



Newsletter No 90 Autumn 2010



Bennett's Woodpecker – Botswana April 2010
Photo: Dick Yates



LONG-EARED OWL (*ASIO OTUS*)
THE APETLONER BADEPLATZ, AUSTRIA 25 MAY 2010
Photo by Pete Evans

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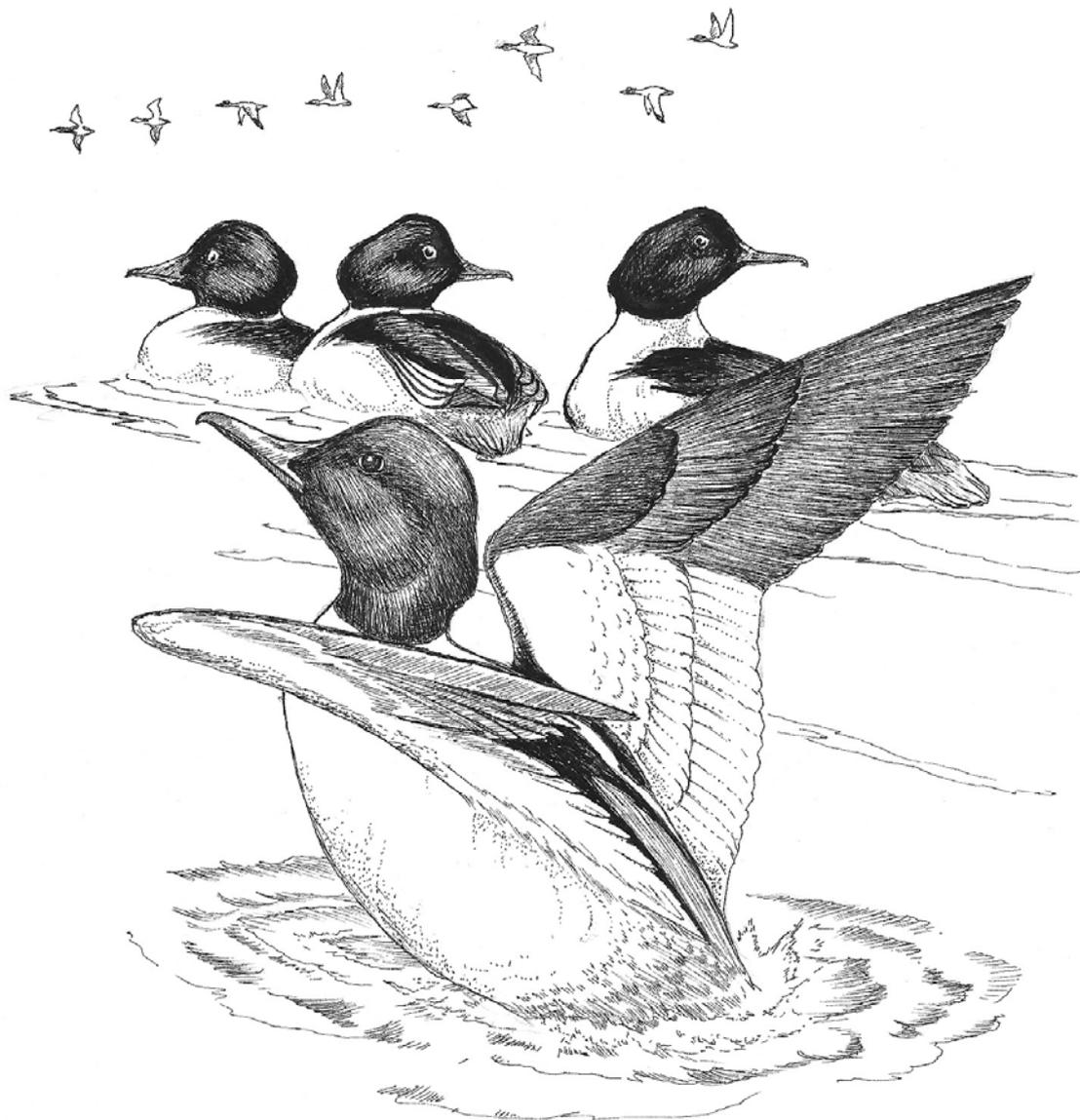
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Goosanders in Winter by Robbie Robinson

Unless otherwise stated, all illustrations in the Newsletter are by Robbie Robinson

CHAIRMAN'S EXECUTIVE EDITORIAL

The word 'austerity' is now being widely used, especially in the Public Sector, and usually it means bad news or, at the very least, a very radical change in how things will occur in the future. Nothing appears to be off limits.

Last year the Serving members of the Committee (now down to only 3 individuals) found that public funding for travel to meetings had been withdrawn, which is a real issue if you are serving overseas, and largely because of this, I stated at the 2009 AGM that I would reduce the number of Committee Meetings. We now have just 2 meetings a year; one in the Spring and one in the Autumn. This is far from ideal and it makes doing our usual business a little difficult. To help, I devised an electronic method of working to enable us to make decisions in an open and democratic manner in between meetings. This system places a great burden on the Secretary in particular, because it requires a lot of control and personal discipline and, whilst it is working (as I write this we are into our seventh electronic debate), there are still teething troubles that can only be properly ironed out in a face-to-face meeting of the Committee. Moreover, it is now apparent to us all that this system cannot fully replace the need for physical meetings because some issues require a lot of debate and human interaction.

Our latest challenge is the fact that the Service will no longer print our publications (the Newsletter and Journal) free of charge; more austerity. This means we face an additional annual expenditure of around £1000 just for the Newsletter production. Whilst we have provision for this in the approved Financial Plan for 2010 this level of expenditure, even with the increase subscriptions from 2011, is unsustainable if we are to continue to provide reasonable levels of financial support to our expeditions. Thus the Committee need to come up with a cunning plan (there are numerous options, all of which require detailed consideration), which will inevitably involve some cloth cutting, unless we are lucky and can find a commercial sponsor to fund our publications. Of course none of this is helped by the fact that I deploy to Afghanistan at the end of August for 9 months. On my return, sometime in June 2011, my family and I will face the joy of yet another move prior to taking up a new appointment; hopefully this time in the UK. This means that I will not effectively get my feet back under the Chairman's table until August/September next year. Gp Capt (Retd) Jerry Knights, the FALO, has kindly offered to replace me during this extended period, but it is unreasonable for

anyone to expect him to cover the full range of my function and his own relatively busy Committee role, as well as tackle how we are going to continue to produce publications in the future.

Therefore, I have decided to cancel this year's AGM in order to permit the Committee to concentrate on finding solutions to our future publication dilemma at its Autumn meeting and on refining our electronic decision making procedures. We have also decided to delay the production of the RAFOS Journal until 2011 (to avoid unnecessary additional expenditure and to ensure sufficient funding for the production of at least one more hardcopy Newsletter in Spring 2011 (from the ring-fenced funds in the 2010 plan). I appreciate these are extraordinary actions and they may cause some of you concern, but please be assured that it is our absolute intent to find a way for the Society to continue to keep its members well informed, to continue to produce high quality publications and to continue to manage our funds in a manner that enables us to mount meaningful ornithological expeditions in the foreseeable future.

An Annual Financial Statement will still be published in November and it will be posted on the RAFOS Website (www.rafos.org.uk), as will the minutes of our Autumn Meeting, which should answer many of your questions and hopefully allay any fears. It is also our intention to continue to run a full expedition/field meeting programme in 2011, which will also be posted on the website. Of course I appreciate that not all members have internet access at home, but I would urge them to go to their local library and take the time to try to view our Website. I should also stress this is not an end to AGMs and we will run one in November 2011. I look for your support to enable your Committee to concentrate its meagre resources (people and time) to effectively tackle our latest set of challenges in order to ensure that the Society continues to thrive.

Any queries or comments on this topic should be made to the Secretary, who will bring them to the Committee's attention at its Autumn meeting.

Clive Watson

Chairman RAFOS Committee

Editorial

The Chairman's statement has left us much to ponder on.

But let's move on to more mundane matters. This newsletter includes the reports on the 2010 Winter Duck, this year's field meeting at Burnham Overy, a look at the RAFOS Team's efforts in the 2007-11 Bird Atlas work and a reminder that we can all do a bit towards the MOD Bird Count. We also have articles from as far afield as Lesbos, the Gambia, Botswana, Austria and Fuertaventura; and last, but by no means least, John Le Gassick's lively account of his trip of a lifetime.

On a more serious note, can I remind you all that the new subscription rates apply from 1 Jan 2011. So please, if you haven't yet done so, get in touch with the Membership Sec and get your subs up to date.

Dick Yates

NOTICEBOARD

RAFOS Field Meetings and Expeds for 2011

9 Jan	WWT Slimbridge – Guided tour of the Centre - Bill Francis
27Jan–5 Feb	Winter Duck 10 – N Scotland Survey - Jim Bryden & John Wells
Apr	Chew Valley Field Meeting - Dave & Anne Bodley
13 Apr-22 May	Austria Exped - BirdLife Austria Survey – Mike Blair
May/Jun	Scotland – BTO Bird Atlas Survey – Jerry Knights & Jim Bryden
Aug	Bucks – Ringing Course – Colin Wearn
Oct/Nov	Burnham Overy – East Anglia Field Meeting - Mike Hayes
Oct	Portland – Field Meeting – Dave & Anne Bodley
22-31 Oct	Cornish Chough - Field Meeting - Jim Bryden & Martin Wightman
Nov	Chew Valley – CVL Survey – Dave & Anne Bodley
Nov	AGM and Post AGM Field Meeting

For quite a few of our activities the dates have yet to be finalised but regulars will know who to contact and if you are unsure please contact the FALO, Jerry Knights:- e-mail – jezrax@btinternet.com or Mobile – 07714 707401.

Mike Blair has asked to add that the dates for Austria may alter slightly so if you are interested please contact him:- blair@dialstart.net. Mike Hayes has moved Burnham Overy to later in the year to decongest the Apr/May period, dates to be announced.

An announcement re dates for the 2011 AGM will go out with the Spring Newsletter.

Adventurous Birding In The Land of the Singing Shag By Martin Routledge

Any one of us who has entered records on the BTO BirdTrack system or submitted either Timed Tetrad Visits or Roving Records to the Bird Atlas project will have made the odd fat-fingered typist slip and entered something a little unlikely. Regular readers of the Newsletter might recall an article set in the Land of the Singing Barn Owl. My own claim to notoriety was a Black Grouse FF (carrying food or faecal sac) in leafy Buckinghamshire! It was really a Blackbird but I didn't double check before submitting the batch of roving records and it must have made my County organiser raise a quizzical eyebrow as it was challenged by return. So no real surprise then that in the excitement of a Kintyre call-over we heard: 'Shag – singing'!!



The Team – in its natural habitat, a beer garden.

Photo: Martin Routledge

Clockwise from front left: Jim Bryden, Keith Cowieson, Jerry Knights, John Wells, Martin Routledge and Steve Heather

For the third year running a small but perfectly formed team from RAFOS have undertaken Atlas work on the Kintyre peninsular. The first two years saw the team based in the South at Machrihanish but this year we were pretty much in the middle of Kintyre based in the Highland Reserve Forces and Cadet Association (RFCA) accommodation at Lochgilphead. Our task was to survey 21 Tetrads for the BTO Atlas and add as much additional information to the surrounding 10Km squares as possible to improve the species richness record of the area. Kintyre is a massive area and although close to Glasgow and popular with tourists it is relatively un-watched by the birding fraternity – a situation exacerbated by the fact that the roads are mainly coastal with much poorer access to the interior. Our task areas were scattered and often

difficult to get at but also covered a variety of terrain from high moor, pasture, fresh water lochs, sea lochs, estuaries, deciduous woodland and the inevitable Forestry Commission plantation. This was a land of lakes and valleys, hills and streams but as my Jockanese travel guides pointed out, I had to learn to call them lochs, glens, crags and burns! Apparently 'Seagull' isn't an expression used in birding circles either.

Logistics, as always, were the key to a successful expedition and our preparations were directed by an impeccable Admin Order courtesy of James Bryden Esq. The Wyton PSI van was pressed into service yet again and ably manned by John Wells and Steve Heather it set off early on Friday 4 June for the sweep across country to Biddulph to collect expedition leader Jerry Knights and Martin Routledge (who had pre-positioned from High Wycombe). Progress was slow as the van seemed to want to pull in to every Tesco's en-route but once it realised Jim B wasn't driving it settled down. Traffic around Glasgow was heavy and we were a little adrift of the Admin Order's timings by the time we got to Dumbarton to uplift Jim and all his kit from the Morrisons car park.



An inhabitant of Morrison's car park!
No, not Jim Bryden but a 'Hoodie'
Photo: Martin Routledge

Almost complete we carried on to Lochgilphead where we found the final member of the expedition, Keith Cowieson, already ensconced in the accommodation and telling tales of a week of birding in the Highlands. The RFCA Centre was undergoing refurbishment and the kitchen block hadn't been finished but the resident caretaker, Alex, had set up a temporary kitchen in one of our rooms and all was set fair for a good week's work. Somehow the bunk bedded rooms were naturally segregated into officers and SNCOs accommodation as a direct result of the snorers and whiners divide. Even this wasn't enough to ensure a decent night's sleep so one member was banished to the isolation ward in the adjoining building!

Most readers will be familiar with the Bird Atlas methodology. This entailed early starts to survey 2 x 2 Km squares or Tetrads with the emphasis on identifying, counting, and recording breeding evidence for each species. For the most part we split into teams of 2, but from time to time we would work as a three ball and on one occasion all 6 of us hit one Tetrads. En route to and from the day's task we would record species in each 10Km square and after formal surveying in the morning we would undertake some more casual birding and record species there too. Our target of 21 Tetrads (allocated by Bob Swann the BTO regional organiser) was less than last year as the sites were more spread out and we weren't often able to do 2 back-to-back without having to reposition. Some of the squares were quite remote and in difficult high terrain so these usually fell to Keith and Jerry - the fittest and most energetic of the team and hence christened the Duracell Bunnies. The other usual pairings were Jim and Steve; and John and Martin. We did however mix things up from time to time with Keith and Martin taking on some

moorland and on one memorable occasion we got John the Wellsmeister so high he was asking for oxygen.

There were some memorable birds. Twice we located **Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* nests thanks to Keith's local knowledge and the directions of a friendly native. One, by a fresh water lochan, had young, although we couldn't see them, but a very attentive mother kept harassing the passing corvids. The other, by a sea loch had a pair in attendance but much less activity around the nest so we're just not sure whether this was a successful site or not. Keith's field craft also found several other nests including **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis*, **Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus*, **Wood Warbler** *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* and **Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*. We found **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* and **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* on the moor (Mòine Mhòr) near Crinan and a pair of magnificent **Black-throated Divers** *Gavia arctica* on Loch Avich. Jim managed to flush both **Red** and **Black Grouse** *Lagopus lagopus scoticus* and *tetrao tetrax* on one solo sortie and we saw some superb examples of **Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe* display flight.

The full expedition list is at the end of this article but it hides some interesting observations. During last year's survey the most numerous passerines were **Willow Warbler** and **Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* and these were our top 2 this year too but there were also good numbers of **Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*, **Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* and a decent smattering of **Siskins** *Carduelis spinus* with **Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* being fairly widely distributed across the region.



Willow Warbler approaching its nest

Photo: Martin Routledge

Of course all the other usual suspects were present (is it just me or can a Hooded Crow be made to look like just about any medium to large bird?) but on the other hand there were some notable absences or at least scarcities of species that should have been more abundant. On the scarce list were **Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, **Jackdaw**

Corvus monedula and **Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* all of which should have been more plentiful in some habitats. Totally absent were **Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* despite seeming ideal terrain and **Dipper** *Cinclus cinclus* although we did find breeding evidence in the form of a used nest from this year. To be fair we've not seen **Dipper** at all during our Kintyre surveys to date but this year the habitat should have been to their liking. It is trends such as these that the Bird Atlas project aims to shed some light on.

