



**Newsletter No 88 Autumn 2009**



**Grey Wagtail at the Woollen Mill – Islay Mist 2009**

*Photo by John Stewart-Smith*

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



**Bullfinch - Jul 09**

*Photo by Ian Grove*



**Little Bittern - Cyprus Apr 09**

*Photo by Dick Yates*

# **THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY**

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(As at 21 July 2009)

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

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Cetti's Warbler

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

## Editorial

Well, it's Newsletter time again and first of all it is my pleasant duty, on behalf of all our members, to congratulate our President, AVM Martin Routledge, on becoming a CB in the recent Queen's Birthday Honours List.

This month we have another eclectic clutch of articles and I hope that there is something for everybody. I am well aware that it is not possible to please all of the people all of the time. So if there is anything in particular that you would like to see in your Newsletter please let me know. I can't guarantee to meet your every little whim but I can try.

Our AGM is now finalised and will take place on 14 Nov 2009 at RAF Brize Norton starting at 1300. The calling notice, info about local accommodation, the evening meal and the post AGM Field Meeting are enclosed with this Newsletter.

As promised, the Committee has reviewed and revised the rules for the Photographic Competition and they also are included in this package.

Please have a look at the programme for the rest of this year and as far as we know it for next year and see which of the activities you would like to take part in. You will find it on the Noticeboard.

RAFOS Library – Over the last few weeks some members of the Committee have been reviewing the contents of the RAFOS Library prior to its transfer to RAF Cranwell, where it will be managed for us by the College Library. The review is now complete and we are busy compiling the new Library list. When this is done it will be published along with instructions on how members can go about borrowing books. In the meantime there are several books/publications deemed to be no longer relevant to core RAFOS business. These fall into 2 categories, those that the Committee believe to have some commercial value and those that could not be sold commercially. Publications in the first category are now being valued and when a reserve price is put upon them they will, in the first instance, be available for members to purchase via an auction. The non-commercial category will be added to the annual book auction at the AGM.

Finally, can I again urge anyone who goes off on a birding trip, or indeed any trip that might have some birding content, please just write a short article to tell us of your experiences, good and bad if necessary, on paper so that we can let the rest of our members know through the medium of the Newsletter.

*Dick Yates*

## NOTICEBOARD

### AGM 2009

RAF Brize Norton. Saturday 14 Nov 2009. 1300

### RAFOS FIELD ACTIVITIES 2009

2-4 Oct 09	Portland Bill
23 Oct – 3 Nov 09	Cornish Chough
8 Nov 09	Chew Valley
14 Nov 09	Post AGM FM – Farmoor Reservoir

### 2010

3 Jan	Slimbridge
29 Jan – 6 Feb	Winter Duck 9
Apr	Chew Valley
Apr (Last week-end)	Burnham Overy
May/Jun	BTO Breeding Bird Survey - Scotland
Aug	Catterick Ringing Course
Sep/Oct	Cyprus Raptor Survey
Oct	Portland Bill
Oct	Islay Mist
Oct/Nov	Cornish Chough
Nov	Chew Valley
Nov	Post AGM Field Meeting

### CYPRUS 2009

For those of you wanting to take part in our next Cyprus Survey please see my piece on page 79. Suffice it to say that it is now programmed for Sep/Oct 2010, but there are still a number of imponderables.

### RINGING COURSES

Due to pressure of work Colin Wearn regrets that he was unable to run the 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. He plans to run the next course at Catterick in Aug 2010.

## **KINTYRE 09 – RAFOS CONTRIBUTION TO THE NEW BIRD ATLAS 2007-11**

*By Jerry Knights from an original article by John Wells*

Following our successful expedition to the south of the Kintyre peninsula in 2008, we returned to Argyll between 29 May and 5 June to repeat the experience this year. Bob Swann, the BTO's Scotland co-ordinator, had proposed a new set of 2 x 2 km squares for us to survey in support of the new Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland that is being produced between 2007 and 2011. The BTO had been very pleased with the coverage and results of the 2008 team of 6 serving and ex-serving members of RAFOS in this remote area where there are few volunteers to get the work done. This year the team had one less member than in 2008 and comprised:-

*John Wells, Jim Bryden, Steve Heather, Jerry Knights, Martin Routledge*



This year we had been invited to survey the middle region of the peninsula North of Campbeltown and once again we were based at MOD Machrihanish, where Defence Estates supported the team with accommodation and access to cooking facilities at their HQ on the base. The birding plan was to walk several formal Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) and record everything we saw, particularly evidence of birds breeding (everything from observing display to noting, but not counting, fledged young). This involved collecting data during one or two hour long observations and included identification by call. As well as TTVs the team recorded all Roving Records of birds seen whilst transiting to the survey areas or when completing sea watches outside the key bird activity periods (dawn to 1100 hours). These Roving Records relate to 10

kilometre squares and serve to include species not picked up during the formal recording period, all of which adds further quality to the results.

Some of the more accessible terrain had been surveyed by local enthusiasts, but we were asked to fill in the gaps and cover the less easy areas such as high hilltops, wild forest plantations and coastal paths. Of course, we were required to seek landowners' permission for access to private land and this brought us into contact with the local community. Often the farmers were very pleased to see us and offered their own experiences of local breeding birds and what was to be seen around their farms. They also shared general experiences of natural history in the area, such as the location of breeding Golden Eagles in the hills, as well as deer, otter and the recently re-introduced North American Beavers. As before, much excellent information was also gleaned from the local bird observatory operator, Eddie Maguire (ex-RAF MT driver) who had been based at Machrihanish. This included local knowledge on where to observe the less common species as well as the use of the facilities at the observatory which is on the coast by the outskirts of Machrihanish village.

Again this year we hired our transport from Brampton/Wyton PSI, and again Steve prepared and managed all our food and catering arrangements to the highest quality. The daily routine comprised a very early start, 0430 hours, and departure after a light breakfast and packed lunch making by 0600 hours. A light rucksack and binoculars were generally all that was required as much of the work involved walking in dense woodland or crossing hard, tussocky moorland to check remote lochans and hillsides. Good hearing and bird identification skills are critical to this type of survey. Indeed, it is a fantastic way of improving your sound identification skills. Telescopes were left in the back of the van except for any long distant observations, and afternoon sea watches.



Rhonadale

*Photo: Jerry Knights*

One of the highlights of the trip occurred back at Machrihanish one evening while writing up our day's sightings. From the old SHQ window, Martin observed a pale raptor that had arrived to perch in the bramble and gorse about 200 metres away. Hunting the rough ground was a male **Hen Harrier** and its nearby perch offered us superb views with both binoculars and telescopes. For some of us this was the best view ever of such an elusive species. We also had terrific views of **Golden Eagle**, breeding **Whinchat** and **Wheatear** and, in the wild valleys we found breeding **Common Sandpiper** and **Grey Wagtail**, and huge numbers of **Willow Warbler**, **Whitethroat** and **Chaffinch**. Alongside these we encountered less common species such as **Tree Pipit** and **Grasshopper Warbler** and, when sea watching, **Red-necked Phalarope**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Eider** and **Shelduck** with young.

So we had a terrific week in very warm, fine weather for the first week of June. We walked some fine countryside, completing a splendid 35 TTVs for the Atlas. This was a higher total than last year because we had fine-tuned our advance planning, drop-off, walking and collection techniques. However, only having 5 observers this year meant that occasionally one member would undertake a TTV alone: obviously, this is not ideal, either from the safety perspective or to obtain the best coverage of an area, but in the short time span available it was needs must.

The Bird Atlas is a huge and very important project and anyone can get involved if only by recording Roving Records. Visit [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net) to see where you can help and get up to date local results. The RAFOS team will be assisting again during the breeding season in 2010, possibly returning to JSMTTC Dundonnell or the Kingussie Drill Hall to survey a new area for the Atlas.



John Wells recording

*Photo: Jerry Knights*

## **Overy Windmill 2009**

**or 'the tide that never was'!**

*by Robert King*

Spring 2009 was only my third Burnham Overy Windmill trip and, being fairly new to the Norfolk game, imagine my surprise when I discovered that I had 'volunteered' to do the write up. So, here goes.

Dawn broke unreasonably early on the Friday morning and, aware that I would be unable to stay for the Sunday night and wanting to make the most of the time, I was en route for Norfolk before half past five in the morning.



Great Grey Shrike

Tradition states that the official trip list for the weekend includes birds seen in Norfolk whilst travelling to and from the Windmill. The M25 was kind and I was at the Norfolk border by 0740; and watching my first Great Grey Shrike since 2003 five minutes later. Great, what a bird to start the weekend with! One catch, I was five metres on the wrong side of the Norfolk border, standing on the bank at Lakenheath Fen RSPB, SUFFOLK, so in bird bingo world it wouldn't count.

Next stop, a mile or so up the road, and, critically, the correct side of the county line, was Weeting Heath. This is one of the classic stops on the way to a windmill weekend, being the haunt of Stone Curlews and Woodlark - and in previous years, Al Roberts. However, being March, we were earlier than my previous windmill trips and the reserve

wouldn't open until April. Scanning of the fields beside the road failed to yield any results, so time for another decision: leave the game and tack back into Suffolk for the chance of Goshawk in Thetford forest? My love of raptors saw me at Mayday Farm soon after, scanning the sky for Gossies.

Picking up the Norfolk plot again an hour or so later (without any hawk sightings), I stopped off to tick a Great Grey Shrike at Roydon Common, NORFOLK. I'd now seen as many Great Grey Shrikes in one day as I previously had in my life and this one would count! Brilliant.

Feeling on form and rather hungry to boot, I had lunch in the heather on Wolferton "Cliff"; having lived in Scotland for a few years, I think this is rather an absurd name for what is little more than a steep bank. Things were really going my way, Crossbills overhead and then:-

What was that? A grey blur flashed past and landed in the tree in front. Down sandwich, up bins.

A Great Grey Shrike! You wait six years then three come along at once. I crossed out "Great Grey" and wrote "Routemaster" in my bird guide.

Fed and watered it was on to Titchwell RSPB where most of the windmill group had assembled. As ever, there was plenty to see, highlights being Spotted Redshank, Avocets, two Red-crested Pochards looking very out of place and a ring-tail Hen Harrier quartering the reed-beds.

Stopping off to pay homage to the Little Owl tree (no owl), I missed the fun and games back at the windmill – no one had the key to get in. An e-mail mix up had left Mike Hayes thinking Mike Blair had it, and vice versa. Ever ingenious, Mike B climbed in through a window left open by the painters and claimed his bed before the rest of us.



*(He did find the kettle so we were able to have a brew through the window. Ed.)*

Daphne Yates, Catherine Sweeney, Brian Eke and 'Big Al'

*Photo: Dick Knight*

A telephone call put things right – the key was under 'the stone'.

Okay!! Now we're getting somewhere! **Which stone?**

You may have noticed that there are quite a lot of likely looking stones lying about

around the windmill. Ten minutes searching and the problem was solved. It was under a stone by the gate! Yes - you know the one, it's that big one that's very nearly in the road and nowhere near the \*\*\*\*\* door!!

But we were in - grab a bed and pour another cuppa.

Darkness descended so off to **The Ship**. Followers of the windmill weekends will know the legendary proprietor of said establishment. This year he was on form, welcoming us in his own unique manner. Financial worries were deep on his mind and he gave tails of woe about closing before next year. Time will tell, but I can't help suspecting it was all a ruse to pour cold water on Mike Hayes' sterling efforts to get us a discount.

Incidentally, this wasn't the only example of thrifty behaviour exhibited by Mike H. By all accounts, the next day he gave Jan and Dick an entertaining display as he tried to haggle a discount on a new tripod at Cley Spy optics; and then in an effort of which Del Boy would have been proud, tried to flog off his old tripod to whoever would listen.

Tripod. Black. One previous owner  
One leg permanently detached for easy transport.

Sleeping arrangements remained the same, though clearly there seems to be some confusion as to what the terms 'snorers' and 'non snorers' mean. There were some strange goings on during the night, with Jan's imagination running riot when one unnamed individual tiptoed off into the darkness not to return until daybreak.

Dawn broke clear and fine on the Saturday and those who weren't on breakfast duty headed to Holkham Gap or Holkham Park for a pre-breakfast walk, finding hundreds of Scoter and all three woodpeckers.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker  
Holkhan Park

Of great delight was the number of Barn Owls out and about. At least ten different birds were seen during the day and Fran even went as far as calling them a flock, which leads to the inevitable question, *what is the collective noun for Barn Owls?*

I suggest "a smallholding", but answers on a post card please.

Breakfast was a corker, though I was more than slightly confused when asked whether I wanted "soggies" first or straight on to the bacon and



eggs? The marmalade, supplied by the Orme household, was top class. The Saturday plan was to head east and I volunteered to drive Pete Evans and Jon Orme along the coast to Stiffkey and Cley. This sparked a chain reaction that saw the three of us out at 11pm that night with torches looking for Pete's car keys in the grass. Not to rub too much salt in the wound, but how many times did you say you'd checked your pockets Pete?

But all is forgiven, as Pete come through for us and found the bird of the day, a majestic Crane, just down the road. Later I thought I caught a fleeting glance of a JCB, but I may have been mistaken!

Jan had views of a fly-over Turtle Dove at the windmill, but the rest of us missed it as we'd just disappeared out of the gate in a trail of dust.

Most of the group stopped off at Stiffkey, a lovely little place that yielded a Sedge Warbler, Common Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Small Tortoiseshell, Bumble bees, Bearded Tits, a fly-over Snow Goose, it's plastic feathers looking very shiny in the sunlight, and several Dunnock that enchanted us with their delightful song. We passed on the usual boat trip to the point, but saw the seals distantly in the haze, I am sure that there was just a pile of rocks when I looked, the seals must have turned up later and sat on the rocks.

Cley was warm and sunny, more akin to June than March. John Stewart-Smith nearly reduced the Cetti's Warbler population by one as a dozy bird crossed the boardwalk beneath his feet and Egyptian Goose, Ruff and Little Ringed Plover were added to the script. The photographers amongst us enjoyed close up views of Shoveler, Teal, Redshank, Little Egret and Avocet.

Al Roberts suggested a trip to Sculthorpe Moor would be worthwhile. Al is a warden at the reserve and was certainly correct. For those who have not been, it featured on the BBC Springwatch 2008 program with cameras following the exploits of the breeding Marsh Harriers. We were fortunate to see both the male and female harriers and Al informed us that it was the first time the female had been seen since last year.



Male Brambling at Sculthorpe Moor

*Photo: Robert King*

Another good sign in the Marsh Harrier story occurred the next morning when we watched the male repeatedly dropping down into the reeds – the location of the new nest perhaps?

A Golden Pheasant was seen and heard by some - Daphne's electronic bird-guide had taught us how to tell the difference between a Golden and a Common Pheasant by sound - this had caused some strange looks in the pub! Pete narrowly escaped being knocked out by a hide window that had not been secured properly and must still have a bruise to show for it. Willow and Marsh Tit, Siskin and Brambling (including some stunning males) entertained and rounded off a good day in the field.

Evening banter centred, yet again, on famous Welsh folk.

Sunday turned out fair and warm. Jon Orme was involved with breakfast preparation but managed not to set off the smoke alarm, a feat worthy of note. Mike Hayes showed how to make a superior sandwich, apparently the triangle shape makes them taste better.

Sculthorpe Moor was the first stop of the day and very pleasant. Then to Abbey Farm where Mike H assured us that Little Owl was a dead cert. The Farm turned out to be a lovely little reserve although fifteen is rather a large number to squeeze into such a small hide. Despite the number of elbows, we all had great views of a pair of Kingfishers and yes, one of the Little Owl pair was sitting on the twisted roots of a fallen oak tree. Now it was my time to turn up a trump, I promised the Great Grey Shrike at Roydon and, despite a minor hiccup in the navigation, an intentional decoy to lure the enemy into a false sense of security, we arrived at the common and, sure enough, were soon watching the Shrike.

We then did a repeat of my Friday experience, with a lunch time stop at Wolferton Cliff giving views of the Great Grey Shrike there, plus a fly-over by Crossbills, a pair of Sparrowhawks, Buzzard and Peregrine.

By now it was early afternoon and we anticipated watching waders roosting at Snettisham RSPB. The afternoon high tide, Mike Hayes assured us, was around 3:20pm. It's a fair old slog out to the pits at Snettisham and we should have known something was up when every birder we met was heading back to the car park.

As we reached the hides we had a collective moment of crisis. Despite it being very close to 3pm, there seemed to be an awful lot of mud out there on the Wash, surely it should be water?

This wasn't high tide. What had gone wrong? Maybe Mike had read the time-table wrong and it was low tide? No, that couldn't be it, as the other morning with the Scoters at Holkham it would have been high tide.

Maybe it was 13:20 rather than 3:20? For some reason, there are no tide tables in the hides at Snettisham. There is one at the car park though. A large brightly coloured one. We had been so pre-occupied on the walk out that we'd stormed straight past it.

The answer? It was high tide, just not high enough. For future reference, according to the notices in the car park, you need a tide of at least 6.8m for a good spectacle. We had 4.9m; the water simply wasn't high enough to drive the birds off the mud and onto the pits.

But it wasn't all bad news; we had fun picking out half a dozen Mediterranean Gulls from the hundreds of Black-headed on the pits. For goose lovers (alas, I'm not one

myself), there were hundreds of dark-bellied Brent, some Canada (of unknown race but they looked small), Barnacle and four Snow Geese (two blue, two white) – you can tell they're Snow Goose not Ross's Goose because the bill comes out of the front of the face. Don't ask! But I knew what I meant.

As the sun began to drop it was time for me to depart, but I'll be back next year for another dose.

A total of 138 species seen during the weekend was a good haul for such an early date. Good fun was had by all and our thanks go to Mike Hayes for organising such a good bash. A full list for the weekend is available from Brian Eke: [b.r.eke1@ntlworld.com](mailto:b.r.eke1@ntlworld.com).

### Attendees

Mike Blair  
Fran Eggby  
Brian Eke  
Pete Evans  
Sue Fleming  
John Foster  
Mike Hayes  
Robert King  
Jan Knight  
Dick Knight

Evangeline MacKenzie  
Iain MacKenzie  
Jon Orme  
Al Roberts  
John Stewart-Smith  
Catherine Sweeney  
Daphne Yates  
Dick Yates



Snipe at Titchwell – Burnham Overy 09

*Photo: Dick Knight*

## **"ALL IN A WINTERS TALE"**

Winter Duck 8 – 2009

*By John Wells*

Preparation for Winter Duck 8 started in Feb 08 when Jim Bryden booked the accommodation at Joint Service Mountain Training Centre (JSMTC) Dundonnell and the JSMTC 'drill hall' at Kingussie. He and I had also co-ordinated sponsorship from our 2 splendid supporters Air BP International and Aircraft Service International Group (ASIG). Little were we to know on commencement of Winter Duck 8 we were going to be 'on exped' over a period of Britain's heaviest snow fall for years. This would have a big effect on how we mounted 'Duck 8' and would leave many of our plans in tatters, like a torn flag in the wind.

From an original 12 participants I had on the list, we were devastated when Veronica had to cry off on Tues 3 Feb because of a severe eye condition. What with other cancellations and work commitments the final number came down to nine. 'Vron' would be sorely missed, not least for her recording skills and general good humour as part of Team 1. New on 'Duck' for 2009 was Peter Tithecott who was travelling from Haverfordwest to join up with the party at Severn View service station - well that's what we thought! That was the plan until 1m long chunks of ice falling from the support cables on both Severn bridges put paid to any road travel on 5 Feb from either side of the principality. An interesting couple of days were in store for the merry band of Duck planners, organisers and participants. In fact, thinking on our feet and changing priorities proved to be the order of the day over the next 10 days.

How do I catalogue our tales of travel woe? Chronologically I guess, so here goes:

**Wed 4 Feb:** The weather forecast was already very dodgy and snow was lying in good accumulations around the SE and SW of England. So I scrounged off work for the afternoon and went to RAF Wyton to collect the mini-van. Having collected the keys and signed the hire agreement I drove back to my home, leaving the van on my drive ready for loading and departure first thing Thursday - hopefully. By that evening snow was falling in the SW and icy roads all over the south and the midlands added to the jigsaw. The snow was forecast to move north in a belt and would be with Steve Heather and me in Cambridgeshire by the next afternoon, the day that Duck was due to be 'on the road'. The intention was that first thing on Thurs morning I would go to Steve's home, 2 miles away, and from there drive up the east side of the country to Jim's at Felkington, Nr Berwick-upon-Tweed. As we had no nominated van driver in the SW Jim was to travel south and collect the other van at an 'RV' at Martin Wightmans' house, near Bristol on Thurs afternoon.

**Thurs 5 Feb am:** Steve and I had planned to get away at first light, but we awoke next morning to a good 5 inches of snow and the news that the A141, Huntingdon to March road was closed. We use this road as a pointer to others in our area, it being the main route across the fens. Also, if you go off an icy road round these parts you don't just go into a ditch, you go off into a 20ft deep 'drain' of freezing cold water! They are called canals in other parts of the country!! The police warnings dictated we stayed put; so we sat it out. Thankfully I had collected the van from Wyton the previous day.

Early that morning Martin Wightman had been driven by a friend to Lyneham to collect the PSI Van and he made it back to Yate in not too bad road conditions.

Meanwhile, Jim had made it to Berwick upon Tweed where he caught the southbound train and was probably around Newcastle at 1100 – hopefully the network would hold together!

**Thurs 5 Feb pm:** Jim; still on track and time to Bristol, the rail network was coping. Martin was watching the snow build up but the roads were still just passable; he had to collect Jim from Bristol Parkway station.

At about 1230 Steve and I went for it! The van was loaded with all our kit and the food that Steve had prepared and we were ready to go, we hopped in and went nowhere!!

*Dig-out No 1.* The weight of all the kit in the 2WD van was a joke, the wheels just spun on the 3-4 inches of compacted snow. Out of the van, unpack the 2 shovels and start digging. This was the first, but certainly not the last, time that these implements would be put to good use.

Finally, we got away and struggled off towards to the A1 at Peterborough. Many accidents were happening around us but the road infrastructure was just about recovering. We had planned to arrive at Jim's house in Felkington, Northumberland about 1700, but due to the late start, the condition of the roads and a few minor mishaps and diversions en route we didn't make it until after 2000.

After a splendid traditional German smoked pork dish; Kessler roast and the accompanying potatoes and veggies, prepared for us by Jim's wife, Hilda, Steve and I retired fairly early, at about 2230, as we were both shattered. A hard overnight frost and a clear and starry night was observed as I padded to the loo in the early hours.

Bristol – same evening; Jim and Martin were keeping an eye on the roads and weather, but knew the next day they were due to get further accumulations.

### **Fri 6 Feb – A tale of 2 Vans.**

The Lyneham Van. Jim and Martin woke to a blanket of snow, they were going nowhere – fast.



The Lyneham PSI Van snowbound in Yate. The view from 'Fieldfares' – Martin's house

*Photo: Martin Wightman*

Next came some more bad news; Peter Tithecott was stuck the wrong side of the Severn Bridge, at his daughter's house in Newport. The day was not starting at all well. This hold up would have a knock on effect on collecting all those in the chain further north. Jim made some hasty phone calls. Needless to say Gerry Bilboa was snowbound in Hereford. Jerry Knights, in Staffordshire, had also had a fair scattering of snow, but all he could do was to await on the outcome of events further south. There was only a faint chance of collecting him that day and heading north and they had even considered cancelling the whole day and starting afresh on Saturday.

However, they came up with a plan. Peter T was to get on a train in Newport bound for Bristol where Jim would meet him at about 1400, from there they would set off up M5 for Gerry and Jerry; and the plan worked well – up to a point. Peter was collected from Bristol - on time – and they then proceeded north to pick up Gerry B. However, J2 on the M50 was as far as Gerry's wife could get, so they picked him up from there. Then there was some debate as to how far they could get that day and they decided that they would try and make it to Jerry and Ruth's place where they would hole up for the night and set off at 0400 in the morning. They made it to Jerry's around 2130, had dinner and were then packed off to bed, very pleased to have made it that far.

The Wyton Van. For Steve and me it was a bright start to the day, the frost had made the countryside a picture, but the clouds in the north looked grey and menacing as if they could yield more snow. But our first sight was of the birds, lots of them, streaming in to the feeders. Fourteen **Blackbirds**, an assortment of **Blue Tits** and **Great Tits**, the occasional **Wren**, lots of **Starlings**, **Chaffinches** and **Greenfinches**, 3 or 4 **Goldfinches** on the niger feeder, about 25 **House Sparrows** and a few bully boy **Fieldfares**; which is unusual really, but I guess they had been forced across from further east and were in need of sustenance. Hilda had been put off them by their antics, she felt the visitors were shooing off her residents. Next, in came the trusty group of **Tree Sparrows**, 2 or 3 at first, great - a year tick, then singly until we had 5 at the small apple tree outside Jim's window, this was the highlight so far of the trip.

