Lady's Mile Little Stint *Calidris minuata* were quite common, Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* were breeding on the salt pans and small numbers of Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminkii*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Sanderling *Calidris alba* were observed. Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatillis* were seen at Bishop's Pool with, Wood *Tringa glareola* and Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* more widespread, while Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* and the odd Greenshank *Trunga nebularia* turned up at most locations. Of the Gulls, Yellow-legged *Larus cachinnans* were common, with Med Gull *Larus melanocephalus* seen twice on 10th and 17th April at Zakaki Marsh. Black-headed *Larus ridibundus* were regular in ones and twos and Baltic Gull *Larus fuscus* was seen on 4 occasions.

Turtle Dove at Bishop's Pool East *Photo: Ian Grier*

The spring migration was in full swing and Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* were much in evidence from the start. Other migrants recorded were Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*, Tree *Anthus Trivialis*, Tawny *A campestris*, Meadow *A pratensis* and Red-throated Pipits *A cervinus*, Yellow *Motacilla flava* and White Wagtails *M Alba*, Black *Phoenicurus ochruros* and Common Redstart *P phoneicurus* and Stonechat *Saxicola torquatas* and Whinchat *S rubetra*. Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* was seen at a number of locations between 6th and 22nd Apr. Warblers also featured significantly: Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* were common, Tony Crease and his team ringed nearly 200 of them on 11 Apr, Olivaceous *Hipploais pallida* was seen most days and a few Ruppell's *Sylvia ruepellii* and Eastern Orphean *Sylvia crassirostris* and Eastern Bonelli's *Phylloscopus orientalis* were seen during the first 2 weeks. Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, Common *Sylvia communis* and Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* and Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* were also present. With the exception of Spotted *Miscicapa striata*, Flycatchers were in short supply with only small numbers of Pied *Fidecula hypoleuca* and Collared *F albocollis* being seen.

The summer visitors such as Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*, Hoopoe *Upupa epops* and Roller *Coracias garrulus* were arriving along with Common *Apus apus* and Alpine Swift *A melba* and of course Barn *Hirundo rustica* and Red-rumped Swallow *H daurica* and House Martin *Delichon urbica*. Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca* were also beginning to arrive to commence their breeding cycle. The first Eleanora's Falcon *Falco eleonorae* was seen on 13th Apr.

All in all a busy time for Team 1. Best birds? I guess everyone has their favourites, but in my opinion, although I didn't see them were the Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*, caught by the ringers but which managed to escape before Tony could get a ring on it, on 9th Apr; the Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatillis* that Peter Evans and Jon Orme got onto at the back of Phasouri Reed-bed on 11th Apr; the Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* seen, but not netted, by the ringing team at Phasouri on 15th Apr and Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptesminimus* on 9th and 14th Apr, the second of which was ringed; and the one I did see, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops supercilliosus* at Bishop's Pool, only my second sighting of this bird.

Team 2

Over the weekend18-20th Apr Team 1 departed and Team 2 started arriving. I say started because it was a bit of a moveable feast spread over a few days and Mike and I were involved in several airport runs. However, we were finally all gathered and Dick & Jan Knight, Bill & Sheila Bourne, Simon Dennis and his partner Theresa and Andrea Rolt were soon busy taking up where Team 1 left off. Tony Crease and his ringers also, left that weekend and were replaced by Colin Wearn, Alan Brimmell, Robin and Julia Springett and George Candelin.

Dick & Jan Knight were the great stalwarts that they always are and worked tirelessly for the cause throughout their stay. For Andrea, a new recruit to birding, this was her first outing with the RAFOS crowd. She seemed to enjoy herself and I don't think that we have frightened her off, mind you, the realisation that we were up and about at 0530 every day seemed to come as a bit of a shock, as witnessed by her initial comment:

"I didn't know that there were two 6 o'clocks in one day!" She soon got used to it.

It was a real pleasure to have Bill and Sheila Bourne with us. I had not met Bill but knew of him by repute, as a renowned expert on sea birds. He was also a founder member of COS 57, one of the forerunners of Birdlife Cyprus, and he had not been back for nearly 50 years. His ornithological knowledge and expertise were much appreciated, even if he is a bit vain and won't wear glasses. He also has a somewhat old-fashioned attitude to spotting the birds: "You keep watch and I'll go in there and stir them up a bit!" Bill has a widespread reputation and a number of the members of the current Birdlife Cyprus Committee, including their Chairman Melis Charalambides, came from Nicosia to meet him. Simon Dennis is well known to many RAFOS members and it was a pleasure to meet his partner Theresa, who, like Andrea, is fairly new to birding; mind you she is learning fast. Simon's skills are an asset on any birding venture but I think that it's his secondary role as a plumber that will go down as his great achievement on this trip. Who can forget the sight of Simon, with a black bin-bag up to his shoulder, having successfully unblocked the toilet in the flat.

From about 17th Apr Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* became a regular sighting at Phasouri and Zakaki and Great Egret *Ardea alba* started to be reported, usually as

individuals. Grey heron numbers peaked between 15th and 28th Apr, with a flight of 24 seen near Bishops' Pool on the 17th and 12 at Phasouri on the 23rd and the Purple Heron and Glossy Ibis passage continued, peaking around the end of April/early May but birds were still coming through until the end of the survey.

Mallard ducklings started to appear at Zakaki about the 17th of Apr and other evidence of breeding by Kentish Plover, Cyprus *Sylvia melanothorax* and Sardinian Warblers *Sylvia melanocephala*, Great Tit and Jackdaw was noted.

Turning to raptors, the iconic Cyprus bird the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* was conspicuous by its absence, with one seen at Tunnel Beach on 14th and 2 on 27th Apr, with 2 further sightings of 2 birds in May. The RoC Game Fund was reporting that there may be as few as 9 birds left on the island and in conjunction with Birdlife Cyprus they are trying to work out a reintroduction strategy for the future. Let us hope that a successful one can be achieved, Cyprus without Griffons is almost unthinkable. Between 18th and 28th Apr 4 Pallid *Circus macrourus* and one Montague's Harrier *Circus pygargus* were seen, Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* were seen in ones and twos throughout the survey, 2 Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* on 23rd and 27th, both at Bishop's Pool and Hobby *Falco subbuteo* was reported between 20th Apr and 6th May again, mainly at Bishops' Pool. Two Sparrowhawks *Accipter nisus* on 29th Apr and 1st May, 2 Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* on 15th and 24th Apr, 2 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* on 10th and 24th Apr. Common Kestrel was seen daily and Eleanora's Falcon numbers increased to 14 on 24th Apr and 25 by 5th May.

Other interesting birds were seen during the Team 2 reign; between 25th Apr and 1 May a Great Black Headed Gull *Larus marinus* visited Zakaki Marsh; this was the same bird each time, identifiable by a withered right foot; Great Snipe *Gallinago media* on 21st Apr and 2nd May, a Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* hung around Phasouri from 24th Apr to 9th May, White Winged Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus* started to put in an appearance from 22nd Apr and Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybyidus* from 27th; European Bee-eaters *Merops apister* were first sighted on 17th Apr and the migration built up from there. Bee-eaters were to become a major project for the ringers along with Common Swift. The Wheatear passage was of very low numbers; Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* were first recorded in early Apr and continued into May but the most seen in any day was 6, Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* was also reported in small numbers up to 1st May and Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* from 13th Apr to 8th May; Cyprus Wheatear continued to be prominent.

Zitting Cisticola in the hand at Phasouri

Photo by Ian Grier

Warblers continued to be in evidence; the last Savi's *Locustella luscinoides* was reported on 16th and the last Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* on 21st Apr. Reed *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and Sedge Warblers *A schoenobaenus* were abundant and Great Reed Warbler *A arundinaceus* continued to be prominent. Icterine Warblers *Hippolais icterina* were reported between 27th Apr and 14th May and Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* first appeared on 23rd, Spectacled Warbler *S conspicillata* was seen on 6 occasions between 12th Apr and 6th May. Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*, or Fan-tailed Warbler in old money, was common at most sites from mid April.

Little Crake at Phasouri *Photo: Ian Grier*

And what about the Crakes, Rails and Pratincoles?, I hear you ask. Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* was reported at Phasouri and Zakaki between 14th Apr and 8th May; Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* was reported 4 times and Little Crake *P parva* 8 times between 9th Apr and 10th May. Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* were seen, mainly at Bishops' Pool from 13th Apr to 4th May and Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* was first reported on 14th Apr and last seen on 13th May; a flock of 40+ was at Phasouri on 2nd May. Finally, on 30 Apr I spotted a bird at Phasouri that I could only describe as a one sixth size Glossy Ibis. At first I was shouted out of court until a few more folks saw it too over the next couple of days. On 2nd May Peter Tithecott saw it fly and saw the white wing bar, and the mystery was solved, it was a melanistic Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*, a species that had been increasing in numbers since about the 20th Apr.

Highlight birds for Team 2? The flock of 40 Collared Pratincole at Phasouri must rate pretty highly, Icterine Warbler was a first for some, *(Wish I had seen it. Ed)* but for me a pair of Griffon Vultures soaring majestically over the sea cliffs near Happy Valley is a memorable sight. Team 2 also had a little time off and 5 of them went up to the Akamas for a day while Mike and I did a few airport runs. Another thought may occur to you, after all those birds would there be anything left for Team 3 to see? Well - read on.

Team 3

Over the weekend 2-4 May Team 3 arrived; in fact a few arrived early, and we were delighted that our President AVM Martin Routledge was able to join the rest of the mob; Peter Tithecott, Sue Fleming, Daphne Yates and Val Kersley. Colin and Al had left the ringing team but George, Robin and Julia were joined by Doug Radford.

By the first week in May the water level at Phasouri had begun to fall rapidly and the wader numbers began to decline as the migrants moved on to their summer breeding grounds in the north. We saw our last Cattle Egret on the 8th May, and a Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* graced Phasouri from the 11 – 13th May Alpine Swift are a passage migrant and summer visitor to Cyprus and by early May we were beginning to see quite a few, between the 6th and 16th of May they were recorded daily at Phasouri with 20 being recorded on the 16th. Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* had been sighted on about 10 occasions during the survey but on 5th May a Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* was reported at Zakaki Marsh and was seen almost daily until the 16th. One Citrine Wagtail was observed at Phasouri on 20th Apr but individuals were seen 5 times between 7 and 17th May, with 2 seen at Bishop's Pool that day.

Throughout the survey Larks, apart from Crested *Galerida cristata*, were scarce. Only 3 Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* were reported, and those in early April; Woodlark *Lullula arborea* was seen only on the Team 3 away day in Troodos; A single Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* at Phasouri on 9th Apr; and 2 reports of Bimaculated Lark *M bimaculata* on 13th May, possibly the same bird; and 2 reports of Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* on 12/13th May. Finally Mike Blair reported a single Lesser Short-toed Lark *C rufescens* during his free time at the Akamas on 18th May.

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* was first reported in mid Apr but most arrived in May and I think all of Team 3 saw the bird. Red Backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Masked *L nubicus* and Woodchat *L senator* passed through in small numbers throughout and on 13th May a Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* was seen at Zakaki. Between the 9th and 15th up to 4 Pallid Swift *Apus affinis* were observed at Bishop's Pool. Owls were hard to come by, not that we set out on any specific owl hunts, but Scops Owl *Otus scops* was heard calling on a number of occasions, Little Owl *Athene noctua* was seen in Happy Valley on 12th and 16th May and the only Barn Owl *Tyto alba* was a fresh road kill on the morning of 11th May at Phasouri. We had one observation of a Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* coming in off the sea in the Bishop's Pool area in April.

Team 3 also had an away day, this time to Troodos, and this time Mike and I went too. An early departure allowed us to get up there and walk the Artemis Trail before heading back to Anoyira for a meal at Nick's restaurant. Birds seen here were Crossbill *Loxia curvirosta*, Coal Tit *Parus ater cypriotes*, Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*, Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes cypriotes* and most of the team got onto only our second Russet-tailed Rock-Thrush.

OK, what have I missed? Looking back through the records, Linnet *Cardelius cannabina* were seen throughout, Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* was a regular sighting in small numbers apart from circa 20 at Curium on 17 Apr and Corn Bunting *Millaria calandra* had its moments, 33 on 10th Apr and 20+ on 15th. Other buntings were harder to find; only 2 reports of Reed Bunting *E schoeniclus* at Phasouri, Cretchszmar's *E caesia* was elusive, with only 6 reports, 3 of those on the Akamas at the end of the survey and Black-headed Bunting *E melanocephala* again on the Akamas in late May.

The Akamas was of course outside the survey area but is included in the reports for interest, as indeed are the Troodos sightings.

The Tower

You will see Mike's story about the Tower later in this issue. These few lines explain how it came about and where it might lead us in the future. Recently, the military has erected 2 very large new aerials on the Salt Lake side of the road opposite the Salt Lake Communications site and there is considerable concern amongst the Cyprus birding organisations that birds, and large birds in particular, could collide with the closely spaced wires of these arrays. A study of raptors flying in, through and around the aerials was carried out in Sep 07 and this indicated that very few raptors had collided with the wires. At our initial briefing with SO1 SHE we were asked to continue this survey to assess the risk to all birds during the spring migration. We agreed to try and carry out as many sessions a week as possible and log all the birds within the vicinity of the aerials. To do this we used the lookout tower inside the Salt Lake site.

We carried out 19 periods of observation amounting to 61 hours, on each occasion 2 person teams were used, thus the total observation man-hours were 122. It is assessed that this was sufficient for it to be called a valid exercise for the spring migration. Throughout the observation period no collisions with any aerial array was observed.

However, the migration of Spring 08 involved considerably fewer birds than expected and raptors were almost totally absent; also the spring raptor migration is usually at a much lower level than the autumn migration. Finally a sample survey of one autumn and one spring migration is insufficient to draw valid conclusions. To this end we may be invited back to continue the survey next year. At the time of writing we have not had an official invite but if anyone is interested please contact me.

RINGING REPORT – *By Colin Wearn*

A nice Cyprus Warbler at Bishops' Pool East *Photo: Ian Grier*

Unlike previous Cyprus expeds this year's expedition was concentrated on the Akrotiri Peninsula. Sixteen ringers participated over the 6 week period and the aim was to catch and ring all the bird species possible to complement the work being carried out by the observers.

The first team of ringers in the field, led by Tony Crease, was the largest and they also proved to be very good gardeners! Getting to grips with the vegetation is a skill every ringer acquires when cutting 'net rides', the areas cleared for the nets and access alongside them. The second and third teams followed on and continued with the ringing and clearance activities in their respective weeks.

Having the independence of our own Land Rovers enabled us to set out well before dawn to set the nets and await the arrival of the first birds. The recces and organisation carried out by Dick together with unhindered access to Bishops' Pool were invaluable. The weather plays a major part in all ringing activities; if it is too wet or windy ringing cannot take place. On this trip it was the wind that cancelled some of our ringing activities, including the day we planned to ring on the Akrotiri Base, but the time was spent profitably birding instead.

Ringing sites were chosen to take advantage of the birds passing through each area at any given time and site selection was down to the experience of the ringers and to observation. After two days at the Phasouri reed beds, we felt the number of species we had come across was only just scratching the surface and it would be worthwhile to have the opportunity to revisit them during any future ringing expedition on the WSBA.

Bishops' Pool held a variety of waders and a ringing opportunity too good to miss but in order to catch the birds we had to set the nets well before first light. This strategy worked well and we caught a fair number of wader species. Unfortunately the catches did not include Black-winged Stilts or Avocets.

European Bee-eater at Bishops' Pool *Photo: Ian Grier*

With the arrival of the Bee-eaters, we were again set the task of how and where to catch them. The answer presented itself near the gates to Bishops' Pool - bee hives! Many evenings were spent around the bee hives extracting not only the Bee-eaters but also some of the bees still clinging to the pre-roost, feeding birds.

Pallid Swift
Photo: Robin Springett

A respectable total of 70 species of birds were ringed, with some outstanding numbers on a few species including more than 140 Swifts, 400 Blackcaps and 200 European Bee-eaters, the latter being the largest number caught in recent years. The severe lack of water available on the island meant large bird populations were not there and correspondingly this affected numbers being caught in the nets. However, the six weeks was very enjoyable for ringers and observers alike with a great deal being learnt by the ringers.

During ringing operations we caught a Reed Warbler and a Blackcap already wearing rings, proving that birds were passing through Cyprus that had been ringed in another country. Both birds were wearing Israeli rings; the Reed Warbler was ringed at Ein Afek on the 16 Apr 08 and the Blackcap was ringed at the Eilat Bird Research Centre on the 14 Apr 07.

Unfortunately we did come across signs of illegal trapping and these were reported to Birdlife Cyprus. Last but not least, we would like to thank Alan Crabtree and the Akrotiri Environment Centre for their invaluable assistance throughout the visit.

SURVEY RESULTS

So after all the birds, what were our findings? Our first conclusion, and this was borne out by many other birders, was, that although the variety of species was normal, overall bird numbers were well down on previous years. The reason can only be conjecture, but the drought probably contributed significantly, some birds probably just kept going north and gave Cyprus a miss this year. Possibly the strong westerly winds blew a large number of migrants towards the eastern med coast; perhaps there were fewer birds coming out of Africa for some reason – but we shan't know until more reports come in from around the region. What about the habitats we studied?

Zakaki Marsh

Photo: Dick Yates

This is a pond deep enough for diving ducks. Measuring about 100m×75m it has a fringe of 5m-tall reeds on 3 sides, this fringe being about 5-15m wide and dabbling ducks feed in the shallower water. The fourth side is the current Zakaki-Lady's Mile link road, which offers the only viewpoint, but an intermittent narrow reed fringe gives some shelter. The present geography of the reserve makes no provision for waders or herons that feed in the open, there being no shallows of any size. Those species that inhabit reed-beds (small herons, rails) have ample cover. The source of the pond's water is presumed to be part run-off, part seepage through clayey soils from slightly higher elevations and part waste-water. A sluice has been installed, connected by a culvert under the road. The Marsh itself lies almost entirely within SBA territory.

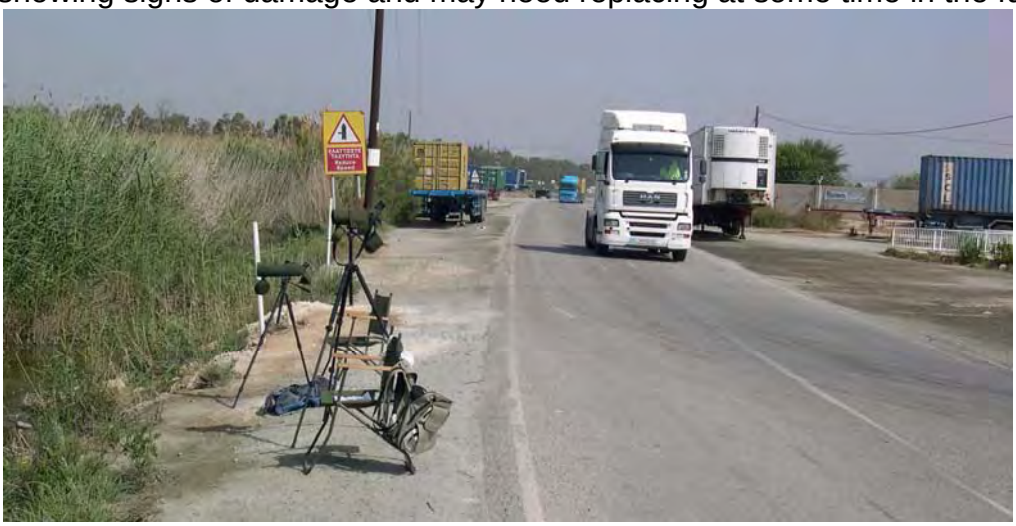
Threats to Zakaki Marsh

Zakaki Marsh is vulnerable to covert landfill, encroachment and to contamination from uncontrolled and unregulated waste and pollution. Of the reserves and valuable bird areas we studied we consider Zakaki Marsh to be the most at risk. Specific threats are:

Unauthorised Lorry Parking and Traffic movements. A recent industrial dispute between trades unions and the Limassol Port Authority, has led to a large number of unauthorised container trucks being parked outside the port boundary. Most of them are within the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), but overspill from the parking has occupied several sites to the south of the Port boundary within the SBA. One of these parking areas abuts Zakaki Marsh and here bulldozed clearances and the addition of hardcore has encroached into the Marsh. We understand that no planning permission had been obtained, or even sought, for this parking from either the RoC or SBA Authorities.

Clearly, containers have to be taken and from the Port and this generates a large number of daily movements; a rough count of movements into and out of that section of the parking lot within the RoC gave a maximum of about 180 per hour. The traffic related to the trailers parked on the SBA generated a rough count of a maximum of about 95 movements per hour, but minimum rates could be much lower. However, all these movements require the prime movers, whether collecting or delivering trailers, to drive over the culvert along the narrow link road towards Lady's Mile and to return by the same route. This road was not designed to withstand the impact of such heavy vehicles, nor is it wide enough to permit these vehicles to pass each other. Much of the road surface has been damaged by the relentless impact of heavy vehicles and has become badly cracked; but the main problem is that the ballasting, adequate for light traffic, has been compacted and spread by these trucks. It is likely that this will have

affected subsurface water seepage patterns and the long-term repair and replacement costs are likely to be high. The recently built culvert from the Marsh to the sluice is already showing signs of damage and may need replacing at some time in the future.



The observation point at Zakaki Marsh *Photo: Dick Yates*

Pollution. The presence of such a large number of trucks and the fact that the parking areas are unauthorised leads us to doubt that there are any contingency plans in place to contain and deal with a major diesel spillage, a routine EC requirement. The risk of pollution of the Marsh is therefore high. In addition, most of the surface area of these parking lots has been made 'waterproof' by the absorption of diesel fuel into the surface. Its removal, as required under EC law, will be costly because a full decontamination process is required.

Illegal Hunting and Fly-tipping. These are problems or potential problems common to most sites and will be addressed later.

Phasouri Reed-bed.

Probably the best known of Cyprus' birdwatching sites, the bird community that depends on Phasouri Reed-bed is wide, from residents and summer breeders to passage migrants and winter visitors. It is scarcely surprising this is a RAMSAR site, currently the only one in Cyprus. The site falls entirely within the WSBA.

Phasouri Reed-bed at the start of ExCypSurv 08 *Photo: Dick Yates*

The Phasouri Reed-bed used to be fed by the River Kourio and although the river usually dried up by May, the reed-bed and adjacent marshes remained wet year-round. The building of the Kouris Dam meant that the river almost ceased to flow except in the wettest years and as commercial farming increased, more and more water was diverted into agriculture. Today the reed-bed dries out most years but it has never dried off. A serious fire in Jan 2008 destroyed about 80% of the reed cover, but it did not affect the underlying ground structure and by April the reeds had recovered. For many decades, cattle have grazed the edges of the reed-bed, providing a counter to reed encroachment of open water round the margins; they also enrich the grassland through their dung. Likewise, the traditional reed cutting for basket making, a speciality of Akrotiri village, helped maintain the reed-bed by creating a broad age class through the reed-bed, allowing regeneration. Both these activities continue, but in a somewhat haphazard fashion and management of the reed-bed has become essential.

Threats to Phasouri Reed-bed.

Water. Lack of water is an annual threat to the reed-bed and this subject is a long-term management issue with which we will deal in greater detail in our final report.

Access. We consider that the present access on the north side of the reed-bed should continue to be the prime means of access. However, consideration should be given to restricting the access by birdwatchers and the general public to a certain distance from the waterline by means of a fence with entry allowed only for those with legitimate business inside the fenced area – *eg* graziers, reed-cutters, researchers and reed-management teams. Signage would be needed to explain the 'barrier', which will need to extend some considerable distance. We did not visit the south-eastern part of the reedbed, and so issues in that area will need to be identified.

There should be bird hides at this superb site. At present reed encroachment along the north side of the reed-bed has covered 10-20m of what was once mostly shallow open water, so the only suitable location is in front of the open water opposite the main access to the extant grazing land. However, if and when the reeds are cleared other hides should be erected. Hides would need to be elevated perhaps 2m above the ground and should be constructed with side fencing to prevent birdwatchers and others from going nearer and help minimise disturbance. Indeed, there used to be a small hide at the easternmost end of the reedbed reached by a narrow boardwalk; its main advantage was that it faced west and so overlooked an area where the viewing light remained good until late afternoon. This was over-run by the reeds some years ago and there is now no sign of it.

Bishops' Pool Area

On private land owned jointly by the Bishops of Limassol and Larnaca, and adjacent to the Akrotiri airfield, the Bishops' Pool area is wholly within the SBA. It centres on a large wastewater pool cut into the rock and access is limited to normal working hours or to key-holders, which rather restricts access for people who would wish to use it.

The pool itself lies in the middle of an extensive farmed area of citrus groves and vegetable and cereal fields, but many fields have rows of windbreak trees. Migrant birds are attracted to this area by the presence of water and the availability of roosts in bushes and trees.