Of the 21 Tetrads surveyed 2 in the high ground were only observed for an hour and the other 19 were all undertaken as 2 hour counts. These full counts produced an average of 28 species but the richest species list was 40 in a Tetrads that contained a small village, woodland and an estuary; the next (at 38) was also in a diverse Tetrads with coast, pasture and some woodland but it was also surveyed by all 6 of us split into 3 teams so was very well covered. The poorest 2 hour count delivered only 9 species and this was on some high moorland with nothing but rough grass and boulders to commend it. The next poorest Tetrads surrendered 17 species also in an area of monoculture – this time a dense pine plantation. So the evidence shows species richness closely follows habitat diversity – but you didn't need to be a rocket ornithologist to work that one out! In all, we recorded 107 species of which 12 were new to our Kintyre surveys. We produced confirmation of breeding for just over half of these species and more telling still, ours were the only records submitted (so far) for 17 out of the 21 Tetrads; even at the 10Km square resolution our RAFOS sightings are often the only record of a species. This was a superb effort and justly recognised by the BTO.

So, we had yet another highly successful Atlas survey expedition in a wonderful part of Scotland. The scenery was fantastic, the birds great and the company outstanding. The banter level was high as ever and all this made for a spectacularly enjoyable few days. There were debates about methodology – was it better to yomp around a Tetrads or stand still and observe? Did 2 **Wrens** singing against each other constitute evidence of Territoriality or did there need to be more? Did the **Dipper** nest mean we could record **Dipper** or not even though we hadn't seen an adult? Even more controversial: was the Co-op better than Tesco's for wine and were sandwiches without crusts the true sign of an English gentleman? Even the midges and the odd bit of rain couldn't repress our spirits and we left Scotland knowing we had made yet another significant contribution to the Bird Atlas 2007-11; only one more year to go – perhaps Northern Kintyre next year Jerry?

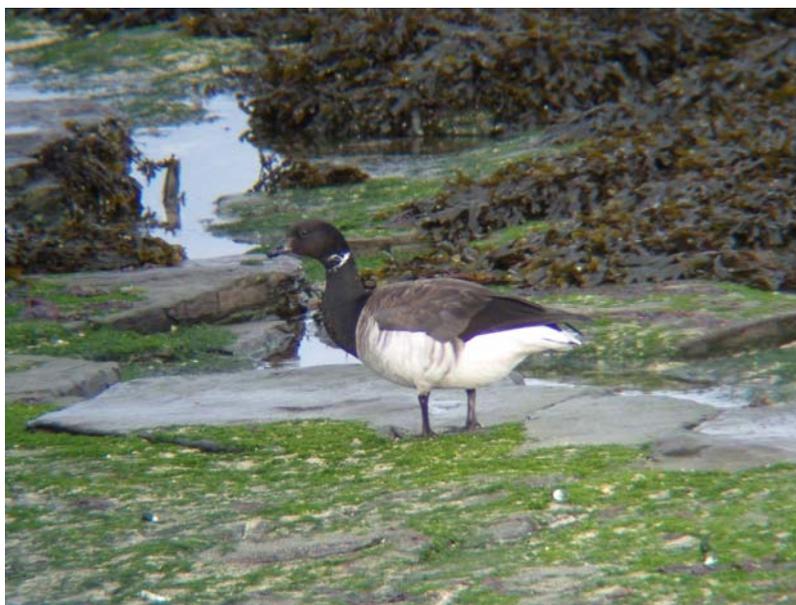


John Wells – not quite on oxygen! But a grand view *Photo: Martin Routledge*

WINTER DUCK IX - 2010

“Don’t worry, we’re in the military.....we’re used to public service”!

The alternative report by Veronica Wootton BSc Hons Environmental Studies



Pale bellied Brent goose
Photo by John Harry

February this year was my third RAFOS expedition Winter Duck to the North West of Scotland. Three teams completed this large area survey gathering vital data for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Scottish Ornithological Club (SOC). The exped took place from 28 Jan to 6 Feb and as the name ‘Winter Duck 9’ suggests this was the 9th year RAF teams from all over the UK have completed the challenge.

The vast amount of data gathered during these expedition gives the BTO a unique insight into the status of non-breeding birds on wetlands in NW Scotland and is used to assist ongoing conservation of their populations and habitat. The submitted data is also fed into the UK wide Bird Atlas 2007-11 survey project. This 5 year study will give a periodic insight into the status of birds not captured since the Atlas of 1988 - 91.

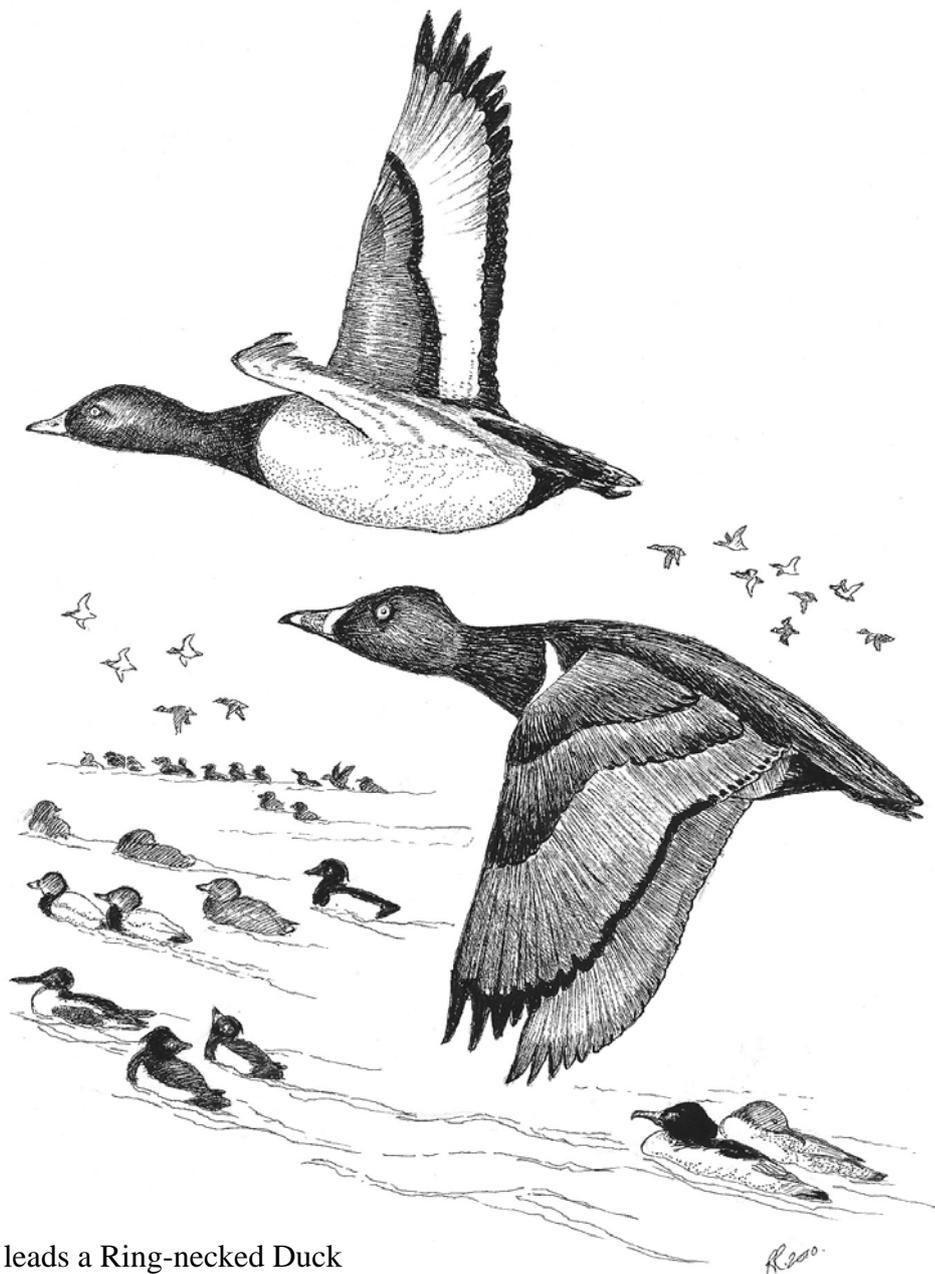


Team 1, R to L, Martin Routledge, Gerry Bilbao FS Jane Mew, known as Jay (RAF Waddington), Veronica Wootton (RAF Leuchars) and SAC Kev Cairns (RAF Lossiemouth)
Photo by Kev Cairns

Team 1 surveyed from Rhue to Lower Diabaig while Team 2,

consisting of Jim Bryden, Steve Heather and Jerry Knights, surveyed the area from Kanniard Mouth to Sheildaig and Team 3, which was made up of FS John Wells (RAF Wyton), Sgt Taff Harry (RAF Coningsby), Mr Tom Dewick and Maggie Sheddan covered the area from John O'Groats to Cape Wrath.

As on all expeditions of this kind there were highs and lows, however, the harsh Scottish winter conditions did not dampen the enthusiasm and drive of the 3 teams to go all out to gather this important data. The completed data statistics from the expedition show that 236 sites were visited for the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) and a further 1449 roving records were contributed to the Bird Atlas 2007-11. As well as the rare species observed such as Ring-necked Duck, Scaup, White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Great Northern Divers, Black-throated Divers, Red-throated Divers, Slavonian Grebes and Black Guillemots; the regular winter visitors and more common species counts also contributed much needed information to the data base.



Scaup leads a Ring-necked Duck

That's the serious stuff now to the real story of this expedition.

Fri 29 Jan dawned bright, sunny, and frosty as I headed off into the wilds of NW Scotland. I was dropped off at Vane Farm, Kinross, where I was collected by some of the team members who had travelled up from England. After a quick scan of Loch Leven we headed up the A9 to rendezvous in Newtonmore with the rest of the crew. The journey up the A9 was very informative as we learned all about the sexual behaviour of John Wells' chinchillas! After the necessary shopping stop in a Aviemore there was a chance to ponder over the latest technology in thermal underwear,

"Merino wool next to your b*****s is OK", quoted Jim Bryden excitedly.

Apparently, merino wool underwear is the very latest must have accessory. Unfortunately, Jim developed a rash in a rather delicate area and had to use a mirror to see where to apply soothing cream - at least that was his story! Excitement waning, we made our way to the Newtonmore Hall that was to be home for the night.

As expensive optics, especially Leica scopes, do not like the cold, everyone unloaded them from the 2 vehicles: alas, Jim Brydon, ex RAF policeman and joint exped leader who had compiled the Admin Instruction detailing all the essential kit, notably a scope, had, apparently, been so excited when Hilda dropped him off in Berwick upon Tweed that he left his precious Leica in the back of his car. This rather basic but catastrophic error for a bird survey, was found highly amusing by the rest of the team. However, Jim was not the only old boy to let excitement get to him; John Wells was so excited that he forgot the key to the cash box.

Friday evening saw us enjoy a good meal in a local hotel and my new hat was modelled by Jerry and Jim.



Suitably hatted – Jim



and Jerry *Photos by Vron Wotton*



A pair of rare birds!! *Photo by Jay Mew*

FS Jay Mew also purchased a very warm hat. They suited us much better than they did Jim or Jerry don't you think?



We also learned the latest antics of Jerry K's goats Treacle and Fudge. Jerry was missing them already. Jerry's goats are a bit like Jim Bryden – they'll eat anything.

Jerry, Fudge & Treacle
Photo by Jerry Knights

We were all glad to hear that Jerry's ankle injury was better this year, as we had had terrible problems in the past obtaining nurofen from Laide Post Office in a snowstorm! They would only sell Jerry

one packet of 12 tablets at a time. Being intelligent RAF personnel, and ex RAF personnel, we foiled them though and all trooped in and bought a packet of Nurofen each for Jerry. Needless to say this did not go down well with the post office owner's wife!

The snow was falling heavily now and the Saturday morning capercaillie hunt was looking doubtful - we don't *really* hunt them, just hope to see them. It was probably for the best as, in previous years, members (including me) have found themselves lost in the Grantown woods. Jim Bryden makes us all spread out you see in a long line (bit like a FOD plod I guess). Now Grantown wood is a deep dark scary type of wood, especially when you realise that you cannot see anyone else and when you call out no one answers you. This is where a mobile phone is a life saver although having to walk with the whole weight of the sun on your right shoulder in your blue flowery wellies to find your way back to civilisation is not an easy task, I know! When Jim eventually found me (navigating by the sun of course) he told me that Maggie and Bob had also got lost and they were using someone's loo in Grantown itself....at least I was still lost in the deep dark wood. But enough reminiscing, back to this year's exciting adventure.

Saturday dawned with lots and lots and lots of deep crisp snow - so Grantown was out of the question, instead we travelled to a well known supermarket in Inverness to meet the final 2 members of the team, Tom Dewick and Kevin Cairns. It was here that we stocked up with fresh vegetables, bread, etc. The meals had been precooked and frozen by Steve Heather and his wife Maria. For an exped. we eat really well and enjoy delicious stews, and curries, all thanks to Steve and Maria.



Winter wonderland *Photo by Jay Mew*

This is the point at which the 3 teams go their separate ways, Team 1 to Dundonnell, Team 2 to Elphin, and Team 3 to Durness. You can just picture the scene, 3 vehicles, 12 excited people, dividing up the food, changing vehicles, and making sure that all their gear gets into the right vehicle. Jim Bryden asked if **everyone** had **all** their kit and we all said yes. But someone had not got all his kit in the right vehicle! Now excitement has a lot to answer for, and John Wells was so excited to be wearing his Tasmanian devil long-johns again that he leapt excitedly into Tom Dewick's 4x4 but forgot another

basic piece of kit for those taking part in a very wintery, winter bird survey - his coat! He didn't discover the omission until Team 2 arrived at Elphin. Tom then kindly offered John his prized posing Rohan flashers Mac, and matching accessories. He was likened to Dr Who, but I can assure you David Tennant is far better looking. However, it was rather disconcerting to note that as soon as he donned the Rohan he seemed to turn into a camp version of Tom!



John in the Rohan *Photo: Maggie Sheddan*

As on any expedition an H&S brief is essential and the prize for the best one has to go to Steve Heather for his very thorough H&S brief to his team 2 in Elphin. He said "now we have arrived at our accommodation, it falls to me to give you the 'elf n' safety brief" ...elf n' safety...do you get it? Health & Safety". Endorphins obviously surging around Steve's little body causing him to get carried away in the excitement of the moment, and all his new gear!!

Excitement is a funny thing, it can spread through a group of people rapidly and they seem to lose all sense of reality. Martin Routledge experienced this phenomenon as he excitedly remarked on a few highland cows sporting a good set of antlers! Antlers on a highland cow - don't think so Martin. Now I admit that I'm a dizzy blonde, but even I know antlers don't grow on highland cows! Jay Mew, another new member to the team this year, had to be quick on her feet; no sooner had she got all her fantastic camera kit out than Team 1 leader, Gerry B, ordered her back in the van - Jay always obliged.

Jay has a lovely DSLR camera and a really really big lens, which she gallantly carried around in her National Geographic photographers' rucksack. I admired the way she managed to carry all her camera kit and scope and binoculars as we trudged through the deep snow drifts to our survey sites. One of the other team members started calling Jay and me Gerry's angels! Of course we were angels, and always very well behaved.

Excitement was a regular emotion for another Team 1 member, Kev Cairns, who kept thinking that he had seen white winged gulls, everywhere! Leader Gerry always put him right though, often reminding Kevin to concentrate on his driving and stop imagining white winged or Lesser Black Backed gulls. But Kevin has to be congratulated for his fantastic driving skills in the terrible weather. These were especially good on the terrifying drive down to lower Diabeg. This was another of those very very steep hills that the vehicle could not get down so we had to trek down to the waterside and then hike back up the 1:4 incline (note to self.....must get fitter for next year as I found it hard keeping up with all the old excitable blokes and super fit Jay). Sub zero conditions and lots of snow made driving conditions extremely hazardous for all 3 teams, thanks to our drivers Kev Cairns, Tom Dewick, and Jim Bryden, we were all carried safely around Scotland.

Cat litter proved to be an essential item for Teams 1 & 2. However, Team 3 refused this vital piece of kit in the belief that they were the super-hero RAF team and did not need cat litter to use as grit for their 4x4. But it proved to be a godsend for the rest of us in the arctic conditions. We continued the survey whatever the weather threw at us, but this expedition is definitely not for the faint hearted or fair weather birders. We also saw lots of Otters and Red Deer and managed to take some photos of them. Martin went off goose hunting at Mellon Udrigle and came back with 2 Springer spaniels that seemed to adopt him.....eventually they went home.



