

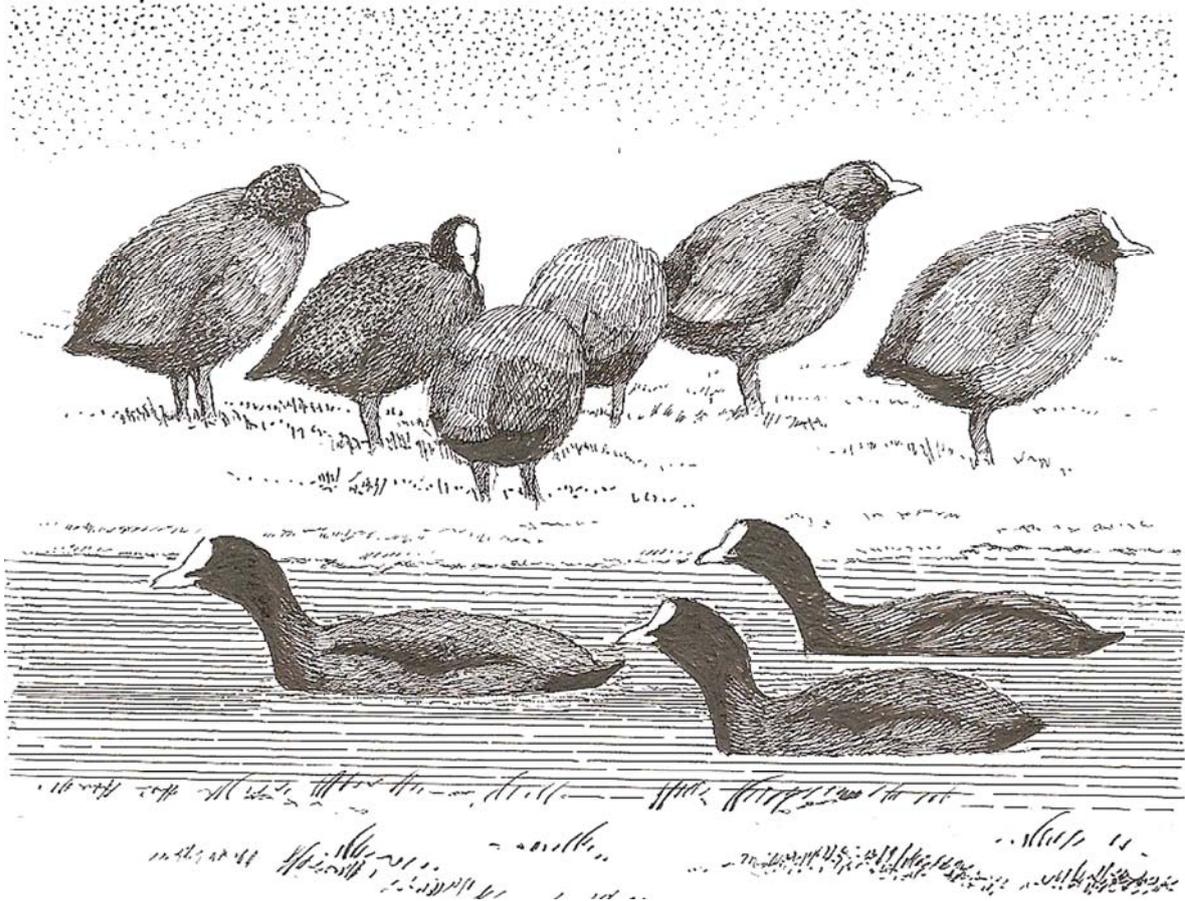


Newsletter No 89 Spring 2010



Winner of the 2009 Photographic Competition
Terry Carne
Osprey with catch

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



WINNER OF BEST ARTWORK COMPETITION – 'COOTS IN THE FREEZE'
By Ken Baldrige



WINNER OF BEST NOVICE PHOTO COMP 'STEPPE GREY SHRIKE'
By Sgt John Harry

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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(As at 31 January 2010)

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Scientific Adviser: Dr A G Gosler Dphil FLS MBOU

CONTENTS LIST		
List of Society Officers		1
Contents list		2
Editorial		3
Noticeboard		4
Chairman's Address to the AGM		5
Chairman's note re annual subscription increase		7
Frank Walker Award		9
FALO's Presentation to the AGM		10
Portland 2009	<i>by Ken Earnshaw</i>	18
Cornish Chough 2009	<i>by Bob Bosisto</i>	20
Romania – The Danube Delta	<i>by Dickie Duckett</i>	25
Autumn Bird Ringing – Gibraltar	<i>by Robin Springett</i>	32
Trinidad	<i>by Terry Carne</i>	37
The Birds Came to Us	<i>by Iain MacKenzie</i>	44
Birding in South Africa (Part 1)	<i>by Jenny Gray</i>	49
F – Stop That (Part 1)	<i>by Ian Grove</i>	57
Science and Puzzles	<i>by Mke Blair</i>	64
RAFOS Items for Sale		73
Committee Details		74



Little Bunting

Unless otherwise acknowledged all illustrations in this issue of the Newsletter are by
Robbie Robinson

Editorial

Welcome to RAFOS Newsletter No 89, I hope that there is something here to interest you.

Let me start off by welcoming our new President, Air Commodore Neville Parton (Dolly), who officially took over on 1 Jan this year. We were delighted to see him at the AGM and look forward to seeing him and other members of his family at our field meetings and taking part in our expeditions.

At the same time, on behalf of the Committee and all our members, I would like to thank AVM Martin Routledge for his support and enthusiasm throughout his tour as our President; his presence at our events was greatly appreciated as was his personal assistance in obtaining external support for our expeditions. Martin is now one of our Vice Presidents and we look forward to his company on many more RAFOS occasions.

Congratulations to our Competition Winners. Once again the standard was very high and hopefully more members will be encouraged to enter this year.

You will see from the noticeboard that we once again have a full programme of field meetings and that we have set the date for the AGM this year, so please make a note in your diaries and come along and join in our events.

CYPRUS 2010 IS ON!!

Yes – after much delay and is it/isn't it, I can announce that the Raptor Survey in Cyprus for Sep/Oct 2010 is definitely on. Please see the flyer going out with this Newsletter for more details and sign up as soon as possible.

The plan is for the survey to last up to 8 weeks, but this will depend on getting sufficient participants. The start date will be Monday, 6 Sep 2010. The maximum number at any one time will be 10, but even then, and assuming everyone can do 2 weeks, this will involve 80 people – a pretty tall order these days. With that in mind the survey has been opened to members of AOS and RNBWS and I hope we can welcome several participants from our sister organisations. Please note that I will be out of the country from 25 Mar to 17 Apr inclusive. E-mail me by all means but I will be able to respond until after 17 Apr.

Finally, may I remind all members to update their standing orders etc for annual subscriptions as soon as possible.

Dick Yates

NOTICEBOARD

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR PRIZE WINNERS AT THE 2009 AGM

Best overall image	Osprey	Terry Carne
2 nd Place	Redshank	John Le Gassick
3 rd Place	Moorhen	John Orme
Best novice photo	Steppe Grey Shrike	Sgt John (Taff) Harry
Best novelty photo	Emperor Goose	Dave Bodley
Best artwork	Coot	Ken Baldrige
Best written article	Nestbox Observations	Flt Lt Ian Grove

AGM 2010

RAF Brize Norton. Saturday 20 Nov 2010 at 1300Hrs

RAFOS FIELD ACTIVITIES 2010

11 Apr	Chew Valley
23 - 26 Apr	Burnham Overy
4 -12 Jun	BTO Breeding Bird Survey - Scotland
TBD	Catterick Ringing Course
Sep/Oct	Cyprus Raptor Survey
8 -10 Oct	Portland Bill
30 Oct - 6 Nov	Islay Mist
22 - 30 Oct	Cornish Chough
24 Oct	Chew Valley
21 Nov	Post AGM Field Meeting

BIRDING HOLIDAY IN UGANDA

Uganda is an equatorial country of astonishing contrasts. No other area in Africa can match its amazing diversity of habitats and this richness is reflected in its bird list of over 1000 species. The best time to go to Uganda is in the dry seasons June to July or January to mid February, and since I like going away during the winter, that's the time I plan to go.

Uganda can be an expensive country to visit but if we plan it and cut out the middle-man we can save from 30% to 50% of the brochure price. Bird watching is an exciting experience best shared with like-minded people, so if you are interested in a 18+/- day holiday to one of the best countries in the world, please contact me:-

Peter Tithecott 01437 765516. E-mail: peter@tithecott.wanadoo.co.uk

There's no harm in finding out

SALE OF RAFOS STOCK

Please see the advert on page 73 regarding the sale of RAFOS stock items. Everything is going at half price so that we can clear the decks for a new buy.

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO THE AGM

This time last year I bored you with a tale of how I had struggled to get to the AGM from a NATO exercise in Corsica, via Naples only just making it by the skin of my teeth. I also promised, notwithstanding that I was stationed in Naples, to do better than I had done in the previous year, because an op tour in Bosnia and a 6 month staff course in Rome had prevented me from attending a lot of Committee meetings.

I am pleased to inform you that I have done better, but I did miss the Spring meeting after the Joint UK Support Unit in Naples declared that because this is a RAF secondary duty and because the travel budget was running short, no more journeys would be funded in this financial year. Dam! However, as it turned out unexpected work commitments prevented me from attending anyway.

Then in mid May, after only 8 months in post, a surprise call from the Desk Officer appeared to offer light at the end of this particular tunnel in that he told me I had to move at short notice up to the NATO Operational Command in the Netherlands in order to fill a new Afghanistan related post. By the beginning of July I was in Brunssum and had negotiated with the UK Support Unit, which appeared not to have the same travel budget problem, to fund my journeys to Committee meetings; thus I made our usual end of July meeting. However, soon afterwards, the unit declared that no more journeys for this purpose would be funded because the RAF had decided that such journeys no longer attract public funding. Thus I have had to fund my last 2 trips across northern Europe to act as Chairman of your Society. The President is seeking clarification on this controversial issue, but given all the other recent cuts in traditionally publicly funded welfare activities within the MOD, including the BFPO system, I am not hopeful that this situation will resolve itself in our favour. Thus you should be aware that, if you vote today for me to serve a second term as Chairman, the number of Committee meetings held annually, not including the AGM, will reduce from 4 to 2 and I will instigate an electronic way of working to try to deal with any topics that cannot wait for the next meeting to occur. Moreover, you should also be aware that it is highly unlikely that I will be at next year's AGM, as I expect to be serving in Afghanistan from next July for at least 6 months.

Now to a real damper, FS John Wells our long standing Publicity Member, has decided, with much regret, to take a break from serving on the Committee due to an impending posting and thus will not be seeking re-election today. Without getting overly emotional about it, this will be a blow to the remaining members of the Committee, as John is a hard worker and makes a huge contribution to all Committee debates. I for one will be very sorry to see him go and look forward to him returning to the Committee at some stage in the future, when he gets tired of a quiet life. The good news is that, subject to your ratification later, we have found a keen individual, Sgt Taff Harry from RAF Conningsby, to replace him.

So what has been happening since the last AGM? As you will hear later from Jerry Knights all our planned expeditions and field trips went ahead, and, you will learn from Chris Sparks, the Treasurer, that our available funds have reduced as expected to a level where we now have to consider finding a way of increasing our annual income in order to continue with our busy expedition programme at current rates of subsidy for an indefinite period; but more of that later.

Two great Newsletters have been published and distributed and we continue to be thankful to the Air Command Printing Section, which somehow continues to produce our Newsletter free of charge. My thanks go to Dick Yates for getting the Newsletters together and to Colin Wearn our Production Member as well as all those would contributed the excellent articles, art work and photographs.

Continuing on the topic of publications, the Journal Editor, Flt Lt Ian Groves, has been busy and all looks on track to produce our first RAFOS Journal for a number of years next summer. The format will be A4 and production of the same quality as our Newsletters: costs should be minimal. Ian has selected a range of topics designed to stimulate serious birding debate and to promote the Society as a significant conservation-based ornithological organisation. His volunteer authors are now busy beavering away writing their articles.

Talking more of the printed word, some members of the Committee led by Jerry Knights and aided by Jim Bryden, have tackled our library of badly controlled and under-utilised books, magazines, articles and reports. Some things were discarded, books deemed inappropriate for retention were catalogued and valued and are on sale here today and if unsold will be advertised on the internet in order to raise funds for the Society, and finally, material deemed worthy of retention will be managed on our behalf by the library at RAF Cranwell.

Moving onto our membership numbers. Overall we remain steady at 186 members, one up on last year. Five members have resigned over the last 12 months, but 8 new people have joined (5 up on last year's recruitment) suggesting our reported activities remain attractive enough to attract new blood.

The Website continues to develop and to be well used and George Candelin, the Webmaster, recently attended the RAF's Web Site Training Course in London and we can now expect some changes in format in due course and better links with the RAF community. However, the Committee has heeded the call at last year's AGM to do our best not to disadvantage members without internet access and I can assure you that we have no intention of becoming solely web based.

As you will have seen, the Photographic Competition Rules have undergone a thorough rehash. Hopefully, the rules are relevant and easier to understand and the new limits on the number of entries an individual can make has made today's judging much easier and should serve in time to raise the already very high standard.

Finally, I must mention our Secretary and her not so little helper Dick. Jan has gripped us and we now do as we are told. The pair have done a great job in getting all our Committee meetings together here at RAF BZN for the last year, so much so that we are almost now part of the furniture. And we all owe them a debt of thanks for pulling today together; top job Team Knight.

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CHAIRMAN'S NOTE RE SUBSCRIPTION INCREASES FROM JANUARY 2011

Nine years ago the Society had relatively large funds in comparison to its reducing membership numbers, but a relatively low level of activity, much of which attracted no financial subsidy. Moreover, our activities were receiving less (and now no) support, in terms of rations, transport and grants from traditional Service sources. Thus members taking part in expeditions were facing increasing personal costs. Therefore, it was decided to use our funds to greater effect to enable a more ambitious annual expedition programme, focussed on conservation based birding activities, providing greater subsidies primarily aimed at reducing the personal financial contributions of those members choosing to take part. It was always understood that eventually our funds would reduce to a level where we would either have to cut back our activities, reduce levels of financial support to individual expeditions, or to seek to increase our annual income, ie raise subscriptions.

Notwithstanding, the Society now also has to provide extensive (and expensive) insurance to cover our expedition leaders. Our funds, supporting a very active expedition programme (the Society put more individuals into the field in 2009 than we have done for at least 10 years), have lasted longer than we expected due to commercial sponsorship of some expeditions and prudent use of a high interest account. However, we are now at a point where our current level of activities and subsidies to them will have to cease within the next 2 years unless we increase annual membership subscriptions. Thus at the 2009 AGM (see AGM minutes enclosed) the Committee proposed a relatively modest increase in membership subscriptions to support a reduced expedition programme from 2011. The members present at the meeting overwhelmingly rejected the proposal and instead proposed a greater increase in annual subscriptions (£20 for individual membership and £30 for family membership) in order for the Committee to continue to put forward similar annual expedition programmes and provide similar levels of subsidies for the foreseeable future; a great indictment of our current activities. Indeed, I was instructed to point out that the above fees (effective from Jan 2011) are a minimum contribution in order to continue full membership of the Society and that greater personal annual donations will be most welcome.

Clearly I appreciate that any cost increases during these times of national financial hardship are unwelcome and a doubling of the RAFOS annual subscriptions may seem excessive, but even at the new rates from Jan 2011, it is clear from the reaction of the members present at the 2009 AGM, that membership of the Society (which will continue to include the provision of two Newsletters) will still offer great value for money for conservation minded birders seeking to take part in and/or support targeted activities that aim to improve global ornithological knowledge. Thus I implore you to continue your membership of the Society by completing the enclosed Standing Order form (also available on the Website) and sending it to the Membership Secretary (**completing all contact details**) at your earliest convenience and, in order to get better value for money, to take part in the expeditions and other activities we will continue to organise on your behalf; I guarantee you that we will find you a space and that, no matter your level of birding expertise, your contribution will be valued. Alternatively you may amend your Standing Order directly if you bank on line, but please remember you will still need to complete the Membership Details page of the enclosed form and return it to the Membership Secretary.

DONATIONS FOR PORTLAND BIRD OBSERVATORY

For many years Anne and Dave Bodley have organised very successful annual RAFOS outings to the Portland Bird Observatory. A large proportion of the membership has taken part in these events, enjoying good company and getting some excellent birding. One particular attraction has been the evening get togethers which tend to centre around a member's presentation and a birding quiz projected, until recently, onto a vacant wall.

Last year the members attending the Field Trip decided a projector screen, for use by the Observatory staff and visitors, would improve matters immeasurably and generously funded the equipment themselves, as the Committee, when approached, decided funds for the screen would not be found. Later at the 2009 AGM the matter was discussed long and hard and the Committee's decision was upheld; however, this leaves a small number of individual members seriously out of pocket. Therefore, it was decided that at the next opportunity the Committee would approach the whole membership inviting all to make donations towards the cost of the projector screen which is now in-place and in regular use at the Portland Bird Observatory. Any money in excess of the cost of the screen will be donated to the Observatory.

If you have attended a RAFOS Field Trip to Portland and have enjoyed the experience we should be most grateful if you could make a small donation to this cause. Cheques (made payable to RAFOS) should be sent to Chris Sparks the Treasurer at: **Glenmoray, 14 Farrant Ave, Churchdown, Glos. GL3 2BP** by no later than 15 May 2010, making it clear that this a donation to the Portland Bird Observatory. Chris will consolidate all the donations and, in conjunction with Anne and Dave Bodley, split the final sum equitably between those members who have already helped fund the projector screen and the Observatory itself. A detailed report will be given at the next AGM.

Yours, *Clive Watson* (Chairman)



Forest Rock Thrush - Madagascar Sep 2008

Photo: Dick Yates

FRANK WALKER AWARD 2009
FS JOHN WELLS



A frequent contributor of high quality Newsletter articles, an aspiring artist who has yet to receive the accolade of the "Best Artwork" award, a sometime photographer, a veteran of many of the Society's more taxing expeditions, a long time stalwart of Winter Duck, a force behind our current Atlas survey work and a very valued and hard working member of the Committee, Flight Sergeant John Wells is the epitome of what a Serving member of the Society should aim to be.

Ever since joining the Society over 15 years ago he has strived to improve his birding and surveying skills and to help others to achieve their own personal ornithological goals. As the Committee's Publicity Member he has worked tirelessly to promote the Society and its conservation work throughout the Service and the MOD, dealing directly with the editorial teams of numerous defence related publications, gaining their respect for the timeliness, accuracy and relevance of the articles he has submitted on our behalf.

Furthermore, his considered input at Committee meetings has helped to shape current Society policy and to ensure that our activities continue to meet the needs of our hard pressed Serving members. Quick to grasp the concept of commercial sponsorship in the early 2000s, he has been very successful in obtaining thousands of pounds from companies in order to support our now annual flagship expedition, Winter Duck, without which this highly important, primarily WeBS focussed activity would be unaffordable to the Society.

Popular, energetic, determined, reliable and innovative, Flight Sergeant John Wells is a most worthy recipient of the Frank Walker Award.

FALO's PRESENTATION TO 2009 AGM

Compiled by Jerry Knights

President, President Elect, ladies and gentlemen, 2009 has been a very successful year for RAFOS fieldwork. Ten of our 11 events this year have put 119 members into the field and, although this is much less than the 147 of last year, it was without a major overseas expedition like Cyprus in 2008. Of these 11 events, RAFOS sponsored 5 of them to the sum of £2000.

Slimbridge - 4 Jan 09. The year began, as in recent times, with Bill Francis leading a 4th January trip to Slimbridge where I should like to report that 14 members had an excellent time with lots of rarities recorded. I said "should like to report" because, until the President's mention of it just now, I had yet to find anyone who remembered the event and this includes the leader. So if anyone wants to correct me on that, I'll be happy to include an addendum to my report and file it alongside Bill's recent dementia tests.