Bishops' Pool and the silt bank

Photo: Ian Grier

The eastern section is mainly mature maquis and scrubland; while the very easternmost part is an area of old maquis, but this may be under threat from the only resident goat farm. The numbers of waders visiting the pool depends on the water levels; at high levels, there are only a few very small areas of shallow water, but at lower levels, a bank of silt deposited by the only unpiped source provides adequate shallows for several hundred birds. The pool takes treated wastewater from the adjacent sewage farm, which as it settles creates conditions suitable for dense mats of algae to form, allowing even the largest waders to 'walk on water'.

There are two bird hides, one looking south and the other west; and although they were obviously built by craftsmen, it appears that their design was achieved without any input from birdwatchers. As a result, the windows cannot be opened and therefore cannot be cleaned and furthermore, they lie below external canopies, thus preventing any view of the sky, where so many birds appear. Some 200m east of the pool, there is a large, newly built environmental centre, which appeared unoccupied during our visit. All posters and displays are in Greek. The whole site has vast potential as a bird area, but access is an obvious concern for the military (airfield security), the farmers (security of their equipment and crops) and the landowners. However, the state of the fencing between the Monastery of the Cats next door and the site allows pedestrian access

The site is a good one for ringing birds because of the limited access to the public and because nets can be rigged in sheltered locations even when it is moderately windy.

Water supply. We do not know the details of how the water input and output are controlled or allocated but we assume that the recent water economy measures imposed on the airbase have reduced the input to the sewage works, but the output, as organised by the farm workers for irrigation, seemed independent of input to such an extent that the water level fell by some 1.5m between early April and the third week in May, the initial level being about 2.5m below the overspill.

Farming. The farmed area appears to be a cooperative, at least in terms of water distribution and crop spraying. All preparation takes place in or near a run-down building with no obvious designated handling or disposal areas. The amount of land within the site that has been allocated to farming has increased markedly over the years

and the scubland and maquis is now a remnant of what it was 10 years ago. The farmers appear to have narrow profit margins and work long hours.

Threats to the Bishops' Pool Area

Storage and Disposal of Agrichemicals. Although the preparation and mixing areas appear to be mainly in the farm building complex, which is below the level of the water in the pool, spillages could occur when the prepared chemicals are transported past the pool. The tracks around the pool are less than 5m from the pit edge. Assuming that chemicals are always correctly prepared and handled, there is still a strong likelihood that through normal application, they will leach into the pool. Despite the spraying, insects abound, and so small passerines may ingest chemicals from prey caught locally. We have no knowledge of the farm's policy on obtaining appropriate and currently-approved agrichemicals, nor of their policy on disposal of old, out-of-date or surplus chemicals. However, there are several piles of old chemicals, probably originally packed in powder form in bags, lying about the place.

Shooting and Netting. Illegal hunting activity undoubtedly takes place within the area and is probably limited to people that the farm workers know. Shooting could easily be masked by the noises from the multiple bird scarers. Consequently, the birds may become accustomed to gunshot noises and be more easily shot when guns replace the scarers. In the Bishops' Pool East area our ringers found substantial evidence of illegal netting activity and all our information was passed to Mr Alan Crabtree, ringing co-ordinator for Birdlife Cyprus, who agreed to submit a report to the SBA Authorities.

Lady's Mile

Lady's Mile is the track paralleling the sea along the eastern edge of the Akrotiri peninsula; between the track and the sea are numerous accesses to the beach and several restaurants. Parallel to this track, about 150m inland, is a raised, pebbly area of scrub, which slopes gradually towards the Salt Lake. Between it and the track lie several shallow saline basins extending to a distance of some 2km from the Port boundary. These roughly rectangular basins have a flat or slightly rippled surface, and along the edges is a border of salt-marsh plants, mostly samphire spp.

In wet years, in the middle, these basins are deep enough for ducks and gulls and they can attract thousands of waders during the migration periods. In years of lower rainfall, the basins still attract large numbers of birds, but then the drier open spaces serve as relatively safe roosts. In very dry periods, such as the Spring of 2008, the basins still serve as a vital haven for small waders and for the locally breeding Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* population; the maximum count in May 08 was 60, including several fully fledged young, but it is certain that many more remained hidden in the saltbush. The basins produce brine in concentrations ideal for brine-loving organisms to thrive, thus producing a rich food source for birds

Threats to Lady's Mile

Vehicular access. There are many tracks on the pebbly rise to the west of the basins and there are linking tracks to the rise from Lady's Mile to the south, there is one near the middle, and the link road from Zakaki town to Lady's Mile becomes a track across the basins 300m from the north end. There are also many unauthorised tracks across the basins, some showing evidence that vehicles had to be towed out after becoming

bogged down. The authorities have tried to limit unauthorised access across the basins by creating a small ditch and ridge along the basins on the main track through Lady's Mile, but this is no deterrent to 4WD cowboys, who also use the pebbly ridge and its hinterland to play at cross-country driving.

Future development. Should the track along Lady's Mile and across the Salt Lake to Akrotiri Village ever be developed it would provide an ideal opportunity to include the building of a wall or obstacle high enough to prevent 4WD vehicles crossing the basins at unauthorised points. The existing crossings could be maintained.

Akrotiri Salt Lake: Track along Northern Edge

This site is overlooked by most birders and ornithologists, perhaps because at first sight it does not seem very promising. It stretches for some 5km from its western end near the access to the Phasouri Forestry Office to Zakaki in the east. However, it is convenient to include, at the eastern end, the Eucalyptus and Pine woodland, home to Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* and European Serin *Serinus serinus*. All this woodland has been planted since the early 1950s (WRP Bourne pers comm), mostly with introduced tree species. Nevertheless, many woodland edges have a dense understorey that provides cover for migrant passerines; they certainly contain a healthy breeding population of Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida*. Where the track is bordered by reed-bed and wherever there is water, many migrant species may appear and here we recorded Great Snipe *Gallinago media*, Corncrake *Crex crex* and Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*. The ringing party ringed many Eurasian Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and several Great Reed Warblers *A. arundinaceus*. The woodland along the track is particularly important in autumn as it serves as a roost for migrant raptors. The track becomes impassable after heavy rain or a rise in the level of the Salt Lake.

Threats to the Northern Track

Vehicular access. Relatively few vehicles were seen to drive it but there are many tracks that reach the main track from the northern agricultural land; some cross towards the salt-marsh and the lake bed. Bee-keepers place their hives along the track to take advantage of the earlier-flowering plants, especially the Mimosas. Usually in late April or early May, they move the hives to other areas where flowering comes later. The main threat from vehicular access lies in the cutting of new routes, but if the location becomes well known, volume may become a problem.

However, it is important that this area is watched to establish bird species' usage throughout the year and to this end it should be better publicised amongst visiting birders, but access will be difficult during wet periods.

Akrotiri Gravel Pits and Ayios Georgios Church

The Akrotiri Gravel Pits lie to the northwest of the village between the salt lake and the coast. This low-lying area contains the enclosures for the aerials comprising the Western Aerial Farm. It used to have several shallow pits that contained water most of the year and the salt flats and gravel plain with some scrubby vegetation, contained dozens of ephemeral pools that had water well into May. During the survey the gravel plain and saltpans were completely dry and there is only one pool of any size remaining. Ayios Georgios Church has a small walled churchyard surrounding the church with a

small fenced former olive grove, known as 'the orchard', opposite the entrance. There is low scrub to the west and north and scattered dense bushes to the east. The church lies some 600m to the northwest of Akrotiri village at the end of a surfaced road where the Akrotiri Gravel Pits begin. Normally, in spring the area acts as a stopover for wheatears and pipits, but the sustained dry weather made the majority of the plain inimical to them, however, a few were encountered around the church. Surprisingly, the ringers had reasonable success in the old olive grove throughout the 6 week period; overall numbers were low but the aridity of the surrounding area made the site a minor oasis where insects could be found. The only water was in a small trough for the goat herds, but we never saw birds using it.

Threats to the Area. As with most of the areas we studied fly-tipping and vehicular access were seen as the biggest threats to the area. It would appear from the constituents of the waste that most of it in the area of the church is deposited by the villagers. Because of the care that many people visiting the church take in looking after it, and because the village itself is remarkably free of fly-tipped material, it is possible that a concerted campaign based on the villagers' pride could reduce the waste disposal problem, at least in the vicinity of the church.

Although the surfaced road ends at the church, the route is one of the principal accesses to the plain, which is a magnet for owners of 4WD vehicles and an area towards the sea is clearly used as a circuit. It is unlikely that the church site would be damaged as most vehicles bypass it but the numbers of vehicles using the plain and gravel pits area for driving practice is undoubtedly damaging the environment.

Sea Cliffs at Akrotiri and other sea cliffs in the WSBA

Akrotiri Peninsula Cliffs. The cliffs at RAF Akrotiri form the southernmost limit of not only the peninsula, but also of Cyprus itself. Running on an essentially east-west axis, they lie entirely within the base and so are not accessible to casual visitors.

Akrotiri Sea Cliffs
Photo: Dick Knight

The cliffs, from 20 to 90 metres high, comprise mainly soft limestone related rock in a mixture of creamy-yellow and pink with cavity riddled faces in many places. The hardest sections are near-vertical cliffs and the softest are almost like scree bound together by the concretion of the smallest particles brought together by run-off. There is a plethora of archaeological sites on the peninsula, especially along the cliff-tops and under overhangs, where Palaeolithic cultures had excavated burial chambers in the solid rock. A track negotiable by 4WD vehicles runs along the cliff-tops, mostly 50m from the edge. The cliffs provide ideal habitat for Eleonora's Falcon, *Falco eleonorae* and are a major stronghold of this species, which exhibits two unusual characteristics for a raptor – it hunts cooperatively

and it breeds in late summer and early autumn to feed its young on small migrant passerines on their migration from their breeding grounds to the north.

The first Eleonora's Falcons arrive in Cyprus from their Madagascar wintering grounds in early to mid April, but the main body does not arrive until about mid-May. A count on 13th May revealed 40 birds; considerable effort was made to avoid double-counting of this most mobile and aerobatic of birds, but it is very probable that at least 60 were present, for it is impossible to see all the cavities where birds might be perching – these perches ranged from near sea level to the cliff tops. Sometimes birds would remain perched for hours, but others would wander inland considerable distance from the cliffs. Apart from display flights by the more dominant birds, it was too early for any sign of courting behaviour. The Akrotiri cliffs, like other sea-cliffs, are also home to a few pairs of Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* (at medium and high level), European Shag *Leucocarbo aristotelis* (low level) and Rock Dove/Feral pigeon *Columba livia*/*C. livia forma domestica* (all levels) and isolated pairs of Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*.

Similar Cliffs within the WSBA. The cliffs at Curium, Quarry Beach, Kensington and Tunnel Beach are higher and of harder composition; they also are home to Eleonora's Falcon, respective counts revealed maxima of 10, 14 and 22. Adjoining the cliff at Curium is a popular swimming beach with several cafés, but the cliff itself forms a promontory into the sea. The only access to Quarry Beach is via a very rough track that requires 4 WD, the beach is narrow and unsuited for swimming but a few fishing boats use the tiny harbour. At both ends of the beach, the cliffs form promontories. Kensington Cliffs have no shoreline or beach, dropping sheer into the sea. The species noted in the previous paragraph are also present at all these cliffs, although European Shag probably only breeds occasionally. Eurasian Griffon Vultures, *Gyps fulvus* used to breed regularly on Kensington and Tunnel Beach Cliffs, sadly there were no recorded nest sites in 2008, but the cliffs were still visited from time to time.

There would appear to be little or no real threat to wildlife inhabiting the WSBA cliffs. There is little risk of pollution and, at present, little or no risk of development.

Threats common to most sites

Illegal Hunting. Currently, all shooting on the SBA is illegal. In early May, under pressure from the hunting lobby, the RoC government decided to allow the shooting of Hooded Crows and Magpies, this has not been emulated within the SBA. The risk of shooters cynically killing European Turtle Dove and European Bee-eater 'by mistake' is high, indeed Bee-eaters are targeted by beekeepers to prevent them eating their bees. We neither saw or heard any shooting at any of the major sites but it takes little time to find and collect a significant quantity of spent shotgun cartridges, many of them used very recently. At Zakaki we saw one man with a starting pistol training his dogs to become accustomed to gunshot noises. The SBA has not allowed any concessions on shooting, but vigilance remains the keyword.

We did find some evidence of illegal netting at at least 2 of the survey sites and at one other location within the SBA not included in the survey. At Bishop's Pool and just off the track to the north of Akrotiri Salt Lake we found places where narrow 'rides' had been cut into the reeds or the bushes. The ones at Bishops' Pool were quite recent but those round the Salt Lake were obviously old. An elderly Cypriot birdwatcher told us he had torn down nets in past years.

We found no evidence of the use of lime-sticks at any of the survey sites.

Fly-tipping. Casual disposal of waste of any kind is a problem in many countries, and although it appears less prevalent in Cyprus than in previous decades, nevertheless it is a persistent and continuing problem. Indeed, in the area behind Phasouri reed-bed we photographed a truck and an accompanying car (including their registration plates) and passed the digital evidence to the SBA Police. Dumping domestic waste usually involves furniture or fittings and is unsightly, but the illegal disposal of dangerous chemicals (pesticide residues, dioxins, worn tyres) or of materials that degenerate into hazardous waste (asbestos products, petroleum products) is a prevalent problem and one that represents a serious risk of contamination. Fly-tipping may cause the loss of some salt-marsh plants, especially those related to the samphires, but the major habitat degradation for these plants results from new tracks being created by 4WD vehicles.

SUMMARY

ExCypSurv 08 was a successful RAFOS exped. A lot of excellent data was obtained which is still being assessed and analysed and should be ready for publication in the next RAFOS Journal, whenever that may be. Birdlife Cyprus and the SBA Environmental Office were both very pleased with the work we did for them and we hope that the SBA will invite us back next year to continue the survey.

Footnote: The SBA have advised me that it would probably be September next year before they would be able to invite us back. However, our ringers express the view that ringing on the Peninsula in September might not be worth the effort. Therefore, we will have to discuss this further in Committee and then talk it over with the SBA Authorities.

The indignity of it!! Spotted Flycatcher – bottoms up for weighing
Photo: Daphne Yates

WINTER DUCK 7 (2008) – 'ALL THE ELEMENTS, DIVERS AND THE FLOOD'

By John N Wells

Plans a go-go. A year, in RAFOS terms, goes by so quickly! After Duck it's Chough and after Chough it's Duck again; an annual cycle of planning, financing and keeping people informed of what's happening. For WD 08 Jim Bryden and I started planning last summer. Jim had made some new contacts in Defence Estates (DE) Inverness who manage the property we use as the main accommodation for the week-long survey. This year he had booked Joint Service Mountain Training Centre (JSMTC) Dundonnell, for the week 3-9 Feb 08, as well as the Drill Hall at Kingussie for the overnight stay on the journey north. Also booked was Faraid Head with the help of Tom Dewick through Field Officer Scotland and Northern Island (FOSNI) - Cdr Bill Jones. In addition, Jim had researched a new base for Team 3 who would survey along the Sutherland coast from Cape Wrath to Duncansby Head. We needed 2 nights accommodation and Jim had surfed the web and come up with Sandra's Back Packers Hostel in Thurso. There are no bounds to the luxury on this trip! Team 3 would now drive straight to Thurso after the Inverness Tesco shopping extravaganza and would be able to get straight into the survey.

Sponsors. Back in the autumn the Winter Duck sub-committee had been proactive and obtained £400 sponsorship from ASIG, a Supply/Logistics company, who had been helped us in 2006 and 2007, and £750 from our friends at Air BP International whose support went a long way in offsetting our food and fuel/transport costs. These sponsors are truly invaluable to this expedition and without them we would have to reduce the scale of the survey considerably.

Sharing the Load. On Duck everyone gets a share of the work, be it in-the-field or before we go. One of this year's unknowns was, where was the second vehicle coming from? We had tried to find other cheaper vehicles to hire for the 9 days but as the RAF contracts there are fewer units hiring out PSI vans. Jim gave me a contact at Innsworth, but sadly they had got rid of their van a couple of years ago; but this guy suggested that I try Lyneham. Success! The SIF Administrator booked it for us and we now had 2 vans booked plus the use of Tom Dewick's private 4 WD, an open backed pick-up. (*John, They call them Utes in Oz. Ed)* So the plan was to conduct the survey in 2 groups of 5-6 in the PSI vans and 3, the Northern team, in the pick-up.

Table d'hôte. Steve Heather, our resident Chef, again offered his culinary skills. With a stock of cans of veg, fruit salad, steamed pudding and some long shelf life compo, plus a few assorted goodies he had stored away in his garage, the Chef had some basic materials to fall back on if everything else failed. But it never does, and the Master Chef ensured each team had a cool box of assorted frozen main meals for each evening at each location. Quite an undertaking, but an absolute necessity as, after a long, cold day in the field there is little time left for food preparation once all the paperwork has been completed. On the menu this year, spaghetti Bolognese, pork in cider and apple casserole, chicken curry, bean casserole, sausage casserole, beef in red wine and chicken in white wine sauce; these main courses were supplemented with a selection of fresh veg or side dishes of Nan bread, chutney, coconut etc when curry was on. Steve gave us all the menu choices and issued Team 3 with enough for their first 3 nights while they were up and around Thurso and Faraid Head. As it happened,

the Back Packers Lodge did not have much storage space, and using the communal area meant preparing meals in and around call over which was a nightmare. Plus, the other inmates required access to the same kitchen, drying area and communal lounge, so all in all it was not an ideal location. Back at Dundonnell our team stuck rigidly to the menu selection so when the others came back there was no duplication of menus.

The Journey. Anyway, back to the Journey north. The 2 vans from the south were on a slightly different itinerary this year. I collected the Wyton van on Friday lunchtime, packed my kit and then went round to collect Steve and the food. After that we headed straight for Jim and Hilda's where they laid on a meal and a bed for the night in their cottage at Felkington. The plan came together nicely with no undue dramas.

Gritted and Grilled. Well, there was one giggle on the way up. On the A1 dual north of Newcastle, we got into a queue of traffic behind a snowplough that had just joined the main road from a slip road ahead; it wasn't actually gritting but looked like it meant business! When it was our turn to overtake, and to my disbelief, it pulled out in front of us and threatened to start gritting in the outside lane! So when the flashing ambers came on, I put my foot to the floor and with the rev limiter choking, we just managed to squeeze past before the grit, sand and gravel blasted the front of the van!!

We got to Jim and Hilda's at around 2130, they were both out for dinner with family and Jim's neighbour let us in. We settled in and relaxed with Hilda's excellent pork casserole and a beer. Shortly after we arrived Jim's phone rang, we didn't recognise the name on the display so we ignored it. This happened 3 or 4 more times and we ignored them all. Pity, it was Jim trying to ascertain that we had arrived safely. In the end he had to ring the next-door neighbour, the one who had let us in, to find out where the hell we were!! The kind chappie from next door rang the bell and told us to answer the bloody phone 'cos Jim wanted an update. When he got back he wasn't a happy bunny and chewed Steve's and my ears off for ignoring him all night.

The Second Van. Meanwhile, Martin had his hands full with the Lyneham van. On collection, it was immediately apparent that it wasn't road worthy; the exhaust sounded like a Sherman tank! Martin questioned the SIF controller on how to get the cracked exhaust repaired, he was referred to the MT controller who was clueless – "not my problem it's an SIF vehicle", bl**dy Jobsworth! Anyway Martin came up with the solution; he drove it to his local Peugeot dealer who kindly welded a sleeve over the offending joint, for a tidy sum! Out of Martin's wallet, needless to say. While this was going on Stan Christophers, this time without his partners in crime Bob Bossisto and Terry Carne who were otherwise engaged, had driven up from Cornwall and arrived safely at Martin's house where Hilary had laid on a meal and bed for him. They left on time the next morning, collected Gerry Bilbao from Innsworth and Jerry Knights from Biddulph en-route for the RV in Perth several hours hence.

Heading for Scotland. Next morning, Steve and I were up and marvelling at the birds frequenting Jim's walled garden and the extended view of the southern uplands of Scotland. There were at least 13 **Blackbirds** sheltering out of the brisk wind, accompanied by **Robin, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Dunnock, House Sparrows, Greenfinch** – the usual fare**.** Then to our amazement in came Jim's piece-de–resistance**: Great-spotted Woodpecker, Pheasant, Red legged Partridge, Reed**

Bunting and **Tree Sparrows**! The lucky blighter has **Tree Sparrows** frequenting his feeders. Mind you he does put out a fine selection of feed and fat balls for them.

We just about got away on time and made calls to Veronica Wooton and Maggie Sheddan, the two girls in the team, whom we were collecting that day. Maggie was our first pick-up, about 35-40 minutes up from Jim's at North Berwick. Unfortunately, Jim's affliction, Tesco-mania, got in the way and a short fuel stop turned into a mammoth shopping venture; hence we arrived at Maggie's over half an hour late. It's just as well Maggie is a patient sort of lady otherwise we would have got the sharp edge of a blethering!. We had arranged to pick Vron up at the Vane Farm RSPB reserve on Loch Leven.

When we arrived at RSPB Vane Farm there were quite a few cars in the car park, apparently a male **Smew** had been in the bay these past few days. Vron had been having a spot of bother with the more than unhelpful individuals manning the reserve and the rest of us were more than a tad upset when she regaled us with her tale. (*It was rather a long story so in the interest of brevity I cut to the essentials. Ed*) At this point Jim took up the challenge to find the **Smew,** as the staff were obviously only interested in themselves to the detriment of others! He hastily searched the open water and put the local staff in their place by finding the **Smew** for them after only 5 minutes.

Smew at Vane Farm

Jim's terse comment on finding the **Smew** for them went something like this:

"So this is the male **Smew,** here then, in the gully two dykes up; just out in the choppy water", says Jim.

"Oh so you have found <u>our</u> **Smew** then", was the response.

There was a short pause….followed by Jim Clearing his throat …"Hu-Ummmmm". Deathly silence as he scans through his scope a while longer… …

"So you'll be wanting me to put you on to the 2 **Slavonian Grebes** out here as well then?" Brilliant! Birding at its finest.

We drank our coffee, ate our stickies and left……..

Inverness Bound. From Vane Farm we headed for the RV at Perth. However, after listening to the regular weather updates it was obvious that we were likely to be held up by snow! On the road the sleet changed to snow and the roadside verges were soon very white and building rapidly with fresh snow. Jim had done some forward planning as the weather forecast hadn't been very good and he had provisionally booked an overnight stay at the Travelodge on the A9 at Perth where we aimed to meet the other wagon for a convoy over the top to Inverness. By now the weather was awful, snow-ploughs were out in force and gritting operations had started. As we closed in on Perth Jim's plan was to make it to the Travelodge, get an update on the roads and then make a decision. We really needed to keep moving north and head for Kingussie and the drill hall, if it cost us the deposit then so be it. Tom Dewick called and suggested that we drive up the east coast to Aberdeen and then across to his place at Elgin. The plan was fine but this would have meant a long diversion adding an extra 3 hours to the driving day for the lads coming up from Yate.

At about 1500 we arrived at the car park, followed by Martin's van about 5 minutes later. What timing! We debated for ages, unsure if the roads were open over the top at Dalwhinnie. The road reports were not brilliant and the mobile web searches were fruitless. Without detailed info we decided to go for it - staying in the car park would prove nothing - if we got to Kingussie, great; if the road was shut we could always come back to Perth.

It snowed all the way up the A9, with about a foot of snow lying and a bit deeper over the passes near Dalwhinnie. Here the deer were close to the road, seeking the less deep snow amongst the heather; fortunately, the A9 road barriers were open and we all breathed a sigh of relief. As we swung by Newtonmore the snow was falling heavily but a call from the front of the van soon had folks on their toes; a covey of 15 **Red-legged Partridges** was making its way across a snow covered field opposite, I called up Martin in the other van to make sure they saw them. He thought I was hallucinating or something! I don't think the other van actually believed us. Until they got the bins on them, how weird was that sighting?

Finally, we arrived at Kingussie where the snow was about 12 inches deep in the drifts and a good 5-6 inches on the pavement and paths to the Hall. Jim had called ahead and the lady who looks after the place let us in. After a few minutes of van emptying and clearing snow from the path, we had to decide who was sleeping where –

"Why does Stan always sleep with the girls", asks Maggie. "It's to get away from the snorers Maggs!" Mmm, - sort of answer I suppose

.

The accommodation was warm and spacious. So after the preparations for the next day it was down to the pub for beer and supper. A minor issue over the 'real ale', which was off, was settled by switching to 80 Shilling, and after an excellent meal it was home to bed.

Next morning we were up at the 'crack of Dunnocks' and down to the eater for breakfast. The Polish lassie did a splendid job of feeding us all full breakfasts and pots of steaming tea, toast and marmalade. I even had a share of a Scotsman's black pudding which was going spare, now that's an offer you don't refuse, neither did Steve.