Monarch of the Glen
Photo: Martin Routledge



Otters at play

Photo: Vron Wooton

Public toilet availability was severely depleted this year due to many frozen and burst pipes. This was a problem as we were drinking so many hot drinks to keep warm that comfort stops were a necessity. We are grateful to the many people who let us wander into their gardens, with permission of course, and then let us girlies and the old guys with the weak bladders use their loos. This expedition would not have been a success



Densely sheeped?

Photo by Vron Wooton

without them! But we always gave free, and unbiased naturally, advice on telescopes.

As well as Red Deer, Otters, Eagles, and all the birds we were meant to be surveying, a certain member of team 1 who shall remain nameless also obviously still infected with the excitement bug was heard to ask, "is this area densely sheeped?" Men obviously find it hard to contain their excitement!

Team 1 also got very excited on the Tuesday night when our illustrious leader, Gerry, promised us a lie in until 0700 the next morning - a real luxury! Every other morning we were up at 0530 ready for a lovely cooked breakfast made by Kevin, while Vron and Jay made the packed lunches. We would then stuff our sleeping bags into their stuff sacks (why are stuff sacks so very small?) and fill our flasks and finally jump excitedly into our vehicle and drive to the start of the day's survey area in time for sunrise.



Sunrise at Dundonnell
Photo by Vron Wooton

I came across a fabulous piece of kit which I found essential, and I'm sure other members will have one for next year. It was a back of the seat "kid's car seat organiser". I kept notebook, pens, highlighters, lipsol, hand cream, penknife, compass (in case I got lost again), ordnance survey maps, tissues, instant cappuccinos, of the unsweetened variety, mobile phone, digital bird

counter and the essential half bottle of vodka - no the excitement of the expedition did not turn me to drink - the vodka was essential to add to the windscreen squooshers water to stop it freezing. Most days we were operating in conditions of -5C.

Team 3 encountered several vehicles stuck in the snow. But, being in the RAF, Taff would excitedly leap out of the vehicle in superhero fashion and utter his now famous catchphrase "**Don't worry, we're in the Military.....we're used to public service**"! Then superheros Taff, John Wells, in the borrowed Rohan, Maggie and Tom Dewick would proceed to dig the stranded vehicle out of the snow. Well done guys! Superhero ambassadors for the RAF.



Team 3 to the rescue *Photo : Maggie Sheddan*

Alas, the superheroes also suffered from the excitement bug! One sunny, but very cold day, they miscalculated the distance to the next petrol station and slowly but very excitedly ground to a halt and had to be helped out by a passer-by. And the moral of this story - no matter how excited you get always keep an eye on your fuel gauge and know how to read the map. John - wiggly roads are longer than straight ones!

Team 1 saved Team 2 from losing all the equipment out of their van one day as Jim, the old excited copper, drove off with the back door wide open - maybe he was trying to lose everyone else's scope!

Oh my goodness I almost forgot; John Wells discovered a new species - the common rabbit. Alas, this was the old excitement bug again as we only have one species of wild rabbit. John was so excited though as he yelled out "Common Rabbits" - sad old man.

I can only comment second hand on tales of forgotten towels and streaking male members of team 3 through Faraid Head, 4x4 vehicle drivers being unable to do a 3 point turn with a small trailer on the back – said trailer having to be unhooked and moved by superheros Taff and ‘Rohan’ Wells, while Maggie obtained the photographic evidence.

I believe it was also this team that called a Golden Eagle sighting that was actually the rear end of a red deer - that old excitement bug creeping in again! Maggie, who had the best scope in Team 3, a brand new Leica, wondered why it was so stiff to move - in her excitement she had forgotten to unlock the centre column! She did see lots of flappy winged gull things through it though and I believe some of her team members were so jealous of it that they are reportedly getting one for next year!

Team 3 were a bit naughty though reminding me that I was missing my superhero, Simon King, on the TV. We did not have TV at Dundonnell you see - we were the disciplined team. Can we invite Simon King to join Team 1 for next year please?

So, what did I learn from this expedition?

I learned that they do not sell balsamic vinegar in Durness Post Office.

Frozen pipes close all the public toilets in the north west of Scotland.

Taff cannot work his alarm clock.

Don't leave your insulated cup in a lay-by in Achiltibuie – Steve.

Red Deer bottoms look like Golden Eagles to Team 3.

When going on a winter breeding bird survey **DO NOT** forget your scope or your coat.

Swarovski's are better than Leicas.

Tasmanian devil long johns are NOT flattering.

Ear plugs are necessary for a good nights sleep.

Vodka is essential for your windscreen squooshers.

Cat litter is really useful and,

RAFOS expeditions are fantastic fun and extremely exciting - so if you think you can handle the extreme excitement then check out the RAFOS website for more details.

Oh! And I now understand what “nice castle” means.

There were many, many, highlights of this expedition, but for me it was discovering 2 White-tailed Sea Eagles sitting on a rock eying up a field of Barnacle Geese.

The Winter Duck expeditions would not be possible without the support of our 2 main sponsors and RAFOS and the Winter Duck Team would like to thank them for their continued support.



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Burnham Overy 2010

By Mike Hayes



Burnham Overy 2010 will be remembered for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the low numbers with only 10 attendees all of whom had been before. People thought up all kind of excuses to drop out this year, including Icelandic volcanic ash stranding them in South Africa, well let me tell you it didn't affect me getting there from Wales! Another excuse was they had to go and do a recce for another expedition. What can be more important than Norfolk in Spring. No excuses will be accepted next year.

The Windmill *Photo: Jon Orme*

The next, and perhaps most significant, event was the temporary closure of the Ship Inn; it was being refurbished by its new owners and converted into a gourmet pub. This meant that the primary aim of this year's visit was to find and evaluate a new eating and watering establishment. Three were tried and after much debate the ????? was voted the preferred option - now you have to read to the end to find out which! This was based on quality, cost and service. So next year I will not accept any complaints, you should have been there this year to take part in the survey.

The Friday started well as the 10 of us arrived in dribs and drabs at Titchwell in good weather - as usual. All the regular birds were recorded despite on-going improvement works on the reserve. This included Scoters, Mergansers and Eider at sea, a range of waders as well as passerines in and around the Reserve Centre.

We arrived safely, despite the Volcanic Ash, at the Windmill in time for Tea and Medals and a fine selection of home made cakes (thanks again Mrs Roberts). This time we all knew where the key was so no dramas this year. The usual scramble for the best pit then took place with the usual falsehoods made regarding snoring status.

The evening was spent evaluating the Lord Nelson just up the road. The food was OK but there was a very limited selection; cost was reasonable and service OK. Not a bad start but lacked the WOW factor.

Saturday started well with a before breakfast report of a Hoopoe on the field in front of the Windmill but it soon disappeared and not all saw it (including me so it was probably a Jay in moult!). Up at Holkholm Hall we failed to record Lesser-spotted Woodpecker for the first time in many years. However, we continued to start building up the general numbers. Breakfast was good, black pudding being a highlight with many, especially as there was no fire drill this time.

After breakfast we met up with Simon Dennis at Snettisham coastal park and soon found Winchat and Redstart, so migration was definitely underway despite the Volcanic Ash Cloud. Many of our migratory birds come from Southern Africa and the Ash cloud didn't seem to affect them. (Please take note Dick!) For the second time in Norfolk we watched a Grasshopper Warbler in full view singing its heart out, the photographers were now getting really excited. As we worked our way back to the Windmill via Sandringham, Dersingham Bog and Hunstanton Cliffs, to pick up Fulmar, we were disappointed not to see Golden Pheasant, Goshawk or any Shrikes unlike last year. Rob King was missed, but I've forgotten his excuse.

Finally, it was back to Titchwell to pick up the species we missed on Friday or to see if any others had forced their way through the Volcanic Ash cloud. Just about everybody picked up the Red-crested Pochard and the Black-tailed Godwit in full breeding plumage. Also changed into his pulling plumage was a magnificent Spotted Redshank. Then it was back to the Windmill for tea and medals and to discuss the burning issue of the day, where to go for dinner that night? We decided, after great debate, that the White Horse had to be next. We arrived early but it was still pretty full so we settled on an outside table in our fleeces hoping that we would not get Volcanic Ash particles in our food. Once again the food was OK, a bit pricier but definitely a wider selection of food and ales. We also had the entertainment tick as we watched a party in wedding plumage arrive for a reception. After dinner we were all scared by what we thought was the arrival of the Volcanic Ash cloud, but it turned out that Brian Eke had just started up his pipe.

So Sunday dawned a bit grey with the threat of rain in the air, this time we were heading East and after breakfast we descended on Stiffkey and battled the breeze. This small reserve always proves productive with a good selection of waders, gulls and wildfowl, and we also picked up our first House Martins. Some time was spent desperately looking for a Nightingale that was heard - or was it? Then it was off to Cley. As we arrived at the reserve it started to rain, obviously, this had been deliberately planned to clear the air of Volcanic Ash, as usually it never rains on Burnham weekend. Therefore, an extended coffee break was called for and we all piled into the visitor centre. After the break we set off for the reserve as the weather cleared, again according to my plan, and we had some good birding. Highlights have to be the Marsh Harriers, our first terns, Sandwich, and some really close views of Godwits. Perhaps the best of all was stunning views of Bearded Tits around the Dawlish Hide complex. Once again the photographers were drooling. After an exciting day we departed the East and headed back for cakes, tea and even more medals. Some of the party then left for home, me, so the rest is hearsay.

The final pub to be tested was the Jockey in Burnham. Good pub, good food and welcoming hosts. Ticked all the boxes. So the decision was made for us for next year, unless of course the hosts sell up and move, or the pub gets struck by moon dust, flood, mud or even volcanic ash.

Just a few facts supplied by Brian Eke our resident recorder who has been assembling all known records for the weekend. This year we recorded 134 species, best year (2006) 164 species and overall 255 and still recording. That's it till next year – see you in the Jockey, Volcanic Ash permitting.

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS

(94 nights actually, but who is counting)

by John Le Gassick

Last year Janet and I decided that the time had come in our lives to sail around the World, following in the footsteps of Captain Cook but hopefully not getting eaten; though I did once have a close shave in the 24 hour buffet. Thinking back to my Coastal Command days I recalled how tiny the Gypsy Moth IV looked from the port beam window of a Mk 3 Shackleton, so we decided on something a little larger and fitted with stabilisers. We settled for a ship of the line sporting 685 balconies weighing in at 86,799 tons and a crew of 886. Unfortunately we could not afford a “glorious balcony” so had to settle for a small room at the front of the vessel, just room for three: Janet, me and the anchor. Well at least the anchor didn’t snore. The voyage was west-about, very useful when adjusting the clocks nearly every day, out through Panama and back through Suez. It was a bit like the last Pelagic that I did in August 2006 in the Bay of Biscay, but a little longer, that too was an inside cabin, but shared with three hairy birders (sorry two hairy birders and Bob). We departed Southampton on a snowy 10th January and although this was definitely not a bird watching trip I did manage to smuggle eleven bird books and my telescope on board; a lot of the books having been bought at last year’s AGM from the RAFOS Library Sale.

From amongst the 1,952 passengers there was one other bird watcher and he had fortunately completed a similar Pelagic Trip, sorry I meant World Cruise, the previous year. I think that to have only 0.0010246% birdwatchers on a trip like this is worryingly low, perhaps we are becoming a red-listed species, for goodness sake there were more people interested in Ping Pong, Pilates and Pounding around the Promenade deck than watching the sea! The first leg, as far as Madeira, was uneventful although a **Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* came on board around 49N 05W, just off Brest.

Barbados saw the list rise to 22 with a fine pair of boobies, (sorry I couldn’t resist it) **Masked**, *Sula dactylatra* and **Red-footed**, *Sula sula* and at Aruba, **Cayenne Tern**, *Sterna (sandvicensis) eurygnatha* thought by some to be a race of **Sandwich Tern**, *Sterna sandvicensis*, all that I will say in my defence is that my “crutch”, ‘Seabirds an Identification Guide’ by Peter Harrison 1983 edition “splits” them.

Sunday 24th January saw one of the highlights of the voyage, the Transit of the Panama Canal. This brought the list to 43 with most of the usual suspects, for me the highlight was **Boat-billed Heron**, *Cochlearis cochlearis*, I do love a distinctive bird! We had two stops in Mexico: Acapulco and Zihuatanejo - try saying that with a mouthful of prawn crackers. They yielded some nice waders and a new bird for me **White-collared Seed-eater**, *Sporophila torqueola*.



Snowy Egret, Mexico 28 Jan 10 Photo: John Le Gassick

The highlight of our far too short stay in San Francisco, mainly caused by US Immigration procedures, was **Tufted Puffin**, *Fratercula cirrhata*. From San Francisco we set out on 1st February holding a southerly course heading for Auckland in New Zealand arriving on Ash Wednesday, 17th February. This leg along the Pacific Ocean was enlivened by talks given by David Saunders MBE, who in 1960 was the first Warden on Skomer Island, so now we were three. We stopped off at Honolulu, Christmas Island (Kiribis) the site chosen for the testing of the United Kingdom's Atom Bombs in the nineteen fifties and we missed out our scheduled stop at Apia because of the proximity of Typhoon Rene (Allo, allo). The pelagic species on these legs were numerous: **Laysan Albatross**, *Diomedea immutabilis*, **Black-footed Albatross** *Diomedea nigripes*, **Newell's Shearwater**, *Puffinus puffinus newelli* (also known as the Hawaiian race of Manx Shearwater), **Wedge-tailed Shearwater**, *Puffinus pacificus*, **Bulwer's Petrel**, *Bulweria bulwerii*, **Wilson's Storm Petrel**, *Oceanites oceanicus*, **Short-tailed (Slender-billed) Shearwater**, *Puffinus tenuirostris* and **Flesh-footed (Pale-footed) Shearwater**, *Puffinus carneipes*, along with 3 **Gadfly Petrels** (*cookilarius*) **Kermadec**, *Pterodroma neglecta*, **Black-winged**, *Pterodroma nigripennis* and **White-necked**, *Pterodroma externa*.



Silver Gull
Larus novaehollandiae
 18 Feb 10
 Photo: John Le Gassick
 (Also known in New Zealand as Red-billed Gull)

The vastness of the Pacific is awe-inspiring, full of cetaceans and fish, on some days we did not see another vessel. One thing that intrigued me, and hopefully you dear reader, were the flying fish, *exocoetidae*, they appeared in every ocean that we crossed, leaping out from the bow of the ship, shining brightly in the reflected sunlight, thinking they were being pursued by a giant predator. The boobies, of all four species recorded, would suddenly appear in mid ocean and skilfully feed off the flying fish picking them off as they leapt from the water to avoid the ship.

New Zealand was marvellous, we called at Auckland on the North Island where we recorded our 100th species, then went on to Lyttleton (for Christchurch) and finally Port Chalmers (for Dunedin) both on the South Island. There were lots different varieties of cormorants but they don't appear to classify any as shags. Here we were still recording **House Sparrow** but once we arrived in Hong Kong it was all **Tree Sparrow**, *Passer montanus*! replacing the House Sparrow even in the city centres until Mumbai when it changed back to *Passer domesticus* again, most odd. We sailed from Port Chalmers

late afternoon on 20th February and as we sailed along the inlet formed by the Otago peninsular it produced a truly memorable bird watching experience. Before we reached the open sea we passed a breeding colony of **Royal Albatross**, *Diomedea epomorphora* where birds were sitting on nests and some were displaying. Once into the Southern Pacific the sea was alive with feeding seabirds mostly **Sooty Shearwater**, *Puffinus griseus*, **Little Shearwater**, *Puffinus assimilis*, **Antarctic Skua**, *Catharacta antarctica*, **White-capped (Shy) Albatross**, *Diomedea cauta* and the icing on the cake a very close sighting of a Prion, probably *Pachyptila turtur* the **Fairy Prion**.

We had four stops in Australia the first was two days in Sydney where we were intrigued by the huge fruit bats, Flying Foxes, in the trees right beside the harbour. Brisbane yielded two sightings of a really odd looking wader, **Masked Lapwing**, *Vanellus miles* which was another new bird for me.