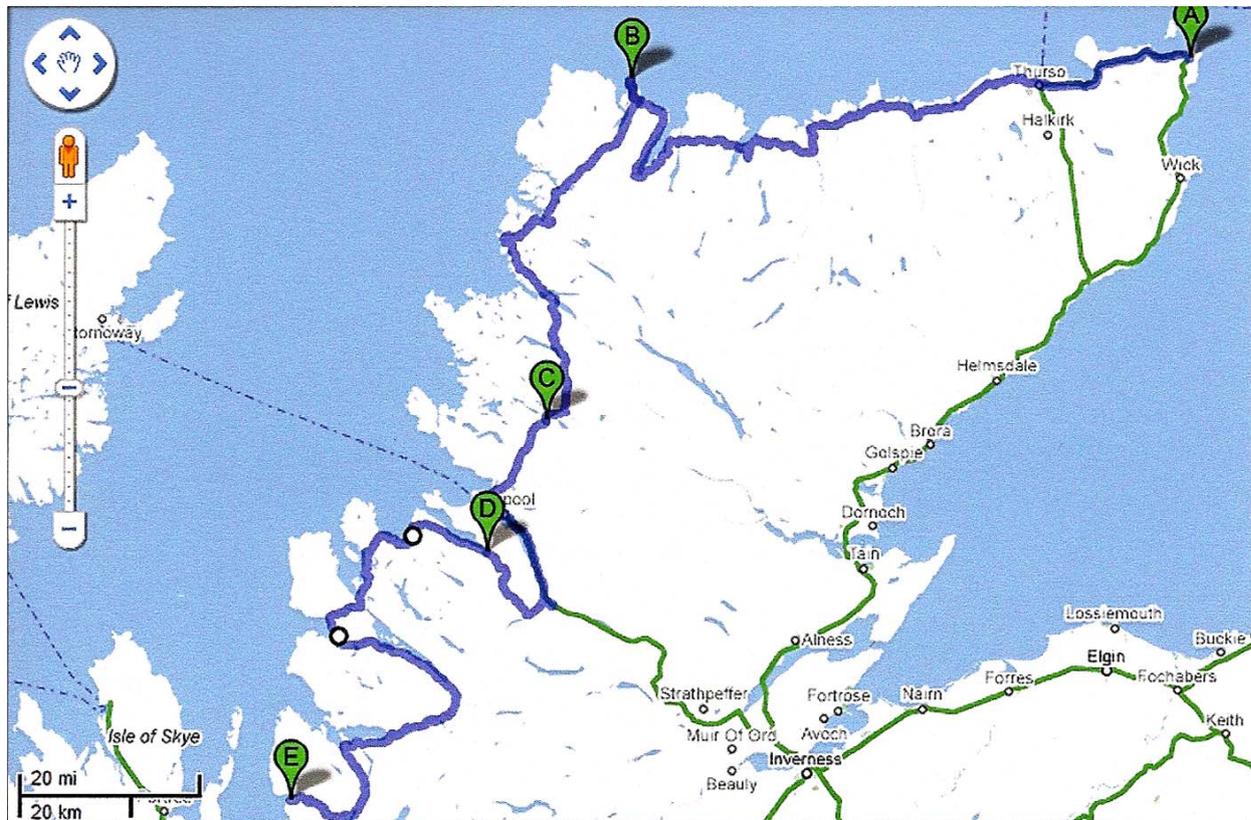
Winter Duck – 6 -14 Feb 09. No such problem with Winter Duck. Indeed, both John Wells and Dick Yates are to be congratulated for their efforts reporting this field survey. John for his ability to write the first five pages of his report without actually addressing any bird watching and Dick for having proof read it without either murdering John or alternatively topping himself. Seriously though, this was our eighth contribution to the Wetland Bird Survey (or WeBS), and it has now transcended its status of the rugged, no prisoners sharp end of serious bird study, and has become an issue of pride and sheer determination among its regular members.



Some wintery scenes from 'Duck 09'

Many a serious birder would not have even attempted to get out of bed, let alone Bristol or Berwick on the morning of 6 February, but our teams did and eventually both vans made it to the Inverness RV for Saturday lunchtime. We won't dwell here on Engineers playing at logistics, suffice to say that when they reached their study base one team was missing some of their dry rations.

We split into 3 teams, and with one of those was a person light because Vron Wootton had been forced to pull out at the last minute. We then operated from the 4 locations labelled A-D on this map:



A is John 'O Groats (Tofts House), B is Faraid Head, C is Knockan Crag Cottage at Elphin and D is our HQ at Dundonnell.

Location "E" represents our furthest south observation point near Applecross. This is a study area of some 500 miles of coastline, and to put that into perspective, just joining up these 5 points by road is 280 miles driving and would take you some 7 hours. This year it would have taken you a lot longer. I was with Team 2 at Elphin, and I still cannot believe that, by dodging the weather and following snow ploughs down steep, single track roads, we actually covered all our study area. We were pulled out of ditches, had snow ploughs lay down grit to get us up hills and generally slid our way across the map.

At Kinlochbervie the sea froze inside the harbour. Each day started well before light, and finished by driving home in the dark. After the evening meal, we would start writing up the records, which sometimes took until past midnight because we were recording totals for the rolling RAFOS record, completing the special WeBS forms, and now Roving Records as well, because all our data will contribute to the new British Bird Atlas. But at least the lounge had a wood burning stove. However, one night it was minus 16 degrees inside the bedroom of this 1850's croft with no central heating by the time I retired and the hot water tap had frozen by morning.

But before you rush for the autographs of these intrepid explorers, those of you who read John's excellent report in the Newsletter, will know of Hilda. She is a Dutch lady who lives alone on her own piece of crofting land, but without the benefit of a croft. All she has is a simple metal barn for her animals and that is where she lives. Here there is no heating, no cooking stove and no running water. And Hilda prefers to sleep with her animals. She doesn't drive, and relies on the kindness of locals to shop for her. We

met her because she acts as the caretaker of Knockan Crag Cottage and was responsible for fetching our firewood.

This year we completed 211 WeBS Survey Forms and Roving Records covering the 450 square kilometres of the Highlands that we travelled through during the week. I think these totalled some 1350 individual records over-and-above our basic survey. And the things that make Winter Duck such a special expedition? The fantastic scenery, the excitement of spotting a big raft of Black-throated Divers or a Kumlien's Gull or a hundred Goldeneye in Loch Kerry or a Sea Eagle floating 20 foot above your head by Gairloch; - and of course the company of a tremendous team as well.

Burnham Overy - 20-23 Mar 09. This year's Burnham Overy was well recorded for posterity by Robert King. I was immediately drawn to read his article entitled "the tide that never was"!! Mind you, I'm still in shock that he managed to see 3 Great Grey Shrikes at 3 separate locations on his way to the windmill !!

Once they'd managed to gain access to the accommodation the trip went swimmingly. The birding seemed to have been as good as ever, especially the amount of Barn Owls seen. Robert's article mentioned the debate about the collective noun for Barn Owls, and although I've not been able to find out what it is, I did find five alternatives to the commonly used "Parliament" for all owls. Apparently, you can have a "bazaar", a "glaring", a "stare" a "stooping" and a "wisdom" of owls.



The Windmill

Photo: Jon Orme

A total of 138 species for a weekend so early in the migration is a pretty fair haul, and as you no doubt know, the tide did come in as forecast, it just wasn't high enough to push the birds onto the reserve. But for me it has been a while since I went on the windmill trip, and Robert's article has fired me up to join the team again next year. Mike Hayes will lead it once more, provided he's managed to get rid of his old tripod by then.

Chew Valley - 5 Apr 09. Chew Valley was just two weeks after the windmill, and the 5 April was a lovely calm, sunny spring day. Ken provided me with notes via Dave Bodley and he reported that 23 RAFOS members squeezed into the Chew Valley ringing hut, but bird-wise the day didn't live up to expectations. In particular, no hirundines were seen when there should have been Sand Martins at least, and for other migrants there was only a single Chiffchaff as well as a Green Sandpiper. There were, however, 6 Ravens and 14 Common Buzzards. The lack of birds was made up for by some fine chat, banter and reminiscing in meeting up with old friends and it was lovely to have such a group together. The afternoon slide shows provided an excuse for some snoring but they were enjoyable for those who stayed awake. Thanks to Val and Anne who provided lunch and some excellent cakes.

Islay Mist - 9-16 May. Islay is a beautiful place, especially if you hit that spring window of good weather, and John Stewart-Smith described this field meeting in his inimitable style in Newsletter 88. The trip had a record 15 members, and all that they recorded

has also been logged for the new British Atlas. However, what made the trip extra special was that, on the suggestion of local expert Dr Malcolm Ogilvie, the team agreed to try to ascertain the current breeding status of Ring Ouzel on Islay. With the help of a local guide, the team successfully confirmed that the island once again has breeding Ring Ouzels after 14 years without a record.

I remember spending hours over a period of three days trying to see my first Corncrake on Islay. It would appear that, in order to get RAFOS to return in subsequent years, the owner of Kilchoman has now imported his own tame bird which he has trained to walk along the wall beside the holiday cottages. Actually, our host, Ian Brooke, has informed us that there were 80 calling Corncrakes males on Islay this year, which is brilliant when you learn that 10 years ago there were only 4.



Our good relations with the Islanders continue, and Bill gave an illustrated presentation on the WWT one evening to a capacity audience at the Islay Natural History Trust. By the end of the week, the total of species seen from the approved start point of the ferry journey to the island was 122.

Whilst completing BTO Roving Record forms is an extra chore, it is interesting to observe how people will quickly get involved and interpret data once they are gathering it for a reason. I noted from his article that John observed that demographics seem to be changing the apocryphal saying that there are many more Hooded Crows than Carrion Crows on Islay – not any more according to our team's records.

Kintyre - 29 May - 6 Jun 09. It has definitely been a year for good weather at RAFOS meetings and the Survey of Kintyre for the new British Atlas we undertook in June was no exception. We returned to the peninsula and were based at the old RAF Machrihanish, but this year our study area was north of Campbeltown as we had completed the area to the south in 2008. A bit like Winter Duck, the trip consisted of long hard days with very early starts to get to the study area and conduct our Timed Tetrad Visits before the birds stopped singing. You can see from the terrain that, once

you get into close forest, bird identification by song is essential. Likewise, we walked vast expanses of very rough open moorland to adequately cover each Tetrads.



Once we had completed the day's Tetrads and the birds had gone quiet, typically we would spend the rest of the day gathering Roving Records, sometimes from Eddie Maguire's Observatory at Machrihanish. This year, we were also as stunned as the rest of you were by the huge numbers of Painted Lady butterflies that had made it this far north from Morocco.

You will know we were due to have Eddie speak to us today. Alas, this has been cancelled because Eddie has been funded to keep the Observatory open until end November, which is great news for him but meant he was unable to travel. We hope to see him again another time. Over the week we completed 35 Timed Tetrads Visits, recorded 24 separate Roving Records over 80 square kilometres which amounted to 7000 individual birds of 120 separate species. But I would just like to emphasise that only 5 members delivered all that work for the Atlas. Next year it would be nice to take a couple more.

Portland - 2-4 Oct 09. Again, I must thank Ken for providing me with notes on this year's trip to Portland. Ten RAFOS members assembled at Portland Observatory for the weekend of 2-4 October. That is well down on the 27 that attended last year, but I don't believe that reflects badly on what was an enjoyable and satisfying visit. The weather on Friday was calm, cloudy and dry, which meant there was not much of a seabird movement. A large depression over northern Britain that night changed matters, with Great Skuas, Mediterranean Gulls, Common Scoters and considerable numbers of Gannets passing the Bill on Saturday. There were Turtle Doves in the Observatory garden all weekend and Sunday brought a Grasshopper Warbler to the ringing nets. Radipole revealed some nice views of Ruddy Shelduck, Med. Gulls and Black-tailed Godwit as well as a distant Water Rail. Lodmoor was almost virtually devoid of birds.

Entertainment was provided as usual by John Stewart-Smith, although I am not sure I am allowed to report the words “video”, “Welsh hill farmers” and “sheep” all in the same sentence. On Saturday night Dave Bodley showed pics from his recent trip with Anne to Sardinia. Again Val Kersley and Anne Bodley excelled with the food, and Kate Smith’s death-by-chocolate cake also received high accolades.

Chew Valley - 18 Oct 09. At Chew for the autumn visit on Sunday 18 October the day was beautiful with a clear sky, little or no wind, warm sun and, of course, excellent company. A welcoming hot drink was enjoyed with old friends on arrival with exchanges of pleasantries, reminiscences and jokes. It must be remembered that some of the team hadn’t seen each other for at least two weeks!!

The birds turned up this time as well, with Kingfisher, up to four Water Rails feeding out in the open, and Grey Wagtail & Cetti’s Warbler also of note. The reservoir’s water level was very low and numerous ducks and waders were exploiting the exposed mud. Further out in the deeper water was a party of 16 Goldeneye, a single Scaup and a Red-breasted Merganser. There was a very large raft of ducks in Heron’s Green Bay made up of Tufted Duck and Pochard mostly asleep in the warm sun. The drake Ferruginous Duck was particularly difficult to locate in the raft but perseverance paid off. There were few passerines about and surprisingly no raptors. After lunch Ian McKenzie put on a presentation of a recent visit to Australia, which was much appreciated. Thanks as usual to Anne and Dave for organising and Val for preparing lunch. Lastly, thanks to Cyril Mathews of the Chew Ringing Group for hosting the day.

Cornish Chough - 23 Oct - 1 Nov 09.

Turning to Cornish Chough at the end of Oct. Martin Wightman provided me with this heads-up on the goings-on this year in deepest, darkest Cornwall. This year, 8 members stayed once again at the Land’s End Vineries chalet park.



They recorded a total of 143 species, which made it a ‘mid-table’ exped in terms of results. Two new species were a very late Cory’s Shearwater and a very lost Radde’s Warbler. Other



notables included their second and third records of Little Bunting, and they also saw Greenland Wheatear, Cirl Bunting and Garganey. One day at the Amble Marshes they also recorded 90 Black-tailed Godwit.

On the downside, the unseasonably mild weather meant a lot of birds still hadn’t begun to migrate, and notable absences included Woodcock and Short-eared Owl. The Chough Consolidated List now stands at 273 species (that’s 265 species and 8 sub-species).

2010. And so now we come to next year's programme.

2010	Dates	Venue	Leader(s)
1	3 Jan	WWT Slimbridge	Bill Francis
2	29 Jan – 6 Feb	Winter Duck 9	Jim Bryden
3	11 Apr	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley
4	23-26 Apr	Burnham Overy	Mike Hayes
5	4 – 12 Jun	Atlas Survey Scotland	Jerry Knights
6	TBD	Ringing Course	Colin Wearn
7	Sep/Oct	Cyprus Raptor Survey	Dick Yates
8	8 – 10 Oct	Portland Bill	Dave & Anne Bodley
9	30 Oct – 6 Nov	Islay Mist	Jan & Dick Knight
10	22 – 30 Oct	Cornish Chough	Jim Bryden & Martin Wightman
11	24 Oct	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley
12	Nov	Post AGM Field Meeting	TBD

First comes Slimbridge on 3 Jan, Bill Francis will again lead the trip. This guided visit is ideal for novices, but also provides the opportunity for those in the Southwest to meet up early in the year.

Winter Duck 9 will take place between 29 Jan and 6 Feb. Jim Bryden and John Wells will lead it jointly. We will see what the weather holds for us next year, but if you think you could enjoy the challenge of one of our most important studies, we'd love to hear from you.

April 11th will be the spring visit to Chew Valley led by Anne and Dave Bodley. This really is an ideal outing for the novice birder wishing to develop skills with the help of some of our most experienced members.

The windmill at Burnham Overy has been booked for the weekend 23-26 Apr next year, and the trip will be led as usual by Mike Hayes. This is a magic way to watch the spring migration and everyone should try this field trip at least once.

Off to Scotland again for a third year of survey for the new Atlas in June. We are currently planning on 4-12 Jun, but the location is not yet confirmed. I am hoping it will be to the Lochgilphead area of Argyll. And you should know before Christmas.

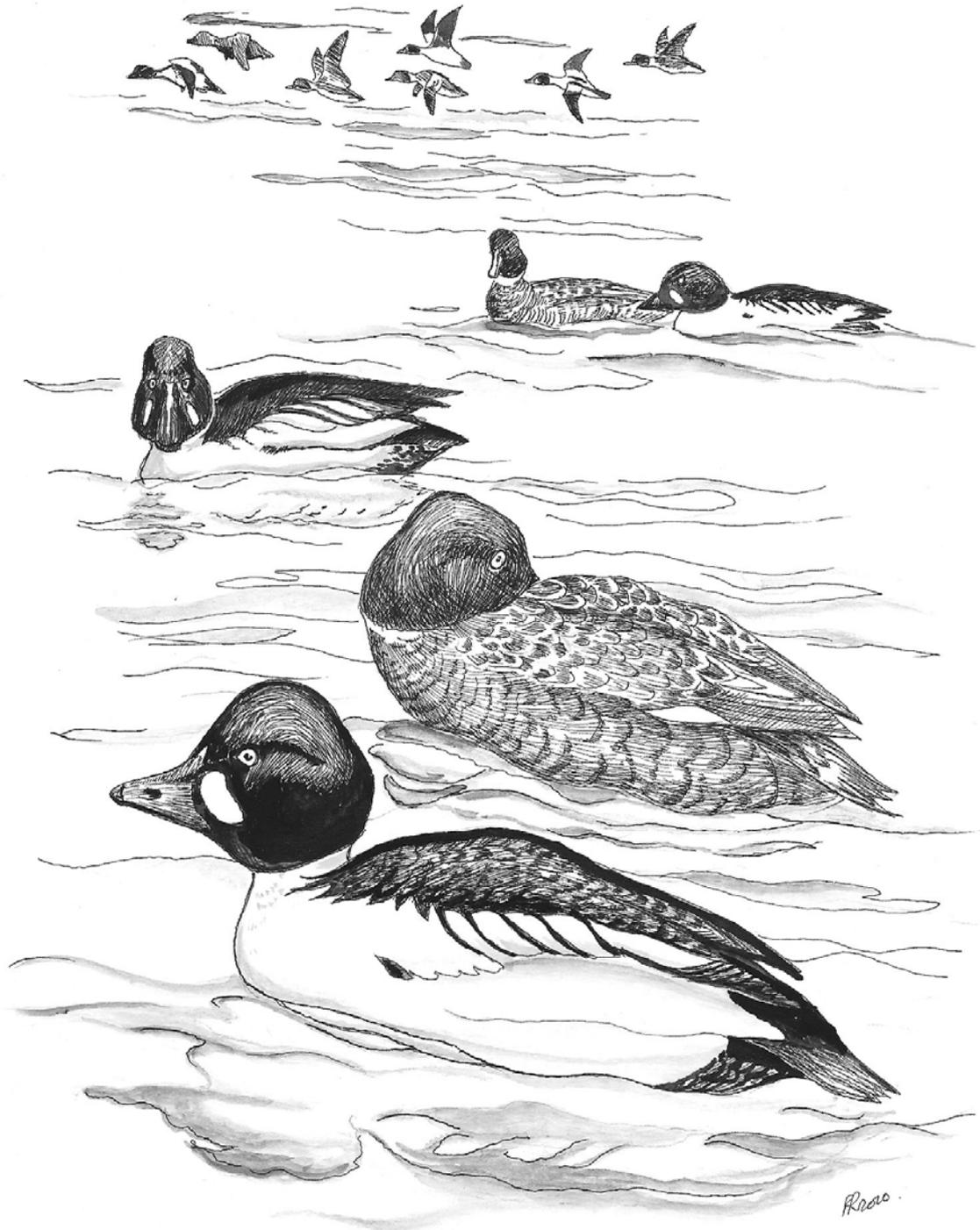
Colin Wearn assures me that there will be a Ringing Course in 2010. Stand by for more details on when and where.

We are waiting for confirmation of our invitation to conduct a survey in Cyprus next year. Dick Yates has spoken to the BFC authorities and they are talking to the budgeteers about funding. The environment office has had the 'financial rug' pulled from under its feet recently, and they hope to get back to us soon. Dick's opinion is 'don't hold your breath', and we await the outcome.

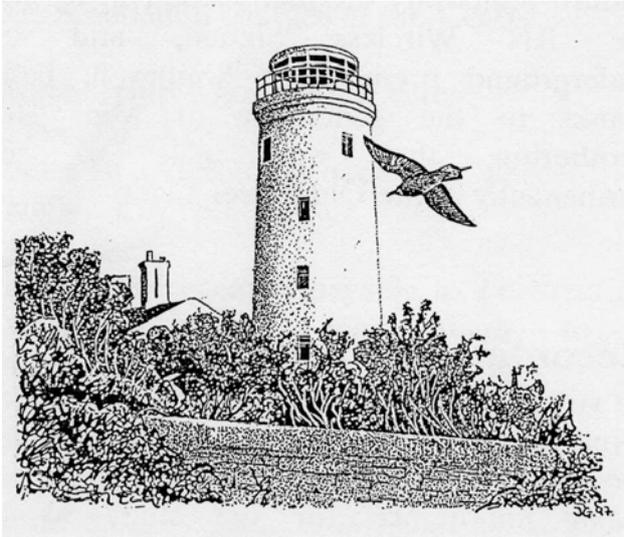
On its 18-month cycle, we will go again to Islay from 30 Oct to 6 Nov. This will be the first Islay Mist to be led by Jan & Dick. No doubt it will remain gentle birding with good friends in a tranquil part of that lovely island.