We went outside to the van and immediately it became obvious we were not moving that in a hurry! The previous night we had driven in on wet, slushy snow; this was now block ice about 6 inches thick, completely sealing in the van. We went back into the warm, had breakfast and drew up a plan.

We called up Maggie to postpone the collection at her place for the time being, then we got Jim's stuff together and loaded the van; dug out behind the wheels and hoped to reverse back onto the lane. Not a chance!! Hilda came up with a cunning plan of using old ashes from the wood burning stove under the wheels, so after an hour of digging and spreading ashes we managed to reverse out it on to the lane – which was blocked! The wheels were unable to get any purchase and we sat there in the middle of the lane – side on. Thankfully the local farmer was out clearing snow from his drive and farm outbuildings with his tractor; we explained our predicament and travel plans and he agreed to clear the road for us. By now, with the help of another 12 buckets of ashes, we had managed to pull forward onto Jim's drive allowing the tractor on to the road.

Once the road was clear we were able to reverse out and move slowly on to the hard packed snow. We didn't dare stop, we just kept it on a straight track and tried to stay out of the hedges. We phoned Hilda to say goodbye and let her know she could stop filling buckets of ash. She asked for a road report as she was due to go to work that day, we advised against it.

At around 1400 we were somewhere near the Forth Road Bridge, having collected Maggie en route and we called Jim to get an update and heard about their plans.

We continued and at Perth the snow was not unduly heavy, but the great unknown is always the A9 over Drumochter. The traffic reports were their usual sketchy selves - the road was open and being ploughed. However, it got progressively worse as we went north and near Newtonmore it was bad, snow about 2 ft deep and becoming compacted, but the road was just passable. We were glad when we pulled off the A9 at Newtonmore and even gladder when we got to Kingussie.

We got unpacked, sorted out the kit and after a pleasant meal at a hostelry within walking distance we contacted the other team, safely tucked up at Jerry and Ruth's, and retired to bed. We could have a lie in the next morning before a further check with the other team and setting off for Inverness Tesco at about 0900 for breakfast and shopping.

**Sat 7 Feb.** We had the breakfast and did the shopping and as it was now nearing the time for the Lyneham van to arrive and the 2 lads from Morayshire to meet up with us, it was a case of all eyes fixed on the crowds and arriving vehicles. Tom Dewick and Kevin Cairns duly arrived and were met in the car park. Tom had collected Kevin en route and both were in good spirits. I thought it best to dish out the brief and Team 1's intended survey options to Kevin, at least if he had the plan it would save time when the remainder of his team, Gerry and Peter, finally arrived. At about 1230 the Lyneham van rolled in. It was hand shakes all round and introductions to the new 'players' on Duck 2009 – amazing we had got this far!

We then reorganised the transport into teams:

Team 1 - Gerry Bilbao/Kevin Cairns/Peter Tithecott would be based at JSMTTC Dundonnell and survey from Red Point to Melvaig; Loch Gairloch; Loch Gruinard; Loch Ewe; Loch Broom and Little Loch Broom to Ullapool.

Team 2 - Jerry Knights/Jim Bryden/Steve Heather. Based at Elphin would cover from there to Rhue and Kinlochbervie and all areas to Kinlochewe.

Team 3 - John Wells/Tom Dewick/Maggie Sheddan. Based in Tofts House, since the back-packers' hostel in Thurso was such a let down last year, Jim had found this nice self-catering accommodation just outside John o' Groats. Team 3 would survey Duncansby Head to Thurso; then move on to Farraid Head and complete the western and all Northern Coastal sites, Cape Wrath included.

Finally, we would all meet up at JSMTTC Dundonnell to complete survey.

Once all the personal kit was loaded it was time for Steve, as Chef and logistician extraordinaire with myself as his accomplice, to allocate the food, other provisions and cleaning and domestic items to the respective vehicles because the 3 teams were each going their own way from here; we would not meet up again until Wednesday night. This part of the plot was new with each team going directly to their 1<sup>st</sup> base; this would save time, fuel and survey hours – the fine-tuning of 'Duck' continues. The whole

procedure went quite smoothly until someone noticed that the Team 3 food box, box marked 'Northern Team' was still on the rear sill of the Team 2's van, going to Elphin and not to John o' Groats! However, we were just about to start the briefing so someone said;

"Oh! Don't worry we will get to that in a minute or so" or something like that, but we never did! **ALL**, and I mean all of Team 3's cereals, fruit, dry rations, crisps, tinned puds, tinned vegetables and chocolate bars for lunch boxes went to Elphin! Team 3 went to J o' G empty handed.

Needless to say Jim wasn't going to let me off lightly with that one!! The quotes were endless!

"Couldn't organise a \*\*ss-up in a brewery"! and,

"Leave you to do just one little thing - and look what happens"!

But it all ended well. Tom did a shop at the local store at J o' G on the Sunday pm and we had recovered the situation.

But to return to the briefing; we had to ensure that we were all familiar with the survey methodology, forms and Atlas Roving Records. This year we had new data collection forms, for our internal RAFOS systematic lists, to share round and understand. Gerry B had put some grey matter to the task and as Martin, our usual recorder, was unable to make the trip this year, Gerry had come up with 2 new index sheets of places/sites and species seen at each one. Effectively we were doing 3 lots of counting: RAFOS, Bird Atlas RRs and WeBs – the priority.

We all reached our respective base camps safely and from now on each team was on its own. The surveying proved to be difficult as I will explain. That night the outside air temperature at Aviemore was recorded at  $-16^{\circ}$  deg, and we were lucky to have got through the A9 as it was shut to all traffic again, with cars abandoned everywhere. The following paragraphs will concentrate on the activities of Team 3, because that's the one I was on, with a few snippets from the others.

**Sun 8 Feb - Survey Day 1.** We set off on a crisp frosty morning with only about 3ins of snow on the ground for Duncansby Head to cover Sector 1 and our first site at Bay of Sannick. If we hadn't quite realised it before we did now – this was going to be a very hard week's survey made even harder because we were in smaller teams, only 3, and each team needed 2 scopes, a driver and some decent counters as well as an I/D specialist. It was a bit disconcerting to be the I/D specialist - if I say so myself. Maggs and Tom knew the ground but this was going to test all the skills we could muster.

The **Fulmars** at the point near the lighthouse at Duncansby Head loved the strong winds but visibility was awful and as the snow flurries blew in, we ducked for cover into Tom's pick-up and let the squall pass through. Just up the road when the squall cleared Maggie picked out a passing **Peregrine Falcon** as it blatted along the coast at 100ft.



Fulmars at Duncansby Head

We also had our first **Red-throated Diver** and then it was westwards towards the adjacent Ness of Duncansby. The Ness of Huna, St Johns Point, the very large site at Gills Bay, Harrow Harbour and Loch Mey were the remaining sites to visit as planned by Maggs. Needless to say I can't give you the totals of all the birds seen but a large flock of 274 **Greylag Geese** was located at Loch Mey. The Loch here is special in that the walk in from the road is undisturbed and the area is designated as a local nature reserve. Across the road from the entrance stile a single **Pink-footed Goose** was all on its lonesome in a field - sad really.

The nature reserve is also special in that it has 2 hides, another blessing! We could get inside and count properly, sheltered from a very cold wind that bit into extremities of fingers and toes. Maggie and I counted 456 **Common Gull**, 112 **Herring Gull**, 181 **Widgeon**, 43 **Common Teal**, 39 **Mallard**, 2 **Goosander**, 4 **Common Redshank** and a single **Pintail**. But the best record was when Maggs spotted a stunning male **Hen Harrier** as it floated from right to left in front of the hide at 50m (max). It proceeded to quarter the marsh and shore of the loch before alighting in the blustery snow squall on a

distant fence post where it sat all fluffed up and motionless for a good 30 minutes, a terrific sight.

One fact that became apparent to us as dusk drew in was that we were seeing greater than normal numbers of 'grey' geese flying south over our heads. Maggie and Tom could not recall having seen this spectacle on previous visits to these northern areas. Could this be a more northerly European population heading for our shores, or were they local birds moving inland at dusk and thus a normal daily movement of birds from the coast to inland. All very puzzling, where had all these geese come from? Also it meant annotating the forms as 'fly-overs', as technically they weren't within the WeBS count areas, but there were just too many to ignore and certainly too many to count accurately, so we made estimates of 70, 120, 80, 250 etc as the skeins headed south.



After that it was back to the cosy surroundings of Tofts House and the warm kitchen with its large pine table for 'call-over'.

Tom prepared the meal each evening whilst Maggs and I did the Admin.

Tofts House  
*Photo: Maggie Shedden*

Team 2 also had some fun and games on day one. They were up near Rhiconich and their wagon got stuck in the snow in a hotel car park; or what they thought was a car park – Jim explains:

We drove in to the hotel car park, whereupon the wagon got stuck and a guy who was watching from a window in the hotel helpfully said:

"You've driven in to a ditch". "Yeah - we know that, now!"  
"It was covered in snow you ken?" "And yes! We can see that now!!"

However, he did provide his 4x4 to pull us out – backwards, at about 30mph. A tad too quick for me, I was thinking - if he stops suddenly there's going to be one almighty bang. But luck was with us.

Team 2 also met up with a local character, surely the hardiest women in the Highlands, again Jim explains:

"Hilda is a Dutch woman who lives at Elphin in a single skin metal barn with **no** heating and **no** electricity. She shares the facility with her goats and sheep and during the day she stands her bed on end to give her the only workspace in the barn. Unlike most 'expat' Dutch she has a really strong accent because she talks to all her animals in her

native tongue, she believes they prefer it. Hilda doesn't have a driving licence, but cycles everywhere, even in 2 feet of snow. She was our alarm call in the morning as she arrived at the neighbouring house every morning at 0600 to prime the solid fuel stove. She befriended the boys and was a truly lovely person." She sounds a real gem.

**Mon 9 Feb - Survey Day 2.** Team 3 – starting off from where we finished the evening before and heading westwards, we went straight to a large site some 6 miles inland; Loch Heilen. It was a low flat area and the loch was difficult to see in all the 'whiteness', it was largely frozen over and we were going to call it a 100% ice until common sense dictated we do the job properly and get as close as possible. We walked in and scoped it. Immediately, it became apparent that **Whooper Swans**, ice and a landscape of snow can easily merge! The birds were on a patch of 20-30yds of unfrozen loch: 59 **Whooper Swans**, were huddled together on the ice and shore line of the loch, this was to be our teams largest count of this species for the week. With them were 30 **Common Gull** and 142 **Greylag Geese** and flying over 3 skeins of 188. This was particularly interesting as it was still only 0745 and not long after first light. Where had this lot come from? Another sign of a cold weather movement of birds to warmer climes? In one of the skeins, directly above us, I called a single **White-fronted Goose** and later in the warm of Tom's van we studied the reference books and we all confirmed the record.

The next few sites were good but Ham Berry was also picturesque, so much so that Tom parked in the middle of the road to get out and do the count, quite forgetting that a snow plough might need to get through. The snow-plough driver took it in good spirit.

At Little Clett, a bay with some sheer stacks just off shore, we saw 36 **Shag** and 36 **Pink-footed Goose** flew over and headed inland, also we had 3 **Long-tailed Duck**, 5 **Turnstone**, 8 **Greater Black-backed Gull**, 13 **Common Gull**, 327 **Fulmar**, and a **Black Guillemot**. A short distance up the road at Scotland Haven, a great name for a small headland, Tom went 'yomping' to survey the bay whilst we caught up with the paperwork. He raced back in great excitement, not over the small count of waterfowl he had made, but with the news that he had seen another male **Hen Harrier**. He pointed us in the general direction that it was flying away. I didn't get on it before it dropped out of sight but Maggs caught a glimpse just before it was out of view. Other sites that day were St Johns Point and many lochs; Loch Dunnett, Sanders Loch, Long Loch, Clardon Haven, Loch Burifa, it's impossible to list all the birds but it's worth listing the sites, aren't they just brilliant names?

While at Little Clett we located a **Shag** with a green Darvic ring on its left leg, unfortunately we couldn't read it. But Team 2 had better luck with a **Whooper Swan**. Initially they could not make sense of the letters and numbers on the yellow plastic leg-ring: then the swan upturned to feed and it all became clear, the ring was on the leg upside down. Jerry submitted the details to the BTO and as yet (June) nothing has been heard from them.

**Tues 10<sup>th</sup> Feb.** The day for Team 3 to pack up and leave Tofts House. It didn't take too long as we had done most the night before and we left the place as good if not better than we had found it. Maggie took to the cleaning with her usual vigour and made friends with the penguins. She also took some time-out and photographed the Reindeer in the paddock at the back of the house and outbuildings. The owners had explained they were bred locally and were quite an attraction.



Tofts House Penguins



and Reindeer

*Photos: Maggie Sheddan*

After leaving Tofts House it was quite a drive out to the first site that day, Thurso Bay including Scrabster fishing harbour. On arrival we saw that it was a large count area that held a lot of birds. In the Bay we found 2 **Red-throated**, 4 **Black-throated** and 3 **Great-Northern Divers**. This was unusual as you do not normally see Red-throats alongside GNDs and Black-throats. Along the shoreline were 23 **Turnstone**, 150 **Dunlin** and in the bay 20 **Common Eider** and 262 **Shag** out on the choppy water. Two **Iceland Gull** and a single **Glaucous Gull** were amongst the local gulls, including an impressive 353 **Herring Gulls**. Two **Goosander** were located on the river outlet in the town itself near the wooden footbridge.

As we headed west, the sites we were due to visit today were well spread out. Brims Ness had 596 **Common Gull**, 4 **Eider**, 5 **Shag** and 16 **Greylag**. Brims Ness to Crosskirk held a pair of **Goldeneye** and 21 **Widgeon**, 1 **Oystercatcher** and 45 **Common Gull**. Sanside Bay brought us a welcome 6 **Long-tailed Duck**, 2 **Shelduck** and 11 **Ringed Plover**.



Great Northern Divers (*Gavia immer*) in winter plumage

*Photo: John Wells*

It was here that we had to drive down a narrow frozen mud and grass track. Braving the cold and wind, Maggs and I opted to walk in to save Tom the agro of taking the pick up and the possibility of getting stuck. Tom decided that he could do a 3-point turn in a smallish gap at the end of the lane, with quite a risk of dropping off the track into a deep ditch. All he succeeded in doing was getting the truck into a 3 wheel spin, the 4<sup>th</sup> wasn't even in contact with the ground, and himself into a rage. Maggs and I had to give up the idea of the walk, we dropped our scopes and went to the rescue and heaved the truck back onto the track. Tom was now in no mood for surveying so we carried on and counted waders for 20-30 mins.

We met some rough weather that afternoon and had to curtail our plans as we headed across to Faraid Head. This meant leaving about 6 sites that we couldn't do that day. Tom called up the range wardens and got a weather update from them and also informed them of our ETA as they also needed to plan their 'escape' home from the range hut at the Head.



Counting at Loch Heilen

*Photo: Maggie Sheddan*

**Wed 11, Thurs 12 and Fri 13 Feb.** These next 3 days were spent surveying around Durness, Loch Eriboll and Kyle of Tongue, and we also made a few new friends at the range hut. The 3 wardens Maj David Halpin and the air controllers made us very welcome. The ATC tower was busy most nights as live firing was taking place whilst we were in situ. We took it in turns to go up and watch and listen to the controllers calling in the Tornado crew as they planned their evening's work in dropping a concrete bomb (complete with small fuse) onto the target at Garvie Island, a small rock outfall some ¼ mile off shore. When live firing the red light was the only indication the range hut was 'active'. Maggie made light of the fact that the boys were more interested in watching the action than cooking dinner and the fact that the tower, when lit up, looked like a pole dancing bar complete with central pole from ceiling to floor.

Thurs 12 Feb had been a troublesome day for Team 2 also. They were behind on their survey and drove down to Dundonnell later than planned, eventually meeting up with Gerry, Kevin and Peter on the Thursday evening. This left them with no option other than to use the supposedly free day on Fri to try and cover the big stretch from Loch Carron to Sheildaig. Team 1, Gerry, Peter and Kevin had been pretty lucky and had managed to complete all their survey areas to plan. They were the only team to catch

up with **White-tailed Eagle** during the week and a **Golden Eagle** over the Isle of Ewe. Both great records in the central survey area.

**Sat 14 Feb.** On this final day Team 2, with Gerry in tow in the Wyton wagon, had a terrific day's birding down at Applecross. Stevie H, our raptor spotting specialist, had located a **Golden Eagle** showing well in a tall Scots pine tree, fairly close to the road. The lads could make out the wing-tag and took accompanying notes.

Our team, Team 3, drove back south to Dundonnell and mopped up the odd site that Team 2 had been unable to cover due to snow bound roads. We even located 2 **Glaucous Gull** and a 2<sup>nd</sup> winter **Iceland Gull** en-route, both terrific views in good light. The evening meet up was short and sweet as we caught up on what had happened to the others and exchanging winter tales of driving difficulties, great birding and great company.

The drive south was uneventful, the best way, broken up by a big boys breakfast and farewells at the TESCO Car Park as the three sets of travellers departed on their different routes home.

Another splendid 'Duck' completed successfully and probably the hardest one I've done. We all have to put in a great effort to make this event the success it is and I certainly feel that the coordination role for Jim and me gets no easier. The hardest bit is working out what each of the 3 teams are up to and if they are on schedule. Jim keeps the communications going very well and we just about kept it on the rails this year. Shame we only met up briefly as a full team, for the one evening. Same again next year?



This shot of a beautiful male Snow Bunting in winter plumage was taken by *Eddie Maguire* from his Observatory at Machrihanish on 18 Mar 09 and is reproduced with his permission

# “ISLAY MIST 09”

## including ‘The Great Ring Ouzel Hunt’

By John Stewart-Smith

This was to be the last “Islay Mist” organised by Bill Francis, so we mustered a record number of 15 participants to dither their way towards the Inner Hebridean island of Islay for the week 9 to 16 May 2009. As with many operations, we had a strategic plan and a tactical plan for “Islay Mist 09.” The aim of the strategic plan was to collect as much data as possible on the breeding birds of Islay and feed all the data to BTO for inclusion in the Bird Atlas 2007-11, mapping Britain and Ireland’s birds. This data is also passed to Dr. Malcolm Ogilvie who lives on Islay and disseminates RAFOS-collected information. Dr. Ogilvie is an eminent ornithologist and specialises in the study of waterfowl. He worked for many years with WWT and The International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB) at Slimbridge before retiring to Islay. He is also a copy editor for technical ornithological journals and publications. The tactical plan was formulated by Dr. Ogilvie and myself and involved trying to find evidence of breeding Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* on the remote high ground in the eastern part of Islay. Ring Ouzels were last recorded there some 14 years ago and Dr. Ogilvie was eager to discover their current status on Islay.

The 15 participants planned to head towards Islay from all points of the compass so an IP (Initial Point) was established at the WWT Reserve at Caerlaverock on the northern shore of the Solway Firth in an attempt to form a cohesive group in Scotland before getting on the ferry to Islay. A fair number of the team remembered the briefing and gathered at Caerlaverock, in dribs and drabs, on Thurs 7 May with enough time to sort out sleeping arrangements and get to The Nith Hotel in time for an evening meal.



The weather at Caerlaverock was wet and windy but with enough bright spells to allow us to polish our birding skills on large and small species of land, shore and water birds.

A Mallard with 31 ducklings in tow was either babysitting for her friends or needed some family planning advice.

A very smart Garganey drake posed for pictures on the pond behind the farmhouse.

There was a modicum of confusion when this duck seemed to be able to be in two places at once (as ducks are reputed to be able to be) until it turned out that there were two Garganey drakes on adjacent ponds. The badgers that fed under the farmhouse window did not move fast enough to cause similar confusion.



Male Garganey

*Photo: John Stewart-Smith*

After two nights at Caerlaverock I sauntered down for breakfast to find that the majority of the RAFOS party were planning an early departure for Kennacraig and the ferry to Islay. This seemed odd to me as Fran, Catherine and I were travelling on a ferry that departed from Kennacraig several hours before the one on which the rest of our party were travelling. We set off after breakfast, putting my faith in Tom-Tom, and we arrived at Kennacraig in plenty of time to catch the ferry after an exciting drive across the mountains in torrential rain. There was no sign of any other RAFOS people and then we remembered that they were engaged in shopping for a week's supply of food for everyone, hence their early departure from Caerlaverock.

The weather cleared and we had a quiet trip across to Port Askaig with some close views of **Great Northern Divers**, **Gannets** and **Black Guillemots** to add to our list. "Islay Mist" traditions include everyone recording all birds seen while on the ferry crossings to add to the total seen on the island. In previous years, as a piece of harmless entertainment, everyone submitted their guess as to the total number of species that would be recorded. The most accurate guesser then scooped the kitty contributed to by all participants. However, for 2009 our illustrious leader, Bill Francis, decided that "guesses" were becoming too accurate and the old hands had an unfair advantage over the newer 'Islay' participants. He decided that everyone would draw a number from a hat and that was your 'guess'. There was a bit of muttering when a few of the old hands drew numbers deemed extremely unlikely to win, but they consoled themselves with the knowledge that winning the pool of £15.00, including their own contribution, would do little to defray the cost of the round of drinks that the winner is traditionally required to buy to celebrate their win. If you win you lose and if you lose you get a free drink. The only problem remaining is that it is just possible that a totally unscrupulous participant might be tempted to "find" an extra species or two to achieve their draw number – but we all knew that everyone was totally scrupulous and would never think of such a thing.

Fran, Catherine and I drove off the ferry and up the steep hill out of Port Askaig to continue recording birds as we made our roundabout way towards Kilchoman House. Our first stop was at Bruichladdich, on Loch Indaal, where we parked on the shore right outside Malcolm Ogilvie's house, which just happens to be adjacent to the Bruichladdich

distillery. This, despite being on the main road, is an excellent place for spotting waders, divers and sea ducks as well as passing terns.



Purple Sandpiper

*Photo: John Stewart-Smith*

I had just assembled my camera and walked a few yards to the edge of the grass verge when I spotted eight **Purple Sandpipers**, two **Ringed Plover**, one **Turnstone** and a host of **Oystercatchers** all within 20 yards of the road and the passing traffic. Having satisfied my picture-taking urges we went to Debbie's small village shop that has an excellent stock of goodies and serves very good coffee. We had just settled to our coffees when Carol Ogilvie, Malcolm's wife, walked into the shop carrying a dish of homemade ice cream and meringue for the shopkeeper to try. I got a nice cuddle from Carol but the four women got the ice cream and meringue. I was told it was bad for me, but coffee was good for me!

We then set off southwards along the coast road (the only road!) through Port Charlotte and down The Rhinns towards Portnahaven, the ladies full of ice cream and meringue and me trying not to think of having consumed too much coffee. The only surprise for me was three **Common Terns** flying parallel with the road and 8 **Greylag Geese** on a small roadside lochan. It was soon time to head back and take the single track road to Kilchoman and our cottage. We stopped outside the cottage and as soon as I opened my car door I could hear a **Corncrake** calling loudly from nearby. Ian, the owner of Kilchoman, came to meet us with a big grin on his face. I thought the corncrake was probably a recording set up to fool RAFOS but Ian soon pointed to a field right behind our cottages and said, "The corncrake has just arrived!"

The remainder of our group arrived straight from their ferry soon afterwards. Perhaps "straight" is slightly inaccurate because Bill Francis apparently mistook the turning to Kilchoman and led his driver off on a mystery tour of Islay before getting his bearings and arriving only slightly befuddled at the cottages.

Sunday morning began at 0500 with a **Cuckoo** providing an early alarm call, backed up by a corncrake calling just behind our cottages. Jan had organised the distribution of supplies to each cottage in her usual efficient style on Saturday evening and all was going well until Bill and Jan realised they didn't have any marmalade in their cottage. This disaster was soon resolved when John Le Gassick owned up to having three jars of the stuff and peace returned to Kilchoman. John Le Gassick then reported that they didn't have any cooking oil, but Jan comforted him by showing him what a bottle of cooking oil looked like. Jan soon had all the residents tucked under her wing and we all settled down to eat breakfast

Bill then briefed us on the day's plan and everyone set off in all directions armed with BTO Roving Record sheets, binoculars, telescopes, cameras and OS maps. It's amazing how so many people can vanish so quickly when driven by a determined leader. As a finale to our day I had been tasked with driving to the airport to meet the 1745 arrival from Glasgow to collect two late arrivals, the Springetts. First off the aircraft was Julia who became Senior Naval Officer, Islay (SNOI) as soon as her feet touched the tarmac. I was pleased to see that she had brought her own bag-carrying assistant in the shape of Robin. He loaded their bags and we set off for Kilchoman. A short stop at Bowmore for shopping and then a drive along the coast road around Loch Indaal allowed the new arrivals to get a feel for all the birds to be seen beneath a cloudless blue sky. Robin and Julia took up residence with Peter and Jenny Gray. Evening call-over showed a rapidly increasing number of species without too much bickering or raising of eyebrows, despite queries about the number of Carrion Crows being recorded. There are reputed to be very few Carrion Crows on Islay, being mainly Hooded Crows. But to give an idea of the amount of data being gathered for BTO by RAFOS on Islay, my personal tally for Sunday was 157 records in 23 different tetrads. I suspect that everyone else was submitting similar daily totals.

