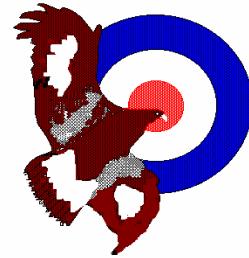




# *Ornithological Society Newsletter*

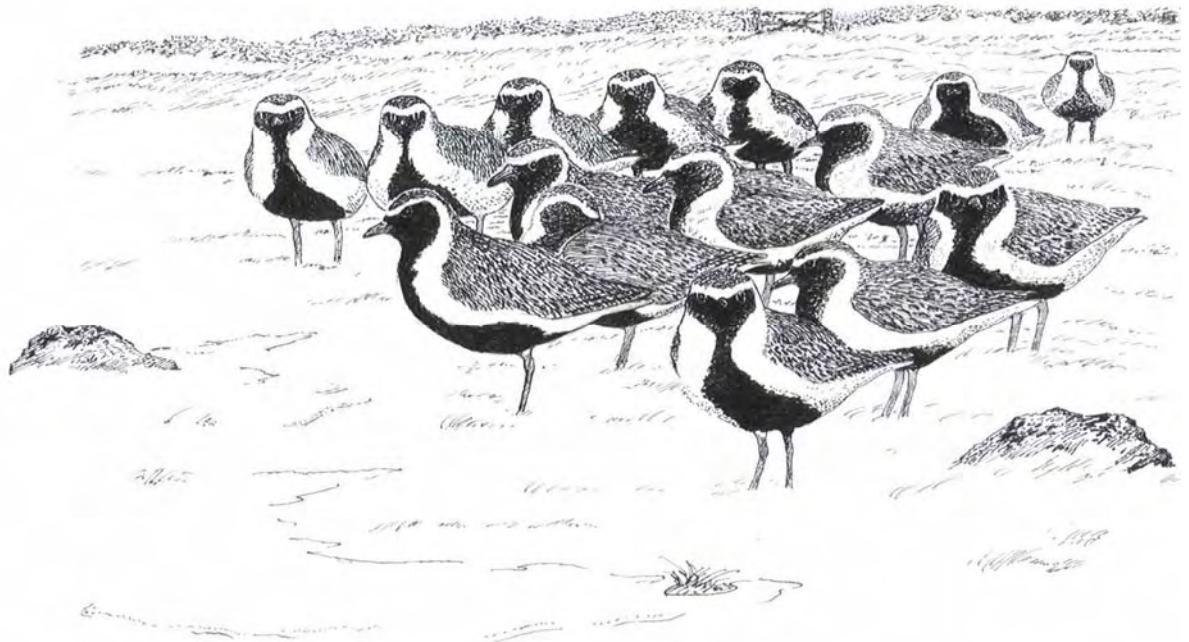


**Winner of the 2008 Photographic Competition  
Jon Orme  
Emu**

**Web Site: <http://www.rafos.org.uk>**

**No 87**

**Spring 2009**



**WINNER OF ARTWORK COMPETITION**  
Golden Plovers by Ken Baldridge



**WINNER OF BEST NOVICE PHOTOGRAPH**  
Cape Eagle Owl by Jon Orme

# **THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY**

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**(As at 26 February 2009)**

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**FALO/Expeditions Member: Gp Capt J C Knights FRGS MRAeS (Retd)**

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**Newsletter Editor: Sqn Ldr R Yates (Retd)**

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**Production & Distribution Manager: Mr C P Wearn**

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**Webmaster: Mr G Candelin**

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**Scientific Adviser: Dr A G Gosler Dphil FLS MBOU**

**Ringing Co-ordinator: Mr C P Wearn**

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

## Editorial

I have to start this edition of the Newsletter by apologising for the right royal horlicks that was made of binding your August 2008 copy. Our printers had a problem with their binding machine, ie it was broken, and the Newsletter was many weeks delayed. Finally, when it was fixed the printing and binding was all done in a rush in order to get the edition out before the AGM, and to be honest no-one noticed that it was bound back to front until it was too late. I hope that you all managed to sort something out and that I didn't spoil the read too much.

Many congratulations to Steve Heather on being awarded the Frank Walker Trophy, a thoroughly deserved honour. (Please see the citation on page 5)

I think the AGM went pretty smoothly, thanks to everyone who attended and especially to Jan Knight and Colin Wearn for organising it. Please see the Noticeboard for details of the 2009 AGM

Those of you at the AGM may recall me using my walking my stick as a pointer during the ExCypSurv 08 presentation. John Stewart-Smith did the little doodle below instead of paying attention!! Thanks John. I had a knee replacement operation the week the following week and I'm now getting about really well.

*Dick Yates*



## NOTICEBOARD

### **AGM 2009**

The 2009 AGM will be held at RAF Brize Norton on Saturday 14 Nov 2009, so please put the date in your diary, we hope that as many as possible can make. Unfortunately there will be no on-base accommodation available; the Secretary will be seeking suitable venues locally and advice will go out with the formal calling notice and agenda with Autumn Newsletter.

### **RAFOS FIELD ACTIVITIES FOR 2009**

20 – 22 Mar 09	Burnham Overy
5 Apr 09	Chew Valley
9 – 16 May 09	Islay Mist
29 May – 6 Jun 09	Kintyre (BTO survey)
2-4 Oct 09	Portland Bill
23 Oct – 3 Nov 09	Cornish Chough
8 Nov 09	Chew Valley
15 Nov 09	Post AGM Field Meeting (Venue TBD)

### **CYPRUS 2009**

Unfortunately the proposed visit to Cyprus in September has been cancelled. It was always dependent on HQ BFC being able to help the Society with transport and accommodation costs. This they were unable to do from their 2009 budget. We are opening negotiations for spring 2010 when we would look at another 6 week exped commencing 1 Apr 10. The FALO will keep members apprised of the progress.

### **RINGING COURSE**

Due to pressure of work Colin Wearn is unable to run a Ringing Course at Catterick in 2009. However, any current or potential ringers who wish to pursue their interest in ringing can contact Colin and he will advise on BTO courses available. Indeed, if anyone lives in the High Wycombe area and would like to go out ringing with Colin please contact him. See contact details inside back cover.

### **ANNUAL PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION**

The Committee are reviewing the rules for the Annual Photo Comp. Any changes are likely to be fairly minor and will be published on the RAFOS website well in advance of next year's AGM. They will also be issued with the AGM calling notice that goes out with the Autumn Newsletter.

## THE FRANK WALKER AWARD 2008 MR STEVE HEATHER



A veteran of some of the Society's most famous expeditions including Belize (86), Ascension (87), Highland Grouse (89 to 91), Shetland (94), the Falklands (95), Varanger Fjord (96), Winter Duck (since 05) and Kintyre (this year), as well as numerous Cornish Choughs (since 94), Mr Steve Heather has been an ordinary member delivering extraordinary impact.

Always up for a challenge in order to achieve the best results, he has battled his way up and around remote 'Munros', coped with Arctic white-outs and tolerated the severity of NW Scottish winters on our Winter Duck series. Due to his natural eye for detail and depth of ornithological knowledge, he has frequently taken on the essential and time consuming role of expedition recorder. However, it is his culinary skills, first properly employed in 1994, for which he is best known. His efforts have not only sustained numerous expeditions in harsh conditions, they have kept teams healthy, and, through his thorough forward preparation, they have raised morale and reduced the financial burden to all participants. He has by hard work, flexibility and innovation, raised the standard of expedition catering within RAFOS to an all time high.

But it is his utter dedication to the Society's annual flagship conservation activity, Winter Duck, for which he deserves most praise. Not content with being the default catering manager for this challenging multi-site event and a recorder, he has also expanded his involvement to helping expedition leaders to run the accounts of this expensive and complicated activity. Winter Ducks could not have become the wide-ranging and scientifically valuable events that they have evolved into without Steve Heather's long term enthusiasm and dedication. As such we all owe him our gratitude.

## AGM 2008 – CHAIRMAN’S REPORT

Air Marshal, ladies and gentlemen after having thanked you all for coming today, I should apologise again for missing last year’s AGM, but as you will have heard from my speech, which Jerry Knights read out, I was still, unexpectedly, in Bosnia.

Firstly, I should also like to thank Colin for doing such a great job getting everything ready for today. Our new Secretary has also been a great success this year and it is only through Jan’s efforts that the Committee continues to function.

Since the end of November last year I have had only 6 weeks in the UK and have had to move the family twice, first to Rome in January and then onto Naples in August. My commitment in Rome as a student on the Senior NATO Staff Course meant that I was unable to attend any committee meetings until the one at the end of September: I intend to do better from now on. Moreover, those of you who have lived in Italy will know that for all its beauty and cuisine it is light years behind the UK in the provision of telephone and internet services. Thus, Jerry Knights has stood in for me as Chairman for most of the year.

Even being here today has been fraught with problems. For the last 2 weeks I have been in Corsica on exercise. On Thursday, following 3\* approval, I left the exercise a day early in order to get back to Naples so that I could catch a flight back to the UK on Friday afternoon. This journey should have taken an over long 14 hours, via Bastia, Marseille and Rome. All was going well until Rome. The flight out was delayed by 2 hours; 4 hours later, at 0130hrs, Al Italia admitted the aircraft pilots had gone on strike and the flight had been cancelled. After much stamping of feet and no sleep I got back to Naples, after 32 hours of travel, by bus, having already missed my Friday flight back to the UK. This morning I got up at 0400hrs and came directly here from Gatwick arriving a little late for the start of the Committee meeting this morning.

My bleat over, I should like to mention and welcome Lt Col Roger Dickey from AOS; many of you know him already. Moreover, as you have already heard, our President has been very active, displaying a like for locations beginning with the letter C: Catterick (on the ringing course), Cornwall (on Chough) and Cyprus. Sir, your participation and support is much appreciated by us all.

It has been a busy year for the Committee members, especially the FALO, Jerry Knights, and for John Wells our Publicity Member. But, you will hear more detail in the expeditions report later.

Looking forward, we have still to sort out our library, but light is at the end of the tunnel, not least because the library at RAFC Cranwell is still willing to take us on. Sponsorship remains the keystone of expedition funding and as usual we are indebted to Air BP and ASIG in particular, for their continued support and generosity. Such support makes it possible for us to play an important role in the national Breeding Bird Atlas survey next year and allows room for additional expeditions; possibly back to Cyprus and to Austria. If interested, please keep your eye out for the next Newsletter or check our rather improved Website run by George Candelin.

There have been some administrative problems with the issue of the last Newsletter and the AGM Calling Notice, which centred around a production problem out of our control. But, I think that you will agree the latest Newsletter is brilliant although there is a mistake in its format.

I have spoken enough and it is time to get on with today's events, which I hope you will find informative and, most of all, enjoyable. Finally, please spend generously at today's book auction, for which I thank Mike Blair.

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**Marsh Sandpiper at Bishops' Pool during ExCypSurv 08**  
*Photo by Alan Brimmell*



## **RAFS EXPEDITION TO KINTYRE 2009**

*By Jerry Knights*

Introduction. RAFOS intends to mount a return expedition to the Kintyre peninsula this year to undertake further survey work for the new British Bird Atlas 2007-11. Survey dates will be 29 May – 6 June 2009 inclusive.

Attendees. Currently 6 members have signed up, which is a working number to complete the survey, but there is room for a couple more if you are interested.

Survey Work. This year we will work in 7 x 10 kilometre squares. Each square comprises 25 x 2 square kilometre tetrads (although, being on a peninsula, some are excluded because they are in the ocean), with minimum coverage of 8 tetrads per square. Selecting which tetrads to complete has been difficult, primarily due to uncertain access as well as potentially difficult walking terrain to complete observations. Up to 2 hours will be devoted to each tetrad (called a Timed Tetrad Visit or TTV), usually by walking through the area in order to ensure the different habitat types are all covered within the fixed time. Last year we covered some 29 TTVs as well as many “roving records” of our sightings outside the formal recording periods. This year we hope to cover a similar amount.

Daily Routine. Survey work will be carried out during the period of high bird activity (i.e. in the morning), so the plan is to divide into teams of 2 observers, with each completing 2 - 3 tetrads a day. This necessitates very early daily starts presuming the weather and terrain permit full coverage. If so, there will be around 5 days work. Teams will record in notebooks then transfer to record forms later. The BTO will provide both pre-printed TTV and Roving Record forms.

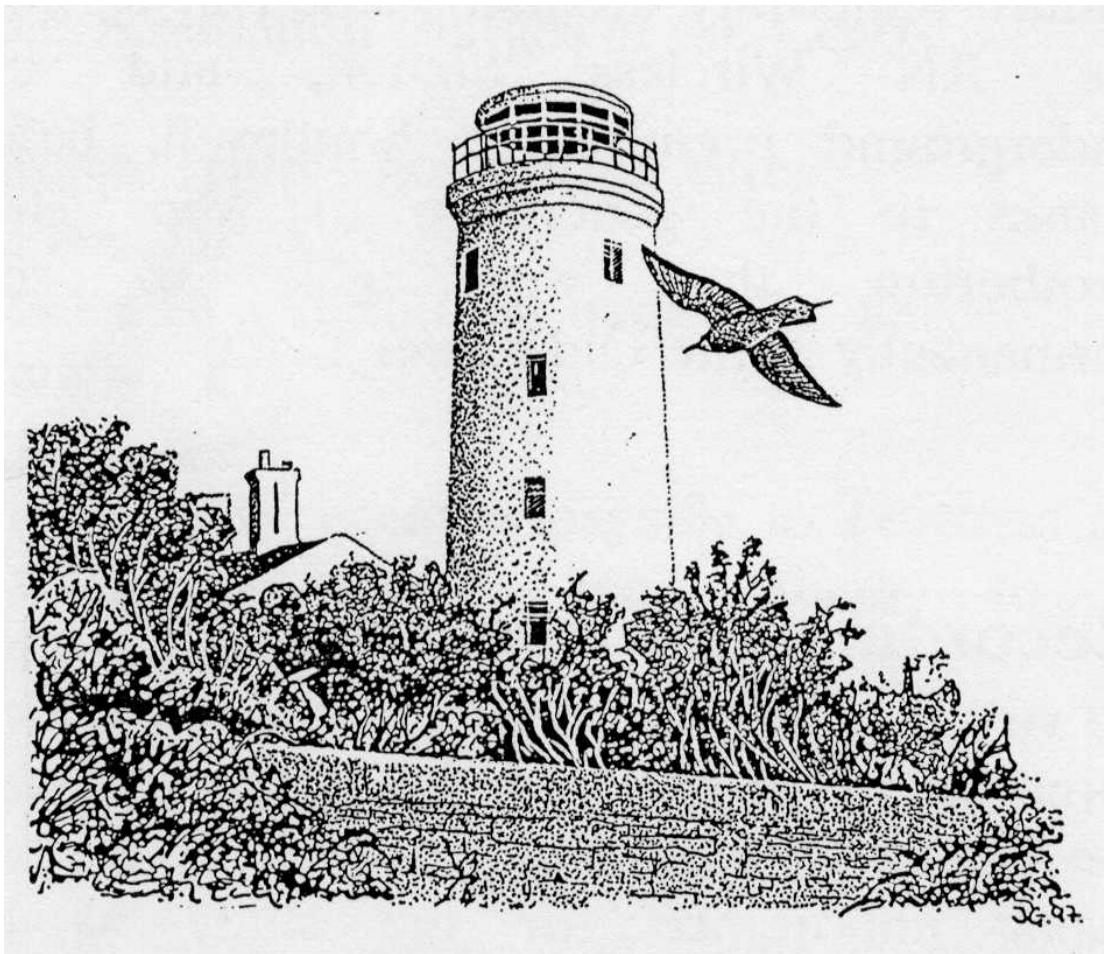
Administration. Accommodation will be at Campbeltown Airfield (the old RAF Machrihanish site). The site is under “Care & Maintenance”, but Defence Estates has agreed to open bedrooms, lounge and the kitchen freezers for food storage. Cooking will be in the Defence Estates staff kitchen. Personal contributions should be under £100.

Transport. RAF Wyton PSI minibus.

Conclusion. Ex Kintyre 09 promises to be another excellent field trip and is intended to make a further worthwhile contribution to the new national atlas. If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible.

## RAFOS AT PORTLAND 2008

*By Ken Earnshaw*



The annual gathering at the Portland Bill Observatory commenced pm Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct in bright, fresh, windy conditions and with much merriment in meeting up with old friends. A Merlin around the Obs and Mediterranean and Caspian Gulls at Radipole were highlights of the afternoon.

After an excellent evening meal provided by Val, John Stuart-Smith gave a presentation of a visit, with Fran, to Andalucia in Southern Spain with some stunning views of its birds and environs. And then!! Alex Smith gave a chaotic, rambling, funny and enjoyable tour of his extended family, etc.

Saturday morning dawned with thick cloud, a strong south-westerly wind but dry, and with expectations of good birding. However things remained fairly quiet at the Bill so several of the group went to Radipole and Lodmoor. A Hooded Merganser had arrived at Radipole some months earlier in juvenile plumage but was now particularly striking in its first year male plumage and was much appreciated by those who saw it.

The rain arrived around lunch-time and from the Obs a sea-bird passage was seen to commence which for several hours was exhilarating. Good close views of Gannets, Great and Arctic Skuas, Sabine's Gull and of Manx, Balearic, Sooty and Cory's

Shearwater were had from the shelter of the huts along the cliff edge. Specific plumage details were clearly visible particularly in respect of the Shearwaters.



Sabine's Gull about to have its day spoilt by Arctic Skuas

Sad instances were noted of two Manx Shearwaters being mugged by a party of juvenile Herring Gulls with both being killed. Of the passerines a few Wheatears and singles of Goldcrest and Firecrest were present. Migration particularly of Pied/White Wagtails and of Meadow Pipits was recorded at the Bill.

Several of the group had visited Madagascar within the past 12 months so, after more feasting, a presentation of the birds and lemurs of this fascinating island was given courtesy of a well presented DVD sent to Mike Rogers by Don Doolittle in the USA who was with Mike on his visit to that island in 2007. Many cries of "we saw that too" and "we didn't see that one, where was it" were heard from those who had been there recently.

Prior to this, an exercise in attributing bird names to all those present at the table was suggested by John Towers and proved to be very funny to most, but perhaps not to all. A list of attendees plus the bird names attributed to them is at the end of article. If you know the people try and match names to species.

There were strong westerly winds and heavy rain throughout Saturday night and into Sunday morning. Unsurprisingly few if any ventured out. By mid-morning about half of

the complement had departed for home and at around 11 am the weather dramatically changed. The wind eased, the rain stopped and the sun appeared. Huge rollers were pounding the shore near the Obs giving spectacular seascapes. Great Skuas were still passing in some numbers along with the occasional Manx Shearwater. But it was the appearance of a single Barn, Short-eared and Little Owls plus a juvenile Peregrine just to the north-east of the Obs, and of eight adult Mediterranean Gulls passing close inshore, particularly delighted those remaining.

Appreciation was expressed by all of us to Val for her continued culinary delights, to Anne and Dave for the organisation of the weekend and to warden Martin Cade who hosted us and provided the facilities for another most memorable weekend.

The complement:

Dave and Anne Bodley

Val Kersley

Jan and Dick Knight

Daphne and Dick Yates

Pam Rees

Glynis and Ian Drake

Fran and John Stuart-Smith

Evangeline and Ian Mackenzie

Karen Sims and John Towers

Bill Francis

Mike Rogers

Sally and Ken Earnshaw

And last but not least Alex Smith

Pete and Jean Bean and Peter and Jenny Gray joined us for the Saturday and David Tattersfield and Liz Mallinson joined us for the Sunday

Study the names above and try to attribute the bird names. NB. This list is not in any particular order:

Great Bustard

Honey Buzzard

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Bearded Tit

Great Tit

Bearded Vulture

Secretary Bird

Hummingbird

Bald Ibis

Long-eared Owl

White Stork

Blue Rock Thrush

Ovenbird

Cuckoo

Sea Eagle

Harpy Eagle

Takapu

Sora Rail

Chickadee

Robin

Spectacled Warbler

**List of birds recorded:** Ken provided a full list of all the species recorded but I haven't included it to save space. If anyone wants it please drop me an e-mail and I will send it to you. Ed

## **LITTLE MARLOW GRAVEL PITS**

By Ken Earnshaw

The Sunday morning field meeting on the 16 November, following on from the AGM at RAF High Wycombe, was initially intended to be held at Chinnor Hill but was changed, at Daryl Hamley's suggestion, in favour of the Little Marlow Gravel Pits. This site is adjacent to the River Thames and is possibly the best birding location in South Bucks. It has boasted a number of uncommon and rare species in recent years. The main lake there attracts large numbers of ducks, geese, swans, herons, etc, and has a sizeable gull roost. The surrounds of the lake have extensive trees and hedges, which hold a wide range of passerines.