Masked Lapwing, Brisbane 1 Mar 10

Photo: John Le Gassick

Then we continued north stopping at the Whitsunday Islands and Yorkey's Knob from here we recorded the impressively large **Crested Tern**, *Sterna bergii* and the slightly smaller **Gull-billed Tern**, *Sterna nilotica* and just in case you thought it was all becoming very black and white, **Rainbow Bee-eater**, *Merops ornatus* and the equally colourful **Figbird**, *Sphecotheres viridis* .



Willy Wagtail, *Rhipidura leucophrys*

1 Mar 10

The most common Australian flycatcher

Photo: John Le Gassick

Six days at sea followed our brief visit to the Antipodes where once again good views were had of **Red-necked Phalarope**, *Phalaropus lobatus*, small flocks of which had been recorded at sea earlier in the voyage. The next port of call was Kota Kinabalu on the west coast of Sabah, here we visited the Prince Phillip Country park and were rewarded with **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (also known as White-breasted) and **Black-capped Kingfisher**, *Halycon pileata*. If anyone is still awake the running total is now 165. Two days in Hong Kong followed where, in Hong Kong Park, we managed to photograph **Red-whiskered Bulbul**, *Pycnonotus jocosus* which, along with **Japanese White-eye**, *Zosterops japonica*, were feeding on the bright blossoms of the Red Kapok Tree *Bombax ceibe*.

There now followed an intensive period of port calls: Nha Trang (Vietnam), Sihoukanville (Cambodia), Laem Chabang and Koi Samui (both in Thailand). In the Collins Field Guide "Birds of South East Asia" 1198 species are listed but from our brief visits, admittedly only on the fringe of the countries, it was an avian desert when compared with the earlier part of the Cruise. One incident worth mentioning was in Sihanoukville harbour a **Peregrine Falcon**, *Falco peregrinus* was "mobbing" a beautiful **Brahminy Kite**, *Haliastur indus*. Singapore, one of the places I really wanted to visit, was in the grip of a tropical downpour all day long so not a lot was seen. Since we first recorded them in Honolulu **Common Mynah** *Acridotheres tristis* was the one bird that appeared at every port of call so it is one of the few on the Singapore List. Although an introduced species they are quite a handsome bird and very easy to recognise.

Kuala Lumpur fortunately was dry, weather wise that is, so a visit to the attractive Lake Gardens yielded **Milky Stork** *Ibis cinerius*, **Hill Mynah** *Gracula religiosa* and **Great-billed Heron** *Ardea sumatrana*. Another four days at sea brought us to Mumbai (Bombay if you prefer), our last port in the Far East. An exciting and vibrant city but no really memorable bird records although **Thick-billed Crow** *Corvus machrorynchos* and **Brown-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus* were new birds for me.

Sunday 28th March found us in the Middle East tied up alongside at Muscat in the Oman. Red-necked Phalarope were again seen as we approached in the early morning and amongst other birds recorded were **Crag Martin**, *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*, **Booted Eagle**, *Hieraaetus pennatus* and **Sooty Gull**, *Larus hemprichii*. Oman is a lovely country and ever since I have been a member of RAFOS the Society has been trying to get back to re-capture those "Masirah" days, unfortunately it has not happened, but it is a country that I will certainly try my best to return to. Dubai and Aqaba followed (where we recorded our 200th species **Common Bulbul**, *Pycnonotus barbatus*) and then on to Sharm el Sheik. **Hoopoe**, *Upupa epops* and **Socatroa Cormorant**, *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* were seen in Dubai. During the transit along the Red Sea we picked up four passengers **Lesser Whitethroat**, of the smaller browner eastern race, *Sylvia curruca minula*, which spent a few hours resting on the sport's deck netting before slipping away as quietly as they came.

The transit through the Suez Canal, on whose banks I lived between 1949 and 1951, was an Ornithological Feast. We dropped off some of the passengers, who were visiting the Pyramids and Cairo, very early in the morning at Port Suez. Fog then developed which meant our transit of the Canal was delayed for three hours. The fog cleared with the rising temperature at around 0900 coinciding nicely with thermals suitable for migrating raptors, the most common of which was **Steppe Buzzard**, *Buteo buteo vulpinus*, with over 500. Also in the rapidly rising spiral of birds were: **Steppe Eagle**, *Aquila nipalensis*, **Short-toed Eagle**, *Circaetus gallicus*, **Lesser Spotted Eagle**,

Aquila pomarina and **Booted Eagle**, *Hieraetus pennatus*. **Black Kite**, *Milvus migrans* was another abundant species along with an **Egyptian Vulture**, *Neophron percnopterus* and a **Long-legged Buzzard**, *Buteo rufinus*. Other highlights of our transit, along the Canal, were **Pied Kingfisher**, *Ceryle rudis*, **Alpine Swift**, *Apus melba* and **Spur-winged Plover**, *Vanellus spinosus*.

Pied Kingfisher



Our next port of call was Piraeus, in Greece, and from there we went for a day in Athens. Here we had good views of an altercation between a **Common Kestrel**, *Falco tinnunculus* and an Alpine Swift. The Kestrel was nesting in a hole in one of the pillars at Hadrians Gate and did not want the swift invading his space.

On the morning of 9th April Arcadia was proceeding on a West North Westerly course, like some eleven storey block of flats, under a clear blue sky with a light Northerly breeze. Ideal conditions for birds migrating from Africa to Europe. Up on the Sun Deck, deck 11, the very roof of our vessel we spent the morning recording these migrants as some of them stopped off for a short rest. I must confess to have never sat out on this deck before during our voyage, being a shade-loving creature rarely venturing higher than the shelter of the Promenade Deck, deck 3. This morning however armed with

binoculars, camera and notebook we recorded 21 species and missed a lot more. The most common was **Nightingale**, *Luscinia megarhynchos* and included in the list were: **Thrush Nightingale**, *Luscinia luscinia*, **Ruppel's Warbler**, *Sylvia rueppli*, **Pied Flycatcher**, *Ficedula hypoleuca*, **Wryneck**, *Jynx torquilla*, **Subalpine Warbler**, *Sylvia cantillans*, **Woodchat Shrike**, *Lanius senator* and two **Black-crowned Night Heron**, *Nycticorax nycticorax* which followed the ship for some forty minutes.



Migrant Woodchat Shrike 9Apr 10

Photo: John Le Gassick

This “fall” of migrants occurred as we transited across the mouth of the Ionian Sea between 19 and 16 degrees East. In the afternoon the weather conditions became less favourable and the stream of birds dried up. Later in the afternoon of this remarkable day I was out on deck to watch the departure of the Italian Pilot from the ship, always worth watching as they insisted that the ship keep travelling at speed (20 knots) whilst they leapt out of and into the pilot cutter. Then shortly after our transit of the Straits of Messina, a **Nightjar**, *Caprimulgus europaeus* flew along, beside the vessel, very close to the side, apparently picking up small prey items before finally disappearing around the bow. This was my first ever sighting of this crepuscular bird in broad daylight, never mind at such close range. Whilst I was collecting my thoughts from this remarkable sighting a **Hoopoe**, *Upupa epops* flew up onto one of the balconies.

Well that is the end of this tale, having recorded 245 species of bird, spent 94 nights in a small cabin and eaten quite a few meals (282 in fact not including elevenses). We sailed into Southampton on 15th April older, wiser and certainly heavier. Back to reality!

List of Books consulted during the Voyage:

Seabirds an identification guide by Peter Harrison

Shorebirds an identification guide to waders of the world, by Peter Hayman, John Marchant and Tony Prater

Wildfowl an identification guide to the ducks, geese and swans of the world by Steve

Madge and Hilary Burn

Birds of the Eastern Caribbean by Peter Evans

Mexican Birds by Roger Tory Peterson and Edward Chalif

Field Guide to the Birds of Western North America by David Sibley

Hawaii Birds by James Kavanagh and Raymond Leung

The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds by Peter, Pat and Raoul Slater

Hong Kong Birds by Clive Viney and Karen Phillips

Collins Field Guide to Birds of South East Asia by Ben King, Martin Woodcock and E.C.Dickinson

Collins Bird Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe by Killian Mullarney, Lars Svensson, Dan Zetterstrom and Peter Grant

Of these guides the ones written by David Sibley and Peter Harrison are outstanding.



A lovely study of a baby Robin

By Brian Grove

FUERTEVENTURA AND ALL THAT

By Julian Quail

September 2009 and Lucy and I were knackered so we decided to go on holiday. We booked a couple of weeks in Fuerteventura (Canary Islands) because we could guarantee the sun, Jul and Aug having been truly awful, and the bird watching is very good at this time of year

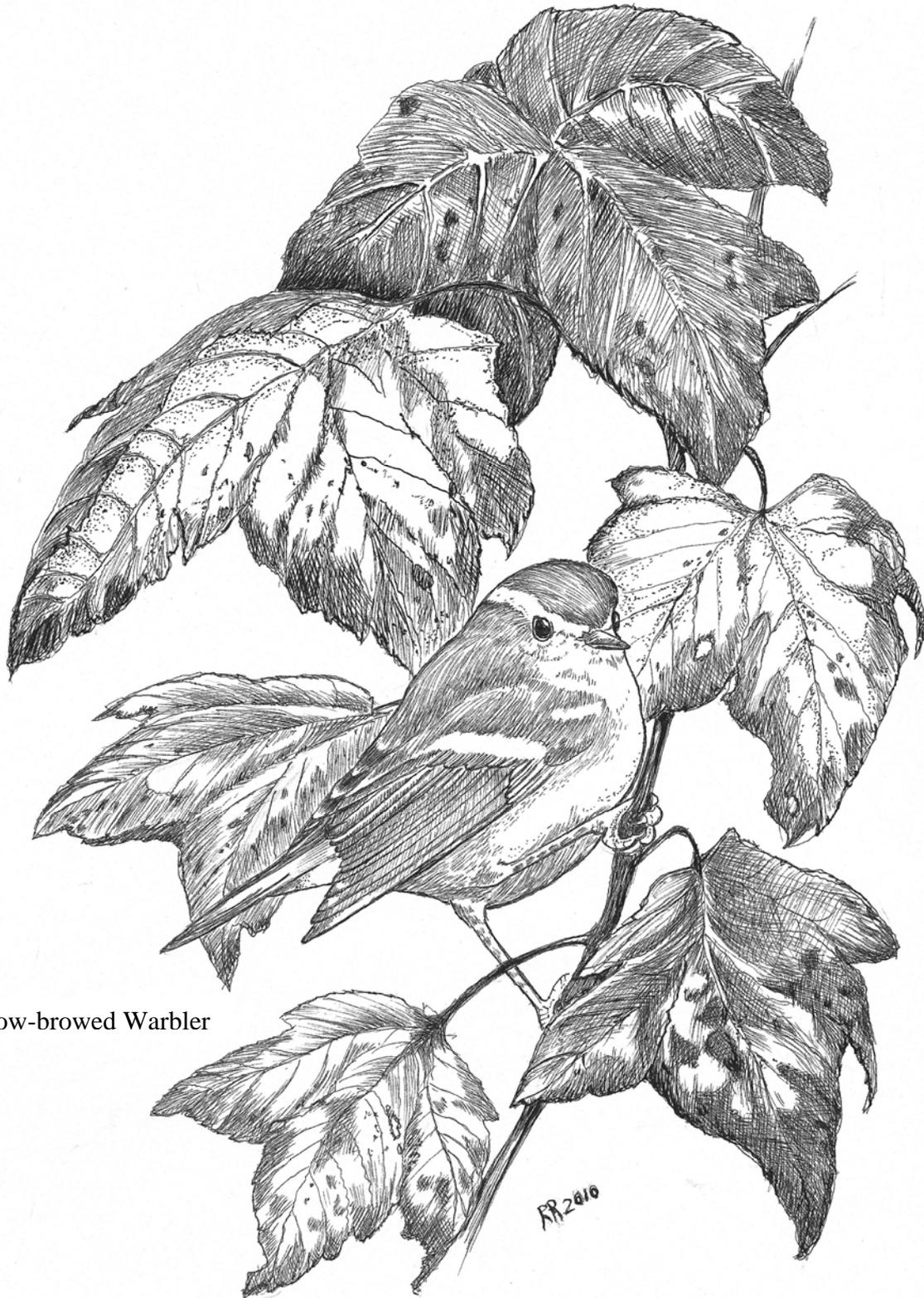
Situated about 60 miles off the west coast of Africa, Fuerteventura is an elongated island measuring approximately 60 by 20 miles, so it is reasonably easy to drive around. The first settlers are believed to have arrived here from North Africa around 850 BC and the island was mentioned by Homer in the Odyssey. But it was in 1405 that the Frenchman Jean de Bethencourt, having allied himself to the King of Castille, conquered the island and gave his name to the former capital, Betancuria, on the west coast. The name of the island itself is believed to have come from Bethencourt's exclamation "Que forte aventure!" ("What a grand adventure"). However, the name Fuerteventura simply means "strong fortune" when translated literally from the Spanish.

The climate is pleasant throughout the year with average winter highs of 22°C and a low of around 15°C; we had average temperatures of 28°C during our stay. At certain times of the year easterly winds bring in fine white sand from the Sahara making for some fabulous beaches of pure golden sand. As far as birding goes, Fuerteventura is home to the Canary Island Chat, which is endemic, and other interesting species include the Egyptian Vulture, Barbary Partridge, Cream-Coloured Courser, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Spectacled Warbler, Common Raven, Southern Grey Shrike and Trumpeter Finch.

We left the UK at 0730 on 23 Sep 09 having decided to fly via Madrid with Iberia. (We could have flown direct but we have such a loathing of Thomas Cook that we decided to give Iberia a go and change planes.) The flight and transfer in Madrid went smoothly, there was even time for a quick 'stiffener' between flights, and on arrival, we hired a car for the duration of the holiday and drove to our hotel, a journey of about 75 mins, arriving at 1630. The hotel was situated on a hill overlooking the beach and provided all the facilities that we needed. We had booked a full inclusive stay, so neither of us had to worry about spending more money or looking for a restaurant.

As it was still early we decided to go exploring before dinner and of course, we took our binoculars with us, just in case! On that first 45 minute walk, we saw several **Pied Flycatcher** (Male, Female and Juvenile), **Raven**, **Glossy Ibis** and a **Yellow Browed Warbler**. The Pied Flycatcher is a regular migrant but is not so abundant in the UK any more, and it was fabulous to see so many during our stay; they were seen daily in virtually all destinations. The Yellow Browed Warbler was a fabulous sighting and a first for me. I knew straight away that it was a warbler and not one that I had seen before; the two wing bars were the real give away. The only other possibility was Hume's Warbler, and this was potentially even rarer, but I still can't be certain that it wasn't a Hume's Warbler, and never will be.

After a good night's sleep, I went for an early morning walk, waiting for the sun to rise, giving me the opportunity to catch the birds first thing. However, I had miscalculated how long it takes the sun to rise the closer you get to the equator. I waited and I waited and I waited. In the end I thought sod the sun and went back to find Lucy.



Yellow-browed Warbler

After breakfast, we spent the morning reading by the pool before going to the beach for the afternoon's exertions of swimming and sleeping on sun beds; it's a tough job but someone has to do it! On the way back to the hotel we saw a **Crested Crane**, normally found from the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo through to Uganda, of which it is the national bird, and Kenya to eastern South Africa; this dude was either feral, seriously lost or an escapee from the local zoo. Anyway, we saw it

every day on the scrub between the beach and the lighthouse and it seemed quite content and not scared of anyone or anything, even the 'fast and loose' chipmunks (everybody calls them chipmunks but they are really Barbary Ground Squirrels.) Mind you this is not surprising given its size - the bird not the chipmunks- at over a metre tall and weighing 3.5 kg, its body plumage is mainly grey, the wings are predominantly white but contain feathers with a range of colours and the head has a crown of stiff golden feathers. The sides of the face are white, and there is a bright red inflatable throat pouch. The bill was relatively short and grey and the legs black and like all cranes, it feeds on insects, reptiles and small mammals.