Another perfect, cloudless day dawned on Monday. I checked that our guide for The Great Ring Ouzel Hunt would be available to lead a party into the hills on Wednesday morning, weather permitting. The forecast for the rest of the week looked good to excellent so it seemed that Bill had got the dates of "Islay Mist 09" absolutely right. Once again the RAFOS members scattered like a covey of startled partridge and set to filling in their BTO Roving Records.

"Our Corncrake" on his wall shouting for a mate. *Photo by Ian Brooke*



After another hard day's work we all gathered together at the cottages in the evening to watch "our" **Corncrake** walking along the top of a stone wall while shouting out its invitation to mate. One of our group is "aurally challenged" (i.e. deaf as a post), and likes to keep her hearing aid in her handbag. This sometimes causes misunderstandings and misinterpretations of what is being said, unless you are inside the handbag. Apparently everyone was listening to the corncrake and said, "Listen! It's

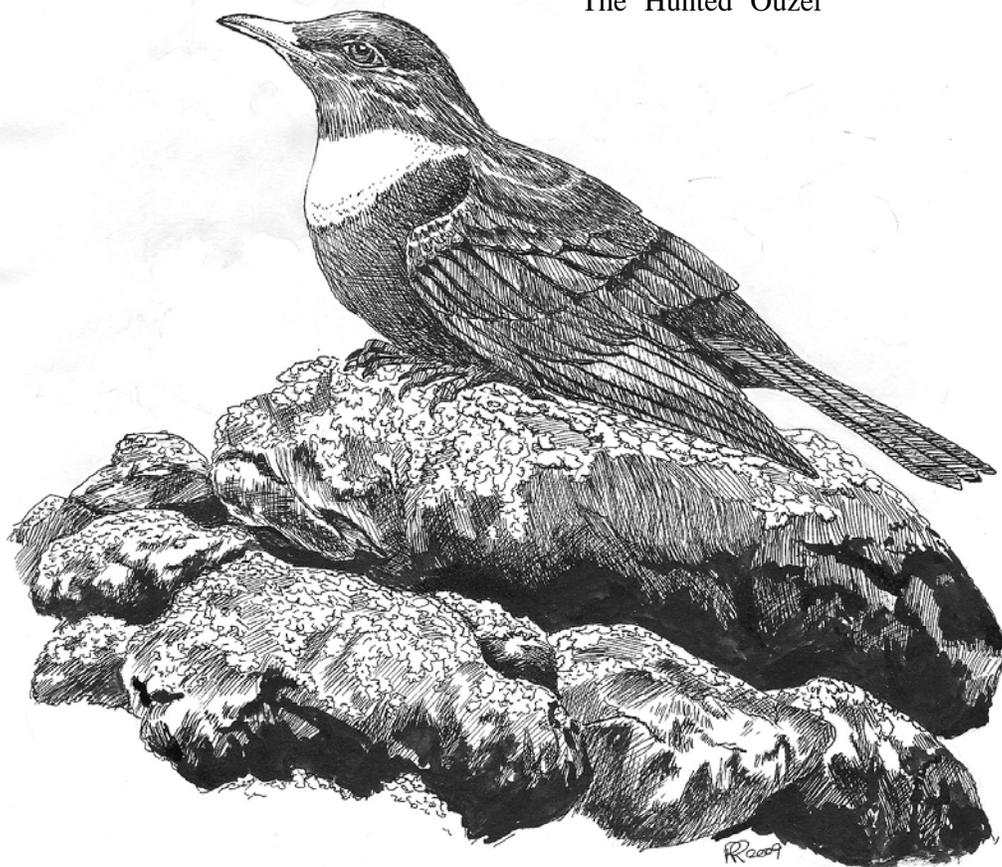
a corncrake!" This produced, "But I don't like cornflakes," from the aurally challenged member. I don't believe that story!!

Many more new species were added to our list at evening call-over and those who had drawn low numbers in the lottery began to plan how to scupper those with higher numbers. Food and drink was taken and the noise abated as everyone settled down for the night.

Tuesday dawned at about 0400 and once again it was a perfect, cloudless day. I dropped off Fran and Catherine so they could explore a stretch of woodland while I drove to the southern end of Islay to do my own thing there. I watched a collie stalk a group of seals sleeping on rocks, then charge the seals and even stand on one seal's back as it floundered into the sea. Apparently, this is a recognised occupation of this collie that lives at Port Wemyss. Once the seals had settled down in the water the collie wandered off and a female **Hen Harrier** drifted over. She flew one low level circuit around the tall lighthouse on Orsay island and then flapped slowly back over the main island. I drove to our planned pick-up point and saw a Greylag with 8 goslings in tow before I collected Fran and Catherine who had added more new species to our tally.

Evening call-over didn't produce any arguments and another excellent day on Islay came to a peaceful end.

The 'Hunted' Ouzel



I had planned an early start on Wednesday with our valiant group of Ring Ouzel hunters setting off to rendezvous at Bridgend with their guide. We actually got there at 0700 as planned and met Mr D.J. MacPhee, known as 'DJ', the Head Keeper of the Dunlossit

Estate. He arrived in his 4x4 dressed in immaculate Dunlossit Estate tweeds in sharp contrast to some of the RAFOS get outs. Introductions were made and a short briefing conducted before the intrepid six clambered aboard behind him and drove off for their ascent of Beinn Bheigier. Beinn Bheigier is only 456 metres amsl but it is approached across fairly rough ground dotted with quite dangerous sink holes and is a few miles from the nearest driveable track. DJ instructed everyone on the need to avoid these sink holes and the SNOI was heard to instruct her bag-carrier to do as he was told, for a change. The long slog proved to be fruitful when Fran spotted a Ring Ouzel sitting on a rocky outcrop (as they do!) and Robin and DJ heard two more birds calling. Robin had his bird tapes with him and they were able to compare the recorded Ring Ouzel with the calling birds to provide absolute confirmation of the recognition. DJ then led them back downhill towards his parked vehicle. During the descent the topic of how to tell the difference between a cormorant and a shag was raised, once again. The Head Keeper thought for a moment and then said, "Well, after five beers I've never felt like a cormorant." That would seem to solve that problem.

The group returned to Bridgend after almost 6 hours on the high ground and the successful conclusion of 'The Great Ring Ouzel Hunt' was announced. Ring Ouzels were confirmed on Islay in the breeding season after some 14 years without any records.

Fran, Catherine and I had a very pleasant supper with Malcolm and Carol Ogilvie that evening and Malcolm was delighted at the RAFOS success in finding the Ring Ouzel on Islay again. On our way back to Kilchoman we were surprised to illuminate a Barn Owl in our headlights as we drove along the edge of Loch Indaal.

Thursday, and as forecast, the sky began to cloud over before 0700 and the morning became blustery. Everyone set off to all corners of the island and we three went looking for Crossbills. However, the wind was tossing the conifers about and making it difficult to hear or see small birds in the trees and we didn't find the Crossbills, but others had been more successful earlier in the week.

Local newspaper and posters displayed around the island, including at the airport terminal, announced that Bill Francis was giving an illustrated presentation on the work of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at the Islay Natural History Trust at Port Charlotte on the evening of Thursday 14 May. We had time to clean ourselves up after a long day in the field and set off *en masse* for Port Charlotte to listen to Bill's presentation. Ten RAFOS members helped to swell the audience to capacity at the Islay Natural History hall. Malcolm Ogilvie announced the success of the Ouzel Hunt and then gave Bill and the WWT a very nice introduction. Malcolm worked with WWT for 30 years and it was because of his research on Islay that he came to live on the island. Bill's presentation, with excellent illustrations, covered the work and history of WWT in detail. He did not refer to notes and gave a relaxed and fluid talk that held our attention throughout. Having been a member of WWT for some 50 years I still learnt several new and interesting things from Bill's presentation. Bill took several questions from the audience before Malcolm thanked him for giving up his time and for the very interesting talk.

Our last full day on Islay was again bright and sunny which encouraged us to dash around to the ends of any available tracks to add to our records. I went to Bunnahabhain driving past the whisky barrel by the side of the single track road that has one end of the barrel showing "To Bunnahabhain" and the other end "To Other Places".

Having parked my car on the foreshore near the distillery I watched several pairs of **Common Sandpipers** engaged in their display flights against the background of the Sound of Islay and the Paps of Jura. There are THREE Paps of Jura, but I've never had the opportunity to discover if this is a peculiarity of the local population or not. There is no track northwards from Bunnahabhain to the northern tip of Islay so I wandered along the shoreline, across the kelp-strewn rocks, until I came to the mouth of a river. This is where I have watched otters playing and a female teaching her pup how to catch fish among the rocks. Otters much prefer to be at river mouths where the fresh water joins the sea. There was no sign of otters today, but there were more Common Sandpipers on the river and flying under the trees of the adjacent deciduous woodland. I heard a **Yellowhammer** singing in the trees and **Sedge Warblers** competed with the seemingly ubiquitous **Willow Warblers**. Eventually I found a footbridge, after confirming that my new boots really are waterproof, but decided that I had come far enough.



Common Sandpipers

The rocks in this area are striking, being huge lumps of Islay marble that are shattered by numerous cracks. Thrift (Sea Pink) grows from these cracks but how they do so is not obvious because they seem to grow out of the bare rock. The big chunks of marble are almost pure white and glossy - perhaps a marble quarry would be possible. I have noticed that none of the old Islay monuments seem to include marble - maybe it was too hard for ancient tools.



Islay Marble and Sea Pink

*Photo: John Stewart-Smith*

Quite by chance, I followed exactly the same route back to the car and thus found a small part of my monopod that had fallen off on my outward walk. I sat in the car, eating my sandwiches and watching the frantic antics of the Common Sandpipers. They use so much energy displaying I wonder that they have any left for consummating their success. With that thought I dozed for a few minutes and then set off to Port Askaig to meet Fran and Catherine who had walked there from Ballygrant. We sat outside the Port Askaig hotel and Catherine went inside to get some refreshment. She reappeared after a long time to announce that she had been waiting to be served at the hotel reception desk thinking it was the bar. She couldn't hear the noise coming from the bar nearby. The beer tasted just as good, anyway.

Another long day came to an end. We all retired to the Port Charlotte hotel for our end of the day meal served in the conservatory and Malcolm and Carol Ogilvie joined us as guests. Two **Sandwich Terns** flew past the windows, but by then everyone was being very cagey about adding more species to our total. We were halfway back to Kilchoman before I realised that I had forgotten to pay my bar bill. We returned to Port Charlotte where Catherine asked from the back seat if we were back at Kilchoman already. I paid my bill and apologised. The hotel owner said I need not have bothered to come back and could have phoned to clear the bill.

Saturday morning was a bit dreary but everyone seemed in good form as the Grays set off early because they wanted to be first on and first off the ferry. Robin and Julia were staying on for another day, so we left them in glorious isolation at Kilchoman. We said goodbye to Ian and Margaret and thanked them for everything. Bill went around with Ian

while they checked the electric meters in each cottage, others set off as they were ready and eventually Fran, Catherine and I were ready to leave. I took the short cut bypassing Bowmore along the single track road. All went well until we caught up with a tractor but he pulled off and allowed us to pass. There were lots of vehicles waiting for the ferry at Port Ellen and RAFOS members could be seen skulking about with binoculars and telescopes trying to add to our total and achieve their lottery number. Bill scored first hit with our first and only Swift for the week. This induced frantic recalculation of who was OUT and who was still IN. I had parked my car where instructed, at a different angle to Peter Gray's Landrover that had been there for ages. My two passengers had been briefed to walk on board as foot passengers and get our breakfasts set up. The ferry arrived, foot passengers boarded and I was shepherded down the ramp and on board – first!!! The mumbling from watching RAFOS members was pathetic. We gathered in the cafeteria for breakfast.

Final calculations after we landed at Kennacraig nominated Dick Knight as the lottery winner. The lottery commission paid out and declared the contest ended. Not long afterwards we got a text message from Robin via Julia claiming a Spotted Flycatcher at the Woollen Mill. Oddly, this extra bird would have made Robin the lottery winner but we had to, sadly, break the news to him that his claim was out of time and thus invalid for the lottery, but would be added to our final tally for the Islay count.

My car was also first off the ferry at Kennacraig. We drove to Tarbert with my "Range Available" indicating zero and the low fuel warning light on. Unleaded fuel on Islay cost 112.9p per litre so the 106p per litre at Tarbert didn't look so bad. After loading £50.00 into the tank we set our sights on Caerlaverock. Torrential rain and a few lunatic drivers made the climb over Rest-and-be-Thankful a bit buttock clenching but the weather improved as we approached Glasgow. There the motorway traffic came to a halt below a sign reading "4 mile delay". My trusty navigator instructed me to leave the motorway at the next exit and we joined a slow-moving traffic jamb milling around central Glasgow before rejoining the motorway a few miles further on. There was a big football match somewhere in Glasgow. The weather improved and we arrived at Caerlaverock without further drama. I was quizzed about how I had been first on and first off the ferry when I was last to arrive at Port Ellen, but I just smiled – which annoyed everyone even more.

Just for the record and nothing to do with needing two more species to reach my lottery number, despite the out-of-hand rejection by our Recorder of my bona fide records of Indian Peafowl and Helmeted Guineafowl wandering apparently wild on Islay I must put on record that the BTO Roving Records web site accepted them both with only a note of "rare." So there!

The final official tally for species recorded during "Islay Mist 09" was 122. This has been remarkably constant over the years during both Spring and Autumn surveys, although the actual species recorded has differed between the seasons. We added a great deal of data to the BTO Bird Atlas that will provide a detailed and up-to-date report on the current status of the birds of Britain and Ireland.

What were the highlights of "Islay Mist 09" for me? Sitting outside the cottage in the early morning with a cup of coffee watching a Golden Eagle and a Peregrine circling overhead must be well up the list. Watching Swallows, Sand Martins and House Martins feeding together low over the lawn and each performing perfect stall turns at the end of each run, all within feet of where I sat. I enjoyed crouching beside Ardnave Loch while photographing Dunlins that seemed totally unaware of me as they fed among the grass and flowers and kept up a very soft conversation between each other.



Dunlin

*Photo: John Stewart-Smith*

But most of all, I enjoyed being in the company of pleasant people who enjoy what they are doing. Thanks Bill for all your work and patience arranging Islay Mist over the years and thanks everyone for the pleasure of your company.

Participants in Islay Mist 09:

Bill Francis (Team Leader)  
Fran Eggby  
Jenny and Peter Gray  
Jan and Dick Knight  
John LeGassick  
Karen Simms

Julia and Robin Springett  
John Stewart-Smith  
Catherine Sweeney  
John Towers  
Dick and Daphne Yates

A full bird list for the week is available for anyone who is interested

*Afternote: Ian Brooke informs me that there have been 80 Corncrakes heard calling so far this year, just 2 short of last year's total. "Not bad", he adds, "as less than 10 years ago there were only 4". Ed.*

# SARDINIAN SOJOURN

*By Anne Bodley*

The last week of April we set off in search of sunshine in the Med, choosing the island of Sardinia as our base and in particular a small hotel just outside the small town of Bitti, altitude 548m. A last minute change of flight times by good old easyJet meant an 0330 wake-up call for 0550 departure from Gatwick to Olbia on the northeast coast of Sardinia. From there, a one and a half hour drive down the motorway and up a winding rural road brought us to our pastel pink and blue painted abode for the next 14 days. The plan was for a walking holiday taking every advantage to bird and botanise en route. We had an excellent walking guide but in the rush of departure we had forgotten to pack bird and flower books! This meant that we were often struggling to identify what we were hearing and seeing.

However, arriving in a rather exhausted state we decided to spend the first day enjoying the sun in the hotel garden and one of the first birds to appear was a **Cirl Bunting** in the scrubby area just beyond the garden. That and a singing **Serín** were the first Med species and both were familiar from previous visits to the area. **Blackbirds** were carrying food and **Blue** and **Great Tits** were foraging in the magnificent pine trees. From our balcony we could look down on the town and watch the **House Martins** and **Swifts** wheeling around the church spire. We took a short walk down into town and saw small flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** and **Feral Pigeons**. We nearly got lost in the tiny narrow streets as having chosen the church as our landmark we realised that it was not actually visible once you were in the midst of things. It was impossible even to see the hotel perched high above because of the tall buildings, and it was more by good fortune than good navigation that we arrived back at our destination. As we ate our Gatwick sandwiches sitting around the pool we were serenaded by **Blackcap**, watched by **Hooded Crows** from the tops of the trees and the **Collared Doves** cooed.

Jay

*Photo by Dave Bodley*



The next day we set off for Cala Gonone, a small resort on the east coast, hoping to take a boat trip to Cala Luna, a tiny beach, accessible only on foot or by boat. Alas the wind was too strong for landing so there were no sailings and the only option was to drive as far as possible and walk the rest. It was Sunday and there were lots of people with the same idea, walkers, rock climbers and families just going down to the nearest bit of beach. **Crag Martins** zoomed around the cliffs and hidden in the 'macchia' (maquis or garrigue), **Wrens** and **Robins** sang. Pink and white *Cistus* shrubs, tree heather and the mastic tree were in flower while the strawberry tree already had small fruits forming. The commonest large bird was undoubtedly the **Raven** which we saw daily, but **Jays** were also common and there was a **Buzzard** soaring around the cliffs.

The only sea birds we managed were **Yellow-legged Gull** and **Cormorant** and both of those in very small numbers. The path was very rough and stony, the sea was only visible at intervals and having made a latish start, we decided we were not as fit as we thought and turned back before the end.

We awoke the next morning to torrential rain! Nothing for it but to get in the car and drive to the lagoons and marshes on the west coast. The scenic route down to the motorway turned out to be very slow and twisty, but had virtually no traffic on it - just a **Kestrel** perched on the wires. Even the motorway was relatively quiet, but spray was a problem as all Sardinian drivers seem to drive at maximum speed, regardless of road conditions. Eventually we found the pools and hundreds of **Greater Flamingo** and one **Avocet**. We were expecting **Black-winged Stilt**, but none were visible on any of the pools – just a few **Shelduck** on the Stagno de Cabras. There was a possible distant **Grey Heron**, a **Little Egret** in one of the ditches and as we drove back to the motorway a quick glimpse of a **Cattle Egret** with a flock of sheep. Not the most rewarding of days, but it was just impossible to leave the car without getting drenched.



Hawfinch in Hornbeams

*Photo by Dave Bodley*

The following day dawned fair but with a cold northerly wind and it started well with a flock of 6 **Hawfinch** feeding on the Hornbeam blossom right outside our bedroom window and they were there every day until the blossom withered. A long drive down the Orientale Sarda, the East Coast Road, that is carved out of the side of the coastal mountain range and winds in and out of remote valleys, proved to be without petrol stations and we began to wonder whether we would make it to our planned destination, Baunei, and back; so we diverted into the town of Urzulei which lay several hundred metres down in a river valley. There we filled the tank and realised that there was a walk in our guide which looked well within our capabilities. It led down through small cultivated plots to the river and our first bird was a **Whinchat**, closely followed by 2 **Whitethroat**, but to our surprise there were no Wagtails, Swallows or Flycatchers around the water.



It turned out quite warm in our sheltered valley and we began to see the first butterflies, an **Orange Tip**, **Painted Lady**, **Common Blue**, **Cleopatra**, **Speckled Wood** and a **White Admiral**.

White Admiral on Rock-rose  
*Photo: Dave Bodley*

A round trip through woodland and back to the river brought no new birds but several interesting plants, such as Cyclamen carpeting the forest floor.

A cloudy day followed with the temperature in the mountains no more than 10°C and drizzle threatening. This suggested perhaps another drive along quiet roads (not that any of them were busy!) with frequent stops for birding and botanising. The main problem on the mountain roads was the lack of safe stopping places but today we followed the Monte Albo road, carved into the side of a limestone massif.

Much of the mountainside was wooded or covered by macchia, but where the vegetation was not too dense orchids were plentiful. The dark purple **Long-spurred Orchid**, *Orchis longucirnu*, was common and its close relative the pale purple to pink, almost to white *Orchis ichtnusa*. We found 10 species altogether, including various members of the **Bee Orchid** family and the large and blowsy **Pink Butterfly Orchid**, *Orchis papilionacea*.



Bee Orchid *Photo: Dave Bodley*

Birds alas were conspicuous by their absence, except for our first **Swallow** flying around some farm buildings; we were beginning to wonder what had happened to them as there were none in the vicinity of the hotel. We ended up right down at the coast where the temperature was a much more pleasant 19°C, so we changed into shorts, removed our sweaters and walked a short way along the coast from the lighthouse at Capo Camino, where the **Crag Martins** were nesting in the empty rooms. This walk had been recommended by the hotel proprietor but it was too late in the day to do it all and we resolved to return another day by a more direct route

*WHERE IS THE SUNSHINE?* we wondered when we saw the sky the next morning; but not to be beaten we set off for a high plateau walk - great mistake! The north wind was howling across the bleak karst landscape and the only birds we saw were a **Cuckoo**, which flopped down quite close to us, and in a small area of woodland where pigs were free ranging, our first **Spotted Flycatcher**. The next morning at breakfast time they were in the hotel garden. The woods had big clumps of Corsican Hellebore in full flower and in another wood up behind a farm I found my first wild Peony, still in bud. We got back to the car chilled right through and slightly damp from flurries of rain sweeping across the plateau.

Crocus minimus

Photo: Dave Bodley



May Day, and a public holiday in Sardinia, so we thought it best to avoid the coast and retreat to the mountains and look for Alpine birds. Unfortunately a lot of other people had the same idea and at the end of the drive up to the ski station of Bruncu Spina, summit height 1557m, there were a number of noisy family parties. No sign of raptors in the sky nor any of the other specialities we sought. There were still large patches of snow but where that had melted the endemic *Crocus minimus*, carpeted the grassland with its mauve flowers and bright orange anthers – quite a sight. We knew from reading the Naturetrek Tour Report that there were other botanical goodies to be found, so we

combed the areas of woodland and found more peonies, but still in bud and a grazed verge studded with the dark purple flowers of a *C Romulea*, a Sand Crocus with the white stars of *Ornithogalum collinum*, Star of Bethlehem, and more Orchid species.

May 2<sup>nd</sup>, and at last sunny and warm enough for breakfast outside on the terrace! Spotty Flies and Hawfinches did their stuff with the usual Serins, Chaffinch and Greenfinch. Taking no chances we chose a river valley walk into the Goruppu gorge. But it was a Saturday and we had failed to take account of the popularity of this walk and the one up Mount Tiscali with its famous archaeological remains, both of which started from the same point. We found a parking place after much toing and froing and set off to cross the river. The wooden bridge had been swept away in the winter floods

and not yet replaced so it was a boulder-hopping exercise and we watched the route the younger element were taking and decided we could just about manage it. Whew! A bit hairy at times but we reached the other side intact and with dry feet! A very pleasant walk but once more too much disturbance for the bird life. At least the flowers aren't frightened off by the noise and few people wander off the path, so they remain untouched. Lots more Cyclamen and a few Orchids. We lunched by the river and I plunged my swollen foot, twisted on Bruncu Spina the day before, into the icy water - it felt a lot better afterwards.