JB & SH birding in Anagach Woods

En-route to Tescos we made a brief stop in Anagach Woods at Grantown-on-Spey. Not much about and definitely no Capercaillie, so, as the supply of birds dried up the conversation turned to Gerry B's recent trip to Israel. Gerry was talking about a raptor count and seawatching, when, without a thought in my head I asked:

"Is that near the coast then"? Roars of laughter followed and I was awarded the **'Hank of the Day'**. Who or what is a Hank? I hear you ask. The term 'Hank' comes from the American free-fall scene and is given to anyone who does or says something stupid related to that particular activity. We adopted it and decided from that point in there would be a 'Hank of the day' award.

And so to Inverness; Marty and Steve did the 'fresh rations' shop while we topped up on de-icing spray, windscreen wash additive and a few last minute items before the remote parts of Wester Ross, where the prices are high.

At this point Tom Dewick and Kevin Cairns joined us and we split into the teams, loaded the vans and set off, with Team 3 heading to Thurso and the other 2 teams edging their way through the snow and partially cleared roads towards Ullapool. Lots of Red Deer were seen at close quarters, and **Peregrine Falcon** and **Red Grouse** were called from the van - some folks have very well tuned eyes!

It was nearly dark by the time we got to the JSMTC at Dundonnell where Janie, the caretaker, met us with a welcoming pot of tea and biscuits. It was then time to get organised, so while Gerry busied himself with the inventory checks the rest of us set to

and cleared the snow from the path and small bridge over the stream and beyond the sheep gate. Rooms were allocated, snorers and non-snorers, Jim drew the short straw and got me or was it the other way round? The girls were allocated a room to themselves, so there would be no room for Stan on his return on Thursday - shame! A final brief from Janie and a test of the fire alarms and we were set for the week.

Team 1. Next day Team 1 set about surveying their allocated area and a run down of what they found follows.

Day One – Red Point - Port Henderson; 10 **Greylags** *Anser anser*, in the fields and 8 **Long-tailed Ducks** *Clangula hyemalis* out on the sea but within scoping distance despite the choppy conditions. In fact the wind was a gale force howler and walking across open bog and up hill into a force 9 completely took our breath away (literally), it was hellish! Around the corner at Airde were 22 **Greylags,** a **Razorbill** *Alca torda*, and 3 **Black Guillemots** *Cepphus brylle*, ('Tysties' to give them their Shetlands name) and near the van, a **Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* broke cover and zig-zagged away. Two **Curlews** *Numenius tenuirostiris* were also in adjacent fields.

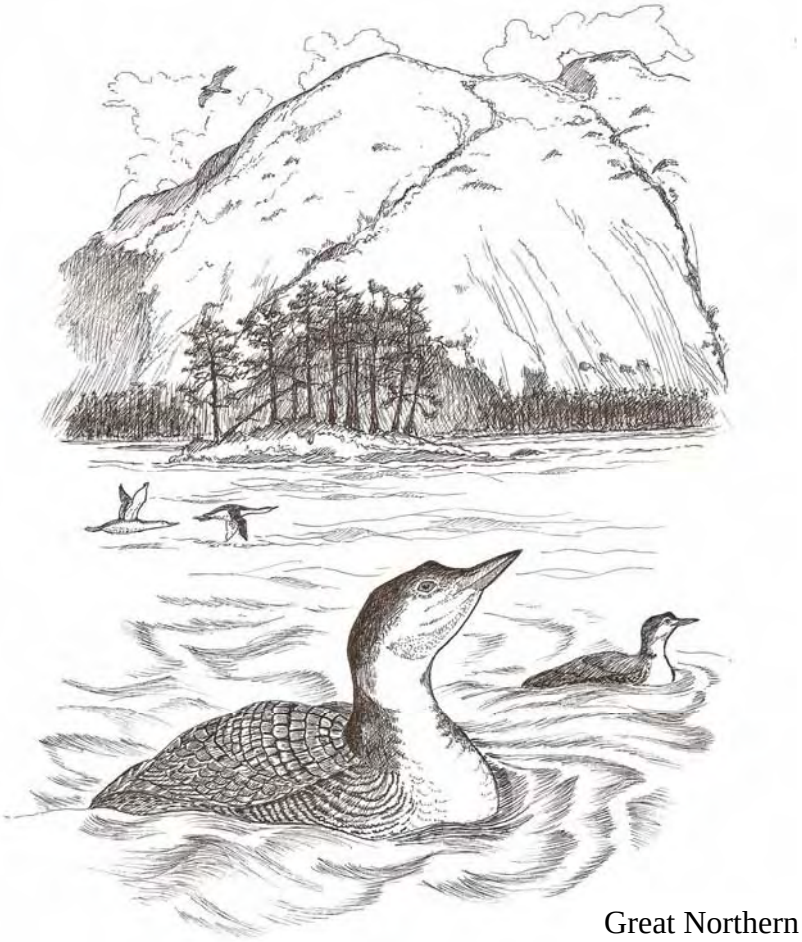
The sector from Loch Gairloch – Badachro, including Gairloch town, has in its confines Loch Kerry and this held large numbers of birds: 218 **Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula*, – some males in early courtship displays were showing off to adjacent females, 180 **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*, 188 **Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus*, on the salmon fishery out-fall pipe, 3 splendid **Iceland Gulls**, 9 **Black-throated Diver** *Gavia arctica* and 80 **Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ridibundus*. These kept the team's counter clicker busy. The van provided a wind-break where Vron recorded the notes into her log and, as ever, Gerry brewed up in timely fashion. The wind made Kevin's photography tricky as he battled against the elements at the rear of the van. Nine **Great Northern Diver** *Gavia immer*, were seen at Gairloch, Caolos Beg West along with 2 **Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata.* The sun was setting as we dove north to Melvaig, where the highlight was 9 more **GND** and 9 **Common Scoter** *Melanitta nigra*, again a surprisingly scarce sea duck for the trip. Two **Kittiwakes** *Rissa tridactyla*, were also seen that day.

During day 2 the drive up to the mouth of Loch Ewe and back to Aultbea provided 12 **GND** in sector 1, 19 in Sector 2, Naast; 11 in Sector 3, Boor and nil in Sector 4, Poolewe. However, 2 superb Otter sightings brought the survey to a halt for a while. In addition, 3 **GND** were seen as we got back on the track at Rubha Thuirnaig to Aultbea and one in Aultbea harbour area. Finally, and to our complete dismay it was Jerry Knights who located 'SNOWBALL' the one and only infamous leucistic **GND** in the bay near the Aultbea fishery slipway at Mellon Charles! She has now been seen in this same location 3 years out of the 7 that we have been doing the survey! (See my separate article in 'Sanctuary' for exact dates.) It was very disappointing that not all of us got on the bird. The weather was horrible, we were crammed into the van to get out of the buffeting wind and lashing rain, with our scopes in the open side door peering out. A break in the weather meant we all streamed outside for a better view – but no, only Jerry managed to confirm the strange white apparition as our friend 'Snowball'. Some of us came back 3 days later on our 'down day', but sadly she had gone, back out to sea no-doubt. There must be something in our assertion that birds often frequent the same sites and this seems to prove it almost beyond any doubt: and we speculated on how old she/he must be and marvelled at the fact that she/he comes back year after

year to the same sheltered area of the loch! Now tell me birds don't know what they are doing!

Divers are Us. Day 3 took us to Loch Gruinard, where HUGE numbers of **Divers** were seen, probably the best 'Duck' - diver totals ever. Four at Ruha Beag, 3 at Airde, 27 at Laide, 21 at Leac Innis Nan Gobhar-An T-saothair, 2 a little further along the loch, (again at an unpronounceable Gaelic name), and 15 at Camas A Chruthaich East with 8 **Black-throated Divers** and that closed the sectors down for Loch Gruinard at 1340. So onwards to the **White-tailed Sea Eagle** 'viewpoint' – Gruinard Island - but sadly none of the beautiful birds was seen this year, from this particular viewpoint anyway.

Day 4 for Team 1 meant an easy start as it was on the door step of Little Loch Broom, a drive up to the headland and at 0830 a first light count as far out to sea as possible from the road access at Badcaul. The loch is long and fairly accessible and easy to count, you just need to remember key markers and not count past them. Here the totals were16 **Black-throated Diver,** 10 **Great Northern Divers**.



Great Northern Diver

After the count, as Vron and Kevin were driving back to base, Vron saw the only **Golden Eagle** for the trip high above the opposite hills. The rest of us were a tad disappointed as we were walking and counting somewhere up the loch, and no other Golden Eagles were seen by any of us during the remainder of the trip.

Day 4 also entailed taking in the main elements of Loch Broom and up past Dundonnel with an RV at the cake shop as the incentive. It is well know that Gerry B is very keen on making the Café for his late afternoon 'tea and a piece'. As it happened, the survey of this large area was going very slowly and at the head of the Loch was a very large group of **Greylags,** 137 as it turned out. With poor access for counting, scopes perched dangerously along the verge of the very busy main road the count awkward and time consuming. Also, I seem to remember we had to back track some 3-4 miles after someone, no names no pack drill, had lost a glove. This meant that we were late at the RV with Team 2 and even worse we missed the café as it shut at 5pm. Shame - the glove was found where he had dropped it in the van!! **Hank # 2** goes to Mr Bilbao.

We eventually made the refuel RV in Ullapool and met up with Teams 2 and 3. Team 3 told us their tale of woe at the backpackers; it was amazing how they got any rest in the place. Stan, Maggie and Tom had done a great job, the survey was completed in record time and over record distances and some fantastic knowledge gained on the areas to visit and how to access them.

Team 2. While all this was happening Team 2 were getting on with their survey around Elphin and were covering a good number of sites without any undue traffic or weather difficulties. **Diver** numbers were steady but not phenomenal, the other species were also around in fair quantities. Some highlights from Team 2 are as follows: 2 **Red-throated Diver** at Port Chiligaig on 4 Feb; an **Iceland Gull,** 3 **Great Black-Backed Gull** *Larus marinus*, and 3 **Herring Gull** at Bagh A Phollain on the same day. Three **Red-throats** at Oldshoremore Bay; 43 **Barnacle Geese**, *Branta leucopsis* at Loch Innis Na Ba Buidhe (unpronounceable!). An **Iceland Gull** at Foindle Bay, this team were the Iceland Gull specialists with another located at Loch Clash. Three **Great Northern Diver**; 3 **Red-throated Diver** and an **Iceland Gull** at Loch Inver on 5 Feb. Also, 2 **GND** at Bay of Clachtoll; 5 **GND** at Bay of Stoer with 2 **Black-throated Diver**; 46 **Greylag Geese** at Loch Na Claise, 5 **Red-throated Diver** and a single **GND** at Bay of Culkein, and 40 **Turnstone**, *Arenaria interpres* and 59 **Ringed Plover**, *Charadrius hiaticula* were there also.

Team 3. The first night at Dundonnell a phone call from Tom confirmed that the Northern team were safely ensconced at Thurso in the 'Back-packers Hostel'. The poor layout and lack of space were a problem but Maggie's evening just got worse. She had gone down to the car to collect something and the hostel door slammed behind her. By this time Stan was in bed and Tom was stuck into his bottle of wine, it was then Maggie realised that she didn't have her mobile with her. She shouted up and threw stones at the window but to no avail, no-one heard and she was stranded in the street. So she sat in the van for a couple of hours before Tom woke, realised she was missing and let her in; it was now 0200, not a great start for our merry band up at 'the backpackers'

However, once out on survey, Stan, Tom and Maggie were turning up some awesome birds for the location and time of year: a male **Ringed-necked Duck** *Athya collaris*, was located, filmed and photographed by the team, as well as **Iceland** *Larus glaucoides,* and **Glaucous Gull** *L hyperboreus*. The three were treading new ground and covering large distances on their survey and having returned to Thurso for the second night they decided to try and make Faraid Head on the Monday night.

Wellies/Boots - Nil Stocks or Hank #3. Tom had driven across some farmland to an inland site and the three were getting ready to start the survey. Quote 1.

Maggie: "Tom, don't you think we should walk from here, in case we get stuck in the mud?"

Tom: "No, No. We'll be ...alright". Two minutes later: "B******!"

So they decided to walk. Quote 2.

Maggie: “Where’s your boots Tom?” Quizzical look!! " What! You don't' have any boots with you..... do you Tom?” … “OK. Bye Tom, Stan & I will count the Barnacles! You stay with the car then.”

Tom: “*+^*^+*”. (*Or words to that effect. Ed.*)

The team was covering as much ground as possible up north and phoning in each day to report progress; they said that they hoped to get the survey finished early. Mind you, they were having lots of success and the weather was holding up in most places, but we wondered what all the rush was about, they were due to meet up with the rest of us on the Wednesday afternoon, now they were arriving back on the Tuesday! We were a little concerned that they wouldn’t get all the required areas covered in such a tight schedule, but we just had to leave it to them.

Glaucous and Icelandic Gulls

Northern Findings. On leaving the ‘backpackers’ Team 3 surveyed all the way across to Faraid Head and bunked accommodation at the range hut where they had a lot more space and privacy. Maggie and Stan were able to play catch-up on the Admin and out on the range they were treated to some live bombing runs as the jets came into the range area. Stan had been able to do some digital photography of a male **Ringed-necked Duck** at Loch Borralie on 5 Feb and the shots were brilliant showing all the main ID features. The team had found a couple of rarities on their sites: an **Iceland Gull** of the **Kumlien** sub-sp at Loch of Mey; and a nice find was a female **Smew**, *Mergus albellus* at Loch Heilen on the 3 Feb. This site also held a fantastic 220 **Pink-footed Geese** *Anser brachyrhynchus* and 21 **Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus*. Dunnet Bay had our maximum count (for all three teams) of 72 **Long-tailed Duck** on the same day, plus 18 **Common Eider**, *Somateria mollissima* and 37 **Widgeon**, *Anas penelope*.

Perhaps the most prestigious bird of the trip was located at Murkle Bay where Stan found a female **King Eider**, *Somateria spectabilis* – we believe that this is a first for ‘Winter Duck’ in the 7 years of surveying - quite a find. Also at this location were 62 **Golden Plover**, *Pluvialis apricaria*, 5 **Turnstone** (surprisingly few of this sp were seen during the week) and 83 **Common Teal**, *Anas crecca*. The team also located a **Little Auk**, *Alle alle* at Traig-Allt-Chailgeag with 9 **Great Northern Diver** on 5 Feb. Kyle of

Durness held 2 **Red-throated Diver** with 4 **Black-throated Diver**. As is normal for 'Duck', **Red-throats** are the least widespread of the Diver species.

When we all met up it became clear that Tom had changed the plan because he was heading south to England for a meeting on the Friday, leaving from his place in Elgin on the Thursday. Team 3 worked at an incredible rate counting and coordinating the record forms, it was amazing they managed to cover and complete as much as they did in the time.

Hank of the Day #4 - Goes to the man who left his scope out for the public to use!

Following the RV at Ullapool our team returned to base last and as we pulled into the lay-by outside the JSMTC Hut, there, reflecting in the van's headlights and standing out like a lighthouse, was a scope and tripod – 'Manfrotto' glinting out in a silver font. "I wonder who that belongs to", came a voice from the back of the van, but I knew straightaway and as we unloaded our gear we smuggled the scope in and awaited call–over, to get some mileage out of the situation.

Call-over was complete; all BTO Survey Forms compiled, birds counted, additional species logged, roving record forms filled in, mapped out and grids confirmed, the days highlights chatted about and then:

JW: "Hands up all those who have their tripods and 'scopes in the basher?"

"Now get your hand down Jimmy!"

'Shoot where's my scope' he thought – but not in those words!

Peace and quiet at night. Now we were all back at Dundonnell the bashers/ bedrooms were fully occupied, with Jim and me sharing as we both snore like troopers! In an attempt to make myself more socially acceptable I had, a week or so before the trip, researched and obtained a 'Anti-snoring' wrist watch device to try out. It is supposed to pick up the sound of the snoring and then give an electric pulse to the wrist, making you turn over and hence stop snoring. At home Sue said it worked OK! Anyway, I had taken it up north intent on improving relations with whoever I shared with! But it didn't work out quite like that! I was awake all night getting small electric shocks into my wrist caused by the loud and prolonged snoring from my room-mate Jimbo! I was not best pleased at getting his share of the electric shocks so I gathered up my bag and pillows and moved out to the lounge where I slept on the floor on the settee cushions. I even contemplated taking the damn thing off my wrist, licking the gel pads and sticking it on Jim's forehead so he could get some of his own medicine! But the story gave the rest of the gang a chuckle when I told them.

As Tom was leaving us to head south to his meeting we had to reorganise. We decided that Stan and Maggie would join Jim and Team 2 and that they would cover the far south over The Pass of the Cattle to Carron, and we would work east into Torridon and up to Loch Diabeg. This plan worked well with both vehicles covering all their allocated sites by dusk – just!

On the way around Upper Loch Torridon, at a nice spot which overlooked an expanse of sheltered and open water known as Ob Mheallaidh, I panned my scope from L to R amongst the sea weed along the shore line and suddenly I had my lens completely full of **White-tailed Eagle**, *Haliaeetus albicilla*, it was being mobbed by **Hooded Crows** *Corvus corone*…. Eagle!! I shouted to get everyone on to it fast, luckily it stuck around for a while and we all got good views. It appeared to be feeding amongst the flotsam on the far side of the loch and as it went about its business we could even make out its Red wing tag with the No 4 on it.

NB: Details on the bird's age, ringing site etc have been confirmed by the BTO. The bird was ringed at confidential site #23 on 9 Jun 2005. It is a male from a brood of two (the other bird was Tag No 3), with a ring No ZZ1389. The bird had been seen and reported on 8 previous occasions from Sheildaig Island, Wester Ros; Loch an Draing, W Ross; Portree, Isle of Skye; and Nr Ardgay, Kyle of Sutherland and also from 3 other locations on Skye and Rosehall, Sutherland. From these records, it can be ascertained that this individual has 3 favoured areas!

Team 1 overlooking Torridon
L to R Jerry, Vron, Kev, John, and Gerry.

Between Shieldaig and Torridon were fewer Diver (sp) but 3 **Slavonian Grebe**, *Podiceps auritus* at Annat and 3 more at Upper Loch Torridon were a nice addition. A further 2 near Inveralligin and 3 **GND** in the horseshoe sea-loch bay at Diabeg were a nice end to the day in a beautiful and remote location.

Team 2 also had some good finds. Eight **GND** at Poll Creadha, 2 **Whooper Swan** at Loch a' Mhuillinn, 13 **Black-throated-Diver** and 6 **GND** at Applecross-Milton, a favoured location for both species and a site of importance in the Wetland Bird Report. Another 6 of each species were at Sand Bay at 1550 and 6 more of each **Diver** sp at

Callikillie, another known site for roosting/gathering of birds, before the light finally faded and dusk closed the day on their endeavours.

The final day was a free birding day. There was a lot of discussion on where we should go; some of Team 1 wanted to have a final look for 'Snowdrop', others, knowing that we had to pack and clean the JSMTC, were happy to do general birding around favoured locations in the local area. But we all agreed a 1600 RV at the centre. The decision was a wise one as we all had a terrific 'chilled out' birding day. Stan, Jim, Maggie, Martin and Steve checked out Mellon Udrigle for White-billed Diver with no luck but plenty of other superb birding around the top of Loch Gruinard and Loch Kerry; the bird of the day for us was probably the **Little Auk** in Gairloch which was very difficult to 'get-on' in the choppy waters.

A happy recorder!

When we got back to the centre it was, as usual, in darkness, but it quickly became apparent that all was not well. The foyer was flooded and the water was running down the walls, very adjacent to the power supplies to the alarm control box, NOT GOOD! Buckets, baking trays, pots and pans; in fact anything we could lay our hands on were scattered about the foyer to try and catch the water as it steadily dripped from the ceiling. We quickly phoned Janie, who phoned in to regional HQ of Defence Estates Inverness to get emergency plumbing assistance and she also called in her husband, a plumber, to see if he could help. It was now 1700 and tea and essential recording work was started as we mulled over the predicament. Janie came over to observe the deluge and explained the water system, great talk Janie but not much help under the circumstances! Time moved on, it was now after 2130 and no sign of the engineer. By 2230 the place was clean (if wet) and the girls had hovered and re-cleaned where the lads had missed. The kitchen was blitzed and utensils, pans and surplus food packed

by Steve and Martin. Stan and Maggie in a frenzy of activity completed the paperwork for the survey of the Northern team areas, and all the maps and admin packs were tidied away. Martin's records for the RAFOS journal were completed by both teams and notebooks were compared to make sure we had not missed anything.

By 2245 we were ready for bed, when the plumber arrived; he had gone to the wrong JSMTC somewhere down by Skye about 80 miles south of us after a wrong call from Defence Estates. Anyway, it turned out that he was ex-RAF and had at some time or other been posted to Kinloss, as of course had Jim, so they needed to have a social chat and relive past memories; but it was not getting the leak fixed, nor was it allowing anyone to sleep in readiness for our 0530 awakening and 0700 departure.

Anyway, it is enough to say that the job was not finished that night, despite my assistance until after 0100, and when we left the next morning we were sure it would be a while before everything was squared away, as indeed it was, but that's another story.

Next morning we arose more or less on time, had breakfast, Gerry did the inventory check with Janie and we were on the road at 0700. Both vehicles had a smooth run south including some nice views of **Red Kite**, *Milvus milvus* on the Black Isle, before another breakfast at Inverness Tesco at around 0800. Perfect timing again!

The rest of the journey went well, we dropped Vron off at Vane, Jim was deposited in Edinburgh to meet up with family for the weekend, and the Wyton van continued on its way. I've heard of no dramas from the other wagon so I assume it had a good run too.

The trip was superb and a great success. Some 211 WeBS forms were submitted to Dr Andy Musgrove of the WeBS Team and all sightings logged by Martin for a journal article once we are on an even keel. However, this Newsletter piece comes first, then we can get on with the scientific 'stuff'. The views and birding were spectacular and the planning and cooking - if I can say so again, was brilliant and everyone played their part. However, the most important aspect of a survey like 'Duck' is a repetition of sites and covering all or as many as possible, of the allotted sites every year. In that respect the 3 teams on 'Duck 08' achieved their goals

All photos are courtesy of Jerry Knights and Maggie Sheddan and more will be shown at the AGM.

Team 1: John Wells, Jerry Knights, Gerry Bilbao, Kevin Cairns and Veronica Wooton

Team 2: Jim Bryden, Martin Wightman and Steve Heather.

Team 3: Tom Dewick, Stan Christophers and Maggie Sheddan.

Burnham Overy 28th-30th March 2008

By Peter Evans

The Team (less a few) *Photo Pete Evans*

The morning of our annual pilgrimage to Norfolk dawned wet and 'orrible. As Jon and I set off the outlook was not good but as we got near to our destination there was a great improvement and this part of the country proved the place to be for the whole weekend: and not only for the better weather. Our first stop was the roadside transport café that has been an annual feature for many years. Having re-fuelled, the next port of call was to be the reserve at Weeting Heath. Wrong! As this year's event was four weeks earlier than usual, the reserve wasn't open so we headed straight to Titchwell. On arrival we bumped into Katherine and it wasn't long before Fran and John S-S arrived. Whilst there we were treated to some great views of Brambling in breeding plumage on the feeders behind the visitor centre.

At the appointed hour we all converged on the windmill to be welcomed with a large slab of home made cake and copious amounts of tea. Mike Hayes had made all the booking arrangements as usual but due to other commitments he was unable to join us; something that has not happened in living memory. Mind you, bearing in mind the average age of the participants, that probably isn't very long. Mike B stepped in as leader for the weekend and he and Sue made us all very welcome.

As mentioned, this year's field meeting was earlier than the past few years and the effect that this had on our sightings was quite noticeable. Geese in particular were far more numerous, with large flocks of Brent being quite common. JO, JF and I spent some time on the beach at Titchwell and turned up **Red Breasted Merganser** and **Scoter** along with the usual waders. As we were returning to the car park we were stopped by a kindly gentleman who asked if we had seen the **Black Brant**. Not wishing to show our ignorance by admitting that we had never even heard of it, we replied that we hadn't. He then proceeded to aim our 'scopes at a large flock of Brent geese and

explained why one of them was different. He was soon repeating this for a number of other passing birders, which just goes to show what a friendly bunch we are.
While walking along the sea defences at Cley, which have been extensively damaged since we were there last year, JO and I came across a group of **Horned Lark (Shore Lark).**

A new location this year was a visit to the reserve at Sculthorpe. We had good sightings of a **Marsh Harrier**, as featured on Spring Watch, and Al Roberts assured us that **Water Rail** was a certainty. This has long been one of my bogie birds so I was thrilled when two of them gave us some good views. Thanks Al.