2010 will conclude as normal with Portland, Chew and Cornish Chough before the next AGM.

Now the usual plug for leaders; if any of you would like to lead a field trip or, indeed, be a deputy leader to gain the experience, please contact me. You neither have to be a top birder nor the world's best organiser, but we do need to increase our small number of leaders who get asked time and again. I will try to give you all the help that I can when you volunteer, so you won't be putting in a solo effort.



Goldeneye by Robbie Robinson



PORTLAND 2009

By Ken Earnshaw

On Friday 2 October some of the usual suspects assembled at Portland Observatory for the weekend. This year there were only ten of us, however we had a very enjoyable and satisfying visit.

The weather on Friday was calm, cloudy but dry. This continued the pattern of recent weeks in that birds were fairly scarce and with very little seabird movement. A large depression over Northern Britain arrived that night such that Saturday was very windy from the Southwest. This resulted in better seabird movements with **Great Skuas**, **Mediterranean Gulls**, **Common Scoters** and considerable numbers of **Gannets** passing the Bill. The wind however tended to keep the little brown jobs well down in cover. A pair of **Stonechats** down near the cliffs, along with numerous **Rock Pipits**, were good to see, as were the **Turtle Doves** in the Observatory garden. These doves stayed around on and off all weekend and were very confiding.

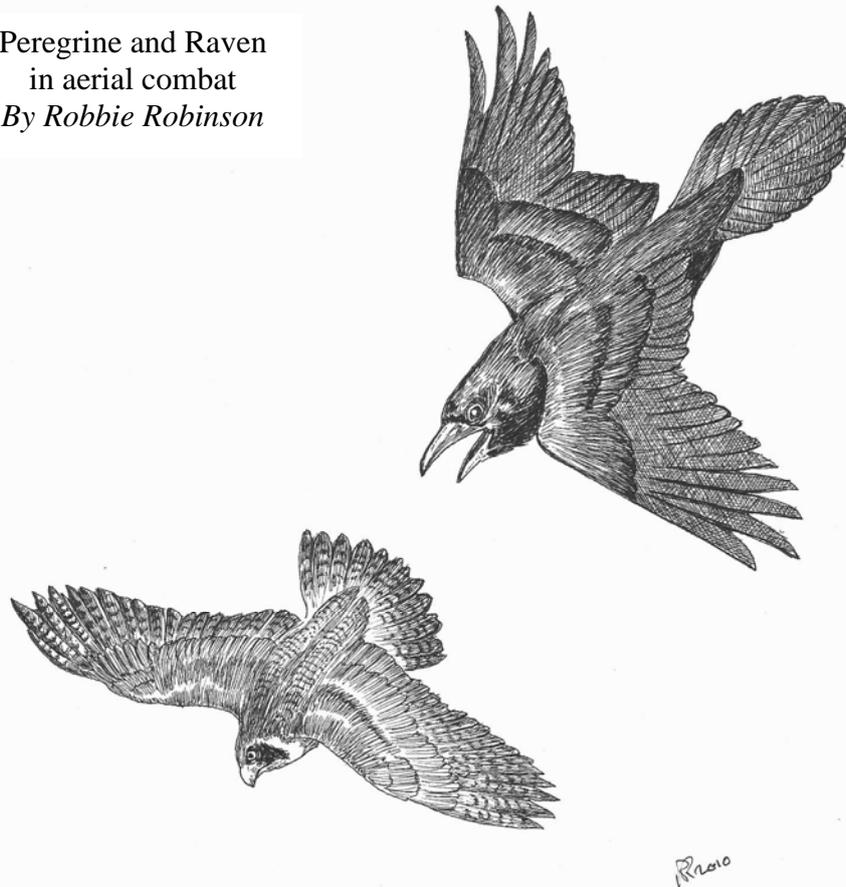
Most of the group went to Radipole on Saturday afternoon where three resplendent **Ruddy Shelducks**, along with several **Mediterranean Gulls** and a **Black-tailed Godwit** gave good close views. Reasonable views through telescopes were had of a distant **Water Rail** as it moved in and out of the reedbeds. Unfortunately, the long-staying **Hooded Merganser** did not put in an appearance but it is understood to still be in the area. Lodmoor was virtually devoid of birds.

The wind eased overnight so that Sunday was quite calm and bright and with a few more passerines showing. In particular a **Grasshopper Warbler** was trapped, ringed at the Obs. and shown to those present at the time. Two immature **Little Gulls** were feeding at the Bill during the early morning sea-watch. An impressive view was had of a **Peregrine** in aerial combat with a **Raven**, near to the Pennsylvania Hotel by Dave, Anne and Alex.

The evening entertainment was provided on Friday via a very amusing video from John Stewart-Smith on the activities of certain Welsh hill farmers at night with their sheep, plus some more standard fare from other members and with Dave Bodley on Saturday showing pics from Sardinia, etc, all with the usual barracking and comments.

Dave had purchased and installed a very good screen for the use of the observatory and it added significantly to the viewing experience compared to previously having to use the wall. This was by way of thanking the Observatory for supporting us over the past 35 years or so.

Peregrine and Raven
in aerial combat
By *Robbie Robinson*



Val Kersley and Anne Bodley excelled as usual and ensured that we did not starve, by preparing the now traditional Portland fare for breakfast, lunch and evening meals. Alex Smith's wife Kate is thanked for sending in a death-by-chocolate cake and another, which were much appreciated. Alex mislaid a vital accoutrement for some time to the amusement of some and to his great relief when it/they were subsequently recovered.

Nick Wright, the secretary of Portland Observatory, is ex-RAF and wishes to be remembered to Peter Montgomery from time together in RAF Germany in the 70's. Memories of escaped 'Indian Thrushes' in a garden there.

Rob King was a welcome addition to the group at Portland and provided a fresh, much younger set of eyes and ears in contributing a lot to what was seen and to the overall success of the weekend.

A set of three long, metal ringing net poles was given to a delighted warden Martin Cade, donated by Mike Rogers. They should prove to be much more resilient than the existing bamboo poles currently in use.

Finally our thanks are extended to Martin Cade for hosting us at the Observatory.

The members:

Dave and Anne Bodley
Ian Drake
John Stewart-Smith and Fran Eggby

Val Kersley
Rob King

Ken and Sally Earnshaw
John Smith

Cornish Chough 2009

(23 Oct - 1 Nov)

By Bob Bosisto

Participants: Jim Bryden, Martin Wightman, Martin Routledge, Steve Heather
Bob Bosisto, Stan Christophers, Gerry Bilbao, Maggie Sheddan,

The last week of October is historically a very good time for seeing a multitude of migrating birds in Cornwall and if day one of the trip was anything to go by Cornish Chough 2009 would certainly not disappoint!



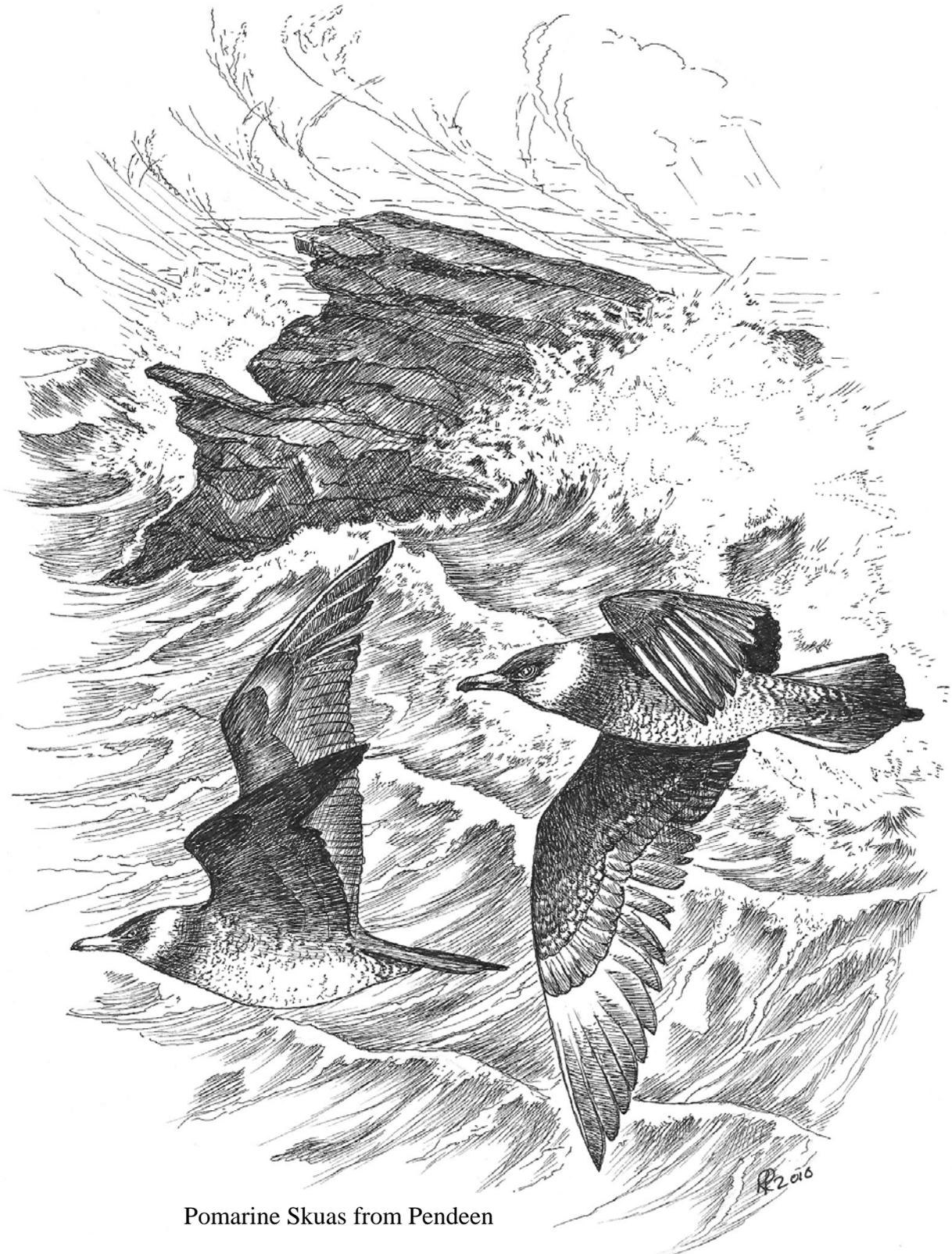
Porthgarra – a regular haunt for the Chough team

Photo: Maggie Sheddan

As the majority of the group live outwith the County, and some as far away as the Scottish Borders, for them much of Friday is spent travelling down to Cornwall. Luckily for Stan Christophers and myself there is no such problem! Before we sped off 'down west' we visited our local patch, Trevoise Head, to get the trips bird list off to a flying start. A fly-over **Richards Pipit** and a very confiding **Snow Bunting** combined with a decent sea-watch, including 15 **Balearic Shearwaters** and a lone **Sandwich Tern**, certainly whetted our appetite for the week ahead. By now the rest of the group had made excellent headway and had more than enough time to fit in a visit to Davidstow Airfield and Crowdy Reservoir. They were rewarded with 3 **Wheatears**, one of which showed characteristics of the Greenland race (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). A **Whooper Swan** at Drift Reservoir and a **Mediterranean Gull** at Hayle rounded the day off nicely.

By 5pm Gerry, Jim, Maggie, Stan, Steve, and myself had made it to The Vineries, at Polgigga, whilst Martin Wightman would be picked up at Penzance train station later in the evening and Martin Routledge would join the group on Sunday. A strong south-westerly wind was forecast for the morning so hopefully a good sea-watch lay in wait at Porthgarra.

The wet windy weather on day two would have put most people off bird watching. But we RAFOS members are a hardy bunch and were rewarded for our efforts with a great selection of seabirds from Porthgwarra and Pendeen Watch. These included a single **Cory's Shearwater** (a first record for Cornish Chough), 2 **Pomarine Skuas**, 15 **Arctic Skuas**, 2 **Sooty Shearwaters**, and large numbers of **Kittiwakes**, **Gannets** and **Auks**.



Pomarine Skuas from Pendeen

We then went on to Carbis Bay where we dined on superb fish and chips, supplied by John Becks, which was probably my highlight of the day! As anyone who has been on an expedition with Jim Bryden would know we still had time for a daily supermarket trip so he could get his shopping fix (in fact we made 11 trips in a week, bonkers!!). It was nice to get back to the 'bashers' eventually and reflect on yet another good days birding.

The next morning a certain somebody forgot to reset their mobile phone as the clocks had gone back that night, 'Jim its 0430 go back to bed'. 'Is it? **** sorry!' Maggie (or Dazzle as she is now better known) was also on top form that morning leaving a trail of her kit from her basher all the way to the van. At least she remembered her flask, the only problem being she forgot to put a teabag in and, for a change, I was made to look rather organized!

A brilliant sea-watch at Pendeen included 20 **Great Skuas**, 19 **Arctic Skuas**, 37 **Balearic Shearwaters**, 2 **Grey Phalaropes**, a **Storm Petrel**, and 2 **Little Gulls**. The group later rendezvoused with Martin Routledge at Drift Reservoir where it was decided by me that instead of getting confused with two Martins on the team, Mr Wightman would now be known as 'fat boy'! A trip to Hayle in the afternoon culminated in a fine record, a very late **Garganey**, being only the fourth Chough sighting.



The Team Seawatch at Pendeen

Photo: Maggie Sheddan

For two hours during the morning of Monday the team had good visible migration counts of finches, pipits and thrushes including 4 **Bramblings** at Porthgwarra. Sadly the weather deteriorated drastically and as the mist rolled in it was almost impossible to do any meaningful bird watching. Still, we did enjoy some nice pasties at Hayle whilst the best 'birds' (for some) were two blondes in Morrisons! Towards the end of the day there was still time for a quick visit to Sennen Cove, a lovely quaint little fishing village complete with a golden sandy beach. By this time Gerry Bilbao was getting plenty of stick about his Swarovski toy telescope, complete with kaleidoscope eyepiece, from the Leica fans (SMC et al). It is all part of the yearly Chough banter arguing over who has

the best scope. However, Gerry had the last laugh as he has photographic evidence of certain members of the team peering through a Swarovski!

Tuesday, and at last the weather improved and plenty of birds were passing overhead at Porthgwarra (1,945 **Chaffinches** being the highest count of the week). Stan once again displayed his birding prowess by finding a **Little Bunting**, but unfortunately for everyone else it didn't linger. We then headed for Loe Pool which is Cornwall's largest natural lake and is a premier site for wildfowl. However, today it was a case of quality rather than quantity with **Long Tailed Duck** and **Yellow Legged Gull** being the star birds. A look at a further 3 reservoirs in the afternoon boosted the trip's species list with **Goldeneye**, **Gadwall** and **Green Sandpiper** recorded.

On Wednesday we visited a further two famous Cornish valleys, Nanquidno and Kenidjack. Historically these places have been littered with various rarities from North America and Asia and invariably they teemed with common birds. Today, though, we wondered where the birds had gone. Personally it was very sad to think how bird populations have plummeted in recent years in Cornwall. Hopefully the information that we collect and pass on to the County Recorder and ultimately the BTO will highlight this worrying trend.

Thursday was the day of our annual trip up to North Cornwall to visit Trevoise Head and The Camel Estuary. Although it was very windy there were plenty of thrushes moving at Trevoise and it was very exciting watching flocks of birds migrating across the headland. Numbers included 171 **Blackbirds**, 37 **Fieldfare**, 170 **Song Thrush**, 340 **Redwing** and 3 **Mistle Thrush**. A flock of 5 **Spoonbills** graced the Estuary in the afternoon together with 11 species of wader.

Steve had decided to stay at Polggiga for the day as it is a very long day traveling up and down the County. He still managed a good list of birds, seen in the vicinity of The Vineries, including a **Black Redstart**. Although Steve was still recovering from a debilitating illness contracted earlier in the year he still made it down to Cornwall for Chough and for me he made a remarkable effort and was, as ever, great company.

The weather on Friday was absolutely awful and as we left the basher nobody really had a plan on where to go, so we headed east to try to escape the fog. The only problem being, there was no escape from the fog! I suggested a trip to Dodman Point as it can be good for migrants at this time of year. The gang was in favour, but they all agreed that if it was bad I would get a good beating! Luckily for me it was heaving with birds with **Little Bunting**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Woodlark** and **Common Redstart** recorded together with other more common species.

After lunch, as we prepared to leave Dodman, there was a decision to be made. We could return on our inward route, on a nice wide road, or take a 'shortcut'. Jim, Stan and Martin (not fat boy) were in gung-ho mood and decided to tackle the more adventurous narrow route; big mistake! As the van climbed a steep hill the road became progressively narrower and as the road was wet and then muddy at a critical point the poor van just skidded on the slippery surface and ground to a halt. Everyone had to climb out of the back doors and push the van uphill whilst directing the oncoming traffic! However, someone was smiling down on us and after much huff'n and chough'n it was a nice sight to see the van speeding away up the hill. What started out as a pretty quiet day certainly turned out to be a very eventful and memorable one. It was Saturday and the last day of Chough 2009. Martin Wightman decided to go

twitching and saw a superb **Raddes Warbler** at St Levan (another first record for Chough and a new bird for him also). The rest of the group spent the morning at Porthgwarra and then we headed up the coast finally finishing off at Hayle for a high tide bird count and another round of fish and chips at Becks! At the end of a hectic 9 days the total list of birds seen stood at an impressive 143 species. As usual lots of laughs, great birding and spectacular scenery resulted in another thoroughly enjoyable trip for all. I'm looking forward to next year already.



Mediterranean Gulls at Hayle

ROMANIA – DANUBE DELTA 20–30 May 2009

Rv Dickie Duckett



Dalmatian Pelican

Photo : Dickie Duckett

As most readers will know, I am a bird photographer rather than a birder, although I do of course spend a lot of time watching birds in the process of photographing them. However, although I have a record of birds photographed, I don't normally keep lists of birds seen, so this report relies quite heavily on my memory and will inevitably be incomplete – sorry about that. By the way, I am definitely not a twitcher!

This is an account of a trip I did to Romania in May 2009 with a photographer colleague, Mike Simpson (not RAFOS). Another colleague had been to Romania the previous year and had provided me with some useful information, and I had also studied Gerard Gorman's book – "Birding in Eastern Europe". The plan was to photograph birds on land for a few days near Tulcea at the head of the Delta, and then travel by hydrofoil into the Delta itself to the village of Crisan. From there we would be taken around the Delta waterways each day on a small boat.

We flew British Airways to Bucharest (no more expensive than the so-called budget airlines and a lot less hassle), picked up our pre-booked hire car (expensive) from Europcar at the airport and set off for Tulcea about 300km away. I was not able to take advantage of my newly purchased TOMTOM with its supposedly pan-European coverage because this stopped at the Romanian border, but I was armed with a book of road maps purchased in advance from that excellent map emporium in Covent Garden – 'Stanfords'. Henri Coanda international airport lies to the north of Bucharest, and to the south of it there appeared to be a ring road to take us around the city. It quickly became clear that this was a 'work in progress'. There were extensive roadworks and a lot of traffic; and to our initial surprise, the crossing roads had priority! After a slow and rather dusty drive of some 30km, we eventually reached the newly constructed

motorway heading towards Constanta on the Black Sea coast. It is an excellent road with little traffic, but it looked as if the money had run out because the motorway came to an abrupt end about 20km short of Constanta.



White Pelicans

Photo: Dickie Duckett

From there we headed north towards Tulcea, but made a brief detour to recce a reserve near Istria/Histria, where we finally saw some birds! The road went through an area of reed beds and rough grassland and we saw several **Yellow Wagtails** (*feldegg* race) and **Corn Buntings** on roadside perches. The occasional **Marsh Harrier** quartered the fields but

never came quite close enough for a good photograph. Hirundines swooped over the reed beds, **White Pelicans** circled impressively above in the thermals, and a **Spoonbill** flew over – we decided it was worth a return visit.

Tulcea is a large port on the Danube. We stayed in the 3* Hotel Delta (there is a 4* version next door). It overlooked the newly-renovated riverside promenade and was very pleasant. For the next four days, we travelled around the local area investigating some of the sites mentioned in Gorman's book, and others suggested by Petre Vasiliu (our host and boatman in the Delta).