After a couple of days of serious relaxing by the pool and on the beach we decided to go for a walk on the plain within the National Park, just up the road. The birding here was tough but very rewarding. We saw an **Isabelline Wheatear**, *oenanthe isabellina*, some distance into the plain - about 2-3 miles. This is a small passerine, formerly classed as a member of the thrush family *Turdidae*, but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher, *Muscicapidae*. It is a migratory, insectivorous bird, breeding in southern Russia and central Asia to Northern Pakistan and wintering in Africa and India. It's like a female Northern Wheatear but larger, more upright and more tawny in colour and has more black on its tail. The axillaries and underwing coverts are white, unlike the Northern Wheatear whose under wing coverts are mottled with grey and it is a very rare vagrant to Western Europe. What a spot by Lucy!

Lucy is a natural bird watcher, good eyes, good ears and keen to learn – her enthusiasm is infectious. On the other hand I'm frankly useless; poor eye sight and poor hearing - pardon!. I just love it. We also saw quite a few Ravens and a pair of **Hoopoe** feeding.

The following day I had a sense of humour failure when I managed to get the car stuck in some sand. Thankfully, Lucy was thinking clearly and persuaded a couple of chaps to pull us out with their 4x4. The good news was that we saw lots of birds including a **Barbary Falcon**, *Falco pelegrinoides*, a medium-sized falcon about the size of a crow. This is a bird of semi-desert and dry open hills which breeds in the Canary Islands and along the coast of North Africa, typically laying its eggs in cliff-ledge nests. Adults have paler grey-blue upperparts than the Peregrine, often with a buff wash to the barred underparts, whereas the larger species has a white background colour. The nape is rufous, but this is difficult to see. Sexes are similar, apart from size, but the young birds have brown upperparts and streaked underparts. The streaking is lighter than in the juvenile Peregrine.

Over the next few days we saw **Linnet**, **Brambling**, **Berthelot's Pippit**, **Raven**, **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Northern Wheatear** (Greenland), **Spanish Sparrow** and **Sacred Ibis**. The **Northern Wheatear**, *Oenanthe oenanthe*, is the most widespread member of the wheatear genus *Oenanthe* in Europe and Asia and is a migratory, insectivorous species breeding in open stony country in Europe and Asia with footholds in Canada, Greenland and Alaska. This one was clearly the Greenland, *leucorhoa*, sub-species that we saw. In fact, I didn't recognise it at first, it is a slightly bigger bird with softer colouring.

Lucy and I speculated how this bird could fly all the way from Greenland to North Africa and back every six months. We wondered if it might fly across to southern Sweden and down through Benelux, France and Spain. However, I discovered an article on the

web¹ that suggests these fabulous little birds may in fact accomplish the flight to their wintering grounds in West Africa, in one direct, transatlantic leg of more than 4000km. This conclusion is based on analyses of wing lengths, body weights, and timing of departure from West Greenland and arrival on the Canary Islands. Staggering! Of course, they are not the only birds to travel this distance. Swallows being the classic example.

Following our debacle with the car in the sand, we decided to spend the next couple of days on the beach. We enjoyed the walking along the water's edge to the lighthouse and back but we could have done with fewer naked Germans!

On the last but one day we decided to give the plain one more try, just in case there was any chance of seeing Houbara Bustard, Cream Coloured Courser or Barbary Partridge. Obviously, we didn't; I am not sure the b***** are there at all. God, what a dry, hot and unforgiving environment it was. However, we did see a **Spectacled Warbler**, which was another first for me. My aim is to see all the warblers in the Palearctic before I am 50. I still have quite a long way to go but there is always a chance. I've added 3 more this year: Spectacled, Yellow Browed and Dartford. Next year we plan on going to Spain and possibly Cyprus, so hopefully I will see a few more including Cyprus, Ruppell's, Olive Tree, Moustached, Bonelli's, Subalpine, Zitting Cisticola and possibly Upcher's Warbler (on passage through Cyprus). The year after that we will visit one of the Baltic countries, probably Estonia during Spring migration, to try and pick up Arctic, Greenish, Booted, Blyth's Reed and River Warbler. Then I guess it's off to North Africa. Undoubtedly, I will never see Aquatic Warbler. This is a standing joke with my birding mentor Mike Blair, who knows too well that this is my bogey bird.

That evening we went down to see if we could see anything in the scrub that straddled the area between the beach and the town of Morro Janble, our hotel was on the outskirts of the town, and our trip was rewarded with a **Southern Grey Shrike**, *Lanius meridionalis*, which was probably the bird of the holiday. What a cracking bird this was sitting there chirping and scratching away.

It is closely related to the Great Grey Shrike, *Lanius excubitor*, but they do not interbreed and are separated by choice of habitat (Sangster et al., 2002). The race *meridionalis* is resident in southern Europe and north Africa, is slightly smaller and darker than the Great Grey Shrike and prefers dry open country. The race *L. m. pallidirostis* breeds in central Asia and winters in the tropics, is much paler than Southern Grey or Great Grey and is sometimes split as a separate species, the Steppe Grey Shrike - *L. Pallidirostis*. This medium-sized passerine bird eats large insects, small birds and rodents. Like other Shrikes, it hunts from prominent perches, and impales corpses on thorns or barbed wire as a "larder". However, the Canary race is a separate sub-species *L. m. Koenigi*.

The day before we flew home we discovered a deserted golf course which was flush with birds. It was amazing. There were **Hoopoe**, *Upupa epops*, everywhere and 2 were calling to each other, which is where they get their name from. However, in between the calls they seemed to be making a noise that sounded like they were spitting at each other. One was calling from the telephone mast just above us and we had a fabulous view. It is a wonderful looking bird notable for its distinctive 'crown' of

¹ "Do Nearctic Northern Wheatear Migrate Non-Stop to Africa?" by K Thorup

feathers and is widespread across Europe, Asia, and North Africa; and it extends across Asia, all the way to Japan, and south to Madagascar. There is some debate about how many sub-species there are with birds differing in size and minor differences in plumage. For example, the bird in Japan has a greyer mantle and less pink. Anyway, this Hoopoe is calling and 'spitting' at this other Hoopoe, and the next thing I know another one has flown into the bird on the telephone mast. It made an almighty thud and only one flew away. It was quite shocking! I must ask Mike Blair if he has ever come across this kind of behavior from Hoopoe: I've heard of Robins killing other Robins but not Hoopoe.



Canary Stonechat

We spent time scanning the golf course, which wasn't in bad condition but a little parched and Lucy spotted a Grey Heron drinking from the pond at the back of the course. We were also lucky to see three **Canary Stonechat**, *Saxicola dacotiae*. These delightful little birds are endemic to Fuerteventura and are pale in comparison to our Stonechat; it looks like a cross between a Whinchat and our Stonechat. The head is brown black with a white supercilium, not seen in our Stonechat, and the orange-buff breast is much softer than our Stonechat and in the Canarian light appears very soft.

We also saw **Spanish Sparrow**, **Canary**, **White Wagtail**, **Spectacled Warbler** and a family of **Buzzards**. The strange thing about the Buzzards was the colouring. We had very good views of them as they circled overhead and the Collin's Bird Guide clearly identified them as Long Legged Buzzards. But why would a family have migrated together? Is it normal for a family to do this? Our instincts suggested that this must be the Common Buzzard but the colouring confused the hell out of me. I know that Buzzards can morph quite considerably but I am so sure that these were Long Legged Buzzard. Another question for Mike Blair.

We spent the last morning back at the golf course which was much quieter. But we were treated to a **Barbary Falcon** hunting no more than 20 feet away as it swooped out of the sky and dived onto a small passerine. We had a long journey back home later that day but it was worth it.

Illmitz and points East and West – Spring 2010

By Pete Evans with asides by Mike Blair

CAST (in order of appearance)

Mike Blair, Sue Fleming, Pete Evans, Iain and Evangeline Mackenzie and Dick Yates.

The show was billed for three purposes, a recce for a possible exped in 2011, a data-collection and note-taking exercise by Mike for a book project and an excuse to experience some excellent birdwatching in an area of Austria and Hungary (northwestern Pannonia) that is very much under-explored by UK birders.

Geographically, the small town of Illmitz lies at the westernmost edge of The Great Hungarian Plain and is close to the Hungarian border: 18km to the east, 5km to the south-southeast and 5km to the west-south-west, the last being across Lake Neusiedl (Neusiedlersee). The adjacent countryside is relatively flat, but far from boring; and because much of it is farmed in a sympathetic way, some I suspect would say inefficient, it is actually quite picturesque. ¹Strip farming, particularly in the vineyards, has mostly not been overtaken by monoculture; in many places quite large areas of woodland have been left around the fields, which supports good bio-diversity and therefore the good habitat that attracts large numbers of birds.

Mike set off in mid April on the two-day drive to Illmitz. For three weeks, he visited many sites of natural history interest, making extensive notes about birds, animals and plants. Northwestern Pannonia is so rich in places to visit that he was visiting, or exploring in detail, a good number for the first time. For example, how many of you know that along the north bank of the Danube between Vienna and Bratislava there is a huge riverine forest reserve, Donau-Auen, that is some 50km long? It is a National Park, accessible by car in four general areas, all reaching the river, and much more can be reached by bicycle, canoe, or on foot via a myriad of trails. Despite this, the majority is closed to the public, and many areas have not been much studied, in part because the density of the uncleared understorey is too great. The restoration in biodiversity, since most of that woodland was felled for fuel by the near-starving populations in the late 1940s, is amazing. Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* has begun to recolonise the forest, the core population 30km to the north in the Marchegg having survived against all the odds. In addition, there are two large 'new' reserves just across the border from Illmitz in Hungary that alone could occupy your interest for weeks. They are 'new' in the sense that they are only just becoming known to the general public in these countries, but I doubt if anyone in a random group of British birdwatchers would be aware of them.

Base camp was established at our regular haunt, the Illmitzerhof², a family-run pension. Sue and I independently had arranged to travel out on 6 May and the plan was to meet at the Gatwick departure lounge. Unknowingly, we had both arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare and spent more than an hour successfully avoiding each other! With departure time approaching we bumped into each other on our way to the gate. Apart from one quite violent episode of turbulence, the flight was up to the usual EasyJet standard. We were collected at Vienna airport about 2100 by Mike and quite literally whisked away in 40 minutes to the Pustahof back in Illmitz, a restaurant where he had arranged for us to eat after they normally had stopped serving food.

¹ Most vineyards near Illmitz are jointly-owned by several families, each having, two to a dozen rows of vines in sequence,

² Burgi & Didi Rel-Hinterlechner. See www.illmitzerhof.at

Early next morning I was out on my customary pre-breakfast stroll along a nearby tree-lined lane. As Mike will tell you, bird song is not my forte³ but the performances of Nightingale, Turtle Dove and Golden Oriole⁴ was an absolute joy. Nightingale in the UK has a reputation of being very difficult to see, but on this particular morning there were four out feeding on the road in full view. The first sortie was to the Austrian part of the lowest-lying plain, the Hanság, which before the construction of drains and dykes, often flooded in wet years. The Hanság is roughly circular, about 20km radius, but the Austrian part in the southeasternmost salient of the country is fairly small, but does contain a very important bird reserve that for decades has held a breeding population of **Great Bustard** *Otis tarda*. There have been times when the numbers breeding approached local extinction, but over the last few years, the group has comprised around 25 birds, perhaps 10 being breeding females. We saw several distant birds, the heat haze making details difficult to make out, but Western **Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava* were everywhere, the local breeding population being the Blue-headed variety.



Yellow Wagtail looking a bit scruffy having taken a bath.

Photo: Dick Yates

The following day, we explored just a bit of the Donau-Auen National Park. The Danube was running fairly high, but within the banks; quite unlike 2002 when the floodwater was 12m above the banks and came within only 15cm of breaching the last line of flood defences. The birdsong was amazing, but the last week in April is probably better for birding,

because the leaves are not fully out by then. Nevertheless, we saw and heard numerous **Icterine Warbler** *Hippolais icterina* and an abundance of the common woodland species. **Syrian Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos syriacus* was seen clearly once, but probably glimpsed often. It was quite unexpected to find **Goosander** *Mergus merganser* breeding just beneath the only road bridge across the Danube between Vienna and Bratislava. However, I spotted a pair of the bird of the day as I was enjoying an Austrian-style toasted 'sandwich' – open, with lots of toast and ample meat paste, sausage and ~~foreign~~ local green stuff – but because I had my mouth full, Mike identified the birds before I could get a word out; **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus*, locally very scarce⁵. The forest is an amazing place now that so many of the trees planted over 60 years ago have come to maturity. There are also many wildflower meadows.

However, the highlight of the day came unexpectedly as we made our way back to the bridge over the Danube. Several motorbikes approached, probably a bit in excess of the 100km/h speed limit, and at the same time, Mike caught sight out of the corner of his left eye a male **Common Pheasant** *Phasianus colchicus* flying low at speed. Since the pheasant's position remained constant as to angle, a collision was inevitable, so Mike braked. It crossed the bonnet safely, but then became the centre of a brief sphere

³ Nor even Pete's thirte!

⁴ **Common Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos*, **European Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* & **European Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus*.

⁵ Mike and Sue have only ever seen one in the region, about 12 years before.

of feathers as it and the lead biker's helmet attempted to occupy the same space at the same time. Fortunately for the biker, he was able to stop safely, despite an interesting mega-wobble. The ex-pheasant could not match that display.

The next day, we rented bicycles in Illmitz and took the ferry across the Neusiedlersee to Mörbisch am See. From the lake you get an idea of the enormous size of the reed-beds on either side, they can be up to 5km wide, and you begin to understand why, in 2009, there were about 750 breeding pairs of **Great Egret** *Ardea alba*, over 200 pairs of **Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* and why an aerial survey over the remotest reed to count **Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia* nests also discovered that **Pygmy Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* had recolonised Neusiedlersee - 25 nests were identified. In 2010 there were over 80!



Pygmy Cormorant and Night Heron

Photo: Mike Blair

On our way down to the ferry from Illmitz, we stopped to watch a small raptor that had just left its night roost in some trees, and had superb views of a male **Red-footed Falcon** *Falco vespertinus*, nowadays another scarce visitor and former breeder. Our cycle trip actually encountered some hills, the steepest fortunately being the down-slopes, and included a loop across the border into Hungary. Although we found an excellent mixture of habitats, a former freshwater wetland, the object of our trip, had been almost entirely converted to grain fields. The return border crossing was marked by commemorative sculptures and display boards that celebrated the response of young Austrians to the Hungarian communist government's threat to shoot anyone crossing the border illegally. Several thousand Austrians put on running kit and took part in a 10km run that largely would take in the route we had travelled in reverse, and at the border, simply lifted the gates off their hinges and offered handshakes and refreshments to the border guards, who promptly shouldered their levelled weapons and waved the runners through.

I had become accustomed to the excellent food, but in our sojourns to restaurants in Illmitz, I had been surprised to find out how well I liked the local white wines. Normally, I prefer red, but these grape varieties had an excellent and distinctive taste. Our party increased to five on the arrival of Iain and Evangeline, who spent just one night in Illmitz before we all set off on a five-day trip into Hungary. Our destination was a five hour drive away to the east of Budapest, the Hortobágy National Park, a vast area with many habitats, but the dominant is the puszta, the rich alluvial flat land that stretches some

700km from east to west. It's an area we had all, with the exception of Evangeline, visited before. At this point I should say that, overall, the weather was less than kind, except on the first full day. The strong winds of the first few days in Pannonia were followed by gloom and some rain, although compared to other parts of Europe where huge quantities of rain fell⁶, we got off relatively lightly, that is, until the journey home, but more of that later. However, the afternoon of our arrival was fine, and we strolled down the lane opposite the Patkós Csárda⁷. Once again, the lane was alive with birds, the most obliging being Red-footed Falcon. We like the friendly Patkós Csárda, where not only can we take advantage of its location at the junction of the two roads that encircle the north of the National Park, but also we can gorge on its superb food⁸!



Red-footed Falcon

Photo: Mike Blair



Moustached Warbler

Photo: Sue Fleming

The first full day saw us visiting the Hortobágy halastó, an area known to UK birders as 'the fish ponds'. The word 'pond' is a bit of an understatement, for although close to the entrance there are hatchery ponds that merit that description, there are a host of enormous shallow lakes where fish grow to maturity as a commercial enterprise. These were dug out, mainly by hand, between 1915 and 1921, for the large-scale rearing of carp for food, a practice that still continues today, though on a smaller scale and involving many more fish species. The ponds cover about 6,000 of the National Park's 55,000 hectares. To examine all the ponds at all closely would take several days from the many kilometres of embankments. As can be imagined, it's a haven for wetland birds and sightings of 40 or 50 different species in one visit would not be unusual. Luckily, we bumped into a tour guide who (surprise, surprise!) Mike knew⁹ and who was happy to tell us the precise location where a **Moustached Warbler** *Acrocephalus melanopogon* was singing. We easily found it, for it was showing quite nicely¹⁰ in one of the many reed beds. It was busy proclaiming its territory and stayed at the top of the reeds long enough for us to get a 'scope on it. This magic little bird was a lifer for several of us. Also quite prominent were most of the European heron species, including **Squacco** *Ardeola ralloides* and **Purple** *Ardea purpurea*, as was **Pygmy Cormorant**.