As usual the breakfast rota was established and so it was that John Foster, Jon Orme and I found ourselves in the kitchen early on Sunday morning. Now, those of you who were on Sanda Island will recall that Jon is very safety conscious and by overdoing the toast he managed to ensure that the smoke alarm was working correctly. Every day! On this particular morning, once again, Jon was in charge of toast production and by turning the thermostat up to the 'charcoal' setting, he managed successfully to prove the alarm system. (*Don't you guys ever learn! Keep him away from toasters! Oh – and Kettles – see Cyprus report Ed.)*

Jan once again scooped the prize for the best hat, head and shoulders above the competition (figuratively speaking). On the way back we called in at Weeting and were rewarded with good sightings of Stone Curlew. Although we didn't know it at the time, Jon and I were to see some in flight a few weeks later in Cyprus.

All in all this was another very enjoyable weekend in the Windmill, and thanks go to all concerned.

And finally, Stiffkey is a quiet, unassuming village that we often pass through on our way to Blakeney and Cley and is the last place that you would think of as having a history. But no! One Harold Francis Davidson was the rector of Stiffkey from 1906–32 and he was better known in the area as the Vicar of Stiffkey or 'the Prostitute's Padre'. It was during his rectorship that he was accused of visiting London to consort with Soho prostitutes. This caused him a few problems in the quiet and gentrified byways of this Norfolk parish. The issue was taken in hand, solicitors instructed and eventually a trial took place. On 28 July 1932 Davidson was convicted and defrocked. His family and supporters agreed that he did indeed travel between London and Norfolk and that he did spend time with prostitutes, but suggested that the reason, far from supporting them in their work, was to offer them advice and give them the time and opportunity to escape from the grasps of their trade.

I'm sure he did!

This year's team was:- Mike Blair, Sue Fleming, Dick & Jan Knight, Ian & Evangeline MacKenzie, John Stewart-Smith & Fran Eggby, Katherine Sweeney, Brian Eke, John Foster, Jon Orme, Al Roberts, Dennis Witherington and yours truly. Hope to see you all again next year.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JOHN STEWART-SMITH
NEW ZEALAND 2008

By Jerry Knights

Far be it for me to attempt to emulate the renowned JS^2 in his series of articles "Let's Go to New Zealand". Indeed, Ruth and I did not embark on a bird watching holiday at all. But once we reached New Zealand and experienced its wonderful landscape, friendly welcoming peoples and its fascinating wildlife, we couldn't resist starting a Southern Hemisphere List.

Re-reading John's articles (Newsletters 82 & 83) as well as Dick Yates' "Of Kiwis, Kokakos and Kakas" (Newsletter 84) one could be forgiven for thinking that New Zealand is a RAFOS right of passage. Well, if you take up the challenge, these notes may be of some small help. I do not intend to tell you about everywhere we went or what we saw, but rather to give you some directions to special places that are not to be missed if birding is your aim in the land of the long white cloud.

NORTH ISLAND

Kiwi. Not an easy bird to see, because they are both nocturnal and rare. Dick & Daphne went on a night time **Brown Kiwi** (*Apteryx australis*), hunt at Kerikeri up in the north of the North Island which was successful, John and Fran tried on Stewart Island. There are several other places you can try this for most iconic of New Zealand birds and we went to Trounson on the North Island where walks leave from the Kauri Coast Top 10 Holiday Park (a campsite), but you do need to book (www.kauricoasttop10.co.nz/kauricoasttop10.htm). You also need fairly good weather because our trip was cancelled due to a wet and windy night where there was too much debris falling from the tall trees. We did see Kiwis at the Thermal Valley in Rotorua, but they were living in an artificial crepuscular glass enclosure. However, the views of these strange creatures were excellent as they snuffled their way about like two legged hedgehogs in search of worms. See also notes below on Kapiti Island and the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary below because kiwi can be seen there as well.

Kapiti Island (www.naturecoast.co.nz)

Transport to Kapiti Island. *Photo: Jerry Knights*

Islands are very special places in New Zealand. This is because their natural defences mean that, once the local introduced pests (stoat, weasel, cat, rat, mouse, possum, hedgehog etc. – all of which either eat adults, young, eggs or food plants) have been eradicated, (often by aerial spraying at huge expense) rare endemics can be re-introduced with a racing chance of success. Kapiti Island is just such a gem. It is situated on the lower west coast of the North Island near Levin and we had a magic time both getting there and birding.

Weka *Photo: Jerry Knights*

The island is Maori-owned, and it is possible to stay overnight. However, the day trip is perfectly adequate and you will be guaranteed to see several of the rarest birds. We particularly enjoyed excellent close views of **Takahe** (*Porphyrio mantelli hochstetteri*) (and believe me a 3 kilogram, 63 centimetre swamphen is pretty spectacular), **North Island Robin** (*Petroica australis longipes*) and **Weka** (*Gallirallus australis greyi*).

Several islands have been set up like this and Dick and Daphne visited the island sanctuary of Tiritiri Matangi off the Whangaparaoa Peninsula.

Karori Sanctuary, Wellington (www.sanctuary.org.nz). Only 15 minutes drive from the centre of Wellington, Karori is an island on the mainland. Effectively, 250 hectares of natural bush has been surrounded by an 8.6 km, high tech metal fence designed in 1993 (costing £800,000 at today's rates). It is also dug into the ground and has a corridor of dead ground outside to prevent access by jumping from nearby trees or fallen branches. All this gives the impression of a private zoo, until you get inside and realise what an amazing conservation achievement it is. There is nothing to stop the re-introduced rarities, all of which are breeding successfully and growing in numbers, from flying over the fence and spreading to the local countryside. I am certain many of them do and their attempts at re-establishment outside the perimeter are probably not very successful, but it is marvellous to see really rare birds coming and going as they please. We were delighted to have another opportunity to see many of the species that we had not been able to track down on Kapiti Island including **Kaka** (*Nestor meridionalis*), **Stitchbird** (*Notiomystis cincta*) and **Saddleback** (*Philesturnus carunculatus*). We also saw the prehistoric **Tuatara Lizard** (*Sphenodon punctatus*) that is confined to New Zealand and was extinct on the mainland until reintroduced at Karori in 2005. Don't miss out on a visit to Karori if you are taking the ferry between the North and South Islands.

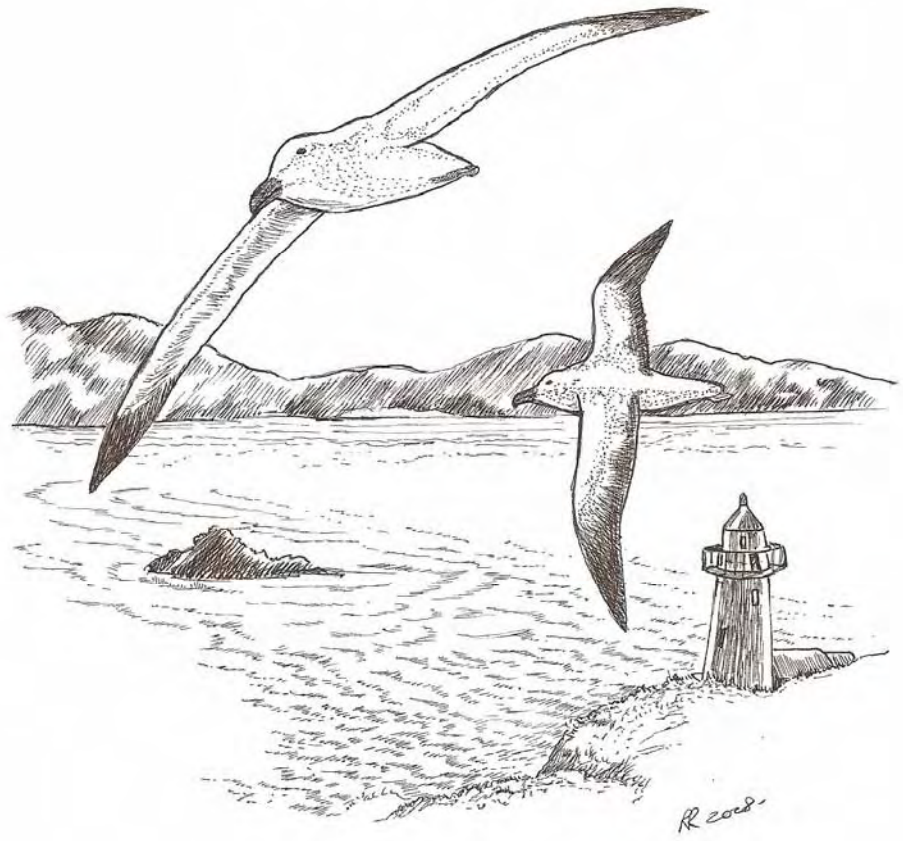
SOUTH ISLAND

Black Stilt. The **Black Stilt** or Kakī (*Himantopus novaezelandiae*) is the world's rarest wader. Although a separate species, the bird is effectively a melanistic Black-winged Stilt (Pied Stilt in New Zealand). Its home is the Mackenzie Basin, an arid area of braided river systems in the central South Island. The bird is a delicate gentle creature with limited ability to reason and no practical defences against raptors such as the numerous **Australasian Harrier** (*Circus approximans*) or introduced predators. As recently as 1981 the population was reduced to 23 birds. It was at that point that the Department of Conservation stepped in with a very determined recovery programme. They established a captive-breeding centre at the town of Twizel where they raise young birds for release (http://nzbirds.com/birding/kaki.html). Such is the poor breeding success rate in the wild that they also progressively replace the eggs in wild nests with china ones which both foils the predators and induces the birds to lay a second clutch. This procedure also helps replenish the depleted gene pool of the captive birds, albeit that the pool was ridiculously small in the first place. The released birds have now established a wild population of 55 including 11 pairs (2005 figures) and the future is looking much brighter although staff do not believe the birds will ever survive long term without man's help.

Kea.

To see **Kea** (*Nestor notabilis*), the world's only alpine parrot, is a wonderful experience. The trouble is that because their habitat is alpine the only way to guarantee seeing them is to climb a mountain. Once you have accepted that, you are almost guaranteed to see Kea because they are so intelligent that they regard man as a free meal ticket and they will invariably find you. I believe they fill the ecological niche that Ravens do in UK. Their flight is so agile that to watch a Kea tumble and soar effortlessly through thousands of feet of air from some distant mountaintop to land right next to you and then calmly walk up and beg food is truly awesome. Any of the peaks to either side of Arthur's Pass (the major route through the Southern Alps from west to east will do, and on top of Avalanche Peak (1833m) we shared an area the size of a lounge carpet with 12 Kea. We did see them elsewhere and a pair joined us at a crowded campsite near the Fox Glacier. Here they swung tantalisingly just out of reach on the flower spikes of Flax whilst a group of entranced photographers chased them from plant to plant trying to get that close-up shot.

Royal Albatross. The only **Royal Albatross** (*Diomedea epomorphora sanfordi*) colony on the mainland is at Taiaroa Head on the tip of the Otago Peninsula. It is exactly what you would expect; a fenced off area that protects these graceful birds when they are clumsily land-bound and an excellent observation hide and associated museum, gift shop and café (www.albatross.org.nz/index.html). But it does what it says on the tin and the experience of having these massive birds soar a few inches over your head is unforgettable. Thank goodness for digital cameras or I would have used a bucket of film.



Royal Albatross

Little Blue Penguin. The **Little Blue Penguin** (*Eudyptula minor*) is the world's smallest penguin, being only 40 cms tall. In lots of coastal beauty spots there are signboards referring to the local population and telling you what to look for on the beach. My advice is not to waste your time trying to see them; they are nocturnal and nest in burrows, so if you don't know where to find them or when they are due ashore you are in for a very long wait. Far better to visit the colony at Oamaru (www.penguins.co.nz). We arrived at the appointed hour and joined the other punters (about 100 in all) to sit in what can only be described as a small version of the old North Stand at Twickenham that faced the sea. Here we were entertained by our headset wearing master of ceremonies who strutted around like the DJ at some bizarre disco and I thought "Oh help, this is going to be awful", but it wasn't. Because the MC had total control of the group she was able to warn everyone to be quiet and how to react when the first pod of penguins came ashore. More important, her expertise (ably assisted by a couple of other watchful volunteer helpers) identified the succession of pods well offshore and we were able to track their progress and

very cautious approach to the shore. Once on the beach, they waited around until they perceived it was safe enough to make the dash to their nesting area. There was then much noisy greeting from wives and offspring who sometimes ran to meet their loved ones. When the formalities were over, they then went round to the other burrows (nest boxes) visiting and chatting with neighbours in high-pitched, wheezy calls and generally enjoying the balmy night air. At this stage our guide went home but we were encouraged to stay if we wished. Ruth at this stage became totally entranced and wanted to stay all night. We managed another hour or so, during which time we actually had penguins come right up to meet us – the whole experience was wonderful.

Yellow-eyed Penguin. Next door to the Royal Albatross Colony is another visitor attraction, a secure breeding area on private land for the **Yellow-eyed Penguin** (*Megadyptes antipodes*). Being a private concern its approach to conservation is slightly quirky and different from the government run outfits, but they are all passionate about helping the world's rarest penguin to thrive. (www.yellow-eyedpenguin.org.nz/about/index). We got pretty close to the nesting birds, although the experience would give any military historian the jitters as it was very reminiscent of travelling through communication trenches en route to Ypres. Again, a very New Zealand experience and one not to be missed.

Yellow-eyed Penguin and young *Photo: Jerry Knights*

So that only leaves all the other New Zealand experiences; the long distance footpaths, thermal pools, snow covered mountains, calving glaciers, sea kayaking in remote fjords, swimming with tiny Hector's Dolphins and, of course, whale watching. Indeed, even at Kaikoura, one of the best spots anywhere to watch whales, you can always join a pelagic birding trip and further blow your mind with more rare bird species (www.naturallykaikoura.co.nz/kaikoura/OceanWings).

I wonder where JS^2 has booked for his next holiday?

FROM THE ATLAS MOUNTAINS TO THE SAHARA - MOROCCO MARCH 2008

By John Le Gassick

Cast your minds back to RAFOS Newsletter No 81, the "Big One", the 40th Anniversary edition with a lovely picture of an iced cake on the cover – there I knew that image would jog your memories! On page 40 there is a short article entitled "A Winter Weekend in Aragon"; it told how four intrepid birders, all members of RAFOS and the recently deceased RAFWOS, spent a pleasant four days in the Spanish Pyrenees. Well it was here one convivial evening, imbibing our host Josele Saiz's fine wine that we heard of the delights of a spring visit to Morocco. Unfortunately the trip for 2007 was already filled. Bob Frost, enthused by the thought of all those lovely birds, wanted to get eleven like-minded people interested so that to a certain extent we could have a large input into what we wanted to see and more importantly to stay long enough at each site to obtain some decent photos. As with all brilliant plans Baldrick, they never quite work out and we found a total of seven men good and true. Josele, who was to lead this adventure, supplied another four. Those of you who are good at maths will have already worked out that the answer is twelve; add on three Spanish speaking Moroccan drivers and it rather tidily adds up to five people to each roomy 4WD vehicle.

On Monday 17 Mar 08 we caught an Easyjet flight to Marrakech arriving at midday. We then had to drive to Agidir where the bird watching was planned to start. In previous years direct flights to Agidir were available but unfortunately this year this was not the case. Our accommodation in Agidir was the comfortable Hotel Tivoli where we stayed for two nights. Common Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*, a new bird for some of us, burbled away from every bush and just across the road from the hotel there was a nest site for Little Swift *Apus affinus.*

Tuesday we visited the National Nature Reserve at Souss Massa, an idyllic place with plenty of water and greenery. Here we had good views of Black-headed Bush Shrike *Tchagra senegala*, and distant views of another speciality, Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris.* On the far bank of the river we saw two groups of Wild Boar, one of the groups containing ten piglets. Wild Boar does well here as they are definitely not on the menu. We enjoyed a picnic under the trees prepared by the drivers, a feature that was to become a welcome part of the long days in the field. Whilst enjoying our lunch we had some splendid views of a male Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* one of my favourite birds. The end of the day saw us "scoping" the muddy flats of the Oued Souss alive with waders, Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandivicensis* and a not dissimilar Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*. The icing on the cake was an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* perched unconcernedly on a tree stump. Once it was dark we spent an uneventful half hour trying to "lure" Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis* into visual range and although there were birds calling none was seen. We returned to the hotel tired but happy at 1930.

Wednesday, 19th March, a nice warm day, we visited Tamri, Paradise Valley and the Souss River. Our main objective was to see a Moroccan speciality, the Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*; they have a breeding colony on the cliffs which is wardened in quite an aggressive manner i.e. not allowing anyone to observe it even at telescope range. Josele is hoping to fund some form of viewing hide/platform to enable visiting birders to view this unique site. Nevertheless quite reasonable views were had of over 60 birds feeding in the adjacent fields and across a nearby lagoon. During this period we had nice views of Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* and an obliging Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrinoides*. The final treat of the day was a very good view of 4 Plain Martin

(Brown-throated Sand Martin) *Riparia Paludicola,* before we made our way to the ornate Hotel Palais Salam in Taroudant, which we were told was once a Sultan's Palace.

Thursday started with poor visibility and a touch of drizzle, and because of the poor conditions we came across two hundred Black Kite *Milvus migrans* halted in their migration by the weather. A memorable sight! The itinerary for the day was: Tadourant, Souss Valley and the River Alouz. We then stayed for two nights at the hotel Ksar Kaissar with its beautiful backdrop of snow covered mountains, just outside El Kalaa. Other species recorded on this day were: disappointingly distant views of Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus,* Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* and very good views of Thick-billed Lark *Rhamphocoris clotbey*. The next day, Friday, we had booked early breakfasts as the plan was to go and observe an Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*, of the North African race *ascalaphus,* smaller and paler than the nominate but still a pretty impressive owl. To our great surprise we awoke to find the rain tipping down, this was a complete surprise and we laid the blame fairly and squarely at the door of our two retired "Met" men. Nonetheless we visited the site and then returned to the hotel until the weather cleared, which it soon did and by 1100 after some very good birding in the hotel surrounds we were on our way. Today was one of the days for a visit to the environs of the famous Tagdlit Track. Here we recorded Red-rumped and Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe moesta* and *Oenanthe deserti*, Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* displaying, Temminck's Horned Lark *Eremophila bilopha*, Bar-tailed Desert Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* and thirteen Crowned Sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus*.

Saturday, 22nd March, we left El Kalaa heading east for the Sahara but first a couple of Moroccan specialities. Mid morning, after much searching, we came upon the first, Mourning Wheatear (or Mourning Chat*) Oenanthe lugens*; also in this area was the equally handsome, but much more common, White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga.* To add to the confusion (what confusion?) an immature White-crowned Black Wheatear has no white in the crown and so can be easily confused with the even more abundant Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura*.

Black or White-crowned Black Wheatear? Photo John Le Gassick

As with all wheatears, always check the tail pattern! We then proceeded through the Todra Gorge, a very spectacular place and full of tourists and stalls selling various nick-nacks. We of course eschewed this and headed off to the barren hill side behind and, at our third inhospitable location, had very good views of the rare and elusive Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola*, not as smart as the abundant Spectacled Warbler *Syvia conspicillata* or the very common Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* but far far rarer and believe me far more difficult to find! The bird we had the best views of made things slightly more difficult as it was moulting into summer plumage. After this we had a picnic, again prepared by the drivers, beside a stream at the head of the gorge, a lovely and tranquil spot. After a long drive we arrived at the edge of the desert to check in at the Auberge "Ali el Cojo", an interesting place but with all the necessities including a large fridge where we could store the beer purchased en-route as it did not serve alcohol but permitted it to be drunk. Once we had dumped our bags it was off to the nearby Oasis until dark.

Easter Day, incredibly early this year, saw us checking the Oasis before breakfast. A true desert species, seen near here, was Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis.* Then after breakfast it was off to the unbelievably noisy location of breeding Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex*. In a nearby tent the sound system for a concert was being tested at maximum volume, but the sparrows were not bothered and we all got excellent photos.

Desert Sparrow *Photo by John Le Gassick*

In this area we had yet another good sighting; amongst a flock of 19 Crowned Sandgrouse there were 2 Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* . During this period, whilst we were looking over a lovely tranquil pool which contained quite a lot of waders one of the sharper eyed members of the party, and believe me we had quite a few, identified Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii.* Out here there is an awful lot of desert and very few Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*, so the services of a local nomad, who knew about such things was acquired and lo and behold we had very good

views of a pair. After this we drove far into the desert to the tranquil Safsaf Oasis, miles from the nearest camel, for a barbecue lunch; and as we entered the Oasis eight Fulvous Babbler *Turdoides fulvus* were seen in the palm trees. The desert is very flat and stony and as long as your vehicle stays on this type of terrain all is well, but when our driver tried to cut a corner through some greenery we became well and truly stuck and quite a lot of energy was used rescuing the vehicle. Just as we were all re-boarding our car a large and well used lorry came into sight obviously hoping to earn some Moroccan Dirhams by towing us back onto dry land! After a short coffee break at the Auberge we drove to the Merzouga Lake where we stayed until sunset, a lovely spot, but a focal point for fossil vendors. Here amongst a lot of interesting birds were twenty Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea.* Next day we had to reluctantly leave the desert and head back on the long drive west, our destination eventually the aptly named Hotel les Jardins in Ouarzazate, try saying that without your teeth in. Around the Oasis Seebohm's Wheatear had been quite common; I am still not sure whether it is a separate species or just a sub-species of Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi.* Another bird worth mentioning that isn't too common, is Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus,* and a pair were perched on the roadside wires. Towards the end of this day in a delightful green wadi just off the main road, not far from the Ouarzazate Reservoir, which we had visited at the end of day four, we had lovely views of a very smart Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*, I think many of these birds looked so magnificent because of the beautiful evening light in Morocco.

On Tuesday our itinerary was: Ait Ben Hadou, Amerzgane, Argbalou and a raptor watch point near Touama ending up in Marrakech. At one of our stops beside the Café Assanfou, proudly proclaiming to be at an altitude of 7000 feet, we saw a flock of eight Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia.* A few miles along the road we stopped for lunch in a delightful village where we enjoyed a typical Morrocan meat stew cooked in a "Tagine". Between courses, the second one being delicious local oranges, we were able to photograph an obliging Moussier's Redstart *Phoenicurus moussieri*.

How do you spell Moussier's? *Photo John Le Gassick*

Following our culinary adventure no one went down with “scurvy”, but we did have a couple of cases of severe diarrhoea and vomiting, Q.E.D. Later that afternoon we had lovely views of Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* and Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* searching for seeds amongst the blossoms of a beautiful Elm.

For our final two nights we were accommodated in the rather splendid, but alcohol free, Hotel Mogador Opera in Marrakech. This hotel was very comfortable and served excellent food and from here, on the Wednesday, our final bird watching day, we visited the High Atlas Mountains. Our first stop in the morning was on the lower slopes where we saw an extremely obliging and vocal Levaillant’s Green Woodpecker *Picus Vaillantii.* We then continued to the top reaching an altitude of some 8250 feet where we saw the Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sangunea* and the rather mis-named, for a bird of the high mountains, Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris.* After another “Tagine” eaten in the open air surrounded by the snow-clad mountains it was time to begin our descent.

On our way down we stopped briefly to look at a male and female Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* in the same bush as a Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus.* We stopped for a coffee in the garden of a roadside cafeteria and said farewell and thank you to our drivers and picnic makers of the past ten days, pressing some Dirhams on them in a show of our appreciation for their driving and culinary skills. The Easyjet flight went smoothly and before we could say “Bobs your Uncle” we were back at Gatwick to hear the tales of the Easter Snow!

A marvellous experience with excellent birds in a series of interesting habitats and above all good company, always ready with a witty remark whatever the circumstance. I liked the country and its people, even the ever present and persuasive Fossil Sellers - does any one know where I can unload two kilos of genuine Moroccan fossils?

Note

Tagine is the name of a special dish and also the name of the heavy clay pot it is cooked in. Tagine dishes are slow cooked at low temperature resulting in tender, falling-off-the-bone-meat with aromatic vegetables and sauce.

References

Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East by Lars Jonsson 1992

The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East by Hermann Heinzel, Richard Fitter and John Parslow 1972

BOU The British List 03/05/2006 (Where possible)

www.boletas.org and www.easyjet.com

12 Merlins Crest
Scarrowscant Lane
Haverfordwest
Pembrokeshire
SA61 1EJ

Tel: 01437 765516

1 July 2008

Dear RAFOS Members,

I am a long serving RAFOS Member and, over the years, I have enjoyed the privilege of taking part in 13 scientifically based RAFOS Expeditions.

Between times I have travelled to many countries of the world to watch birds, usually with a group of like-minded people. Normally, I have carried out all the research and made all the booking arrangements myself and, when necessary, have taken the lead on the ground.

It occurred to me that there may be a number of RAFOS members who do not feel that they can contribute to a full-blooded RAFOS type expedition but would still like to travel to look for birds. Indeed, they may wish to do this in a more sedate, less intensive manner, in greater comfort and, of course, as economically as possible. Over the past 20 years I have picked up a great deal of experience organizing this type of trip and I would hope to cut the cost by up to a third or to extend the trip by a third.