Some 15 participants met in the car park at 0930 and we arrived back there at 1200 after having circumnavigated the lake, enjoyed each other's company and seen a good range of species including Grey Wagtail, Kingfisher, Ruddy Shelduck, Red Kite and Buzzard. Flocks of Siskin and Goldfinch were overhead in the trees and clear views were had of them through the telescopes. These and the Fieldfares and Redwings were of particular interest to the group. A couple of Ring-necked Parakeets also put in a noisy appearance. This species appears to be slowly spreading out from their main population centre, which I understand is around the West London area.



Redwing and Fieldfare

The gull roost was scrutinised but nothing special was noted. Similarly the rafts of ducks were checked and although good close views were had, nothing of particular significance was seen apart from a questionable female Tufted Duck showing some characters of Scaup.

I think it is fair to say that all of us enjoyed the good views of the birds there and appreciated the site as a whole. The weather was reasonably kind and the rain held off until we were back at the car park.

Our thanks to Daryl for introducing us to the gravel pits and for the success of the visit.

## Participants:

AVM Martin Routledge – RAFOS President

Daryl Hamley

Sally Douglas - Bucks Bird Club

John Stewart-Smith

Fran Eggby

Catherine Sweeney - Fran's sister

Karen Sims

John Towers

Richard and Jan Knight

Pam Rees

Ian and Evangeline Mackenzie

## Sally and Ken Earnshaw

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

# A LAY-BY ON THE A41 ETC

By Ken Earnshaw

A large expanse of grassland on the Berryfields road just to the west of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, is designated for housing or business development. In the last few days it has played host to a female Hen Harrier, several Short-eared and Barn Owls, Merlin, Red Kites and numerous Kestrels and Buzzards.

Naturally this has attracted the local birding community and so, late afternoon on 7 Nov 2008, Sally and I joined some 35 others in a lay-by on the A41 adjacent to the fields. Very close views of the harrier and the owls hunting over the fields in bright, clear conditions were much appreciated by the birders.

There must be a considerable population of mice and voles in the fields to sustain these visitors. I was told that for some years now this area has lain fallow and generally undisturbed. I wonder how much longer will this site remain as it is?

Earlier in the afternoon about a half-mile from the lay-by down the Berryfields road, three Ravens were feeding on a carcass, probably of a Roe deer, along with crows and magpies. Great chunks of red meat could be seen being torn from the carcass by the ravens as testament to their strength. One raven was seen to catch a crow, turn it onto its back and then peck at its body. The raven appeared to eat parts of the crow while the crow's wings were still flapping and its feet were clawing at the air. The crow was not seen to recover.

A similar incident occurred about 15 minutes later. Sally was not impressed and could not continue watching. We called back the next afternoon but the carcass had been stripped bare and with no Ravens present.

I understand that this killing of crows by ravens is quite unusual behaviour.



Ravens eating a Roe Deer



Raven dismembering a Crow

## **MADAGASCAR MARATHON**

*By Ann Bodley*

It was with considerable trepidation that we read the detailed itinerary for our forthcoming trip to Madagascar. Madagascar looks a smallish island alongside the continent of Africa but with the aid of a detailed map of the country we realised that huge distances were involved and travel involved at least 5 internal flights and four long drives on roads which we did not expect to come up to motorway standard! And there were rather a lot of one-night stands in the programme; this looked set to be an exhausting 'holiday'.

However, we were committed, so deciding that this would be "the adventure of a lifetime", we left home at 0530 on 3 Sep 08 to fly Easyjet, with two others members of the party, Al Jordan and Bernie Priaulx, to Paris, Charles de Gaulle airport, where we expected to meet the rest of the group. Success! The Welsh contingent arrived with our intrepid leader Pete Tithcott sitting on a luggage trolley waving his crutches around to the imminent danger of all fellow passengers. Pete had damaged his Achilles tendon a couple of weeks before departure and it was touch and go whether he would be allowed to travel, but there he was, leg in plaster from toe to knee and with strict instructions not to put any weight on the foot. In this respect our Malagasy tour company came up trumps providing a wheelchair at all our destinations; though not all the terrain was suitable for this mode of travel!

As we settled down for a snack lunch the remaining four members of the party turned up; Dick and Daphne Yates and Daphne's brother, John, and his wife, Sally. They had sensibly flown to Paris the night before and had a good long sleep in a comfortable hotel, before embarking on the 14 hour flight to Antananarivo, as a result, they looked quite fresh compared to the rest of us.

We started to make our way to the check-in desk for the Air Madagascar (hereinafter known as MADAIR) flight only to find our way barred. Aha! A security alert, guessed the RAFOS contingent; quite correct, and as we watched the armed guards patrolling outside a muffled explosion was heard. Someone's luggage gone for a burton!! Eventually the all clear was given and we joined the long and tedious queue that wound around the area in front of the few desks open and it became apparent that the aircraft would be full and there was no chance of stretching out on vacant seats. More waiting, but finally the aircraft left at 1630 and we landed at Antananarivo at 0400 after an 0300 breakfast.

As soon as we had cleared customs we were met our guide, Rija who was to travel with us for the entire 3 weeks and what an asset he proved to be – excellent English, very knowledgeable about birds and other wildlife, always calm and smiling, and totally unflappable throughout. But first we had to endure the usual nightmare of fighting off the horde of porters dying to take our luggage, and then it was obtaining a visa and changing money. The local currency was Ariaries – approximately 2,900Ar to the £, so everyone came away clutching huge wads of notes. We had a quick coffee and then spent the hour before our next flight bird watching around the terminal buildings and on the nearby paddy fields, where we saw our first Dimorphic Egrets with other Herons and Egrets. On the terminal roof were a couple of Common Mynah and a flock of Madagascar Bee-eaters perched on a distant pylon.



Madagascar Wagtail

*Photo: Dick Yates*

A Madagascar Wagtail, splendidly marked, was feeding on a grassy area nearby and Red Fody skulked in the evergreen trees opposite. So many of the birds we saw looked just like their African or European counterparts, but being separated from the mainland for so many thousands of years had evolved slightly differently and were considered endemics with the prefix Madagascar, commonly known as Mad.



Madagascar Red Fody (pronounced Foody)

Eventually it was time to board the plane again, for our third flight in 36 hours, to the town of Maroantsetra up in the north east of the island. This was followed by a half hour drive in beat-up old taxis along dusty, rutted tracks until at last we reached the hotel where we could relax for a few hours before setting off for an afternoon bird watch in the nearby woods. The hotel was situated on the shores of a lagoon and beyond was the sea, and Moorhen and Mad Kingfisher had already shown themselves in the reed-lined lagoon. The nearby secondary woodland was busy with locals and was obviously badly

degraded so we had no great expectations, but we did see Mad Turtle Dove, Mad Coucal and Kestrel, Frances's Sparrowhawk and the Crested Drongo, a pretty ubiquitous bird. Night time brought Mad Nightjars calling outside our huts, and at last a welcome comfy bed.

Next Morning, 5 Sep, we packed just what we thought we would need for the next couple of days and set off at 7am down to the harbour in Maroansetra to board three boats for the hour and 30 minute ride across the bay to Masoala Rainforest Reserve and Arrol Lodge, a glorified bush camp which was to be our home.



The Bodleys on board

Photo: Dick Yates

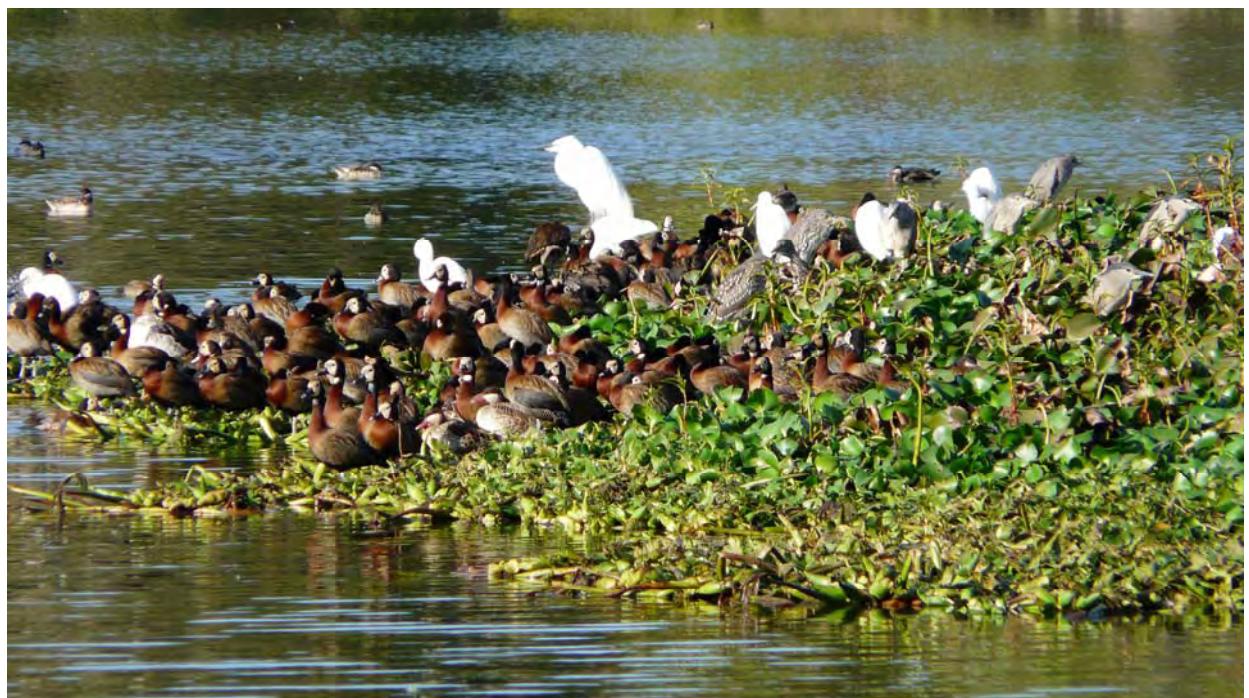
There was no jetty where we made landfall, so it was shoes off, roll up trousers and wade ashore. There followed a 5 hour walk up and down slippery slopes through the forest in intermittent rain, finally arriving at our base at 2:30pm for a welcome lunch. The accommodation was in thatched roofed wooden huts, basic but adequate, with the 'facilities' 30 yards away across wet, squelchy grass! About 3:30 we set out for another walk in similar conditions to the morning and lasting until after dark. This brought us several new birds, such as Mad Green Pigeon, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Mad Cuckoo-shrike, various Greenbul and our first Vangas. Madagascar has numerous endemics, including whole families such as the Vangas, Ground Rollers and Asities. The Vangas have a wide variety of bill shapes and sizes which reflect specific evolutionary adaptations and one of the specialities of this rain forest reserve was the Helmet Vanga, with its massive blue bill, and it showed itself splendidly several times, so no one missed out - a truly stunning bird.

Our tally of birds gradually mounted over the two and a half days in Masoala and great was the joy of those who saw Bernier's Vanga, one of the rarer species which even Rija had never seen. Mind you, it was very hard work - fording streams, tottering along narrow muddy paths and planks through paddy fields, scrambling up and down steep slopes 'off piste' trying to keep dry as the rain forest lived up to its name. Our tally of Lemurs and Chameleons was becoming quite respectable too, thanks to the efforts of

the local guides. The former rejoiced in names like the Weasel Sportive Lemur, Eastern Grey-bamboo Lemur, Brown Mouse Lemur, while the latter could only be identified in Latin! All came in a great variety of sizes. It was with some regret that we left Masoala but we were all looking forward to a hot shower, clean clothes and some warm sun to dry out everything we had taken with us.

7 Sep, and after the uneventful early morning boat trip, we were back at our comfortable hotel in Maroantsetra where the area around our huts began to look like a gypsy encampment, with clothes spread out on the grass, over the bushes and along the balcony rails. Some of us including Pete made a bee-line for the pool. With his plastic waterproof stocking, which became known as his 'outsize condom', over his plaster cast, he lay down in the water. What he hadn't allowed for was the air inside the 'outsize condom', which, acting like a balloon, caused him to turn turtle and not be able to right himself. Fortunately, Bernie was to hand to turn him right-side up and drag him to the edge. Thereafter we kept a very close eye on his antics in and around swimming pools! In the afternoon we had a short walk along the beach towards the mouth of the river where we saw a few waders but nothing of any great note.

8 Sep. Today we flew back to Antananarivo, hereinafter called by its local name Tana, to overnight before the next leg of our journey. Nothing is easy in Madagascar, especially flights with MADAIR, and this one involved an intermediate landing at Toamasina, a small town on the east coast. The place is unremarkable except that it lays claim to one of the few colonies of House Sparrows on Madagascar and we got ours at the airport. We arrived at our hotel in time for lunch, and in the afternoon we visited Tsarasaotra Park, a local wetland reserve, in the capital which teemed with herons and egrets, White-headed Whistling Duck, Knob-billed Duck and a Mad Swamp Warbler. It was quite level going so wheelchair Pete was able to share our enjoyment.



White-headed Whistling Ducks, Dimorphic Egrets and Night Herons

*Photo: Dave Bodley*

9 Sep. The 150km road journey to Perinet was to take all morning and having seen the early morning traffic in Tana we could see why, it was unbelievable. Once out of town the road was narrow and twisty with many heavy lorries, as we wound our way slowly

up and over a 1000m pass. At last we arrived at the small town of Andasibe and our accommodation at the Vakona Forest Lodge; and what a contrast it was to the bush camp at Arrol Lodge. This was luxury, with a glassed-in dining room on stilts over a lake and everyone had their own well-appointed chalet.



Andasibe Town



Vakona Lodge

*Photos: John Wilks*

The only snag for Peg-leg-Pete was the long flight of steps to reach them! After a good lunch we set out for Perinet rainforest reserve at 3:30pm, only to discover that, by government edict, the reserve now closed at 4pm and we were not allowed in. For a while we birded along the road and had good views of Mad White-eye, Souimanga Sunbird, Red-tailed, White-headed, Chabert's and Blue Vanga; and we then returned to the lodge for an excellent meal and a sleep.

10 Sep. Apart from Perinet, the other mid-altitude reserve in the area is Mantadia, about an hours drive away along a very rough dirt road, and in order to be there at dawn, we had to breakfast at 5am and leave at 5:30. At Mantadia the target bird was Scaly Ground Roller but in spite of much effort on the part of the guides we had no success. However, we did see Mad Little Grebe, Mad Magpie Robin, Mad Paradise Flycatcher and Nelcourvi Weaver; and we also saw more lemurs by dint of scaling steep slopes again, Red-bellied and White-fronted high up amongst the topmost branches.

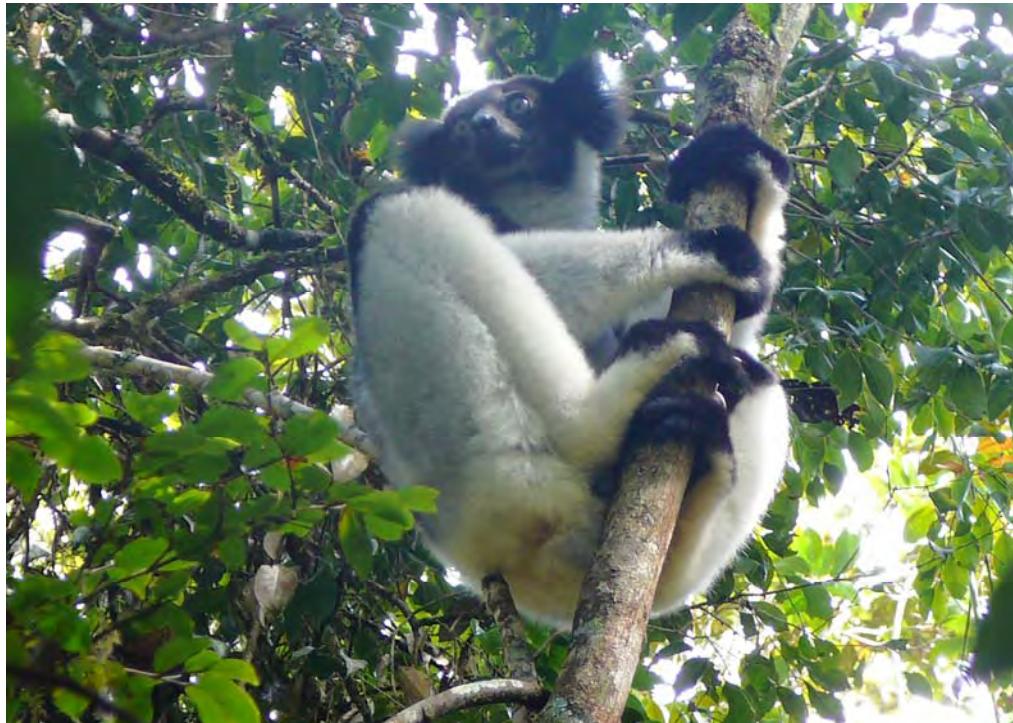
Lemur watching was much easier that afternoon when we went by canoe across a small moat to Lemur Island – a refuge for rescued lemurs set up by the hotel owner. In no time cameras were out to record Black and White Ruffed Lemurs draped around the necks of most members of the group. Although habituated to humans, these lemurs lead a fairly natural life on the island and looked well-fed – bananas provided by the staff for the visitors to hand



Diadem Sifaka    Photo: Dick Yates  
out being the mainstay. Some lemurs are also breeding on the island. It was a delight to see the most beautiful of the lemurs, the Diadem Sifaka at such close quarters. We

then went for a short walk round the island and with the help of a tape we managed to get fleeting glimpses of a Mad Flufftail and a Mad Rail on the far side of the island.

The next morning, 11<sup>th</sup> Sep, we made our visit to Perinet Reserve. Here we got good views of Mad Blue Pigeon, Mad Scops Owl, White-throated Rail, Velvet Asiti, Tylas and some other more familiar rain-forest birds. But one of the more memorable moments was the unearthly sound of a group of Indri howling in the distance. These are the largest of the lemurs and are endangered with only 2 fairly small populations left in existence. For many years they were hunted by the locals who think that they bring bad luck, and their cries are almost enough to make this seem believable. However, there is now renewed hope for their survival as the local people realise the 'tourist dollars' that are to be made from them.



Indri

*Photo: John Wilks*

The afternoon session was a bus ride, with frequent stops to get out and walk, back along the road towards Mantadia where we found Red-fronted and Blue Coua, Spectacled Greenbul and some warblers. We also had a very successful hunt for the Madagascar Rail which was efficiently flushed out by our guides.

12<sup>th</sup> Sep and the manic birders made a no-breakfast 5am start for another visit to Mantadia for Ground Rollers while the more relaxed among us opted for a 7am breakfast and a relaxing morning.

*Ed. This where I but in because I was one of those manic birders.*

We arrived at Mantadia just as it got light and set off into the forest. The target was again Scaly Ground Roller and after about an hours searching we finally caught up with one. It was a pretty hard slog to find it but well worth it. Other good birds were Crossley's Babbler, Cryptic Warbler, Dark Newtonia, Forest Fody and Rand's Warbler.

The late breakfasters spent some time watching the Mascarene Martins swooping around the grounds of the hotel and building their nests under the eaves of many of the chalets. Some people swam and some walked, while we noted a flock of Mad

Mannikins in the hotel garden before taking a stroll up the dirt road towards the reserve and delighting in another island refuge with a number of Ring-tailed Lemurs standing on the shore looking wistfully across to us. Alas, no canoes to get across to them.

After lunch we set out for Tana, another 5½ hour bus journey, the last two spent crossing the city, where the evening rush hour traffic, if anything worse than the morning, again clogged the roads. Back at the hotel we said goodbye to Henri our driver, as the next stage was a flight to Tulear in the south west corner of the island, where we would be met by a new bus and driver, who had left two days earlier to get there in time.

13<sup>th</sup> Sep. As the flight did not depart until mid-afternoon, we had a tour of downtown Tana and a visit to the Botanical Garden which had a small zoo where we saw the Aye Aye, a nocturnal lemur, along with a few other endemic animals such as the Fossa.

A good lunch at the airport was followed by a long wait in the departure lounge as the plane was over an hour late, apparently due to a casevac, as an ambulance met the plane and a stretcher was unloaded. When we finally boarded, the plane was full and amongst the passengers a full 15+ stone French rugby team and of course a number of tourists. The combined weight of the passengers plus their bags was too much and we had to depart without any luggage at all. However, on arrival in Tulear the new bus was there to meet us and we drove 25km on a sandy road to arrive just before dusk at Les Dunes Hotel at Ifaty, a pleasant collection of chalets in lovely gardens right on the coast. This would be home for the next 2 nights.

0500 14 Sep, and after a quick coffee we set out for Ifaty Spiny Forest Reserve, part of the endemic spiny forest which is a feature of that corner of the island. Thorny bushes, succulents and Baobab trees are the main vegetation and that habitat has a number of specialist birds adapted to the bone-dry environment. Our guides and “beaters” provided us with a succession of interesting birds, including Green-capped and Running Coua, mainly terrestrial; Crested Coua, mainly aerial; Subdesert Mesite, Long-tailed Ground Roller and Lafresnaye’s Vanga, a large black and white bird with a massive shrike-type bill.