European Roller

Photo: Dickie Duckett

Our target species were **European Roller** and **Bee-eater**. I should perhaps add that successful bird photography demands that one gets quite close to the subject. Even with a 500mm lens, one needs to be within about 30m for large birds, and much closer (5-10m) for small ones. This usually means the use of some sort of hide and, given reasonable access, a car makes a very good one. We probably exceeded the terms of our hire car rental by driving off-road but, fortunately, no disasters befell us.

European Bee-eater

Photo: Dickie Duckett



Our first outing was to Malcoci, a small village about 10km SE of Tulcea. On the approach to the village are some high sandy cliffs, and at least two pairs of Rollers were nesting there. **Tree Sparrows** and **Starlings** were also using holes in the cliff, but it was difficult to get close enough in the car for good photographs. Continuing through Malcoci for about 2 km, we came to more sandy cliffs where Bee Eaters were nesting. It was early in the season,

and they were only just beginning to pair up, but there were opportunities to try and photograph them in flight. Added interest was provided by a **Kestrel**, probably a first year bird, that occasionally came barrelling through the Bee Eaters in the forlorn hope of catching one. There were also a few Rollers.

Vadu is on the coast about 70km south of Tulcea. An abandoned and rusting industrial complex stands near the entrance to the reserve area. A small rubbish-filled pond by the entrance held several **Natterjack Toads**, and old settling ponds attracted Waders, Terns and Gulls. In the reed beds we saw (and heard) **Reed Warbler**. We also saw **Black-winged Stilt**, **Common Tern**, and Marsh Harrier but photographic opportunities were rare. Following the track through the sandy scrub area lead eventually to a deserted Black Sea beach where we had a celebratory paddle!

Leaving Vadu, we rounded a bend to see a Marsh Harrier in a field on a new kill not more than 30m away. We viewed it from the car for a while, but sadly, as soon as we wound down the windows it flew off with its prey. We returned via Histria where there was a large flock of White Pelicans, and also the local ground squirrels – **Suslik** – that live in burrows in the sandy soil.



Suslik and young. Photo: Dickie Duckett

We spent another couple of days around Tulcea and investigated an area of lakes to the west, where we found **Squacco Heron**, **Little Egret** and the occasional **Hoopoe**. We also photographed **Northern Wheatear** and **Crested Lark** and discovered more Bee Eater colonies. One, down a sandy track in Malcoci, provided good photo opportunities for both Bee Eaters and Rollers. We were able to park the car quite close

to the low sandy cliff and managed some successful photography. Passing locals in their horse-drawn carts were friendly, and usually also happy to pose for pictures!

Leaving Tulcea early one morning we became annoyed by a following car that kept hooting at us. Eventually we let it overtake, and it became clear that the driver had simply been trying to tell us that we had a puncture! Fortunately we had checked the spare and wheel change kit at the airport and changing the wheel was successfully accomplished. We later got the puncture repaired at small cost at a very busy tyre depot.

So, phase one of the trip came to an end. We had not managed many good photos, but had had some memorable meals in our hotel restaurant and tried a good selection from the wine list! Leaving our car in the hotel car park, we boarded one of several ex-Soviet hydrofoils that travel down the Danube Delta to the sea. A different company operates each hydrofoil; there seemed to be no co-ordination between them, and no common timetable – somewhat confusing as we found out to our cost on our return journey.

The hydrofoils travel at about 30 knots on the open river, and it took only an hour to reach Crisan, our next destination. Petre Vasiliu and his French wife, Caroline, run a Guesthouse there, and he takes visitors out in his small motorboat. We had pre-booked him and his boat for five days at what seemed at the time to be a reasonable cost (150 euros per day), but the tumbling pound had effectively increased the price by about 30% by the time we arrived. Nevertheless, as we usually set off at 0630 for 4-5 hours, came back for lunch and then went out again for another 3-4 hours, it was still good value, especially as full board was only 28 euros per day each. Crisan is on the main channel of the Danube, but there are many sub-channels, lakes and creeks that can be explored by a knowledgeable boatman. We had expected the birds not to be alarmed by the quiet approach of our boat, and were therefore disappointed when most took off when we got within about 60m! However, by persevering we usually found some that were happy for us to approach quite close. Most of our photography was done from the boat, but we landed occasionally. Among the more common birds were various Herons; **Squacco, Purple, Grey and Night; Little and Great Egret; Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Lapwing, and Common and Pygmy Cormorant.** We also came across **Ferruginous Duck** and **Garganey** and a few, usually solitary, **Dalmatian Pelican.**

The Delta is an important breeding area for **White Pelicans** and, although the breeding area itself is out of bounds, there are lakes in the northern area of the Delta where we were able to see and photograph large flocks. In the middle of the day, hundreds of them circled in the thermals. In Crisan itself, **Swallows** and **House Martins** nested on the houses, and a pair of **White Storks** were nesting on a pylon.

One day, deep in the Delta, we visited the village of Letea, close to the Ukrainian border, where time seemed to have stood still. The basic thatched cottages, stooks of hay, lack of modern machinery, and horse-drawn carts reminded us of what rural England had probably been like a 100 years or so ago. An old couple were very friendly, and they patiently allowed me to try out my very rusty Russian before insisting on going to the local shop to buy a large bottle of beer to share with us!



House Martins nesting



Penduline Tit at its nest

Photo: Dickie Duckett

One of the highlights, and a new bird for me, was the **Penduline Tit**. Petre was very good at spotting their nests hanging precariously from willow branches and, on one memorable occasion, we spent about an hour watching and photographing a pair weaving their intricate nest. We also photographed small groups of **Bearded Tits** as they foraged for seeds among the reeds, and **Whiskered Terns** at their nesting colony on lily pads in the middle of a lake - with the cries of the Terns accompanied by the continual croaking of the **Marsh Frogs**, this was a noisy experience! An enduring memory is of **Cuckoos** everywhere. This is testimony to the number of host birds (Warblers) present in the Delta and perhaps explains why so few Cuckoos now seem to come to UK.

During our travels along the waterways we also saw, and occasionally were able to photograph, the following: **Hooded Crow, Marsh Harrier, Hobby, Black Woodpecker, Lesser Grey Shrike, Kingfisher, Red-necked and Great-crested Grebe, Common Tern, Great Reed Warbler, and Black-winged Stilt**. Of particular note was an encounter with a **Grey Heron** trying to subdue a **Grass Snake** – it wrapped its tail around the Heron's leg and wouldn't let go! We also photographed Squacco and Purple Heron catching a Marsh Frog.

The Guesthouse was basic but comfortable, and we were well hosted by Petre and Caroline. I asked Petre how he managed to speak such good English – “you must have been to England” I said. “No”, he replied, “I learned by correspondence course”! I should add that he also spoke excellent French and German. I asked him how he viewed post-Ceausescu Romania. He said that he felt his country had embraced western practices and products too quickly. For him, living a simple life in the heart of the Delta, the old days had many good aspects. Nevertheless, he was taking advantage of the new opportunities offered by tourism and had just completed building a large new house with extra rooms for guests. Bearing in mind that all the materials

had to be shipped by boat from Tulcea, and that the workmen also had to be brought in, this was quite an achievement.

We left Crisan on an early morning hydrofoil, having purchased our tickets a couple of days earlier from the quayside office. "There will be two boats" Petre said; "yours will be the second one". Once on board we presented our tickets only to be told that they were not valid for that boat and that we had to pay again – we should have been on the first boat! We drove back to Bucharest by the scenic route, survived the most rigorous inspection of our hire car that I have ever experienced, and were safely back in Heathrow by early evening.

Overall, it was a fascinating trip, and I have some good images by which to remember it. We were also able to gain a good impression of this country of contrasts. Every so often we came across enormous but crumbling concrete grain silos - remnants of the old Communist order - often alongside their modern equivalents. In some areas there are vast fields farmed with modern machinery while, in the country villages, life goes on much as it has always done with people happily tending their animals and land in the old fashioned way.



Purple Heron with Frog
Photo by Dickie Duckett

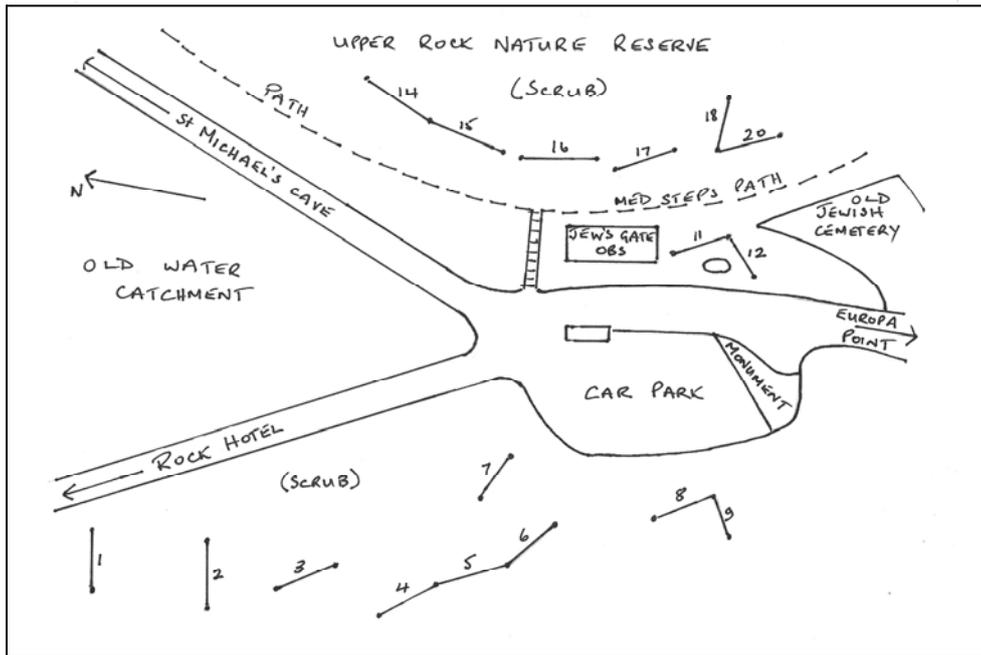
AUTUMN BIRD RINGING ON THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR

By Robin Springett

Julia and I are RAFOS members and we both hold a C ringing permit from the BTO. We have a small apartment in Spain, near to Gibraltar and are frequent visitors to the Rock. We are fairly experienced birders, with a good knowledge of Gibraltar and nearby Spain and I am the www.birdingpal.org friend for Gibraltar. For the last 10 autumn seasons, we have been involved with ringing migrating birds at the Jews' gate Bird Observatory operated by the Gibraltar Ornithology & Natural History Society (GONHS).

It is always a difficult call just when to ring on Gibraltar; in the spring, wonderful choice and birds in breeding plumage, but generally small daily numbers. In autumn, late August, September and early October should bring some unusual birds, whilst from mid-October onwards numbers should be up, but variety is down, young birds predominate and the weather can deteriorate. One of the delights of Gibraltar in spring or autumn is you never really know what will turn up! We always try to ring in both seasons, but missed autumn 2008. Spring 2009 saw us trying to ring throughout March with Steve Norman, who was the Ringer in Residence. The weather only allowed a total of 15 days and we ringed 158 birds of 22 species, which is about average for the time of year (In March 2007, it was 149 and 15 respectively for 2 weeks ringing). It is quite a lot of effort, with very early starts, for relatively few birds, but the expectation of variety is always present.

This is a brief report on the 2009 autumn migration, but specifically the period 20 Oct to 1 Nov. In autumn 2009 we arrived on the Rock on 2 Oct and went to Jews' Gate to meet up with an old friend and regular autumn ringer, Ray Marsh. Ray is an AOS member and is usually there for a month. This time he had organised a succession of other folk to stay at the observatory for the duration of his stay. We met and enjoyed the company of these visitors and ringed a number of birds up to 19 Oct, but Ray does his own report, and we won't duplicate it. Jews' Gate supports a total of 17 nets, most 60ft, but some smaller; see diagram below.



Lanes 1, 2, 3, 7, 16, 17, 18 and 20 are single nets; Lane 4, 5, 6 is a triple, and lanes 8/9, 14/15, 11/12 are double; the latter in the garden round the observatory with a small pond to attract birds (in case you wondered, lanes 10, 13 and 19 no longer exist.) Ray had chosen not to install numbers 1, and 18, as they are on the very steepest slopes. When we arrived on 2 Oct, we had put up the net in lane 1, but it was only opened when we were there ringing. Lane 18 required serious gardening to make it useable and it had been decided to give it a miss this autumn; a decision we saw no reason to change!



Common Nightjar -
Caprimulgus europaeus.
Photo by Robin Springett

Bird numbers were fairly low throughout early October so we were hardly needed. Possibly migrating birds were held back by the very fine weather in northern Europe; what we wanted were winds from the north, and generally they failed to happen. We started ringing on 4 Oct and by the time we went home on the 12 Oct, Julia had only ringed 109 birds, an average of 12 birds a day mainly **Blackcap** and **Robin**.

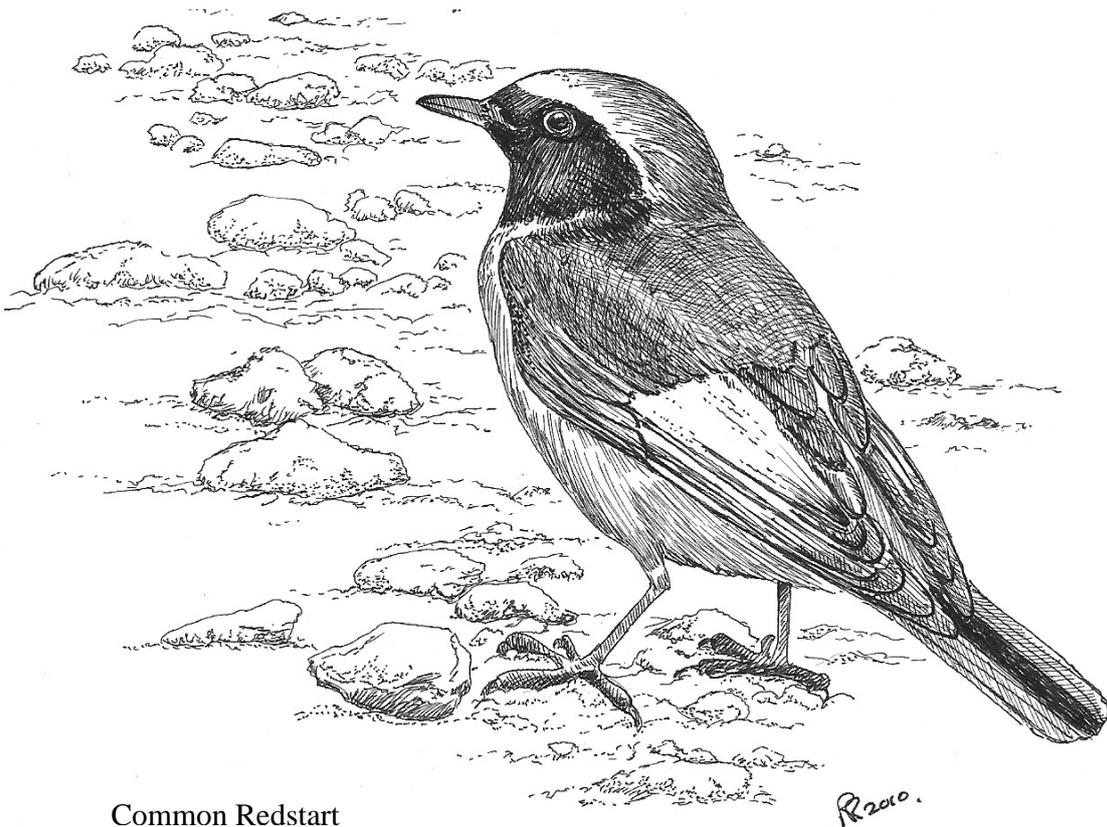
However, things started to look up next day (13th), with Julia ringing 45 birds and among the Robins and Blackcaps were 2 **Garden Warblers**, one each **Common Nightjar**, **Red-necked Nightjar** and **Scops Owl**.

Black Redstart -
Phoenicurus ochrous
Photo: Robin Springett



The **Song Thrushes** started to arrive next day, as did the **Black Redstarts**, but both initially in small numbers. The total birds ringed topped the 100 for 5 consecutive days. A **Dartford Warbler** was ringed on 17th, together with another **Nightjar**. The 19th was the last day for Ray, as he was leaving early next morning. The weather can be unsettled from October on, but it had been fine, with a couple of exceptions up to when Ray left. We had experienced the still, calm days of a true Indian summer. Temperatures would not have disgraced late August or early September. Some days, there was a gentle east wind, which brought with it the levanter, a cloud over the Rock induced by a warm moisture-laden wind being forced up the east face of the Rock and water vapour condensing out.

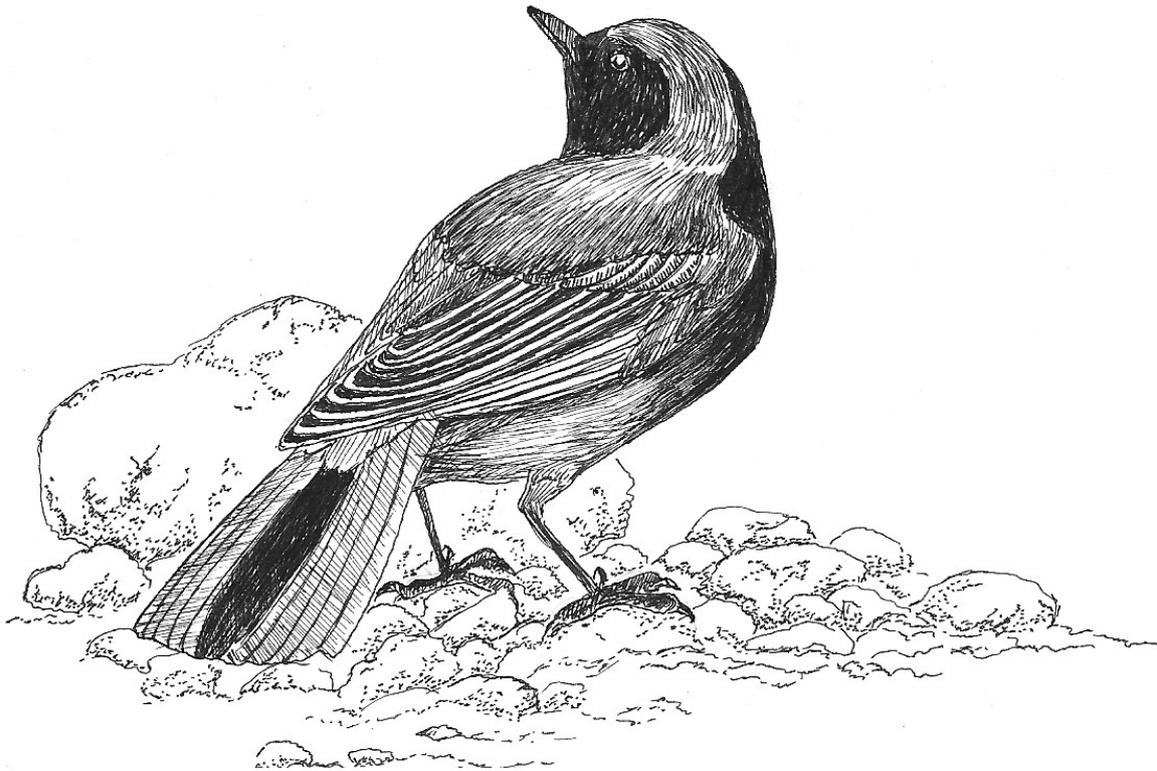
Ringling at Jews' Gate requires the presence of an A ringer, and from the 20th onwards, we had arranged to ring with local GONHS member, expert birder and A ringer, Charlie Perez. Ringling with Charlie is always such a privilege, and we never fail to learn something. The daily routine agreed with Charlie was for us to open the nets before dawn, and await Charlie for the first round of the day. We planned to close the nets in time to leave each day around 1330. After opening the nets on the 20th, the next task was to replace net 7, which had been destroyed a couple of days earlier by the proverbial "flying pig", probably a Barbary Partridge or two, but possibly a Raven.