Of course, the trips are in no way meant to replace or compete with RAFOS expeditions, more to complement them. I will not be getting any contributions from RAFOS funds; all trips will be completely self-financing.

My next trip is to Madagascar, indeed we will be there when you get this Newsletter, and there are 7 RAFOS members out of the 12 going.

I would like to offer my experience and expertise to any RAFOS members who feel that they might like to try one of my trips. Therefore, if you are interested in activities of this sort please get in touch and we can see if we can enjoy a birding experience together.

Under consideration for 2009 are Uganda and/or Vietnam, but I am open to any suggestions.

Kindest regards,

Peter Tithecott

peter@tithecott.wanadoo.co.uk

LE BIRDING

By Jon Orme

Last February we spent a week with (non-birding) friends at their holiday cottage near St Omer in Normandy. Whilst there we decided to try a local bird reserve, the **Parc Ornithologique du Marquenterre,** situated on the north shore of the entrance to the Baie de Somme about an hour's drive south of Calais.

I have always had in my mind the stereotype of a French birder as someone who dons full combat kit and goes out and blasts a few sparrows with a very expensive shotgun before retiring to the Bistro for a long lunch; however I was pleasantly surprised.

The reserve turned out to be thoroughly worthwhile. It's a cross between Holkham with elevated pine woods overlooking the site, and Cley marshes with many pools and scrapes, and more are being prepared. At least 25 pairs of White Stork were noisily nesting on prepared platforms and in the pine trees and a Common Crane foraged in the field behind the car park. No less than 14 Spoonbills waded in one of the pools with Great and Little Egrets and a Great Cormorant was also present. Several pairs of Whooper Swans were preparing to nest amongst the pools.

Photo: Jon Orme

In the 2 hours we spent at the site we saw a total of 31 species, mainly familiar water birds such as Teal, Shoveler, Shelduck, Gadwall, Little Grebe and Greylag and Barnacle Geese. The French birders were a friendly bunch much like our own but, surprisingly, they all spoke French!

The reserve has no less than 13 well situated hides spaced out along 2, 4 and 6 km walks and has good parking, a restaurant and a shop. It is less than an hours drive south of Calais and could therefore be a good antidote to enforced booze cruising (those of us chaps who have been subjected to the Cite Europe shopping complex will know what I mean!). Stay a little longer and one could take in another wetland reserve at St Omer, and the **Maison de la Baie de Somme et de l'Oiseau** just across the estuary which describes itself as a bird interpretation centre. I haven't tried these last two but intend to if we are ever invited again! For the aeronautically minded the French aircraft manufacturer Caudron has a small museum in the nearby town of Rue.

All in all a worthwhile destination with the bonus that duty frees can be gathered, although not as cheaply as was once the case. Thoroughly recommended!

WORLDBIRDS

If you collect bird records and want to contribute to conservation around the world then www.worldbirds.org is the place to visit. The WorldBirds project (RSPB, BirdLife and Audubon) is working to cover the whole globe with a 'family' of systems to pull together important data from members of the public. There are many people with an interest in viewing and recording birds recreationally, and birdwatching is an immensely popular activity that attracts huge numbers of people around the world. A considerable, and rising, proportion of these bird watchers not only make local trip to view birds, but also visit countries rich in biodiversity to do so.

Too often these data stay locked away in notebooks and Excel spreadsheets, when in fact they could be making an important contribution to the conservation of birds, habitats and sites. Over the last decade, Internet-based projects involving large-scale public participation have proved to be a successful way of enabling people to get involved in conservation. The aim of the WorldBirds project is to allow people to participate at a level at which they are comfortable, gain skills, improve their ways of recording, and so increase their enjoyment, sense of achievement and contribution to conservation.

From the point of view of the BirdLife Partners involved, they are able to use data entered to help with their conservation work, both for science and as a way to bring together a birding community. Birds are an important focus for conservation as they play major roles in the way ecosystems work (eg through seed dispersal and pollination), they are highly visible to the general public and, particularly in species-rich countries, they are an excellent source of revenue through bird-watching and tourism. As detailed and accessible information about wildlife and habitats is an essential conservation tool, birds can be a highly effective way to identify and set national conservation priorities.

So, if you participate, what's in it for you? A key belief of the WorldBirds team is that data should be made widely available (with a few caveats for sensitive species) and as such, any user of a system has access to large volumes of existing data. You can run reports to find out where to go to see a species, or list what has already been seen at each location. There is a suite of reports, checklists, downloads and maps that can be used, along with tools to enable you to manage your own data. And of course, you'll be part of a growing group of people who are making a real difference to protecting birds around the world. Remember, every record counts, whether something you saw this week, or something you recorded over a decade ago.

From www.worldbirds.org you can find out which countries are on-line. Some have their own system based on our core model (for example, Kenya), while others are independent (eg Sweden). In many cases, groups of countries run on the same platform, such as in the Caribbean, and several are in their infancy (for example, Central Asia and the Middle East). However, by the end of 2008, we hope to have over 120 countries plugged in.

Please join us and support the work of the BirdLife Partnership and their collaborating organisations. Why not make the most of your observations and help us protect the birds and places that you enjoy visiting?

Ian Fisher

THE TOWER (THE BLOODY TOWER)

Mike Blair

As all you well brought-up birdwatchers know, getting a good angle of view on a bird contributes enormously towards a successful identification of the species. Some species oblige by being prominent and characteristic – a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* hovering is, as the shadier tipsters put it, 'a racing cert'. The little brown job that flits between bushes is not. Calling upon the wisdom of forefathers or mentors, the sensible birdwatcher seeks a good vantage point. This could take the form of a flat roof on a Spanish hostal that overlooks a deep valley, if raptors and vultures are the target; *ie* Hostal El Anon in Jimena de la Frontera. Failing that, the unlucky majority will have to be content with as large an arc of view that the topography permits. Sea-watching in flat calm is straightforward, except for the minor hitch that the desired birds often stay too far offshore. Gales, then, feature heavily in the dedicated seawatcher's diary, as do driving rain, chilblains, chapped faces and streaming eyes, unless of course as at St Ives, someone has provided a stout rampart behind which to shelter; in extreme conditions, seawatchers may agree a rota for sticking heads above parapets. Most of us ordinary birders prefer to avoid such testing circumstances; we work the angles round intervening obstacles and seek high ground to provide the panoramic view.

On the Akrotiri Peninsula in Cyprus there has long been an aerial farm adjacent to the Salt Lake just north of Akrotiri Village. Its history is one of constant change, as new communications systems and advances in technology demand that older installations be replaced. However, long gone are the days when a communications aerial resembled a prototype Blackpool Tower. Nowadays, slender guyed aerial towers support large nets of wires between them, and it is reasonable to suppose that such structures might be a danger to birds. The dangers suggested do include the fanciful, that: the radiated energy would cause birds to drop out of the sky as eagerly-anticipated snacks for foxes, or would confuse birds' sense of direction; the sunlight glinting on the cables would hypnotise the birds into collisions, and birds being ancient creatures, would be unable to avoid an object that is 100m high and about the same distance across. The more likely problems suggested were that birds would not be able to manoeuvre well enough, if as tired migrants they encountered the aerials in poor conditions (fog or gales) or at night; would they be tempted to perch where they would short-circuit the power, being flash-grilled as a consequence? Would they be in danger when they took off again?

Perhaps a worthwhile analogy is that of wind turbines. Early wind turbines on land had a lattice tower, which attracted migrants as perches, but the larger birds were less able to avoid the blades. Any turbines situated on narrow migration flyways take a toll of medium to large birds, and those situated where hunting raptors soared or fished did likewise – a good example is of the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Norway. However, the evidence so far from many studies is that turbines in less critical locations experience few collisions, certainly not to a significant degree. What the effect of a thousand-strong turbine farm in the North Sea would be is a question that remains to be answered.

In 2007 a survey of the Salt Lake aerials was carried by a chap called John Cromarty during the outward (autumn) migration, when traditionally migrant numbers in Cyprus are much greater than on the return (spring) migration. The average numbers in any migration season vary year-to-year due to the weather conditions prevailing, for these have shown little consistency since the Meteorological Section was formed at RAF Akrotiri. What has been consistent is that summers are dry and hot and most rainfall tends to occur in winter and early spring. The Cromarty survey was carried out from a security watch tower within the compound of the communications unit. In some respects, the Tower, as it became

known, (yes, I assure you that you can hear the initial capital T being pronounced) was an ideal location – from it, the entire aerial farm could be seen through 360°, some 15 metres above ground level. This perfect panoramic viewpoint was reached by a vertical ladder enclosed in the standard metal lattice 'cage' tube; climbing it did demand a little effort, but you had to take much care not to scrape knuckles or bark shins. Quite frankly, it was rather like being a teenager again, taking minor risks. In retrospect, we should have known that things would not be that simple, despite having the approval of OC unit and the Unit's H&S executive.

However good the Tower was as a birdwatching vantage point, it lacked one essential – birds to observe and count. Two dry winters and springs had left much of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) with very little water, a circumstance aggravated by a lack of urgency in implementing water supply restrictions and a lack of awareness that a water shortage would affect everyone. Throughout our time there in April and May, cars were still being jet-washed, gardens watered and patios hosed down, although a little less often as time passed. One earnest and well-educated Cypriot told us that the dams were full and that the 'shortage' was just a political scam. We said that we had seen Asprokremnos Dam and it was at less than 10% of capacity, but he told us we hadn't. I guess that nice Mr Bush could do with a few more supporters like that. The aridity of much of southern Cyprus was far worse than I had ever seen it. Mediterranean plants have evolved to cope with fluctuating rainfall, the classic maquis having originated on the mountain ranges of western Saudi Arabia long before the first people settled to grow crops, but there are numerous examples, particularly along the North African coast, where conditions have in the past became too extreme even for hardy resinous plants such as Cistus sp. Another dry year could see the citrus growers go bankrupt on a large scale. The recent adoption of cereals as a winter crop will require rain over the next two winters if this change is to succeed.

Hooded Crows

The first few sessions in the Tower had a paucity of birds 'intruding' into the aerial farm, although there was a **Eurasian Wryneck** *Jynx torquilla* on a gatepost, and a **Black-eared Wheatear** *Oenanthe hispanica* mooching around. The resident **Hooded Crows** *Corvus cornix* regarded the aerial farm as part of their hunting and scavenging territory. In the many patches of low scrub and grass tussocks where the water from Phasouri reed-bed drains into the Salt Lake through the aerial farm, we saw them searching for small reptiles, ground-nesting birds and large insects. They would use the aerial towers and the much lower transmission line supports as hunting posts, but were thoroughly familiar with the detailed layout of the structures. Not once did we see them scavenging directly below the huge suspended aerial nets, which suggested that whatever diurnal or nocturnal migration was occurring, it wasn't suffering casualties from collisions. Early on, a **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* enjoyed fence-sitting and pouncing on lizards, which despite the aridity seemed plentiful. There were always the resident **Black Francolins** *Francolinus francolinus* to enjoy – the male's back and vent are surreal in appearance, rather like the patterns on the dresses worn by women in Gustav Klimt illustrations; these patterns are set against a coal-black chest and neck, with scarlet and white on the head. This avian scarcity was subsequently regarded as a golden age, a positive cornucopia compared with the 'can we hope for more than ten birds today' mantra of the later sessions. One consolation was that the Tower was the ideal point from which to watch the newly-arrived Red Arrows during their display work-up sessions.

Black Francolin

However, absence of birds was not the main drawback of the Tower. That was, by a long chalk, its vulnerability to westerly winds, for the entrance off the ladder was on the west side, and there was no door. The persistence and strength of these winds, on about 35 of the 44 days I was there, especially in the afternoons, were unusual. On some days, the dust (from Libya; thanks Colonel Gaddafi) was painful to the eyes and got into all our lenses, but it also made telescope use difficult. Brass monkey time saw up to five layers failing to keep the observers warm, even though the ground temperature at the Tower's sheltered base might be 25°C. Despite the wind, the heat-shimmer remained over the drying Salt Lake. The aridity had clearly affected the numbers of birds in the adjacent area – one might think that there were almost no migrants coming through, but the ringing teams working in the few areas that retained water managed to ring over 2600 birds in the Peninsula's hotspots. The very few ornithological highlights of the Tower sessions included three Eurasian Hoopoes *Upupa epops* in close proximity forming the advance guard, the main body and the rearguard of the migration, all in 20 seconds, several individual Eleonora's Falcons *Falco eleonorae* sauntering through and a formation of 51 Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* first sighted far out to sea and misidentified initially as the Red Arrows who were just completing a practice in that direction. The flock headed towards Zakaki in a steady climb, but our keen observers there at that time were busy counting Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca* on the water; they missed the flamingos overhead and so were unable to misidentify them.

The staff in the communications unit and their guard force (the Resident Infantry Battalion = RIB) were excellent – they assisted at every turn. We were loaned a rope with which we could haul our bags and telescopes up the Tower, and we were also issued a radiation detector that covered the frequencies the aerials used – if the alarm went off, our instructed first action was to replace the batteries! Indeed, we discovered a 'can do' attitude amongst the many sections at RAF Akrotiri that was reminiscent of the 1970s, to our pleasant surprise, but there was one exception – nobody could take on our photocopying requirement unless we had undertaken a complex approval procedure that took weeks to complete. We therefore bought an excellent printer/copier for €80; constant trips from the accommodation on to the base for this purpose soon would have cost much more and would have taken ten times as long. We donated this machine to the Akrotiri Education and Environmental Centre, which is on the main drag past the village and is funded by the SBA. It is manned by local people who are very keen and have established good links with other environmental groups and offices as well as with the RoC and SBA Police.

Actually, there was a second exception to the 'can-do' approach, and thereby hangs this tale. The Tower teams, having racked up over 100 manhours of watching no birds not hitting the aerials, were working to a polished routine, but after a short break, Dick Yates and I, on a Saturday afternoon stint, having drawn the short straw yet again, were about to climb the ladder. I started up the 28 rungs.

"'Oo told you you could climb that ladder?" bellowed a dulcet Yorkshire ~~expert~~ ~~expat~~ export from stage right.

Dick, who is not vertically challenged, turned his head slowly, rather like a hungry grizzly whose attention had been caught by a bleating tethered goat. Fortunately, Dick still had his driving spectacles on, and so he could see a ~~thick~~ thickset chap in white civvies shirt and shorts, who sported greased-back hair and spectacles seemingly riveted to his nose, turning increasingly pink; another ID feature comprised the appalling large tattoos on his arms. Now, you know how John Wayne crosses the saloon to confront an importunate character whose part in the movie is about to come to an abrupt end? Dick, despite his

bad leg, managed that walk spectacularly well. For no particular reason, let's call this chap 'Jobsworth' – there is many a good Dickensian precedent.

"The Officer Commanding this unit", replied Dick with dangerous calm, and explained that we were conducting a bird survey at the request of the WSBA, and that we were reporting to the Health, Safety and Conservation executive at Episkopi. To give you some idea of the timbre of Jobsworth's voice, imagine Geoff Boycott's monotone expounding at length on the best way to stay at the crease for five hours, but not score many runs; now imagine the voice being less animated and expressive. Got it?

"The OC unit 'as no authority about climbing strooctyoors", responded Jobsworth with breathtaking confidence, "Me, I'm in charge of all 'Ealth an' Safety aspects with regard to climbing strooctyoors an platforms above two metres 'igh. No-one can cross from platform to platform or climb a strooctyoor unless they 'ave dun a course and can apply each time for a certificate of safety from me! Wot' 'appens when you 'ave an 'art attack oop Tower if you 'aven't been certified?"

Somewhat nonplussed by this logic, Dick admitted later he missed the opportunity to bandy words about exactly who was certifiable, but pointed out that the senior H&S person in the WSBA had authorised the work.

"Wot's 'is name?" queried Jobsworth. Dick told him.

"Never 'eard of 'im!" was the triumphant response.

Stalemate. No one could be contacted on a Saturday afternoon, and Dick, thinking it might be prudent not to just ignore Jobsworth's presence, not knowing where he fitted into the scheme of things, decided we would come back on Monday morning and call in on OC unit to sort it all out. Jobsworth, having swiftly reached puce now returned to a healthier pale pink and magnanimously decided to explain (a little) further.
"On first May, new regulations about climbing strooctyoors came into force in the Joint Service Publication. That means anyone 'oo 'as passed a course 'as to coom to me to be signed oop to climb a strooctyoor. Besides, anyone 'oo climbs strooctyoors 'as to state that they are medically fit to do so by fillin' in the 'Authorised Climber – Self-certification Fitness Questionnaire'."

Why was it that the irresistible image that came to mind was that of the ~~pompous~~ ~~self-important~~ Verger in *Dad's Army*?

On the Monday, we went to see OC unit, who clearly was annoyed that some unknown person had taken it upon themselves to assume responsibility for the Aerial Erectors' work. OC unit was happy for us to continue, but advised he would follow the matter up.

Pleased, we went to the foot of the ladder only to find that a 2-metre long 1cm thick aluminium sheet, precisely the width of the rungs and shaped so that it hooked over the top rung of the first part of the ladder, had been affixed to the ladder by a hardened steel-hasped padlock that needed a serious key to be obtained by any intending climber. Jobsworth clearly had been busy over the weekend, either making this item or getting someone to make it, just so we couldn't climb the Tower on someone else's say-so. We promptly returned to OC unit. Now, you know just how precisely people speak to you when they have clearly become incandescent about someone else? We thought it prudent to exercise discretion at this point, but we guessed that the phone lines would be humming. We also gave the senior H&S person a heads-up.

It turned out that the ‘new’ regulations were simply the existing ones slightly amended, and of course put into a much more bureaucratic form. However, the various terms of reference of the various appointments involved could not easily and quickly be aligned with an agreed interpretation of the regulations. Much more to the point, it turned out that Jobsworth should have advised all personnel of the revised procedures and implemented them long before they came into force, but had failed to do so. This left OC unit and others in the dark and without an opportunity to agree the way the new regulations should be applied. It was as if the left hand was making a determined attempt to ignore the existence of the right hand. We seriously doubted if Jobsworth had thought through the implications of the way he was proposing to implement them. At a trivial level, he would have been seriously dischuffed at having to come in at 0630 every morning to sign clearances for us and then return again after work in the afternoon for our next shift. Much more serious is the thought that if the security state had increased, the RIB would have had to wait for Jobsworth to come in before they could climb the Tower safely to use it as a lookout. With only a few days to go of our time in Cyprus, Dick decided that it was not worth the hassle of proving that the new system didn’t work, and so we attempted our last few watches at ground level outside the fence.

I wonder if the Aerial Erectors, when they have to maintain the aerials, now have to queue up each day to get their chits signed? The words ‘horse’ and ‘cart’ come to mind, but in the immortal words of Eric Morecambe, “…not necessarily in the right order!”

Sandwich Bar ?

Photo by Bill Francis

IN THE LAND OF THE SINGING BARN OWL - KINTYRE 2008

The Team *Photo by Jerry Knights*

In June a select team of six birders set out to deliver RAFOS's 2008 contribution to the BTO / BirdWatch Ireland / Scottish Ornithological Club project of re-writing the Atlas of British Birds. The project runs from 2007-2011, and involves both winter and breeding season surveys to determine the bird population. The study methodology works by dividing the country into 10 kilometre squares and birders then volunteer to spend between one and two hours listing what they see and hear within the "tetrads" of 2 x 2 kilometres inside each 10 kilometre square. In order to record that a particular square has been adequately studied, at least eight of the 25 tetrads comprising each square must be visited if possible.

For most volunteers, a tetrad or two will be their contribution. But RAFOS was able to offer a team to survey a remote area where there are few birders, and many of you will remember we did the same for the previous Atlas (The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland 1988-1991 by D W Gibbons, J B Reid & R A Chapman, published in 1993 by T & A D Poyser) on Exercise Highland Grouse between 1989-1991. Then, we surveyed in the West Highlands, around Fort William, Loch Ossian, Inverailort, Acharacle, Ben Eighe and Letterewe. This year we selected the Kintyre peninsula because Defence Estates kindly permitted us to use the old RAF Machrihanish (now under care-and-maintenance prior to sale) as our base.

Organisation was easy, partly because it was only a small survey team, but mostly because Jim Bryden did all the admin and especially because Steve Heather did all the cooking. Those with knowledge of Winter Duck expeditions will appreciate that Steve produces an outstanding evening meal and that he pre-prepares these before the trip so the final cooking is effortless. Transport was to the usual high Wyton PSI standard as organised by John Wells, and the team rendezvoused at my home in Staffordshire. For

Bob Bosisto and Dave Thomas, who shared wheels all the way from Newquay, just getting to the RV was a long day, but once we were together as a team the journey north was uneventful. For those who like to record all the “trip-ticks”, the star bird en route was undoubtedly the full breeding plumage male **Peacock** (*Pavo cristatus*) seen walking beside the A74(M) near Longtown before Gretna.

Machrihanish was just the way most of us remembered it, with the ever-alert MOD Guardforce awaiting our early evening arrival. The place was actually a hive of activity, with a commercial concern constructing wind turbines in the old hangars on a 24/7 basis, and the airfield now operating as Campeltown Airport. After dropping our kit in our rooms, sorting out the kitchen and stocking up the freezer we made a brew and sat down to discuss our approach to the week’s work. We had undertaken to survey 6 x 10 kilometre squares, potentially a minimum of 48 tetrads but, as we were on the end of a peninsula, quite a bit of the survey area was under the Irish Sea. We estimated that we could cover the squares with 29 tetrads and one or two linear walks along the coast to collect “Roving Records” outside the formal timed tetrads. The other debate was over how much we should attempt to complete each day. Obviously, it would be counter-productive to survey outside the main period of bird activity so this forced us into early morning starts and a finish before midday. We reckoned that each team of two persons could survey a couple of tetrads in that time, meaning we could survey 6 per day. Once complete, we aimed to undertake sea watches and to visit other interesting spots, including some night visits for owls, and we would record everything we saw as additional Roving Records.

Seawatch *Photo: Jerry Knights*

With the decisions made, we set our alarms for 0430 and crawled into sleeping bags. The sun was already up and the wildlife getting going when we hit the road at 0600 the next morning. We felt a little guilty disturbing the guard who let us out of the base, and there wasn’t much traffic about as we made our way to the Mull of Kintyre for the first tetrads. All went well as we got used to the methodology, with the biggest decision being whether each tetrad contained enough work to make it worth a 2 hour stint or whether it could be completed in a single hour. This was OK if you could sit on a hill and look out over your

patch, but with tussocky moorland dissected by small ravines, bogs and streams it could take 2 hours just to walk through the area.

John Wells making notes overlooking the Mull of Kintyre *Photo: Jerry Knights*

I recall that it was also on that first morning that we started to have trouble with one of the team members who we will refer to as “Murphy”. It began innocently enough with him not fastening his rucksack properly so that his fleece jacket fell out. By the time he realised, we were all in the wagon driving to the next site, so we turned round and went back (not easy on a single-track coastal road with steep hills on both sides). Of course he had dropped it near the lighthouse which we could see a thousand feet or so below us, but the day was saved by a worker from the lighthouse who had found it on his way up the cliff road. A small incident, but only the start. After that everything Murphy touched went wrong. One of the most complicated was placing his Tesco’s Club Card on the cash till conveyor belt just at the point the shop assistant pressed the accelerate button. Apparently, there is a “crumb tray” thingy in the bowels of those machines to catch such items, but they hadn’t got the key because it was with their maintenance engineer and this turned into a three day epic before resolution. Undoubtedly, the funniest was his ability to record details in the wrong columns when writing up tetrad sheets each evening. This resulted in a sequence of unique ornithological combinations including Kittiwake nesting in a woodland habitat and, of course, the Barn Owl whose evidence of breeding was proved by us having observed it singing!! Luckily, our conscientious recorder Bob was hot on the trail and all our data got double-checked.

By now we were in the groove. We got up early (for Murphy this meant 0330 hours as he had mis-set his alarm again) and drove to drop off the survey teams at their appointed locations. We picked them up when surveying was complete and usually travelled to the Machrihanish Sea Bird Observatory where its owner, Eddie Maguire, made us most welcome. Lunch would be followed by some intense bouts of sea watching, and during one of these Bob spotted the first **Balearic Shearwater** (*Puffinus mauretanicus*) movements of Kintyre's new season. Just off the coast at that point is a real feeding hot spot for the Gannets from Ailsa Craig, and it was quite an experience to watch these huge birds being chased by a pair of **Arctic Skuas** (Parasitic Jaeger - *stercorarius parasiticus*). After this, it was the daily visit to the supermarket to buy fresh provisions and check on the whereabouts of Murphy's Club card, then home for another splendid Steve creation. Throughout the day Dave would also be busy compiling the photographic record of our endeavours, or falling asleep in the sunshine beside his telescope if the mood so took him.

Davall Island *Photo: Jerry Knights*

The Kintyre peninsula is a beautiful, unspoilt place, and all the more so because we had perfect weather all week and the midges weren't too bad. Being out and about early in the day also meant we saw lots of mammal activity as well as birds; plenty of foxes, several deer and even fawns that were only a few days old.