Sunny again the next day, so we looked for an easy walk along tracks rather than stony paths, which my wretched foot did not enjoy. We drove along to Benetutti (406m) and then across the Tirso river plain and up through Bono to the Passo o Uccaido. We decided to forgo the climb up to Monte Rasu and joined the route at the halfway point. Parking on the verge we missed by inches a fine stand of Bee Orchids and opposite a **Woodchat Shrike** perched on a bramble clump. We passed a farmhouse with lots of chirruping **Spanish Sparrows**, free-ranging pigs and flocks of sheep guarded by 5 dogs! They herded the sheep together as we approached and barked furiously at us, but otherwise gave us no trouble. We walked on through wood pasture with enormous old Cork Oak and Downy Oak trees - ideal for Pied Flies or Redstart I thought but there were none, and still no Wagtails by the streams. The banks of one brook tumbling down the hillside were covered in Star of Bethlehem and Summer Snowflakes. We picnicked in a grassy dell surrounded by Robins, Blackbirds and Blackcap and our first **Coal Tit**. There were more wild Peonies in the woods, but still only in bud. In the distance we could hear a **Turtle Dove** purring, a **Mistle Thrush** churring and singing, and a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** drumming. As we returned to the car we found our first **Stonechat** and heard a **Nightingale** from deep in the scrubby hedgerow. Some evening rain had left us wondering if the weather the next day was going to let us down again; but an early morning visit to the bathroom was rewarded with the most glorious sunrise over the distant mountains. Sardinia has range after range of mountains and we had splendid views from our windows. Perhaps this time we should set off with a full tank and try to make it to Baunei where a steep climb up onto the plateau should bring us to an isolated tiny chapel and a walk down to the otherwise inaccessible beach. We found the little church and the surrounding old buildings where pilgrims overnight – no beds I noticed, only stone ledges which looked very hard, though there were fireplaces! A **Spotted Flycatcher** appeared to be nesting in the 'kumbessias', the pilgrim accommodations that had windows but no glass and no doors! The path led us past some rock pools, still with water. The previous winter had been one of the wettest that people could remember, and flood damage was evident on many roads with bridges swept away, frequent potholes and erosion at the sides and great channels dug out on some hillsides. The descent was gentle to start with and we found a good lunch spot with a view right down to the cove. Ravens played around the cliffs and a **Wren** and **Blue Tit** foraged in the trees above our heads. We set off again only to find that the path had turned into a steep gravelly slide at which my foot and David's knees rebelled. We got as far as the first shepherd's hut built into the cliff side, the entrance no more than a cleft in the rock, took a photo and retreated. Back on the plateau **Goldfinches** were singing and **Spotless Starlings** were feeding on the back of the usual sheep! It was not unusual to see flocks of a hundred or more sheep or goats roaming free – cheese making is a source of income to many farmers.

After some 50km of bends and hairpins there and the same back, the next day was voted a 'stay local' day. A leisurely breakfast in the sun was followed by a walk up the forest road opposite the hotel.

## Sardinian Firecrest



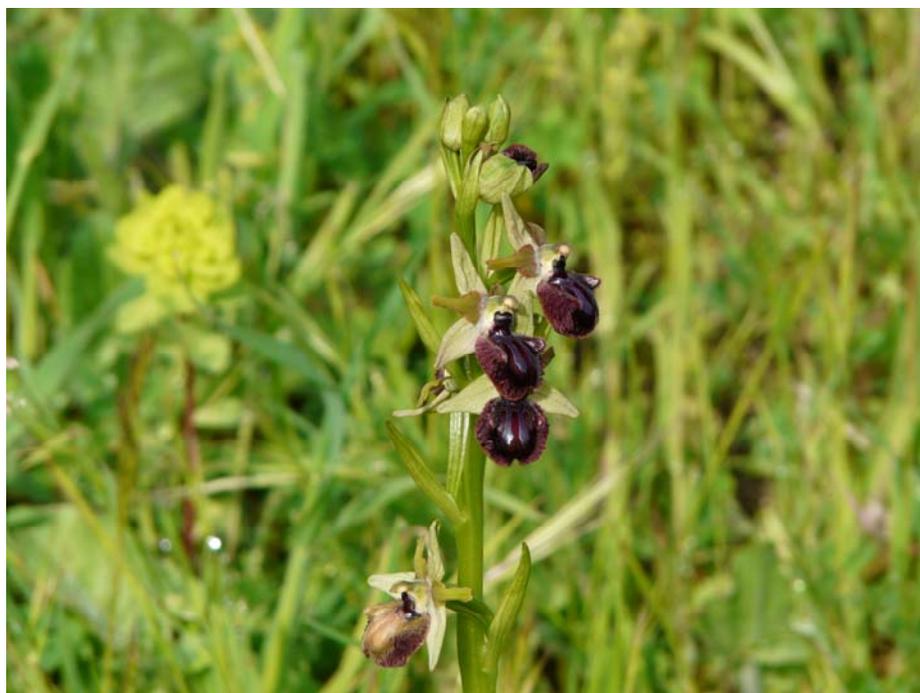
**Firecrest** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** soon made their presence known and at least 6 **Nightingales** were singing in the scrub.

My eyes were mainly on the rocky banks which had lots of orchids of various species. As the road straightened out at the top in more open farmland the bird and flower interest waned, so we returned to the hotel and ate lunch round the pool – no swimmers! In the afternoon a short drive brought us to an area of open country where David concentrated on the birds, finding numerous **Corn Bunting**, **Stonechat** and **Wheatear**, while I scoured the roadside banks for more orchids. A Lark was singing on the wire at the end of the afternoon which we thought was a **Woodlark**, though neither

of us was familiar with the bird nor its song. This was confirmed when we had much better views 2 days later and the song was committed to memory.

A return visit to the lighthouse at Capo Comino and the 4 hour walk to Berchida Beach and back along virtually level tracks seemed a fitting activity for a warm, sunny day – not too much exertion! Wild irises had sprung up all along the verges, Tongue Orchids abounded and even wild Love-in the Mist and Gladioli had appeared since our last visit. The **Crag Martins** seemed undisturbed by the workmen who had erected scaffolding right in front of the entrance to their nesting site and the pair of **Spotted Flycatchers** feeding near the lighthouse equally undeterred by the noise and activity. At Berchida itself the river fails to make it right to the sea and forms a big lagoon with marshy areas, where 5 **Mallard** were swimming with the drinking cows, **Coot** were calling and a **Fan-tailed Warbler** gave a lovely display. We also spotted our first dragonflies of the holiday – 3 species different in size and colour, but without a book, who knows what they were!

The last 2 days were taken up with repeat visits, one to Bono to climb Mount Rasu and do the complete walk, and the other to Bruncu Spina where we were rewarded by excellent views of **Whinchat** and **Wheatear** on the way up, **Tawny Pipit** doing display flights and a *flava* **Wagtail** in full glorious breeding plumage around the brook at the top. The crocuses were still flowering, the Peonies were in full flower, and we found a track that led us through an area containing 10 different species of orchid. One hillside was covered in wild Pansies, white and yellow Star of Bethlehem, and several plants of Thrift just opening. The area was virtually deserted except for a few grazing cows and we revelled in the peace and quiet, the magnificent scenery and the fresh mountain air. We forgave the Golden Eagle, the Water Pipit and the Citril Finch for failing to appear, as there was so much else to enjoy. Sardinia fulfilled all our expectations, but we vowed if we returned to stay at two or three different centres to cut down the amount of tiring driving we had had to do to visit such a wide variety of sites. It's a very large island, about half as big again as Corsica and even more mountainous, but we enjoyed excellent hospitality and food and the local wine wasn't bad either!



Early Spider Orchid

*Photo by Dave Bodley*

# COMPARING NEST BOX OBSERVATIONS

*By Ian Grove*

Recently, away from the distractions of family and the workload associated with my normal office routine, I found myself with some time on my hands, an honest pleasure in these days of high operational tempo. I was living in the mess during my course and rather than spend my evenings loitering around the bar or watching television, undisturbed for once, no distractions of wife/children asking questions just at the crucial point of a complex subplot, I decided to improve my birding knowledge and read through a few back copies of the RAFOS Newsletter. (Actually, the real reason was, that I didn't want to spend each evening drowning in beer calories and adding to my already enlarging middle-aged midriff, and the inane drivel that is broadcast these days makes me want to protest against my licence fee.)

So it was that I found myself reading an article "Advice to Young Boxers, or How to get the Most out of a Small Nest Box" by David Counsell in RAFOS Newsletter No.73 (Spring 2002). Whilst this article was published just seven years ago, a leap forward in and proliferation of technology has increased the ability to observe what breeding garden birds get up to within the confines of a nest box. For me this technological advancement should be embraced in order to further our understanding of and raise interest in matters ornithological. Therefore, I will try to articulate my experience with a nest box this year and compare it with David's 2002 observations.

Actually, it all started for me several years ago, with the daunting question of what do you buy your father for Christmas? He had everything he could possibly need, and new socks each year was starting to stretch the thank you smile on Christmas morning a little tighter. So remembering a chance passing comment on how much he liked the BBC's Springwatch and the nest box footage, I set about building him a nest box that he could link to the TV; a homemade Christmas present, just what every grandfather dreams of!

The cost of a readymade box is extortionate, but the items required to make your own can be bought at a fraction of the price. So I found myself in garage with a cunning plan, a 6ft length of 6 inch wide naturally treated timber (B&Q), a small day/night security CCTV ([www.lincstrust.org.uk](http://www.lincstrust.org.uk)). I added a few inches to the length dimensions; the extra is needed to allow for the minimum focal length of the CCTV camera.

To keep it short, the following spring I had a very excited father giving me a daily commentary on the **Blue Tit** (*Cyanistes Caeruleus*) story unfolding within the nest box; eleven fledged. The excitement my father had enjoyed meant that I had to build and site a camera nest box of my own. This is where I would like to add my own amateur findings to the historical RAFOS corporate knowledge observed and noted in Newsletter 73. I am sorry if my article appears to try and teach experienced ornithologists how to suck eggs, but for an amateur this was an absolutely fascinating insight into the natural world. I will, hopefully, try to add to the knowledge already imparted by David's article and the ultimate intention is to encourage the next generation of birders.

Choice of bird, if there is such a thing as they actually choose you rather than you choosing them and I do not mean in a Harry Potter Owl type of way, can be influenced. The type of bird that takes up residence within the nest box can be prejudiced by using different designs. Whilst my father's box had enticed a Blue Tit, 28mm opening hole, I had chosen a 32mm opening to try and lure one of the many **Great Tits** (*Parus Major*) that frequently visited my hanging peanut feeders.

***“Tits prospect in March so the boxes should be in position by then.”***  
**(David Counsell Newsletter 73)**

I hung the nest box in January, giving potential house hunters an early opportunity to view the ample and plush interior. In the cold months of a North Yorkshire winter, it was easy to check, on a weekly basis, if anything was happening inside the nest box by switching on a power supply to the CCTV camera and watching the resulting picture on TV from my cosy chair. This discrete method of surveillance meant that the nest box was completely undisturbed and any potential tenants were left none the wiser to my voyeuristic nature observation plans.

***“They build in April and start to lay in the middle of the month.”***  
**(David Counsell Newsletter 73)**

Late March saw the first signs of encouragement that the chosen location, direction (not too south facing), height from ground and box design were going to be successful, as **Great Tits** regularly visited the nest box. They sized it up both externally and internally with fleetingly short visits, so as not to attract predators to their habitation intentions. The first signs of nest building in April brought great delight and it could readily be seen how courser material was brought in first. The nest was finally and very neatly finished with fine soft feathers and hair.

The now frequent visits with building material had caught the unwanted attention of a **Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*). During one observation, just after the female had entered the box with a beak full of moss, a **Starling** landed on the outside and held onto the hole opening. From the comfort of a settee I could look through the lounge window and see the **Starling's** body on the outside of the nest box and its head on the inside, as it had now pushed it through the entrance hole. On the TV, the female **Great Tit** was looking decidedly unhappy at the situation. At first it backed away, and then with a loud shriek and much wing beating it attacked the protruding head forcing the **Starling** away. After a bit of further wing flapping and a little sleep she got back to nest building, tentatively making sure that the coast was clear before leaving the nest box.

***“The birds will often cover the eggs with feathers or wool.”***  
**(David Counsell Newsletter 73)**

Now you see them now you don't! The nest seemed to stay empty for ages and faith was beginning to wane that eggs would ever be laid. I thought that the **Starling** attack must

have daunted the breeding pair. Then, during one lunchtime viewing, I got the shock of seeing seven eggs; this was obviously the noted observation of covering eggs with feathers or down to prevent casual observation by a predator. By the evening all seven eggs had once again vanished and the nest looked bare once more.

***“The number of eggs laid is the highest number of eggs seen, or the largest number of young, whichever is the greater.” (David Counsell Newsletter 73)***

With 24/7 observation I could see exactly how many eggs were actually laid. Nine eggs were laid in the first brood and during the incubation period the female leaves the nest for food/toilet duties every few hours, leaving the eggs visible during these short forays. The date of hatching could also be determined as I had seen the exact date when the female started to incubate. Incubation starts when the final egg is laid so that all eggs hatch at the same time to prevent chicks of varying sizes having to be fed. This is important as no holds are barred when it comes to getting food from the parent birds. To put it bluntly, those chicks that are too slow at the table soon get left behind in size very quickly, and die.

I was able to observe the starvation process that inevitably resulted in death. The smaller chicks are unable to compete with the larger chicks for food so they do not grow as quickly and the spiralling downward cycle of starvation continues. We would lose two chicks this way and it was very noticeable on the video footage how quickly their size diminished compared with their siblings. Each chick died within 24 hours of failing to compete successfully for food.

***“The number fledged is the number of young ringed less any dead left in the box after the others have flown.” (David Counsell Newsletter 73)***

The chicks grow at a staggering pace and were soon chirping for food, this would lead to the downfall of four more. With a microphone built into the camera the scraping sound of a parent bird landing on the nest box with food could easily be heard; it was up to 0.5 seconds before the parent bird was actually seen. Much like Pavlov's dogs salivating to a ringing bell<sup>1</sup>, this sound immediately prompts the chicks to push up their heads on outstretched necks with open beaks to receive food; the eyelids of the chicks were still shut tight at this stage.

Unfortunately, the sound of a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos Major*), that also frequented the peanut feeder, landing on the hole is much the same. The outstretched necks and squeaking beaks, searching for parental food, proved too tempting for a song bird hungry woodpecker looking to supplement its peanut diet and a chick was grabbed across the neck and whisked quickly out of the hole. A total of three chicks would disappear this way, over the space of three days; hatching day +9 to hatching day +11. A

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<sup>1</sup> **Ivan Petrovich Pavlov** (September 14, 1849 – February 27, 1936) was a Russian, and later Soviet, physiologist, psychologist, and physician. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1904 for research pertaining to the digestive system. Pavlov is widely known for first describing the phenomenon of classical conditioning. The concept for which Pavlov is famous is the “conditioned reflex.” Pavlov's research on conditional reflexes greatly influenced not only science, but also popular culture. The phrase “Pavlov's dog” is often used to describe someone who merely reacts to a situation rather than using critical thinking.

fourth chick was killed by the woodpeckers, but in the few days between the third and fourth attempts the chicks had grown too large for the woodpecker to drag through the hole and a lifeless corpse could be seen at the bottom of the nest.

This ability, unobtrusively to observe, allowed me to witness the parent birds removing all corpses from within the nest. Even the corpse that was too big for the woodpecker was removed by the parent birds over several days. The female **Great Tit** picked the dead chick apart and it disappeared from the nest box piece by piece. Whilst this act may seem gruesome, I am sure that it was a necessity in order to keep the nest clean, tidy and tick free for the three surviving chicks and the subsequent second brood. Without the ability to observe these acts of corpse removal the number of chicks fledged would have been deduced as being higher.

***“The number of eggs hatched is the number of eggs laid minus any eggs left in the box after the others have flown.” (David Counsell Newsletter 73)***

The chicks fledged on hatching day +20 and this led to a further shock. The nest was not left bare when the chicks flew. Sitting neatly at the bottom of the nest were two **new** eggs, a second brood? Yes. The total eggs in the second brood was four, with four hatched.

***“I inspect the boxes once a week or every 5 days.” (David Counsell Newsletter 73)***

If the assumption is made that the nest box was visited every 7 days and disturbance of the nesting birds minimal, how would actual unobtrusive daily observations tally against the average figures of infrequent observations:

	Actual observation	Infrequent observation
Eggs Laid	9	9 <sup>2</sup> (9 eggs seen)
Eggs Hatched	9	9 (9 chicks ringed)
Chicks Fledged	3	9 (No bodies left)

The infrequent observation figures would paint a much healthier survival rate for my garden nest box than actually achieved.

***“I humbly submit this in the hope that there are many more young persons out there who will be glad of the following.” (David Counsell Newsletter 73)***

The ability to see inside the nest box 24/7, from the settee, without risk of disturbing the birds is truly fantastic; and actually needed very little technological knowledge or expense. My children became engrossed and invited several neighbours' children to see what was going on; this in turn brought around inquisitive parents. My sons' teachers found out

<sup>2</sup> This would assume that the infrequent observations would note that the 2 eggs left, after fledging had taken place, were of a second brood. If not the number of eggs accountable to the first brood would have been noted as 11 (9 chicks ringed + 2 eggs left).

about it and with the ability to record the footage, a video was duly made and shown at my children's school. I talked about chick progress so much at work that several showed a keen interest and I emailed video footage into work.

One of the Great Tits *Photo: Ian Grove*

The input of technology into the bird box observations allowed around 29 adults and 60 children to witness the life and death struggle of a **Great Tit** family in my own back garden; without once disturbing the nest and jeopardising further lost chicks. Hopefully one or two people who saw the videos will remember the experience and join RAFOS in the future.



The ability, frequently to observe, showed the high mortality rate and what was causing the deaths. Whilst observing one nest box can give a large variance over methods of gaining average figures, what figures on mortality rate would be achieved if one hundred nest boxes were unobtrusively observed? Would there be a significant new trend?

I know that my 89 viewers does not compare with the 3.9 million prime time audience of the BBC's Springwatch, but, I hope it helps in the future.



Youngster being fed

*Photo: Ian Grove*

# Ups, Downs, Along, Under, Over, Out (and Back?)

Mike Blair

Being early September (2008), it was not quite light when we left North Norfolk, perfect conditions for playing that harmless game, 'Count the Norfolk winkers'. The game has only one rule – you count the number of cars that have only one headlight (no, not motor bikes) before you cross the county border – it's amazing how the frequency diminishes in Suffolk or Cambridge! By Brandon, we had achieved the respectable total of eight. At Mildenhall, we reached dual carriageway linked to motorway that is continuous to within 25km of our favourite destination in eastern Austria, Illmitz. Our Norfolk time of departure gets us to the M11/M25 junction when clockwise traffic is lighter than elsewhere and southbound traffic on the M23 to the Channel Tunnel at Folkestone is almost non-existent. At the automated check-in, we were in time to be offered an earlier schedule, and so drove almost straight on to the train, pausing only for an ad-hoc 'sniffer' security check. By 0800 UK time, 0900 Continental time, we were on the French motorway reaching our watering-hole in central Germany<sup>1</sup>, a straightforward drive, with breaks, by 1530. We had to curtail our customary walk when the weather broke, but having to sample the local Mahr beer was ample compensation!

The weather remained broken the next day until giving way to cloudless skies exactly on the Austrian border, the Germans obviously not being up to date with their payments to 'der Wettermann'! These glorious conditions were to last for the next ten days, daytime temperatures reaching 35°C at times. We settled into our room at the Illmitzerhof, Frau Klein fussing over us in welcome. We quickly went out and rented bicycles for our 3-day stay, and visited some of the nearby shallow lakes that together are called the Seewinkel, for autumn migrants. En route, we had seen a few **Black Kite** *Milvus migrans*, several **Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius*, multiple **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* exceptionally numerous **Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius*, and many unidentifiable smaller birds, especially miscellaneous woodpeckers. The presence of so many Jays over such a huge area suggested that the 2008 acorn crop had failed further east.

Water levels in the Seewinkel were good for autumn, attracting large numbers of ducks that were emerging from eclipse plumage. **Wagtails**, mostly **White** *Motacilla alba* but some **Yellow** *M. flava* foraged on the foreshores, and a good variety of waders probed the mud. Groups of **Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* scurried about, sometimes objected to by migrant **Ringed Plover** *Ch. hiaticula* but ignored by **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*, the occasional **Curlew Sandpiper** *C. ferruginea* and **Sanderling** *C. alba*. In slightly deeper water, **Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa*, a local breeder as well as a migrant, foraged steadily, whereas the odd **Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* preferred to prance from location to location, evidently strongly influenced by *Zugunruhe*, or migratory restlessness. As always, **Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus* panicked hopelessly<sup>2</sup>, whereas sizable numbers of **Spotted Redshank** *T. erythropus*, did not – you could almost detect the *embarrassment*! As for **Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus*, some bumbled, the young bloods pretended they ruled the roost, but most just stood there, clearly having had their fill.

<sup>1</sup> Gasthof Rotes Ross (The Red Horse) in Burghaslach, a village between Würzburg and Nürnberg, is owned by Martin Rößner, [info@rotes-ross-burghaslach.de](mailto:info@rotes-ross-burghaslach.de), who speaks little English, but his children, if they are at home, do. Very welcoming.

<sup>2</sup> You would think that after all this evolutionary time that Redshanks would be experts at panic, but maybe 'expert' Redshanks got eaten because panicking at the right time was too late – those that panicked early and inappropriately always got away.



Jays

Continuing on down to the main lake, the Neusiedlersee, we had little luck this time with birds in or over the reedbeds, although a **Great Egret** *Ardea alba*, did launch itself from a pond where normally it would have ignored our presence. Herons generally were well

hidden, perhaps awaiting the end of the flight-feather moult. However, a timely local gulasch soup, a splendid restorative, at one of the cafés offered the opportunity to fix our attention on the hirundine visible migration. Quite obviously, passage was steady and pretty heavy, **Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia* being in the majority. We had noticed this steady movement when we had arrived and it had continued without a break, but it was the next afternoon, when similarly esconced in the garden of the Karlo<sup>3</sup> pub on the western edge of Illmitz that I made a series of 30-second counts every five minutes over a total period of about 40 minutes. All birds crossing a line between me and trees 300m away were counted. The average count suggested that 7,500 – 12,000 hirundines were passing that limited sightline every hour – it makes you think, doesn't it? Many years ago in a dry autumn in the Seewinkel, vast numbers of Sand Martins were roosting in the centre of a dried-out lake, the low estimate being 80,000. Some of the reedbeds beside the shallow lakes often attract huge roosts of **Barn Swallows** *Hirundo rustica*, but on that evening, they were very much in a minority, although resident birds and their recently-fledged young took offence if any migrants came too near!

Much of the local landscape is taken up by vineyards; in autumn the grapes, mostly for white wine, are maturing and so the usual occupants of this habitat, **European Stonechat** *Saxicola rubicola*<sup>4</sup>, **Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* and (in the grassy intervals) **Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra*, are joined by several hundred thousand boisterous **Common Starlings** *Sturnus vulgaris*, eager to exploit this rich resource of carbohydrate and sugar. Rather understandably, the wine-growers view such behaviour much as our police view 'raves'. Now, there is a long-established and unique countermeasure applied in this season – they 'Scramble' the interceptors! A small fleet of single-engined light aircraft attack<sup>5</sup> the flocks, mostly at zero feet, firing detonating pyrotechnics, emitting amplified distress calls and breaking up flocks to keep them on the move. The aircraft are very basic and mostly of late US 1940s vintage – they have to be, because of the need to fly slowly and perform stall turns at low altitude over intervening trees. Nevertheless, it is slightly unnerving to find an aircraft flying a couple of metres above your head as you cycle along the tracks! However, there are differences from the 1980s. The vineyards abound with bird-scaring devices, such as fluttering soft plastic hawk shapes, spinning devices to which are attached plastic shapes that alter irregularly, and gas guns<sup>6</sup>. A new countermeasure, however, is apparent: whole rows of vines are wrapped in a black mesh that allows sunlight and air to reach the grapes, but prevents Starlings from reaching all but the grapes nearest the mesh. The mesh is applied and removed by a specialist vehicle that straddles the row. The damage that myriads of Starlings can do to unprotected vines is enormous and well-documented, but Starling numbers have varied considerably since the millions of the 1980s. One factor relating to Starling numbers is the presence of cattle in the area; when cattle numbers drop, so do Starling numbers, because the ground is less churned up to reveal grubs and other tasty morsels. However, best practice in viticulture requires a weed-free environment beneath the vine, which Starlings like, as do **Eurasian Wryneck** *Jynx torquilla* and **Eurasian Hoopoe** *Upupa epops*, both of which are summer breeders here. Nevertheless, after a period in which Starling numbers dropped drastically, leading to calls to stop funding the aircraft, they have again increased, but it seems to a lower maximum.

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<sup>3</sup> For your information, the soup this time was Knoblauch (garlic).

<sup>4</sup> A combination of DNA research, careful examination of museum specimens and applying the priority rules of first published descriptions (the frequency of refusal to consider a rival's published paper in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was surprisingly high – modern researchers take much more care to consult the original documents) has meant that our Stonechat is no longer *S. torquatus* – that scientific name applies now to all African forms.