Common Redstart

The weather continued fine for the 20th and 79 birds were ringed, but next day, due to the wind and rain few birds were ringed and by the 22nd the weather was too bad to open the nets. Oh dear, had the bad weather set in? It improved a little on the 23rd, and the good weather returned for the 24th, and lasted until 1st Nov. There was yet to be a real autumn fall of migrants and we were hoping for really large numbers of **Blackcap**, **Robin** and **Redstart**, with perhaps a sprinkling of rarities. We did hear and see **Redwing** and **Ring Ouzel**, but none went into our nets! With the fine weather back, we ringed around 100 birds every day from the 24th onwards, and on the best day we ringed 111 – Nelson in cricketing terms – how appropriate for Gibraltar, but a few days late for the actual anniversary of Trafalgar (21st).

We could have continued ringing until 4th Nov as we were not due to leave until the 5th, but Charlie had to depart on business on the 2nd so our last day ringing was 1st Nov. On 2nd together with Charlie, we took down all the nets and recovered the guys. The net lanes were due a good cutting back before the spring of 2010, having become overgrown and surrounded by too many tall trees. It was sad to cut short ringing, but needs must! For the record, the Indian summer lasted right through to the end of November, and good numbers of **Black Redstarts** and **Finches** were noted around the observatory – maybe another year! In summary, it had been a good, but not an over generous autumn as far as numbers were concerned, with approximately 2,500 birds ringed.



Black Redstart

Our total for 13 days ringing was 1214 birds of 23 species as indicated on the table below.

Species	Ringed	Processed*	Total
Scops Owl		1	1
Red-necked Nightjar		1	1
Wren	2	1	3
Dunnock	1		1
Robin	261	14	275
Redstart	2		2
Black Redstart	111		111
Blackbird	9	4	13
Song Thrush	54		54
Dartford Warbler	1		1
Garden Warbler	5		5
Blackcap	542	21	563
Sardinian Warbler	18	5	23
Willow Warbler	1		1
Chiffchaff	102	1	103
Blue Tit	5		5
Great Tit	1	1	2
House Sparrow	1		1
Chaffinch	5		5

Serin	9		9
Greenfinch	31		31
Goldfinch	2		2
Total Species = 23			
Grand Totals	1165	49	1214

* Processed includes local retraps, controls, and other birds with biometrics done by Julia.



Male Serin – *Serinus serinus* Adult is on the left

Photo by Robin Springett

TRINIDAD

By Terry Carne

When I read John Le Gassick's description of 'the sister island' In Newsletter No. 86 I thought that a pen picture of Trinidad might be in order. Courtesy of Dick Yates' toe up my behind, here it is!

I am a little over half way through my birding trip to T&T, having arrived in June 2008 on a two-year contract. Unfortunately, my little contribution to the crime fighting effort here occupies most of the daylight hours, consequently John will have been better qualified than me to talk about Tobago, having spent more than twice the amount of time there that I have! However, I do feel qualified to make some observations about Trinidad.



Trinidad is the larger and most populated of the two Islands. It is crescent shaped, the two arms pointing towards Venezuela, 9 miles away. The name Trinidad comes from the three hill ranges, the Northern range being part of the Andes mountain chain, which forms a chain of islands, the Bocas, to the west; Chacachacare Island is the closest point to the mainland. Mainland Trinidad is about 55 miles north to south, and the average width about 40 miles.

The population of Trinidad and Tobago is about 1.1 million, with the highest concentration being in the north of Trinidad, along the 'east-west corridor' and that, not surprisingly, is the area of highest crime. It is also near most of the recommended birding sites. A word on the crime situation later. The population comprises roughly 30% of African descent, 30% Indian and 30% mixed, the remainder Amerindian, Chinese and white. The official language is English, apparently - I struggle, still, to understand some of the guys I work with, particularly on the 'phone! Situated as it is just 10°N of the equator there is little seasonal variation in temperature, and days are roughly 12 hours long, there is about an hour more daylight in June than in December. There is supposed to be a wet season from around May to January, with a mini dry season around September. However, last year's dry season was pretty wet and this years wet season has been pretty dry.

Historically Trinidad was a major producer of sugar, with coffee, cocoa and citrus grown on plantations. The major industry now is petroleum production, concentrated in the south of the island, where there is also a pitch lake, said to be the source of pitch for all of the roads in the world - all except those in Trinidad, I sometimes think, which can be a little testing.

The capital is Port of Spain, in the north west, but there is a continuous conurbation running from Caranage to the west of Port of Spain to Arima in the East, joined by the Eastern main road, and forming the east-west corridor. Running parallel to the Eastern main road is the Eastern Highway, which has frequent crossroads, controlled by traffic lights. What planning clown thought that was a good idea? Sometimes it makes the M25 look like the hanger straight at Silverstone! East of Port of Spain the Eastern Highway is bisected by the Southern Highway, marked by T&Ts only flyover, opened earlier this year. That highway runs as far as San Fernando (no trains anymore - Johnny Duncan took the last one in 1956). San Fernando is Trinidad's second city

The airport, Piarco, is just south of the Eastern Highway, a little east of Trincity.

The traffic is awful, despite the small size journey times can be horrendous, and the driving is straight out of the whacky races, though it isn't always as funny. You will be overtaken, undertaken, tailgated and cut up. If you move off when your light turns green you will be hit by one of the three or four cars coming through on red - if you don't move off immediately the driver behind will be incandescent. Large lorries are driven like sports cars, except the real wrecks, which you will find crawling along in the middle lane of three, or right hand lane of two. Not surprisingly there is a high incidence of fatalities on the roads.

We finished 2009 with about 530 murders. There are many, many illegal firearms, ranging from home made to machine pistols, and every adult male has a machete, called a cutlass here, when murders are committed with them the victims are described as having been 'chopped'. A number of murders have been in the course of burglary or robbery, often for little gain, and others have been the culmination of arguments in bars. Having said that, none of the murder victims since I have been in Trinidad has been white, though some European expats in Tobago have been targeted. It seems that most people who come birding in Trinidad do so on organised trips, with guides. If anyone contemplates finding their own way around they should exercise caution, there are some areas that it would be unwise to stray into.

That's the history and geography lesson over and the public safety warning duly delivered; so, having put you all off coming, let's talk about what I am enjoying while you all stay at home!

I imagine that anyone contemplating a trip to Trinidad will have heard of The Asa Wright Centre, and would be likely to include a stay there for at least part of their visit. Thoroughly recommended. A stay for 3 or more nights will include a visit to the oilbird cave, and the Centre can also arrange various other excursions. The guides associated with Asa Wright are excellent, their bird i/d is out of the top drawer. I have been there many times, but only as a day visitor, and I never tire of the place. I will definitely stay for a night before I leave the island, the gates don't open until 9am and I would like to experience at least one early morning there.

The Asa Wright Centre was a plantation, and is being allowed to revert to rainforest, it is situated in the Arima Valley, within the northern range, an area of extensive rainforest. The beauty of Asa Wright is that birds are fed regularly, consequently several species are very much easier to see there.



Copper-rumped Hummingbird

Photo: Terry Carne

You will not get closer to hummingbirds, half a dozen species are regular around the veranda, and all three honeycreepers are possible, though red-legged is rare, none in 2009. Both species of Manakins lek a short distance down a footpath, Bearded Bellbirds reside a little further along. You may also encounter one of Trinidad's venomous snakes, the Fer-de-Lance, which is a pit viper (there are four lethal species, the bushmaster is also a pit viper, and two coral snakes). There are plenty of references with lists of birds to be found, particularly on the web, although Wikipedia seems to have added a number of species. Suffice it to say that a trip to Asa Wright will add many rainforest species to a list, most of which can be seen from the comfort of the veranda.

The second absolute must is a boat trip on the Caroni swamp, an extensive area of mangrove. Boat trips leave daily, prompt at 4pm, with the aim of watching Scarlet Ibis go to roost. As spectacular as they are, there are a number of other species that could be seen, including mangrove specialities such as Green-throated Mango hummingbirds, Bi-coloured Conebill and perhaps Common Potoo. The boatmen know their birds and have excellent eyes, they will adjust the trip to accommodate keen birders, ensuring that everyone who wants to see the birds that they have spotted. Tree boas, caiman and four-eyed fish are pretty much a certainty.

South of the Caroni at Waterloo is the Temple in the sea, a popular tourist attraction. There is an extensive area of tidal mudflats that can also be viewed from there or the nearby village of Brickfields, where the locals have established a small reserve and have replanted mangroves. There aren't many locations in Trinidad for a gull watcher to get a fix. Plenty of Laughing gulls here, but Herring, Lesser Black-backed, Ring Billed

and Black-headed Gulls are rarities. But it is a great spot for waders, terns and skimmers, and last summer there was a party of Greater Flamingos, I believe the 4th record for Trinidad and the 3rd at this site. Who knows what you might find?

Continue south, just before San Fernando is Point a Pierre, where you will find the Petro Trin refineries. Within the grounds are a golf course, school and the Wildfowl Trust. Access to the site is controlled by a guarded gate and another controls access to the Wildfowl Trust, making this another very safe site to visit, but you must call ahead. Plenty of caiman and terrapins and a good chance of seeing neotropical Red Squirrel. Birds will include Anhinga and Purple Gallinule. You will also see Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and Muskovy Duck (of course they're wild). Red-capped Cardinal is quite reliable, as are Green and Ringed Kingfishers. There is a small entry fee and tee shirts are on sale at a very attractive price, good souvenirs or gifts to bring home.



Male Tufted Coquette on Lantana

Photo: Terry Carne

There are a number of excellent sites south of San Fernando, but the travelling time makes a trip to 'south' unlikely during a short visit.

Return to that infamous east-west corridor, at either end are the sites of WWII US bases. Beyond Caranage to the west is Chaguaramas, which was a naval base, and at the eastern end of the highway lies Waller Field, an airbase which is said to have been the world's largest in its day. The bases were established during WWII, part of the bases for destroyers agreement with the US - one of the destroyers became HMS Cambletown, famous for the raid on St Nazaire.

Waller field features in many sites and trip accounts, but access has been restricted as a result of the extensive development taking place on the site. It is a shame, early this year I watched 8 species of humming birds in the same tree there.

Chaguaramas, on the other hand, is less likely to feature, but is well worth a visit. There is a very good chance of seeing Red Howler Monkey and if you don't see them you will

certainly hear them. There are bird species that are more or less restricted to the western extremity of the island, such as Blue-tailed Emerald, Mouse Coloured Tyrannulet and Streaked Saltator. There are a couple of others only resident on the Bocas, Black-faced Grassquit and White-fringed Antwren, the latter only on Chacachacare. Both are present on Tobago. Chaguaramas has extensive rainforest, with a number of well marked paths, as well as Trinidad's only worthwhile snorkeling beach.

There is no bad time to visit Trinidad, though there is seasonal variation of the species present. Aside from the birds Trinidad's greatest wildlife stars must be the turtles. Leatherbacks begin nesting around the beginning of March, though at that time there are few, and those that do come ashore tend to be in the early hours. By early April the season is in full swing, and a visit to the nesting beaches during the evening will guarantee sightings. Incubation is around 60 days, so hatchlings start to appear during May, with June and July the peak months. In addition, both Hawksbill and Green turtles also come ashore, albeit in much smaller numbers. Nesting continues through to August, though the numbers of leatherbacks are dropping off by then. The nesting beaches are along the east and north coasts, Matura on the east coast and Grande Riviere in the north are probably the most popular. In Grande Riviere there are 2 hotels immediately beside the beach. Conservation at those sites, particularly Grande Riviere, has been so successful that the biggest threat to the leatherback there is probably other leatherback. So many females are coming ashore that the later arrivals routinely dig up earlier nests and the eggs are eaten by Corbeau (Black Vultures), possums and stray dogs (of which there are many), amongst others.



Blue & Yellow Macaw

Photo: Terry Carne

The Nariva swamp on the east coast is Trinidad's only site where Manatee reside, I understand that there are 30 or so remaining. The chances of seeing any are very slim, though slightly better late in the dry season (May) when they are confined to deeper pools in the river. The water is stained dark brown by the tannin from riverside vegetation, so that it is impossible to see into the water - my only sighting has been of the trail of bubbles as they swam below, but my daughters were lucky enough to see one surface to breath.

Nariva is the site of the re-introduction of Blue & Yellow Macaws; Red-bellied Macaws are also present. Within the swamp an area of forest, known as bush-bush, is home to both Red Howler and White-fronted Capuchin monkeys. Around 180 bird species have been recorded there, 57 species of mammals, over half of which are bats, according to the information board and 11 snakes, including the anaconda.

A visit between Sep and Dec would make Ruby Topaz and White-tailed Goldenthrout humming birds unlikely. However from Sep through to Nov at one small site I watched Least, Semipalmated, Western, Solitary, Spotted, White-rumped, Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Plover, Southern Lapwing and Black-necked Stilts. At the same time 8 species of heron, Osprey and Ringed Kingfisher (the size of a crow) and Spectacled Caiman fishing - all in an area not much bigger than a tennis court. Armchair birding! White-rumped, Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers are passage migrants and there is a return passage Apr and May. Other winter visitors include American Redstart and Northern Waterthrush.



White-rumped Sandpiper

Photo: Terry Carne

Summer visitors include White-cheeked Pintail, Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous Kites, Large-billed Tern, White-collared Swift, Blue and White Swallow and Swallow Tanager.

There is a choice of two guide books. The most recent, *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*, Kenefick, Restall and Hayes, is the more portable and every species is illustrated, including, for example, Southern Pochard, not seen for over 150 years. The alternative is French, a little bulkier and not all species are illustrated, though there is more information in the text. I also have a site guide, *Birdwatchers guide to Trinidad and Tobago* by William L Murphy, good detailed directions to a variety of sites, all in the north, as the guide anticipates a short visit. One or two of the sites described are no longer readily accessible, but it is a useful book. The best map I could find is published by the rough guide, it is not an OS, and the minor roads marked bear little resemblance to what you'll find on the ground.

Rainfall can be very heavy, and quite persistent during the wet season. Optics, and especially cameras, will need protection. An umbrella is probably better than a coat, the temperature remains high, but at altitude it can be chilly if you get wet. A cape may be

useful, but even the best breathable fabric is unlikely to cope with the high humidity. It remains warm through the evenings and night. I spend virtually all of my off duty time in tee shirt and shorts, I brought a couple of short sleeved rugby shirts with me to begin with, wore one one evening, and have since taken them back home, way too warm. Long sleeved shirt and long trousers may help to protect against insect bites.

If anyone is contemplating a visit, please feel free to contact me, e-mail terry.carne@live.co.uk. I will do my best to respond to questions.



Swallow-tailed Kite

Photo by Terry Carne



Oilbird on nest (May 05)

Photo: Dick Yates

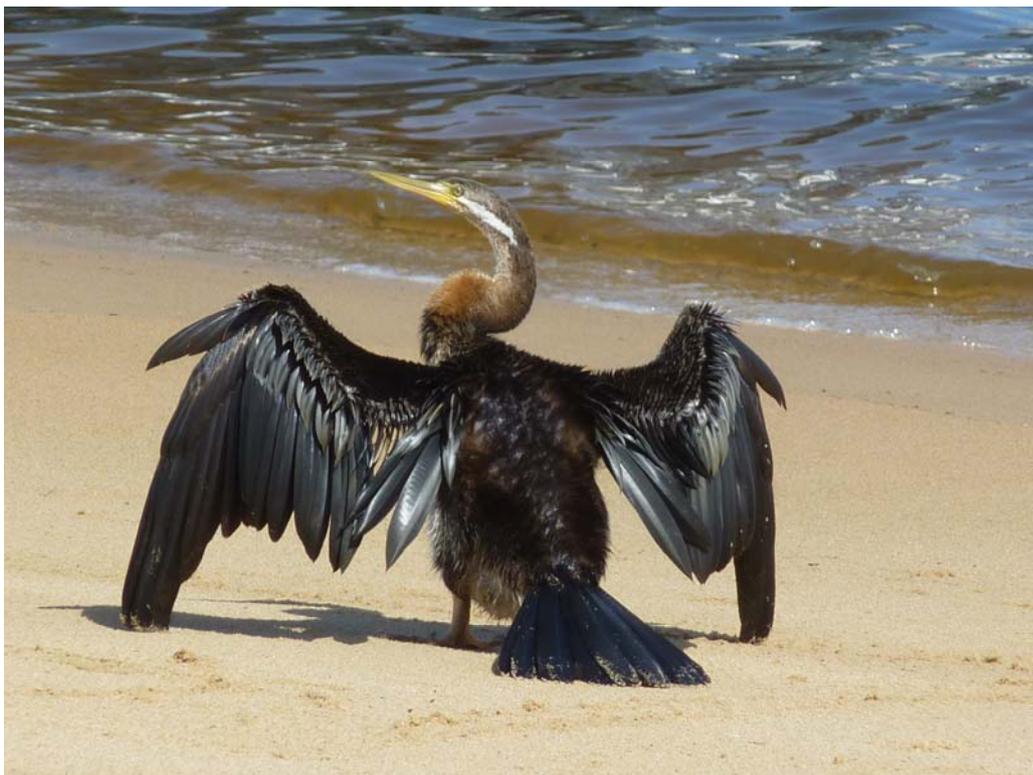
THE BIRDS CAME TO US

By Iain MacKenzie

A month to go and time to start packing for our 4 week trip to Australia. Our baggage allowance, one case not exceeding 23kgs! What birding equipment should I take? Being a casual birder, I decided against a telescope and tripod, but binoculars were a must, plus a camera. As I've never really taken any bird photographs, I decided not to take my Canon D400 SLR and 300mm lens, but opted for my new Panasonic DMC-TZ7 compact camera, which has a 300mm zoom lens and is capable of HD quality video. Now for the field guide, a quick look at my Collins Field Guide to the Birds of Australia and I'm thinking it's too big and it weighs in at over 1 kg! I'll buy a smaller field guide when I get there.

Saturday 4 Sep, departure day, finally arrived and we boarded a Qantas A380 bound for Singapore where we had a 3 night stop-over, before heading on to Perth on 8 Sep. It was Spring time in Perth and the weather was mainly windy and wet with the temperature in the region of 14-18°C. Wed 9 Sep, our first day in the city and I found my way to the Angus & Robertson bookshop looking for a suitable Field Guide. For me the function of the guide was to provide the novice Australian birdwatcher the basic information to identify the more commonly encountered species and soon I found and purchased 'A Photographic Guide to Birds of Australia'. It is about the same size as the Mitchell Beazley 'Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide' and proved to be just right for my purpose: only a couple of times did I need to refer to a more detailed guide. In this article I will concentrate on the birds that I managed to photograph on our travels around Australia.

Sunday 13 Sep and we were grateful for a lovely sunny day - 24°C as we walked down to the banks of the Swan River from where the ferry departs to South Perth, for our visit to King's Park. As I mentioned I'd not really taken any bird photographs in the past, but suddenly birds here seemed so close and tame.



Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*,
“hanging out to dry”
on the banks of the
Swan River, Perth.
*Photo: Iain
Mackenzie*

So it was out with the camera and photographs were taken of **Darter**, wings outstretched, and **Australian Pelican** feeding.

Australian Pelican
Pelecanus conspicillatus
Photo: Iain Mackenzie



We walked along Mount's Bay Road and into David Carr Memorial Park, which leads to the uphill climb to King's Park. David Carr Park has a expanse of water and very soon we spotted a Darter's nest, with sitting bird, and another adult nearby; a fledgling on the ground. Good photographs were taken and the youngster was filmed on video.



Darters on nest. Photo: Iain Mackenzie

Further along, the grassed area was flooded and this provided an excellent birding experience. A pair of **Black winged Stilt** were busy feeding, along with some **Grey Teal**; both were recorded on video. On the water were **Pacific Black duck**, with ducklings, whilst on the bank was a solitary **Little Pied Cormorant**. Also seen were **Australian Magpies**, **Magpie-larks** and **Welcome Swallows** collecting mud. The climb up to King's Park took us passed many flowering trees, attracting **Red Wattlebirds**. I got some good shots, but a little later I photographed a **Red Wattlebird** on a stunning **Kangaroo Paw** plant giving me one of my favourite images. Kings Park covers 4 square-kilometres and is located on the western edge of Perth's business district. It

contains a mixture of grassed parkland, botanical gardens and natural bush on Mount Eliza, with 80 bird species recorded. Observation points give stunning views over Perth. King's Park was busy with people enjoying the many flowers and shrubs and it also contains the Western Australia War Memorial attracting many visitors.



Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata*, on Kangaroo Paw

Photo: Iain Mackenzie

Not many other birds were seen, but as dusk fell we found a nesting pair of **Grey Butcherbird** which brought a good birding day to a close.

On 14 Sep we flew to Sydney and hired a Holden Epica for 14 days. We planned to drive South along the Princes Highway coast road to Melbourne, before heading North up the Hume Highway to Canberra and back to Sydney. We arrived in Sydney 2 hours late, at 8pm, and by now it was gone 10pm, so our first night stop was the first motel we passed, the Carss Park Motel, just south of Sydney.