Over the week we carried out nearly 300 man hours of timed tetrad study, listed just short of 7000 birds of 104 different species, and my personal highlight was **Grasshopper Warbler** (*Locustella naevia*) which we saw as well as heard on 5 occasions. We also heard the first **Quail** (*Coturnix coturnix*) of the year for Kintyre and recorded more than 220 **Common Crossbills** (Red Crossbill - *Loxia curvirostra*) which were presumed to be newly arrived from Scandinavia.

We managed to complete our work by Thursday afternoon and this gave us one spare day that we spent checking out a couple of recommended birding locations further up the peninsula at Bridgend and Carradale. Again we were impressed by the beauty of the terrain as well as by Murphy's ability to loose his mobile phone again. All too soon we were packing for the long drive home.

Eider Duck *Photo: Jerry Knights*

In summary, an excellent week in the company of some first rate birders, and a job well done as this year's contribution to the Atlas survey. Hopefully, we will be able to return to Kintyre whose gentle scenery and people made us so welcome. Finally, thanks must be recorded to Bob Swann (BTO Scottish Atlas Organiser), Paul Daw (Recorder, Argyll Bird Club) as well as Alan Muir, Ian Wardrop and Kate McKerral of Defence Estates Machrihanish for making us so welcome and looking after us during our stay.

Crossbills

OPERATION SKUA – 2007

By Kevin Cairns and Tom Dewick

For the last 3 years Scottish members of RAFOS have teamed up with members of the Cape Wrath Conservation Group to mount expeditions, study the flora and fauna on the Cape and the 2007 expedition, mounted 15 -17 Jun, had a specific aim to ascertain the breeding status of the Arctic Skua in order to provide data for the MOD breeding bird survey.

The location for the survey was the Royal Naval Bombardment Range (RNBR), which is situated on a peninsula in the far north-western extremity of mainland Scotland. The total area of the site is 3,138 hectares, this includes 1092 hectares to the south of the lighthouse track and a further 2046 hectares north of the track which is owned by MOD. The predominant underlying rock type is Lewisian Gneiss that is overlain, most notably at the coast, by Torridonian sandstone. Both rock types are base poor and when weathered form nutrient poor soils. The interior of the range has a varied relief with open heathland interrupted by numerous unremarkable hills, separated by stream valleys interspersed with lochans, pool complexes and blanket mire. At the southern extremity lies the Ben of Fashven, the highest point of the range, that has extensive steep sandstone outcrops on its west and north faces. The coastal area consists of large sandstone cliffs, sea stacks and several small islands. Apart from small tracts of lithosol that have developed on inland outcrops of rock, the primary soil type is peat which forms extensive blankets on level expanses where the drainage is poor.

The peat substrate is exposed to wind and to grazing from red deer and this affects the plants on the range. Three main communities have been identified, and these have been influenced to varying degrees by three factors. Firstly, the most abundant vegetation type is grazed acid moorland which presents a complex variety of habitats that are typical of the northwest highlands of Scotland. Secondly, the stream valleys, these provide some shelter from the prevailing winds and with improved nutrients they support a more luxurious vegetation type. On the outcrops of Fashven the most precipitous ledges are inaccessible to grazing animals and can therefore support patches of scrub vegetation similar to those found in the valleys. Lastly, the most varied and botanically interesting plant community on the range can be found on the ledges, and moderate gradients of the sea cliffs. The natural inaccessibility of these ledges and slopes prevents grazing, allowing a wide variety of plant species that are not resistant to browsing animals to flourish. The steep angle and free draining nature of the cliff does not allow peat to accumulate; and the absence of the peat substrate, and the seabird influence, further increase the variety of plant life, which can exist in such a habitat. In addition to these main communities a limited number of plant species are supported by the freshwater lochs, pools, and shell craters. Only limited flora would occur naturally on the exposed small islands, and the regular bombing which causes shattering and scouring of the bare rock restricts this further.

The coastal area of the site is an internationally important north Atlantic seabird breeding station. The most heavily populated areas of the cliffs are exposures of Torridonian Sandstone where the rock ledges provide suitable nesting sites. At the base of the cliffs there are boulder fields, and detached from the main cliffs are several stacks, which hold significant numbers of breeding and roosting seabirds. Three of the four islands on the range have a more level terrain and are the main breeding sites for large gulls. The moorland provides support for a limited variety of birds in low densities. The bog pools in particular are attractive to several species of sensitive breeding waders. The birds present in the interior are typical of species found on Scottish northwest highland moor and peatland habitats.

An Garbh-Eilean (Garvie).
A small island just north of Cape Wrath used for live bombing

As the Cape Range is only closed for sixty days a year to undertake UXB clearance and other estate husbandry, we were privileged to find ourselves as part of the MOD Estates

Bird Survey. With only three access points, by ferry from Durness; an 11km walk from the top of the Kyle; or, for the more energetic, a four-hour hike up to the Cape from Kinlochbervie, very few people have the chance (*or inclination? Ed*) to visit this remote site.

Plans, as plans go, were in our favour and the various weather reports gathered from the Met Offices at Lossiemouth and Leuchars and of course BBC News boded well and helped in planning each day's events. Of course, in that part of Scotland the only reliable forecast you get is by looking out of the window and surprisingly, apart from in the south where it was quite cloudy, the weather was hot and sunny for the whole weekend. Having gathered on the Friday and surveyed Farad Head we pondered the rest of the weekend over a glass or two of wine and a fantastic dinner provided by Tom. We were now ready for the two days on the Cape and it seemed to be beckoning us from our vantage point in Farad Head range hut.

For Vron and me this would be virgin territory and we greeted Saturday with trepidation and a sense of awe, we felt a childlike excitement at the possibility of finding new places to explore and new hiding places. Sat morning and a quick ferry trip across the Kyle of Durness and we were there, to be transported to the bothy at Kervaig, in the back of the range 4x4. Seeing the Cape from this unique vantage point gives the best views possible of an unspoilt area of Scotland, virtually untouched, and still carrying with it the splendour of this great country.

Tony, Maggie and Vron were dropped off at Inshore Cottage and led by Tony were going to be surveying Clo Mor; whilst Tom set out to survey Fashven and the surrounding Lochans and hills. Al and myself had the unenviable pleasure of transporting all the kit down to Kervaig bothy and then starting the survey from there to the lighthouse.

Cape Wrath Lighthouse

The day had started hot and it promised to develop into a great day's birding, and we were not disappointed. We obtained spectacular views of Arctic and Great Skuas, and a very obliging Red Throated Diver was sitting stock-still very close to her nest. After watching for about half an hour we saw a pair of Arctic Skuas within twenty feet of the diver, and we thought that they were just waiting for a chance to grab the eggs that the diver was incubating; but, to our surprise, we found that they had a nest of their own not thirty feet away. Other highlights included Golden and White Tailed eagle, Peregrine, Greenshank, and a live 1000lb bomb.

Great Skua

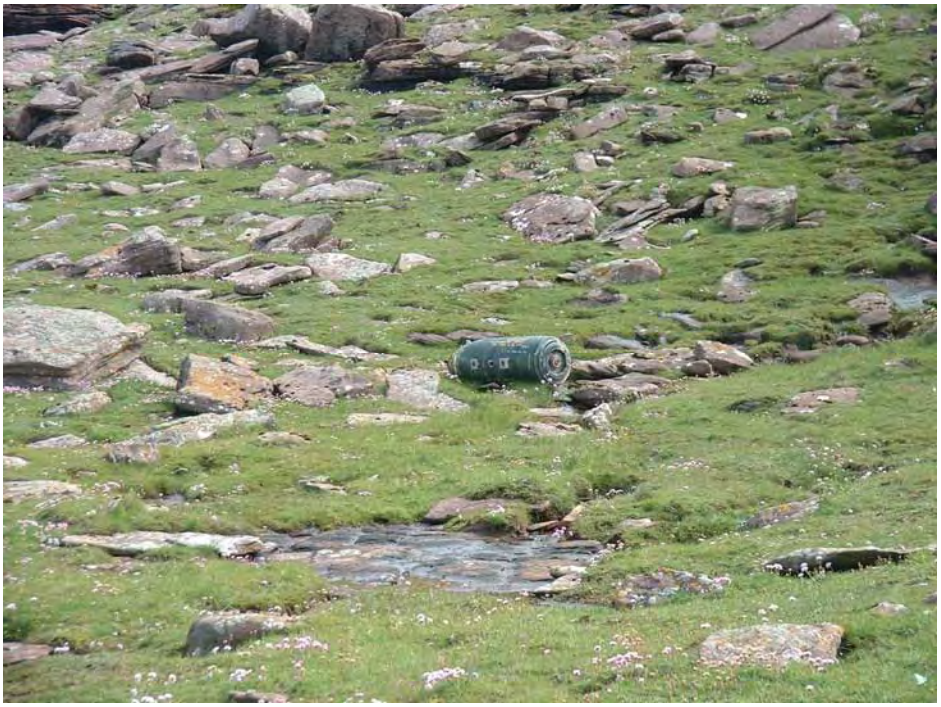
After several hours watching and having confirmed the presence of the Diver with eggs and the Skuas taking turns to sit on their nest, we decided to walk to the lighthouse. But once again our attention was drawn to an Arctic Skua 'sitting tight', so it warranted further investigation. We discovered that it had probably just dined on Puffin and was taking an afternoon nap on a guano covered hillock in the middle of a peat bog. Al found a large group of Great Skuas sunning themselves and presumably getting ready for tea; very soon feeding sea birds would have to run the gauntlet of the marauding Skuas who would be encouraging them to give up their hard fought catch.

The bothy at Kervaig, although spartan, holds many of the comforts of home, like a fireplace, chairs and an area to crash.

With compo rations consumed, drinking the water of life helped stave off the chilly night air.

With the virtually untouched habitat comes an array of plants, mosses, lichens and peat hags to keep even the most avid botanist happy for hours. With such species as Golden Rod, Great Sundew, Bog Asphodel, White Water Lilly and Bell and Ling Heather, on the Cape there is something for everyone.

The survey continued through until Sunday afternoon and as we prepared to disperse we all agreed that it had been a memorable weekend with excellent weather, birds and company and of course the UXB we found on Pavingstone Point



The UXB on Pavingstone Point

The aims of the expedition were to find the presence of breeding Artic Skuas. Not only did we find evidence of this, but we also had evidence of an increase in the number breeding Red Throated Divers. The task for the coming years is to expand our knowledge of the status of breeding birds and if possible, encourage the Skuas and the Divers to utilise the Cape for years to come.

This year's expedition is due to take place from 13 -15 Jun 08 and it is hoped that we use the cottage at Loch Inshore as a base camp. This would allow us to expand our survey area to encompass more of the Cape and to provide even more of a home from home.

2007 Participants: -

Tom Dewick	Exped Leader
Kev Cairns	Coordinator
Al Kennedy	Logistics
Tony Kirkham	Bomb crater study flora specialist
Maggie Sheddan	Ornithologist
Vron Wootton	Ornithologist and heathland specialist

All Photos by Kev Cairns and Tom Dewick.

WINGS (Part the second)

By Mike Blair

It's worth digressing here to make a point about the perceived understanding of the word 'theory'[1]. The disparaging term, 'that's only theoretical', is largely to blame, but the point is, that unless there is a theory to apply to any physical process, the understanding of how that process works is limited at the very least. A theory is a testable explanation that has arisen from other suggested explanations that needed to be questioned and challenged until all the questions that have been asked to 'test' the theory are answered by that theory. Consequently, a theory remains robust until new thinking or new research produces questions that make the theory fail the test. That's why the disparaging term should have been 'that's only hypothetical', because a hypothesis describes a suggested explanation that has not yet been proven to be robust enough to be called a theory. Got it? If something is properly described as theoretical, it means that the standard of proof achieved is as high as can be obtained with present knowledge. This concept irritates the hell out of 'creationists' who see any change of scientific opinion arising from new research or evidence as confirmation of the conspiracy to which all scientists, especially those who have even expressed any opinion that might be supportive of Darwinism, have allied themselves[2]. I should point out that here I'm describing as 'creationists' those people who assign literal truth to texts that have undergone innumerable translations at varying times in the last 2000 years or so, and therefore not only feel free to reject evidence when it suits them, but also to reject any inconvenient findings of their own when seeking to justify their case. Countless millions have secure religious beliefs without the need for such as creationists to tell them what to believe when evidence to the contrary exists.

Sir George Caley is often credited with the first heavier-then-air flight in 1853, when his 'aircraft', the latest one of a series of designs from small models upwards, was launched by farm workers hauling ropes down a slope, but when the slope got tired of descending, the craft's path intersected promptly with the ground, proving that the first law of flight – the law of gravity – when obeyed in a vertical direction, will always demonstrate that the ground is the stronger. Was Sir George killed? No. Was he injured? No. Was he downhearted? No. Then why did he abandon his flight research? Because he couldn't find any coachman other than one John Appleby prepared to pilot his designs without qualifying in a Flying Training School – Sir George had volunteered coachman John on the principle that employees were volunteers by definition. The story goes, and it is too good to be spoiled by subsequent research, that apparently, Appleby, upon staggering from the kindling, resigned his fairly lucrative employ on the spot, emphasising that his terms of reference had been amended without

---

[1] Yes, you're absolutely right, there's another rant coming on.

[2] *New Scientist* (Vol 196 No 2628, 3 Nov 2007 page 4) reported the case of retired chemist Homer Jacobson, whose 1955 paper has often been cited by members of the creationism movement as supporting the case for 'intelligent design'. In the original paper, he had conjectured that possible explanations of biological processes of how the chemical building blocks of life had emerged could not entirely be explained by the state of knowledge at the time. Creationists have interpreted this as meaning divine intervention must have occurred. Jacobson has been so embarrassed at being a hero of creationism that in Sep 07, he published a review of his 1955 paper in the light of research conclusions reached in the intervening 52 years, and demonstrated that improved knowledge meant he could retract the two conjectural paragraphs. He is now accused by creationists (in thousands of e-mails) of selling out to the conspiracy against creationism – I wearily reiterate that what he has done is merely bog-standard scientific methodology – examine the latest evidence and test the theory – if it fails, amend the theory in accordance with my explanation in the text above.

consultation, thus serving as a rarely-emulated example of an officer of air rank[3] acquiring a UB40 on principle. Sir George didn't get where he was by stepping into the firing line when he could remain a dispassionate, objective and unbiased researcher – after all, these are the principles of good science – and he was 79.

The Wright Brothers in 1903 are nowadays popularly regarded as the pioneers of powered flight, yet in the UK, its military potential was not immediately grasped by the high heid-yins, unlike in some other countries. In the first few years of its existence, the Royal Flying Corps gathered a collection of aircraft of variable stability and reliability, but there was little concept of using flying machines in any way except as mobile balloons to carry out reconnaissance for the Army. The Royal Navy's early version of its Operational Requirements office rather quickly grasped the idea that on-board aircraft could augment the airship's contribution to detecting both submarines and capital ships, but implementation was seriously impeded by Admirals whose idea of dealing with the unsporting threat of an underwater craft, was to ignore it because it was ungentlemanly. That it certainly was, but radical changes of policy were not likely at a time when rigid adherence to orders, the product of decades of peace, was regarded as prime – for example, as cited in the new biography of Robert Falcon Scott[4], one Captain who was involved in two fatal collisions when he could have avoided them by disobeying orders went swiftly on to much higher things, whereas another, when his ship was in similar peril, changed course but was officially reprimanded for failing to obey orders.

Meanwhile, the first real use of aircraft in war occurred in 1910 and 1911 in the Balkans, where commanders on both sides realised the tactical potential of aircraft to support military aims and the need to develop countermeasures against the 'spy in the sky'. Incidentally, camouflage against aerial reconnaissance was first attempted on a large scale during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71) when Paris was besieged – observers in captive balloons wrote down what could be seen on the battlefield and threw down the information tied to small stones – apparently the casualties amongst the *poilus* detailed to collect the messages was high – they didn't like wearing the new metal helmets. Attempts by aircrew to drop grenades and the like in the Balkan war were more dangerous to the aircrew than to the intended targets. That scene from *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines* where the dastardly Jack Lemmon's assistant lodges a bomb on an undercarriage strut while the burning fuse shortens… Still, lessons couldn't be learnt from foreigners, could they?

The Wright Brothers had, as bicycle makers, much pragmatic experience of empirical changes in design to improve their product, and had built delicate model gliders. They knew the essential need to have the weight of the rider between the wheels, had an instinctive understanding of the principles of centre of gravity, and from the success and failures of their glider models quickly realised that there had to be some method of fore-and-aft stability in flight. They had hit upon the classic wing cross-section, and so they simply added a small wing ahead of the pilot and another behind him. The forewing could be moved in a way that pulled the nose up or down, thus tackling the vertical stability aspect. They then built a full-scale glider that they launched from a track by weights dropping in a pulley system, but found that there was yet another mode of

---

[3] Yes, the coachman must have been of air rank – he was the sole member of the air fraternity at that time, albeit briefly, although he was also the AC2 who cleaned out the ablutions, and who extinguished the torches when closing the stable doors at night before the horses could bolt. Clearly, if he could ride a horse, he could ride a flying machine. If you believe that the existence of this kind of thinking would come to an end as true aircraft developed, I can disabuse you. In 1981, I was responsible for deleting extant scales from the Royal Air Force AP 830 that not only detailed the entitled holdings of blacksmith's tools and stores, such as horseshoes, but also that indicated those scaled items whose totals were to be calculated using the number of pilots who had horses on the unit.

[4] *Scott of the Antarctic*, by David Crane. 2005. HarperCollins. London.

stability – horizontal, or roll stability. The addition of a direct pulley system operated by the pilot to bend the end of the wing down (wing-warping) gave the illusion that all stability problems had been encountered[5]. The first successful powered flight off the same track at Kitty Hawk (chosen partly because the breeze tended to be in the same direction for long periods) in 1903 came after a whole series of experimental adjustments (and repairs) needed after unsuccessful attempts. The ground speed achieved in a steady headwind was less than 10 miles per hour and the distance achieved was less than a Boeing 747's wingspan, but remember, they had designed and built their own propeller, modified the engine supplied, and went on to use essentially the same 'Wright Flyer' for several years in lengthy and often complex flights, winning prizes for new records.

Soon, movable controlled flying surfaces such as ailerons and rudders made an appearance, but tailplanes were a more fitful part of the designs. The need for flying surfaces came from the realisation that stability in the air was not achievable just by catering for three distinct modes of stability, because all three could interact, depending upon the aircraft's design, airspeed and the attitude of the aircraft when the control inputs were made. Furthermore, it was quickly apparent that control of the aircraft was limited – harsh movements of the control surfaces could overstress the structure or cause the aircraft to adopt an attitude from which the pilot could not recover, due to induced interactions with another stability mode. Spinning became a frequent short-cut to Boot Hill. In the days before Health & Safety, there were plenty of young men seeking adventure and risk who could take the places of the departed. Nowadays, their modern equivalents tend to assault passing trees and buildings with cars.

By 1953, human ingenuity had taken powered flight from 10 miles per hour to transonic success at 727mph by Neville Duke in an early Hunter. In March 1956 the world air speed record was increased to 1132 mph in the Fairey Delta 2 piloted by Peter Twiss, who achieved a 38% increase over the F100 Super Sabre's record of the previous September. Aviation is full of 'what-ifs', although our present understanding gives us pretty good clues as to which of these would really have been 'oops'. For example, the supersonic Miles M52[6] was cancelled <u>in 1946</u> through lack of political nerve. It is very likely that it would have produced important data on high-speed flight much earlier in the UK than eventually was the case; but it also would have proven that the prone pilot position was impractical for combat aircraft! In Canada, the Avro Arrow was cancelled for the same lack of vision – only when the MiG-25 came along was its equal produced. Later, the UK government's decision to cancel the TSR2 was tainted by the immediate and violent destruction of the jigs by scrap merchants on unattributable orders, an action seemingly funded from slush funds not overseen by Parliament. Quite a few of the factory employees were beaten when they tried to prevent the destruction. Now there is no doubt that TSR2 would have performed well, but equally there is no doubt that the particular alloy chosen for the aircraft skin for its outstanding qualities would have been its Achilles' heel – the scientists were not to know that a rare type of oxidation process was fostered by the alloy's chemical make-up, and within a few years its deterioration, hastened by the stresses of high-speed and high-G flight, would

[5] They had, but only for a limited definition of 'stability'.

[6] The Miles Aircraft Company had been known for their designs of trainer aircraft, and so there was a feeling in government circles that going from 120 knots to Mach 1.6 (1000 knots at altitude) was a seven-league step too far. Politicians do like 'Yes' or 'No' answers, don't they, especially where the nature of the question is that the actual answers are the only ones that are impermissible. Miles' record in producing subcontracted designs efficiently and to a good build standard during WWII was completely ignored. The M52 featured a wing whose cross-section resembled that of the Lockheed F-104 Starfighter, first flown in 1952. The demise of the M52 encouraged one WEW Petter (who also designed the Midge and the Gnat for Folland Aircraft Limited) at English Electric to follow up the Canberra with a considerable contribution to the aerodynamics of the Lightning.

probably have resulted in catastrophic losses and an unaffordable re-skinning programme.

British engineering history is full of examples of radical designs, but equally represented are the occasions when the selection of a design to be produced was made, without taking engineering advice, by people who took pride in lacking technical competence. Despite the above-mentioned claim that God is an Englishman, He clearly had no effect on the processes in the Bristol Company that produced the Brabazon and the stainless steel 188. The Brabazon had a vast wingspan, greater than a 747, but was intended to carry only 28 passengers in absolute luxury (including sleeping accommodation) slowly across the Atlantic; only a few airports could accommodate it and it was made obsolete by jet designs before it even flew. The 1961, 188 supersonic aircraft was intended to research the 'heat soak' problem of sustained supersonic flight, but it did not carry enough fuel to fly for long enough at high speeds. Its wings were tiny, with a huge engine half-way out, rather like a smaller version of the 1964 Lockheed SR 71[7] Blackbird. Because the American aircraft industry was dominated by very large manufacturers, at that time the research ambitions could be initiated in-house, whereas in UK, small specialist manufacturers could aim at one particular research area, but if they failed to attract government support, they would become bankrupt (Miles, Saunders-Roe). Furthermore, production practices often were traditional and lacking innovation, which perhaps explains why the Handley Page Victor bombers not only were equipped with whatever electrical systems the firm could buy in job lots (yes, there were multiple variations between dc and ac systems between individual aircraft, and corresponding non-compatibility of black boxes), but each aircraft was built on its own, hand-built jigs, which resulted in quite amazing differences in dimensions between aircraft – length and wingspans were inches different. The design of the wing was innovative, but production was not. Little had changed since WWII, when clever and sensible tank designs had to be changed to meet the traditional production methods acceptable to the work force, resulting in over-complicated and overweight machines – the highest rate of strikes in UK was in 1940-42, not in the 1960s.

The design concept of the future (later exemplified by the Anglo-French Jaguar, whose innards were easily accessible to the engineers allowing unserviceable parts, mechanical or electrical, to be tested or removed and replaced quickly) was scarcely in evidence up to the 1970s. For example, if a certain electrical black box had to be changed on the Phantom, elements of the air cooling system, radar connections and missile control circuits all had to be removed or disconnected, which meant that after the new electrical box had been fitted, you had to reconnect all the other systems before you could test the electrical box to see if it was actually working, and then you had to test the other disturbed systems. It was very much a case of the 'not invented here' syndrome, for the accessibility concept had successfully been applied comprehensively to a WWII 'contingency design' – the Martin Baker MB5. This aircraft was designed and built just in case the Hawker developments (Tempest IV and II[8]) failed. The MB5 engine-change took two men only 40 minutes and all the aircraft's main components were easily accessible via locking panels; however, by 1944 the MB5 was too late and the Tempest marks were too successful for the MB5 to go into production, despite its

[7] Originally designated RS-71 (Reconnaissance and Surveillance), the rumour was that it became SR-71 when President Lyndon Baines Johnson in making the first official acknowledgement of the aircraft's existence, accidentally transposed the letters. However, General Curtis LeMay had been campaigning for 'Strategic Reconnaissance' beforehand – the paperwork just hadn't caught up with the President's speech, which he delivered accurately. George W Bush, eat your heart out – in those days people actually listened in the hope of a Presidential mis-articulation, rather than cringing before the inevitable!

[8] Yes, the Mk IV came before the Mk II, the former mostly being a slimmer-wing (and therefore higher critical-Mach number) fighter development of the ground-attack Typhoon and the latter a very different overall design with a radial Centaurus engine, the forerunner of the excellent Sea Fury carrier-borne fighter.

high top speed, excellent manoeuvrability[9] and long range. Aircraft designers may produce an aircraft of elegance and performance, but even in simpler designs, the internal design was often lamentable – the Beagle 206 of the late 1970s had a hot-air supply to the wing leading edge to prevent the build-up of ice, but if this pipework developed a fault, the wing on that side had to be removed, but before that could be done, the engine on that side had to be removed, and before that could be done the propeller had to be removed, all because the pipework had to be taken out and replaced through the wing root, easy enough to do when the prototype wing was on a bench in the factory before fitting to the aircraft!