<sup>5</sup> Mature readers may remember that I wrote about this technique in the late 1980s – some of the then elderly aircraft are still flying! 2009 postscript: the overhaul of Austrian airworthiness certification has grounded this fleet, probably permanently.

<sup>6</sup> Although birds get used to the noise of gas guns, it does seem that when used in combination with all the other methods described, they keep the Starlings jittery. On the other hand, flocks of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Tree Sparrows *P. montanus* flinch not in the slightest in trees next to an operating gas gun.

As in all 'wars', applying standard countermeasures will lead to the development of counter-countermeasures<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the mesh was introduced because the Starlings no longer raided a vine row in long, steady streams of bird coming from a safe roost. The previous suite of countermeasures had led to the Starlings arriving mob-handed all along a row at one time so that they could feed before an aircraft arrived. Now that mesh is so widespread, the Starlings now operate in smaller, more mobile flocks, but in many places one flock at a time. In turn, this means that several aircraft are airborne at any one time. Through most of the daylight hours, the pilots either spot Starling concentrations themselves or are directed by mobile phone. Despite all this activity, the many cycle paths continue to attract holiday-makers of the more vigorous sort, but they seldom take any interest in the bird life.

The whole of the southern Neusiedlersee is a WWF reserve straddling the Hungarian border. One cyclist did seriously explain to me that the WWF 'No entry' signs were only for people interested in 'the Nature', but anyone else could ignore them<sup>8</sup>. On our next visit, we intend to explore the recently created public reserves on the Hungarian side of the border – these are in wetland areas where farming reaches only the edges – but this time we confined ourselves to exploring as many of the small lakes as we could comfortably reach by bike in the next day. Two lakes in particular, 'Ober-' and 'Unterstinkersee' (probably well-named if ever the mud is disturbed), are superb for birds when water levels are adequate. **Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* was not difficult to find, although we saw only singletons. There are many small thickets and woodland areas that we had no time to explore, but almost everywhere where there are tracks cyclists are allowed use them and we could have spent the entire day in the wild areas between vineyards. These include sizeable tracts of grassland where Black-tailed Godwit breed and owls hunt. Many such areas locally seem ideal breeding habitat for **Greater Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla*, but this bird nowadays is rare enough to warrant a report to the Austrian Rarities Committee.

A glance at the regional map suggested that a few days in Slovenia would be possible. Easternmost Slovenia borders (just) the southernmost and hilly part of Burgenland, the Austrian province in which the Neusiedlersee lies, and also westernmost Hungary, access to which is now possible for cars from Illmitz via Pamhagen. We decided to travel via Hungary and return via Austria. Our route south through Hungary was via a series of local roads, in zig-zag fashion. Having just downloaded the Eastern Europe map into the Tom-Tom satnav, this journey would be a good test for it. The Western and Eastern Europe maps do not automatically switch over as you cross the border, but in compensation, you can nominate a destination just over the border and then 'change maps' once you are in that zone. So far, it had been straightforward, but here I digress into a minor technical byway. In the process of preparing a Tom-Tom electronic map, a hard-copy map has to be scanned in by very advanced kit. As you probably know, most high-quality hard-copy maps that you can buy contain deliberate small errors so that unauthorised copying can be detected (the AA got taken to court successfully by Ordnance Survey a few years ago). Also, sometimes the print detail on hard-copy maps can indicate that a junction or bend is slightly different from its physical composition, which is why just occasionally, your route will direct you round two sides of a triangle! We found that some of the roads just across the Hungarian border were depicted on the Tom-Tom screen as being 50 metres or more one side or other of the

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<sup>7</sup> The gas guns begin firing very early in the morning and continue late into the evening; apparently Starlings have begun to feed on the grapes outside daylight hours instead of going to roost at dusk...

<sup>8</sup> Just in case you think that this is a typically Austrian reaction (it's certainly commonplace there), when Norfolk County Council and North Norfolk District Council put up signs on many country roads indicating that these were recommended cycle routes, for a time afterwards, cyclists visiting from cities would stop vehicles and tell the driver off for illegally using a cycleway where cars were not permitted...

actual road. With judgement, this became easy enough to interpret, but when road works diversions came up, finding alternative routes with Tom-Tom kept bringing us back to the same point! Once we had travelled over 15km from the border, we found that this 'error' had disappeared. The reason for this misalignment, as I later found out, was that the Warsaw Pact military, who controlled all map-making in these countries, ensured that large-scale deliberate errors were always included in the maps, so that if they fell into NATO hands, artillery targeting would always be in error by at least 50m!

Hungarian agriculture is mostly still small-scale in this part of the country, which was clearly still suffering from an imbalance of investment, although some signs of improving prosperity, such as some houses sporting fresh paint, could be seen, although the roads remained generally pretty bad. After about three hours, we began looking for signs indicating border crossings into Slovenia. The latest hard-copy road map we had showed none in this area, the nearest being on a main road about 50km further on. However, we soon found a small signpost at an otherwise undistinguished junction indicating 'Slowensko/Slowenija' down a narrow, but paved road. After 10km, it suddenly widened into a smooth bit of highway for about a kilometre either side of the border (which was not marked), then returning to a narrow road to the next village!

We headed for Maribor to locate the accommodation we had booked on-line from Austria. Like many eastern European cities, Maribor's outskirts comprise buildings seemingly assembled from a standard design set of concrete parts, but with one part never delivered. However, following the Trusty Tom-Tom, we arrived in a district with mostly detached and pleasant houses. Outside the hotel, its café was full, but we were quickly and cheerfully sorted out and after dumping our gear in our room, we set off to explore. The hotel lies beneath an imposing forested crag, and although the road appeared busy it led only to the bottom of a small-cabin ski-lift. This is where a round of what you might call the 'World Rough Downhill' championship is often held, and perhaps as training, there were many young people, mostly chaps, going up the ski-lift carrying or wearing what looked like very heavy-duty roller-blades; they also had ski-poles. A glance at the open areas of the mountainside revealed figures descending precipitous rocky tracks at furious speed!<sup>9</sup> An explanation for the frequent sound of ambulances came to mind. After dodging a few showers, we returned to enjoy our first Slovenian dinner. By the next day, the weather had again settled and we headed for Ormoško jezero (Lake Ormoško), an artificial waterbody behind a dam some 60km to the southeast. The border with Croatia<sup>10</sup> runs through the middle of the lake, which is fed by the River Drava. The last few kilometres from Pušenci needed Tom-Tom, because on-screen we could see from the maze of tracks which were dead ends.

**Mute Swans**, *Cygnus olor* in their hundreds, mirrored in the flat-calm water, were a major surprise. Another was that the embankment proved to be a busy temporary stop-off for small migrant passerines, many of them young birds on their first migration. We spotted a well-built hide, but it was locked and lacked any instructions about how to get the key! **Icterine Warblers** *Hippolais icterina* came through, feeding intensively but briefly in successive bushes. The activity was such that the eye was constantly diverted by movement. **Black-necked Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis* edged into nearby reed clumps as **Black Tern** *Chlidonias nigra* flocks wheeled over the lake surface. The only people on our side of the lake were in the railway gang re-laying track, but on the other side in Croatia, men fishing dotted the bank. I wonder if any of you remember the spectacularly unhandsome and sullen Croatian central defender who used to play for

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<sup>9</sup> This wasn't any kind of competition – they were doing it for enjoyment!

<sup>10</sup> Oddly, to our eyes, the Croatians spell it 'Hrvatska'.

the national football team in the 1990s? Most across the lake appeared to be related. The lake is one of the sites recommended in Gerard Gorman's *Birding in Eastern Europe*, and is well worth visiting.

That afternoon, we went up the ski-lift and had a stroll round the top, finding **Coal Tit** *Periparus ater* amid numerous **Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*, before sampling the fine beer at the open-air bar prior to our descent. It was then that the amazing qualities of the Slovenian people came to our aid. At the bottom, I discovered I had left my binoculars in the bar at the top! I was quickly assured that I could travel free back up to the top and down again, but first, they got on the intercom to the winding-gear house at the top. Someone up there, halted the ski-lift to go over to the bar, and there they found my bins on the table, gave them into the custody of a 'volunteer' coming down, and arranged for the ticket-office at the bottom to have them taken to the café where I was having a meal. What superb service!

The next morning we took a circular route up into the mountains 70km to the west of Maribor. In some areas, the villages have banded together to fund and operate an on-line community. At strategic locations above each village is a solar- and wind-powered communications link giving line-of-sight Internet, television & telephone access for every household. The Internet cafés are free! Most Slovenian towns, especially the drab, small factory towns in the main valleys, can only dream of this facility. The village where we stopped for coffee is now a holiday destination, but to reach it you have to drive through a gorge that is wide enough only for the road and the stream, the walls being vertical cliffs 100m high, the route tightly winding. We did see **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* on a high meadow, but apart from **Northern Raven** *Corvus corax* and the odd **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*, birds did not feature heavily that day. We had intended, after swinging north, to take the local road south of the east-flowing Drava to avoid traffic, but after 5km the local road was completely closed by road works. The sign to this effect, in several languages, was in the middle of the road, but mounted on the barrier. Back at the junction, we found that there was indeed a sign to the same effect, but we hadn't missed it, because it was well after the junction where we had turned right! However, the enforced change to our plans was a blessing in disguise, for now we had to take the European trunk road along the north bank. Now evening, with the sun behind us and windless clear skies above, our views as we wended our way along this stunning, mountain-bordered valley of the mighty Drava have become embedded in the memory. Miraculously, there was almost no traffic.

Sue had been studying maps and other tourist bumf. "Why don't we visit this area?" she suggested at dinner, pointing out on the map a much more mountainous region 150km further west. However to reach it in timely fashion, we would have to use the motorway. After a couple more glasses of decent local wine, I was easily persuaded that the idea had been mine. Next morning, we first went just north of where we had been staying to visit the vineyard from whence that wine had come! The vineyard lay up a winding, steep and narrow road. Outside the main building sat two old women, who conveyed to us with regret that today was the traditional European custom of 'rest day' (in German *Ruhetag*), but that on any other day of the week, including Sunday, we could sample (*probieren*) and purchase wine to our hearts' content<sup>11</sup>. Down and round we went, heading first east then south to pick up the motorway, which like most in Europe nowadays (even in Germany, but only for commercial vehicles) is a toll road, but the prices are low. In Slovenia, we still had to purchase a sticker (*vignette*<sup>12</sup>: this word

<sup>11</sup> "Oh dear! What a shame! Never mind!" to quote the David Croft and Jimmy Perry catchphrase. (Best done in a Welsh baritone, lovely boys!)

<sup>12</sup> "It's your actual French!" to quote the Barry Took and Marty Feldman catchphrase uttered by Hugh Paddick or Kenneth Williams as 'Julian and Sandy'.

has taken on a useful new life across Europe, but not from its English usage). Slovenia has been an independent country for but a few years, but what the electorate decided was to put into power a party of mostly young politicians whose manifesto was to implement policies in which joined-up thinking was evident<sup>13</sup>. Transport links had priority, as did education<sup>14</sup>, conservation<sup>15</sup> and civic responsibility<sup>16</sup>. The signs on the motorway indicated the huge fines liable if drivers hadn't paid the tolls – for a large commercial vehicle, up to €1500. Persistent offenders have their vehicles crushed.

At Ljubljana, the capital, we headed up the motorway, as yet incomplete, north to Bled. Bled can best be described as Ruritanian. The 1930s & 40s Hollywood idea of central European society – princes, counts and barons on their estates or at court, on sets with a background of castles, lakes, cliffs and grand hotels<sup>17</sup> – an idea that most intelligent people mocked as far-fetched, is proven by Bled and its environs as having been totally undersold. Bled is more much more kitsch! On the island in Lake Blejsko, the smooth sheer cliffs topped by a castle more Disney than Disney himself ever dreamed are totally impossible! Bled was one of the places to which the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Court migrated in summer to escape the heat and stink of unhygienic 19<sup>th</sup>C Vienna. Indeed, although the valley upstream (where we were heading) had no outlet except difficult mountain tracks towards what is now part of Italy but then was just another bit of Austria, Bled became a favourite summer haunt of the court after the Emperor had ordered a 5km-long single-line railway tunnel to be constructed so that he could travel to Bled from the west. Nowadays in Bled on sunny days like that of our visit, the young tourists wander about in scraps of material that I understand are reckoned by some as clothes<sup>18</sup>. Driving here may require additional concentration.



The View from No 104a

*Photo: Mike Blair*

tiny village of Srednja vas where the B&B at 104a<sup>20</sup> was wonderfully welcoming. We had the room in the eaves; the balcony not only overlooked the valley and gave

We continued on our way up the valley past Bohinjska Bistrica (at the north end of that tunnel) to the euphoniously-named holiday destination, a village really, of Ribčev Laz, mostly because it has the regional tourist office and we wanted to find somewhere to stay. Our criteria were quite simple: somewhere basic for a few nights, but within walking distance of a restaurant. The young ladies in the tourist office spoke very good English and were thoroughly capable<sup>19</sup>. We were directed to the

<sup>13</sup> Wouldn't work here, then...

<sup>14</sup> English is now a compulsory subject from the age of eight, but many young people are fluent in Slovenian, German, Italian, Croatian and even Hungarian as well. Russian, once compulsory, is now taught in relatively few places.

<sup>15</sup> For example only electric boats on lakes, (locally) strictly-controlled fishing, only farm vehicles permitted on most country tracks...

<sup>16</sup> We met, encountered and saw many young people, all of whom were articulate, polite and interested. It was marvellous!

<sup>17</sup> Thinking about it a little more deeply, thousands of well-educated and musically-aware people from central Europe emigrated to the USA in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many finding work in the emerging movie industry. Perhaps some of the set designers were from, or had visited Bled?

<sup>18</sup> 'That's a nice swimsuit you're almost wearing', illustrates that precision and diplomacy may be incompatible. Sue's 'He's got no strides on!' (as immortalised by Paul Hogan) is similarly descriptive, if injudicious when bellowed.

<sup>19</sup> By registering with the tourist office, you are given a tourist card which, when entered in any car park machine, gives you unlimited free parking.

<sup>20</sup> Apartma-Sobe, [www.sobe-stare.net](http://www.sobe-stare.net), [sobe.stare@email.si](mailto:sobe.stare@email.si), Sredna vas 104a, 4267 Sredna vas v Bohinju, Slovenia. Magic. Book, fly to Ljubljana, rent a car, after about 90 minutes, you are there.

excellent views of the mountains on either side, but it also had a refrigerator, which we used as soon as we got some local wine from the village supermarket (the one-room version). The two restaurants were superb (and popular). The nearer was rather more rural in menu, but the owner had run restaurants in a number of well-known hotels in Europe. I managed to glimpse **Dipper** *Cinclus cinclus* from the outdoor seating that overhung the fast-flowing stream. Slightly further, past the farm, was a much larger establishment that managed to keep any flies off the bread by enclosing the basket inside a patchwork hen – you lifted the wing to get a piece of bread (which was wonderful). You can also watch good numbers of Common Buzzard patrolling the fields from the outside tables.

One advantage<sup>21</sup> of visiting in Sep or early Oct is that because the prices for all accommodation (several grades) in the tourist office booking scheme are regulated, the off-season flat rate for B&B is about €11 pp. Now, Ribčev Laz lies at the eastern end of what must be one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, Lake Bohinjko. The water is crystal clear, contains very large fish, and the surrounding mountains are simply stunning. There are a host of walks from the easy to the very difficult.



Lake Bohinjko

Photo: Mike Blair

In our short time there, we did three major walks, all officially easy (the other grades, charmingly, are 'rather' difficult and 'difficult'), but if you are a serious mountain-walker with all the kit, for the 'difficult' routes, you have to register in the unmanned walking shelters on your designated route, otherwise the patrolling wardens will call out the mountain rescue team, who will fine you heavily if you have decided to ignore protocol. On our first afternoon there, we went on a 'simple' walk in mountain forest on a 'well-marked' route from our village; we aimed to complete a loop of about 6km. However, some of the slopes were steep and long and although we were never lost in the sense that retracing our steps would have been straightforward, you did need a sense of terrain and distance covered when you came to junctions in the path that were not indicated on the maps. With twists, turns and gradients, it was at least 8km before we came to Stara Fužina, the village two down from ours. The beer went down well after a quick shower!

Next day, we ambled up the valley of Korita Ribnice which goes north from Stara Fužina. We'd learnt our lesson – we took the car to the car park at the bottom of the valley. The first couple of kilometres, amid numerous **Eurasian Nutcrackers** *Nucifraga caryocatactes* disputing noisily, are in mixed forest. There are paths on both sides of the rushing stream in the narrow valley. You soon encounter someone on duty to take the entry fee, but a little further on is a pub with good local food! Here we met a young American couple, both academics, taking time out for a year to visit as many countries as possible while travelling light. Their two children, who were very bright and

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<sup>21</sup> Another advantage (or disappointment) was that our timing meant that we missed the Cow's Ball. This is not a rural confusion of bovine gender, as came to mind when earnest locals asked in interesting English if we would be able to attend; it's a party for the people who bring the cattle down from the alpine meadows, but first they parade them through the streets. Maybe the first option would have been more interesting?

entertaining, had come along with them, but on the premise that they would complete their education course en route. The next 4km takes you up a steadily rising slope through small traditionally-farmed fields. The people working there were cheerful and welcoming. Before the next stretch of mountain forest, there is another pub, which we passed to explore higher paths, but only a few of the usual forest bird species appeared.

Eventually, the ascending path took us up through a narrowing gorge towards a saddle, but just as the path crossed the stream, we saw off to the right an equally steep path at the top of which was a log-cabin built on stilts angling out of a cliff; yes, you're ahead of me, this tiny place was yet another pub! The young owner looked extremely fit. He and his colleagues have to replenish the stock every day by carrying everything up from the end of the vehicle track above the previous pub. As we were speaking to him, a party of about 25 geriatric central Europeans were descending the other side of the gorge, having crossed the saddle from the other side. I've looked at the map, and they would have had to have walked at least 15km to get to that point! Shortly afterwards, a similar party appeared from lower down. If they are all thirsty, I guess restocking is quite a task! From the pub's overhanging balcony we found numerous **Eurasian Crag Martins** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* zipping across the void. On the way down, after we had had coffee at the middle pub, two **Golden Eagles** *Aquila chrysaetos* circled a cliff high to our left. That afternoon, we drove to the end of the road past Lake Bohinjnsko, and went on up to the waterfall by the 511 steps; pretty, but no pubs! Next time, I'd like to walk round the lake.

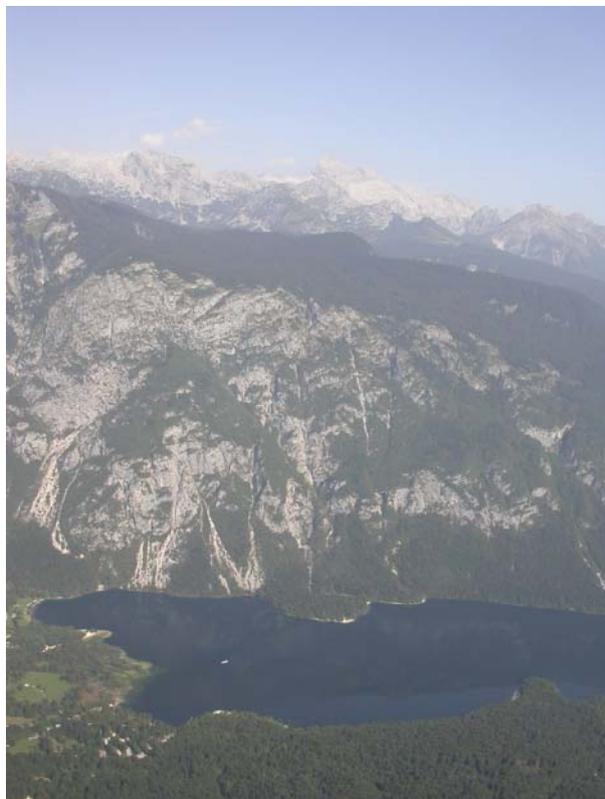


Crag Martin country

Photo: Mike Blair

On our last full day, we decided we would take the electric boat from Ribčev Laz along to the other end of the lake, go to the top of the mountain by ski-lift and walk back down to Ribčev Laz. An autumn mist had descended that morning and it was just lifting as we got to the jetty, opposite which we parked. The schedule stated that the first boat left at 0900, and by 0850, when we were beginning to think there was a problem, a long teak hull slid silently out of a nearby boathouse. It was the strangest feeling that I thought I recognised the boat, although this was my first visit to the country! Only four other people got on the boat, which seated about 50, but then some photos mounted in the boat provided the clue: the boat previously had been on the Königssee in the

Berchtesgaden National Park in Germany. I still remember the large glass of Münchner Helles I had before returning to Berchtesgaden on that same boat, many years ago! It had been transported by road all the way to Bohinj'sko jezero a few years previously. On the flat calm lake, we simply sat back and enjoyed the scenery. We walked up to the ski-lift, which comprises two separate huge cabins that take 4 minutes to travel from 550m to 1,550m.



View from 1550m

*Photo: Mike Blair*

The views from the top platforms of the toy-like boats on the lake or across the valley to the imposing Triglav massif were awe-inspiring, but a change in the weather was on the way and so after a coffee, we took the mountain path, ostensibly about 7km long. Now, I expected the path to twist and turn (it did) and so be much longer than indicated on the map (it was); I expected there to be long, quite steep descents (there were) through the forests, some of which were magnificent; I expected that in places the path, especially where it crossed tracks or roads, not to be obvious (it wasn't), but what I did not expect on the last steep descent (after large open areas of alpine pasture) was that huge stretches of the path would be gouged out and filled with a slurry of leaf-mould, pine needles and cowshit! Those of you who have the habit of reading footnotes as they occur will already have the answer.

Those of you who remain puzzled, please refer to the previous footnote<sup>22</sup>! I reckon that conservatively, we covered almost 12km on our descent.

Sadly, we had no more time to spend in Slovenia, but we certainly will return to the Lake Bohinj'sko area (we might even take the steam train through the tunnel (car plus passengers at €11 each). As we set off back to Illmitz via southern Burgenland, the daytime temperature for the first time dropped below 27°C. By the time we crossed the Loiblpass, it had dropped to 1°C and snow was driving across the road, but fortunately every driver on that road was suitably cautious. Once down to the foothills, conditions recovered somewhat, although it had become showery and blustery. As we crossed briefly into Hungary near Eisenstadt to take the shorter route south of the Neusiedlersee, Sue said, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if we came out next year with some of our friends?" That, as they say, is another story.

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<sup>22</sup> So that the festivities associated with the 'Cows' Ball' can take place, the cattle must be brought down from the alpine meadows beforehand to holding areas so that they can be inspected, cleaned and groomed for the parades. Clearly some of this process takes place involuntarily on the forest footpaths above Ribčev Laz.

## TEAM 'HERE WE GO AGAIN' 4 – 'TYROS' 8. THE 2009 PANNONIAN CUP RESULT

Mike Blair, with inserts from Martin & Julia Ellacott, Tim & Irene Loseby, Julian & Lucy Quail, Jon Orme, Pete Evans and Dave Munday woven into the text amid elbow-jogging by Sue Fleming and Iain Mackenzie

**Factoid:** Neusiedlersee, the second largest steppe lake in Central Europe, straddles the Austria/Hungary border, covering c315km<sup>2</sup>, about the size of Salisbury Plain

Now where was I? Oh, yes, I remember. This is the other story mentioned at the end of the other story, as it were, when Sue said, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if we came out to Illmitz next year with some of our friends?" This persistent thought then drifted into contact with another, 'Perhaps it could take the form of a preliminary reconnaissance for a RAFOS return to the area'. I pitched the idea to the RAFOS Committee in the context of not undertaking the trip at the same time as any expedition planned for 2009 and keeping schtumm<sup>1</sup> until RAFOS were happy that the participants in the 2009 expeds had confirmed. Within these constraints, I found I had about 25 expressions of interest, some from RAFOS members, some from friends unconnected with the society. Eventually, whittled down to 12 people by conflicting commitments, we had the outline of an interesting time! In order to give people the best possible option, I suggested that any period within a timeframe of just before Easter to just after mid-May would suit, because picking people up from and dropping them off at Vienna (Wien Schwechat) or Bratislava<sup>2</sup> airports would be straightforward – about 40-50 minutes' driving time to Illmitz. Martin and Julia Ellacott in Bonn could join in only for a few days at the beginning, Tim and Irene Loseby, much-travelled birders and neighbours of ours in Holt, could come from 23 Apr to 1 May, Iain Mackenzie from 1 to 10 May, and the others, Pete Evans, Jon Orme, Dave Munday, Julian Quail and his lady Lucy from 4 to 14 May. Sue could come out with Tim and Irene, and travel back with me. I would drive out and back.