We awoke next morning to pretty continuous rain. Over breakfast, Mike proposed that

⁶ There was a huge low-pressure system, stretching from Iberia across to Ukraine, that scarcely moved for about 24 days. Fortunately for us, the worst rainfall was compressed into an arc that took in southern Poland, which suffered devastating, long-lasting flooding. Southern Slovakia had the worst floods since before World War II, but because the weather south of the Slovak border was far less violent, relatively little water accumulated in Hungary, the exception being a huge cloud, 10km in radius, that dropped 30cm of rain in 24 hours on the city of Miskolc on the Danube in western Hungary.

⁷ See www.patkoscsarda.hu

⁸ Its goulash soup in a suspended metal bowl (Kesselgulasch) and 'Special Rich Soup' are stunning starters!

⁹ Gerard Gorman, a Yorkshireman who lives in Budapest with his Hungarian wife and family, who wrote *Birding in Eastern Europe*, WildSounds, Salthouse, UK and *Birds of Hungary*, Christopher Helm, UK. See www.probirder.com

¹⁰ Very unusual behaviour for it to exhibit itself so openly for so long a period – we were so lucky.

we drive around some of the local area to try to find birds roosting until the weather improved, and so later that morning we found ourselves on the bank of the river Tisza, which is a major tributary of the Danube. Getting to the other side entailed boarding a chain-hauled ferry. We drove on alongside a few other vehicles and in due course a surly-looking Hungarian (SLH) was tapping on the window demanding money. At this point we had a language problem establishing how much the toll would be. He produced a scrap of paper and scribbled on it 900 forints – so far so good. Sue coordinated the gathering of the dues and between us we managed to come up with the requisite amount, but SLH was not a happy teddy. Several times he tried volubly to convey to us what the problem was. We realised that adopting the traditional British ploy of the linguistically-challenged (shouting louder) would not help much, but eventually it dawned on us that he wanted the fee in coins. Did he have a meter somewhere on this Heath-Robinson ferry? He returned the 200 forint notes we had proffered, rather quickly, we thought, and went off muttering, leaving us somewhat bemused. There is more later.

On the north bank of the Tisza, we followed a local route west, more or less paralleling the river. Here, we discovered what is probably a core principle of Hungarian road maintenance policy. Over a stretch of some 28Km we encountered about 200 sections where the top tarmac surface had been scraped from one side of the road, or the other, or both, leaving cavities with steep, sharp lips on the edges and ends; and to make matters worse many were full of water making the lips invisible. Naturally, oncoming traffic, mercifully scarce but always surprised to see us, used the intact side of the road as far as possible. We managed to negotiate these hazards successfully and paid a brief visit to the enormous wetlands¹¹ and lakes that lie adjacent to the River Tisza at Poroszló, seeing **Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* in numbers and at close range¹² before the rain closed in again.



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photo: Sue Fleming

Later that evening, after dinner at the Patkós, we were settling the bill for the meal when Sue produced the 200 forint notes. Our friendly waiter came to the table, looked at the notes offered and sadly shook his head. Luckily, his English vocabulary could cope with telling us that these notes were no longer legal tender having been superseded by coins. That's why SLH had gone away muttering! But wait, there is still more! This episode had occurred on a Saturday. The following Monday in Tiszafüred we saw signs for a bank and Mike had a bright idea, "Let's see if we can change those notes."

¹¹ These are also vast, but there are organised boat trips, but only on days when you can't get there...

¹² This is the only reliable site MB knows where this species performs reliably every day in daylight.

We followed the signs, but there was no longer a bank there, although the Hungarians had kindly renewed the direction signs. Finally, we located the bank and Mike and Sue went in to conduct the transaction. They emerged a few minutes later wearing resigned looks. The teller had told them, in fluent English, that they could have changed the notes until last Friday, and helpfully suggested that, for another week, the Bank of Hungary would still redeem them. As the nearest branch was in central Budapest, 125km away, there were no votes for the proposal for the sake of 77p.

This tale has a postscript. It transpires the offending notes had been offered to Sue in UK by a fellow RAFOS member unable to join our trip, whom it would be churlish to embarrass by naming. Suffice it to say that he's good at inadvertently testing smoke alarms and bad at finding shearwaters close inshore!

One day we were travelling along the road to the north of the Hortobágy in an area known for **Common Cranes** *Grus grus* (we saw over 70; most are thought to be non-breeders having a gap year from migration) and raptors such as Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (which we didn't see). We stopped at several small viewing platforms along the way and at one we could see, some way off, a raptor of indeterminate size, perched on the cross-beam of one of the many pole-beam wells¹³. At first we couldn't identify it for certain, but when another joined it we determined that they were buzzard-sized. Then the colour-pattern of the feathering could be seen and it was identified as an immature **Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus*, whose most northerly population breeds here. I should, perhaps, point out to those of you who, like me, had never seen one before, that one of the essential identification criteria is that it has short 'trousers' (leg feathering), so really it should be called a Short-trousered Buzzard because it hasn't actually got long legs – it's just an illusion!



Common Cranes

Photo: Sue Fleming

One of the reasons we stayed at the Patkós Csárda for this particular period was that it included Sue's birthday. Mike had done a wonderfully surreptitious job of organising a surprise party; the staff served up a veritable banquet of deliciously prepared whole duck, which we washed down with bottles of bubbly. The five of us really dined in style that night. Mike told us later that people on a nearby table were frantically scanning the menu to try and find our dish! Unfortunately for them it was a one-off special.

Another trip we made was to spend more time exploring the area at Poroszló where we

¹³ An ancient but reliable design, traditionally operable only by herdsmen who could pull down the lever arm 5 metres above the ground by snaring it with their long whip, either by standing on the saddle of their horse, or by using their long-range walking stilts they used as platforms to watch over their livestock far out on the puszta.

had seen the Night Herons. We first had a meal at a hotel set amid splendid ponds where we sat at waterside tables. This took some time because quite a few of our first choices were 'off', but the staff had to wait each time until the English-speaking waiter was free to inform us!

After lunch Mike walked west along the bank of the lake to find out where and when the boat trips departed. The booking office, in a large and new-looking wooden building, was closed, marooned by floodwater in a grassy car park. Near a small pier, a large notice-board announced in several languages that there were scheduled trips every hour throughout the week but only after 31 May, however, there would be two trips on Fridays and Saturdays during May. The general appearance of the grassy approach to the pier suggested that the May trips for 2010 had not started yet! Mind you, the appearance of a **Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius* moving between two avenues of trees was some compensation. The others had taken the eastern path, finding many Night Herons and all the river terns: **Whiskered**, **White-winged** and **Black Terns**, *Chlidonias hybrida*, *leucopterus* and *niger*.

All too soon it was time to return to Illmitz. Much extensive flooding was seen in the fields, evidence of the torrential rain, which, to a large degree, we had managed to avoid. Unfortunately, it was also time for Iain and Evangeline to leave us and return home, with Sue following the next day.



Penduline Tit at Nest *Photo: Dick Yates*

For a day or two Mike and I were on our own until Dick arrived. We explored some of the sites on the far side of Lake Neusiedl, finding **Penduline Tit** *Remiz pendulinus* nesting. We also walked round a large grassland area near Oggau, the Oggauer Heide. Bordered by fields and vineyards, this is an excellent place for harriers to breed. At one time, **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* was the dry-land equivalent of Western Marsh Harrier. But

today, the latter, perhaps driven by population pressure, has spread on to farmland and out-competes the former, and so we were lucky to see a single Hen Harrier. However, **Montagu's Harrier** *C. pygargus* seems to have a more catholic set of breeding habitat preferences and several obliged. In between rain showers and under lowering cloud, we were puzzled by a dashing, dark falcon. Eventually it settled on a small twiggy bush and we got close enough to identify it as a very wet **Hobby** *Falco subbuteo*. Its behaviour was explained when another falcon appeared, for it had been courting its mate by display flying. Now the two zoomed round several times, before settling, once again to perches. The male caught a dragonfly, but the female declined the offered morsel – she probably prefers Milk Tray! To the rear of a small woodland bordering the reedbeds, two **Barred Warblers** *Sylvia nisoria* were in competitive song, and as we were trying to see them properly by edging round a bush, a large bird came out of the long grass almost under my feet. It's the closest I've ever been to a **European Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus*!

On 21 May we picked Dick up from Bratislava airport¹⁴. Over the next few days we visited some of the local hotspots, of which there are many, including the two very extensive national parks in Hungary. One (Hanság South) has a large colony of **European Bee-eaters** *Merops apiaster*, a fascinating array of wet woodlands and heaths and several very large ponds teeming with bird life. The other (Hanság East) has endless tracks through mostly wet forest, the main route being 20km long! This area has a large population of **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* (whose sharply-‘zizzing’ song comprise frequencies that I am unable to hear – I have to ‘tick’ their presence on the say-so of trusted others!) and also surprisingly of **Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella*. Although mostly plantation forest, there are old natural stands, and the clear-felling is done on small lots, so there is a huge range of age-related habitats, much with copious undergrowth. In both sites, there are considerable deer populations, particularly of **Red** *Cervus elaphus* and **Roe** *Capriolus capriolus* and we also obtained good views of **European Wild Boar** *Sus scrofa scrofa*, when 2, presumably adult females accompanied by a procession of no less than 14 piglets – or should that be boarlets - crossed the track about 150m ahead of us. However, it was on another trip to the Austrian part of the Hanság, below Andau, that we saw ten male Great Bustard in flight, an astonishing privilege. Two minutes later a group of people turned up and missed out. However, the birds’ heads could still be seen above the long grass.

Whilst staying at the Illmitzerhof we had several conversations with Michael Dvorak who works at BirdLife Austria in Vienna. Michael is hoping that RAFOS members will be able to assist with survey work next spring which will probably take the form of a common bird census in late April and early May. Perhaps somewhat unbelievably this could include Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*!

Another splendid association is that between visiting RAFOS members and the locally-renowned natural history film maker Robert Polay and his Canadian-born wife Sylvia. Robert’s enthusiasm is infectious. He shows some wonderful footage of local birds at his weekly wildlife presentations in one of the local hostleries, the Jagdhof. His equipment is fairly basic and his car acts as his hide, but he says his secret, as all wild life photographers will tell you, is that he has good local knowledge and masses of patience. Sylvia has a huge vocabulary in Canadian English and Austrian German, and has the gift of employing both at the same time and remaining completely understandable! She also provides splendid banquets, seemingly at the drop of a hat.



Black-tailed Godwit

Photo: Dick Yates

We were given a good example of Robert’s expertise the day we went to the local outdoor swimming lake, ‘Apetloner Badeplatz’, to look for the resident **Long-eared**

¹⁴ About 50 minutes from Illmitz

Owls *Asio otus*. (See Pete's photo inside the front cove. Ed) For several years they had occupied a nest-box right above the crowds of bathers, but this year they had chosen to nest in a waste-paper basket that had been wedged in a tree for this very purpose. It had at least one quite obvious chick in it. When we arrived in Robert's car there were a couple of keen bird photographers already there, fruitlessly searching the trees unable to find an adult. Robert did one very slow pass and without even getting out of the car, spotted it. Even when I was pointed to the exact location I found the bird difficult to find, such is its camouflage.

Towards the end of May our stay in Austria had come to an end and it was time for the three of us to start the homeward journey. Mike had organised a route taking in Slovenia where we were intending to spend three days. The journey was mostly autobahn through rolling and twisting countryside until we headed south of Klagenfurt to cross the Karawanken Alpen (Carnic Alps) by the sinuous and spectacular Loiblpass. Our chalet-style pension, Stare Stanko, in the village of Srednja vas, was situated in one of the most beautiful settings imaginable. Our balcony looked out down a valley with steep mountains on either side. Even though it was dull and misty we could imagine what it would be like when sunny. We did at least record **Eurasian Nutcracker** *Nucifraga nucifraga* and **Common Raven** *Corvus corax* as compensation. We dined at the local restaurant and were served by a Croatian chap, new in the job, whose English was strongly suggestive of Liverpool!

The next day was dull, but we refused to be downhearted as we drove the short distance to the amazing Lake Bohinj, superb in water clarity and surrounded by stunning mountains; indeed, to the northwest lies the highest peak in Slovenia, Triglav, which gives its name to the National Park in which we were staying. Our plan was to take an electric powered tourist boat to the other end of the 4km lake and then use the ski-lift and see what mountain birds we could find at the top. As we quietly motored across the glass-like surface, what I took to be a solitary duck appeared. I casually got the bins on it and immediately realised that I had never seen a duck anything like it – by then Mike had seen it and with a 'WOW!' identified it as a **Black-throated Diver** *Gavia arctica* in full, perfect breeding plumage! Probably resting en-route to the High Arctic.



The intrepid birdwatchers with Lake Bohinj in the background
Photo: Dick Yates

The ski-lift turned out to be very modern and very fast, whistling us the best part of 1000m up the mountain in four minutes. Arriving at the top it was a very different world as it was raining. We sat in the café, had a coffee and idled away the time hoping for a

break in the weather which eventually came and we ventured out into a very strange landscape. Ski lifts, nursery slopes and ski runs look weird when there's no snow. The rain didn't hold off for long but we managed to find a family party of **Common Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra*, **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus*, **Dunnock** *Prunella modularis* (a rarity and mountain species here) and Mike picked up the song of (appropriately) **Water Pipit**

Anthus spinoletta. The rain returned with some ferocity and, after sheltering for a while, we dashed back to the cafe when it had moderated to a mere 'downpour'. Once back down at the lake it was still raining and we decided unanimously to take the boat¹⁵ and not to walk back round the north side of the lake. While waiting for the next boat, a short walk beside the lake produced **Marsh Tit**, *Poecile palustris*.

With the weather deteriorating further and the forecast exceptionally bad, indeed many parts of Europe had suffered severe flooding already, the decision was made to depart a day early and head for Berchtesgaden in Germany. Fortunately, we were able to use the wireless broadband Internet prevalent in all Slovenian villages to notify our destinations of our plans. When we crossed the border into Austria via a tunnel, the weather all across Austria was superb, if breezy! Had we made a mistake? Mike hadn't warned me that we all should be counting tunnels on the autobahn north if we wanted to avoid a forfeit, and so when I got the right answer (14), it must have been the ones I counted when I (occasionally) nodded off on the journey!

Approaching the German border the rain set in again, initially as low as 'torrential' but it built up from thereon and as we approached Berchtesgaden the traffic was moving at only 20km/h for safety. Pension Kederlehen was up a steep single-track road that was rapidly turning into a river, and we were very glad to get there in one piece. However, even with the continuous rain, the low cloud and the mist, there were occasional breaks revealing what is obviously a stunning spot and we were just able to see the peak of the Watzmann that dominates the valley. While having a welcome drink in the breakfast room cum lounge Mike pointed to the outline of a building on top of the ridge above us, "That's the Berghof on Kehlstein mountain where Hitler had his mountain retreat", he said, and as we watched, it snowed.

We left next morning and the weather did not improve much until we reached our last stop in the village of Burghaslach, the Rotes Ross, where we had all stayed before and Mike many times. Here on a walk round the village, Mike was able to find me another lifer, a **Marsh Warbler** *Acrocephalus palustris* in a small ditch bordered by occasional small thorny bushes. Being a full day ahead of our original schedule, we decided to check with the Channel Tunnel to see if we could bring our crossing forward 24 hours. They had space, and for a small charge, amended our booking. The journey to Calais, though long, left us with time to kill as we encountered no delays en-route, and so we were able to divert into Bruges for lunch, by which time brilliant sunshine was the order of the day. It was a lovely end to the trip.