At 0600 the next morning we were awoken by loud screeching and looking out, we found, to our amazement, that there were 15 **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo's** flying around the trees. Before driving off we spent an hour in the adjacent Carss Bush Park and took video of **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** feeding on berries and seeds, plus some burrowing for roots, which was really exciting to watch. Photographs were also taken of **Little Corella**, **Noisy Miner** and **Willy Wagtail**.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*
Photo: Iain Mackenzie

On 18 Sep, driving south on Grand Pacific Drive, part of The Princes Highway, we made a detour to Fitzroy Falls in the Southern Highlands; these spectacular falls, 81 metres high, are located within the Morton National Park. However, the weather was rather cool and the only bird I managed to photograph was a **Crimson Rosella**. We had a good view of a **Black-shouldered Kite**, which was occupying a prominent look-out position, but it was too far away to photograph; and we got our first glimpse of **Surperb Lyrebird** crossing the footpath ahead of us and within minutes a pair of **Shining bronze-Cuckoo**, posed for a few seconds, almost within touching distance making the whole visit very worthwhile. Further south, at Shoalhaven, a **Masked Lapwing** protecting a chick was captured on video, a surprise encounter and welcome sighting.

Laughing Kookaburras



On 19 Sep we were at the old gold mining township of Mogo, where a pair of **Laughing Kookaburra** sitting on a power line were happy to be photographed. The town itself is very popular with tourists with many quality craft shops and galleries.

The 21st saw us at Lakes Entrance 300kms east of Melbourne. Lakes Entrance is situated between Bairnsdale and Orbost at a man-made channel that links Bass Strait and the Tasman Sea with the 400 square kilometre network of inland waterways known as the Gippsland Lakes. A very pretty area and good for bird watching. **Royal Spoonbill, Great Cormorant, Little Black Cormorant, Great Egret, White-faced Heron, Black Swan, Pied Oystercatcher** and a pair of **Pacific Gulls** were observed.

By the 25th we had reached the Blue Mountains and soon settled into our accommodation at the Three Sisters Motel, the Three Sisters peaks being the main reason that so many tourists visit this area. We took the short walk to view the Three Sisters and later before dusk took a walk through the wood and had good views of **Pied Currawong** and **King Parrot** as well as the rose pink coloured **Galah** and yet more **Sulphur Crested Cockatoo**.



Bassian Thrush

The next day we walked down the mountain to the cable-car base station, this took us through rainforest and during the 3 hr walk, we saw 2 pairs of **Superb Lyrebird** and managed to get some images of this most secretive of birds. Also photographed was **White-throated Treecreeper**, **White-browed Scrubwren** and **Bassian Thrush**. On our journey to Sydney, a brief stop at a supermarket in the Blue Mountains town of Glenbrook, 65kms west of Sydney gave us our only sighting of **Long-billed Corella**.

Our final 4 days were spent in Sydney, where the Botanical Gardens were well worth a visit and produced many of the common parkland birds including **Crested Pigeon** and **Australian White Ibis**, the latter being extremely common outside McDonald's and akin to our feral pigeon in their habit of picking up food scraps. From the steps up to the pathway for a walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, we had our best and closest view of **Rainbow Lorikeet** in a neighbouring tree. Our last day in Sydney was 30 Sep and an early morning visit to Bondi Beach yielded its usual gang of resting **Crested Terns** and **Silver Gulls**; whilst a few miles further north, en-route to Watson Bay, we stopped at a headland, known as Signal Hill Reserve, and had excellent views of both male and female **Superb Fairy-Wren**, **New Holland Honeyeater** and **Eastern Yellow Robin**.



The weather in Sydney had been good and today was 26°C as we drove to our final location before handing the hire car back. Centennial Park is one of the largest parks in Sydney and has a wetland area, known as Lachlan Swamps. Here we saw **Hardhead**, **White-faced Heron**, **Pacific Black Duck**, **Wood Duck**, **Grey Teal**, **Australian Grebe**, **Black Swan**, **Dusky Moorhen** and **Eurasian Coot**.

Obviously many birds were seen on our travels, but I've mainly listed the birds that I was able to photograph and on the whole I was pretty pleased with the outcome. I had pleasure in showing the digital images and video to those attending the Oct 2009 field meeting at Chew Lake Bird Observatory.

Generally our holiday went according to plan and with ease we saw far more birds than we expected, in fact the birds came to us!!

BIRDING IN SOUTH AFRICA - Part 1

By Jenny Gray

Johannesburg – first African sounds

It is always the new and unfamiliar birdsong that gives that first exciting indication of a whole new biodiversity to be explored when you arrive for a birding trip on a new continent - at last a tangible edge to that long anticipated venture, and our recent trip to South Africa was no exception. Having arrived at Airport Safari Lodge, Johannesburg late the night before, we were greeted with the bustling cacophony of African birdsong at 0500 the following morning, each call ringing out confidently in the cool hours of early morning. The Lodge, whilst conveniently situated within 10 to 15 minutes drive of the airport, unexpectedly, had a delightful rural setting. It supported a good diversity of bird life in quite a modest sized area. There was also a small herd of Springboks in an adjacent field – fittingly, as a symbol of South Africa, the first of many species of ungulates (antelopes to you and me) that we were to see. After the strident tones of a passing squadron of **Hadedda Ibis** had died away, we realised that the grounds were home to a pair of **Blacksmith Plover** and their young. Their urgent metallic clanging pierced the air as they flew back and forth, desperately trying to keep their fearless and reckless chicks out of danger. These sounds were amply augmented by the occasional raucous shout of **Helmeted Guineafowl**, the busy chatter of **Cape Sparrows**, the incessant high-pitched warbling of **Spectacled** and **Greater Masked Weavers**, whilst in the background, was the insistent purring of the **Cape Turtle Dove** - rather like the soft cooing of Collared Dove here at home.

This was a great start to our three weeks in South Africa, a trip organised by Peter Tithecott, and with his wealth of experience and inimitable good humour it promised to be a great trip. Earlier in the year, the group had started out as a whole busload of naturalists; but due to redundancies, accidents, illnesses and so on, the party had shrunk to just four, Peter, Juliet, and myself – and Ruth who arrived on a later flight on our first evening. The trip was neither a field trip nor a scientific expedition: it was unashamedly a birding holiday. And as such I enjoyed every minute of it!

The first morning, while Peter organised the transport, Juliet and I – African novices both – explored the lodge grounds. Our list for the first hour was impressive. We were able to familiarize ourselves with the common South African birds that we would see most days. These included a pair of nesting **Fiscal Shrikes**, a **Black Shouldered Kite** resting, but quietly alert, on a nearby dead tree, **Southern Red Bishop** fussing in the reed-beds, whilst **Common Myna**, **Cape Glossy Starling** and **Cape Sparrow** were noisily jostling for attention, as they would be in any suburban setting. **Laughing Doves** added their evocative cooing to the discordant bazaar. In the distance we could see **African Palm Swifts** slicing through the air, moving higher as the day grew warmer; as well as flyovers of more familiar birds such as **Egyptian Goose**, **Yellow-billed (Intermediate) Egret**, **Grey Heron**, **Glossy Ibis** and **White Stork**. The special bird of the morning though, I felt, was the **Red-throated Wryneck**, a modest looking bird of cryptic markings that is difficult to see amongst the sandy vegetation, but when spotted is a rewarding find with its bright chestnut throat and distinctive jerky action.

Rietvrei – A safari preview

Lunch was a quick bar snack at Rafters 'pub' up the road – where Peter sampled the

exotically named 'Suzy Wong' dish. This turned out to be some sort of Chinese/Indian concoction which came heaped with prawn crackers of such pastel shades that Peter was reluctant to eat them or even be seen with them on his plate. I think he thought it was on a par with being seen drinking Babycham and lemonade complete with cherry on a cocktail stick! (I think Juliet and I had a toasted cheese sandwich, though clearly that was not as memorable.)

African Fish Eagle

Photo: John Wilks



In the afternoon we continued to familiarize ourselves with the local birds at Rietvrei, a conservation park just north of Johannesburg. Here we had our first views of **African Darter** - reminiscent of the Anhinga of North America, **Grey-headed Gull** – the default gull of this area and **Pied Starling** – another bird with a common counterpart in Europe. More exotic species included **Orange-throated Longclaw**, **White-fronted Bee-eater** and **Pin-tailed Whydah**. In the background we were becoming aware of the insistent, liquid call of the **Dark-Capped Bulbul**, which was to be a constant feature throughout the trip. However, the call of Africa is said to be that of the **African Fish Eagle** and we had our first sighting of this huge and majestic bird on this short trip to Rietvrei - as well as good views of the first serious animals - **Burchell's Zebra**, **White Rhino**, **Black-backed Jackal**, and **Blesbok** antelope.

The grasslands around Wakkerstoom - Larks and Pipits, Cranes and Korhans

The following day brought a long drive across to Wakkerstoom some 250km south-west of Johannesburg. This was made more tedious than it need have been by the extensive road works on the main road out from Johannesburg to the west. As we were to find out later on the long drive from St Lucia to Kruger, unlike here in UK or in Europe, where road works necessitating one-way traffic are kept to a matter of a few hundred metres at most, in South Africa a main arterial road can be restricted to one way traffic for up to 15 kilometres at a stretch, resulting in long delays while each stream of traffic waited for its 'turn' in the one way system. This was particularly frustrating for us as clearly the aim was to upgrade several 100km of the same road at the same time, and so after a short stretch of normal two way traffic, we were back to waiting in the convoy again. Presumably, this is the price of the World Cup!

The traffic hold-ups were clearly an established problem because at one set of temporary traffic lights women from the local villages had set up a mobile marketplace. They struck an iconic sight, as they plied their way down the rows of cars and trucks, with their colourful dress and piles of exotic fruit balanced high on their heads.

The last 50km to Wakkerstroom were a complete contrast to the urban grind of the main highway. A gravel road took us through vast empty grasslands; dry, with low vegetation, at this time of year and we began to enjoy the birds again. The waltzing display flight of the male **Long-tailed Widowbird** became a familiar sight, usually seen with up to a dozen females anxiously dashing around it in pursuit. Clearly the display had the desired effect. We also managed to spot **Crested Crane** and **Lesser Flamingo** feeding at isolated waterholes and an unidentified female Korhaan dashed across the road in front of us.

Wakkerstroom itself is a delightful village set in a beautiful valley in Southern Mpumalanga. The church and Court House and several other buildings are historical monuments and the attractive setting has obviously drawn a thriving artistic community to the area as well as retirees from all parts of South Africa. Though consisting of only a couple of short streets, because of its remoteness, Wakkerstroom has all the schools, shops and amenities a small community requires. Situated 1760m above sea level, and surrounded by a major farming area, within its two short streets it has a large police station housing a stock theft unit covering 800 square metres. Unsurprisingly, then, the area has a very low crime rate.

Toad Hall

Photo: Jenny Gray



We stayed with Pat and Isabel in Toad Hall, their beautifully restored Victorian house, whose gardens had featured in 'Garden and Home'. Originally from Glasgow, Pat and Isabel had spent their life in Africa, Pat being in the mining industry, and had retired to Wakkerstroom to run this B & B. Their hospitality, as in all the family run establishments we stayed in, was excellent. Nothing was too much trouble or inconvenient for them. Being birders meant, of course, that our meals, especially

breakfast, were never at 'normal' times. But Pat and Isabel went out of their way to be accommodating and served meals whenever suited us. Pat was a great talker, and in his inimitable Glaswegian brogue, undiminished after a lifetime abroad, he entertained us with stories of their life in Africa.

After arriving at Wakkerstroom, we had a relaxing light lunch on the ranch-like veranda of the Wakkerstroom Country Inn, where we added **Speckled Pigeon**, **Brubru** and **Red-Winged Starling** to our list and then headed out towards a remote dam where Peter was confident we would see some special birds of the area. At our first stop we found a colony of **South African Cliff Swallows** nesting below a low bridge. These are unusual among swallows in that their tails appear quite square in comparison to most species. At the second stop, also a bridge, this time across a small river that cut deeply through a rocky outcrop, we were entertained by the courtship display of a pair of **Diderick Cuckoo**. Both birds were calling as the male flew back and forth across the stream bringing food for the female. Some careful observation also found a pair of **Ground Woodpeckers** on the rocks at the side of the stream. This is a bird endemic to South Africa and is not always easy to see. Meanwhile **Brown-throated Martins**

swooped over the water and **Cape Wagtails** tapped their way across the rocks. Star of the show here though was not a bird, but a **Rock Dassie** – a sort of hamster like animal about the size of a medium family dog – making its way through the undergrowth to the water.

On the way back to Wakkerstroom, although we saw good numbers of birds, amongst them **Greater Striped Swallow**, **Mountain Wheatear**, **African Pipit**, **Cape (Orange-Throated) Longclaw** and **African Stonechat** - a much brighter bird than our Stonechat - it was the bold antics of the **Meercats** that stole the show on these dry grasslands. We also had glimpses of **Yellow Mongoose** from time to time, presumably indicating an abundance of snakes around, though we did not see any. The day finished with a beautiful African sunset over the lakes and marshland of the nature reserve just outside the village where we picked up many wetland species. **Purple Gallinule** and **African Snipe** were caught lurking in the reeds along with **Clawless Otter** whilst several species of heron flew overhead to their roosting grounds. Both **Cape Cormorant** and **White-breasted Cormorant** came in to roost and a **Pied Kingfisher** entertained us repeatedly hovering over the lake and diving for fish. It was an unusual sight as most kingfishers in Africa don't actually fish but live on frogs and invertebrates - a fact that comes as a surprise to many people, including myself.

That night we had what we thought was the thunderstorm to end all thunderstorms or at least to be worthy of a Spielberg film set - the shuttered windows banging and rattling, lights flickering, electricity going off for several hours. The Victorian house in which we were staying was very atmospheric! However, because of Wakkerstroom's position in the hills, these spectacular electric storms are obviously quite common in the summer and we should have had a clue from the candles, emergency flashlights etc that Pat had equipped us with.

The next morning started early and it soon became very hot as the sun burnt off the mist. We spent the day with Lucky, a local bird guide. As with all Birdlife Africa official bird guides, he was very well informed and was well used to taking foreign visitors around the area. He was able to show us **Blue Korhaan** and **Barrow's Korhaan** – both beautiful endemic birds that we probably would not have found without local knowledge. Similarly, as the day went on, Lucky was able to take us to the specific locations of several endemic larks. The rarest of these, **Rudd's Lark**, is currently Red Listed as 'vulnerable' by Birdlife International. This small lark took some searching out but we were eventually entertained with a few minutes of its high display flight from our vehicle at the side of the road, showing well its unusually thin tail. **Botha's Lark**, though not as rare a bird as Rudd's Lark, also took some specialist knowledge to find. We parked the car at the entrance to a vast field of short parched yellow grass and Lucky proceeded to lead us a mile or two into the centre of the field. After some calling and waiting we eventually saw and heard a pair of these smallest of larks. Having seen them we retreated fairly briskly as it was clear that their nest was nearby – but not before Lucky had retied the knots in a few tufts of grass and left a trail of sheep dung to mark the area for future trips!

Other larks we saw that day included **Rufous-naped**, **Spike-Heeled** and **Red-capped Lark** all of which are common birds across sub-Saharan Africa but all were new to me. We also saw **Eastern Long-billed Lark**, another fairly common endemic and a handsome bird it is; and like all the long-billed larks, is larger than the ordinary larks. Whilst searching for these specialities we were entertained by a **Wing-snapping Cisticola** doing just what it says on the tin – rising high into the air and snapping its

wings loudly on the descent. We also saw **Eastern Clapper Lark**, a near endemic, which is right on the eastern edge of its range in this area. Its display differs from that of the Wing-snapping Cisticola in that it claps its wings on the ascent. Cisticolas are notoriously difficult to identify in the field and later, back at the lake, Lucky put us right on a **Levaillant's Cisticola** which we had misidentified as a Monotonous Cisticola the previous day. During the day we also saw many other new birds such as **Sentinel Thrush, Yellow Wattled Plover, Mountain Chat, Ant-Eating Chat** and our first glimpse of the spectacular **Secretary Bird**.

The first part of the day had taken us through the farming community. The local houses here were mainly small mud-walled ron-da'vals, set in a family compound rather like a small-holding. At the time we were passing, primary school children were emerging from their remote homes immaculately dressed in their green and gold school uniforms, complete with green knee length socks with gold bands round the tops. Later in the day we passed the local secondary school, but interestingly the pride in school uniform had slipped a little and despite the remoteness of the location the students here looked and acted like teenagers coming out of school anywhere in the world!

At the end of the day we gave Lucky a lift back to his home which was in the 'township' a mile or two outside Wakkerstroom. This area was a great contrast to the small rural communities where we had spent the day, where the women were seen sweeping their compounds with twig brushes and cheerfully gossiping at the village standpipe. We had exchanged friendly waves and smiles with everyone we saw as we passed by.

However, imagined or otherwise, the township held a threatening air as we drove through to the upper reaches to Lucky's home. It clearly wasn't as overcrowded as the big townships we had seen near Johannesburg and Pretoria, nevertheless, it had the depressing atmosphere of a rundown low rent inner city area; and although many people were walking purposely home from work and others were enjoying an early evening game of football or gossiping with friends, there was an underlying air of dereliction with the stray dogs, piles of rubbish and heaps of breezeblocks by half finished one room houses. It was the only place on the whole trip where we felt an air of menace as we were eyed suspiciously by the residents – and the only place in the whole trip where we felt obliged to lock the car doors as we drove by.

Wetlands of St. Lucia – Crocs and Hippos, Storks and Herons

The trip down to St. Lucia, 300kms away on the coast, was mostly on gravel roads at first across the grasslands of the high plateau and then down to the Zululands of KwaZulu-Natal. Once into KwaZulu-Natal there were many references to the Boer wars on the road signs. We also passed through some lovely small towns and villages, many billowing with beautiful mauve Jacaranda trees.

The St. Lucia wetlands have been a World Heritage site since 1999. Not only is it a valuable biological research area, but mindful of the needs of the local population and its economy, the Wetlands Authority purports to strike a balance between biodiversity protection and ecosystem rehabilitation, on the one hand, with a genuine commitment to social equity and regional economic development on the other. It also recognises that sustainable tourism forms part of this and the authority has facilitated the development of infrastructure and tourist facilities in the area in such a way that it has also created opportunities for local people.

After our long cross-country journey, we arrived in time for a preliminary look at the estuary at Beachside. There were a few surprises here – a statuesque **Woolly-Necked Stork** on the shoreline and several **Pink-Backed Pelicans** lurked in a small lagoon area before treating us to a flying display. A **Caspian Tern**, easily identified by its large size and huge red bill and both **White-fronted** and **Ringed Plover** were added to the list. We also had our first views of **Yellow-billed Kites** – a bird we were to see nearly every day for the rest of the trip.



An inspection of the weaver nests amongst the reeds found a **Southern Brown-throated Weaver** – a bird only found on this particular coast. We also had our first sightings of a small ‘pod’ of **Hippos** and a couple of **Nile Crocodiles** gliding swiftly through the water.

Southern Brown-fronted Weaver
Photo: Jenny Gray

Later in the week we had a closer encounter with Hippos and Crocs on a commercial ‘sunset boat trip’. This is not a trip for the purist birder, who, like Peter, prefer to bird watch without the other tourists milling around and without the harsh drone of the boatman’s commentary. However, I don’t mind being a tourist from time to time, and I found it a relaxing way of adding good views of the usual water birds, but also the massive **Goliath Heron**, a **Great White Heron** and an **African Spoonbill** – similar to ours but with a rather showier bill. Despite the light fading fast we also managed to pick out a pair of **Water Thick-knee** and several **Three-Banded Plover** in the mud at the water’s edge.

St. Lucia is not just good for wetland birds. An early morning walk through a nearby wood brought a host of new species for the trip. The eponymous **Speckled Mousebird** shuffled furtively through the foliage; a **Sombre Greenbul** announced its presence with a distinctive shout followed by a sentence reminiscent of a Cetti’s Warbler; at the tops of the trees groups of **White-eared Barbets** were seen in silhouette and the harsh baying of **Trumpeter Hornbills** (which sound nothing like a trumpet) followed us at treetop level. We also tracked down a **Red-Capped Robin-Chat**, given away by its song in the dense undergrowth. Braving the rain one afternoon, another patch of woodland brought a delightful variety of colourful small birds: **Yellow-bellied Apalis**, **Southern Boubou**, **Collared Sunbird**, **Purple-Banded Sunbird** and **Yellow-bellied Greenbul**. Also the showy plumage of **Livingstone’s Turaco** could be glimpsed from time to time in the thick foliage at the tops of the trees.