Well, that's the gist – I won't bother you with the odd details that almost conspired to make me tear my remaining hair out<sup>3</sup>. I got in touch with Frau Klein to pre-book accommodation in the Illmitzerhof<sup>4</sup>, and with a colleague and friend who works at BirdLife Austria, Michael Dvorak<sup>5</sup>, to float the idea of our party contributing to bird information-gathering as best we could. Next, I had to organise my trip. Robert King, who joined RAFOS after meeting up with John Stewart-Smith<sup>6</sup> in Gibraltar, and has been to the Burnham windmill fieldtrip, was amenable to meeting up on the afternoon before my early-morning Channel Tunnel crossing and putting me up overnight. We went to the nearby Staines reservoirs, finding Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* and Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*<sup>7</sup>. This early April day was surprisingly warm and had produced dense swarms of flying insects, but we remained unbitten<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original Yiddish spelling...

<sup>2</sup> Quiz trivia (should that be quiz trivium in the singular?): The closest capital cities in the world are Vienna and Bratislava, 50km apart in a straight line.

<sup>3</sup> eg Enforced flight schedule changes for 6 people after booking to suit our preferred timings; some went with the flow and others got their money back and re-booked.

<sup>4</sup> Contact details in previous article, but Google 'Illmitzerhof' and it won't take long!

<sup>5</sup> I know the composer Antonin Dvořák spelt his name with an 'ř' and not an 'r', pronouncing it 'dvorzh-ak', but Michael pronounces his 'dvor-ak'. He won't buy you a beer if you get it wrong! Michael is proudly Viennese.

<sup>6</sup> Even the most unlikely circumstances can have unexpected consequences! Robert had hoped to get to Austria with us, but he had used up all his leave entitlement.

<sup>7</sup> Yet another example, I'm afraid of a gull species that looks generally very similar to other gull species in *Larus*, but is now found should belong to a different genus.

<sup>8</sup> I understand that only female mosquitoes bite, but not until their 'mouthparts' develop about 3 days after hatching. Geneticists are working to modify *Anopheles*-type mosquitoes whose mouthparts won't develop enough for us to be injected with the malaria plasmodium; the aim is to release these into the wild so that this genetic modification spreads through the population, thus reaching breeding sites where insecticides are not applied.

My first stop across the Channel was somewhat off my normal route at Dokkum, a small town in the north of the Netherlands<sup>9</sup>, where I would meet up with the three authors, Rob Bijlsma, Leo Zwarts and Eddy Wymenga, of a book about the natural history of the Sahel latitudes, concentrating on West Africa. Rob, an old friend, had asked me to edit the English texts of the chapters, and I had managed to complete that task over the 2008/9 winter, sending the last one back at the end of March. Dokkum is delightful, like a mini-Bruges, but satnav helps with the many twists and turns; like many towns in the Netherlands now, most road signs have been removed, as have the pavements, which means that drivers have to concentrate very hard not to run into pedestrians and cyclists, because even in many two-way streets, vehicles have to edge on to the walking areas to pass each other. Accident rates have dropped in startling fashion! The first Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* and Chiffchaffs *P. collybita* were in song, even though few leaves were out. That afternoon, they took me to the sea defence embankment. At this location, the sea currents have slowed to drop silt from the estuaries to the south, creating a saltmarsh that is up to 5km distant from the embankment. Around 85,000 Barnacle Geese *Branta leucopsis* now winter here and most seemed still to be present. About 20km further east, not far from the border with Germany, passerine migrants were beginning to set up the first territories. A brief burst of song from a vegetated ditch made Rob and me look at each other and simultaneously blurt out, "Bluethroat"! *Luscinia svecica* itself, at the latitude of Norwich!

It was a fairly long run the following day down to Burghaslach and the hospitality of Martin Rößner and family<sup>10</sup>, but for any of you who might have been stationed at RAF Gütersloh or had to pass Osnabruck in the 1980s, the short stretch of Autobahn that didn't get built because of corruption scandals still isn't there! Indeed, then as now, all the maps, including TomTom, reveal no gap, no hiatus. The drive to Austria was uneventful, although Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* was much in evidence, but soon after the welcome at the Illmitzerhof I went for a wander. A short walk, during which I heard numerous Willow Warblers and Common Nightingales *L. megarhynchos* and at least two Eurasian Bitterns *Botaurus stellaris* in small, isolated patches of reeds, brought me to a track that services vineyards north of the nearby shallow lake, Zick Lacke. At this time of year when grass and reed growth has scarcely begun in earnest, it offers views over the lake that soon the season will obscure. Many Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* were courting, two birds actually incubating eggs, Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* abounded, over the nearby grasslands Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* were displaying vigorously, but the star, only 20m away was a Marsh Sandpiper *T. stagnatilis*, a scarce but regular bird on passage. After mid-April, plant growth is such that ten times the numbers of birds could be present, but unless they fly, you won't see them. Each year, different areas of reeds are cut and so in early spring reconnaissance is essential. Down by the Illmitz ferry terminal, a large cleared area revealed a dozen Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea*, a pair of Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and many pairs of the commonest visible waterbird, Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*. Western Great Egret *Ardea alba* seemed to have had good breeding seasons (A BirdLife count in June 2009 suggested about 700 pairs and a host of non-breeding birds). However, it was noticeable that the similarly-sized Western White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* was in very short supply. It's a good example of how conditions in the preceding years affect species differently, even when they share largely the same food. For the previous 9 years, summers had been dry, winters mild but not wet. The 2008/9 winter had replenished the shallow lakes fully. In years of relative drought, the egrets retreat

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<sup>9</sup> The people of the northern coast of the Netherlands and of the neighbouring stretch of German coast regard themselves as Frieslanders first. Many local words are similar in pronunciation to old Lowland Scots (Lallans), and so I could understand an amazing amount of the conversations of locals, but not if they spoke formal Dutch!

<sup>10</sup> Martin Rößner, Gasthaus Rotes Ross, [info@rotes-ross-burghaslach.de](mailto:info@rotes-ross-burghaslach.de), +0049 (0) 9552 374.

to the centre of the reed-beds surrounding the main Neusiedlersee, where food such as fish remains plentiful, even though elsewhere populations of amphibians, reptiles and small mammals diminish, to the detriment of storks, for they may shift to forage on the edge of reed-beds, but are poor at catching fish. After wet winters, you may often see at ephemeral ponds in open land (often grazed by re-introduced, semi-domesticated European Bison *Bison bonasus*) mixed groups of White Stork, Great Egret and Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, sometimes over 50 birds at a time.



European bison *Bison bonasus*.

Photo: Tim Loseby

The shallow lakes that comprise the Seewinkel were water-filled, which meant that many species were widely dispersed, not a problem with most of the commoner species, but those that are scarcer or those that tend to flock may escape notice. Most of the roads and tracks through this area have some sort of traffic restriction, and although it is possible to walk almost everywhere, the sheer area involved, about 15km × 15km, rather demands that you have to use a bicycle when birding here. The rental bikes mostly are sturdy, low-friction models – you soon learn how to strap a tripod on to the basket<sup>11</sup> – but at the sandiest tracks, you occasionally have to get off and walk<sup>12</sup>. The standard map of the Neusiedlersee Region is the Freytag & Berndt Wanderkarte 271. It is updated regularly and shows cycle tracks, whether European, national or local. Changing land usage can mean that a track is not quite where the map depicts, but in places short stretches of some long-established link roads, omitted long ago from reference maps, are not shown.

Martin and Julia were due the next evening and so before they arrived, I visited as many more locations as I could, including a few that were more distant. Early on 9 April I went to explore the same area where the Marsh Sandpiper had been, but there was no sign. Instead, two Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, a bird that is a very scarce migrant here, were feeding industriously in the same patch of flooded grass. I cycled north and checked as many of the ponds and small lakes as I could. Near a roost of Black-headed (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) and immature Yellow-legged (*Larus michahellis*)

<sup>11</sup> A tip here: serious birders should rent a ladies' bike – you will try only once to swing your leg off a men's bike, for when you catch your leg on the tripod you collapse in an untidy heap. The rear basket holds telescope, rain gear and map.

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, you can come to a stop and fall over in the sand. Some people have done this more than once.

Gulls was a Marsh Sandpiper! I could not tell if this was the same individual I had seen the day before, but it made a nice start to the day! Much to my surprise, I found 20 Great Bustards *Otis tarda* about four kilometres from the reserve that is maintained for them south of Tadten and Andau. They probably wander a good deal around the general area, which is very open and flat, providing good sightlines, before the grass and crops grow to height to offer cover. It's surprising just how well these huge birds can conceal themselves in growth that can't hide the ubiquitous Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*. The wintering bustard flock<sup>13</sup> here had settled to some 26 birds in total, which as the breeding season progressed, separated into three groups under a dominant male. However, it was difficult sometimes to make out which males were group leaders, so much displaying was going on. These birds were to prove pretty cooperative throughout.

### ***The Novices' Tale – Martin and Julia venture to Illmitz and beyond***

Having spotted<sup>14</sup> Mike's plans for an informal birding trip to Illmitz I thought, 'Why not?' It was time to prove that I was more than just a casual bird lover fonder of staying in bed than getting up at the crack of sparrows<sup>15</sup>! My 'previous' was limited to a day out at Dawlish Warren with the 'famous' RAF birder Martin Wightman<sup>16</sup>, whom I'd harried to let me tag along so I could see a master at work and perhaps recognise a few more birds for my life list. I should point out immediately that 'life list' is a tad misleading – I don't actually have a list or anything like one. I do have some scraps of paper torn from notebooks, I have notebooks with scraps of paper in them and I have some scruffy side notes in my field guides... But a proper neat, clearly documented and dated birders list? My abiding memory from that particular trip with MW was just how awful I was at recognising birds. I'm told I did see a Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* or at least looked at one<sup>17</sup>. I even fell asleep in a hide, eyes glued to my bins watching a Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*<sup>18</sup>! However, I had discovered I really did like watching birds, and so thanks to Martin it had been a completely successful trip. Three days at Illmitz therefore seemed like a natural progression and an opportunity to do some 'total immersion' birding with another expert from RAF ornithological folklore<sup>19</sup>. Julia is a very understanding wife and had agreed to come along and so we flew from Bonn to Vienna and set off in our rental car for the 50km to Illmitz. The satnav fitted was deeply upset at being so near its limited European coverage – after we had obediently passed the airport for the third time we bought a real map and started again<sup>20</sup> – a life-forming experience (LFE)! Rather worryingly for Mike, we reached the Illmitzerhof somewhat later than expected, but he had left a 'can't-miss-it' note not only to say that he was at the pub, but also how to get there! This was an extremely positive and exciting sign for us - beer on the itinerary! Already there was a familiar feel to this expedition! We quickly found him: 2 hours, some steaks and several Weiss beers later we had made our introductions, exchanged a few war stories and sorted out the plans for the weekend – a very good start to my novice birding adventure.

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<sup>13</sup> This wasn't the only flock of Great Bustards in eastern Austria in the winter of 2008/9. Another much larger flock was monitored at a secret location by BirdLife Austria. You read it here first, folks!

<sup>14</sup> I have an irresistible weakness for bad puns – you have been warned!

<sup>15</sup> Told you!

<sup>16</sup> MB's note: Hmm... a RAFOS *Newsletter* article debating the difference between fame and notoriety, within a birding context, compiled by many RAFOS members?

<sup>17</sup> Actually, I couldn't really tell how it differed from all the other terns!

<sup>18</sup> Honestly, Martin it wasn't your dulcet tones, it was all that fresh sea-air!

<sup>19</sup> MB's note: perhaps rather the equivalent of stories from the Other Side?

<sup>20</sup> This tale already has a moral – always have a hard-copy map! Clearly, the anonymous car rental company expects all its customers to turn left to Vienna.

Day 1, 0700: pre-breakfast orientation. I was somewhat relieved when Mike proposed a 7am start as I had imagined all birders started the day at 5am in the dark, recognising birds only by their calls and rhythmic snoring patterns. I'm sure he was somewhat concerned when out of the hotel appeared an uncouth lad, clad in green, (I assumed green to be the official birding dress code) bins waving and pointing madly at anything that moved. I must admit to feeling like a birding 'Luke Skywalker' in the presence of a calm and collected 'Jedi birding master'.

"Yes, Martin, a birder's strength flows from the Force, but beware of the dark side – life lists, year lists, twitching; easily they flow, quick to compel you to the chase. If once you start down the twitching path, forever will it dominate your destiny. Consume you it will, as it did my other birding apprentices".

As we wandered to the nearby vantage point overlooking meadows and reedbeds, Mike had already located Nightingales nearby and I had heard, for the very first time, Bitterns booming – a magical first for me. The environment at Illmitz is very special; there are vast reedbeds, lagoons and grassy meadows, all seemingly filled with birds. Greylag Geese *Anser anser*, Black-headed Gulls, Red-crested Pochards, Great Egrets and other herons, Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* plus grazing roe deer *Capreolus capreolus* and dozens of laid-back brown hares *Lepus capensis* dominated the scene. I was hugely impressed with how quiet, natural and open the countryside was. Next we made a quick visit down to the Neusiedlersee itself, where I was impressed by the vast expanse of the reedbeds, which dwarfed those I had experienced on my few visits to Norfolk. Purple Heron, Kentish (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) and Little Ringed (*C. dubius*) Plovers, all lifers for me, completed a very successful pre-breakfast foray.



Map of the Hungarian reserves adjoining eastern Austria. © Sue Fleming  
Day 1, post-breakfast. After a typical Austrian breakfast we headed off and soon entered Hungary in search of the unknown (to western birders) Hany Istók Tanösvény ('Király-tó' for short, after the lake there) reserve, one of many over a vast area.

En route we saw Western White Storks nesting on village rooftops, but then I spotted a Black Stork<sup>21</sup> *Ciconia nigra* in flight – a lifer for me. I sensed I gained a tiny bit of ‘street cred’ with Mike! The reserve proved to be a beautifully quiet, open wooded landscape. In no particular order we saw Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*, a tree creeper *Certhia* sp, Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*, European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*, heard Savi’s Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*, and a Gropper (I trust this is correct?<sup>22</sup>), Western Marsh Harrier and a non-birding highlight for Julia and me, thousands of green frogs *Rana* spp making an absolutely wonderful noise. I inadvertently recorded another lifer when a pair of rather innocuous-looking duck turned out to be Ferruginous Duck! Mike thinks this is a superb place; I was suitably pleased with myself<sup>23</sup>. We returned to Austria by a circular route to reach the mystical Great Bustard reserve south of Andau. Mike took some back roads so no options were missed. Soon we came across a chap in the ‘GB zone’ who had an enormous Prime lens fitted to an equally impressive camera body – clue! As a bird lover I have admired pictures of these impressive birds displaying, but the heat haze made our distant first sighting look like a group of giant chickens<sup>24</sup> – yet another lifer, but next time we hoped for a closer and more enlightening view! On to the observation tower at the Andau Bridge<sup>25</sup>, a good place to see birds, where, believe it or not, I identified my first Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* in flooded fields. Now, I may have seen one before but would not have positively identified it, but Mike’s careful tuition on Ruff recognition was nevertheless a little wasted on me at first:

“What’s that, Mike?”

“A Ruff...”

“And what’s that, Mike?”

“Also a Ruff...”

“Mike what’s that?”

“ANOTHER BLOODY RUFF!”

And so on...

That they all looked completely different to me was a puzzle, but then I realised that the puzzle was part of the answer, for I’ve cracked the ‘Ruff’, using Mike’s ‘Rough guide to Ruff ID’ – if it’s a scruffy-looking wader with a small head and indeterminate colouring and you don’t have the faintest idea, then it’s 99% certain it’s a Ruff. Seems a good enough rule for me! The best bird here was an adult White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, another lifer for me (I had seen its close relative White-bellied Eagle *H. leucogaster* in Oz) and very impressive, but the most amazing was yet to come. We had just scaled an observation platform about 5km further on when a beautiful female Montagu’s Harrier *Circus pygargus* flew along low-level in a reedy ditch, rising to fly past in perfect view and form – another lifer and something quite special. After making our way back to Illmitz, a solid Austrian meal followed by a nice bottle of Herr Klein’s wine in the Illmitzerhof garden finished off a very, very satisfying day indeed.

*Day 2. Having your cake.* Our pre-breakfast meander produced a Kentish Plover in the Illmitz marina car park. Julia went to explore the town and so Mike and I set off to explore the other side of the Neusiedlersee. It was another lovely day and soon after scanning the reeds at Jois looking for movement in isolated small trees, Mike located

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<sup>21</sup> Listen! I know they’re very big but this was in the distance and I did see it. MB’s note: on the next sighting, one was carrying nesting material.

<sup>22</sup> MB’s note: accurate, if not precise! (Common Grasshopper Warbler *L. naevia*).

<sup>23</sup> MB’s note: Martin and Julia were so spellbound when we first stopped at the reserve’s HQ that they missed the brief appearance of two Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*. This magnificent reserve deserves thorough exploration, but be warned that by mid-April, you need the best protection against myriads of biting insects.

<sup>24</sup> MB’s note: accurate again, but precision isn’t possible at such low resolution!

<sup>25</sup> MB’s note: it was closed a little later to repair decay and damage.

another lifer for me, a Bluethroat in full view and singing beautifully<sup>26</sup>. On the road to Breitenbrunn marina, we stopped at a belt of trees just before the reedbeds, where I had the pleasure of finding in a nearby undulating flooded meadow both Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* and Green Sandpiper<sup>27</sup> *T. ochropus*, two more lifers, which Mike identified for me, and 3 Little Ringed Plovers. Overhead, a fine Western Marsh Harrier cruised serenely past with a big beakful of nesting material. Mike pointed out on the telephone wires two 2 distinctive and beautifully marked Corn Buntings *Emberiza calandra* (lifer). Then came an extremely memorable birding moment– Mike suddenly stopped, looked up into the nearest tree and said, “Long-eared Owl!” I looked for ages but just couldn’t see it; after much prompting by Mike, I finally made out my first Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* sitting on a branch almost within touching distance – an amazing bird and completely cryptic in its habitat.



Now I don’t know many birders but to me this was a hugely impressive example of fieldcraft – how Mike found this bird that so perfectly blended into its environment was amazing. ‘Could it get better?’ I asked myself as we got to the end of the road and started checking out the extensive reedbeds. In answer, we found Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* (lifer), many Eurasian Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, one Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*<sup>28</sup> and a host of Marsh Harriers, far more than I’ve ever seen before. We cruised back to the hotel after a very satisfying day to meet up with Julia. Another solid Austrian dinner, again followed by local<sup>29</sup> wine in the garden, saw us serenaded by evening birdsong from Western Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Linnets *Carduelis cannabina* European Serins *Serinus serinus* and Common Blackbirds *Turdus merula*.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*  
Photo: Martin Ellacott

**Day 3. Icing on the cake.** Mike chose a walk around the local roads for our pre-breakfast exercise and how productive it turned out to be. He eventually found a Common Nightingale singing in view, another first (although we’d heard them constantly), a vivid yellow ‘Blue-headed’ Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava*, Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* and a passage Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*. I saw a pair of

<sup>26</sup> MB’s note: over a fairly short period, I found 6 singing male Bluethroats, four of them in ‘traditional’ areas, but all territories had been deserted only two weeks later, possibly because the females’ migration might have been disrupted.

<sup>27</sup> MB’s note: the former is a common Neusiedlersee passage migrant, often lingering, but the latter comes through regularly in very small numbers.

<sup>28</sup> I remember Mike saying the gape colours are different, primary extensions differ, and often the flight feathers have narrow edging, but I can’t remember which way round these apply!

<sup>29</sup> MB’s note: this is one of these scarce occasions where the word ‘local’ lacks sufficient precision – perhaps ‘adjacent’ instead would serve – the wine is superb!

Ferruginous Ducks, this achievement earning me a small pat on the back from Mike. After breakfast, we rang the changes, renting bikes for the day, and set off on a winding ride around the lakes and meadows that surround Illmitz. This mode was much more my territory; as an ex-RAF racing cyclist I was quickly leading up the road on my 50lb, 14-gear, poor excuse for a mountain bike. But as the day went on I was invariably last, because I felt compelled to check out every nook and cranny, desperate to get the most out of my last full on birding day in Austria. We saw some early migrant Common Terns *Sterna hirundo*, two Arctic Terns *S. paradisaea*<sup>30</sup>, Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (lifer), a passage Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* (lifer, unless Martin Wightman tells me otherwise), Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (lifer), Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (lifer) and a passage Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*.

Common Tree Frog *Hyla arborea*. Photo: Martin Ellacott

We also found some Common Tree Frogs beautifully bright green, clustered on the reeds and some stunning orchids in the grass around one lake – this area is exceptional for nature. We spent some time at the top of an enormous observation platform at Hölle<sup>31</sup> – the view was stupendous – white-sailed boats on the Neusiedlersee, Marsh Harriers patrolling incessantly and Greylags nesting everywhere. Mike tried hard to find me my ‘bogey’ bird, Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, but try as we might, we failed to locate one<sup>32</sup>.



The Illmitzerhof: Martin Ellacott, Mike Blair and bikes. Photo: Julia Ellacott

We finally cruised back cross-country to the Illmitzerhof, very weary but very contented after a fine day, totally enjoyable. We capped it off with a very nice Hungarian dinner and the inevitable bottle of ‘Klein-Wein’ in the garden. So, my main

highlights? Specifically, these were the female Montagu’s, the delightful Long-eared Owl, the booming Bitterns, but overall the beautifully peaceful nature of the Illmitz district. I noted some 110 bird species of which 30 were lifers. Mike proved to be a perfect ‘Jedi birding master’ and showed great patience in answering my incessant questions. His field-craft was impressive and something to aspire to – leading to my

<sup>30</sup> MB’s note: Arctic Tern is irregular in tiny numbers; sightings here require a report to the Austrian Rarities Committee.

<sup>31</sup> MB’s note: in the immortal words of the late Peter Sellers, ‘It’s Hell, you know’.

<sup>32</sup> MB’s note: this is going to sound hard, Martin, but a Wryneck appeared near Illmitz church on 13 Apr, the day after you left...

second LFE which is you really need to know your bird calls to help maximise your birding opportunities. This prompts my third and last LFE which is to invest in the small Palmtop/PDA thingy that Mike used to check out the birds we saw that needed some further positive identification. Finally I want to thank Mike for his excellent organisation and birding knowledge – it made our trip memorable and rewarding. I can heartily recommend Illmitz as a birding venue and I hope to make a return visit soon<sup>33</sup>.

### **Mike's interlude**

One of the common breeding birds of the grasslands is Eurasian Curlew, its distinctive evocative calling lingering in the air on calm days. It is my subjective impression that these birds are slightly shorter-billed than those seen in the UK. Furthermore, the previous year's birds, mostly non-breeders I suspect, have bills that will reach their full length only at the end of their second year. Consequently, when Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*<sup>34</sup> is suspected, much care is required if viewing conditions or distance are less than ideal! On the three occasions (11, 12, & 20 Apr) I found Whimbrel, they were in tight flocks and very alert, very much passage birds. Although a few Curlew were associating with them, generally when Curlew were in any kind of flock (most were on territories), the flock was loose with just the odd bird on sentry-go. Just southwest of Illmitz is an area, Sandeck, accessible only on foot or by bicycle, but it does have a tall tower probably built for military radio purposes, but now, at its first platform, open to the public up a very steep ladder<sup>35</sup>. I was quite surprised to find three Barnacle Geese nearby, and jumped to the conclusion that these were escapees or birds that no longer migrated north, but later I was told that they had been seen on about the same day the previous year. An identical tower, 6km further south, but an 8km cycle ride, is accessible by car. It overlooks a compound where Grauer Steppenrind, the Hungarian traditional long-horned grey cattle that graze the marshes, are kept overnight. Between the two towers, the first access track gives you a sweep of about 160° to scan; my first scan found about 500 Greylag Geese and about 100 Great Egrets! Slow examination of the goose families and flocks found strangers – five Greater White-fronted Geese *A. albifrons* – the last of the winterers to leave. However, before I reached this point, my necessarily circuitous route had been profitable – Common Grasshopper Warbler had scolded me from cover, but became positively wrathful in the open when responding to playback. I left this guardian in peace only to find (and obtain a distant picture) a Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* perched in a bare tree beside a pond, and to hear the first Eurasian Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* of the season (sorry, Martin and Julia, again the day after you left). Both towers are about equidistant from a large reedbed in the centre of the southern Neusiedlersee. This reedbed, called Grosser Insel, is home to a population of Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, a species once again expanding its range into its former distribution. However, Grosser Insel is so distant, even to a telescope, that it would be unsafe to assign identification. You would have to take a boat trip and hope that the bird appeared.

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<sup>33</sup> When on the way to the airport, I saw a Spoonbill!