If I had to make a short list of the birds that most impressed it would have to be; **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*, the 10 **Great Bustards** in flight, **Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia*, **Moustached Warbler**, **Black-throated Diver** and of course the **Short-trousered Buzzard!**

Illmitz lies in an area under-explored by UK birders. It has countless and varied habitats ideal for birdwatching. The locals are very welcoming and the local wines and food are excellent. If you venture there to sample what it has to offer you will not be disappointed.

¹⁵ For €10, you can buy a tourist card, which gives you free parking and a discount on the boat fare. Because the boat return ticket (which itself gives a discount on the ski-lift fare) is only €1.50 more than the single fare of €6.50, we had cannily bought return tickets, given the weather

The Livingstone Trail – a bird extravaganza through Botswana, Namibia and Zambia

By Jenny Gray

There we were, nothing on the clock but time elapsed since the start of sundowners, sitting with a glass of wine in a cottage on Islay. Unbeknownst to me, Dick was deep in conversation with Pete, and Daphne and I were chatting on a sofa across the room. Little did we realise that we were the objects of a concerted pincer movement revolving around the basic question ‘how did we fancy the Okavango Delta in spring?’ Pete’s years in Whitehall made him prevaricate: I, on the other hand, had no hesitation. This sounded like a trip of a lifetime. And so it proved to be.

As it happens, the sundowners theme continued throughout our 3 week trip to Botswana and Zambia. The locations varied from comfortable chairs around the campfire, which our camp hand, Lops, referred to as African TV, to superb sunsets over pools filled with Hippos, whose early evening chorus made an idyllic accompaniment to a G & T. Sunset and inevitably sunrise were short lived, even though our trip coincided with the equally short transition from the heat of summer to what the locals considered the depths of winter.

After 3 weeks of tropical heat day and night, it was suddenly distinctly cooler at night, and there was still a slight chill in the air when we set off from our mobile camp in the Moremi Game Park for our final birding run around the northern regions of Xakanaxa. The sun was just rising into a clear and cloudless blue sky and it seemed that the vast wilderness and ever changing landscape of the Okavango Delta was everything it said on the tin. Accompanied by the deep staccato roar of hippos and the evocative call of African Fish Eagle, the converted Landcruiser ploughed through the wild sage, releasing that unmistakable odour that manages to be both pungent and fragrant at the same time. As we rounded

the corner to the eponymous Lechwe Pans, the Red-necked Falcon was obligingly perched on the same tree as the day before. There was the usual large family group of Lechwe grazing watchfully, their golden coats set off handsomely by the early morning sun. The bird sightings began to come thick and fast. Plain-backed Pipit, a good ‘nerd’s bird’ if ever there was one, was seen lurking in the grasslands. We could not

African Skimmer at Moremi

Photo: Jenny Gray



resist stopping to photograph a Grey-headed Kingfisher, resplendent in the early light. The ubiquitous Lilac-breasted Roller showed well too, as did a Black-shouldered Kite keeping a watchful eye from a small knobthorn tree. A pair of Swainson’s Spurfowl scuttled across a patch of bare ground, a Brown Snake Eagle was spotted on a tree top, and as we passed a small pool we noticed the nine African Skimmers seen a few days

earlier where still in situ, along with a Black-winged Stilt, Yellow-billed Egret, Yellow-billed Stork and a couple of Three-banded Plovers scuttling along the water's edge. Two Sacred Ibis flew over and the warbling croak of Wattled Cranes was heard in the distance. By this time the usual suspects were also making themselves heard. Southern Yellow-billed and African Grey Hornbills squawked their way from tree to tree, Blacksmith Plovers rang out metallic warnings and a Red-eyed Dove announced its presence. As we approached a thicket, we heard the liquid call of a Black-headed Oriole as it flashed by and disappeared into the canopy.

Blacksmith Plover
Photo: Dick Yates

The target bird for the morning was the scarce Greater Honeyguide. Grant, our guide from Letaka Safaris, had seen it the previous day. We were out of luck again, but did get good views of Bennett's Woodpecker, one of the more scarce woodpeckers. In the meantime we glimpsed a delightful Kudu and calf standing in the dappled light from the trees. Later, a Side-striped Jackal sloped across the path at a clearing; another clearing revealed a herd of some fifty Impala. At one point we were alerted by the frantic alarm calls of squirrels which we presumed meant that there was a predator about, almost certainly a leopard that had been seen in the area. Though we hung around for some time we were not lucky enough – or observant enough – to see it.



In a final bid to see the Greater Honey Guide, Grant thought we should try Dead Tree Island on the way back to our camp. However, when we got to the log bridge to Dead Tree Island we discovered that it was under a considerable amount of water – this was not usually a problem for the Landcruiser. It seemed to cope with fairly deep water/mud/sand. During the trip we had only once needed to be towed out by the back-up team. However, neither Grant nor we wished to put Toyota's technology to the test this time as a very large and not too happy looking hippo had installed itself in our path. So it was decided to beat a retreat back to the camp for an early brunch. I must have looked at my watch at this point; my field notes tell me that it was 0732. We had been out barely an hour since dawn, but we had amassed a bird list of several dozen and had also seen a good number of mammals.

Later that day, on the drive out of Moremi Game Reserve on the way back to Maun, we stopped at a suitable clearing and at last had good views of the Greater Honeyguide. Back in the grasslands a Small Buttonquail was flushed from the side of the track and we also at last caught up with the hitherto elusive Secretary Bird.

This was the last day of a 20 day epic birding trip to Botswana, Namibia and Zambia in

Mar and Apr 2010 and brought the total number of birds for the trip to over 380. (We had the unexpected opportunity to add to this total as we had to spend a further week in SA when Europe was cut off from the rest of the world by the Icelandic ash cloud)

Dick and Daphne had had their sights on a trip to Botswana for some time and it seemed too good an opportunity for Pete and me to miss and so after little hesitation Dick got to work in putting together a trip. After some Internet research on travelling and birding in Botswana, it became clear that to get the best out of the trip it would be advisable to go with an experienced operator. We discovered that Letaka appeared to be the ground operator for a lot of the large bird watching tour companies. Also, it turned out that Daphne's brother had recently been on a safari with them and spoke very highly of them. It turned out to be a good choice. Geraldine, their contact in the office in Maun, was extremely helpful and efficient and produced a number of itineraries with various different options of accommodation. There are a good number of very high quality safari lodges in Botswana but they come at eye-watering prices. Hence our decision to use Letaka's mobile camping - or tented accommodation, as Grant from Letaka would prefer to market it - option for the majority of the trip. We were reassured by Daphne's brother that though they were in bush camps, the food and service was first class – and that the tents were very comfortable, had real beds, duvets, en-suite facilities etc. – so no running the gauntlet of snakes, scorpions, hippos and large cats on late night visits to the loo tent, armed with nothing but a headtorch.

The trip started with an overnight stay at the Safari Club Lodge in Johannesburg; a delightful oasis of chalet type accommodation a short drive from the airport. After a morning flight to Maun, a small town on the edge of the Okavango Delta, in the north of Botswana we were met by Grant Reed, one of the Reed brothers who own and run Letaka Safaris, and, it turned out, was clearly a world class bird guide and naturalist. Letaka is Setswana for 'tall reed' and the locals enjoyed the interplay of the surname and the pronounced tallness and slimness of the brothers.

When we pulled off the road for lunch we started to get our eye in with Burchell's Glossy Starling, White-browed Sparrow Weaver, and Barred Wren Warbler and identified the scruffy nests of the Red-billed Buffalo Weaver. We also had our first glimpse of the characteristic canting flight of the Bateleur, its extraordinary short tail rendering identification unmistakable.

Lake Ngami and First Impressions

Our introduction to camp-life, which I have to admit was to prove to be a significant feature of our trip, was a group of drab-looking bush tents set up in the gloom of an unprepossessing clearing in some woodland a few hundred metres from Lake Ngami.

Jenny at her 'drab tent'
Photo: Daphne Yates



By this time the heavy hint of rain in the air had brought out the clouds of biting insects around and about the tents. As I generally regard birding as a leisure activity preferably accompanied by pleasant surroundings and comfortable accommodation, this first impression did not augur well

for the rest of the trip. My apprehension that I was perhaps on the wrong trip was not helped when Daphne found a small but lethal scorpion on her foot – admittedly dealt with briskly and efficiently by Grant, who carefully extracted it without killing it and released it back in the woodland where it would resume its vital place in the ecological scheme of things. We were soon aware that our place was at the bottom of the food chain as far as insects were concerned.

So far there was no sign of the clear blue skies and the wide-open horizons seen on the wildlife programmes. Either I had been misled by the glossy travelogues or there was another Botswana still waiting to be discovered on this trip. This unpromising start continued with 200 metre trudge along the lakeside, through thick mud interspersed with determinedly vicious Acacia bushes – and with the said clouds of biting insects persistently swirling round our heads.

Painted Snipe
By Robbie Robinson



However, an hour or so around the lake brought sightings of half a dozen species of duck, including a Hottentot Teal, common in the area but scarce elsewhere in Southern African. There was a good variety of sandpipers, including Marsh, Wood, and Common, together with Common Greenshank and Ruff. We managed to spot a group of Collared Pratincoles foraging in the mud. These are always difficult birds to pick up when on the ground. We had our first sightings of the African Fish Eagle and also both Lappet-faced and White-headed Vultures. Unusually for the area was a sighting of a Grey-headed Gull and we also saw a White-winged Tern fly over. Both Three-banded and Kittlitz's Plover were in evidence. In and around the water were Reed Cormorant, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis, African Sacred Ibis, African Spoonbill, White Stork, Marabou Stork and Great White Pelican. The sheer diversity was immense. I was thrilled to see a Painted Snipe, a bird I had wanted to see for some time, and even more so to catch sight of a Black Heron actually in that unique pose it has, with its wings forming a circular canopy to form a shade over the water.

In the scrub alongside the lake there were flocks of Wattled Starlings, small groups of Blue Waxwings and Black-faced Waxwings. All the usual African birds were here too, including Long Billed Crombec, Brubru, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Marico Flycatcher, Black-chested Prinia, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Village Indigobird, to mention just a few. There were several excellent views of Crimson-breasted Shrike on the way back to the vehicle for sundowners.



The first Sundowners (L–R) Pete, Dick, Grant, Ofensi and Jenny)

Photo: Daphne Yates

As Grant poured the generous gin and tonics, we were able to watch the dense flocks of Red-billed Quelea forming and swirling in unison from perch to perch. By this time the clouds had cleared enough for a respectable sunset and in the final hours of day light, with G&T in hand, we were treated to a fly past of Greater Flamingo across the lake in front of the setting sun. In two hours of

birding we had seen over 80 species. Within another hour we were back in camp and enjoying a 3 course meal cooked and served by the camp staff.

We stayed a couple of nights at Lake Ngami and whilst we were there, were fortunate to have a second guide, Ofensi, who was finishing his guide training with Letaka. His good humour, patience and exceptional observational skills certainly helped me “get my eye in” early in the trip and we all appreciated his driving skills, as well, as we circumnavigated the lake in difficult conditions the next day. The lake was in flood and many of the tracks were under water or extremely muddy and at one point we had to have an exciting race back to camp out of the way of a humungous thunderstorm. There were some great birding moments though. We saw a Booted Eagle being mobbed by a Little Sparrowhawk, a Shikra displaying and watched an African Harrier Hawk (*Gymnogene*) float through a small open thicket, presumably looking for nest holes of small birds, or other vertebrates, to raid using its long, double-jointed legs. It was a good day for raptors; we also saw Martial Eagle and Black-chested Snake-Eagle. After dinner during a short night drive, we had great views of a magnificent Verreaux’s (Giant) Eagle Owl as it took off from a dead tree trunk very close to the vehicle. We managed to spot a small Pearl-spotted Owlet and the ubiquitous Barn Owl, but an interesting sight was that of the Southern White-faced Scops Owl, with its huge white facial discs. Careful and thorough searching by our guides brought us both Square-tailed and Fiery-necked Nightjars, as well as making a start on the mammals list with a Bushbaby, Small-spotted Genet and Spring Hare.

Next morning, a short walk to the lake before leaving Ngami for Shakawe added Saddle-billed Stork, a bird thought to be under threat in South Africa and uncommon even in Botswana, and Curlew Sandpiper, a very common summer visitor in southern Africa, but a sought after scarce migrant here in UK.

The Panhandle: Rock Paintings and River birding

On the way to Shakawe we managed to spot Kori Bustard stealthily moving through the long grass before it managed to conceal itself in the undergrowth. We began to see the first of many Purple Rollers and a few Eurasian Rollers. Our destination, Drotsky’s

Cabins, was a mixture of cabins and spacious camping pitches, with a very pleasant riverside deck area with bar.

A walk round the grounds over the two days we were there brought excellent close views of African Goshawk as well as Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, Collared Sunbird and Yellow-bellied Greenbul. Nearby, we were able to locate a raucous flock of the eastern sub-species of Black-faced Babbler, which is often difficult to find, but the Narina Trogon that we searched for diligently remained elusive. That night we became more acquainted with the Wood Owl call than we needed to, courtesy of Grant replying to their first calls. They competed well with the croaking frogs, the whining insects, and the grunting, snorting hippos in their efforts to keep us awake.



White-backed Heron chick
beside nest

Photo: Dick Yates

A morning boat trip brought us excellent views of a White-backed Heron and two chicks. Though cryptically situated in riverside foliage, Salvation our boatman knew exactly where to look. Nearby we noticed a small group of Brown Firefinch repairing some abandoned Village Weaver nests. This is a

bird only found in the Okavango delta and Caprivi Strip in nearby Namibia so it was a big tick for us. After much searching we eventually found a roosting Pel's Fishing Owl, our target bird of the morning. We also saw many other good birds, Lesser Jacana, not an easy bird to see, was flushed from reeds in a narrow channel, an Ayre's Hawk Eagle circled above the tree line, Little Rush Warbler, Chirping Cisticola, Coppery-tailed Coucal and many other species completed the morning's list. The boat trips also gave us a real feast of photographic opportunities of Little, White-fronted, Swallow-tailed, Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters.

Dark Chanting Goshawk

Photo: Daphne Yates



The Tsodilo Hills are some 40km South of Shakawe and we travelled there via the old dirt roads. It made a good day out mixing birding with some history and culture. The hills are of great cultural and spiritual significance to the San peoples of the Kalahari and the rock faces in the area are decorated with numerous paintings, some of which have been dated to be about 24,000 years old. On the way there we saw Dark-chanting Goshawk, Tinkling Cisticola, Golden-headed Bunting, Yellow-throated Petronia and many more in the Miombo woodlands. We found a displaying Flappet Lark among several Fawn-coloured Larks on the sandy track near the historical site and Violet-backed Starling, Marico Sunbird, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Black Cuckoo Shrike were some of the new birds seen on the way back.

Nambia and the Caprivi Strip

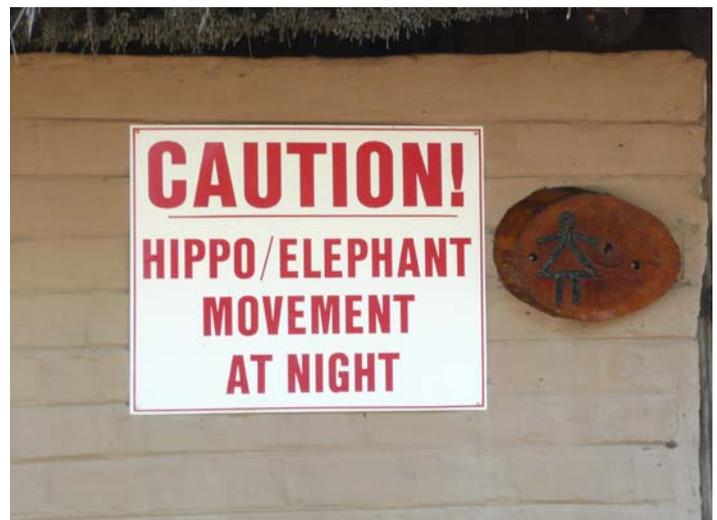
After a night of heavy rain we moved on next day towards the Namibian border, stopping at the Mohembo Ferry Station where we picked up some 7 species of hirundine, including specialities such as Mosque and Wire-tailed Swallow as well as a few Little Swifts. For some reason our baggage was very thoroughly searched at the Namibian border. It had started to rain by the time the border officials got to my bag, however, so I had the privilege of being taken to the appropriate room indoors for the search rather than on the tarmac of the car park like everyone else.