Early airship practices included mechanics walking over exposed latticework on which the engines were mounted in order to adjust the engines or to top up the oil, because engine reliability of the time demanded such TLC[10]. Engines for heavier-than-air flying machines had to be much lighter, and so TLC was still appropriate for quite some time. Early single-engine aircraft had low endurance because the engine and fuel were heavy and so fuel-tanks were made as small as possible. Engine failure, even during short flights, was distressingly common, many aviators perishing because they attempted to turn back when the engine failed – few had enough experience to handle an aircraft when it changed into an uncooperative heavy glider whose main flight characteristic was to develop a spin at a higher airspeed than when power was available. The existence of the propeller driving air over the inner wings helped maintain an even airflow over much of the wing-length, but without that airstream, irregularities on the wing surfaces allowed local turbulence to develop so that it broke up the even spanwise airflow at a higher overall airspeed. However, when single-engined aircraft became large enough to accommodate a cabin, some designs allowed the pilot to top up engine fluids from small reservoirs. Multi-engine aircraft tended to carry a crew, one of whom (the engineer or other unfortunate) was volunteered to walk out on the wing and attend to the engines at regular intervals. Gradually, systems came into being that allowed such adjustment from inside the cabin, but the mindset of some aircraft designers stayed in 'belt-and-braces' mode for longer. The De Havilland Dragon, a larger and square wing-tipped predecessor of the Dragon Rapide, had two gauges and two adjusters on each engine, visible from the passenger cabin, and a crew member was required to walk out to the engines every so often when the gauges demanded it! I was lucky enough to fly over parts of southern Queensland in a DH Dragon, restored to its original scarlet and silver Royal Flying Doctor livery – the adjustments still had to be made, but the method had been updated – slide a cabin window back, ease out a long hardwood stick with a handle at one end and a hook that could turn the adjuster eyes on the engine, then adjust until the gauges read correctly. Lastly, return the stick to its brass lock fittings in the cabin roof! Many early airliners or large aircraft had tunnels or accesses through the wing to the engines[11]), one of the last I know of being on the Blackburn Beverley, where just aft of the crew cabin on the upper deck were circular access panels on either side. I tell you, it was incredibly hot, dark and noisy behind the No 4 engine!

Early large airliners often had very thick wings because this design made best use of the low maximum airspeeds then achievable to obtain lift, allowing some designers like

---

[9] The MB5 wing was similar in planform and cross-section to that of the very fine North American Mustang, the same solution being reached independently, but the latter might have influenced the MB design. Indeed, a replica MB5 was built in the USA in 2006, using a Mustang wing.

[10] You might know this as 'Tender Loving Care', which happily would be appropriate, but it also was engineer-speak for 'Top-up, Lubrication and Checks'.

[11] Incidentally, the Sunderland flying boat had this facility (and wing-attachable platforms) for the mechanics and aircrew, who could not walk on water. **NB** John Stewart-Smith has advised that aircrew can, indeed, walk on water – it's just that being modest unassuming chaps, they only do so in private as consenting adults.

Ernst Junkers to provide passenger seats in the G38 with a forward view through leading-edge windows! Higher speeds brought thinner wings, which challenged designers to provide sufficient fuel capacity to achieve long range – the Comet 3 added leading-edge fuel tanks that projected ahead of the wing, and Convair on the 990 put fuel tanks into the trailing-edge shock bodies that projected rearwards. Thinner wings brought higher landing speeds, which designers countered by introducing leading edge-slats to sustain airflow over the top surface (which allows a lower stalling speed[12]) and trailing multiple flaps to replicate the performance of earlier-era wings by providing additional lift at landing speeds. Larger and heavier aircraft required larger airfields with surfaces that could withstand the impact of these beasts, and so airports were often shoe-horned into very small spaces. The old Hong Kong airport had a runway built out into the bay, but landing from the landward end required the aircraft to carry out a 90° starboard turn on the approach. This became even more alarming to the uninitiated when population pressures caused tower blocks to be built on and very close to the approach path, those beneath it gradually having fewer storeys as the runway neared – after the final turn, passengers could look out either side up at the housing! Elsewhere, the public's love affair with technology in general and aircraft in particular was waning, airports gradually being regarded as bad neighbours, especially as aircraft got noisier before political pressure added new design criteria to aircraft powerplants[13].

The sheer size and scale of applying fast-developing technology (driven much by the demands of WWI and WWII) continuously over such a short period meant that even basic understanding of it is beyond most people, whether through an education devoid of technical understanding or a preference for comforts available beyond the wildest dreams of their ancestors. Flight and aircraft have become a packaged part of existence, with no personal connection – just watch a few of the 'Airport' programmes to discover how widespread the irrational has become when the travelling public find out that they can't treat airlines, airports and the staff involved as serfs[14]. Thank goodness there are still people whose imagination helps preserve the link between natural and powered flight. In 1977, Bryan Allen pedalled like mad to cover 1 mile in a straight line in the delicate Gossamer Condor, winning a decent prize of $250,000 for human-powered flight, but eclipsed this achievement in 1979 in the elegant but equally fragile Gossamer Albatross over the English Channel in a flight time of 2 hours and 49 minutes. This is probably the nearest that humankind will get to the Greeks' vision of Daedalus and Icarus. To do better, you have to become an angel – it's quite clear from existing narratives in which the appearance of angels is mentioned that they obviously possessed superior performance criteria, getting to B from remote A in a twinkling[15], but there are potential problems to overcome. Before that, as an aside, I haven't actually been able to find the career path humans→angels on the Internet, or even a sensible

---

[12] Much to the relief of passengers!

[13] Of all the houses within the current noise footprint of London Heathrow approaches and climbouts, about 80% have been built by speculators and local authorities after Heathrow was designated the main airport for London in 1948. Just in case you might think that aircraft noise was not an issue in these days, check Hansard from 1948-58, during which time Parliament made clear to all local authorities that people would not like to live under these flightpaths. I expect there's a lode of weasel-worded verbiage produced by these local authorities to be mined by an investigative social historian.

[14] I once was delayed several hours when the aircraft became unserviceable about an hour after an earlier flight had suffered the same fate – the first delayed aircraft was replaced by the only spare, and the passengers on mine would have to wait until a flight from Portugal arrived. Of many totally irrational, and by any reasonable definition of the word, bonkers passengers on my flight, the biscuit was taken by a large and aggressive man who said, "I'm not interested in any ***** (choose expletives) explanation, get me a ***** (same again) aircraft now! I don't care about any other ***** (ditto) flight being delayed – they can ***** (you get the idea) wait!" in the conviction he was being sweetly reasonable. There now seem to be so many people who should not really be allowed out unattended…

[15] For some inexplicable reason, the precedence of the original, easy-to-use SI (SI=Superior Intellect) units has not been recognised. Examples include: 10 twinklings = mo/2 ('alf a mo) or 1 tick (just a tick), 10 ticks = 1 blink of an eye (Augenblick originally), 10 Augenblicken = 1 wee whilie, 10 wee whilies = 1 standard whilie, 10 standard whilies = 'ang abaht a bit, 10 'angs abaht a bit = a long weight (in the space-time continuum), etc

list of qualifications, but it does appear that an absence of wings does not disqualify you!

It's reasonable to assume that the preponderance of twinklings means that the limiting factor in the physical world, *c*, the speed of light is bypassed by some means when angels go from A to B or to other reaches of the alphabet. For those of you who were expecting the first lucid layman's explanation of the Unified Theory of Relativity, I'll have to disappoint you and stick to Einstein's earlier equation, $E = mc^2$. If angels are large, then converting their mass m to energy E takes a bit more effort than if they were small, and more effort takes more time. Handling large amounts of energy is trickier than handling small amounts, and the side effects of conversion in the local neighbourhood would not only make that neighbourhood uninhabitable for centuries, it would also be unpopular with the locals whose unplanned termination of their existence would spoil their day somewhat. Attempting to achieve a reasonable fraction of the speed of light when A and B are on the same planet involves accelerations and decelerations severe enough to compress solid structures, let alone quasi-biological organisms, but a worse problem is the friction-generated heat from the passage through the atmosphere, no matter how brief. Consequently, perhaps angels' wings are actually the equivalent of the heat-dispersing fin-plates on the original VW Beetle's air-cooled engine, but post-trip conversation with humans would have to be deferred until the surrounding air had cooled below levels that would roast 'long pig'.

Now, I understand that the mathematics indicate that the 'worm-hole in space' theory would allow the instantaneous transfer of A to B without invalidating Einstein, but so far the teething problems remain unsolved – first, to paraphrase Mrs Beeton, find your nearest wormhole portal (possibly not in our galaxy), and second, the destination B may not the same for all values of B, which is a bit other-worldly.

Do we stand a better chance if angels are small? Ye-e-e-e-s, but, as you might imagine, some patience will be needed. In the physical world, the smaller the angel, the more the angel experiences the effects of microscopic phenomena. Hummingbirds are at the top end of the scale of creatures that are small enough to exploit the 'stickiness' of air, their tiny wings operating at such a very high rate that they gain additional lift not only from vortices, but also from the fact that the combined effect of air molecules acting more like a liquid than a gas can be exploited to a significant degree. This phenomenon was discovered by researchers into bee flight, thus answering the old riddle about bees having more mass than their wings could lift. If angels' wings worked in this way, then manoeuvrability and control would be precise and wings could be made smaller and lighter, but of course, A to B transit would still land you in what is unlikely to be "the best of all possible worlds".

Can we conceive of instantaneous transit? It may come as a surprise, but that possibility is perhaps less remote than might be thought, but it does require angels that are really tiny, actually on the sub-atomic or quantum scale, and this would seem too small for practical communication with humans, thus negating any success on the instant-transit front, but I'll come back to that. Researchers into communications and information transfer all over the scientific world now seek to exploit the fact that the rules of physics[16] break down at the sub-atomic scale, because at that level, any form of energy is not continuous but comes in discrete packets, or 'quanta'[17]. A principle

[16] Not as we know them, Jim.

[17] An easy analogy to help you grasp the sheer tinyness envisaged is that there are more water molecules in a glass of water than there are grains of sand in all the deserts and on all the beaches and in all the seas in the world. OK, I lied, it's not easy.

common to light and other forms of electromagnetic energy is that if the smallest possible amount of light (a quantum) is aimed at one of a pair of very narrow slits which are positioned a little ahead of a third, single slit, the results of observation and measurement are that this single quantum appears to have passed through each of the pairs of slits before passing through the single slit. Physicists in many experiments have found that this phenomenon, which essentially is that the quantum acts as both a particle and a wave at the same time, allows 'action at a distance'. The theory is that in such circumstances, the photons or electrons act as 'entangled pairs', but the spooky thing about them is that the state of one of the entangled pair measured at one location invariably exactly matches the state of the other entangled electron at another location, the greatest physical separation distance between them so far being several hundred kilometres. Such action at a distance not only holds the promise of passing information faster than light, but also might well be 'angel-friendly'. So now our angels can appear instantaneously, how do they communicate with humans before and after? Well, there is the possibility that the weird world of dimensional mathematics will allow a physical object to be enfolded into a rather higher dimension than the four in our world (height, length, breadth and time) in a way that the 'package' can be handled as if it is an entangled pair of sub-atomic particles. Now who is going to volunteer to be the first human package?

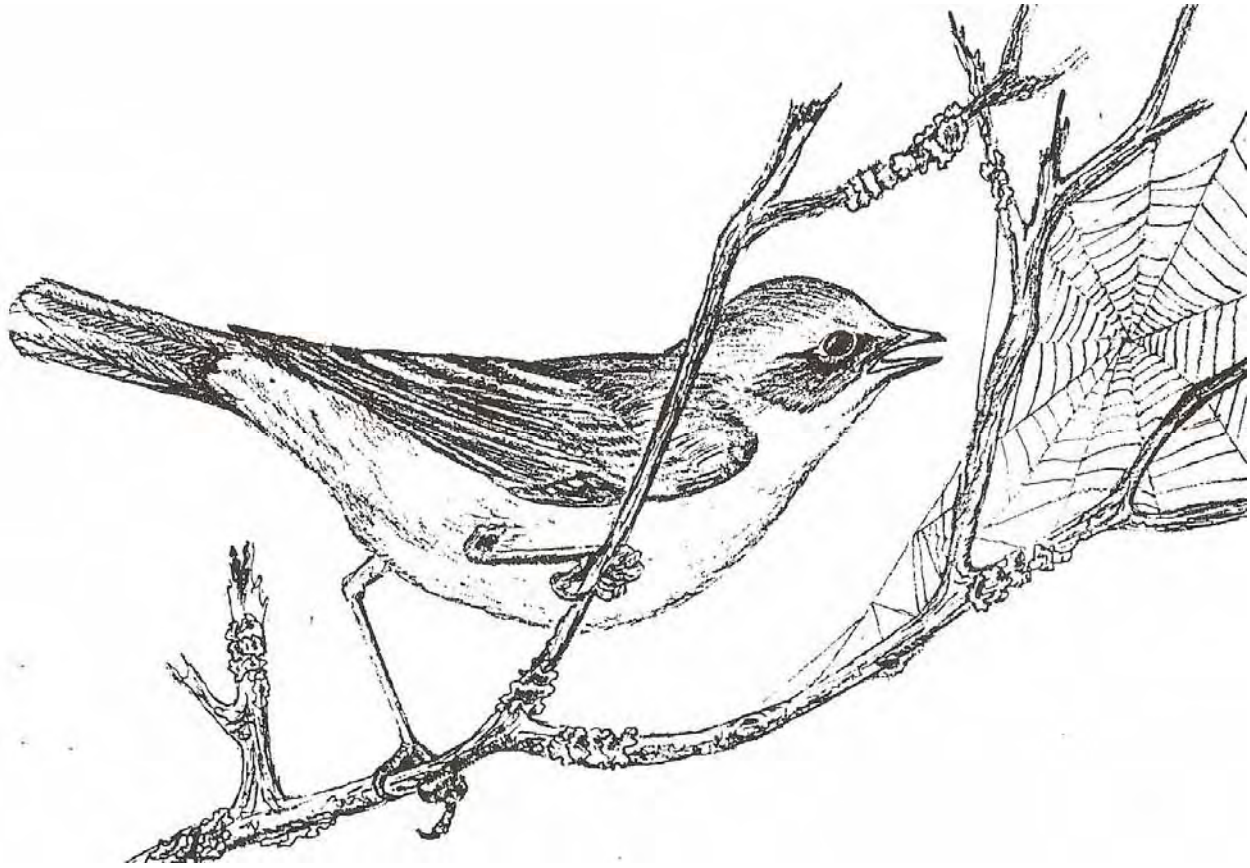
All the foregoing has avoided the main point about biological wings, and that is that they work superbly well. No artificial wings so far designed and built can compete with any found in Nature to meet the same requirements that natural wings meet. A bird's wing can alter its length, width and cross-sectional and lateral curvature as a reflex, the wing of each flying or swimming bird being fit for its purpose, a product of countless generations' need to survive the host of environmental pressures, both gradual and abrupt. Birds and their wings are incredibly light, but work for long enough for tiny passerines to migrate thousands of miles to and from their wintering areas for about four years of constant use. Some larger birds use their wings continuously over immense tracts of ocean, but here I'm not thinking of albatrosses, but rather of the Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis* I saw on Kauai, one of the Hawaiian Islands where it winters, but since it breeds in mainland Asia, it must undertake a non-stop sea crossing of at least 7910 km, and since it may live for more than ten years… However, even this record distance has now been eclipsed by the *baueri* subspecies of the Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, some of which are believed, when winds are favourable, to fly directly to Australia from their Alaskan breeding grounds, some 11,000km[18]. Some tagged birds made it in 6 days at an average speed of 77km/h, which left no time for stopping en route, although many undoubtedly do. None of the tagged birds appeared to have looped through Asia, all records en route being from islands more or less on the direct course. The Asian route would be a longer distance overall, but with shorter sea crossings. The return migration is less direct and rather more leisurely.

There are around 12 million species (insects, birds and mammals) that can fly. Even the fragmented fossil record shows that there probably have been many more that are now extinct. The processes that led to flight and the huge variety of wings are simple in general and hugely complex in detail, but the principles remain common across the board. Evolution is a dynamic process, often gradual when the pressures are gradual, but quite often rapid. The beak sizes of Galapagos finch species change with the size of seeds that become dominant in correlation with rainfall variations; Blackcaps *Sylvia*

[18] New Scientist issue 2492, 26 March 2005, page 21.

atricapilla from Bavaria now winter in Devon and Cornwall instead of Africa and have developed shorter wings; the total numbers of fish species in Lake Victoria began to recover[19] when the tilapia fishery project collapsed; and entirely new fish species (but closely-related) formed in an artificial 'stream' in an outdoor laboratory in California, where access between parts of the stream was denied for only a few generations. Yes, fish may not have true wings, but their fins act as wings and motors in water!

When you look at a bird in flight or on the water, look closely at how it uses its wings – you'll be amazed at how much angels have to learn – and just marvel. You'll be having the same experience as our very smart pre-historic ancestors, albeit for different reasons[20].



Lesser Whitethroat *By John Wells*

Last published in Newsletter 59. Spring 95

[19] The tilapia do remain, but their population has been constrained by factors not fully understood, reducing predation pressure, which in turn allowed surviving native fish species to exploit niches whose former inhabitants had been devoured by the tilapia. The new occupants of these niches adapted to them and developed into separate species – not re-creating the original species.

[20] The subject of how angels function has a long history. St Thomas Aquinas (*c*1225-1274) struggled with the conflicting concepts that angels are both incorporeal and that they can assume bodies, *ie* they are not subject to the physical laws that apply to humans, but at the same time, they are, or at least to some of them. The philosophy he came up with was that when an angel does assume a body, it is physically present, but it doesn't have sex and has no need of physical nourishment – so no angel could be a gourmet or attend orgies, but then didn't need to poo in Heaven either. Eventually, he came up with a hierarchy of 3 orders, each of 3 choirs, of angels; these were Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones; Dominations, Virtues and Powers; Principalities, Archangels and Angels. Promotion was slow. What a subject for a taxonomist! See plato.stanford.edu and www.aquinasonline.com

SISKINS IN SUBURBIA 2008

By John Le Gassick

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* has been a rare but welcome visitor to the garden of 17 Acacia Avenue in the late Winter/early Spring. Normally there are one or two annual records such as: one Siskin 17th March 1984, male and female 25th and 26th February 1986 and 2nd April 2006 again a male and a female. This year the number of birds visiting the feeders has been much greater than in any of the years that I have lived here.

I moved into Acacia Avenue in January 1979 and have always recorded the birds in the garden, since its inception in 1995 I have been a member of the BTO Garden Birdwatch www.bto.org/gbw and since that date have kept weekly records.

Every January I suspend a red peanut bag in the garden in the, probably mistaken, belief that this will attract these attractive finches. This year only once was a bird seen on the nut bag, they mostly fed on the two suspended niger seed feeders and to a slightly lesser extent on the sunflower hearts dispenser. The majority of the records were early in the morning.

I am also aware the fact that I have been in full retirement since 2001 and having an interest in digi-scoping the birds in the garden means that I spend a lot more time watching the feeders than in the earlier years. Nevertheless I feel that here in the heart of suburbia, it has been a good year for Siskin!

Table showing visits to the Garden Feeders (date & numbers)

12/2	22/2	24/2	25/2	26/2	28/2	29/2	4/3	5/3	6/3	8/3	9/3	10/3	11/3	12/3	13/3
2	1	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	4	3	2	3	2

Male Siskin on Sunflower hearts and a female on the peanut bag

Photos by John Le Gassick

Note: Two more were recorded on 16th March and another pair on 20th March.

LAGOA-DOS-SALGADOS ('PERA MARSH') ALGARVE PORTUGAL UPDATE AUTUMN 08

By John Wells

Lagoa dos Salgados *Photo by Valtar Jacinto*

In March this year I received an update from Jose Pedro Tavares, of the RSPB, in his role as The Country Programmes Officer for Portugal, Turkey and Greece on the current status of the wetland area known as Lagos dos Salgados or 'Pera Marsh' and Jose has allowed me to broaden publicity on the campaign for greater management of the site. Those who have been there, or read about it, will know that the existence of the site is fragile but also that a wealth of bird life frequents the site when the water levels and clarity are to the birds liking. Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estuado das Aves (SPEA) and the RSPB have been working tirelessly to secure the long-term conservation of the site, which remains an unprotected Important Bird Area (IBA) in the Algarve Coastal region.

Here are some key points from Jose's brief:

Designation of the site as a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive.

The first and immediate objective is the campaign to establish the wetland as a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive. The Portuguese Government are involved in this decision and are happy to declare it such if all relevant stakeholders can agree and sign a formal declaration. Sadly, after two years this matter is still open. Jose has contacted the Portuguese Government and confirmed that this is still their position. Following the initial stakeholders meeting in Feb 06, attended by all the local stakeholders, 2 main issues and a number of minor ones remain to be decided before all the signatories would agree. These are:

- Final approval for the golf course to west of the marsh/lagoon, including a tourist complex. This was finally agreed last year but work will not commence until about 2010.

- Water provision and water pricing to lagoon and to the existing course to the east of the lagoon as well as the new planned golf complex. The provision and pricing of water remains the outstanding problem to solve – but it is not an easy one. Aguas do Algarve (AdA), the Regional Council Authority, have to provide good quality, treated water to the wetland from their new water treatment plant being built a few km inland but they want paying for it.

To date, after many meetings, there is still no agreement on this difficult problem. The RSPB/SPEA took legal advice, built a case and are now prepared for negotiations. The Environmental Impact Assessment for the new treatment plant was heavily influenced by SPEA and it was written with the agreement of AdA who are under an obligation to provide the water. The matter is not made easier by the fact that the new golf course is still 2 years away and, at present, the other golf course gets its water elsewhere. More meetings will follow, but a secure water supply is the highest priority for the site. This was graphically demonstrated when, in about April 08, the whole site was drained and the number of nesting birds was decimated: you may have read in the papers, it made headline news in Portugal where the Government was called to account and parliamentary questions were asked as to how it could have happened. I am led to believe the golf course acted negligently. I understand the lagoon was still dry in June. As you can see progress on this matter is frustratingly slow.

Then there are the other smaller, but still important, issues.

The "Ecovia". This is a raised wooden cycle/walk way, being paid for with EU money, that will cut through the site at the beach car park on the southern perimeter. The walk way will cause some disturbance while being constructed but in the end may work in our favour as it could stop walkers and cyclists from wandering aimlessly amongst the breeding sites. Some voices have been raised in concern that the track will bring in 'the masses' from the dense tourist complexes, but again we do want to encourage people to visit the site and understand conservation as long as proper management and facilities are in place.

Draining of the wetland. The whole of Portugal suffered major heavy rains and flooding, especially in Lisbon, at the end of Feb 08. At around the same time the site was drained to prevent the golf course flooding. This has happened for a number of years and probably led to the mistake in April. Fortunately, birds do return as soon as some water trickles back, let's hope they eventually returned after the April draining.

The Interpretation Centre. Plans are in place to convert a ruined farmhouse and outbuildings into an interpretation centre. Jose is asking for an architect to help with this work under a voluntary agreement - do you know of one? Transfer of ownership to SPEA will be given once the status and management of the whole site is formally agreed by all.

Disturbance. Over the last few months reports of disturbance by quad bikes, joggers, horse riders, camper vans, motor bikers etc. appear to be on the increase. The local enthusiast and un-paid warden, Mr Rui Eufrasia, wrote a letter of complaint to the local land planning agency and 3 signs were erected to inform dog walkers that dogs are to

remain on the leash. You may recall in my earlier article how a boxer got free from its owner when I was there with Rui and proceeded to run amock amid the birds, eventually killing a Black-tailed Godwit. Jose has asked that any disturbance is reported. I hold the address of the 'CCDR Algarve' who is to be informed if you see such callous activity around the birds.

Construction at the site. Two major construction projects are in the pipeline, possibly starting in 2009. The first, construction plans are being presented to build a submarine waste/effluent pipeline under the lagoon and out to sea from the new sewage treatment plant. SPEA and RSPB are planning to monitor closely the construction phases and minimise impact. The second is the construction of tourist a complex; this work has now been approved and will start 2009/10. During construction it is envisaged that both will cause significant disturbance and will make the site look pitiful, but when complete, and if done properly we are confident that it will recover to its former status.

Events. Ruis Eufrasia organised a guided tour in February for interested birders and walkers. Along the lines of the RSPB Aren't Birds Brilliant Campaign.