Running Coua

Photo: Dave Bodley

By 9:15 it was beginning to warm up and we beat a retreat to the hotel for breakfast. While some of the party then departed for Tulear to collect the luggage, (*I was one and I'll tell you about it in a minute. Ed*) we sat on the stoep and enjoyed the Mad Magpie Robins which sat confidently close to our chalet and the flock of Grey-headed Lovebirds that foraged in the sandy grass down by the swimming pool. A few of the keener birders elected to go on the bus and leave about 5Km out and then walk back to the hotel along the beach. They totted up a number of waders but arrived parched and nearly overcome by the heat.

*An interlude with the luggage:*

The party that set off to recover the luggage had a couple of adventures en-route. Having dropped off the walkers our first mishap was getting the bus stuck in the sand going through one of the villages. Useful work with a shovel by the driver's mate and strenuous pushing by us and several villagers got us out, the villagers seemed to want some remuneration but they were out of luck. We continued, but not for long, in the very next village we got stuck again, this time more shovel work, pushing and a tow from a guy with a 4WD got us out. Peter remarked casually,

"Am I being uncharitable, or is it purely coincidence that the tourist busses only get stuck in the villages?"

Finally we got to Tulear and went to the airport, it was deserted. Rija found someone in the bowels of the building and gained the intelligence that our bags had indeed arrived but were no longer at the airport. They had been moved to a MadAir lock up somewhere in town for safety. We set off in pursuit and eventually tracked them down them in an unlikely looking building in a back street. Baggage retrieved we set off home and this time we got through all the sand traps without incident. An interesting four hours was had by all. *Back to you Anne:*

The morning walkers may have had a hot time of it but we all nearly suffered the same fate in the afternoon when we set out across the salt flats to find one of the rarest waders in the world, the Mad Plover.

Madagascar Plover  
Photo: Dave Bodley



Walking in a long line across the flats with no shade we found several Kittlitz's Plover and at last one Mad Plover, about the size and colouration of Kittlitz's but with a distinguishing broad black breast band. We were able to get close enough for good photos. The return walk provided us with a flock of noisy Sickle-billed Vangas.

15 Sep and another incredibly early start to beat the heat and taste the delights of the spiny forest at La Tableau to the South of Tulear. This time it was mostly thorny scrub and we were in pursuit of Red-shouldered Vanga, Verraux's Coua and Sub-desert Warbler. This involved trying to keep up with our guides who were running through the sandy scrub with few obviously defined paths. But we emerged victorious, if somewhat

scratched and rather hot and dirty! From there a short drive brought us to a damper area where we found Mad Sandgrouse, Mad Cisticola and Mad Black Swift. However, it was with some relief that we arrived at the Victory Hotel in Tulear for a 10:30 breakfast and, wonder of wonders, time to relax by the pool until lunch and an afternoon visit to Tulear Botanic Gardens where even Peg-leg Pete managed a guided tour of the plants and birds – two more ticks for the life listers, Mad Buttonquail and Sakalava Weaver which were festooning a large tree with their nests.

16 Sep - and bright and early (0500 again) we set off in the bus for the first stage of the long drive back to Tana. The destination for the day was Isalo National Park but first we stopped at a new reserve on the way, Zombitse National Park. This was our first experience of a new habitat, dry deciduous forest.

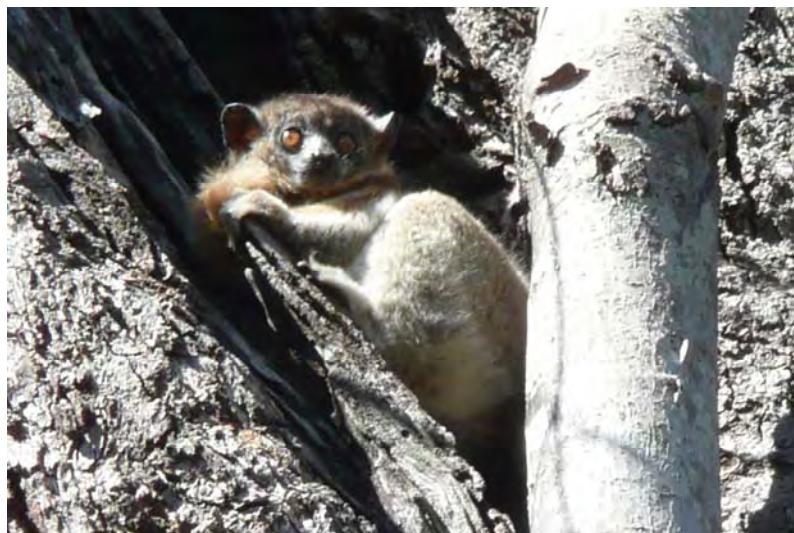
As usual a local guide was waiting and he was able to show us Giant and Coquerel's Couas and Appert's Greenbul, another very rare bird, shown in the bird book map as one tiny dot in that area. Hubbard's Sportive Lemur, a nocturnal species, peeped out at us from half way up a hollow tree and as we headed for our next stop, a troop of Verraux's Sifaka was spotted in the trees.

Appert's Greenbul



Hubbard's Sportive Lemur

*Photo: Dick Yates*



The landscape in the south started as vast areas of parched grassland where rearing cattle is the main occupation and we came across a small town in the middle of nowhere where a colourful market was in full swing and it was obvious the locals had walked miles to get there. The few small towns we passed through thronged with people in a wide variety of dress and a variety of facial features representing local tribes and their African or Far Eastern origins.

As we neared Isalo Park the landscape changed again with huge rocky outcrops rising out of the flat plains, the main geological feature of the Park, and we found our next hotel, Jardin du Roi, built in and around the rocks. Five star luxury, so of course we were only there for one night! However it was ideal habitat for Benson's or Forest Rock Thrush and a walk down to a small lake resulted in another good find, our only sighting of Mad Squacco Heron and Mad Partridge, feeding on grain put out by the hotel owner: they might have been destined for the pot!

17 Sep, and a leisurely start, for a change, and a short drive brought us to a local community where a small patch of woodland held a group of Ring-tailed Lemurs. They seemed used to people, but were not fed and certainly not tame enough to approach close to. For some it was their first view of these iconic mammals of Madagascar that appear on all the postcards.



Children queuing for the lunch leftovers

*Photo: John Wilks*

After a generous picnic lunch, the remains of which were much appreciated by the local children who kept a close eye on us throughout the meal, we continued on to our destination, the high altitude rain forest of Ranomafana National Park. Accommodation started off in huts half a mile up the road and up a long and steep set of steps: totally unsuitable for peg-leg Pete who was allocated a hut, with his carer, Bernie, just behind the Reception and dining area. By the end of the next day most of us had been moved to huts below Pete's. They had seen better days but were adequate and we could at last get some more laundry done during our 3-night stay.

Over the next 2 days, 18 & 19 Sep, new birds and mammals awaited us. The guides found Madagascar Wood-Rail, Pitta-like Ground Roller (what a mouthful, but an apt name), Collared Nightjar roosting, which we would never have found on our own as they were so well camouflaged and off the main path, White-throated Oxylobes, a skulking wren-like bird, Wedge-tailed and Green Jery, Common Sunbird Asity and Pollen's Vanga. For the mammals more scrambling up steep, slippery slopes was necessary to get good views of Red-fronted Brown Lemur, Milne-Edward's Sifaka, Eastern Sportive, Short-toothed Sportive, and Greater Bamboo Lemur. Photography was difficult with poor light, thick greenery and the number of people all trying to see the same things. Ranomafana is probably the best known of the National Parks and something of a honey pot for tourists, so it was not so surprising to discover that the park staff were feeding Ring-tailed Mongoose and Small Indian Civet for the benefit of visitors. Even the Brown Mouse Lemur was attracted to a certain tree by some sweet substance smeared on the trunk.



He was there after all!!

On the afternoon of the 19<sup>th</sup> we were taken to a marshy area surrounded by paddy fields to search for Emutail, but with no success. However the guides flushed a pair of Mad Snipe and Three-banded Plover was spotted on one of the paddy fields. On the walk back along the road we discovered Mad Cuckoo, which had just returned to the island after wintering in Africa.

A visit to a waterfall and river gorge brought joy to the botanists. A dripping wet wall was covered in pink orchids and a short search produced Sundews, an insectivorous plant, not unlike the sundews of our local peat moors here in Somerset. It was not really the season for orchids to be flowering in the wild but most of the hotel gardens had cultivated ones in pots or attached to trees, the most striking one was a handsome white bloom with a 12" spur which was said to be pollinated by a moth with a 12" tongue, the only thing able to reach the nectar at the bottom of the spur. By contrast, the walls at Vakona lodge had a wild orchid with a maximum height of 6" with minuscule white flowers all up the stem.

20 Sep and we needed an early start for the long drive back to the capital. It was interesting to see the different building styles and materials as we passed through different ethnic areas. Amazingly during the 10½ hours that we were on the road we only observed one accident where a minibus was lying upside down beside the road. This in spite of narrow roads, potholes, wheeled vehicles of all kinds, bicycles, carts, rickshaws and aged buses, though there didn't seem to be much public transport at all. We had our picnic lunch in some pine-woods, where Dick took a purler on the dry, slippery needles trying to reach the food. The rest of us spent our time trying not to slide down the slope on our bottoms while eating. And to end the day another battle to get through the traffic in the capital – we always seemed to arrive on the opposite side of town to our hotel.

21 Sep and yet another internal flight, this time to Mahajanga on the north-west coast.

The plan was that, on arrival, we would have a boat trip into the Betsiboka River Delta and along the mangrove covered islands to look for Mad Teal, Mad White Ibis and Humblot's Heron. Unfortunately, when we arrived the tide was falling and the boat was not able to get to our pick-up point; so we had to be content with an enormous sea food lunch of prawns, crayfish, crab, lobster and brochettes of barbecued fish – shame!!!. In spite of the heat we managed to do justice to the mountain of food and were grateful for a relaxing afternoon by the pool at the Sunny Hotel, because we were destined to make an early start the next morning for the dry deciduous forest at Ampijoroa Forest Camp.

22 Sep and with two minibuses it was possible for the eager birders (*me again. Ed*) to leave at 4am while the rest of us enjoyed a buffet breakfast at a civilised hour and a leisurely drive to our destination. We were lucky enough to get one of the refurbished huts with all new pine furniture and mod cons. There was however no electric light until they started the generator at dusk, and no hot water. *I'll butt in here and tell of the early birds morning. Ed.*

Our mini-bus arrived at Ampijoroa about 0600 and we immediately set off into the dry forest to try and find Schelgel's Asity and after about an hour we found a pair at the top of a tree, so the early morning get up had been worth it. The other new bird was White-throated Mesite and for me Mad Nightjar, really good views of a pair roosting. We also saw Great and Lesser Vasa Parrot and had a chance to compare them. We then set off in search of Van Dam's Vanga, our guide knew of a nest tree but although we waited for over an hour and heard them calling they didn't show up. *Back to you Anne.*



Madagascar Nightjar  
Photo: Dick Yates

Meanwhile, our group had a walk in the forest with our guide who showed us Coquerel's Coua, Western Scops Owl roosting and the Western Avahi or Woolly Lemur, together with a number of birds that we had seen before. We then took it in turns to be taken on a boat trip on the lake which brought yet more new species. Yellow-billed Stork, Humblot's Heron feeding on the shore, a pair of Mad Fish Eagles watching us from a tall tree, Mad Jacana picking its way daintily through the aquatic vegetation and a Darter. Also drawn out on the shore was also a large Crocodile, which seemed to take no notice of locals fishing on the edge of the water.

A night walk that evening produced very little other than a few chameleons and a Grey Mouse Lemur – the forest was very quiet with no insect or animal noises at all. Perhaps it was the heat and maybe they were aware of the forthcoming storm which came as a complete surprise to us with an enormous thunderclap, followed by lightning and heavy rain and for some time we were treated to a spectacular thunderstorm.



Madagascar Scops Owl – Grey Phase

Photo: Dave Bodley

23 Sep and the start of our long trek home. But first we had to get back to Mahajanga, so a 4am start with no water, breakfast by candlelight (generator not yet running), and the return drive to the Sunny hotel. The boat trip that we missed had been rearranged for today and very rewarding it was, with good views of Sacred Ibis, Lesser Flamingo, Bernier's Teal, Lesser Crested Tern and a number of waders. It was then lunch in the hotel and head off to the airport to find that our flight had been changed.



Lesser Flamingos on the Betsiboka sand banks

Photo: John Wilks

Originally, we were told that the flight back to Tana would be via the island of Nosy Be: as it turned out we went from Mahajanga to Nosy be, back to Mahajanga and then on to Tana. No one could explain why it was necessary for 13 passengers plus their luggage to make this unnecessary flight to Nosy Be and back to Mahajanga.

In Tana we changed terminals, said our farewells to Rija, and boarded the plane for Paris. This somewhat rushed day was followed by a nail-biting session when we got to Paris – were we going to make our connection to Bristol? The plane was already an hour late leaving, it burst a tire on landing and had to be towed to the service area, a bus took us on the long journey to the terminal where there was a lengthy queue for immigration and we had to wait ages to collect our luggage and then get to the adjacent terminal. Well, we made it with 4 minutes to spare but only because our luggage was first off. None of the other Bristolians made it nor those going north, though the Welsh contingent with a later flight were lucky.

On internal flights we mostly flew at a height where we could still see the land below and the deforestation and erosion were significant, together with the absence of roads of any size; hence the number of internal flights during our 3 weeks. Madagascar is suffering from rapid population growth and a shortage of land and the big question seems to be how much longer the designated areas of conservation will survive. There are already plans to put a pipeline through Perinet National Park. Ranomafana has already been logged once and is now only secondary rain forest. In some areas efforts are being made to plant fast growing eucalyptus for charcoal as that is the favoured fuel even in the capital, but eucalyptus needs a lot of water and is not suitable for all areas. For a country that has such incredible biodiversity and such a unique flora and fauna it would be a tragedy if more were to be lost and the precious areas further fragmented.

As we said good-bye to Rija he stressed how important tourists were to Madagascar. Not only do they bring in much needed funds but they show the powers-that-be how important the national Parks and Reserves are. So, fellow members of RAFOS, start saving now and give yourselves the adventure of a lifetime while doing your bit for conservation!



Zebu carts are just about the only form of transport for local people

*Photo: Dick Yates*

## SHARED MOMENTS OF THE 1950's AND 1960's

By Mike Blair

The quality of imagery in natural history publications and programmes provides an enriching, direct link with our emotions and understanding, an effect that is much more difficult to achieve with words. Strangely, there are many people who remain disconnected from such influences – at a superficial level this takes the form of a dismissive, ‘Oh, yes, very nice’ but much more worrying is aggressive hostility expressed as a reasonable position, ‘Attenborough filmed them – why do we need them any more?’ I suppose that I should be trying to convince such people that joined-up thinking is better than dogmatism<sup>1</sup>, but instead I’ve decided to wimp out and relate to a more understanding audience a few natural history experiences that I thought were momentous. These more or less are in chronological order, but I won’t let phrenology spoil a good story.

I must have been about seven years old, walking with my grandfather in the countryside. Most weeks we went for a walk to the harbour, to the seashore or for miles along tracks somewhere in Angus – in those days, the country bus service was extensive and reliable! We came upon a dell where the summer heat lingered in the motionless air. A burn<sup>2</sup> flowed between overhanging bushes bordered by briar patches, the uncut road verges rich with grass species<sup>3</sup> and the entrance to a field dotted with bare patches of reddish earth. Everywhere there were bees, beetles and dragonflies – the variety of large and colourful insects was amazing, but what I took for granted then but now think was amazing was that my grandfather could tell me about all of them. I remember vividly his absorption as he discussed each species, telling me how they fitted in to the scheme of things, particularly that they formed the main diet of certain birds. Now, my grandfather left school at the age of 12 to take up an apprenticeship as a carpenter, but he left as an educated person, capable of reading and writing fluently (he could spell, too), as did all his school friends<sup>4</sup>. He died when I was eight, but some of his teaching clearly rubbed off.

In those traffic-free days, I was off on my bike at every opportunity. Egg-collecting was a recognised way into learning about the natural world, but it was always in the context of never taking more than one from a nest and using gloves to avoid leaving a human scent. My collection was fairly small, as were those of my friends, but we never had the competitive urge to try and get the same as everyone else. Rather, we regarded our collections as complementary. However, even in those days, some species were viewed as pests, particularly Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus*, whose persistent attempts to nest on roofs in Arbroath provided an annual battleground on which the Town Council and private individuals had to fight. Even in those days, there were people who debated the reasons why gulls increasingly were attempting to nest in the town, and the subject appeared in letters to the local paper, the *Dundee Courier & Advertiser*, a mainstay of DC Thomson<sup>5</sup>. One sensible suggestion was that the main population that bred on the red sandstone cliffs, up to 300 feet high, north of Arbroath had increased since the end

<sup>1</sup> Of course, being dogmatic is the easy option – it saves time and effort thinking. However, inarticulacy and illiteracy, states that are not by any means limited to people with reading difficulties or of low intelligence, might just prevent any other option surfacing for consideration.

<sup>2</sup> Just in case any of you don’t know, a ‘burn’ is a stream or rill. Oh, you did know...

<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons for the retreat of Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* is the reduction in variety of grasses – long grasses provide cover and food for large insects and short grasses allow bare patches, where large insects lay eggs, to exist.

<sup>4</sup> A hundred miles from dogmatism, but that meant that when they did lay down the law, you could be sure that they could tie you in knots with closely-argued reasoning. Most of them had attended schools with only one or two teachers, where classes contained all ages.

<sup>5</sup> You will, of course, recognise this name as the publisher of the personality-forming *Dandy* and *Beano*.

of World War II because the town's modernising fishing fleet could venture more widely without risk of being sunk by enemy action<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, went the argument, if clutches on the cliffs were removed or destroyed early in the breeding season, then there would be less pressure for birds to nest in town. As it happened, the end result was that the disturbance in early spring over several years drove more gulls to nest in town, where it was safer! However, that's not where my tale is leading.

At many points along the cliffs towards the tiny fishing village of Auchmithie it was possible to get down vertiginous paths to the sea or to the few sheltered beaches that were havens for summer swimming and picnics, and on these descents there were many accessible gull nest sites, so it seemed a worthwhile approach. Naturally, many children sought to emulate the adults, particularly because wartime recipes that included gull eggs had been revived amid the furore, which meant potential additions to our pocket money! One day while cycling along the cliff path, I met a bunch of lads eager to collect gull eggs. They had come prepared, because their saddlebags were lined with rags to cushion their loot. They asked if I would like to join in, which I appreciated, but when I suggested that perhaps it was too late in the breeding season, eggs being too far developed, I was greeted with blank looks<sup>7</sup>. Still, they were good company, and so I wandered down the cliff path to the bottom<sup>8</sup>. They did find a few nests, but were driven off most of them by the very aggressive owners. One lad then shouted, "Look, a nest, just under the cliff", and I saw a bird sitting tight just where the grass slope ended. I said, "That's not a gull", to which the universal response was, "Och aye, it is so", and so I decided to watch developments from higher up the path. Sure enough, as the would-be robber got close, he was hit by a warm vomited stream of half-digested fish purée. A Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* had just demonstrated why it is not a gull. My altitude advantage meant that when the lads had got over their shock, I could safely assume the rôle of innocent bystander<sup>9</sup>.

My parents had moved from a rented flat in town to a mansion converted into three separate private houses – we had the former servants' quarters and I had the run of extensive grounds. I soon knew the birds that were resident and those that were migrants. In a slowly-decaying complex of four wooden buildings built as wartime storage units for the nearby RNAS HMS Condor, Blackbirds *Turdus merula* nested on head-high transverse 4x2 beams to which the wooden outer panelling was affixed; the birds got in through small holes in older panels, through ill-fitting doors and open trapdoors and any broken panes, as did Wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes*. Even Song Thrushes *T. philomelos* did not turn up the opportunity for nesting inside long-unoccupied buildings. In the hedge that was directly against the back and side of the complex, Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* was a late migrant breeder, but the first arrival was always a male Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (my grandfather had pointed out to me that the longer tail streamers belonged to the male) that would hang around and even start building a nest on the house beneath the gutter before I ever saw a female appear. Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* bred in our yew trees *Taxus baccata* and Siskin *Carduelis spinus* in an ivy mound that was six feet high but was planted in an open area. A long-

<sup>6</sup> Some 10 fishing boats from the town were lost at sea 1939-1948, either through traditional hazards or enemy attack; mines claimed some post-war.

<sup>7</sup> I guess these lads had only a hazy idea of the biology of the egg, for they cheerfully dismissed my objection.

<sup>8</sup> Returning to these sites many years later, I marvel at my childhood insouciance in taking, what to adult eyes are dangerous risks! Today, no way!