We were surprised at the unsettled weather in St. Lucia. In fact, there were several periods of heavy rain, but despite feigned surprise by the local hoteliers and tour operators, I later realised that we were in a ‘wet summer’ region and this was to be expected at this time of year. Although it did not detract from the bird-watching only Ruth braved the stormy weather for a whale-watching trip on a hair-raising boat-ride

through the swell. The rest of us did not miss out though as we managed to spot **Hump-Backed Whales** spouting and breaching on our trip to Cape Vidal. This length of coastline is a beautiful and remote place overlooking the Indian Ocean. The strong offshore winds lifting the spray into a fine mist over the surf gave the place a wild and ethereal sight.



Cape Vidal

Photo: Jenny Gray

High vegetated sand dunes protect the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and reserve along the whole length of the coast. As we drove through to Cape Vidal, we saw **Vahlberg's Eagle**, identified by its distinctive flat head, standing sentinel on a bare tree. Flocks of **Bronze Manikin** bathed in the dust on the unsealed roads and **Red-breasted Swallows** were nesting in an old building. We also saw our first **Vervet Monkeys** of the trip.

The list of birds we saw in the St Lucia area is extensive. The forest and grassland birds included **Square** and **Fork-tailed Drongo**, **Burchell's Coucal** and **Tawny-flanked Prinia**. Other wetland birds included **Yellow Billed Stork**, **White-faced Duck**, **Great White Pelican** and **Striped Kingfisher** as well as **Yellow Weaver**, **Dark-backed Weaver** and **Wire-tailed Swallow**.



Wire-tailed Swallow

Photo: Jenny Gray

Behind the main street with the shops and restaurants St. Lucia has a quite suburban air and small **Red Duiker** forage among the small trees and neatly kept verges. Our guesthouse in St Lucia, personally presided over by the owner June, would have been called a small boutique hotel in this country. It only accommodated about a dozen guests, but nevertheless had two small swimming pools around which the rooms formed a courtyard. It was very well appointed and furnished with beautiful African designs and textures. We were quite reluctant to leave this luxurious existence but greater delights awaited and after four full days we moved inland to Rhino Lodge near the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi and uMkhuze wildlife reserves and ultimately to Kruger National Park – the Jewel in the Crown of South African National Parks. Because of the effective tourist marketing of other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the opening up of new birding areas in Asia and the ever present lure of tropical South America, I am sure the great safari parks of South Africa are in danger of being overlooked. However, there is no doubt that their size and splendour remains undiminished and that they remain a model for wildlife reserves around the world. The story of the second part of our journey will be told in the next edition of the Newsletter.



White Rhino at Rietvrei

Photo: Jenny Gray

F - Stop That – Part 1: Equipment Choice

By Ian Grove

My introductory rant

I take part in two of the most frustrating pastimes ever, birdwatching and fishing. Not only are all the protagonists¹, of both pastimes, sceptics battling on a lek², they also appear to be the luckiest people on the planet. Usually, they have seen it, done it, caught it, weighed it, experienced it and had a life fulfilling experience just the day before on the very spot where, on the day I arrive, is as barren as the hottest sun scorched desert³. Typically, protagonists could not be more disappointed by the lack of a life changing experience on the day that I pitch up, which is usually my one birding or fishing trip of the month; the one that I have been planning for the last six months because the other five were called off due to last minute family commitments or the inclement British weather.⁴

But I have a plan, a plan so cunning that you could pin a tail on it and call it a weasel. A plan I will call *digital photography*. Because, if I ever do turn up on that special day, I will be able to record that special moment forever and show pictures that will wither the hardest of sceptics. The pictures will be of such a quality that the subject photographed will not be misinterpreted as a blurry, out of focus alien space ship with feathers, or scales.

But how do you go about capturing that special moment? What is the best equipment for what purpose? I don't really know if the honest truth is told. But I would like to tell you about some of my equipment frustrations so that if you do decide to take up your own cunning digital photography plan you will have a reference of my experiences.

Willy Wonker's Golden Bar.

Everything that we do in life is a project. Let's take shopping as an example. You have a list of what you need and a budget to buy it with. You could go to your upmarket supermarket and buy the organic version or alternatively you can go to your down market store and buy the value range. There are two main drivers for the choice that you make: 1 – What quality you are willing to tolerate? and 2 – What is your budget?

¹ I use the word protagonist because of the strutting and posturing that goes on in the two sports. If you have ever caught a near record breaking fish it just happens that the person that you next speak to has caught a bigger one. If you have ever seen a lifetime tick bird they are the person who saw two mating whilst feeding young the day before.

² A lek is a gathering of **Black Grouse** (Tetrao Tetrix) males, or certain other animal species, for the purposes of a competitive mating display. Intermittently or continuously, they spar with their neighbours or put on extravagant visual or aural displays.

³ The Hottest Place on Earth ever recorded was El Azizia in Libya where the temperature reached 136 degrees Fahrenheit (57.8 Celsius) on Sept. 13, 1922. Deserts need to have less than 250mm of rain / year, can be either hot or cold and cover almost 33% of the Earth's land surface.

⁴ I think I have reached the age where I am turning into a grumpy old man.

I, along with everyone else on this planet, would like to have endless funds and spare time, but not being Bill Gates⁵ I have to ensure that I get value for money for what quality I am aiming to achieve. We would all like the gold plated solution, but in reality that is usually so specific a requirement it would hinder the wider scope and general use that we usually set ourselves. “Jack of all trades, master of none” your solution might be, but, at least whatever the situation you will end up with something. Unless, of course, you can afford a camera and lens for every special photographic opportunity and have the muscular strength to carry them all.



Spoonbill at Llanelli WWT Mar 09

Photo: Ian Grove

Setting the Aim

As with all projects you have to set your criteria. What is it I am trying to achieve? For me this was a simple statement.

“A photograph that identifies, without doubt, the subject I was trying to capture.”

This sounds simple until you bring in a small, feathered, twitching, nervous, constantly moving subject at extreme range or shrouded in foliage. I ruled out straight away the “of magazine quality” as I have neither the time nor the money to spend on getting those kind of results. Once you have set your aim stick to it. Constantly altering the aim will put you over budget and delay your purchase.

Quality of Shot

Quality is determined by many characteristics, but I will stick with those that are

⁵ On 11 March 2009 Bill Gates was estimated to be worth \$40 billion, which is about the same in pounds these days, and is dedicating his life to charity work including eradicating child poverty and AIDs.

determined by the equipment that you buy and not nature or location:

Film speed

F-Stop

Lenses:

Glass

Focal length

Processor

Pixels

These component characteristics are so inextricably linked that it is hard to talk about one without dragging in one of the others.

Film Speed and F-Stop

For me speed is everything. Try running as fast as you can for 50m and at the end of your run hurl your body through a ring formed by your average sized car tyre, landing with aplomb and unhurt the other side. This is what your average **Paridae** will do each time it enters the nest box. A **Peregrine Falcon** (*Falco Peregrines*) is the fastest animal on the planet attaining speeds of up to 200 mph. Just note through your binoculars how many times a second your average bird moves. Even if not flitting between branches, they are constantly scanning for food or predators and their feathers will ruffle with the slightest of slight breezes. To capture a pristine shot, of absolute clarity requires speed.

There are two basic ways in which to increase the speed of your shutter. Increase the ISO rating⁶ of your film or use a smaller F number lens⁷. Increasing the ISO number is cheap financially on a digital camera; just select a higher film rating; if your equipment allows. The cost comes in picture sharpness and a reduced ability to crop into or magnify your picture. The increase in film speed requires a larger grain⁸ and therefore increased pixilation. To keep the film speed as low as possible, requires more light to hit the film and a subsequent lower F number. The cost here is in the price of the lens. As an example a Nikon 400mm lens at F2.8 will cost roughly six times more than a similar Nikon lens at F4.5; however, the associated reduction in ISO rating leaves you with a clearer sharper picture for the same shutter speed.

Whilst talking about film it is worth noting that talk is cheap but computer memory even

⁶ Film speed is the measure of a photographic film's sensitivity to light, determined by sensitometry and measured on various numerical scales, the most recent being the ISO system. In the ISO arithmetic scale, corresponding to the ASA system, a doubling of the sensitivity of a film requires a doubling of the numerical film speed value. For example, a film rated ISO 200 is twice as sensitive to light as a film rated ISO 100.

⁷ In simple terms, the f-number is the focal length divided by the "effective" aperture diameter. It is a dimensionless number that is a quantitative measure of lens speed. Opening up a lens by one stop allows twice as much light to fall on the film in a given period of time, therefore to have the same exposure at this larger aperture, as at the previous aperture, the shutter speed is set twice as fast (i.e., the shutter is open half as long); the film will usually respond equally to these equal amounts of light, since it has the property known as *reciprocity*.

⁸ In digital camera systems, an arbitrary relationship between exposure and sensor data values can be achieved by setting the signal gain of the sensor. Camera designs provide at least some ISO choices by adjusting the sensor's signal gain in the digital realm. This variation allows different tradeoffs between the range of highlights that can be captured and the amount of noise introduced into the shadow areas of the photo.

cheaper. The ease with which memory devices are now produced has significantly lowered their cost. There are many websites offering low cost digital storage, my personal favourite is sevendayshop.com. On a recent trip I took 265 digital photographs, on a single card at 12 megapixel resolution; I would never have contemplated using 8 rolls of wet film due to cost and size. Memory cards are reusable, cheap and several can be carried easily, pretty much giving unlimited shots at almost zero cost.

Weeding out good digital shots from bad is not overly time consuming, with practice and ruthlessness, and even if you only achieve a 10% rate of good "keepable" shots you will be left with plenty to choose from. It is more likely that nothing exciting to capture will happen, rather than not having an ability to capture it in some way. So keep that shutter pressed and on a multiple shot setting when any opportunity arises.

Capturing the moment is the first requisite. Once you have several shots in the bag then play with zoom, ISO and other manual camera settings. The digital darkroom allows great experimentation and most programs are fairly easy to operate and very intuitive, even for the most modest IT user.

Lenses

The glass used in a lens has a dramatic effect. Extra low dispersion glass can remove the effects of chromatic aberration⁹ and ensure a brighter coloured and better defined picture. A Nikon or Canon lens will, in my experience, provide rapid focus without hunting, less chromatic aberration and crisper pictures than a similar TAMRON or SIGMA lens, but you will pay twice as much for a Nikon lens as a comparable TAMRON.

The Focal length or zoom rating affects the image. It is pretty much guaranteed that you will be using a large focal length, 400mm or above. At this length hand holding the lens becomes awkward, not only due to the sheer size of the lens but also any small movements are subsequently magnified and cause blur in the image. The effects can be reduced by increasing the shutter speed or the stability of the lens. I have already discussed the costs incurred trying to increase shutter speed. Increasing the stability can reduce the freedom of manoeuvre. The use of a tripod and remote shutter release mechanism can inhibit your ability to swing a camera around to keep the lens focussed on a rapidly moving bird. The introduction of vibration reduction lenses has improved the ability to hand hold larger lenses but again at a cost in sterling.

Image Sensors and Megapixels

"Spatial wafer processing variations, particulate defects and amplifier variations create nonuniformities"¹⁰

⁹ In optics, chromatic aberration is the failure of a lens to focus all colours to the same point. It occurs because lenses have a different refractive index for different wavelengths of light (the dispersion of the lens). The term "purple fringing" is commonly used in photography, although not all purple fringing can be attributed to chromatic aberration.

¹⁰ CCD vs. CMOS: Facts and Fiction by Dave Litwiller

One of the more interesting reads is “CCD v CMOS: Facts and fiction”, but what do we really want to know? Probably not a lot more than can be shaped by good marketing, something that appeals to your own individual eye and consumer reviews from the web. But here are a few snippets anyway.

There are basically two types of image sensor that can be fitted in a camera, Complementary Metal Oxide Semiconductor (CMOS) or Charge-Coupled Device (CCD); there is a new sensor on the market called a Foveon sensor but its use is currently limited. Both mainstream sensors have comparable quality and cost but depending on what blurb you read CMOS seems to have a slight edge on CCD when it comes to battery life.

If I were to randomly pick several popular makes of camera you will see what I mean.

Type	Make	Model	Pixels(Mega)	Sensor Size (mm)	Sensor Type
Compact	Nikon	Coolpix L19	8	5.75 x 4.31	CCD
Compact	Canon	Powershot A480	10	6.16 x 4.62	CCD
Compact	Sony	DSC-S780	8.1	5.75 x 4.31	CCD
DSLR	Nikon	D90	12.3	23.6 x 15.8	CMOS
DSLR	Canon	EOS450D	12.2	22.2 x 14.8	CMOS
DSLR	Sony	Alpha-A350	14.2	23.6 x 15.8	CCD

Not everything in life is better the larger it gets. Increasing the megapixels can actually introduce noise into your pictures and once again quality of product will help image quality. Noise levels can be reduced by increasing the size of the sensor and here DSLR cameras have a distinct advantage over the compact cameras that are associated with digiscoping. The smaller the pixel the more noise that it generates, from the table the sensor sizes of the compact cameras work out at around 32 megapixels/cm², whereas the DSLRs are around 3 megapixels/cm², therefore, DSLR camera image sensors inherently produce much less noise in the production of the picture and quality is instantly improved.

Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) or Digiscoping?

Digiscoping is the act of attaching a digital camera to a telescope. There are various means to achieve this but buying a commercial off the shelf kit is about the easiest method there is; and there are some very good kits out there that can be manipulated quite easily to make it meet your bespoke needs. The pro and con of digiscoping is the huge magnification that you are using. Whilst you have the ability to capture pictures of birds at a very extreme range it is very hard to get any sort of shutter speed due to the small lens aperture on a compact, it requires absolute stillness of camera and lens when pressing the shutter and it is often slow and awkward to find the subject in the viewfinder. The choice of telescope and eyepiece can also dramatically affect the picture quality and extra low dispersion glass is an absolute must at this extreme magnification to prevent chromatic aberration.

DSLR photography is flexible, adaptable, quick and light. There is also the higher likelihood of subject capture, on a fast moving subject. The choice of cameras, pixels and associated lenses in the market place is quite extraordinary and ever changing. Even with relatively modest kit and a little practice you will soon be capturing what can be the most stunning pictures of elusive small birds.

I have tried both DSLR and digiscoping and each has its place in the arsenal of wildlife photography. I have also been known to carry both sets of equipment and binoculars to cover every occasion and ended up looking a bit like a Sherpa on an Everest trek; adventurous birdwatching? Digiscoping, I have found, is good for photographing wader type birds at range on an estuary or marsh. Waders tend to be slower moving which gives you the time and opportunity to find them visually, focus and take a picture before they leave the view finder. DSLR photography, in my limited experience, is more suited to capturing smaller, up close and agile birds.

But what about attaching your DSLR to your telescope? This can now be done using bespoke T-mount devices. These trick the camera into thinking that they have a lens attached. However do not think that you have suddenly achieved the best of both worlds. Auto focus usually becomes inhibited and trying to ensure that a crisp image is achieved through your DSLR view finder or screen becomes very hit and miss at a large magnification with no depth of field.

So What Do You Do?

Have a specific aim when you are deciding what to buy, yours will probably be different from mine. Stick with that aim and do not push that aim too high, unless you can afford it. There are a myriad of factors that will affect your choice on what to buy and the picture quality that you will achieve; and these do not include available light, distance, size, speed and elusiveness of object which cannot be controlled. DSLR and digiscoping have their own specific niches but DSLR has definitely provided greater flexibility for me, however, it has come at a greater cost in sterling.

Buy the best that you can afford, even if it means delaying the timing of your purchase; but like buying a computer there is something new on the market every day and sooner or later you will have to dip your toe in and live with the results of your purchase. Better quality materials will last longer and also prove to be less frustrating and the return in both pleasure and photographic quality will be worthwhile; £2000 on an item that will last 10 years comes out at around £4 a week, so buy yourself two less beers and have a wallet full of memories and corroborated stories to tell.

Have I attained my aim? Have a look at a couple more of my own amateur pictures and decide.

Are you able to determine the bird species?



Little Grebes at the nest – Nosterfield Aug 09

Photo: Ian Grove



Sedge Warbler - Nosterfield Aug 09

Photo: Ian Grove

Yes? Then I have achieved my aim.

'BIRDS – SCIENCE AND PUZZLES,

OR, ARE YOU CERTAIN?

(Byways of bird identification and how to avoid getting lost ¹)

Before you can identify a bird, you have to know what it is. That sounds straightforward¹, but if you go back one step, you run into the broader question: how do you know what it is? OK, the book describes it and may make reference to a species or subspecies, but how did the authors know? Without treading on every step on the way down, let's go back to the beginning.

What is a bird? Something that flies? So do many insects and bats, but some birds don't fly either. A creature with feathers? That's a better approximation, but there have been quite a number of feathered fossils, not all of which were ancestors of the birds. The point is that there is no simple definition that fits, yet we can be pretty confident that we can identify present-day birds as such. I won't go into technical detail here, but the best full definition of a bird is rather technical and lengthy and involves mentioning numerous taxonomic groupings well above anything that most people run into, but please retain the comforting concept that such a definition exists. Now, take on board that no biological organism can actually be defined so accurately that every specialist can agree the definition. Why? No human language has wide enough limits to cope – whole books have been written on species concepts in the hope that lasting definitions of species can be found. Let's try a few examples of clear statements that fail.

1. Species are fixed in time. Darwin shot that one down in flames with such precision that evolutionary biologists continue to be amazed at the sheer quality of his insight; modern technology has failed to find any counter-argument that proves him wrong on any aspect that was being debated at that time (Darwin was long before the discovery of genes, but even in that field his general principles hold true for almost everything studied).
2. A species cannot interbreed with any other. In that case, the 30-odd duck species that can interbreed with Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* should therefore be called Mallard, as should several goose species!
3. Only subspecies that don't interbreed can be called subspecies. The *feldegg* subspecies of Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* passes this test on its northern and western distribution (range expansion) but fails on its eastern and southern limits, but in one case a subspecies borders *feldegg* in both interbreeding and non-interbreeding areas!
4. Hybrid zones, where there are populations showing the characteristics of neighbouring taxa², should indicate that lumping is preferred to splitting. Generally, hybrid zones are either stable (no change in size with time, although the location may change; splitting is therefore tenable) or unstable (size does change with time, but the final outcome may be unclear; some gull populations are in this state and so although lumping is the better bet, with which neighbour should you lump?).

¹ Yes, I do remember Basil's *sotto voce* epithetical definition of Sybil Fawlt's specialist subject on Mastermind, "The bleeding obvious!"

² Taxa, plural of taxon, a useful catch-all word meaning any group or rank in a biological classification into which related organisms are classified.

I'd like you to consider accepting the basic principle that whatever the state of knowledge that has been reached by the finest of researchers, it can be called accurate, but not precise. Precision is improved by each scientific advance, but for reasons analogous to those outlined above, it cannot be perfected in biological terms; evolutionary change occurs, and so in time, any extant description will require revision³. In practice, the terms subspecies and species are usually very useful ways of describing bird taxa, but because evolutionary change within the scale of a human lifetime, the need to count for change can be ignored in most cases. Or can it? Until recently, the concept of evolutionary change brought with it several assumptions that seemed unchallengeable, but on being tested, failed. The first assumption was that in only exceptional cases was evolution observable (eg for Darwin's finches on the Galápagos), but many examples across the biological spectrum are now known, the most obvious being such as influenza viruses. The second assumption was that evolutionary change, driven by ecological pressures, produced new species that differed recognizably (in the case of larger organisms⁴). This assumption has been shown to be false at times, through a variety of techniques, but mainly through the 'bar-coding' DNA techniques⁵; eg DNA differences between two bird taxa don't always correspond to plumage and morphology differences in breeding distributions (still rare, but now such anomalies are sought). Also, two apparently identical bird species can breed in the same area but not interbreed. Researchers looking into such cryptic species have in some cases identified some differences in song, behaviour, migration strategy and habitat selection, but not all these criteria appear to apply in each case.

Now, having got used to the idea that a useful degree of precision can best be achieved by using concepts that are 'fuzzy', let's have a look at some of the recently-published papers in ornithology and their effect on our understanding of how bird taxa are related to one another. I'll cite the paper and then summarise the findings and their likely effect.