<sup>34</sup> This species may soon be split into Eurasian (our bird) and Nearctic Whimbrels (*N. hudsonicus*), so if you've seen it in the US, you may get an armchair tick!

<sup>35</sup> Austria and Hungary still have a shortage of HSJs (Health & Safety Jobsworths), but they may be catching up soon: one tower in Austria and two in Hungary were closed during my time there, but I admit that one in Hungary in poor enough condition to give pause even to me.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*. Photo: Robert Polay (with permission)



On meeting up with Michael Dvorak and Dr Alfred Grüll at the Illmitz Biological Research Station, we discussed some common and some spreading species that might be logged to useful effect. I came away with three mapping tasks: Eurasian Bittern on territory away from the main reed-beds (13 booming males<sup>36</sup>), and all sightings of Ferruginous Duck (21 pairs<sup>37</sup>) and Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* (19 tetrads with pairs or singing birds; not found in 64 tetrads with apparently suitable

habitat). The mob, on their arrival in May, were to do a woodland survey (18 species) and engage in simultaneous 3-hour counts of Greylag Geese, allowing for movement within and between areas (2646 adults & young)

### ***The World Travellers' Tale – the relaxed birding of Tim and Irene***

Irene and I had a trouble-free Sky Europe flight from Luton to Bratislava for our 8-night stay. Sue had come with us, but would stay to the end. It was our first time in eastern Austria, somewhere we had known about for many years, but somehow never got around to visiting. We were looking forward to enjoying some relaxed birding and seeing some visible migration, an aspect of birding that seems harder and harder to come by these days. Throughout, the weather was fine but somewhat windy, so consequently any big movements were held up, but Mike's comprehensive tour of the area's hotspots and reserves more than compensated. Our days whizzed by. The large reserves just over the border in Hungary were most impressive with their mix of open water and vast reed-beds. White-tailed Eagle, White-winged (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) and Black (*C. nigra*) Terns, Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant and Black Stork were the highlights. Other memorable birds at Mike's favourite spots were Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* nest-building on a windy morning and a tantalisingly brief view of a calling Little Crake *Porzana parva* at Jois. Breeding Syrian Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos syriacus* and Western Black Redstarts were numerous in Illmitz town but the early morning calling Wryneck always managed to elude us. On our travels, we had excellent views of two migrating Eastern Imperial Eagles *Aquila heliaca*, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year birds, which we encountered by chance one afternoon as we were heading for the café and coffee and cake! We had sighted them from quite a distance, but our route crossed their path near where they had landed, disappearing as they do in apparently open fields – fortunately, they both got airborne just after we got out of the car! We had a day out with local photographer Robert Polay, and using his car as a hide, we were able to access areas that normally are off limits to vehicles. He showed us all his favourite photo locations and in return we found him a migrant Common Crane *Grus grus*, an unusual local visitor at that time of year; Robert was more excited than us at this sighting!

Although winter rains had been good, the lack of spring rain at the Great Bustard reserve had held back the grassland growth and so we had great views of up to 9 birds,

<sup>36</sup> Includes two booming males in nearby Hungary.

<sup>37</sup> Includes 11 pairs in nearby Hungary.

the males strutting their stuff in fine style (a lifer for Irene). We enjoyed these massive birds so much we paid them a second visit on Tim's birthday<sup>38</sup> on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Other abiding memories were:

- The fine local wines.
- Excellent food especially the local asparagus which was just coming into season.
- The rural landscape.
- The quiet villages and small towns with few vehicles.
- The friendly and comfortable accommodation that makes this area a destination well worth revisiting.

### ***The Young Peoples' Tale – Julian and Lucy muse on birds and culture***

On 4 May we flew Aer Lingus from Gatwick to Vienna where Mike picked us up in his trusty Rover and conveyed us to Illmitz in only 38 minutes. Jon Orme, Pete Evans and Dave Munday had arrived a little before us that day and had rented a car, Iain MacKenzie had arrived a few days earlier, but Sue had joined Mike a week before that. I already knew Jon, Pete and Sue, but Lucy had yet to meet them. The first priority was to go and see the Great Bustards, and although only two birds cooperated, one was displaying its white fluffy tail nicely.

Male Great Bustard *Otis tarda* displaying  
Photo: Hand-held digiscope by Sue Fleming.



From there we popped down the 'Bridge at Andau', a spot that we had birded before a few years ago, literally on the Austrian-Hungarian border, where we stand in the centre of the bridge over the canal, and wait for things to happen. Thousands of Hungarians fleeing the Russians in 1956 crossed here, many losing their lives, the spot marked by a small but poignant monument. The local Austrians all helped to feed and accommodate the refugees; there are still strong affinities. The birding was good, but last time it was outstanding! No Wryneck or River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* – boo<sup>39</sup>! But we did manage Great Reed Warbler, Eurasian Reed Warbler,

Western White Stork, Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* (never get bored with Cuckoo), Common Nightingale and White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba*. After a bite to eat we went north round the main lake to see a nest of Eurasian Penduline Tit; the nest takes the form of an elaborate grass and reed bag that hangs from a tree branch, usually over water. We also heard Little Crake and Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* responding to playback – fabulous!

<sup>38</sup> MB's note: delicacy prevents us mentioning which one, but Tim won't see this footnote number again...

<sup>39</sup> MB's note: Julian, Sue did later manage to find a Wryneck, but on the path on the Hungarian side of the border. River Warbler failed to appear there at all this year.



Penduline Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

Photo: Jon Orme

The very next day we set off on a six-hour drive to eastern Hungary to the Hortobágy National Park, the first in Hungary, some 800 km<sup>2</sup> rich in folklore and cultural history, part of the Great Hungarian Plain. Now a World Heritage Site, the Hortobágy is part of the largest natural grassland in Europe, steppe-like in character, with cattle, sheep, oxen, and horses tended by herdsmen, and it provides a variety of habitats for over 342 bird species. The plain formed following ice-age induced deforestation and extensive subsequent flooding of the River Tisza, a major tributary of the Danube. The Hortobágy remains relatively under-developed, industrial agriculture being kept outside its borders, preserving the lands' potential for wildlife. Many once-typical European species still thrive here, including European Turtle Dove, Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*, Corn Bunting, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Western White Stork and Eurasian Hoopoe. The supporting cast of Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* and European Serin are exotic delights for UK birders. Here, too there are still high densities of Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* and Eastern Imperial Eagle and good numbers of Great Bustard and Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* (Don't get me started on dipping on Aquatic Warblers). Ponds, lakes, marshes and fishponds abound and are home to the three marsh terns (White-winged, Black and Whiskered *Chlidonias hybrida*), many wildfowl, and sought-after passerines such as Bluethroats and Savi's Warbler, as well as other goodies such as Pygmy Cormorant and Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, most of which we managed to see.

Our accommodation, the Patkós Csarda, is near the heart of the park. It is a simple, rustic and clean restaurant (vast menu), with a couple of buildings for accommodation – cheap and cheerful – and the food was largely local recipes, honest and wholesome. The coffee and beer were also fabulous and we loved it. After unpacking, a walk down the deserted country lane opposite brought us Montagu's Harrier, many Western Yellow

('Blue-headed) Wagtails<sup>40</sup> (and a 'Black-headed' *M.(f.) feldegg*, which breeds from the Balkans through to Afghanistan), Golden Oriole, Red-footed Falcon, Crested Lark, Western Great Egret, Red-backed Shrike, Western Black Redstart, Corn Bunting and Common Crane (over 60,000 stop here on a migration).

Early next day I searched for a small group of Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*<sup>41</sup> which Dave and Iain had seen the day before. On the way back, Hoopoe and Bee-eater! Following breakfast (ham, salami, cheese, honey, fresh bread and lashings of coffee and orange juice), we walked the Hortobágy halasto (9 miles!) through a complex of pools and huge fishponds. The birding was incredible. I knew we were on to a good thing when our first bird turned out to be a Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*<sup>42</sup>



singing in a tree at the car park! As we wandered along the path, we saw amongst other birds, Sedge (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*), Eurasian Reed, Savi's and Barred (*Sylvia nisoria*) Warblers, Black-crowned Night, Purple and Grey (*Ardea cinerea*) Herons, the marsh terns, Eurasian Spoonbill, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, and the bird of the day, a Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, which is a very small heron, so small, that when Lucy and I first glimpsed it at close range, Lucy had the impression it was a kingfisher.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Photo: Mike Blair

We also had amazing views of Eastern Imperial Eagle which was long the chosen heraldic creature of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. However, such powerful symbolic status did little to help this bird, but at least nowadays successful conservation strategies are helping to increase numbers of this inhabitant of open lightly-wooded country. The wonderfully detailed descriptions in field guides are not much use if this large bird is a mile or more away, but our views of one drifting 20 feet above our heads and then landing within 30 feet enabled us to check the book's accuracy! By the way, the weather was fabulous, ranging from 24°C in Austria to 31°C in Hungary, but this made our wanderings through the fishponds hot and sweaty. It was good to get back to the motel and have a large, cold beer and then an early night for all concerned.

Before breakfast (honey again - got considerably sticky – fabulous), we had distant views of a (White-spotted<sup>43</sup>) Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica cyanecula*, which is found predominately in central and southern Europe. We spent the morning going round the north of the park scanning from various viewing platforms for Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* (no luck) and Common Cranes (60+ from the breeding population). A highlight was hearing two Eurasian Hoopoes calling to each other. Although we saw

<sup>40</sup> A really mixed bunch, and what a view at no more than 10-12 feet away! The scope revealed their facial bristles. Males: Black-headed, with no sign of a supercilium, Blue-headed (blue-grey head with white supercilium and malar stripe; females had much browner backs and were very pale buff-yellow below.

<sup>41</sup> A really fabulous bird, with brick-red face and throat, stopping off on its lengthy migration to Arctic European latitudes.

<sup>42</sup> As many of you know, I am particularly fond of warblers and I had probably seen only about six in my lifetime! The male has this wonderful lemon yellow breast and clean white belly and a most distinctive accelerating trilling song.

<sup>43</sup> MB's note: The informal English names of 'White-spotted' and 'Red-spotted' Bluethroats are less than ideal, given the extent of individual variation in many populations.

very little after lunch, we were entertained by a Bee-eater colony and I gained another new bird: Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*. This large pale pipit is rather undistinguished on the ground, mainly sandy brown above and pale below, not quite as upright as the even larger Richard's Pipit *A. richardi*. It has a characteristic "schip" call. Sue picked out from the excellent Hortobágy guidebook a floodplain beside the River Tisza floodplains that was en route for our return journey. We gained incredible views of all three marsh terns, Common Cuckoo (including one hepatic female and two copulating in midair), Red-backed Shrike, Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*, as well as the usual swathe of herons.

Just after this, Mike's car's engine cooling system sprang a leak in the top radiator pipe. Thanks to the combined effort of the ex-RAF technicians in the other car and local Hungarians on whose access road we had parked, the pipe was patched well enough to allow us to get to a motorway service station. While all this was going on, and not wishing to be remembered as the cook who spoiled the broth, I stood on the opposite side of the main road looking for woodland birds, which cooperated; first I found a pair of copulating Nightingales and then a Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* appeared. This very handsome bird, readily identifiable by its quivering bright orange-red tail, is on the Amber List, now having an unfavourable conservation status in Europe. At the service station, Mike phoned AA-Europe, they contacted the Magyar Autoclub, who contacted Mike. Bob was very much our uncle and in just over the hour, we were on our way again. We arrived back in Illmitz about 1900. Mike was heroic, and not a little tired.

The following day we decided to visit the Great Bustards again; nine this time. We also saw Common Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*, Whinchat and the ubiquitous Yellow Wagtails. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to be blasé again about Yellow Wagtails in this country? Back at the Andau bridge we heard, but didn't see, much to my chagrin, a couple of Icterine Warblers *Hippolais icterina*. Lucy also managed to see a Wryneck. It was another hot day and we headed to the roadside cafe for a bite to eat. I decided to ignore Lucy and tucked into light lunch. Half a pig later, and having washed it down with copious drink, we went to view different parts of the Neusiedlersee. Again, the birding was fantastic, mainly focussed on waders. We saw Common Redshank, Ruff (in all shapes and sizes), Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Black-winged Stilt, Northern Lapwing, Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*, Kentish and Little Ringed Plover, Hoopoe, Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, Western Marsh Harrier and Western White Stork. Lucy's practice with the telescope had made her very proficient. She loved the birding watching and her infectious enthusiasm makes her great company.

At the end, Lucy and I had a couple of days in Vienna, spending much time in the numerous cafes and art galleries. We splashed out on a little bit of luxury, staying at one of the city's two K+K boutique hotels, founded in 1961 by Josef and Helmut Koller – they are just the right side of pretentious! We managed to cover a lot of ground. Our programme was:

- First, St. Stephan's Cathedral (initially completed in 1160, but added to subsequently). Near the end of WWII, it was saved from demolition by German forces by a Captain Klinkicht, who disobeyed the city commandant's orders. Hooray!
- Next, the Albertina art gallery (opposite the Opera House) for the Batliner Collection that includes examples of French Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, the Fauves, German Expressionism and the Russian avant-garde, including Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul

Cézanne, Amedeo Modigliani, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. It was superb, but a Rembrandt stole our hearts: Saint Paul in Meditation.

- Post-cultural tryst demanded nourishment: to the Hotel Sacher to try some authentic Sacher-Torte. The story goes that in 1832 Prince Metternich ordered the creation of a particularly palatable dessert to spoil high-ranking guests, but that day the chef was ill and the order was fulfilled by a 16-year-old apprentice in his second year, Franz Sacher<sup>44</sup>. The speciality was a resounding success: a soft and fluffy chocolate cake with the tasty apricot jam under the icing. I have to confess Lucy and I enjoyed it but weren't blown away.
- Evening, local student bar, food awful, beer & atmosphere marvellous, apparently my German pronunciation and accent were amusing<sup>45</sup>.
- After breakfast, to the Secessionist building built 1897 by Joseph Olbrich. Amongst the Secessionist exhibits is the commemorative Beethoven Frieze.
- Lunch at a coffee shop.
- PM, to a baroque palace built in 1697 by Prince Eugene of Savoy. The fabulous Belvedere houses one of the most iconic paintings in the world, Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss", painted during his 'golden period' (1907-1908), depicting a couple, amid symbols and shades of gold, sharing a kiss against a bronze background. It is one of those paintings that you really need to see; photographs don't do it justice.
- On the way back to the hotel, had to pop into a coffee shop.
- Just enough time before our flight to London: to the Leopold Museum (major works of Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka) to view the most important collection in the world of Egon Schiele, an Austrian painter born in 1890 and protégé of Klimt. Noted for his intensity, and many self-portraits, the characteristic twisted body shapes and the expressive lines in Schiele's paintings and drawings mark the artist as an early Expressionist.
- Bump into Pete, Dave and Jon at the airport.
- Coffee and cake for all!

### ***The three musketeers' tale – all for one and one for all!***

We landed at Vienna a few minutes before Julian and Lucy's flight – they would go with Mike who had brought Iain to meet us and act as navigator to Illmitz in our rental car. After settling in at the Illmitzerhof, all eight of us assembled in the garden at the tables under the pergola, the vines having just burst into leaf, to the traditional welcome of Herr Klein's fizz – 2 bottles of splendid Sekt! Jon discovered several tree frogs on the pergola uprights and on vine leaves; he decided to photograph them only to remember that his camera was in the bedroom upstairs. As Jon dashed away, Pete mused, "I wonder if I've got the room key?" We had done a little familiarisation birding on an indirect route from the airport, but began to get into the swing of things the following day when we ticked off the Great Bustards.

Our outward journey the next day from Illmitz to the Patkós Csarda on the edge of the Hortobágy was fairly lengthy<sup>46</sup>, but the birding rewards were brilliant. Our car-load went through the centre of Budapest. Miraculously, we achieved this with few problems

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<sup>44</sup> MB's note: Aye, right!

<sup>45</sup> What would students know?

<sup>46</sup> Jon, shortly before flying out, had been taken aback at the distance to the Hortobágy shown on the map. The maps sent to him in September must have had longer kilometres...

using a fairly basic map and Iain's unerring sense of direction.<sup>47</sup> On arrival at the Patkós Csarda, we met up with Mike and his passengers. They had got hopelessly lost around the city but purely by chance had stumbled upon the new Budapest ring road which is not shown on any maps yet. Not surprisingly, Mike's version of this episode is somewhat different, but given that his satnav didn't show the new road either, I think 'lost' is more accurate.<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, the return journey using the new road was a doddle, although Mike's radiator hose leak made it a dawdle for his party, as Julian and Lucy have described above! The replacement hose had been fettled from a Lada spare part, Jon seizing the opportunity to make us crack up by his question, "Is that what they call 'lada-hosen'?"

At the Patkós, where many Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* nests are under the eaves, Mike had the dubious pleasure of an adult swallow alighting on his head, but unfortunately, we were not quick enough to photograph the event for posterity. The bird probably found that Mike's shiny pate lacked sufficient grip! In the grounds of the Patkós compound, we found a couple of very old horse-drawn carts, obviously relics from a bygone agricultural age. On closer examination, Jon and Pete discovered that the carts' construction was quite complicated, being a combination of timber and steel, a demonstration of the skills of both carpenter and blacksmith. What really intrigued them was the intricacy of the suspension and the steering mechanism, which they just could not puzzle out. From our photographs, we suggest that the design may be so clever that it might be of interest to Ross Brawn!



Ancient horse-drawn cart

Photo: Pete Evans

The day trip to the Hortobágy halasto fish-ponds turned out to be more of an expedition than we thought. The large ponds had been dug many years ago, originally stocked with carp that are still in evidence to this day. On arrival we were not aware of how extensive the area was<sup>49</sup>, and set off on what turned out to be an 11-mile hike that took

<sup>47</sup> Considering Iain is a train driver and goes where the signalman decides, this was quite an impressive feat.

<sup>48</sup> MB's note: following the Budapest southern ring-road signs (nearly all Hungarian place-names are 15 letters long and full of consonants that in English usually get an outing only in a game of Scrabble®), at a new junction as we reached the Danube, the only signs with our en-route place names on it took us along the west bank of the river. That was OK until we came across a huge queue at an accident, where the police had closed the road. I went back to the junction, then used the satnav to steer towards intermediate destinations that were close to the (I thought) unbuilt ring road. Although the last short-cut link was not open, we managed, even though many of the overhead signs were still covered up and only about three vehicles were going our way!

<sup>49</sup> Next time, we must remember to read and digest the briefing material beforehand!

the best part of the day, although bird numbers and species were good.<sup>50</sup> It was an enjoyable, if rather tiring, day! For us, one of the highlights of the Hungary foray was the Patkós restaurant – all the food was local and it was a fantastic experience to sample so many new dishes, most of which were heavily laced with a whole range of paprikas. We also discovered an excellent red wine which was light, very akin to a rosé. Because the local custom is to serve it cold<sup>51</sup>, we had to explain to the waiter that we would prefer it at room temperature. Although the next bottle arrived at just the right temperature, we suspected that it had been warmed by being immersed in hot water – the label peeling off was a bit of a clue!

Pete's favourite, naturally, was when he found the Bluethroat. The day we wandered round the fishponds at Hortobágy halasto was warm, dry and calm, so we (sorry, not you, Pete) could hear bird calls and songs from a long way off. The sightlines were great, especially from the many platforms and so we could scan the vast numbers of birds at our leisure. Strangely, this regular stronghold of Pygmy Cormorant held not one – perhaps the winter rains had made outlying sites more attractive. Our other highlights? For Jon and Pete, the huge numbers of Bearded Tits were a satisfactory change from chasing around Cley for the last five years with little success! Our Penduline Tit sightings were special – it's such a good-looking and agile bird – and seeing it nest-building was a bonus, as was being shown another nest by a very obliging German photographer. For Dave, the Red-throated Pipits on Pete's Rise<sup>52</sup> captivated him, as did the Tawny Pipits. On the 'downwind leg' of the Hortobágy halasto fish pond circuit tour Jon, Dave, Iain and Pete came across one of the viewing platforms which looked as though it had been used by a Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* as an eating post – so much fishy debris had been scattered about that we couldn't think of any other satisfactory explanation. Perhaps the eating post had been used by the very Osprey we had seen earlier. Jon and Pete averaged more than one lifer a day on the trip so they "were well happy".

After Julian and Lucy had swanned off to Vienna, we were given confidential information on where to find Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*. On the morning of the Musketeers' departure, amid a forest of pylons, we pressed ahead in driving rain against a chill headwind under low cloud. Some of us did manage to pick out a very large falcon in silhouette as it launched itself away from us, but there was no way we could identify it – next time, perhaps?

**PS** The species list is available from MB at [blair@dialstart.net](mailto:blair@dialstart.net).

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<sup>50</sup> MB's note: splitting up into, first two and then three parties meant that each group saw different things. Sue and I encountered a Moustached Warbler that came through reed-stems and grass to look at us from less than a step away on the ground, and the only Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* of the trip held territory at the top fishpond.

<sup>51</sup> MB's note: not only a local custom, but quite widespread for light red wines, although this particular one was splendidly gluggable at room temperature!

<sup>52</sup> About a kilometre from the Patkós is one of the few mounds to rise above the very flat puszta; it was not named on our maps and so we called it Pete's Rise, claiming it for Her Majesty.



Wine-tasting in Herr Klein's cellar, the 'Klein-Weinkeller'  
L to R: Sue Fleming, Mike Blair, Julian Quail, Lucy Quail, Pete Evans, Jon Orme  
and the delightful Herr Franz Klein  
*Photo: Dave Munday, who really was behind the camera!*

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*Apropos nothing, except that I had a half page to fill and I like the photo; this is a  
Madagascar Kestrel taken by John Wilks during our Madagascar trip last year*



# HAVE SOME (MORE) MADEIRA M'DEAR

By Dick Knight

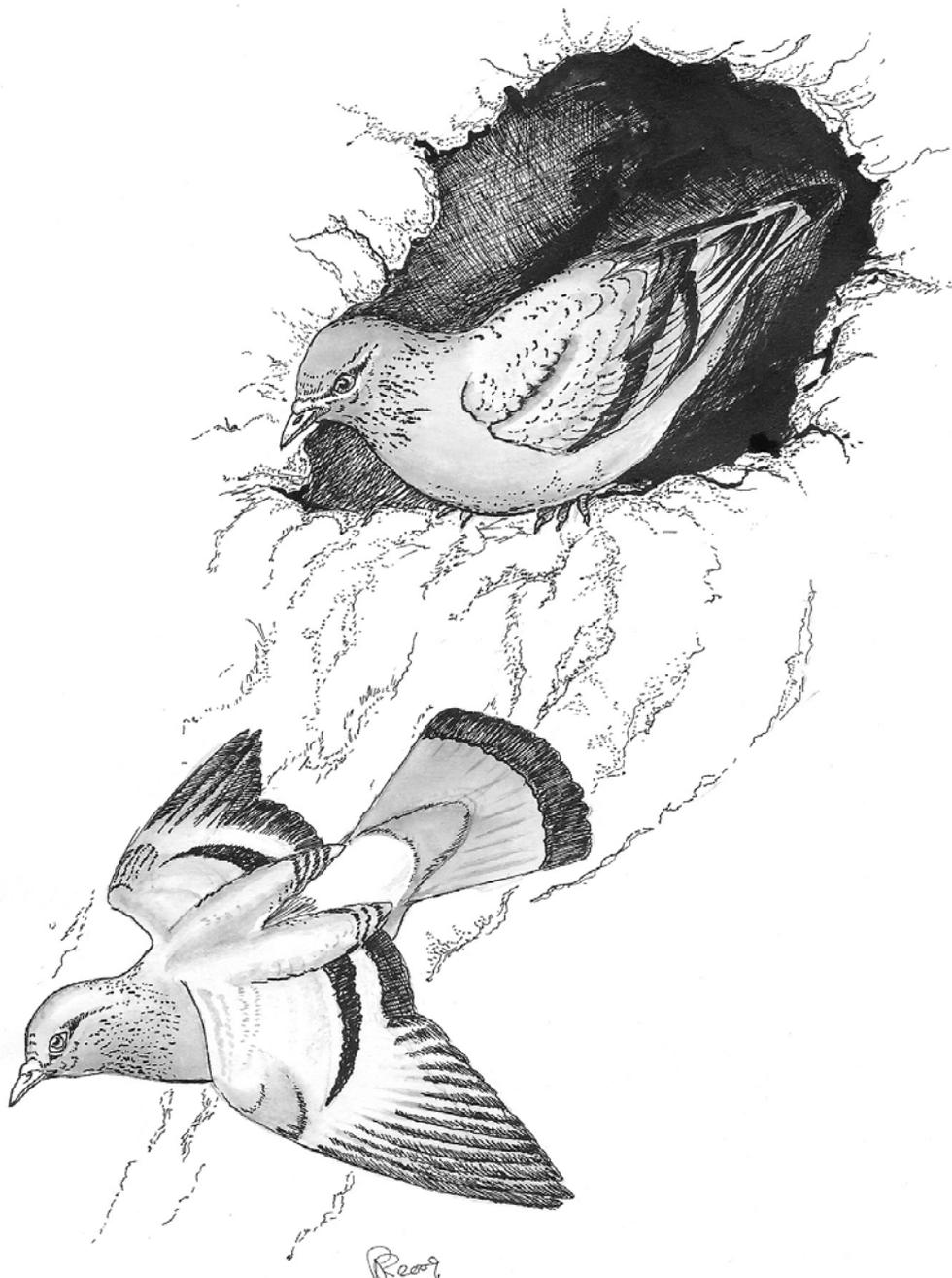
Two years ago, in need of some winter sun, we went to Madeira for a week of rest and recuperation. We were very taken by the island and thought we should go back there again, but this time, 5 weeks later in the year, in the first week of March, so the weather would be a bit warmer. At least, that was the theory.