<sup>9</sup> It's not wise to be in the position of having imparted knowledge, which having been rejected and then found to be correct, and remaining in the vicinity; the rejector may wish to impart consequences. From further up the cliff, I could be on my bike quickly; they couldn't catch me before I had relayed the story back in town. In any case, the gooey lad would not be with the others – one whiff and they would want to be well way from him.

lost notebook of mine listed all the nests I found each year, egg-collecting having lost any appeal. In the grounds of the former mansion, roughly 200 yards square, there were over 100 nests annually. I quickly came to realise that the Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* would never be a candidate on the natural history version of Mastermind when it came to nesting; some nests, if the loosely dropped assemblages of twigs should be dignified by that term, could not actually hold any eggs – they just dropped straight through!<sup>10</sup> I spent hundreds of hours utterly fascinated by the insects, mammals, amphibians and birds that inhabited the grounds. It was around this time that I began to realise that some adults, pleasant people they may be, seemed to want to have a vested interest in putting preconceived views into a reinforced concrete box, where nothing can adjust them, for some would say to my mother, “Doesn’t he get lonely on his own?”

When I was fourteen, our next-door-neighbours decided to have a family holiday on the island of Jura; I was about half-way between the older children (whose father had been killed on the destroyer *HMS Glow-worm* that attempted to defend the carrier *HMS Glorious* from the *Scharnhorst* during the Norwegian campaign) and the younger children from the second marriage. Because I had become a member of that family by being in their house every day, I was asked along. In those days, we simply travelled by small removal van, the five children sitting on the blankets stacked in the back<sup>11</sup>. Our campsite was in a sheltered field nestled against the hill about quarter of a mile up the slope from the tiny harbour of Ardlussa; at the far end of the field was a mature mixed pine forest that was relatively open, but where many of the fallen trees had been left to rot naturally. It was a magical place, with spectacular mosses and an understorey of blueberries *Vaccinium myrtillus*<sup>12</sup>. My main interest on that holiday, guided by the skipper of the boat that had picked us and all our kit from Crinan, was to commandeer the rowing boat moored in the harbour, wedge a pole rod under the thwarts and row back and forward across the swaying kelp in the tiny bay, trolling the white feather lure; after 20 minutes I would have 6-8 pan-sized mackerel *Scomber scombrus* – they congregated in the channel between the harbour entrance and the rounded rocky island, but would wander in the clear harbour waters – one course for our lunch or dinner was safely in the bag.

Every other day, a party of us would undertake very long exploratory walks across the island, but our favourite journey was up to the northern extremity, where we could see the largest whirlpool in Europe, Corrievreckan, form as slack water came to an end. On calm days, there was a faint low-frequency rumble as the whirlpool reached maximum intensity, the Atlantic waters being constricted by the width of the channel to Scarba<sup>13</sup> and the geology of the sea-floor, which rises steeply from 110 fathoms to 2.5 fathoms in the middle. It was an eerie experience, for the noise essentially was directionless. The only indication of movement of a huge volume of water was the occasional spiral streaking of foam flecks, the actual depression, though large, rotating gently, seemingly harmless. Often, the depression is not visible, possibly due to a combination of the moon on the tides and the prevailing winds. One inhabitant unperturbed by the 12-knot current was the Atlantic grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*, whose curiosity at us scrambling over the rocks brought them almost into touching distance. The most direct route to

<sup>10</sup> Given that so many Woodpigeon nesting attempts fail (newly-hatched chicks stepped on, chicks fall out, prominent nests raided by predators such as stoats, cats and crows), this raises the question, ‘Why are there so many Woodpigeons?’ Answers in an e-mail to [www.youmustbejoking.com](http://www.youmustbejoking.com).

<sup>11</sup> Health & Safety would have a fit. En route, there was only one hill where we all had to get out so the van could reach the top.

<sup>12</sup> Clue.

<sup>13</sup> Scarba’s west slope is like a wedge, and is related to the underwater slope that the incoming water meets.

Corrievreckan from the campsite went through the pine forest, where the Highland cattle browsed, and on the day I decided to explore it, I met at the gate the postman in his little Morris van that had rubber mudguards<sup>14</sup>.

"You'll be waanting to watch out in that forest", he said.

"The Highland cattle aren't dangerous", I replied, slightly baffled, having happily walked among these huge gentle creatures.

"Ah", he said, "That wass not my meaning. Chust be careful on this road through the woods".

He smiled and drove off. Did he believe in forest spirits or Gaelic sprites? After an hour of exploration, I got back to the road. All was peaceful, but the quiet was abruptly punctuated by a very percussive, loud and deep noise. It was quickly followed by several more, accelerating into a rapid finale. On a fallen tree, an agitated huge black bird was glaring at me, its creamy-white bill drawing my gaze hypnotically. The trance was broken when it dropped down and began to strut towards me. I could see that the bird was nowhere near my size or weight, but somehow that part of the equation of rational analysis seemed outweighed by the threat of painful damage to my legs – in those days boys wore shorts. Although I had been fortunate to be able to pick up a substantial pine stick, I didn't feel at all confident that the first Capercaillie<sup>15</sup> *Tetrao urogallus* I had ever seen, a resplendent male, would be at all impressed as I backed steadily towards the gate a long quarter of a mile away. I was right – he wasn't. I was perhaps fortunate that he confined his aggression to short rushes towards me once I had opened up a gap. He didn't give up until the gate was within sprinting distance, and then the feathers subsided – how could a bird a little larger than a Black Grouse have seemed so dangerous? Next day, my postman friend roared with laughter.

"We may be slow and chentle in our speech in the islands, but we know what we're talking about".

Jura was also the place where I encountered the UK's largest creature. We had been rained out of our tent by a night-time downpour of tropical intensity and duration, if not temperature. Local friends helped us clean out the dust and cobwebs from a small empty cottage on Lussa Bay, about 2 miles south of our camping field, a tiny inlet fed by a small clear burn<sup>16</sup>. A fascinating find was a wooden home-made toy steamboat, which had a small leak and would sink satisfactorily in a rock pool<sup>17</sup>. The local geology, especially to the south, was of a series of on-edge rock layers; where these had encountered water, they were smoothed and curved, but those higher up the slope, though eroded through passing aeons<sup>18</sup>, formed an irregular series of steps enclosing trapped patches of soil whose main chemical constituents determined the plant community they contained. The steps, parallel to each other, were not parallel to the

<sup>14</sup> A contribution of the General Post Office (second-class post was always delivered with the first-class post if there was room in the bag) to road safety was to have rubber mudguards on their vans so that injuries to pedestrians would be reduced, yet another example of a 'good idea' from someone without any technical competence proving the power of assertion – injuries remained at the same level, but were suffered by slightly different areas of the body, mostly because the pedestrian was thrown in a different direction towards other traffic!

<sup>15</sup> Originally, the spelling was 'Capercaillie', the 'z' having the kind of unpredictable effect on pronunciation that it has in other Scots names. ('Menzies' was usually pronounced 'Ming-ees', hence 'Ming' Campbell, the Lib-Dem leader overthrown by unliberal and non-democratic ageists.) I have been reliably informed by a hopelessly unreliable source that the pronunciation had been 'Capperkail-ye', 'Capperkail-ye' or whatever intermediate version your tongue can manage. A fluency in Xhosa should help. PS. The letter 'v' in Scots names also can act as a wild card; eg Milngavie is pronounced 'Mulguy' & Balgavies 'Balgay'. PPS The post-person in Scotland nowadays is often Polish – no pronunciation advice there.

<sup>16</sup> Now a Scottish NT property!

<sup>17</sup> At least it's one step up from sinking boats on the bath!

<sup>18</sup> Sorry, Bishop Ussher (1581-1656) of Armagh was just a wishful thinker in a position of authority – our planet was not created on 23 October 4004BC – the truth is much less boring.

coast and steadily descended to the sea. The result was a patchwork of colours, each 'patch' being different, but all offering more protection from the elements than would an open hillside. Some of the patches contained pools, others dense arrangements of grasses, but some even had bushes and trees miniaturised by a natural bonsai process of westerly gales that would shred any plant sticking its 'head above the parapet'. Progress along this coast, slow enough when I had to stop to examine each patch, took time and care to negotiate the 'steps', because every so often, you had to regain altitude as the step you were traversing edged to the sea.

After one of those ascents, we noticed a movement in the sea below us. Rather unusually, we had some adults with us, including a local man who had been employed for a short time in the Irish post-war basking shark *Cetorhinus maximus* fishery. There were also a number of short-lived Scottish fisheries attempting to make a profit from its liver oil<sup>19</sup>. This long-lived species requires a large area through which it can roam fairly regularly, but when successful breeding adults were removed, its numbers crashed. What we could see 200 feet below us in a clear sea was a small, loose group of 20-foot-long basking sharks, lazing along southwards, mouths agape. Having been brainwashed by adventure stories and comics, we youngsters knew that these were fearsome beasts, and so it was a little deflating to be gently corrected by someone who had hunted them – they are totally harmless to humans, for they simply feed on whatever animal and vegetable matter enters their open mouths as they cruise along. These sharks, we were told, were probably not yet old enough to breed – they looked big enough to us. About two hours later, when the thought of food was insistent enough for us to turn round and traverse the steps in the other direction, one of us (I wish it had been me) called the attention of the adults to another beast in the water, approaching us along the coast from the north.

"Is that one big enough to breed?" our former shark-hunter was asked (again, not by me, I'm afraid).

There was no reply. I looked at him. His mouth was wide open, in cartoon-style amazement. I looked at the approaching fish. Its mouth was open, too, but not in amazement; it was feeding just like the basking sharks had, but it was the size of a bus.

"Hellss bellss and Heffens abuff! That's a bliddy big wan!" spluttered our former shark-hunter, followed by, "Sorry, Missus", in embarrassment to the senior lady adult, "I should not haff been swearing!" We youngsters now had two sources of delight – an adult had sworn in front of us<sup>20</sup> and we had an adult basking shark<sup>21</sup> to admire!

Then there was that magical time in 1960 when I had a Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* all to myself in Glen Doll. At weekends in late spring, I would come home after school, attach my little tent to my bike, and cycle inland. By 19:30 I would be at the entrance to one of the five<sup>22</sup> main Angus Glens, and would pitch my tent in a farmer's field – this was more straightforward than you might think – my father who worked in the Royal Bank of Scotland handled the accounts of many farmers across the county: "Och, so you're Fred Blair's laddie", was quite a passport, but I must admit it was the country

<sup>19</sup> Many years ago, I read Gavin Maxwell's *Harpoon at a Venture*, an account of how he had tried to set up a basking shark fishery in Scotland on Soay in the 1950s. It has recently been republished. I seem to remember an early paperback at 1/-. For anyone young enough to be familiar only with decimal currency, this was how 'one shilling' (= 5p) was written.

<sup>20</sup> Isn't it strange that so recently this was such a rare occurrence?

<sup>21</sup> Adults can be almost 40 feet long.

<sup>22</sup> From west to east, Isla, Prosen, Clova, Lethnot and Esk.

cooking of the farmer's wife that I coveted! After an early breakfast, I would head on up a glen. Glen Doll is quite a distance up Glen Clova, where a rugged bluff splits the river into two tributaries. This Saturday morning was still and sunny, and I reached Glen Doll at about ten o'clock. Nowadays, there is a car park, information boards and signposted trails, but then they assumed you were able to read and interpret a map<sup>23</sup>. I climbed up a hillside opposite the bluff and had reached about 500 feet above the river. Right on cue, as I scanned the cliffs, I saw movement, and a Golden Eagle began its day, having judged that the thermals were to its liking. On its first circuit, it came almost directly above me, judging correctly that I was harmless. I watched it for twenty spellbinding minutes until I could no longer make it out against the sky.

The scene shifts to the Middle East, to Aden in 1964. In my spare time I would get on board any aircraft going up-country or just flying around so that I could take photographs. One day while flying in a Belvedere<sup>24</sup> twin-rotor helicopter that had shuttled some troops a short distance from Khormaksar airfield, I was sitting in the doorway secured by a monkey-belt to the opposite side of the fuselage, endeavouring to get good pictures of the mountain, Shamsan, that lay south of the base, when we were diverted north of the runway to let a civil DC-6 land. One of the problems with photography from a turbine-powered aircraft is that the hot exhaust will distort your view. In the Belvedere's doorway, the area of view that would permit good photography was always changing as airspeed modified the exhaust plume. The hover was usually the worst, as hot gases were driven down past the doorway. On being cleared to return south of the runway, we were directed west, because the wind had changed, requiring a runway change. We flew over the enclosed salty shallows between the end of the runway and the causeway to Sheikh Othman. Here, several hundred Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* had assembled, a stunning and quite unexpected sight – I wonder if my slides have survived? I must look for them – I managed to sell quite a few copies of the best one.

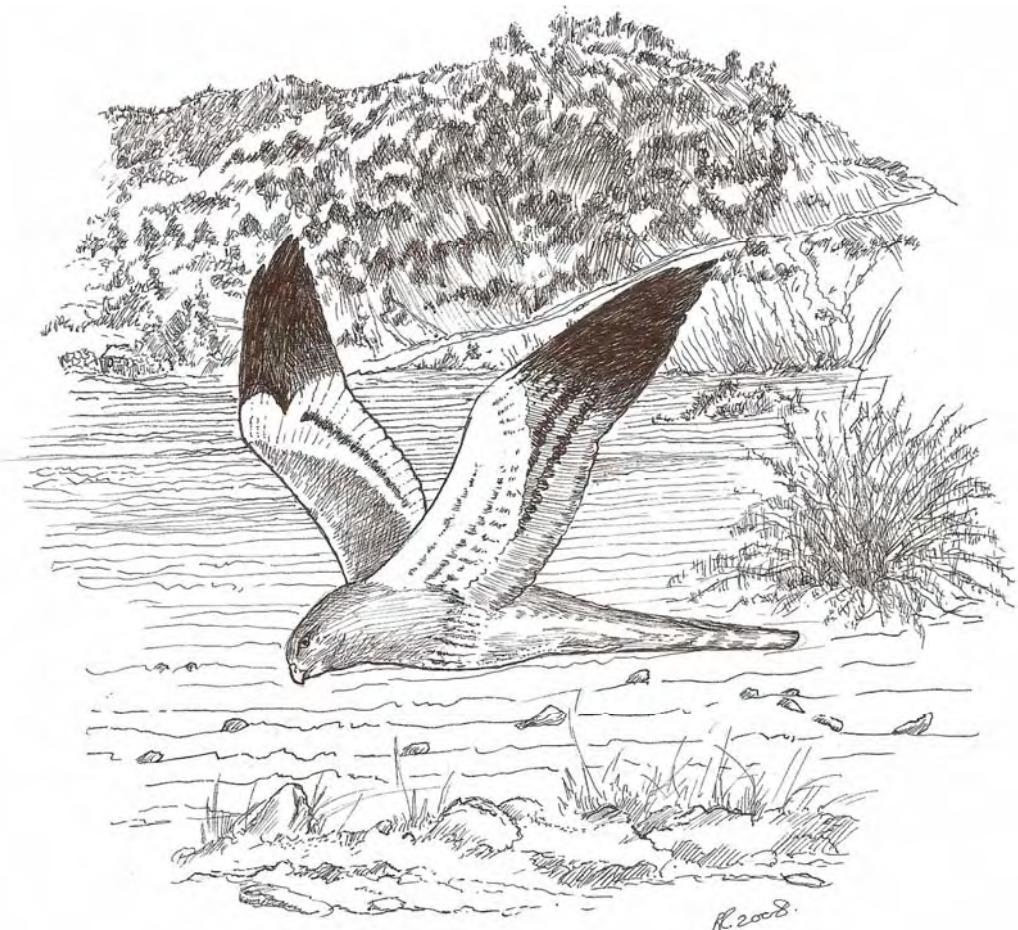
A little later that year, I took part in an Adventurous Training expedition in Tanganyika<sup>25</sup> to Mount Kilimanjaro, Kibo peak being at almost 19,500 feet. The last leg of this long walk is the steep ascent of the summit cone from the plain between the two summits, but without oxygen. I managed to within 200 feet of the crater rim, but could not recover quickly enough down at Kibo hut, the highest, at 15 500 feet, so had to descend the track to thicker air. Down at Horombo Hut, at 12,300 feet, below the ancient eroded peak of Mawenzi, where I recovered after a day's rest, and had the great good fortune to see something I thought must be an everyday experience. Since then, I've realised it was quite exceptional. I was sitting outside Horombo Hut in splendid weather when a large bird, long-winged and long-tailed, soared up from below the slope until it was well above me, but about quarter of a mile away. Suddenly, it dropped something. 'That's careless', I thought. It descended fairly rapidly, out of sight again down the slope, but soon appeared again, soaring. Through my binoculars, I could see it was carrying something. To my amazement, the bird was careless again! After several repetitions, it dawned on me that this behaviour was deliberate, but by this time I had realised that the 'prey' was in fact a sizable bone being dropped on to rocks to expose the marrow. I have never seen Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* since.

<sup>23</sup> My father had a set of the detailed, beautifully-produced, (lightweight) canvas-backed and waterproof pre-war 1 inch to 1 mile OS maps.

<sup>24</sup> The Belvedere was a very useful helicopter, but its engine-starting system was inherently dangerous. The Avpin gas on ignition turned the turbine to wind up the rotors, but the gas chamber's metal became brittle from the effects of the very high temperature gas ignition and could develop cracks through which unburnt gas could leak, leading to aircraft fires, which inevitably were fatal if a landing could not be made very quickly.

<sup>25</sup> A few months previously, 'coincidental' revolts had broken out in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika (now Tanzania, incorporating Zanzibar), which had kept us on tenterhooks about getting approval to travel – clearance came just the week before.

Like many RAF airfields, Lyneham was situated on a bluff above a valley. This is a useful feature for any aircraft near its stalling speed, for the pilot can drop the nose to gain airspeed. The valley, Pewsey Vale, was reached by descending Dauntsey Bank, a formidable prospect for drivers lacking good brakes. From Lyneham village, I could cycle down an even steeper road that dropped almost without bends directly down to the bottom of the Bank, and after a short distance on the main road cross the main GWR Paddington-Bristol<sup>26</sup> main line. Here, a marvellous lane led off north from a side road. Here, birds were abundant and wild plants and crops alike enjoyed the rich soil. I first became familiar with the behaviour of such birds as Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*, Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* in this unspoiled environment<sup>27</sup>, but my sharpest memory is of seeing from an ancient stone bridge my very first Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*, an iridescent jewel in summer sunlight – it was a totally reliable performer, for between spring and autumn, whenever I wanted to show anyone the species, there it was. ‘So’, I can hear you ask, ‘Can you take me there and show me this paradise?’ Well, yes and no. I can take you, but you might not survive the experience and you wouldn’t see anything that resembles my description, for now the M4 motorway goes slap bang through the middle – I know, because I’ve looked.



## Montague's Harrier

<sup>26</sup> This was always a stretch of line on which drivers could set their locomotives racing, a spectacular sight.

<sup>27</sup> OK, so in Scotland we had Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* and Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*, but southern species were new to me then!

**BRAZIL – DECEMBER 2007**  
**PART 1 - RIO STATE ATLANTIC RAINFOREST**  
**AND SERRA DOS TUCANOS**

*By Robin Springett*



## Introduction

Julia and I are travellers and birders, and quite what took us to Brazil in December 2007 I am not too sure. We had been to Trinidad and Tobago, so had some experience of Neo-tropical birds and we were keen to re-visit the area, and thus our musings settled on Brazil.

First we turned to our usual research sites, Birdingpal.org and Fat Birder; then friends picked up on Serra dos Tucanos at the Bird Fair, it is in the Rio State Atlantic rainforest, and after looking at their website, we decided to book 2 weeks with them. As we planned to go for a month, we needed something else and having decided to give the Amazon a miss this time it came down to Iguazu Falls or the Pantanal. The Pantanal seemed to us to be totally remote and off the wall; but Iguazu is also a tourist destination, and December would be high season, so the Pantanal self-selected. The Pantanal is about the size of France, so we then had to decide north or south? In the end this was decided for us. Braulio A Carlos, from the Pantanal Bird Club, not only replied to our email quickly, but offered us a week in the northern Pantanal and with a day in between, and a visit to the Emas National Park. All this would meet our dates and our budget and sounded very exciting. The story of our visit to the Pantanal and Emas National Park follows in Part 2.

We booked flights to Rio de Janeiro via Air France from Bristol. This allowed us to take the full baggage allowance from a regional airport at no extra cost. Internal flights within

Brazil proved more of a problem, as the airline web sites, although in English, would not accept a credit card from outside Brazil. We eventually used two specialist travel agents based in the USA to book internal flights and the hotel in Rio for our first week at Copacabana Beach.