1. **Irwin, DE, AS Rubtsov and EN Panov. 2009.** Mitochondrial introgression⁶ and replacement between Yellowhammers (*Emberiza citrinella*) and Pine Buntings (*Emberiza leucocephalos*) (Aves: Passeriformes). *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society*. **98**: 422–438.

In studies of distributions of species across large areas (phylogeography) and in taxonomic research, much emphasis is placed on the study of the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) of the organisms concerned. The transfer between generations of mtDNA is via the female line. Nowadays, prudent researchers employ more than a single DNA technique in studies to enable them to pinpoint anomalies that will warrant subsequent explanation. In this study, Yellowhammers and Pine Buntings differ strongly in appearance and song, yet they are known to hybridise in places. Their nuclear DNA also differs considerably, which further adds to the paradox of hybridisation actually being possible. However, the mtDNA of the two species not only differs by much less, it differs by so little that it could have arisen only during or just after the last ice age! What's going on? The paper shows that the nuclear DNA indicates an ancient separation of the ancestors of the two species, but that at the time of the mtDNA differentiation, it is likely that a mutation that occurred in an individual had been so strongly selective that it spread rapidly throughout the population of one species, the by-product being that its mtDNA was dominant over the other species' mtDNA to such an extent that it replaced it through hybrid

³ You may therefore conclude that 'Can I tick it now?' can be classed as a question without a meaningful answer, if philosophy is your bag.

⁴ I categorically refuse to be drawn into the world of micro-moths, but evolutionary biologists might have predicted that the complications of identifying such creatures (differing only in the construction of their genitalia, a condition observable only by the use of powerful microscopes) might just have parallels in the Big World.

⁵ Go back a few issues of *RAFOS Newsletter*!

⁶ Introgression is the back-crossing of hybrids of two populations with the result that new or unusually modified genes are introduced into both populations. The domestic chicken arose thus from the wild Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* that once roamed from Iran to South-east Asia. The wild population is disappearing fast because there is a profitable trade in re-invigorating the fertility of domestic stock across the world. Rule of thumb: if it can climb in flight, it's wild, if it can't, make chicken soup of it.

generations back-crossing with the core population⁷. The data from the other DNA techniques used in this research are consistent with the ancient separation, the lines from both species being present in the hybrid zone, which comprises a considerable area in the Russian Federation just north of easternmost Kazakhstan⁸. The genetic explanation in the paper is of a very rare event, but it is unlikely to be unique⁹.

2. A. **Alström, P, PGP Ericson, U Olsson and P Sundberg. 2006.** Phylogeny¹⁰ and classification of the avian superfamily Sylvioidea. *Molecular Phylogeny & Evolution* **38**: 381–397.

B. **Fregin, S, M Haase, U Olsson and P Alström. 2009.** Multi-locus phylogeny of the family Acrocephalidae (Aves: Passeriformes) – The traditional taxonomy overthrown. *Mol. Phyl. & Evol.* **52**: 866-878.

In almost every field guide of the last ten years, the coverage of the ‘Old World Warblers’ was comfortingly grouped together, technically under the family name of Sylviidae. Most birders have heard of Per Alström and his many surveys of remote parts of China for warblers, specifically *Phylloscopus* warblers; indeed, there is now, somewhat to his embarrassment, a warbler named after him, Alström’s Warbler *Seicercus soror*¹¹. I suppose most envisage him as an ageless wanderer who returns from remote areas on rare occasions¹², but he has been largely responsible for much original research. The first of these two papers shows that the relationships between the original genera in the traditional Sylviidae are largely non-existent. The second refines the relationships. The broad taxonomic instincts of the ornithologists around the turn of the 19th century turn out to have been sound; the Phylloscopidae (leaf warblers) stand separate from the Acrocephalidae (reed warblers), but the *Locustella* warblers (such as Grasshopper Warbler) are absorbed into the Megaluridae, whereas the family of Sylviidae is much diminished in size¹³. Amongst the reed warblers, the genus *Iduna* for the smaller *Hippolais* warblers not only is upheld but increased by the addition of Thick-billed Warbler, now *I. aedon*. *Seicercus* warblers remain in Phylloscopidae, *Hippolais* and *Iduna* remain in Acrocephalidae, but the positions of these families in the overall taxonomic sequence have changed¹⁴. All these changes are in accordance with the underlying principle of the taxonomic sequence of the world’s bird species – related families are placed close together, according to determined age and oldest families come first. However, note that the first paper here deals with the position of many other families than just the Old World Warblers.

3. **Inger, R and S Bearhop. 2008.** Applications of stable isotope analyses to avian ecology. *Ibis* **150**: 447-461

⁷ Another possibility is that when the two separated species’ populations met once more around the last glaciation, a selective sweep had occurred. This is the reduction or elimination of variation among the nucleotides in adjacent parts of the DNA from a mutation as the result of recent and strong positive natural selection. This can occur when the new mutation increases the fitness of the carrier (the individual bird) relative to other members of the population. Natural selection favours individuals that have a higher fitness (but it has to survive long enough to pass on its genes) and with time the newly mutated variant (allele) would increase in frequency relative to other alleles. As its prevalence increases, neutral and nearly neutral genetic variation linked to the new mutation will also become more prevalent, the jargon term being “genetic hitch-hiking”. A strong selective sweep results in a region of the genome where the positively selected haplotype (the mutated allele and its neighbours) is essentially the only one that exists in the population, resulting in a large reduction of the total genetic variation in that chromosome region.

⁸ This paper also provides an explanation as to why Clive Byers in his research in numerous European museums for the book on buntings (Byers, C, U. Olsson and J Curson. 1995. *Buntings and Sparrows*. Pica. Robertsbridge, Sussex. UK) found so many intermediate-plumaged birds in the collection drawers.

⁹ As Terry Pratchett reminds us, ‘Million-to-one events happen all the time’.

¹⁰ Phylogeny comes from Phylum, a taxonomic rank, which in our case is Aves (birds) and hence phylogeny is the evolutionary development of a species or of a taxonomic group of organisms.

¹¹ One of the English names sub-committees of the International Ornithological Congress found this name too prosaic and has replaced it with the romantic-sounding ‘Plain-tailed Warbler’. You may demur.

¹² Actually, Per Alström at present is professor and head of the Department of Vertebrate Zoology and Molecular Systematics Laboratory, Swedish Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 50007, SE-104 05 Stockholm, and of the Department of Systematic Zoology, Evolutionary Biology Centre, Uppsala University, Norbyvägen 18 D, SE-752 36 Uppsala, both in Sweden. He also has several other hats, including heading international ornithological groups and advising the Swedish Rarities Committee.

¹³ I doubt it will come as a surprise that a little bird told me that the examination of the large family of babblers (Timaliidae) at present being undertaken may well transfer quite a few species into the new Sylviidae.

¹⁴ For details, see the downloadable Excel tables at www.worldbirdnames.org.

I can sense your instant excitement at the mention of this subject, and if that's the case, you're not wrong! Geologists and geographers have developed mineral and soil identification techniques based on the ratios of the presence of certain light element stable isotopes. Some elements have two such isotopes (one isotope will have more neutrons in the atomic nucleus than the other), but their most important characteristic is that, unlike unstable isotopes, they do not decay by emitting radioactivity. The lighter isotope is generally present in excess of the heavier by around 20 times, but this ratio varies with location. Consequently, if the stable isotopes of several elements are present and their ratios measured, the combination of these ratios is often referable to a location on the earth's surface. In a sample, the more elements whose stable isotope ratios are measured, the greater the accuracy of pinpointing the location. However, the technique has to be used and interpreted with care, because, for example, floods can move soils a long distance.



Aquatic Warbler in hand
*Photo by Zeichner S Seyfer
from an entry in wikipedia*

Ecologists were among the first to apply this technique in the late 1980s to determine plant distributions from the isotope ratios in their specimens. Although there are still many gaps, quite a lot of the earth's surface has now been mapped this way. Inger and Bearhop have summarised in their paper the application of this technique in ornithology. Although the isotope ratios in the blood and internal organs of birds can be measured, all it tells researchers is where the bird has been in the past several days, because the isotopes are not retained for long in the body. However, isotopes consumed by the bird, either in food or on material ingested with food are also taken up by the claws and feathers, and here are trapped by keratinisation.

Consequently, feathers grown by a migrant in its winter quarters can be analysed to determine the isotope ratios present during the entire feather growth period.

We have known of the main breeding grounds of Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* (mostly in Belarus) for less than 15 years, but until 2008, we had no idea where the wintering grounds were, except that migrants trapped en route were heading for somewhere in West Africa south of the Sahara. Stable isotope ratio analysis of feathers taken from birds arriving at their breeding grounds produced a pattern of ratios known from only one location, a 25km² area in the Djoudj National Park in the Senegal Delta. That autumn, ornithologists went to this remote region and found wintering Aquatic Warblers at a minimum density of 100 birds per square kilometre. This technique also has the potential to tell us where birds spend time resting and feeding en route, thus providing vital conservation data for the protection of stopover sites, many of which are as yet unknown.

If we look at developments in understanding migration, some interesting papers have appeared recently.

4. A. **Thorup, K, Teske Ortvad and J Rabøl. 2006.** Do Nearctic Northern Wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) migrate nonstop to Africa? *The Condor* **108**:446–451.
- B. **Gschweng, M, EKV Kalko, U Querner, W Fiedler and P Berthold. 2008.** All across Africa: highly individual migration routes of Eleonora's Falcon. *Proc. R. Soc. B.* doi:10.1098/rspb.2008.0575. Downloaded 16 Dec 08.
- C. **Anderson, RC. 2009.** Do dragonflies migrate across the western Indian Ocean? *J. Trop. Ecol.* **25**: 347-358



Northern Wheatear

Photo: Dickie Duckett

The first paper shows that what we in UK call the Greenland Wheatear migrates nonstop across the Atlantic to a landfall in West Africa, often the first landfall for tired migrants being the Salvage Islands or the Canaries. Any occurrence of numbers on the western seaboard from UK to Portugal is due to wind drift that year, and nearly all such records are much later than the arrival dates on the Atlantic Islands, suggesting these are late departures. This conclusion is reached from consideration of departure and arrival timings for a 4100km Great Circle route (to Selvagem Grande, the nearest landfall) and by relating wing lengths and weights of the birds at both ends of the crossing. Previous conclusions that the bulk of Greenland Wheatears pass through the European western seaboard undetected now seem unwarranted¹⁵.

The second paper offers the solution of a long-standing mystery. Why are there so few records of Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora* on migration between its breeding area (much of the Mediterranean cliff coasts and the NW African Atlantic coast) and its winter quarters (Madagascar)? The migration routes of its congener, Sooty Falcon *F. concolor*

¹⁵ Of course, the Alaskan population of Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (strangely, the same subspecies as UK birds, *oenanthe*) migrates from its breeding grounds via China, Southeast Asia and India to eastern and southern Africa, the longest known migration of any landbird. This population is very long-winged.

(Red Sea and Persian Gulf to Madagascar & the African mainland opposite) are fairly well known. The presumption was that the Eleonora's Falcon moved at night along the sea coasts, westwards through the Mediterranean and then crossing land at the shortest point (Suez). The advent of tiny digital radio-tracking devices that transmit a code at intervals (say every 12 hours) meant that the routes of quite small birds could be plotted by satellites¹⁶. It turns out that even juvenile Eleonora's Falcons head more or less directly for Madagascar from the area in which they hatched, across the Sahara.



Globe Skimmer or Wandering Glider, *Pantala flavescens*
Photo by John C Abbot
from an entry in Wikipedia

The third paper in this group is altogether the most enchanting, for it offers an explanation to yet another long-standing riddle. Why do certain species of dragonflies occur annually in great numbers on migration in Ethiopia and southern Arabia to India, but have rarely been recorded travelling the opposite way except on very few occasions, and not in vast numbers? Charles Anderson is very much an amateur naturalist in the traditional sense; he does it in his spare time, but his job took him to the Indian Ocean islands of the Maldives. He noted the interesting phenomenon that each year in October the islands would be invaded by dragonflies, but there was no suitable breeding habitat for them, and so he began to investigate. He discovered that, "In the Maldives the south-west (or boreal summer) monsoon blows from about May to October, while the north-east (or boreal winter) monsoon lasts from about December to March. The Inter-tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) marks the boundary between these two wind systems. The ITCZ migrates north and south seasonally, following the sun, passing over the Maldives heading southwards during the November inter-monsoon and northwards during the April inter-monsoon". The ITCZ is part of the weather engine that controls the monsoon, but also creates a south-westerly movement of the air-mass above the Maldives at about 1000 - 2000m asl. However, surface winds often are in exactly the opposite direction. The upper air mass, essentially a low-level jetstream, flows towards the Seychelles and the eastern African coast. The principal dragonfly species is globe skimmer (also called wandering glider) *Pantala flavescens*. The strength, persistence and duration of the upper winds are such that dragonflies (and other insects) could make the journey across the open ocean in just a few days, but their initial arrival in the Seychelles coincides with the movement of the ITCZ, which itself takes about a month. Millions of dragonflies in many separate influxes

¹⁶ A kind of TomTom satnav in reverse. I expect you've noted that TomTom is an anagram of motmot, a Neotropical nonpasserine bird in the Momotidae family; there are 10 species.

congregate in the Maldives for only a day or two each time over a period of a few weeks, always in conjunction with the ITCZ movement.

Dragonflies undertaking this journey arrive in eastern Africa just in time for the rains, and so they can get on with breeding. Interestingly, the next generation moves north to Ethiopia, where it in turn breeds; that generation moves across Arabia to India, just in time for the monsoon two years after the first generation had departed India. However, there are annual arrivals in the Maldives in May, but on a very much smaller scale, suggesting that some dragonflies that hatched in Africa do return directly to India by utilising the weaker ITCZ-induced north-easterly flow across the Indian Ocean. Interesting though all the trans-oceanic dragonfly sagas may be, what is much more relevant to you, dear reader, is that this hypothesis offers the first circumstantial evidence that some bird species from India and points east spend (northern hemisphere) winter in eastern and southern Africa by surviving the long journey far from land through feeding on the dragonfly swarms en route. It has long been conjectured that Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* flies directly from the Indian sub-continent to Africa¹⁷, because there are so few autumn records in Arabia and the Horn of Africa. There are ample spring records, though. Naturally, Charles Anderson logged the bird species that appeared in the Maldives when the dragonflies arrived; in addition to Amur Falcon, his list includes these species that tend to 'appear' at their 'winter' destination: Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, Lesser Kestrel *F. naumanni*, Pied Cuckoo *Oxylophus jacobinus* ssp *serratus*, Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*, Common Cuckoo *Cu. canorus*, European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, European Roller *Coracias garrulus* and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*. All these species have been documented as feeding on *Pantala flavescens*¹⁸.

My last excursion into ornithological research concerns the large grey shrikes; a paper being published as I write and an appendix in a book published about the time you read this:

5. A. **Olsson, U, P Alström, L Svensson, M Aliabadian and P Sundberg. 2009.** The *Lanius excubitor* (Aves, Passeriformes) conundrum—Taxonomic dilemma when molecular and non-molecular¹⁹ data tell different stories. *Mol. Phyl. & Evol.* (In press).
- B. **Bannikova, A. 2010.** On the molecular phylogeny in the genus *Lanius*. Appendix 2 In: Panov, EN. *True Shrikes - Laniidae of the World. Ecology, Behavior, Evolution.* Pensoft. Moscow, Russia.

These two molecular analyses of the large grey shrike complex were carried out independently and come to a remarkable degree of concurrence. Suffice it to say that subtleties and complexities of relationships between the various geographical groups are teased out, but the conclusions differ in many ways from traditional classification. Because of this, any formal revision of taxonomy is being withheld until a number of issues are clarified. These include re-evaluation of museum specimens against an agreed list of criteria, because some of the sampled specimens originally were wrongly identified as to subspecies and others had been identified by applying only one criterion (from modern knowledge of morphology and plumage, this is inadequate). Many populations and vast areas of breeding distribution are poorly known – it's necessary to sample these populations to test the conclusions of the above research.

¹⁷ The entire population of Amur Falcon migrates from the Russian Far East to Africa.

¹⁸ There is circumstantial evidence that *Pantala flavescens* feeds en route on micro-insects (whose arrival on Aldabra, for example, coincides with that of *P. flavescens*), but it is also known to feed on smaller dragonflies, of which several species accompany *P. flavescens* on its Indian Ocean crossing.

¹⁹ Molecular studies = DNA & related work, non-molecular studies = eg behavioural, vocal, morphological (structure & shape) & plumage research.



House Martins at the Nest

Very briefly, the results indicate possible classification and approximate breeding distributions²⁰ thus²¹, unofficial English names in single parentheses:

²⁰ Do get in touch if you want more detail: blair@dialstart.net

²¹ Before you applaud the increased clarity of the status of large grey shrikes, note well this point: the relationships between these groups are extraordinarily complex, such that no concept of species (there are several dozen) can provide any definition of species or subspecies that would fit most of these taxa. Some show two or more

1. Great Grey Shrike *L. excubitor* (includes *homeyeri* & *leucopterus*) France to about 120°E.
2. Northern Shrike *L. borealis sibiricus* (provisionally includes Central Asian *mollis* & *funereus*, whose range lies athwart that of eastern *pallidirostris* populations, & Sakhalin & Kuriles *bianchii*) 120°E to the Bering Strait, *L.b. borealis* Alaska & Canada.
3. Southern Grey Shrike ('Iberian Shrike') *L. meridionalis* Iberia & S France only, but closely related to *L. borealis*.
4. Loggerhead Shrike *L. ludovicianus* south of *L.b. borealis*.
5. 'Sahara Grey Shrike' *L. elegans* (includes *leucopygos*, *algeriensis* & *koenigi*) Sahara E to W Egypt & Sudan; *jebelmarrae* and *theresae* not sampled.
6. 'Arabian Grey Shrike' *L. aucheri* (includes *buryi*) Egypt, E Sudan, Arabia, SW Iran.
7. 'Desert Grey Shrike' ('Saxaul²² Grey Shrike') *L. lahtora* (includes *pallidirostris*) Indian subcontinent NW to Iran, S Kazakhstan, E in narrowish band through deserts of Central Asia to China. Note that name 'Steppe Grey Shrike' inappropriate for habitat occupied (saxaul desert), & that *lahtora* described 20 years before *pallidirostris*.
8. Socotra Grey Shrike *L. uncinatus* Socotra Island. Note although DNA very different from that of *aucheri*, no consistently discernible plumage differences – a cryptic species.
9. Chinese Grey Shrike *L. sphenocercus* eastern China (previously included the next taxon).
10. 'Giant Grey Shrike' *L. giganteus* central China (now split from Chinese Grey Shrike).

Oh, the halcyon days when field guides confidently provided authoritative lists of species and subspecies! However, publishers of bird books will continue to do so, mostly because the people running the firm know nothing about biology!²³ The greatest difficulties face the compilers of the major avifaunal lists, because there is no common agreed solution for inclusion of something that 'isn't quite' a subspecies. The team I have worked with since 2003 on the OSME²⁴ List of bird taxa includes such waifs by placing the species name in brackets, thus *Lanius (meridionalis) lahtora* while explaining that we are portraying something of uncertain status (*ie* 'don't know'). In Dec 2009, the latest downloadable version (v6.4) of the Clements world list has a column in which the word 'group' appears where 'species' or 'subspecies' is not appropriate. Perhaps you should start saving up for a pocket DNA analyser that will decode a feather!

genetic lineages suggestive of many cases of populations isolated by glaciations for thousands of years still retaining the capability of interbreeding when contact is regained. The large white-headed gulls and the yellow-wagtail complexes (both *flava* & *citreola*) are now considered to be similarly undefinable; the Little Owl *Athene noctua* complex may also be a case in point.

²² Saxaul is a plant genus (*Haloxylon*) characteristic of Central Asian arid and semi-arid deserts, vital for holding the soil together and as part of an ecological zone essential for desert life. It is disappearing at a very high rate due to its use as fuel for the growing human populations, many of which are fleeing conflict or areas where all the saxaul has disappeared. Yet another human tragedy in the making?

²³ I expect some of you may be ahead of me here – yes, the circumstances described above are not too different or distant from the situation in plant biology, where gardeners and researchers alike are all too aware of the widespread tendency of varieties to form that cannot be defined as species or subspecies. It's one of these 'why didn't I think of that before?' moments, for there is no biological imperative that says that processes are confined to any particular biological Order.

²⁴ I expect most of you know this acronym, which sensibly has remained unchanged when the geographical area covered expanded, so that OSME now stands for 'The Ornithological Society of the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia'; can't see 'OSMECCA' becoming instantly popular.

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Red Kite

Photo by Brian Grove

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