So it was that we touched down at Madeira on the Monday. We found our bags and got out into the airport arrivals hall quite quickly, but there was no sign of our holiday company rep. After a couple of minutes we spotted a chap with a group of locals around him who looked worth checking so I headed that way. The locals were the transfer taxi drivers, and when one of them spotted the company baggage label on my case I was herded towards the rep, for it was he! We were given our arrival documentation then efficiently whisked away to our hotel in Funchal.

After unpacking we went down for a couple of softies and a snack lunch in the bar. Speaking to another English couple, we heard that the previous week had seen the most rain in 40 years and the previous few days had seen the first serious snow in 18 years. So much for the warmer weather! Having had a very early start in the morning we were feeling lethargic but we took an afternoon stroll down the hill towards the harbour, taking some photographs of the hills from St Catherine's Park in case no-one believed us about the snow. There were lots of male **Blackcaps** calling and hopping through the trees but we couldn't see any females of the species. There was a quartet of **Mute Swans** on the ornamental lake and a **Grey Wagtail** was working the tables at the open air café for crumbs. Looking down onto the harbour we could see plenty of **Yellow-legged Gulls** and a few **Ruddy Turnstones**. As there were 3 cruise ships docked we didn't go down to the seafront, which was heaving with people, but staggered back up the hill. I'm sure it takes 10 minutes to get down the hill but at least 15 minutes to get back up, and we were in need of a cuppa when we reached the hotel again. We sat on our little balcony and watched the **Canaries** in the garden and the **Plain Swifts**, *Apus unicolor*, overhead. The hotel is quite small with perhaps 30 rooms and there were fewer than 10 couples staying, several were French, a pair of German and 2 other English couples, so we had plenty of practice at greetings in different languages. At dinner we were treated to a glass of champagne to welcome us back which I thought was a generous touch, until I noticed that the others were each given a glass as well.

On the Tuesday we had a call from the hire car company, very apologetic but, as they had a busy morning, could they deliver our car at 09.00 rather than 10.00? Certainly! We didn't drive far while we acclimatised to the local driving style, travelling eastwards past the airport to the large town of Manchico. A river enters the ocean here but the mouth was being dredged and the stone spoil dumped 100 yards away on the beach front, so there was just a **Little Egret**, a few **Black-headed Gulls** and a **Kestrel** overhead. On our previous visit, walking inland beside the river for a short distance, we found a sizeable flock of Swallows and Martins; this year, nothing! And, to cap it all we didn't even make it back to the car because a short, but very sharp, shower came through and we had to take shelter of sorts by a building. We drove further round the coast to Caniçal, which has an industrial and fishing port. Here we could only find some **Spanish Sparrows** in a row of date palms, so onwards to Prainha, a village with a small harbour.

Looking down to the inlet we could see **Rock Doves** going in and out of small caves and a few **Berthelot's Pipits** on the grassy slopes. A **Common Buzzard** quartered the ridge line, getting mobbed in the process. Surely we must do better at Ponta de São Lourenço, the eastern extremity of the island. The Germans were out in force, route marching the 3 miles from the car park to the point, but there is now a bridge and wooden board walk over the marshy bit so where's the challenge? We opted for an arduous 100 yard stroll down a different track to get a good view of a flock of **Rock Sparrows**, our only previous sighting of this species had been a stringy glimpse in Crete some years ago. I left Jan and went on a further 100 yards to check out some bushes in a narrow valley but the wind was blowing straight down the valley and the bushes were empty; when I got back she was watching a group of **Linnets**. The strong wind and occasional heavy showers seemed to be keeping most birds hidden so we headed home for tea, taken sitting on our balcony while watching a female Canary pulling bits of kapok from the husks on the tree.



Rock Doves

We took the hotel courtesy bus to the seafront at Funchal on Wednesday morning. There was only one cruise ship in harbour so there weren't many people about, with only a few pesky souls trying to persuade us to take a boat trip or visit a restaurant. I'm not sure if it really works but, as most of them are Portuguese and English speakers, if you reply "Nein, danke" they don't persist. At the far end of the seafront and 100yds inland from the bus terminal is the market which is well worth a visit, especially if you're into strange exotic fruits and flowers. A camera team was filming one of the stalls and causing an obstruction in the process. On the slog back up the hill, St Catherine's Park provided us with a **Ring-necked Parakeet** but that was about all. On the last part of the climb the courtesy bus went past on his return run, tooting the horn and waving to us. Rosie, the Customer Services Manager was mortified at the driver's behaviour, but we took it in the spirit (we think) it was intended; we were only 100yds from the hotel and he couldn't have stopped on that bit of road anyway.

We took the hire car east along the coast to Cabo Girau, at 1900ft they were variously the second highest, or among the highest, cliffs in the world, depending on the source document. Good sport driving up all the hairpins but bad timing! There were 5 coaches from the cruise ship, all the passengers wore stick-on numbers on their lapels to denote their coach number and they were milling about randomly. A car was blaring out Colombian pipe music with CDs for sale and the path to the cliff edge was flanked by stalls flogging tourist tat. We took a quick look at the view then fled - to Lugar de Baixo, a small town a bit further along the coast. If you weren't told about it you would never find the small pond between a building and the sea wall. Apparently, EU money was provided to build a small harbour; the locals said it wouldn't work because of the sea currents but of course the officials knew better. Except they didn't!! The rock sea wall remains and a reed-fringed pool has formed behind it. The **Muscovy Ducks** were still there, but did all 12 chicks belong to one female or was she running a crèche? We counted a couple of Little Egrets, a few Turnstone and a single Grey Wagtail, and we eventually got the **Moorhen** count up to 4. A pair of Common Buzzards and a pair of Kestrels worked the cliffs behind the town, occasionally trying to defend airspace from the others. After a while a **Dunlin** appeared at the edge of the little stone island in the pond, to be joined by a **Common Sandpiper** and a **Ringed Plover**. We were just thinking of leaving when a **Teal** appeared from the reeds - except on closer inspection it was a **Green-winged Teal** - nice tick!

The local TV news on Thursday morning said the road up the mountain was now open after the snow, and indeed it was clear, albeit with drifts on the verges and signs of some clearance work by a digger. I will gloss over the 3 attempts to find the right road heading north out of Funchal thanks to the ambiguous road signs and a less than detailed map. The top of Pico do Areeiro was in drizzle and 30 knot fog and it felt freezing. A generation of Madeirans hadn't seen snow before so the kids were throwing themselves into it and doing all the things that kids do in snow. One family was filling a plastic shopping bag with the stuff to take home, and the TV news had shown pictures of people building little snowmen on the bonnets of their cars then attempting to drive them home.

Being more mature than that we continued north to Ribeiro Frio where a levada walk starts. We got there just after 3 coaches but the occupants seemed to be heading for restaurants and wandering all over the road, oblivious to any traffic. Levadas are concrete irrigation channels, about a foot across and 15 inches deep, with a footpath beside them and, being for water, they and the paths are relatively level.

On our previous visit we'd had fleeting glimpses of **Madeiran Firecrest**, *Regulus Ignicapillus Madeirensis*, which has less white above the eye than the nominate race, along this walk. This time we'd gone less than ½ a mile when we found one feeding among the leaves on the bottom of the levada, seemingly unconcerned by our presence. Indeed, it then started to display to another, bouncing about in the trees until I got my camera out, at which point it disappeared.



Madeiran Firecrest

Photo: Dick Knight

After a mile we got to Balcoes. You follow the path round a big rock to be faced with railings. Look over the railings and there is about a 500 foot sheer drop on 3 sides! We'd had distant views of **Trocaz Pigeon**, more or less a Wood Pigeon without white wing bars, here last time, but not today.



Madeiran Chaffinch

Photo: Dick Knight

**Chaffinches** appeared, obviously used to being fed, and sure enough a coach party of noisy Germans came round the corner to oblige them. On the local birds, *Fringilla Coelebs Tintillon*, the grey-blue of the head extends down the back replacing the brown, making them more attractive in my opinion. It seemed ages before the coach party read my mind and departed and I could attempt to photograph the Chaffinches and the Firecrest that had appeared in a nearby bush.

A feature of the breakfast show on the local TV is a hook-up to an internet site that shows, in addition to the traffic cameras, the view from half a dozen video cameras around the island to give an idea of the weather; and we thought it looked all right in the north-west on the Friday. There is now a motorway-standard road to São Vicente on the north coast, and west of there it is not bad, with many short tunnels through the rock to give a reasonably straight and level road as far as Porto Moniz. Here it was breezy and drizzling, which made for a lively sea but the only bird we could find was a distant **Shearwater** of some sort. Chatting to another couple of bird watchers, we hadn't missed much over the previous 5 days. They had been out to sea on the replica galleon which sails motors from Funchal harbour. We had dismissed it as a tourist trap but, apparently, you can decline the photo opportunity with the parrot on your shoulder, and some of the crew are fairly knowledgeable about the sea birds encountered. Ponta do Prago is the most westerly point of the island. There's a lighthouse at the top

of the cliffs and a small café, but the little village a mile inland is being extended with houses being built westward. The site gets a good write-up on the birding web site but all we could find was a Kestrel patrolling the cliffs, a small flock of Canaries and Jan got a fleeting glimpse of a probable **Sparrowhawk**. We thought we might do better driving back over the central plateau, Paúl da Serra, but half of it was out in 30 knot fog. Towards the eastern end of the plateau, where the cloudbase had risen to 100ft, we came across a wind farm of 20-odd turbines but, despite the strong wind, only 4 were turning. Perhaps the others were not yet connected or the island wasn't using much power. While admiring the view, or lack of, a piercing call drew our attention to a Common Buzzard drifting past. After a disappointing day for birds we followed the road south, back to the hotel for tea and medals.

Saturday, and we strolled gently along to the far end of the seafront at Funchal to the cable car station. Having sat in a car, a woman stepped forward and took a photograph of us. Knowing what was coming, I took a photo of her taking a photo of us, which seemed to disconcert her; but sure enough, at the top at Monte, we were offered the chance to buy copies of our photo which had already been printed. It was too difficult to offer a swap, given the potential language difficulties.



Carros de cesto

Photo: Dick Knight

From Monte the adventurous can take the 3 mile ride down to the outskirts of Funchal in a *carros de cesto* (translated, basket car – in my view, basket case), a wicker seat for 2 on a wooden sled controlled (?) by 2 *carreiros* who ride on the back and steer by pushing or braking with their boots as required. They wear a uniform of white trousers and shirt with a straw hat. When we got to the town at about 1000 there were considerably more *carreiros* than tourists, waiting for customers. Half a dozen of them spotted a Ring-necked Parakeet in a tree, which caused much pointing and excitement as they followed it through the town for a bit. Maybe because I visit Surrey regularly I'm getting blasé about the bird. Then, we spent a couple of hours in the Monte Palace Tropical Gardens.

It was much too early in the year for them to be at their best and there was a little evidence of frost damage from the cold weather but it was worth it. There were a few Blackcaps among the trees and a Common Buzzard hunted the valley beside the grounds but, as usual, that was about it for birds. The admission price to the gardens includes a free glass of Madeira at the café which improved morale, especially as we were entertained by a Firecrest in the tree next to our table. Our travel insurance company would cover us for tobogganing on snow but not on a public road so we took the cable car back down, plus it drops you at a convenient place in town, not a mile out. One of the main streets paralleling the sea front was lined with stalls for an open-air market which made the stroll back interesting.

Sunday was our last full day on the island so we had to go out despite the weather. We headed east to Manchico in the drizzle. Heading for our usual parking spot we noticed

the streets in the centre of town lined by groups of men and the only reason we could think of was some sporting event such as a cycle race about to happen. Jogging between shelters from the rain we passed the large church. The west doors were open and people who couldn't find room inside were standing outside under umbrellas. We could perhaps explain that as it was International Women's Day apparently. Down by the river where it entered the sea there were a couple of Turnstones and a Little Egret. Upstream, a pair of Grey Wagtails were feeding among the stones. One had more black on the wings than I have noticed before, but I couldn't get a decent photograph in the poor light against a dark background at that distance. But we did get one more bird there for our list; a **Mallard**. (*Hope you didn't get over excited!! Ed.*) The weather was still miserable so we headed back to the car. Taking brief shelter in the Town Hall porch on the way I saw a recruiting poster for the Portuguese Air Force – I could be an F16 pilot if I volunteered. The groups of men on the streets had thinned out a bit by now and the bars were busy so we concluded that it was nothing to do with any sporting event, that's how the chaps spend Sunday morning when the wife's at church.

As it was our last night we were given a glass of champagne with dinner. The downturn in the economy is hurting the island with a shortage of tourists and the staff asked several times "Will you come back?" For a birding holiday the answer would be no. To escape the British winter and be spoilt for a week, yes, we'll be back.

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## CYPRUS UPDATE

*By Dick Yates*

In late Apr this year I returned to Cyprus for a short, non birding, holiday. But naturally I revisited the wetlands that we surveyed during ExCypSurv 08, so I thought that I would give you a quick update on the situation there. By the end of last summer almost all the wetlands on the Island were bone dry. In the early part of the winter things did not improve very much at all, but in Jan and Feb 09 the rain finally came. When I visited Zakaki Marsh there was a reasonable amount of water and some of the reeds near the road had been cleared to allow a better view of the wetland. In addition, most of the trucks and trailers that had blighted the site last year had been removed. The situation at Phasouri Reed-bed was not so good. There was still very little water and from the usual viewing spot almost nothing was visible because of the reed growth. This area is still crying out for effective management. The situation at the Bishops' Pool was not too bad, there was water there and quite a few birds were using it. The Pools at Aspro Dam were still virtually dry with just a few inches of dank water, however, I did find a nice Little Bittern there. As I write this, in mid July, I hear that Zakaki Marsh is once again nearly dry.

You will be aware that the Committee has agreed to a follow-up to the 2008 Survey on the Akrotiri Peninsula on the condition that some of our costs are met by the Sovereign Base Area Authorities (SBAA): in return we would undertake specific tasks for them. During my visit in Apr I met with one of their Environmental Officers and we had a very productive discussion. It was agreed that we should return to Cyprus, but not until Sep 2010. The reason for this is that they would like us to complete the raptor survey that was started in 2007. Birdlife Cyprus conducted the survey this Spring and will do so again next Spring. They have an independent 'volunteer' to conduct the Sep 09 survey and they would like us to carry out what will be the last in the series in Sep/Oct 2010. In addition they will have to get budgetary approval for our visit. At our meeting we agreed the following:-

1. The survey would be for a maximum of 10 weeks during Sep/Oct 2010.
2. There would be a maximum of 10 people at any one time.

3. HQ SBAA would bid for funds to provide us with accommodation and transport.
  - a. Accommodation to be either within the military estate or in a local village. The SBA Environment Office would arrange this accommodation.
  - b. Transport to consist of 2 X Safari Landrovers or equivalent + fuel.
4. RAFOS members would fund their own air fares to and from Cyprus and pay their own food costs.
5. The main aim of the survey will be to complete the study on raptor interaction with the large aerial arrays on the Akrotiri Salt Lake; all bird movements within the aerial arrays would be logged.
6. Survey personnel would provide a maximum of 7 hours monitoring per day between the hours of 0700 - 1100 and 1500 - 1800. These hours would be flexible and dependant on weather and light conditions.
7. The main observation platform would be the Tower within the Salt Lake site compound, but other suitable observation sites may be used for members unable to climb the tower. (eg The site(s) used by Birdlife Cyprus)
8. Continuing studies of bird activity at other sites within the WSBA would run concurrently but not to the detriment of the main study.
9. Security clearance for access to sites within the military estate, eg the Salt Lake Site Compound, RAF Akrotiri and Episkopi Garrison, would be arranged by HQ SBAA for those expedition members for whom it is deemed necessary.
10. Sqn Ldr (Retd) R Yates would conduct the Risk Assessment for the tower and also ensure that all members conducting the study from the tower comply with H & S requirements. The precise details of H & S requirements to be provided by HQ SBAA.
11. If the funding from HQ SBAA was not to become available it is unlikely that the study would go ahead. RAFOS and its members would be unable/unwilling to meet the full cost unaided.
12. The study would be open to members of the Army Ornithological Society (AOS) and the Royal Navy Bird Watching Society (RNBWS) but led by RAFOS.

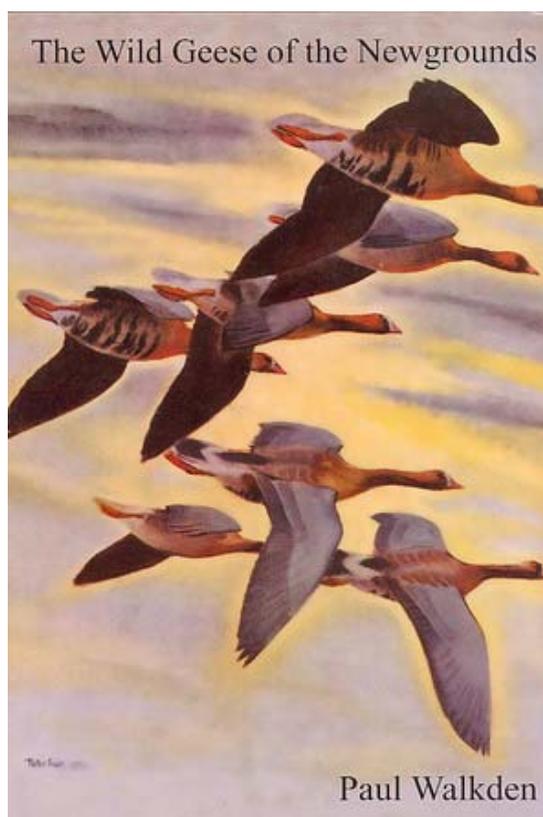
The way I hope this will work is that we will get 10 people for 2 weeks at a time to fill the allocated survey period. Now if that sounds a lot of people, 4 teams of 10, it is, hence our decision to open it to AOS and RNBWS members. But 10 people allows us to have a 2 man team on the raptor survey for each time period and this duty will not come round again for another 2 days.

At present there is no plan to carry out ringing, for 2 reasons: firstly the ringers state that Autumn ringing on the Akrotiri Peninsula is not really worth it and secondly, the SBAA will not fund ringing operations. However, if any ringers would like to come and take part in the survey they can undertake ringing operations for 2 days in every 3.

Anyone interested in this survey please pass your names to me or to the FALO, Jerry Knights, and I will let you know whether it is going ahead as soon as I know. This is likely to be early next year.

## The Wild Geese of the Newgrounds by Paul Walkden

Reviewed by Bill Francis



Paul Walkden decided to write his book, *The Wild Geese of the Newgrounds*, to celebrate the centenary, in 2009, of the birth of his childhood hero, Sir Peter Scott. Paul moved to Gloucestershire in 1972 with a view to meeting Peter Scott; an ambition he achieved. This led to a lasting friendship and working relationship with both Sir Peter and Lady Scott. In a long and distinguished record of involvement with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), Paul has produced an authoritative bibliography for Sir Peter Scott. He is currently a member of the committee of The Friends of WWT Slimbridge

The book tells the story of the Newgrounds at Slimbridge (Peter Scott's spelling), as well as covering Peter Scott's earlier life and career. It describes Peter Scott's building of the centre and the foundation and development of the WWT from its earliest beginnings. There are chapters on the history of the River Severn and the White-fronted Geese, as well as details of the other species of geese that occasionally arrive with them. The activities of catching and ringing wild geese, including the innovative method of rocket-netting, are described. Wildfowling on the Severn is also covered. The book is lavishly illustrated with coloured and pen and ink pictures by Peter Scott himself. It concludes with tables of data concerning the dates of arrival of the White-fronts and their national distribution.

The book is easy to read and provides an informative background to the activities of WWT in Gloucestershire and of its distinguished founder.

*The Wild Geese of the Newgrounds* is published by the Friends of WWT Slimbridge at £17 and all proceeds will be used by the Friends to fund projects within the Slimbridge Centre. (ISBN: 978-0-9561070-0-8)

# **SUMMARY OF BIRDS RINGED ON THE WESTERN SOVEREIGN BASE AREA IN CYPRUS - APRIL 2009**

*By Chris Lamsdell*

This report details the birds captured and processed on the six days when ringing took place within the WSBA, between 8 and 17 April.

## **8 April - Bishops' Pool**



Heavy driving rain delayed commencement of ringing activities. Once the clouds cleared, it was decided to erect a total of 66m of netting in two sheltered areas amongst orange groves, close to the pool. Birds started moving around soon after the rain stopped and 22 were caught. Several Blackcap, Wood Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat were processed along with singles of Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Cuckoo, Collared and Pied Flycatcher. The last bird was released at 11am, just before a torrential downpour, by which time the nets had been taken down. The full catch

was 6 Blackcap, 5 Wood Warbler, 5 Lesser Whitethroat and one each of Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Collared Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, Chiffchaff and Cuckoo.



European Cuckoo



Collared Flycatcher



Eastern Bonelli's Warbler



Wood Warbler



Pied Flycatcher

10 April – Bishops’ Pool



Conditions were windier than ideal, but rain looked unlikely so it was decided to work the uncultivated area to the east. There seemed to be a few birds moving through the area and a small catch of 5 birds comprised 2 Blackcaps, a Nightingale, Wryneck and Woodchat Shrike. As the wind freshened, efforts were abandoned and nets were closed by 1030.

Woodchat Shrike



Wryneck

12 April – Bishops’ Pool.

Nets were again opened in the shelter of the orange groves, between 0800 and 1200. Blackcap was the leading species (20) with a Common Redstart, Wryneck and House Sparrow.



Common Redstart



Blackcap

Saint Nicholas of the cats (Bee hives) An evening session produced 3 Lesser Whitethroats, a Wryneck and a Greenfinch.

Zakaki Marsh. A last minute stop at the marsh presented an unexpected opportunity when a Eurasian Coot was caught up by hand to become the second individual of the species to be ringed in Cyprus.

14 April – Bishops’ Pool



It was decided to work the eastern area initially. But with only 3 Blackcaps, a Whitethroat and a Cyprus Warbler caught after 3 hours, the freshening wind prompted a re-location into the shelter of the Citrus groves near the pool. This swelled the catch by a further 11 Blackcaps, Lesser Whitethroat and 3 Great Tits, one of which was a re-trap from a previous year.

Cyprus Warbler

16 April – Saint Nicholas of the cats (Beehives)



Bee hives at the Monastery of the Cats

It was noted that around 40 Bee-eaters were feeding around the beehives and despite windy conditions and the threat of heavy showers an 18m net was set up. Five bee-eaters were netted along with a solitary Olivaceous Warbler.



First summer European Bee-eater



Olivaceous Warbler

17 April – Bishops' Pool

In near perfect conditions, nets were erected along the grove edge beside the conifer-lined road leading to the first patch of Mediterranean maquis; and in the maquis area. Thirty-one birds of 12 different species were processed. The maquis nets contributed several Blackcap, a Whinchat, a Garden Warbler, some flycatchers including Spotted Flycatcher, a Cretzschmar's Bunting, Whitethroats and a Wryneck.



Whinchat



Cretzschmar's Bunting

The grove side net caught several birds that visited to bathe or drink from puddles in the track. Amongst the House Sparrows and Flycatchers, Tree Pipits and Crested Larks were notable.



Crested Lark



Spotted Flycatcher

*All photograph in this article are by Chris and Diane Lumsdell*



**So How many? And what is the collective noun for Siskins?**

*Photo: Dick Yates*



**Whiskered Tern at Paxton Pits – Apr 09**

*Photo: Dave Butterworth*



**Barn Owl at Stiffkey Apr 2009**

*Photo by Robert King*