### To Brazil and Rio

All the planning and booking of flights was begun in Feb 07 and completed by May/Jun, for travel in December. Our actual fly out date from Bristol was 30<sup>th</sup> Nov and we travelled overnight to Rio via Charles de Gaulle airport Paris and a more soulless place is hard to imagine. It was our first flight with Air France and they couldn't be faulted, both from Bristol and Paris; but we did have a 2 hour delay due to some clown driving some handling equipment into the Jumbo we were sitting on! However, once underway the flight was uneventful and we arrived at Rio International airport and took a taxi to our hotel. Easy so far! Rio is amazing, and Copacabana is great. We chilled out on the beach for a day, but the following day we went birding in the Botanic Gardens with Marise, a local birder we contacted through Birdingpal.org. Marise is a tour guide by profession and was most helpful; she explained the common birds, gave us advice on getting about by bus and taxi and on safety. She gave us the confidence to travel around, and made our stay in Rio more pleasant. We did down-town and the old part, and went on the tram which climbs up into the suburbs built on the surrounding hills. Each tram has an armed policeman riding shotgun; very reassuring! However, the tram is the best value visit in Rio.

### Serra dos Tucanos

On our fifth day we got a taxi back to the airport where we met up with another couple, Richard and Thelma, and waited for the transport to Serra dos Tucanos. We had expected a minibus but got an estate car; so we were crammed in like sardines with one suitcase on the roof; not much fun and not a very good start. It took almost 3 hours to get to the lodge due to accidents and traffic, and we were a little frazzled as the aircon wasn't working. Andy and Christina Foster, mine hosts, welcomed us and apologised for the transport. (It turns out that there is only one minibus at the lodge, and that had been on an airport run before we were due to be picked up. The car was the less than an ideal back up and we got a reduction on our final bar bill which seemed fair).



Serra dos Tucanos Lodge  
Photo Robin Springett

The lodge itself is well situated for a birding holiday, as it has extensive grounds that are contiguous with the Rio State Atlantic rainforest, an important biome with National, State and private reserves within easy daily distance. Andy Foster has selected a series of daily bird walks which cover the various habitats from lowland and wetland to the high peaks. These are all explained on Serra dos Tucanos website and I will only briefly describe them here.

It was then straight into lunch and over lunch, and in the afternoon, we met the other 6 birders with whom we would share the next 12 days. They had arrived that morning, and like us were finding their way round the lodge and watching the exciting birds visiting the feeders in the garden. They were a group of birders, who tried to get away somewhere each year, and for all except one, this was their first visit to both Brazil and the Serra dos Tucanos lodge. The old lodge building has been renovated to a high standard and Julia and I settled into a nice double room with en-suite facilities. We looked at our programme, which indicated that Andy would not be doing any guiding, which was surprising and a disappointment, given his reputation as a guide. Whilst we reflected on this we decided to take a dip in the pool, which is filled by spring water from the mountains and very refreshing! At dinner we were a bit surprised to find that neither of our hosts ate with us. This seemed to be an opportunity missed, as being able to interact with an acknowledged regional bird expert like Andy would have added to our enjoyment. The food was plain and without choice, but well cooked and plentiful. That evening we met our guide, Peter (Pete) Forrest and learnt about what to expect the next day. All birding trips would start at 0700, with breakfast at 0615, and the first day would consist of 2 excursions; the Theodoro Trail in the morning and Serra dos Tucanos after lunch.

**Theodoro Trail.** Next morning, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 10 of us, plus driver and guide, piled into the minibus at 0700 and set off for this trail, which is uphill and into the rain forest. It was a bit of a squash with all our gear, but it was not far. The trail is a disused railway/road cut off by road widening. It starts quite wide, but quickly becomes overgrown and narrow and I didn't envy the guide, Pete, who was trying to get all 10 of us on the birds; some people were taking video and most were operating at their own speed. It was definitely shakedown day! However, we all came to the conclusion that the trail was too narrow for one guide to cope with 10 birders; 2 guides with 5 per guide would have been much better. We benefited from the presence in the group of Newton George, a bird guide from Tobago, who was quickly onto the birds Pete had found, and for those of us who were struggling to get our eye in, he quickly got them into his scope! I recorded 37 species during this walk. In the afternoon we did the local trail around the lodge; bit of a waste of time with just 7 species, but all part of getting used to the forest. After dinner, we all got together with Pete for a call over. Whoops, we all seemed to have a different list; some people had downloaded one from the internet and we had just bought the Birds of Serra dos Tucanos, a small guide by Andy Foster and Ber van Perlo, which is relatively expensive, but fills a need. Suffice it to say that we had expected to be given a bird list as part of our stay at the lodge, and a day or so later we were, but we felt that this was another trick missed in helping us to enjoy our stay. Also worrying was the weather forecast for the next day.

**Three-toed Jacamar Excursion.** December 7<sup>th</sup> dawned a bit damp, but we went off on time with great expectation to see one of the rarities of this area. This was a full day outing, and we had a large box of food in the minibus to make us even more cramped. Our first stop caused problems immediately; we were looking for a White-tailed Hawk, but saw an all black bird, with no markings. Peter Swayne managed to get some good

video footage, and others got photos and these were to enliven our evening discussions for a few days. Also of note were very good views of a White Woodpecker family.



White Woodpecker

The weather held up, and we found a shady spot for lunch. In the afternoon, we got to the Three-toed Jacamar site, and had some very good sightings before the promised rain cut short our very exciting day, which had included our first sighting of howler monkeys.

**Requa Wetlands.** December 8<sup>th</sup> was a half day excursion to the wonderful Regua wetland, which together with an adjacent small hill covered in forest, is a private reserve, with lodge accommodation. We started in the forest, and immediately ran into the problem of trying to get 10 people onto a bird in very confined spaces; how much better this would have been with 5. Wow, not a lot of birds, but some great ones here, and well done Pete for finding them; Antbirds, AntShrikes and Antwren among them. We walked through the forest,

birding for about half of it, to a couple of lakes, newly recovered from farmland and birded there. By the time we were due to leave for lunch we had bagged 42 species, but didn't feel that we had exhausted the lake's possibilities despite Pete's hard work. It would have been better to have taken 5 into the forest, with 5 going round the lake, and then swapping over, but that would have taken 2 guides. Andy, where were you? The afternoon was free and we birded the garden hard getting another 21 species; some of the Tanagers and Hummers soon became like old friends!

Next day, 9<sup>th</sup> December, was a Sunday and we had a day off. We were not offered any other option and again this was disappointing, as the weather was forecast to be wonderful. Anyway, a little money from each of us persuaded the minibus driver (called Marion or something similar; nice guy, funny name) to take us back to Regua wetland for the morning; we were without a guide, but we had a great time and got 38 species.

**High Altitude Trail, Lower Section.** December 10<sup>th</sup> involved us going into the nearby Three Peaks Regional Park to Pico Caledonia. The trail is also known as Sao Lorenzo Trail and the weather was fabulous. We started with the Hooded Siskin, and it went on from there, slowly climbing the trail, to have lunch at the top. During lunch a Swallow-tailed Cotinga gave us some wonderful views and on the way down, Julia was quite overcome with close views of Burrowing Owls, and we eventually had to drag her away. Thirty-eight species, good views, beautiful weather, good company, an all-round fabulous day.

**Serra dos Orgaos National Park.** December 11<sup>th</sup> and a long drive up to the Serra dos Orgaos, Organ-pipe Mountains National Park, and as we climb into the minibus the name of the National Park is explained. Great slabs of mountain never troubled with an Ice Age, nor even frost, rise up from the greenery like the pipes on a giant church organ, all this against a backdrop which looks down to Rio and the sea in the distance.



Serra dos Orgaos, Organ-pipe Mountains National Park *Photo: Robin Springett*

The entrances to the National Park are on either side of the highway and about a half mile apart and we started at the lower and later went to the upper. A good day's birding and some good walking; the weather held up for the duration, and with wide paths, or roads, we all had a great time. Thirty five species of birds with mainly good views, although not everyone got onto the Streamcreeper, it was the bird of the day for us and a large Tegu Lizard made for an interesting and varied day.

**Cedae Trail.** 12<sup>th</sup> December and a half day on this trail which produced 19 species. Not a terribly exciting day, but Pete assured us that we got a few birds here that we wouldn't elsewhere, and a large tree full of dangling Crested Oropendola nests was worth the walk. We spotted a Smooth-billed Ani slipping out of one nest; apparently they are the cuckoo for the Oropendula! That night at call over, Julia and I had seen 210 species since our arrival in Brazil; not bad, but we would need a bit of luck to get up towards the 300; and our luck was about to run out.

**High Altitude Trail.** 13<sup>th</sup> December was to be our day up to the mountain tops, to the top of Pico Caledonia. We had seen the top a couple of times and with hindsight, the day we saw the top, we should have gone for it; but we were told that there were packed lunches and other meals and transport to consider, but for me there is no excuse not to be flexible.

We started off from the same point as on 10<sup>th</sup> December, the Sao Lorenzo Trail; the weather was very dodgy, and the altitude made it worse. But we kept on getting good birds, and the best, as the drizzle began, was the Black and Gold Cotinga. We had the most amazingly close views of males displaying and there were one or two females as well; we didn't even need bins they were so close! We also had good views of the Swallow-tailed Cotinga which we had seen briefly on the lower trail.

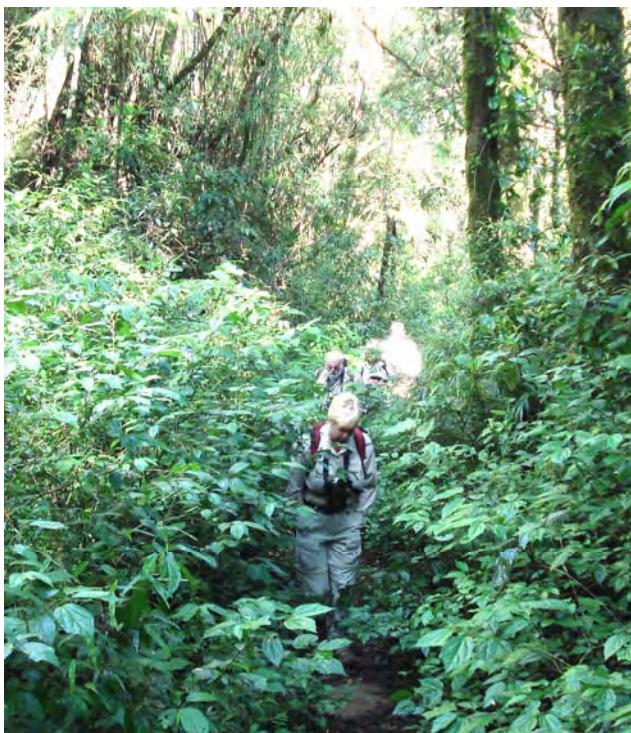
But then the rain started, like a heavy mist at first, but it soon turned to rain. The birding became impossible, not because the birds disappeared, far from it, but it proved impossible to get the bins to the eyes before the eyepieces filled with water! Pete called a halt, but one or two had gone further up the track, and we had to get them back. We had seen only 18 species, but all the new ones were altitude specialists, and we were all devastated at having to cut short our day.

It was here I made a really serious mistake; I didn't put my bins inside my waterproof. My Bausch & Lomb Elite are not gas filled and in the 20 or so minutes it took us to walk back to the minibus they got seriously wet, but the actual damage wasn't noticed until we got back to the lodge. It was then that I noticed the date; not that I am superstitious, but we had aborted our most exciting and anticipated bird walk and I had ruined my bins, with over 2 weeks to go of our trip. My binoculars were totally filled with water, which had got in through the focussing mechanism. We always travel on a birding trip with a couple of pairs of Leica Trinovid mini-bins as back up to theft etc, but not this time, as we were only allowed one bag and had decided to bring our small scope and tripod instead. Fortunately, Andy found me a pair of binoculars which kept me going until we left.

After lunch, we did the local Macae de Cima Trail down to a reservoir. For me this was a bit of a waste of time. The best bird was rather far off views of Channel-billed Toucan, but as we had seen this close up in the Rio Botanic Gardens, not really relevant. However, it was a pleasant walk mainly in sunshine, but soon after we piled into the minibus the rain arrived and back at the lodge, it was suggested that we might find the Potoo. Pete gave us time to get our waterproofs on and we slipped and slid up the orange forest path from the garden to the last seen roosting point of the Potoo and we were in luck! We were directed to look at a broken-off tree stump about 20 feet from the track and on top of it was the actual break, or was it? This piece of wood was slowly rising; it was stiffening up!! And there was an eye! The Potoo had seen us, it was moving ever so slowly from its normal "at ease" roosting position to "attention" with its bill pointing straight up. Pete identified it as the Long-tailed Potoo, which was nice for me as we had seen the Common Potoo on Trinidad, and we watched it quietly for a few minutes, the rain completely forgotten. Cameras clicked and whirred; then we quietly left this strange bird to its daytime roost. A little later, I took Julia up to the spot, and quietly we watched it. By then it had slumped back into its "at ease position". It did briefly open one eye a little and peer at us, but we were obviously not a threat and it remained relaxed. If I had to pick a best bird, it would be the Potoo.

The rain lasted all that night, and almost all of the next day. Our trip to the Bamboo Trail was off and it took a lot of negotiation with Andy and Pete to programme it for the Sunday. As guests, we couldn't understand the problem, but we eventually won. The lodge is not as comfortable a place as it should be when it is raining, as the two covered viewing areas are separated by a non-covered one. It compares unfavourably with Asa Wright on Trinidad for example, where it is possible to sit protected from the rain and watch the feeders and garden whilst keeping dry; also Asa Wright always has knowledgeable staff on hand to assist guests. At the lodge, if Pete is not around, then you are on your own, as Andy rarely interacted with guests and the local staff neither speak English nor interact with visitors. Thankfully, the rain cleared up towards evening, and we could look forward to our final outing on the morrow.

**Bamboo Trail.** Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December was dry and the hills and forest were covered in thick mist, water dripped from leaves but there was the hint of blue sky. We left at 0700 as usual, this being a very prompt group, and set off uphill to an area of summer homes for rich citizens of Rio. The trail begins as the Rua Edina Ribeiro, an unmetalled road between villas, characterised by the barking and snarling dogs belonging to the gardeners and watchmen that look after these holiday homes – a big stick and some stones are useful for this first part of the trail! Shortly after the house, where the road ends, an access track into the Tree Peaks Regional Park begins. This is characterised by bamboo, hence the name, and it was soaking, and hanging across the



trail making a very wet tunnel. The Bamboo Trail is good, and we got the most excellent views of the all white male Bare-throated Bellbird displaying and calling. This was another difficult and close trail, where at one point we had to take off boots and socks to ford a stream that was nearly waist deep from the earlier rain. Once again 10 birders with one guide was difficult; also it was a half day trail expanded into a full day, but the birding was good, and for those who missed the Streamcreeper in the Organ National Park, we saw not one, but four. At one point I stepped off the track to position a scope for better views of calling Bellbirds, to be told "don't move, there is a snake on your foot"! I froze and looked down to see a snake about 2 feet long slithering round my ankle and over my

right boot. Steve Cale the artist had issued the warning, and he was sketching the animal as it slid away! No harm done thankfully, and we later identified it from Steve's sketch as a juvenile Jacaraca Lancehead (*Bothrops jacaraca*) a fairly poisonous snake, which eats small rodents, not tall men!

## Summary

At that evening call over, Julia and I had seen 240 species since arriving in Brazil; most during our stay at the lodge and had a great time. Could it have been better? Certainly, but it was good, mainly due to the hard work of our guide Pete and the good company of the people we found ourselves with at the lodge. I had expected Andy to do some guiding and certainly a party of 10 is at the top end of what a guide on a trail can cope with. Some narrow trails should only be done with 5 or 6; a second guide is needed, and was expected from the information given to us by a friend who had visited earlier in the year. If Andy has stopped guiding, the situation will need a re-think. A second minibus would also help. At the end of the day, flexibility is called for, and clients should leave feeling that they had had the very best opportunity to see birds. The jewels are the high altitude trails; planning should be flexible enough to change with the weather, it is the Atlantic Rain Forest after all, and get some good weather forecasts, they must exist. We also would have liked the chance to spend a day birding at the coast. This was withdrawn from the offered programme recently due we were told to security worries; a way round this needs to be found. The catering was adequate; there was always lots of food, but more choice and imagination, both at meals and lunch packs over the 2 weeks would improve the experience no end. The endless tea and coffee at the lodge was wonderful, but to run out of tea bags for several days was poor. We did notice that the kitchen was used as a refuge for non-catering staff, especially in times of bad weather. This would be unacceptable in the EU, and should not be allowed here.

Finally, a word about the staff. We can't praise Pete enough; he was a good guide, tried very hard, got good birds and was the front man for the hosts, but he is not Andy's deputy and it wasn't clear to the guests just who was in charge, especially as Andy and Christina were away for a few days on business. The local staff cannot and do not

speak English, nor will they interact if you try halting Portuguese (with the exception of the driver, whom we have mentioned elsewhere); instead you will get a card telling you they don't speak English. All the clients are probably English speaking and clearly some staff training is called for. We did not see enough of our hosts; in fact when they were in residence they were practically invisible. They never ate with us, even on the one occasion when we had a barbecue, and Andy cooked. Is it too much to expect to be entertained and have the experience of the Atlantic forest enlivened by Andy, and to enjoy Christina's company some evenings. There is so much to learn about Neo-tropical birding in particular and Brazil in general. Finally, would Julia and I recommend Serra dos Tucanos? For sure; it delivers the birds, perhaps not as many as expected, but good birds, and it is not that expensive. However, we would caveat that recommendation with the comment that with a little thought it could be so much better. We were doubly blessed with the good birding companions we met there. But then, that can't be guaranteed!! Go, Brazil is brilliant!

Location: Serra dos Tucanos, Atlantic Rain Forest, South East Brazil  
[www.serradostucanos.com.br](http://www.serradostucanos.com.br)

Proprietors: Andy and Christina Foster

Resident Bird Guide: Pete Forrest

Guest List:

Julia & Robin Springett – birders and travel writers from UK

Thelma & Richard Banham – UK birders living in Spain

Steve Cale – wildlife artist from UK: [www.steve-cale-artist.co.uk](http://www.steve-cale-artist.co.uk)

Newton George – bird guide from Tobago:

[www.tka.co.uk/birds/trinidadandtobago/guides/newtongeorge.htm](http://www.tka.co.uk/birds/trinidadandtobago/guides/newtongeorge.htm)

Bernard Leveridge – intrepid photographer and birder from UK

Malcolm Rymer – professional wildlife cameraman from UK: [www.wildlifevideos.net](http://www.wildlifevideos.net)

Peter Swayne – amateur wildlife cameraman from UK

Rod Thorpe – birder and all round nice guy from UK

Guira Cuckoo



At Serra dos Tucanos

Ovenbird's Nest



Photos by Robin Springett

**BRAZIL DECEMBER 2007**  
**PART 2 - THE PANTANAL AND EMAS NATIONAL PARK**  
*By Robin Springett*

### To Cuiaba

We left Serra dos Tucanos for Rio airport straight after breakfast on Monday 17th December. My main worry was the state of my binoculars, which were still useless. I had been offered the loan of bins by one of the other guests at the lodge, but had emailed ahead to our guide in the Pantanal, Braulio A Carlos telling him of my predicament and asking him to loan me a pair of bins. I was pinning everything on this, but had not received a reply. The journey to the airport was uneventful, and once we had checked in, I 'phoned Braulio and he confirmed to me that he had a spare pair of bins – phew! We were flying TAM via Sao Paulo to Cuiaba. Getting onto the flight from Rio we were greeted at the aircraft door by a steward and someone wearing 4 rings and a cap; surely not the aircraft captain? The same thing happened at Sao Paulo, and my curiosity was sated by an announcement in English by the aircraft captain saying how much he enjoys seeing all the passengers boarding the flight! Doesn't he have things to do on the flight deck? Still, a nice touch, but can't see it happening in Europe.

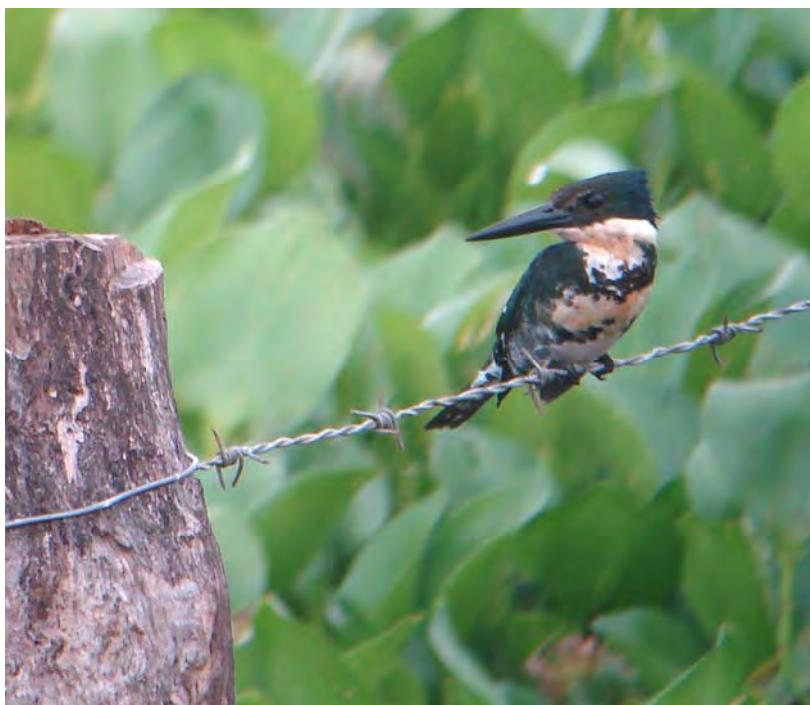
We were met at Cuiaba airport by Braulio and taken the short distance to our hotel, where we were left to check in and told what time we needed to be ready next day. Cuiaba is the fastest growing city in Brazil and we were on a new development alongside the airport. The hotel was nondescript, but adequate and convenient, with restaurants and a shopping centre close by. We had a walk, and looked at all the various options for eating, and decided to eat in the restaurant opposite the hotel; there we had one of the best pizzas outside Italy and were able to watch the comings and goings of Cuiaba society.