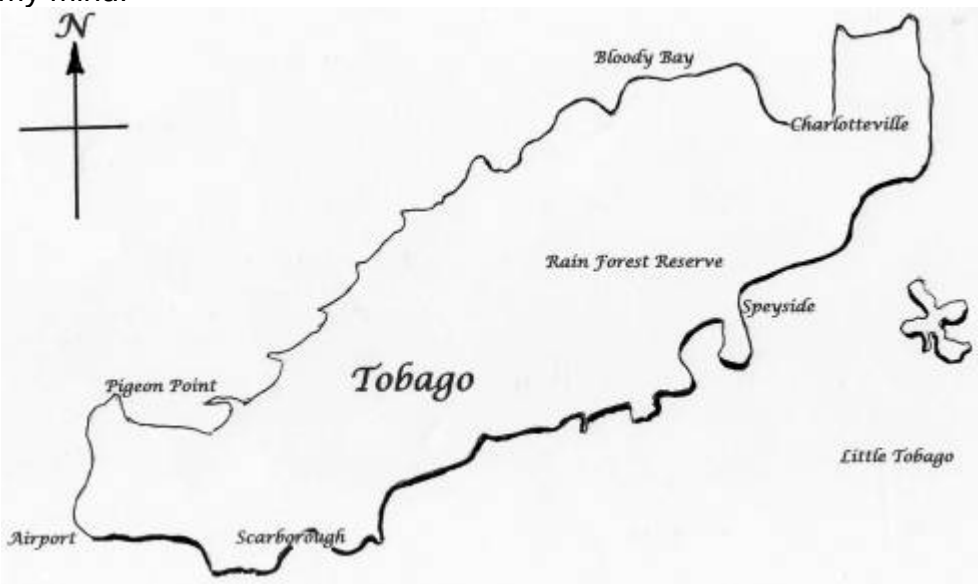
Capacity. Manning and costs are rising and SPEA and RSPB are losing resources on this and many other projects. José has asked we support SPEA through subscriptions by joining the Society. Fundraising and publicity can only come from committed supporters – one to consider if you have any ideas. He is also looking for a full time Lagoa dos Salgados campaigner. José is contactable through RSPB international Division, The Lodge, Sandy Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL E-Mail jose.tavares@rspb.org.uk

The sign says 'No Fishing'
Photo taken at Llanelli WWT by Mr Brian Grove (*Father of our Librarian. Ed*)

TOBAGO (What no Trinidad?)

By John Le Gassick

Strange as it may seem, after the frenetic excitement of the Morocco trip this was planned as a restful two weeks holiday sitting in the shade with some snorkelling so it definitely was not a bird watching trip; although diplomatic clearance was obtained to take my telescope! The holiday was booked through Wild Wings who have years of experience in this part of the world. Through them we booked two weeks at the Blue Waters Inn just outside Speyside, at the opposite end of the Island to the Airport, a transfer time of approximately ninety minutes on account of the winding nature of the roads. Originally I had planned to hire a car but during the course of this journey I changed my mind.



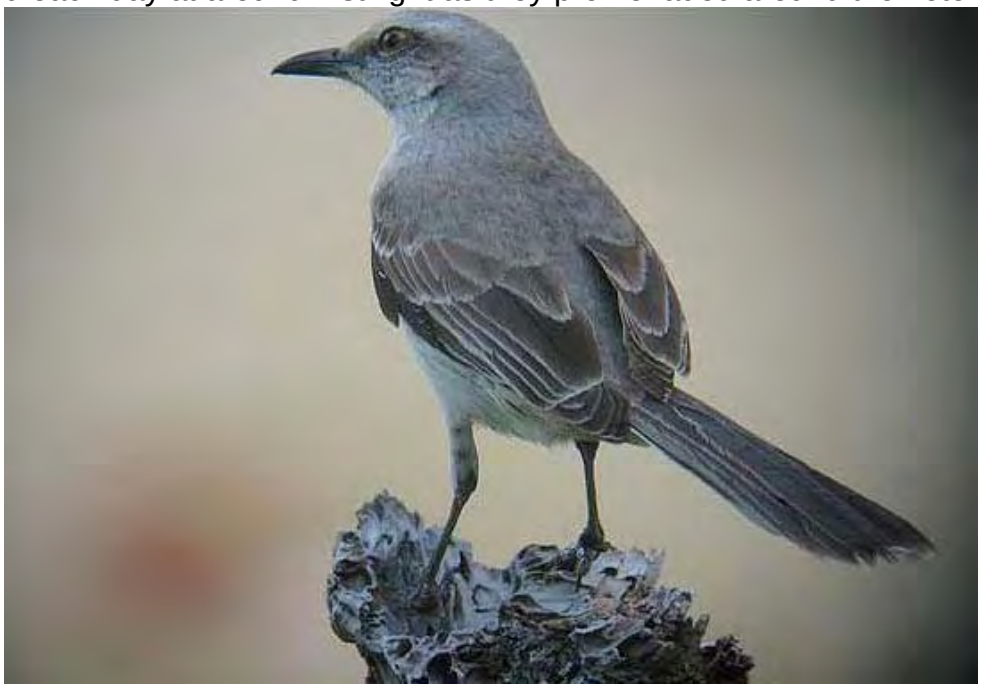
Of volcanic origin, Tobago is an island 26 miles long by 6 miles wide and is located at 1109N and 6040W. The main central spine of the Island is covered in rain forest rising to a height of 1800ft. Although the Island lies to the south of the hurricane belt it was struck by Hurricane Flora in 1963 which destroyed large areas of the rainforest and many of the plantations. The rainforest has however re-generated and is therefore now designated virgin rainforest. The capital Scarborough is on the southwest coast and Speyside is at the eastern end of the island. The northern coastline is on the Caribbean Ocean whilst the southern shore faces the Atlantic, this makes the north and the south shores very different, almost like two separate islands. As the names of the towns and villages on the Island suggest there has been a strong British influence in the past ranging from James the First in 1608 when the Island was first claimed for England until 1976 when as part of Trinidad and Tobago it became an independent Republic. In between these dates the Island changed hands some 22 times, mainly between the French, Dutch and of course the British. Speyside is the popular location for bird watchers because of its proximity to Little Tobago, an uninhabited island which, along with the neighbouring St Giles Island, is home to important colonies of Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus mesonauta*, Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*, and Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri lherminieri* amongst others.

The village of Speyside consists of a few small hotels and a handful of simple "eateries", one of these the aptly named "Birdwatchers Restaurant" was our favourite. Jemma's Seaview Kitchen was another very popular venue, set in the treetops

overlooking the beach, here they only serve a set menu. Blue Waters Inn is only about a mile from Speyside but the narrow road is uneven and has a very steep gradient. When we ate in Speyside we found the best and easiest plan was to take a taxi for the short ride back to the hotel. The dates for our visit were April 17th to May 1st and throughout this period we did not experience any rainfall. Most days were cloudy at times and a fresh NE/NNE breeze kept the temperature around a pleasant 78^0F.

I am going to split the bird-watching into four sections: The first is around the hotel and its environs, Speyside and the small fishing village of Charlotteville, a ten minute taxi ride away on the Caribbean side. The second, our day out around the Island where we visited the sewage works at Bon Accord, the nearby (soon to be built on) mangrove swamp, the Tobago Plantation, Grafton Bird Sanctuary and after lunch at Pigeon Point a visit to Adventure Farm. Third, a visit to Gilpin Trace in the Rainforest Reserve and finally a trip to Little Tobago. Throughout the period of our "holiday" 103 species were recorded, of which 83 were new to me. The reason for this acceptable bird list was that during the first week I made the acquaintance of Newton George who leads local birding trips and is extremely knowledgeable about the avifauna of Tobago. He was one of the two official Rain Forest Reserve Rangers until he retired in September 2004 to become a full time tour leader employed by most of the bird watching holiday companies.

All of the rooms at Blue Waters face the sea and with a telescope good views can be had of Little Tobago and the previously mentioned species; add to this fishing Roseate Terns *Sterna dougallii dougallii*, Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus fuscatus* and Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus stolidus.* This meant that early every morning there was plenty to watch. Outside our room we had a Blue-grey Tanager *Thraupis episcopus nesophilus* nest, the young from which fledged during our holiday. One unmissable bird was the Rufous-vented Chachalaca *Ortalis ruficauda ruficauda* whose raucous unmistakeable call started each day at around first light as they promenaded around the hotel.



Tropical Mockingbird *Photo: John Le Gassick*

The most common bird here, and throughout Tobago, is the Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus tobagensis*, a comparatively recent (early 20th Century) arrival. Others seen on a daily basis around the hotel gardens were: groups of Shiny Cowbird

Molothrus bonariensis minimus, Kingbirds both Grey *Tyrannus dominicensis vorax* and Tropical *Tyrannus melancholicus satrapa* along with the rather beautiful White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verrauxi* and the wide spread Pale-vented Pigeon *Patagioenas cayennensis tobagensis*.

White-tipped Dove *Photo: John Le Gassick*

A novelty feature of the bar and restaurant were the Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres morinella*, flocks of around twenty birds would vacate the beach, where they enjoyed the fresh water in the footbaths beneath the showers, to scavenge under the tables at meal times. Another frequent visitor to the bar was the ubiquitous though colourful Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola luteola* which would, if one was not careful, settle on the table to scavenge crumbs. Fortunately the much larger but equally colourful Blue-crowned Motmot *Momotus momota bahemensis* , whose picture graces the bar and all literature pertaining to the Hotel, remained in the shrubbery on the beach side of the railings. These birds, although very handsome, are quite nasty predators of the chicks and eggs in humming bird nests in the rainforest. A short but very steep walk out of the complex leads to a trail around a ridge high above the buildings leading to Anse Gouleme, a totally deserted bay and beach. On this walk some of the highlights were at least four breeding pairs of Rufous-tailed Jacamar *Galbula ruficauda ruficauda*, very obliging and photographable birds that nest in holes in sandy banks similar to bee-eaters, White-fringed Antwren *Formicivora grisea intermedia* and a pair of Barred Antshrike *Thamnophilus doliatus fraterculus*.

The common hummer around the hotel and at most places on the Island was the Copper-rumped Hummingbird *Amazilia tobaci erythronotus*. From up here on the high ground lovely views were had of the Magnicent Frigatebirds as they glided in on “long finals” to Charlotteville. Charlotteville was excellent for photographing Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*, at this time of the year, a very smart gull. Charlotteville is an active fishing harbour, and the waste from the fish gutting is dumped in the shallows where it attracts large flocks of Laughing Gull and Magnificent Frigatebirds, allowing very close views as they fight noisily over the spoils. One other place worthy of a mention is on the edge of Speyside, just as you leave the road to climb up to Blue Waters. Here there is a small stream feeding into a shallow lagoon full of fish fry where we saw Yellow-crowned Night Heron *Nyctanassa violacea cayennensis* and Green Kingfisher *Chloroceryle americana croteta*. From the comfort of the decking beside the beach we also recorded Great Black Hawk *Buteogallus urubitinga urubitinga* and Caribbean

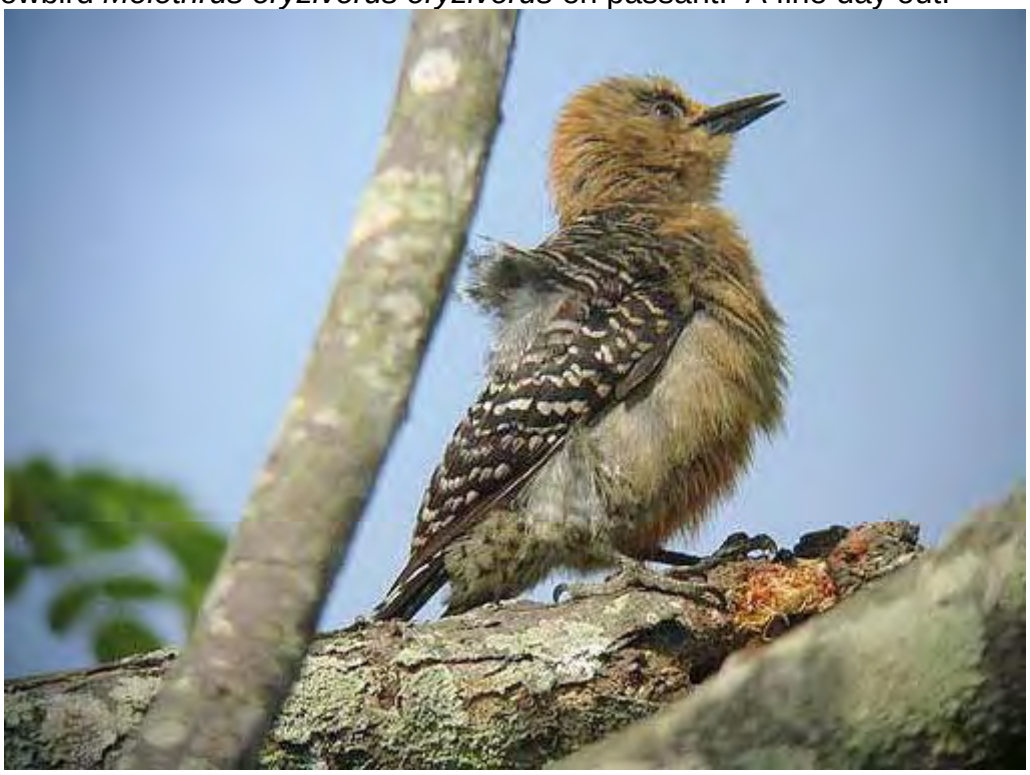
Martin *Progne dominicensis* as they flew along the ridge. We later had closer views of Great Black Hawk in the rainforest.

Our first trip with Newton George was on April 23rd when after an 0430 alarm and an early breakfast we arrived at the Bon Accord Sewage works at 0630 to see the two local specialities before they departed for the day. These were the Black-bellied Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis discolor* and White-cheeked Pintail *Anas bahamensis bahamensis*. Other notables were: Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana jacana* (I must stop repeating myself), Yellow-headed Caracara *Milvago chimachima*, Anhinga *anhinga anhinga anhinga* (there I go again), Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio martinica* and Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla* to name but a few! A walk around the nearby mangrove yielded some nice waders in the drainage ditches beside the road: Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaraia solitaria*, Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*, the most commonly seen wader throughout our stay, Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* and Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus.* Finally I was able to video the locally named 'Johnny Jump-up', the Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina splendens.* The male performs an interesting display making a series of short vertical jumps, from a perch, with spread wings and tail whilst uttering a wheezing call, doing this for a considerable length of time. I eventually became bored and left him to it.

We then visited the Tobago Plantation which features a mangrove swamp with a board walk going through it, here we saw Chivis Vireo a sub species of Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus* and Yellow-breasted Flycatcher *Tolmomyias flaviventris collingwoodi* and coiled in the tree tops a large Cook's Tree Boa *Corlallus enydris cooki.* On the various pools there were plenty of Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus brachyrynchus* (try saying that with a mouth full of sandwich), fishing Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* and Green Heron *Butorides virescens virescens* everywhere. A welcome lunch was taken at the cafeteria in the Pigeon Point beach facility - wrist bands had to be purchased for entry – and during lunch we had nice views of fishing Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus.*

Green Heron *Photo: John Le Gassick*

Early afternoon we visited Adventure Farm where the main attraction is most of Tobago's humming bird species visiting feeders. At the time of year when we visited all the usual species were present, but if there is a lot of blossom in the nearby trees then some desert this feeding station for a more natural diet. Sitting in a comfortable chair, cold fresh orange juice in hand we watched and photographed: Rufous-breasted Hermit *Glaucis hirsutus insularum* , White-necked Jacobin *Florisuga mellivora*, Black-throated mango *Anthracothorax nigricollis nigricollis*, Ruby Topaz *Chrysolampis mosquitus* and Copper-rumped Hummingbird. That's my sort of bird watching! There were also a variety of seed feeders close to the veranda which, during our stay, were visited by male and female Red-crowned Woodpecker *Melanerpes rubricapillus rubricapillus* Eared Dove *Zenaida auriculata stenura* and Bare-eyed Thrush *Turdus nudigenis nudigenis.* We then returned to Speyside along the Caribbean coast road identifying Giant Cowbird *Molothrus oryzivorus oryzivorus* en passant. A fine day out!



Female Red-crowned Woodpecker *Photo: John Le Gassick*

Saturday 26th April we visited the Gilpin Trace in the Rain Forest Reserve on the Main Ridge. Trace is just another name for trail. Today we had a more leisurely departure at 0615. Some of the highlights from the many stops on the journey to the Gilpin Trace were: Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus cyaneus*, Collared Trogan *Trogan collaris exoptatus*, White-winged Becard *Pachyramphus polychopterus tristis*, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher *Mionectes oleaginous pallidiventris* and Golden-olive Woodpecker *Piculus rubiginosus trinitatis*. We arrived at the trace at 0800, and were lucky that the trail was nice and dry as we were told that at some times of year it is so muddy you have to hire Wellington boots from a local entrepreneur stationed at the forest edge. Once in the rain forest we quickly located the bird of the day White-tailed Sabrewing *Campylopterus ensipennis* , a bird that only occurs on the forested Main Ridge on Tobago. For me the other highlight along the trace were the displaying Blue-backed Manakins *Chiroxiphia pareola atlantica.* They have a display that consists of a minimum of three males who leap over each other on a branch giving a buzzing call in an attempt to attract the drab olive-green female. Although it was quite dark in the forest the electric blue backs and red heads of the participating males stand out well. It made for some wonderful video. Perhaps the other highlight was the rather strange and

difficult to see Stripe-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis cinnamomea carri*, they scratch around on the forest floor amongst the leaf litter and are best located by their call. After the Rainforest we stopped by the Bloody Bay River where we had good views of Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* and were nearly caught out by a juvenile Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea* which is totally white. Other road-side sightings included Piratic Flycatcher *Legatus leucophaius leucophaius*, three Olivaceous Woodcreepers *Sittasomus griseicapillus griseus* and another Green Kingfisher.

Little Tobago *Photo: John Le Gassick*

Finally, and perhaps saving the best to last, Little Tobago. The Island is about one square kilometre in size and covered in dry forest. It has been a nature reserve since 1909 when Sir William Ingram attempted to save the Greater Bird of Paradise *Paradisaea apoda* from total extinction in New Guinea by releasing 45 juveniles on Little Tobago. None survive today and the Island has been deeded to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago as a wildlife sanctuary. I visited the Island twice, the first time on the 25th April was with the normal package of Island visit linked into a snorkelling experience. This trip was all right but was not intended for birdwatchers so it was a little frustrating, as there wasn't time to linger at specific locations, though the guide was very pleasant and knowledgeable. On this trip the highlights for me were Crested Oropendola *Psarocolius decumanus insularis* and excellent protracted views of Short-tailed Swift *Chaetura brachyura brachyura.* I re-visited the Island on the afternoon of the 30th, this time with a party led by Newton George, which was far more expensive but much more satisfying as there was plenty of time at each stopping point for photography etc. The real highlight of this visit was White-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus cayennensis leopetes* which roost on the ground so close to the footpath it is a wonder that no one stands on them. The rest of the birds we had seen previously but are worth

a mention: Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus antillarum*, Brown-crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus tyrannulus tyrannulus* and an Audubon's Shearwater chick, obligingly poking its head out of a burrow. On our return to the jetty at Blue Waters, the icing on the cake, excellent views of Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon* perched on some rocks. Until this moment I had just had fleeting glimpses, from my balcony, of a kingfisher sp. whizzing along just over the surface of the sea.

In conclusion it was a most enjoyable holiday, even without the experience of a visit to the Asa Wright Nature Centre on Trinidad where I hope to visit in the very near future. All bird names used in this article were taken from Kenefick, Restall and Hayes 2007.

Ref: Birds of Trinidad and Tobago by Martyn Kenefick, Robin Restall and Floyd Hayes. This recently published Christopher Helm Field Guide (2007) was excellent. I particularly liked the way families and sub families of birds are accorded a (coloured) plate number. This made the separation and identification of these mostly unfamiliar birds so much easier.

Birds of Trinidad and Tobago by Richard ffrench

www.wildwings.co.uk

Newton George E-mail: ngeorge@tsstt.net.tt

Yellow-bellied Elaenia *Elaenia flavogaster* on nest. Tobago May 2005 *Photo: Dick Yates*

The RAFOS Newsletter

is published twice a 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 costs down. They can be used to illustrate text but will only appear in black and white

- **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 I use MS Word so please use this if possible. **Please send any graphics/photos separately, preferably as .jpg files or Word documents. Please don't build them into a word processed document**.

- **I look forward to receiving written contributions in the following formats, listed in order of preference:**

    1. **By e-mail** to richardyates7@btinternet.com as an attachment. **Please avoid fancy layouts – see above.**

    2. **On a floppy disk/CD ROM**. Same hints on content as for e-mail apply.

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

    4. **Hand-written** and I'll type it in myself (least welcome!).

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

Dick Yates

Please address contributions to:
R Yates
49 Lakeside
Newent
Gloucestershire
GL18 1SZ

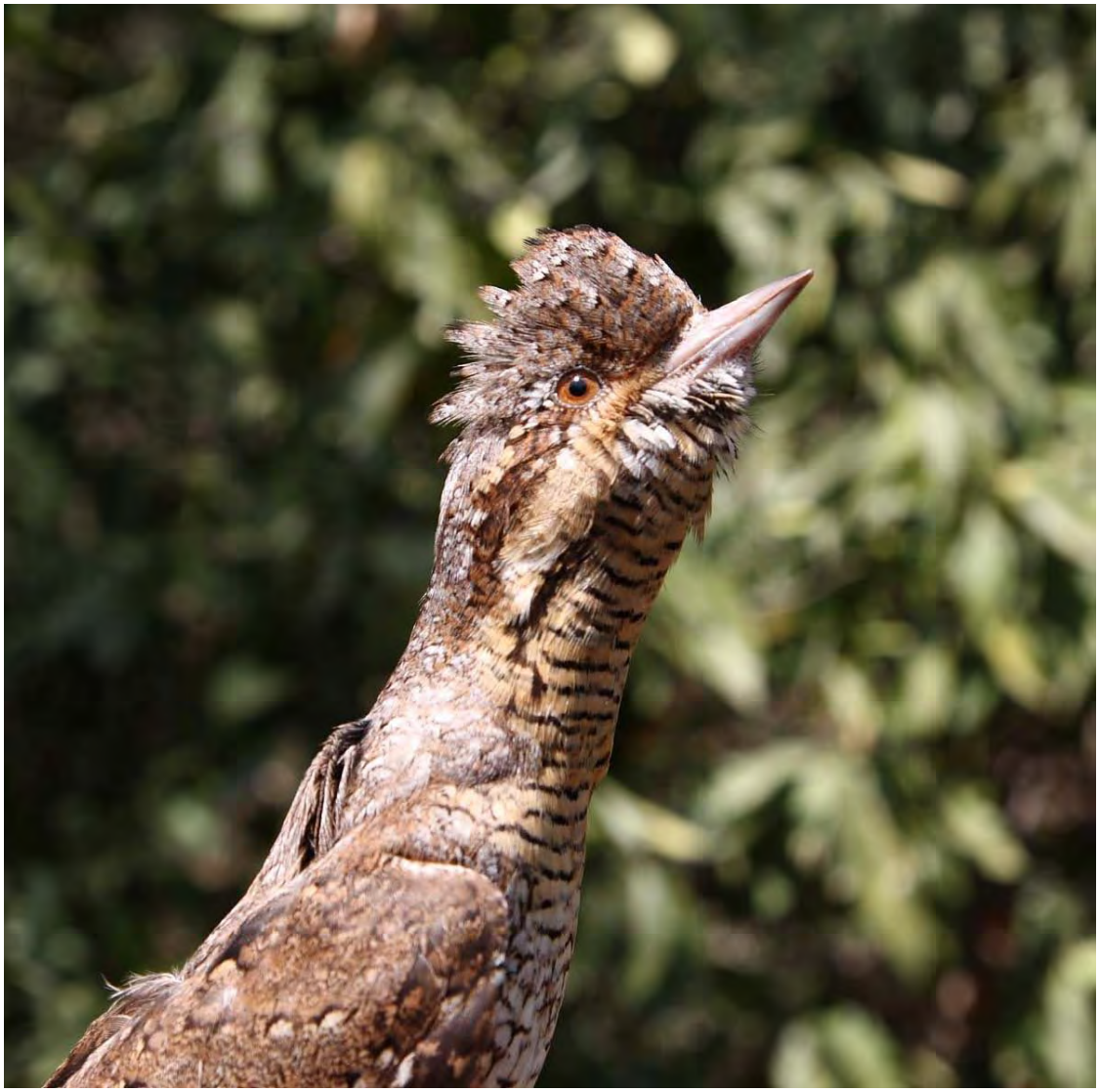
RAFOS is a member of the BTO/Bird Clubs Partnership

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.

Bee-eater at the hives near Bishops' Pool *Photo: Daphne Yates*

The indignity of it all! Spotted Flycatcher – bottoms up *Photo: Daphne Yates*

European Roller *Photo: Thomas Hadjikyriacou*



Wryneck in the hand at Bishops' Pool *Photo: Ian Grier*