### Cuiaba to the Panatanal, Piuvale Lodge

18th Dec - Pocone and Mosquitoes. We managed an early breakfast before Braulio picked us up at 0700. His minibus was new and comfortable, which was lucky, as we were to spend a long time in it. We were the only members of this tour. It was for up to 8 people, and we had booked it in February, with a promise that the tour would go for just the two of us if no one else booked; thus we had this wonderful guide all to ourselves!! We would find out just how good he is as we went on.

The Pantanal is a huge area bigger than France, mainly in Brazil, but it extends into neighbouring countries (Bolivia, Paraguay, with a small part in Argentina). It is low lying (80-100 meters above sea level) compared with the surrounding land (600-700 meters), and during the wet season it becomes a swamp. Water drains slowly from the Pantanal into the Paraguay River via many tributaries, most only running in the wet season; and unusually for a swamp, most of the rainfall occurs in the surrounding higher land. Thus, the Pantanal itself can remain relatively free of rain, but the water level will visibly rise as rain elsewhere drains into it and begins its journey to the Paraguay River. This normally happens in late November or early December, and triggers reproduction in many of the bird and animal species. Birds are seen in breeding plumage, but because the whole area is wet, few birds need to congregate on standing water, and they become harder to see. It was the time for mosquitoes too, but also a good time to see giant otter and jaguar.

In the dry season, large areas of grassland appear that are suitable for grazing cattle and about 40 years ago, the military government then in control of Brazil tried to open up the Pantanal to cattle ranching and built the Transpantanaria. This is a wide earth road 179 kms long with 126 bridges, running from Pocone to Porto Jofre on the Paraguay River; it was built by scraping soil from either side to form a central bund. Not only did this create a road raised from the surrounding land, but the areas on either side from where the soil was extracted have become lagoons which are wildlife havens, but also, in the wet season, wildlife corridors. The gateway to the Pantanal is Pocone, which is a town not that far from Cuiaba, probably 200 kms of good highway, which continues beyond Pocone towards Bolivia. Turning off the highway at Pocone and driving a few kilometres on tarmac and a few more on dirt, the Transpantanaria itself is reached. The original dirt road is still there, passable easily in the dry season, but more difficult in the wet. The entrance has a barrier and a sign and to enter it is necessary to sign in with the ranger on duty, and whilst doing this we saw our first Cayman. As we drove on, we came to the first Fazenda (ranch), with the incongruous sight of a plastic Father Christmas and Feliz Navidad sign at the entrance.



Amazon Kingfisher at Piupal Lodge  
Photo: Robin Springett

Rivers are crossed by wooden bridges, but these have had little maintenance, and some are really dodgy to cross. A lot of damage is being done by large semi-trailer trucks moving cattle out from the Fazendas, and this was the busy time for moving cattle, as the pastures became inundated and returned to swamp. The whole area is a unique ecosystem, which is seriously under threat. Sadly, it becomes more degraded by the day; mainly it seems from the effects of human activity in the surrounding higher land causing pollution to drain into the Pantanal, but also from uncontained tourism within the Pantanal. For more details on all aspects of the Pantanal, see [www.pantanalbirdclub.org](http://www.pantanalbirdclub.org)

Many Fazendas offer tourist facilities called Hotel Fazendas; these days they must to survive, and Piupal Lodge with nice guest accommodation, restaurant and swimming pool is probably typical of the slightly up market ones. It is only a short drive from the start of the Transpantanaria and of the about 16 guests, we were the only ones wanting to see the birds and wildlife. The others were not eco-tourists at all.

We soon discovered that Braulio has a routine; start early, have a siesta around midday and start again mid-afternoon. We arrived for lunch, then settled in and had a swim, before doing some birding. The grassland surrounding the lodge was getting wet, and Braulio said that the wet season flood water was arriving and in a week or two the grass would be underwater. We had been warned to take precautions against mosquitoes, and we had long-sleeved shirts on and loads of deet based anti-mosquito cream. At around sundown we went to one of the forest islands in the grassland in search of Hyacinth Macaw. After quite a lot of walking about quietly, we found 3 of the birds and got very good views, but the mosquitoes! We were bitten to distraction, and no amount of spray kept them at bay. We found later that the only real protection was our waterproofs, but these were so hot to wear, we only wore them as a last resort. We went back for supper, which was a buffet with lots of choice and excellent; after which we had a call over and discussed plans for the next day.

19th Dec - Piupal Lodge, Forest, Savannah and Lake. We started out after breakfast searching around the track to the lodge, and then visited some areas of forest. We saw new birds all the time, including a splendid Rhea family, 2 adults and 12 chicks following behind.



Rhea near Piupal Lodge  
Photo: Robin Springett

We saw how effective calling birds is at this time of the year, as we continued to target new birds. Hard to pick a best bird for the morning, but Red Scythe Bill probably did it for me.

After lunch back at the lodge, we went down to the lake and took a boat ride. Almost immediately we started looking

for Least Bittern and managed to call one individual, which showed itself reasonably well. This was exciting enough, but when Braulio heard a call like Least Bittern, but subtly different to his ears, he recorded it and then we proceeded to call this individual. It kept getting closer, answering all the time, until we were able to see it well and photograph it. It was different from the Least Bittern we had seen earlier, same size but somewhat darker with slightly different markings. As it was calling it was an adult, but it didn't respond to Least Bittern calls, just the recording of its own call. Also, Least Bitterns didn't seem interested in its call. This was truly a mystery. Braulio had some ideas, but didn't share his thoughts with us.

We continued on our boat trip, making landfall at various points, including some very good views of the odd looking Chacwa Chachulata, and as dusk approached and we headed back, a tree full of Storks preparing to roost made a wonderful sight silhouetted against the fading light. On the drive back, we got our first views of the Sun Bittern, with its strange gliding flight and amazing butterfly like wing markings. After evening meal, we had the usual call over and since leaving Cuiaba the day before, we had seen 44 new species.

We discussed the unusual Least Bittern. Braulio said he would do some research on the internet that evening. The next day we would bird along the Transpantanaria on our way to the next lodge some 60 kms further into the Pantanal.



Wood Storks roosting.

*Photo: Robin Springgett*

### Piuval Lodge to Pixiam River

20th Dec - Otters, Bitterns & Nightjars. At breakfast, Braulio said that what we had found the day before was Cory's Least Bittern, not seen in the Pantanal since the late 60s. (*Photo inside back cover. Ed.*) It was originally classified as a separate subspecies, but, as it is very rarely seen over the whole range of the Least Bittern, it has been re-classified as a morph. We were not sure about that, given the very different reaction we had seen to its call and that of Least Bittern. After breakfast, we started off on our way to Piuval Lodge, slowly birding down the highway. There had been rain, and the dirt road was muddy and rutted. On some of the bridges, we had to move loose planks to make a route for the minibus, and on one, ford the stream, as the bridge looked too rickety. After about 6 bridges, we got to a large bridge crossing a river; here we stopped and got out to bird.

Before we had a chance, a large mammal popped its head up in the water, then another and a third! Giant otters; in fact a family group of 2 adults and a juvenile, which constantly begged for food from its parents, generally without luck! We watched them for maybe 30 minutes while they fished. These are big animals, perhaps as big as a man, and very curious. When some horses and riders crossed the bridge, the otters couldn't stop looking and came right up to the bridge. Eventually we went back to birding, and Braulio played his Cory's Least Bittern call. To our amazement, we called out 2 more individuals, one of which Braulio managed to video. Then he changed the call to Least Bittern and these 2 lost interest, but we finally called out the genuine article, a Least Bittern. These birds were all fairly close to the road, maybe 30 feet away, and we were able to see the differences. I know that is not very scientific, but it was the best we could do in the field.

We stayed there for about an hour, and then continued towards our next lodge, birding all the way. St Tereza Fazenda Hotel is about 60Kms down the Transpantanaria, about 1Km off the road. The lodge is OK, but not as comfortable or as well appointed as Piuval, however, it is on the Pixaim River, and mid-afternoon we set off by boat to explore. There were Caymans everywhere of all sizes. We surprised a large family of Capybaras swimming across the river and fully expected to see the smaller ones taken by a Cayman, but they all got across and started feeding; the larger ones were the size of a small deer! The birding was a bit slow, but we did get good views of those we saw and added a number of specialist species. We didn't see the expected giant otters, but as we had seen them earlier, it was no problem.

Cayman and Capybara  
Photo: Robin Springett

After dinner Braulio offered a drive to find nightjars. Julia declined, so he and I went out for an hour and saw about a dozen; the majority were Paraque, and we dazzled and handled one. We also saw a couple of Spot-tailed Nightjar, and Little Nightjar. We managed to spot a few marsh deer startled in a powerful spotlight: and we got back in time to do a call over, and have a beer.



### St Tereza Fazenda back to Piuvale Lodge

21st Dec, and after breakfast we continued down the Transpantanaria for a few hours, stopping at a remote wayside café for lunch. The further you drive down into the Pantanal, the worse the road gets, a lot of damage is being done to the road by the large trucks used to transport cattle; not only do they churn up the surface but they damage the wooden bridges, and there is no maintenance. After lunch we started on the trip all the way back to Piuvale lodge, stopping at various bridges to bird. Back at Piuvale in time for a swim before dinner, we watched a pair of Brown-chested Martins feeding their young in an Ovenbird's nest that they had taken over. The nest was in the outside bar and like hirundine everywhere, once rearing young, they are oblivious to humans. After dinner we went for a short drive around the estate roads.



Brown-chested Martin chicks in  
an old Ovenbird's nest  
Photo: Robin Springett

### Back to Cuiaba

22nd Dec - Piuvale Lodge and Transpantanaria Highway. Next morning after breakfast, we went back down the Transpantanaria to the bridge where we had seen the otters and the Cory's Least Bittern and again tried to call one out but failed, although we did get responses to our calls. Then it was back to Cuiaba. Before he left us, Braulio asked if he could bring his wife and young son on the trip to Emas NP as he would be away from home for Christmas. We had no problem with that.

## Cuiaba to Emas National Park National Park

23rd Dec. We managed an early breakfast, and were picked up by Braulio at 0700 as promised. We were delighted to meet his wife and young son (Braulio junior of course). It is a drive of over 500kms to Emas; the arterial road is rarely dual carriageway, and it carries a lot of slow moving heavy goods vehicles, even on a Sunday, so it takes a considerable time. The first 100kms was pure hell, but it got better after we climbed to the plateau for the majority of the journey through arable land on a road that ran straight for miles. A bright spot was the stop at a service area for Sunday lunch. In Brazil, a well known form of eating out is a meat buffet. You get the salad yourself, and waiters come round to the table with amazingly large amounts of meat fresh off the BBQ on large skewers; mostly beef, but pork, chicken and sweetmeats are also included. All this for an all inclusive price!

We got to Emas around 1600 that afternoon. The NP is an oasis of “Cerrado”, the Portuguese name for savannah, in the middle of continuous agriculture. Only 20 years ago it was indistinguishable from the surrounding country, then all Cerrado; but such is the pace of change in this part of the world that just this little patch is left. The big crop is soya bean, and it is obviously very profitable.

Emas is Portuguese for Rhea, and the reserve was established initially to protect them. As you approach Emas, Rheas are everywhere in the soya fields; hopefully doing a good job of eating the insect pests, because the birds are encouraged by the farmers. There are two entrances to Emas, and we entered by the northern one intending to drive the 50 kms through and exit from the southern (main) entrance. The habitat is pristine, and teems with life, which indicates what has been lost to the onward march of soya beans. As we turned into the NP proper, with open savannah and termite mounds, we very quickly came across an owl sitting on a fence post. This is suitable habitat for the giant anteater, and we saw evidence of attacks on the termite nests, but no anteaters. The bird count slowly mounted as we made our way through the park. The habitat changes as the land gently slopes downwards, to become more wooded, until eventually the river is reached and we crossed on a wide bridge. Nearby was a newly erected viewing tower, and further across the river are the administrative and accommodation buildings for the NP staff and volunteers. We stopped and made our number with the administrator, paid our fees and collected our ranger.



The birding was good, and as night fell, we saw 4 species of nightjar, some on the track and some we found sitting on termite mounds.

Little Nightjar  
Photo: Robin Springett

The only minor hiccup was our ranger getting us lost in the dark in an area he didn't know. We eventually left the park somewhat later than planned at 2100 via the south entrance, and from there it is some 37kms towards Brazil's newest town, Chapado do Ceo, only 10 years old, and our hotel. It is a wide dirt road bounded on one side by agriculture and the other by the NP, but for the last 12kms it has agriculture on both sides, and eventually squatters housing before the town proper begins. Our small family run hotel was located on the main street, and we were surprised by the width of the streets and the air of permanence. Of course, in the town the Christmas decorations were up, huge trees made out of empty plastic bottles, which looked wonderful all lit up. We got into our hotel, met the family, and made our way up an ill-fitting spiral staircase to our room. Thankfully, someone carried our luggage. Not much left to do except fall into bed exhausted.

24<sup>th</sup> Dec - A Full Day in Emas NP. Breakfast was interesting, it was self-help and everything had been put out the night before, or was in the fridge, but we managed happily. Given that we had a 37km drive, Braulio wanted to be away by 0630, and when we got to the park entrance, where we met our ranger, dawn was breaking. At the entrance, we got great views of Yellow Cheeked Parrots. This was just the start, and we had a brilliant morning in the NP visiting the river and lots of good habitat. We were a bit concerned to see smoke from at least two fires, probably started by lightning, and we were passed by a truck full of rangers heading towards the fire. We followed, hoping to see raptors and other birds attracted to bush fires and we were not disappointed. Later, we stopped for lunch at the Park HQ and just got ourselves sorted on the veranda of one building when it started to rain. We were watching a small family group of Macaws in the nearby mango trees, when the shower turned torrential. We ate lunch inside the building, as it was cold and wet outside. The rain was quite long lasting, but as it eased off, we went into the main HQ building to look at their small exhibition. When we got back outside the rain had stopped and the sun appeared.

As we got back into the vehicle, Braulio noticed what looked like a very long-legged dog in the grass behind the mango trees and as we watched, a Maned Wolf gingerly made its way out of the long grass to eat the mangoes brought down by the rain.



Maned Wolf  
Photo: Robin Springett

While we watched this first individual get bolder by the minute, it was obvious that there was a second lurking in the shadows. By now, lots of people had appeared and

cameras were whirring everywhere from the buildings. The second animal eventually summoned up the courage to rush out onto the short grass below the trees, pick up a mango in its jaw and take it away to eat out of sight. All the while, the first wolf was calmly eating mangoes in full view of the watching people. We decided that this was a pair; the female was the least cautious, perhaps she had pups somewhere? Eventually, she took her mate and left, and we were able to find out more about the Maned Wolf. It is a long legged animal, with a body about fox size, but its long legs give the impression of much greater size. It is not a carnivore, rather an omnivore, largely living on small rodents and reptiles, beetles and fruit. Usually seen alone, it pairs up in the breeding season. I suspected that the female was more than familiar with these particular mango trees, as she had come straight there after the storm, expecting fruit to be on the ground. She was on her "patch" and was used to the sight of people, whilst the male was much more wary. Anyway, we had wonderful views of these strange animals.

The torrential rain had made the tracks impassable for a two wheel drive vehicle, and we birded locally near the NP Headquarters. We also noticed that the bush fires which had been burning for a couple of days appeared to be out. As dusk fell, we prepared to leave, but noticed that in some areas the termite mounds were covered in small lights and looked like miniature skyscrapers with the lights on; so weird! We never really got an explanation, but Braulio said it was a well known phenomenon that happened after rain. We guessed it was something to do with the insects attracting a mate; whatever the explanation, the "lights" in the mounds were bright enough to allow photographs to be taken by an ordinary digital camera. After this, we headed back to the hotel.

On arrival we were told that the family had invited us to celebrate Christmas by eating with them that evening. There then followed one of those mix-ups that can happen. We had been out all day and badly needed to shower and change, but it wasn't explained to us that all the family were already waiting for us through the hotel in the private area. To our severe embarrassment, we kept them longer than was polite, which was a shame, as they had gone to great lengths to make us feel welcome. Still, all was forgiven, and we sat down to a sumptuous meal with our guide, his wife and son, the hotel owners, one aged mother, three sons, a daughter, son-in-law and child, and a cousin; the latter spoke English and had worked in Manchester. We had beef (of course), pork, turkey (for our benefit), vegetables, rice and salad. We contributed some wine, and an amazingly good time was had by all. We ate outside in the garden, with virtually no insects, and a very agreeable temperature. They wanted to know how we celebrated Christmas and we were able to answer their questions. They were also fascinated to learn that we had been on St Helena Island the Christmas before, the one before that in Spain and before that in Florence, Italy. This experience was, of course, much different from life in a small town in a big country in the very heart of South America. We were told that this being a new town, almost everyone went back to relations in Rio or San Paulo for Christmas.

25th Dec - Christmas Day in Emas. We went to bed much too late for an early start; nevertheless, we were up early and out before 0630 to slip into the park without a ranger, as he had the day off. Normally, no one is allowed in without a ranger, but we didn't ask questions as we were grateful to be out on a public holiday. We went straight to the small piece of wet woodland where Braulio had re-discovered the Cone-billed Tanager. We parked some way away, and made our way with tripods across wet grassland and stopped about 30 yards from the trees. Braulio started to call the bird. We walked up and down the edge of the trees for nearly an hour and we had almost given up, when we got an answer to the call. All of a sudden the bird, long thought

Cone-billed Tanager      Photo: Robin Springett



extinct, was right in front of us on the edge of the trees. It was even there long enough to allow photos to be taken through a scope. However, a second and then a third bird appeared and at least one must have been a female, as it triggered a display flight, which was a series of large swooping circles from a perch on the edge of the trees. We spent a good hour watching these birds, before they lost interest in us and disappeared into the trees. Originally collected as a skin by a Frenchman collecting for Paris University in the early days of the 20th century, it then disappeared for about 70 years. Braulio believes that the collector was a bit casual with record keeping, and simply put down "Cerrado", without noticing the specific nature of the wet woodland

needed by the birds. He also believes that the collector was not too good at locations, as he seems to have recorded the bird as collected about 400kms away from its current location. All in all, not much help to later ornithologists, and no surprise that it was something of a mystery for so long. After this excitement, we did some more birding, before leaving for our hotel and a lunch with the family, consisting of cold meat from the night before. In the afternoon, we did some birding around Chapado do Ceo, one or two lakes, and some scrub, and when we got back we had a walk around the town where children were outside riding new bicycles and showing off presents. This was our last full day in Emas, tomorrow we would drive through the NP en-route to Cuiaba.

### Emas to Cuiaba

26th Dec. We were down for breakfast by 0600 and were joined by the owners, and one son, who struggled down the spiral staircase with our suitcases. We were surprised that our ranger also turned up for breakfast; he obviously had an eye on his tip. We were away by 0630 and got a wonderful send off from the hotel. We got into the NP shortly after dawn and took a very slippery track down towards where the largest fire had been burning; it was a scene of devastation. The fire had burned through the Cerrado, leaving in its wake termite mounds and one or two charred trees. Of course, this was a natural occurrence, and the vegetation would spring up again, helped by the wood ash from the fire. We looked for and found some small birds which specialise in such disasters, eating the cooked insects.

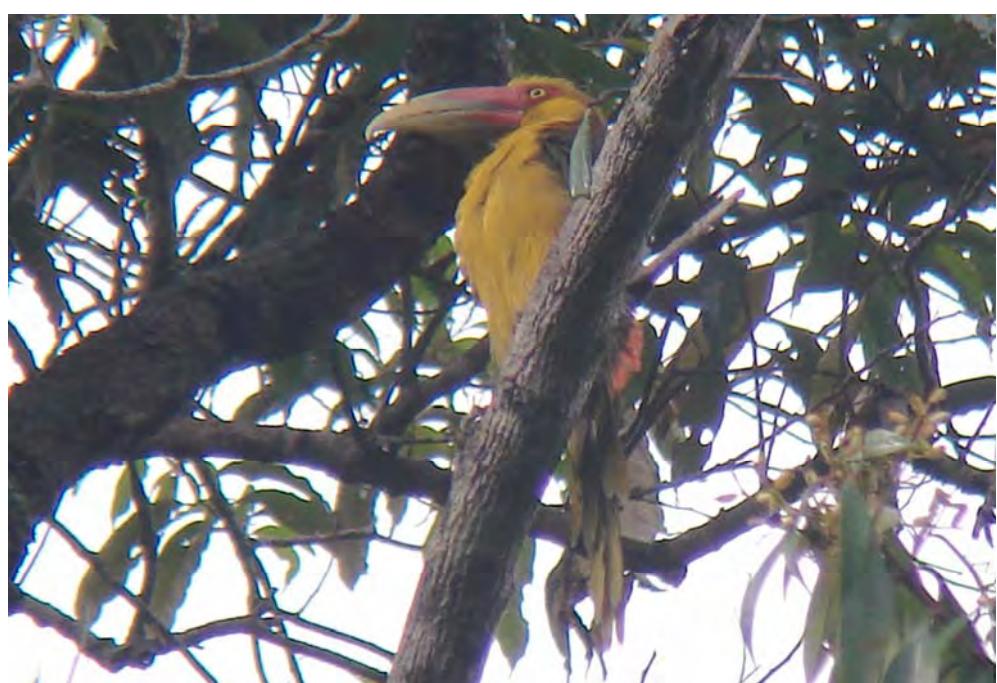
Shortly after getting back into unburned vegetation, we saw a giant anteater. We jumped out of the minibus and managed to get very close indeed to this amazing animal, as I guess it has few predators and poor eyesight. This one was about the size of a pig and covered in a long shaggy coat. We were able to get close enough to touch it, and we were so absorbed by this that we all forgot to take a picture. It was only as it was leaving that the idea of a photo came to mind; hence those taken are a bit hurried and out of focus. Still, the memories are vivid! At the northern entrance of the NP, we said farewell to our ranger, and prepared for the long journey back to Cuiaba. The only

interlude was to stop for a meal in a little one horse town, where we photographed a 50 year old VW split screen pick up still working for its owner. Back at the hotel we had stayed in on our first night in Cuiaba, we said farewell to Braulio's wife and son; Braulio was coming to take us for some local birding next morning before we got our flight back to Rio via San Paulo.

It was a great wrench saying farewell to Braulio, as he had been so brilliant as a guide and we had got to know him well in our time together. What a lot we had seen during one month in Brazil. This is a vast country, which would have been just a coastal sliver if the Treaty of Tordesillas had been adhered to. Sometime in the current century it will become the regional giant. Over the month, we had seen 437 bird species and a whole new sub-continent – WOW.



Giant Anteater – Emas NP  
Photo: Robin Springett



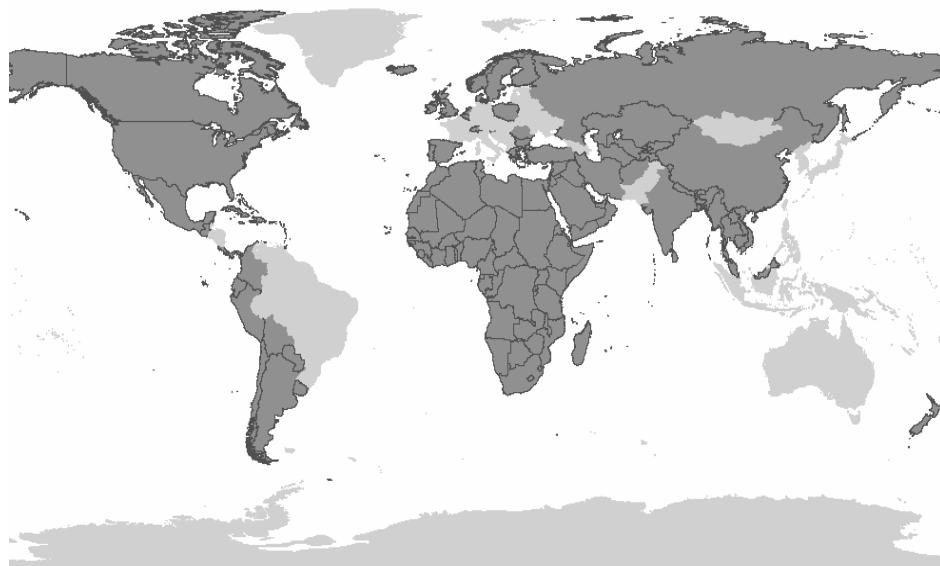
Saffron Toucanet Photo: Robin Springett

(Robin has provided me with a full list of the birds he and Julia saw on their trip and I will e-mail to anybody who wants it. Ed.)

## THE WORLDBIRDS PROJECT – AN UPDATE

*By Ian Fisher*

The WorldBirds project, run by the RSPB, Audubon and BirdLife, and was mentioned in the last Newsletter. It now covers two thirds of the world's countries and territories, over 125, and by June of 2009, only a quarter of the world will have no participating system.



(Dark grey are participating countries)

The installations connected to the global map portal at [www.worldbirds.org](http://www.worldbirds.org) all have the same goals - to collect birdwatchers' observations and make them available to conservation, to encourage participation in birding activities, and to provide birders with a place to see others' birding trips. Most of the systems are based on a core model developed by the RSPB and BirdLife on behalf of the country Partners, while others have been created independently with the same overall purposes.

Your data are vitally important for conservation, and for rarely visited places may be the only information available. One of the BirdLife Partnership's key tasks is to identify Important Bird Areas (IBAs) around the globe, then work with national and regional governments to secure official protection. Although Partners carry out extensive survey and monitoring work, resources are tight and it is impossible to cover all ground. By contributing your data for both rare and common species, you will be feeding into a wide variety of initiatives, from IBA support to wild bird population indicators. And with the addition of historic records, we don't have to wait 10 years to determine a population trend - we can work backwards and see what has happened over the last decade.

In some countries, the project has only just started to take root. For example, the African systems are on-line but not yet widely publicised - so yours could be among the first data in there. Others, such as Kusbank in Turkey, have several hundred thousand observations. DOFBasen in Denmark has 7 million!

To find out more visit [www.worldbirds.org](http://www.worldbirds.org) and follow the links. Each system has its own login, although some cover several countries (for example, the Middle East is served by a single system and Africa is covered by 5 regional 'hubs'), and access is free. By providing your data you will be helping to ensure that next time you visit, the birds will still be there. BirdLife Partners around the world appreciate your help.

## UNCERTAINTY - UNPRINCIPLED?

By Mike Blair

Recently I caught up with Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, as adapted for television by Howard Davies. It is a visualisation of what passed between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg when they met in Copenhagen. Nothing unusual in that, you might think, even when you discover or know that both were perhaps the finest theoretical physicists of the time, and that Heisenberg had been the protégé of Bohr. The play is a three-hander, with Stephen Rea as Bohr, Francesca Annis as Margrethe, Bohr's wife, and Daniel Craig (yes, that Daniel Craig) as Heisenberg. It was one of these all too rare productions<sup>1</sup> that captivates at every turn – the author's fine, spare writing, superb acting and a subject so huge and important that you are left with the thought, 'What if?' You see, both men were nuclear physicists and each had unravelled some of the secrets of the subatomic world<sup>2</sup>. Bohr's work made it possible to envisage how a nuclear weapon might be made, and Heisenberg<sup>3</sup> had demonstrated that to understand the behaviour of subatomic 'particles', conceptual understanding could not be based on the observable properties of the 'real' world.

This meeting took place in 1941 in Denmark at Bohr's house against the backdrop of a world at war. Bohr had been permitted by the occupying Germans to continue teaching and research. Heisenberg was German, and was in charge of research in the Third Reich on the practicality of developing a nuclear 'wonder weapon'. He had his doubts as to whether this could be achieved, but knew that Bohr might just hold the key. Heisenberg was in no doubt as to the ruthlessness and fickleness of Nazi policies, but like many, he knew that a refusal to work on the problem would simply mean that rivals lacking any scruple would seize the opportunity to be in charge. His post-war explanation was that he could discuss the problem with Bohr in a way that would allow Bohr to avoid suggesting the path that would solve it. In any case he said that he later solved most of the problems on his own, but presented the work to his political masters as requiring even vaster resources than had been envisaged. He also used language in a way they, as non-physicists, did not understand; the nature of such a regime is that noone would be willing to ask any other physicists their opinion. Bohr's post-war recollections of the meeting in Denmark differed<sup>4</sup>, causing much strain in their relationship, but it may just have been that Heisenberg was more aware than Bohr that the house might have been bugged, which is why he was remembered by Bohr as being so triumphalist about the Nazi nuclear effort. Almost certainly, however, some of the discussion took place in the garden where no one could overhear.

The paradox of the meeting, well-captured by Michael Frayn, is that both men were so fascinated by the difficulty of the challenges presented to them by the kind of mathematics and physics they had created, that the sheer seduction of this intellectual task would continue to drive them towards a solution, no matter what the ethical aspects were, yet it is clear that the human uncertainty deriving from these ethical aspects were omnipresent in their discussions, if only obliquely. We shall never know just what was

<sup>1</sup> This quality of production is due in no small part to David Attenborough's vision when he became Controller of BBC2 many years previously. During this time, benchmarks were set, and despite the mass of dross now on the box, his legacy lives on.

<sup>2</sup> Bohr had won the 1922 Nobel Prize for Physics on the structure and radiation of atoms and Heisenberg the 1932 Nobel Prize for Physics for the invention of quantum mechanics.

<sup>3</sup> Heisenberg is best-known today for the 'Uncertainty Principle', which when applied to electrons, means that if you know an electron's position relative to the nucleus of an atom, you cannot know the speed of its movement about that nucleus; the converse is also true.

<sup>4</sup> Bohr's recollections were made public only in 2002.

discussed<sup>5</sup>, but I do urge you to watch *Copenhagen* when it is repeated! All fascinating stuff you might say, but what is the possible connection to birds? Read on!

Over the years, I have harped on about the way birds use the sky, sometimes as flocks, sometimes in display and sometimes in ways that seem to have no easy explanation. Generally, birds do not fly in straight lines, nor do they steer directly to a landing point. There are exceptions, of course, such as gulls heading for their roost, but mostly they adopt a less obvious course, often one that consumes more energy than necessary. For smaller birds, indeed any bird that is a link in a food chain with ample predators above it, an indirect course allows it to scan 360° in the horizontal plane and to look up and down without the need for sizable movements of the head. Natural selection ensures that birds with non-variable courses will become breakfast more often than those that keep a lookout, and so extra energy expenditure increases the odds of survival. Larger birds tend to adopt a landing course that heads into the wind, and so may have to fly a downwind leg before approaching to land, but they, too, will often scout the surroundings for predators – herons often examine a reed patch carefully before settling. For sociable species, or at least species that will associate after the breeding season, individuals may make several passes over a group of standing birds before landing; I suspect that in some cases they are working out, and this phrase has impeccable credentials, the ‘pecking order’. In this case an indirect course is more likely to lead to less aggression. These examples are all cases of apparently random and energy-consuming behaviour, seemingly displaying uncertainty, actually being executed with a degree of certainty that the exposure to risk is less than that of direct flight to land or perch – what appears obvious is not. Such a counter-intuitive result is quite commonplace in the natural world, because marvellous subtleties have arisen through the survival of the wariest birds.

Missing from the skies in late August is the insistent scream of the Common Swift *Apus apus*, the onset of whose migratory movements are more rigidly tied to calendar dates than perhaps any other bird. Southernmost breeding populations are the first to pass through Mediterranean latitudes where insects are available from late March onwards. Each population comprises four waves: the early non-breeders that will probably breed only in following years – there is some evidence suggesting that the latest-hatching chicks from the year before occur in this wave; there is then a fairly small wave of ‘pioneers’ whose early arrival does not guarantee that mates or sufficient food will be available – these are often first-time breeders; there is the main body, which tends to arrive over just a few days, and lastly, there are the stragglers, who seemingly seldom breed successfully, mostly because the best sites have been taken by the third wave.

The Common Swift is thought to land only to breed, which perhaps is why the species has one brood, and then departs. The departure of breeding pairs is not governed by the availability of food, but lack of food can accelerate their departure. Even if chicks are but a day or two from fledging, if it is a late brood, they will be abandoned. The clock is everything. I can think of one reason why this should be so. Swifts are notorious for tick infestation, which means that in a bird that lands only to breed, these ticks have to be mighty tough; their survival strategy depends on their young hatching on other birds in a five-week window in the year. Only when Swifts are nesting semi-colonially do the tick species have a chance to parasitise a different family – certainly

<sup>5</sup> After the meeting, Heisenberg went back to Germany, but the Nazis never became close to producing a usable weapon; after the war, Heisenberg headed the Max Planck Institute for Physics and remained at the forefront of research. Bohr and his wife escaped in 1943 through Sweden, where she remained until the war was over; he went on to be a leading figure in the Manhattan Project that succeeded in making a nuclear device, although even by 1944, he had become an advocate of stringent control of nuclear research and the use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

they will move on to the chicks in the nest, but keeping all your genes as a parasite on a single bird lineage is not a survival strategy that guarantees success. Perhaps ticks transfer when Swifts mate in the air – it will be some camera work to catch that!



*Swifts*

Ticks can counter rigid behaviour on the part of the Common Swift, but in a different way the swifts demonstrate flexibility that other species cannot match. Being an obligate aerial feeder on insects (and arthropods – I know!), the Swift has an easy time of it in summer when weather conditions remain stable, but it is in the nature of things that often summer storms develop. The Common Swift has been tracked ahead of a storm front for up to 500km from its nest before returning to feed its chicks. Insects can reach high concentrations ahead of storm fronts – just ask any pilot who has been ahead of a cu-nim about the smear across the windscreen! It is also quite apparent that the Common Swift can find insect concentrations that appear between isolated

thunderheads. However, I observed recently that this ability to find food uses cues that may seem obvious, but I hadn't made the connection.

After a rare warm morning in August 2008 – it had been a weird mix of weather – the clouds built up to form an overcast. This pattern of bright morning and dull afternoon had been a general one for a few days and so I paid it no attention. I was industriously stabbing away at the laptop keys when a bright flash and near-instantaneous loud bang hinted I should shut down and remove the plug! Abruptly, intense rain steel-rodded down with scarcely a pause for almost half an hour, varied only by turning briefly into hail at times. Spectacular it was. There were several largish cumulo-nimbus clouds slowly rolling in a narrow front from the south. The rain ceased at just after 4 pm, and once again, the sun returned, its rays unimpeded by any atmospheric dust. The rise in temperature from 11°C at the height of the downpour to 29°C was rapid. I thought no more of this until I went to get in the car to drive down to Salthouse. The skies were full of birds flying in totally random directions and patterns, but above 300 feet. The vast majority were Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*<sup>6</sup>, but there were also many Western<sup>7</sup> Jackdaws *Corvus monedula*, all wheeling, turning, twisting and swooping individually against the clear blue sky. I estimated that there were over 400 birds in a ballet that seemed to lack any choreography, but then a combination of observation and penny-dropping (old currency) amongst the little grey cells<sup>8</sup> lifted the metaphorical veil – ants! Probably the airborne swarms were garden ants *Lasius niger*, quite a large species for UK, but of course the August weather pattern had been the ideal trigger. Through my binoculars I could see a myriad of tiny dots flying upwards, ignoring the birds. The adjective that best describes the manoeuvrings of gull and corvid alike is 'graceless', yet the previously random nature of the dance assumed a pattern as a degree of regularity became apparent. The regularity was not fixed, but neither was it merely dynamic, for it comprised much uncertainty, the watcher being totally unable to predict the path any bird would take to its next snack.

You might be interested, or conversely, dismayed, to know that mathematics<sup>9</sup> can now describe such patterns, and not only for a single particle<sup>10</sup>, but for a multiplicity – we are beginning to understand the behaviour of chaotic systems<sup>11</sup>. This kind of mathematics relates conceptually to the kind of thinking that produced first quantum mechanics and then quantum dynamics; all these require the means of dealing with uncertainty.

However, how might the theoretical understanding of the principles of chaotic systems be useful in studying the movements of birds in the sky, whether all individuals are acting individually, or in a flock where groups are joining the main body or leaving it to go to roost? Those of you who watched the Olympics, in particular the diving and the gymnastics, might remember the camera technique that allows images of the athlete to be reproduced in a fixed sequence against a background that still 'moves'. This is a very advanced version of previous methods, for it can include distance information (from

<sup>6</sup> What on earth happened to *Larus* did I hear you ask? Well, one of the things about research is that the findings usually suggest other lines of enquiry, and so a whole raft of gull DNA-related studies has recently been published. Most of the findings agree closely, but some need further work. The AOU and now the BOU (see [www.bou.org.uk/](http://www.bou.org.uk/)) have recommended respective sets of changes to order, sequence and scientific names to align with the accepted findings. Some Western Palearctic gulls whose scientific names have changed are: Brown Hooded Gull is *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*, Grey-hooded Gull *C. cirrocephalus*, Common Black-headed Gull as above and Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*. I can forward other website details on request to [blair@dialstart.net](mailto:blair@dialstart.net); for developments in internationally-agreed (IOC) recommended (not compulsory!) names see [www.worldbirdnames.org](http://www.worldbirdnames.org).

<sup>7</sup> Yep, Western! The split is to Daurian Jackdaw in the east as *Corvus dauuricus*.

<sup>8</sup> David Suchet in his incarnation as Poirot obviously has been a (late) formative influence.

<sup>9</sup> For our US friends, 'mathematic' or 'math'.

<sup>10</sup> For 'particle' read 'bird'.

<sup>11</sup> Well, perhaps excluding my study, which might be better located in Unseen University.

the subject to the camera); it's a pretty sure bet that someone has already begun to use this to study birds in the air – each individual on a recording can be studied singly, three-dimensional information being extractable and displayable in various graphical formats. The mathematics involved may well be developed further by the actual equations describing the path taken by a bird being fed back into the original theoretical equations, but I would predict that our insight into bird flight dynamics will be greatly improved. The underlying point about this short excursion is that despite more and more fields of scientific endeavour requiring specialist courses at universities, they are all linked in fundamental ways to each other and to the natural world. This may actually seem quite obvious to you, but do remember that even in the educated world, there is strong support for dividing these fields into two sections – those that are unacceptable because belief is more important than evidence, and those that are acceptable because belief has not yet found grounds for their non-acceptability.

Meanwhile, this vast balbo of gulls and corvids erratically endeavouring to feast on the ants was characterised by frequent desperate changes of direction ending in clumsy lunges. Suddenly, a high-pitched scream announced the arrival of a large pack of migrant Common Swifts from the north; our birds had left two days previously. The assumption that they had spotted the birling mass of birds from afar I would argue is the only reasonable explanation. Time and time again, this tightly-packed squadron, some fifty strong, cut speedy arcs through the sky, individuals rarely making any move away from the general hunting course. Presumably, there were enough ants in the sky for fifty swifts to feed simply by keeping their mouths open. Although the two hunting techniques on view differed radically, both clearly were effective. For fifteen minutes the combat drifted slowly downwind, and then the ants had dispersed too widely to remain targeted by the birds. Hirundines had been conspicuous by their absence, although there were many in the general area in the days that followed, but I was struck how the migrant swifts seemed to be searching in the lee of the thunderheads, and found a huge concentration of food by doing so. This is the opposite of what generally happens in the breeding season, when hunting swifts fly ahead of a storm line, and so it seems that their inbuilt impulses allow them to survive better than simply repeating known behaviour. It's a way of reducing the total uncertainties of hunting. However, the Common Swift's rigid adherence to a calendar-based timetable may prove its undoing, because changing weather patterns in the climatic zones it must cross to reach its breeding areas are changing the peak times of plant production, and hence those of the insect production, some peaks in the north being over by the time the birds arrive.

Although a different insect community is available for consumption, it appears that this, for some reason, does not suit the chicks as well. The drop in productivity, whether in the nest or a reduction in numbers of birds making their return migration, could well be due to other, temporary factors, but unlike other bird species, there is no sign yet of the Common Swift adapting to rapidly-changing patterns of food availability. The nature of uncertainty facing the Common Swift is changing – there is no concept of fairness in nature, and the survival of any species depends on its ability to adapt to changing circumstances; in other words it has to learn the new principles that apply.

## **QUEENSLAND'S TROPICAL NORTH**

*By Dick Yates*

In early Feb this year Daphne and I spent 10 days in and around Cairns and the Atherton Tableland in Tropical North Queensland. Cairns is an excellent place to start, or even base oneself, when on a short birding trip to the area. Right in the heart of Cairns tourist area is the Esplanade, and from here you get a wonderful view of the mud flats in the bay that are a Mecca for waders. The best time is an hour before and a couple of hours after high tide when the birds are quite close. In addition, the Atherton Tableland, with its excellent birding areas, can be reached by car in about an hour.



Cairns Bay and The Pier Centre - far right

*Photo: Dick Yates*

We stayed in Cairns for our first and last nights; in between we spent 3 nights at Kingfisher Park, Julatten, at the north end of the tableland; 2 nights in the Rainforest Motel in Atherton at the south end and 3 night at Cassowary House in Kuranda, just above Cairns. Both Kingfisher Park and Cassowary House are birders retreats.

We had a target list of 6 species, Southern Cassowary, Chowchilla, Red-necked Crake, Double-eyed Fig Parrot, and Tooth-billed and Golden Bowerbird. We managed to see only 2, but heard 2 others and the final 2 remained resolutely elusive.

February is the wet season in that neck of the woods and boy was it WET!! We arrived at our hotel at about 1600, dropped our bags, grabbed the scope and headed for the Esplanade. Nothing too exceptional, Eastern Curlew, Red-necked Stint, Royal Spoonbill, Lesser Sand Plover and a couple of Pied Imperial Pigeons, and then rain came - tropical rain; within seconds we were soaked to the skin and the vis dropped to a few metres; run for the hotel 2 blocks away. It rained for the rest of the day.

Next morning it had stopped raining and we set off for Kingfisher Park via a few local birding spots such as Redden Island; Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, Grey-tailed Tatler, Metallic Starling and White-breasted Wood-swallow: Yorkey's Knob; Green Pygmy Goose, Darter, Black-fronted Dotterel, and Forest Kingfisher: and so to Kingfisher Park. Before we got there it had started to rain again. Kingfisher Park is run by Keith and Lindsay Fisher and they have a website at [www.birdwatchers.com.au](http://www.birdwatchers.com.au). It is

a great place to stay, with comfortable cabins and lovely grounds for birding. They have a resident population of Red-necked Crake so I was quite hopeful, but Lindsay informed us that since the wet started they hadn't been seen. However, the prize bird at this time of year is the Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher; 4 pairs were nesting in grounds and we got marvellous views.



After the rain a rather bedraggled Macleay's Honeyeater finds the feeder.  
*Photo: Dick Yates*

Other residents include Macleay's, Graceful and Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters, Red-browed Finch and Orange-footed Scrubfowl. One sees Australian Brush Turkeys scratching around in the leaf litter all the time, but these Scrub-fowl are real heavy duty operators, with powerful legs and claws they really get stuck in when it comes to 'mud moving!'

Up early the next day, no rain, this seemed to be the pattern, fine early but rain by mid to late morning. A walk in the grounds produced Spectacled Monarch, Pale Yellow Robin, Large-billed Scrubwren, Little Shrike Thrush and Spotted Catbird.



Spotted Catbird

We were just returning for breakfast when Keith came out and said he could hear Yellow-breasted Boatbill calling. After about 10 minutes searching we finally located a pair about 5-7m up in the understory. Only a small bird but with an astonishing bill and bright yellow chest.



Australian Bustard *Photo: Dick Yates*

We then set out to visit a couple of other recommended spots. At Abattoir Swamp we found White-browed Crake, Brown-backed and Blue-faced Honeyeaters and Chestnut Breasted Mannikin. At a place called West Mary Road we got excellent views of 3 Australian Bustard and a Pale-headed Rosella and as we set off for home, just as the rain started, we had a flight of 13 Red-tailed Black Cockatoo go overhead.

We were back at Kingfisher Park by lunchtime and the rain had really set in and confined us to quarters.

Fri 6 Feb and our early morning walk did not produce anything new so after breakfast we set out for another local hotspot called Rifle Creek. This is a picnic area with tables and a couple of nice tracks through the bush for walking. In the picnic area we found Dusky Honeyeater, White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike and Olive-backed Sunbird; and a short walk through the bush yielded Pied Monarch, Northern Fantail, Lovely and Red-backed Fairy Wrens, Fairy Gerygone, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher and White-throated Honeyeater. We then followed the road south towards Mareeba and stopped at Lake Mitchell which has a causeway running down the middle: here we saw an Osprey with a fish, so it probably had a nest nearby, Australian Pelican, Leaden Flycatcher, Double-barred Finch and Rufous Whistler. Up to now we had been in bright sunshine, but it was now around 1400 and the clouds started to roll in and by the time we got back to Kingfisher Park it was tipping it down.

Next morning we said goodbye to Keith and Lindsay and headed south to Atherton. En-route we found Great Bowerbird in Mt Molloy and Magpie Geese as we passed Mareeba Wetlands, which were closed due to flooding caused by the heavy rain. We stopped at Lake Eacham and started the 3Km walk round the lake, but after 1Km we were getting a thorough soaking again, so decided that one K back was better than two K forward and abandoned the attempt; but not before getting Golden Whistler, Grey Fantail and Red-headed Honeyeater. We headed for Lake Barrine for a late lunch and to dry out and by 1500 the rain had stopped so we tried for another walk, this time we got about 1.5K before it started again, but we did add Grey-headed Robin, Brown Cuckoo Dove and White-cheeked and Lewin's Honeyeaters to the list. By now we had had enough of getting wet so we headed for our motel and hunkered down for the rest of the day.

The next day, Sunday, we headed out for some birding spots within a 20Km radius of Atherton. The weather for the day was intermittent rain so we got some good birding in between the showers. The Crater Lake at Hypipamee yielded Eastern Whipbird,

Yellow-throated Scrubwren, Rufous Fantail, Bridled Honeyeater and a Treecreeper that we didn't see long enough to ID. But there was no sign of either of our target Bowerbirds and one of the Rangers we spoke to said that he hadn't seen them for some weeks, since the rains started in fact. We moved on to Hastie's Swamp which produced Purple Swamphen, Hardhead and Dusky Moorhen, and at the Cathedral Fig we added Brown Gerygone and Australian Pipit to the tally - a relaxing and gentle day's birding.

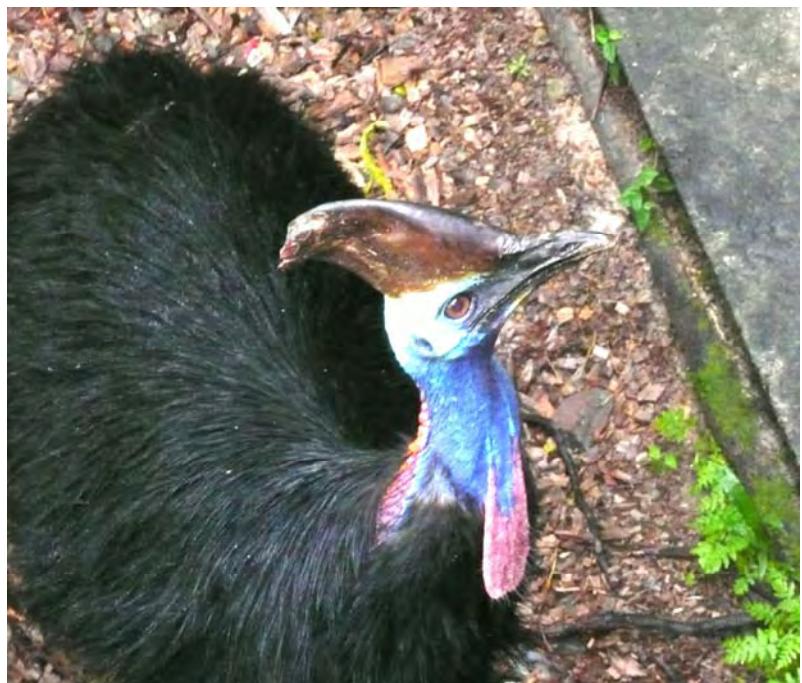
Monday 9 Sep and we set out for Cassowary House via Tinaroo Creek Road which was supposed to be THE spot for Squatter Pigeon and Black-throated Finch. However, before we got to the right spot we stopped to watch a pair of Brown Quail quietly fossicking beside the road. As we watched a 4WD came from the opposite direction, which naturally saw the Quails off, and the lady driving advised us not to cross the little wooden bridge over the creek up ahead as we would never get back if/when it rained. We had a look at the bridge, the map and the weather and decided that discretion was the better part of valour, so we contented ourselves with birding the side-roads up to the bridge. Not much new to report except a very unexpected Peregrine Falcon and the best views that I've ever had of Pheasant Coucal. After a bit of general tourism we headed for Cassowary House and, yes you guessed, it started to rain!

Cassowary House is a private guesthouse in the heart of the rainforest run by Phil and Sue Gregory, they also run a bird watching tours company called Sicklebill Tours. Sue runs the guesthouse and does a lot of the organising for the tours and Phil leads the tours, all over Australia and particularly to PNG. You can find their website at [www.cassowary-house.com.au](http://www.cassowary-house.com.au).

We arrived at about 1500 and had a chat with Sue and then went to our room, but it was not long before Sue called out "the Cassowary is here".

We hurried down to the house and there just below the balcony was a male Cassowary who has been nicknamed 'Dad'. The house is right in the national park and has no boundary fences so the wild creatures are free to come and go as they please. 'Dad' has been visiting Cassowary house for 20 years and, while still a completely wild and free bird, he has got quite used to people. (A female also visits quite regularly but we didn't see her this time.) He stayed around for about 20 minutes before wandering back off into the bush. Male Cassowary do all the incubation and raising of the young and 'Dad' usually has some youngsters in tow at this time of year, hence the name. As he was alone, Sue's conclusion was that he did not breed this year, probably due to the extremely wet conditions; mind you he is getting on a bit in Cassowary terms!

On the Tuesday we were out and about by 0600 for a short early morning walk which yielded Superb Fruit Dove, Helmeted Friarbird and Cicadabird, and although we could



hear Chowchilla calling around us they were deep in the forest and well out of sight - very frustrating!

At breakfast, Sue puts on a splendid breakfast on the balcony, we met one of the mammalian specialities of the place, Musky Rat Kangaroo. Only about 9 inches long it is the smallest member of the kangaroo family and while it is on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species it is classified as of LEAST CONCERN. We watched him while we breakfasted and Sue told us of a Laughing Gull, a vagrant to Australia that was reported to have arrived on the Esplanade the previous Friday so, we decided to try and find it. We left about 0930 and as we drove out of Cassowary House we found a family of Bush Thick-knee resting out in the open beside the road.



Bush Thick-knee

*Photo: Daphne Yates*

It takes about 40 minutes to get from Kuranda into downtown Cairns and we parked in the underground car park at the Pier Centre. We walked out of the complex and across to the sea front and there, amongst a group of about 6 Silver Gulls, was the Laughing Gull; it was that easy - it shouldn't be allowed. A bit further along the jetty was a Little Tern.



Laughing Gull and Silver Gull

*Photo: Dick Yates*



Little Tern. Photo: Dick Yates

Laughing Gull wasn't a 'lifer' for us but it was new for our Oz list. Other than these 2 there was not much new on the mudflats apart from a Terek Sandpiper and a grey morph Eastern Reef Egret. We spent the rest of the day in non-birding tourist activities like eating and shopping and returned to Cassowary House about 1630.

There was now a new guest in the room opposite and we met him over dinner in the local pub, it was a guy called Bruce Beehler who works for Conservation International and is Vice President for Indonesia and the Pacific Islands. Incidentally he is also a co-author of just about the only field guide to birds of Papua and New Guinea, now out of print incidentally. You can find out more about Conservation International at [www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org). Bruce was a very interesting dinner companion and he joined us for the 0600 walk the next morning.

He also really knows his bird calls. I couldn't even hear the high-pitched call of Double-eyed Fig Parrot, but Bruce did and traced them to a tree right above us. We got great views of a pair of these tiny parrots as they prospected a possible nest hole in a tree some 10m above our heads. He also held a lengthy conversation with a Noisy Pitta who resolutely stayed in deep cover. The other great bird for the morning was a female Victoria's Riflebird doing its 'creeping line ahead' search along a dead branch seeking her breakfast. Speaking of breakfast, it was back to the house for ours, and the good bird for this meal was a Grey Goshawk perched on a tree about 500m away. A scope would have helped but we got a pretty good look with binos.

After breakfast we said goodbye to Bruce and did the rounds of a few more birding spots without really adding anything new. The Cairns Botanic Gardens were very quiet but did give us a pair of Black Butcherbirds and the Laughing Gull was still hanging around the Esplanade, but no new waders could be identified, mind you the tide was well out by the time we got there. We then set out to find some turf fields and settling ponds to the south of the city that a local website was giving as worth a visit. The settling ponds were being refurbished and the whole area was a building site, and the turf fields were now given over to sugar cane, a better cash crop I guess. Finally, a jetty, said to be good for herons, was just a muddy car park and boat ramp at a bend in a rather dirty river, but it did have an Osprey sitting in a tree. All in all a not very productive day; and seeing it was about the only day it didn't rain it was a shame to have spent most of it in the car looking for places to see birds – but these things are sent to try us!

On our return to Cassowary House Sue told us that the Red-necked Crakes had been calling during the afternoon, so I went out in search of them. Needless to say they were now silent and nowhere to be seen. But I did see another Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher though which made up for disappointments of the day. That evening Sue cooked us a super meal, and, accompanied by a nice bottle of Western Australian Chardonnay, the day ended on a very pleasant note.

Thursday 12 Feb was to be our last day and we were to return to the Rydges Hotel in Cairns before our flight back to Brisbane on Friday morning. Another nice early morning walk and when we got back for breakfast 'Dad' had dropped in to say goodbye as well. We said our goodbyes to Sue and set out to take in a couple of the places we had visited on the first day before heading for the big city and some final touristy bits before leaving town. At Yorkey's Knob we had another little walk around the golf course and added Crimson Finch to our list and the Darters nesting in a tree in the middle of the lake seemed both to be attending their offspring. We then tried to visit the Cattana Wetlands only to find the area closed for redevelopment, so we headed for Cairns. We checked into the hotel and then went to one of the Esplanade restaurants for a leisurely lunch. Then, as the tide was still well up I decided on a bit of mud-flat watching while Daphers did the hotel bit; whatever that is! On all previous visits I had been keeping my eyes out for Varied Honeyeater, which I knew to be present, but had so far eluded me; today they were everywhere! A pair of Caspian Terns were roosting on the mud and a couple of Lesser Crested Tern had joined the resident bunch of Crested Terns. Little Tern numbers had increased to 5 and the only Striated Heron of the trip was stalking in the shallows quite close in. Most of the regulars were still about and finally the Laughing Gull did a flypast from the airport end to the pier end of the Esplanade. By now the tide was well out and most of the birds beyond even scope ID range so I packed it in and settled for a cold beer. Despite the rain we had had a very good 10 days birding. Not an enormous bird tally but still pretty decent. Cairns and its hinterland is a wonderful place for birders and should be on the itinerary if you are heading out that way on a birding trip.



A miscellany of Fairy Wrens by Robbie Robertson

## August

By Mike Blair

Traditionally, the mid-July to late August period is quiet, as birding goes. Unless the high-arctic species have had a disastrous breeding season, the main goose immigration is later. Outward migration of many passerines has already occurred, invisibly.

Common Nightingales *Luscinia megarhynchos* have gone, juveniles departing last after a brief period of exploration to familiarise themselves with the surrounding area, whose main landscape features become imprinted, so that on their first return migration they can begin searching out that part of the general area for the right combination of shapes comprising the natal region. Many species do this, even those that almost immediately depart for other nesting areas, particularly if the best habitats are already occupied by experienced breeders. As the duration of suitable nesting conditions has lengthened (BTO nest records over a 55-year period prove this), many species have benefited, being able to produce more broods. In early August it is now commonplace first to hear territorial birdsong and then to see evidence of nesting, eg generalist species like Great Tit *Parus major* and Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* that can adapt quickly to changing circumstances and diets, quite unlike many insectivorous warblers, such as Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* and Chiffchaff *P. collybita* that depend on certain caterpillars being abundant for their chicks. These caterpillars feed on young leaves, the trees are in leaf earlier, but the seasonal 'clocks' of some *Lepidoptera* have not adjusted to the changing climate, and so lay their eggs around the usual dates, by which time most of the leaves are mature and inedible. One consequence is that many moths and butterflies are in decline. In turn, warbler numbers drop, but not at the same rates country-wide.

August sees also the departure of the Common Swift *Apus apus*, usually on or around 22 August in my part of the world, except for occasional migrant flocks in transit.

Shorebird migration usually is slim and desultory, although this year (2008) over 1500 Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, a mixture of adults and juveniles, were at Cley on 26 August, perhaps evidence of high insect densities on the Dunlin breeding grounds early in the breeding season, in turn perhaps an indication that the grip of winter loosened early in the Arctic. Other oddities came in the shape very early of Nearctic rarities in the west of Ireland, particularly American Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*. These transatlantic vagrants may have arrived, not so much as a consequence of seasonal changes, but because in the preceding 14 days, the Atlantic weather patterns had been more complex than I can ever remember; the weather forecasters were not attempting to predict the weather more than two days in advance!

Incidentally, August is the month during which my twitcher friends and acquaintances normally become almost ordinarily human. Each time the pager goes off, they wearily extract it and complain about the information displayed;

"Why do they put that on the pager? Everybody's got that on their year list!"

They then turn to moaning about the relations who have descended upon them in the summer. Their quiver factor is so low that you need to be looking hard for it to detect it! This August, however, the Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii* up Skegness way put paid to that – the quiver factor was palpable, each pager alert provoking the Pavlovian reaction

sequence of: startle response<sup>1</sup>; frantic grab towards where pager ought to be<sup>2</sup>; bring the pager to the reading position<sup>3</sup>; furious fingerwork as previous uninteresting messages are removed ineptly<sup>4</sup>; the shout<sup>5</sup> of the location of the rarity followed by indignation<sup>6</sup>, ending in two interlinked decisions on how to react to the news<sup>7</sup>. If the twitch is on, once the drinks have stopped rippling, minesweeping is an attractive option for those left at the table.

I have to confess I rather like August. It's the time when you can be lucky enough to find a newly-independent juvenile male Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* discovering that newly-independent Blue Tits don't really fancy lunch, especially if they feature as the main course, and are *really really* quick and nimble. I could swear that puzzlement exudes from the little raptor after each unsubtle sally. The down side is that the little hunter will die very quickly unless he feeds – large insects may stave off his demise, but unless he adopts the honed techniques of his ancestors, his genes will not survive.

August is also the time that gardening is impeded by importunate Eurasian<sup>8</sup> Blackbirds *Turdus merula* – attempts to cut down overgrowth find adults and juveniles alike perching just where you are trying to use the shears or clippers and picking up the debris causes indignant squawks as they tumble out in undignified fashion to scold you under your feet – the insects and arthropods desperately seek fresh cover, occasionally biting you on the way.

Most of all, it's the time when a different kind of birdsong begins, representing rather unusual behaviour – a species singing to establish winter territory. On 19 August, I heard my first European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* at full throttle<sup>9</sup>. At first, the song comes from within cover, for the adult birds are just half-way through the moult of their primary feathers, P1 to P5 growing fast, but P6 to P10 are still being shed. As the new feathers strengthen, the bird becomes more manoeuvrable, confidence returns and singing from exposed positions becomes the norm. More than that, the Robin's song represents the onset of autumn, just as the Common Swift's departure marks the end of summer.

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<sup>1</sup> Disastrous if a pint of Abbots is in movement between mouth and table.

<sup>2</sup> Those who have left their pager in a jacket also do this – it may have an evolutionary benefit as a herd response.

<sup>3</sup> This action is not that of the accomplished gunslingers of the movies – often a pager becomes violently airborne to the risk of nearby Muggles, or to itself as it encounters, what in pager terms, is best described as an immovable object. The presence of bifocals or distance spectacles between eye and pager often induces extraordinary contortions that Muggles find quite entertaining.

<sup>4</sup> It's more fingerpigs than fingerwork and is often accompanied by expletives not unfamiliar to Billy Connolly fans.

<sup>5</sup> The shout is never from the same hymn-sheet.

<sup>6</sup> The indignation arises because a rarity has turned up in a place not known to them or to the geographically-challenged (often the same thing – “Bordon? Where the ---- is Bordon?” By the way, that was the Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo* and it was in Hampshire – you know, where the RCT used to train steam-engine drivers).

<sup>7</sup> A pecking-order ritual comes first, where carefully-chosen utterances establish the ‘twitchability’ of the report – is it worth going, and is it possible to reach the location before civilisation ends – if the decision is to ‘GO’, then car allocation and spreading the news are combined, often ending in a clearing cloud of dust.

<sup>8</sup> Proposals have been published (and with likely acceptance) that Tibetan Blackbird *T. maximus* and Himalayan Blackbird *T. simillimus* differ sufficiently in their genetics to merit specific status, hence ‘Common’ changes to ‘Eurasian’ for our resident and our wintering Fennoscandian birds.

<sup>9</sup> Did you know that female Robins also sing at this time? They have to establish their own winter territory and will defend it against male or female.

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**CORY'S LEAST BITTERN – BRAZIL DECEMBER 2007**

*Photo by Robin Springett*



**SAKALAVA WEAVER (MALE NON BREEDING) – MADAGASCAR 2008**

*Photo by Dave Bodley*