It was too late in the year and the water was too high to try for Rock Pratincole at their breeding stronghold at Popa Falls, so after a short stop at a bridge at Dvundu, just over the border, where we found Retz's Helmet Shrike easily, but had a fruitless search for Angola Swallow, we pressed on down the 'Golden Hwy'. This is the main access route between the main body of Namibia and Chobe national Park and Victoria Falls. Though nearly 500 kilometres long, other than a mere handful of tiny settlements, there are no shops, petrol stations or facilities along the way. Only a few years ago before the end of the Angolan civil war in 2002, it was required to transit the Caprivi Strip as part of an armed convoy.

A short foray into the miombo woodlands after lunch saw a handful of new birds on the list. The loud fluting of a Black-crowned Tchagra practising its scales alerted us to its presence and we also had good views of local specials such as Green-capped Eremomela, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Pale Flycatcher and Grey Penduline Tit as well as the more widespread birds such as Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Common Scimitarbill and Southern Black Tit.

Our target bird for the day was Sharp-tailed Starling. We had seen Burchell's Starling, a near endemic, and Meve's (Longtailed) Starling, a very localised but common resident as well as all the usual common and widespread starlings, but Sharp-tailed Starling has a very small range and since we were passing through it, this would be our only chance of seeing it – worldwide. After some hours of travelling down a relentlessly straight road through otherwise featureless miombo woodland we noticed a flock of some 40 starlings drifting up and down the tree line at the side of the road. Closer inspection with five pairs of bins confirmed that they were indeed nearly all Sharp-tailed Starlings, together with a few Violet backed Starlings.

We then pressed on to our new campsite at Namushasha Lodge on the Kwando River some 20 kilometres south of Kongola, near the Caprivi Game Park. This was another establishment with both lodges and a public camping area. Our camp was set up in a grassy knoll in front of a small ablutions block which had this large notice on the wall. Initially, we thought it was a joke put up by some wag; but we changed our minds when we saw the tell tale droppings next morning.



On arrival we were met by the ever smiling Lops with a welcome cold drink, before freshening up for sundowners, call-over, and another of Chris' splendid three course meals, cooked, as usual, over an open fire. We had become accustomed to the camp

routine by now. A wakeup call at 0600 from Joseph, together with a supply of warm water in our canvas basin under the canopy in the front of the tent started the day. It was still dark at this point so we relied on head torches to get ready for a light breakfast, after which we went out on the morning activity. Lunch was either taken en-route or in the field, but occasionally back at camp where the crew usually put on a delicious brunch.

A walk in the grounds of Namushasha soon found our target bird, the Grey Tit-flycatcher. We also saw Copper Sunbird, a very localized bird with a restricted range and African Golden Oriole, another uncommon species. There was a host of other birds including a very late Broad-billed Roller, Bearded Woodpecker, Chirping Cisticola and as well as both Levillant's and Klaas's Cuckoo. African Barred-owl was in evidence both evenings. The following evening we were entertained by Swamp Nightjar at sundowners on the flooded airstrip nearby.

Pearl-spotted Owlet - in the middle of the day!
Photo: Daphne Yates

By this time (day 7) thanks to Grant's thoroughness and expertise, we had seen over 260 birds on the trip. Because we had seen most of the birds for the area, the birding was beginning to become more challenging. Both here and at Katima-Mulilo, our next destination, we often had a three or four hour walk through the miombo woodlands in order to see the target birds and despite the early starts to the day it quickly became very hot in the sun. Though we were not always in luck with the target birds we did find Luapula Cisticola, Arnott's Chat and Stierling's Wren Warbler at Kwando; all 3 have a fairly limited range and are unlikely to be found elsewhere in Southern Africa.



Katima-Mulilo was a thriving, bustling outpost on the Zambia/Namibia border, whose inhabitants clearly maintained a high sartorial standard. I felt distinctly underdressed in my scruffy camping gear when we climbed out of the vehicle in the town. The relative wealth of Katima-Mulilo was in great contrast to the villages we had passed through in the countryside. There seem to be a number of refugees from Angola, who had established small settlements along the Caprivi Strip, but they had no income and with not even the opportunity of some modest subsistence farming, the mainstay of most families in the countryside, they were among the poorest people we had seen.

Our next camp was on the banks of the Zambezi River. Much of the local area was flooded; the place where we were supposed to be staying was actually in the Zambezi and we had a last minute change to the campsite at the Zambezi River Lodge. We lost contact with the back-up truck at this point, so Daphne and I (and secretly, the chaps, I suspect) were rather hoping that there would be a last minute change to one of the luxury hotel rooms at the Zambezi River Lodge but it wasn't to be, the back up truck found us and a new camp was established.

There were several special birds to be seen in this location. We heard and saw Schalow's Turaco in the lodge grounds. Just round the corner, after some searching we tracked down Eastern Bearded Scrub Robin, an elusive bird and one that was on the far western edge of its range in this area. A little further afield, after a fairly strenuous walk into the miombo we managed to see good views of Copper Sunbird and an immature Dark Chanting Goshawk. Possibly the best find of the tour though was the sight and sound of 3 Racket-tailed Rollers displaying. Next day we managed to find a pair of the elusive Shelley's Sunbird, though only Pete managed to get a good view of the male in the scope.

African Jacana – a common wetland species

Photo: John Wilks



There were a number of small accessible wetland habitats nearby and we added breeding Rufous-bellied Heron, White-backed Duck and Pygmy Goose to our list as well as having unusually good views of Black Crake. At one such lagoon we were quietly surrounded by a group of local villagers, young and old, and all their cattle and goats. Their headman approached us and, gently but firmly, charged us (as 'whitemen') of putting crocodiles in the pools. This was not a personal allegation, but as we realised afterwards, seemed to be part of a continuing long term dispute in Mudumu National Park, between the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET) which is trying to restore the area to the stunning wildlife area it once was, and local communities who, understandably, do not want elephants trashing their crops and crocodiles taking their livestock.

Victoria Falls and the Mighty Zambezi

The bridge across the Zambezi at Katima-Mulilo is only the fifth along its 3,540-kilometre-long journey from its source in Zambia, through Angola, along the borders of Namibia, Botswana and Zambia again, and then on through Zimbabwe to Mozambique and into the Indian Ocean. It was completed in 2004 and links the Trans-Capivi Highway with the Zambian road network forming a section of the trade route from south-central Africa to the Atlantic, known as the Walvis Bay Corridor. It is also intended to carry tourist traffic. From the bridge, which has a span of 900metres, we could see the sheer extent of the river when in flood. This year the water was exceptionally high. The border post at Seshwe was a colourful and chaotic introduction to Zambia. Immigration and customs were situated in a couple of run-down single story concrete buildings but the officials from the other concerns suddenly and unexpectedly appeared from various temporary shacks around and about the makeshift car park, just when we thought we were free to go.

The procedure went something like this:

At Immigration - fill in a book - pay for visa - US\$50

At Customs - Fill in TIP - Fill in Book - pay Carbon Tax - US\$20

In a Caravan/Shed/Building (CSB) outside the Customs office – buy Insurance - US\$40 (for 3 months)

In another CSB outside Customs office – pay Road Toll - US\$20 (if the car is not your own)

In yet another CSB outside Customs office – pay a Council Levy - US\$10

Time taken for this evolution - approx 2 hours.

Other than the ubiquitous road-blocks, the journey to Livingstone was uneventful. We did not waste much time birdwatching, as I think we all had our sights on the prospect of a couple of nights respite from sleeping under canvas, and were looking forward to making full use of the facilities in a fully equipped modern bathroom. However, a short diversion gave us great views of Miombo Pied Barbet, which we were very fortunate to see as it is a Central Africa bird on the southern edge of its range. It is similar to the widespread Pied Barbet, but does not have a black throat, and the ranges do not overlap. As a bonus we unexpectedly found a pair of Wood Pipit in the same location. At this point, even though we were many kilometres away from Victoria Falls we could see the spray from the Falls rising hundreds of feet in the air, like a column of white smoke. Hence the name Mosi-Oa-Tunya - 'the smoke that thunders' in the Kololo language.

Given its place at the site of this world class natural spectacle, Livingstone, though a bustling place, was nevertheless a modest sized unprepossessing town. In great contrast to this in every way, Taita Falcon Lodge, where we were staying, was some 11 kilometres along a remote track out of Livingstone. The view from the terrace down the Batoka Gorge, overlooking Rapids 16 and 17 downstream of the falls, was truly breathtaking. This was luxurious birding. The rustic chalets, constructed from stone and reed, were imaginatively appointed with local furnishings. From the deck we managed to notch up Auger Buzzard, African Black Swift, Cinnamon-breasted Rock Bunting and Mocking Cliff Chat without leaving the bar. The beautiful little Jameson's Firefinch and the Orange-breasted Waxbill were in the grounds or nearby, and Dick managed to see a pair of Verreaux's Eagles as they flew through the gorge, harassed all the way by the resident Auger Buzzards.

Determined to have some R'n'R from full-on birding for this part of the tour, Daphne and I gave the early morning visit to Livingstone sewage farm a miss, but thoroughly enjoyed a relaxing sunset cruise on the Lady Livingstone on the upper Zambezi, but not before having excellent views of the brilliantly coloured Half-collared Kingfisher on the riverbank.

In contrast to our luxury though, it was a sobering sight at five thirty in the morning, to see a young boy on the long walk to school, some eight kilometres down the dirt track to the main road. It is a struggle for many rural families in Zambia to meet the costs of education and although primary education is free, educating girls is clearly considered by many to be an expensive luxury, as most of the secondary schoolchildren from the small village near Taita Lodge were boys. We later encountered some of the girls being kept busy with their mothers trailing back and forth to the village well, expertly balancing buckets of water on their heads.

After tracking down Collared Palm-Thrush in the grounds of a riverfront hotel, our next challenge was catching the Kazangula Ferry across the Zambezi back into Botswana. This was easily the most entertaining African experience of the trip. The sand road down to the ferry was packed with commercial lorries, overland trucks, local buses, tourist coaches and private vehicles all jostling for space and strategically manoeuvring themselves to jump the queue and catch an early ferry. The immigration and customs activities were much the same as the Seshwe border post but with the added involvement of buying a ferry ticket. The whole area was heaving with activity. It was particularly disorganized that day as, despite the fact that it was such an important strategic river crossing, two of the three ferryboats were out of action. Since each boat could take only one commercial truck and two private vehicles (and as many foot passengers as could squeeze into the space available), some of the truck drivers could expect to wait as long as three weeks to make the crossing as there was now a wait of 45 minutes between ferry crossings. In the meantime, a veritable marketplace had been set up by enterprising locals and the colourful commotion and bustle made compelling viewing.

One boat had long since been abandoned and made a great bird – and people – watching platform while Grant negotiated hard to push up our place in the queue. As well as the general chaos, one of the sources of entertainment was watching a dozen or so men dive time and again into the (croc and hippo infested) water at the bow of the other dysfunctional boat in an attempt to repair it.



The ferry's drive on ramp (left of picture) had dropped off and had been lifted by a JCB. It was held up by a single hook. I wouldn't go under there even without the hippos & crocs.
Photo: Dick Yates

Somehow Grant managed to sneak us onto the second or third ferry and it was with some relief that we 'escaped' to Botswana and to the friendly, relaxed town of Kasane. It took ten minutes to fill in the immigration form at the Botswana border and we were able to continue on our way to Bush Camp No. 8 in Chobe National Park.

Chobe National Park – Bush camps and Big Game

Chobe National park is a classic wildlife park with a wide range of habitats. Because of the water levels some of the waterside drives were inaccessible, but this did not detract from our enjoyment of the area. We were able to feast on all the timeless sights of families of elephants going down to water, ponderous giraffes grazing on trees at the side of the track, intimidating herds of buffalo, inquisitive baboons, startled groups of lechwe and many other species of antelope.

Our private camp site, Bush camp No. 8, was in a secluded glade with wide views of sunrise over the flooded Chobe/Zambezi confluence. It would have been an ideal place

to have enjoyed the sounds of the African night, if it had not been for the sound of the generator from the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) who were occupying Bush camp No. 9. In fact they were some kilometres away but sound travels a long way in the stillness of the night. The BDF's missions have been increasingly focused on anti-poaching activities and this camp formed part of their training.

The diversity of bird life was not as evident as in other places, but there seemed to be good numbers of each species. A boat ride on the Chobe River gave us our best views of flocks of the beautiful Southern Carmine Bee-eater, though the boatman was determined to distract us by playing daring-do with a large pod of Hippo. Sundowners in the Kazwanbenga Valley was shared with hundreds of African and Fawn Pipits, displaced from the Chobe floodplain. We also saw both Fiery-necked and Square-tailed nightjar here. An unexpected but great sighting was a collection of 12 Temminck's Courser. We also came across large numbers of Marabou Storks, but probably the most surprising spot was a small group of Southern Ground Hornbill, stalking their way through the long grass.



Southern Ground Hornbill
Photo: Dick Yates

Nata and the Makgadikgadi Pans

It was a long straight road to Nata, the only town between Kasane and Francistown, 420 miles away. We had just one night at Nata and stayed in the chic luxury chalets at the verdant oasis that is Nata Lodge just south of the town, where Red-eyed Bulbul was quite common. We had an evening drive in a lodge safari vehicle across the flooded Nata delta to a superb vantage point to have our sundowners watching the fabulous sunset over the Makgadikgadi Pans. During the drive we picked up Cape Shoveler and Grey-backed Sparrowlark and had distant views of Greater Flamingo. We were lucky to see a flight of Grey-crowned Crane fly over and a Marsh Owl was flushed on our race back through the floods.

It was at about this point in the tour that Grant, our guide, came clean with us and admitted, not entirely in jest, I suspect, that we were not on a luxury holiday with some good birding thrown in – as Daphne and I had expected, hoped for, even – but that there was some long standing rivalry between him and his brother. We were actually on a mission to exceed the total of 382 birds that his brother Brent had attained on a similar safari earlier in the year. It became clear that Grant would take it as a personal failure if he could not notch up the same number, or more, with his clients.

Next morning, some good stops on the long journey back to Maun found Wattled Crane, Eastern Clapper Lark, Red-capped Lark, Double-banded Courser, Plain-backed Pipit

and Birchell's Sandgrouse. On one of our forays onto the grasslands, we were followed by a small group of young children, shouting at us in Setswana. However, a few words shouted back in Setswana from Grant to the effect of "go away or I will come to your village and tell your father that you have been cheeky" sent them packing as fast as they could run. Not a tactic that would be effective in this country any more, I suspect!

Moremi Game Park – The Okavango Delta

After a very pleasant night stop in the Thamalakane River Lodge just outside Maun we set out for Moremi. The roads into the park were in an interesting state after all the recent rain and on the way to our camp we had to cross 'Third Bridge', yes it is a bridge and not all the bridges were as crossable as this one



Third Bridge. *Photo: Jenny Gray*

On the way in we saw a variety of new birds including Red-crested Korhaan, White-crowned Shrike and Luapula Cisticola and at the pools we found several Slaty Egret, a speciality for the area, a solitary and stately Goliath Heron, a flight of ten African Skimmer and African Marsh Harrier. After being serenaded by an African Scops Owl and nearby Hippos during the night, the next morning we caught up on the Yellow Three, Yellow-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Duck and Yellow-billed (Intermediate) Egret, all fairly common birds that had been conspicuously absent so far.

Although we were on a bird trip, in such a rich environment as Moremi, it was often the animals that stole the show. We were impressed when

Grant suddenly stopped the vehicle and leapt out to catch a 7 foot long rock python that happened to be crossing the path. He is a consummate expert on snakes and we were treated to an interesting, graphically illustrated discourse on snakes. We were not quite as impressed when an over ambitious run through a deep channel left us stuck in the vehicle surrounded by water inhabited by hippos and crocodiles. Fortunately, Chris and the camp crew were able to find us and tow us out with their truck.

Lions are always an exciting sight on safari and we were lucky enough to see a large male posing beside a huge termite hill and, later, a group of females and young languishing in the long grass under an Acacia tree. Throughout the park, as at Chobe, there were numerous sightings of all the usual mammals including, this time, the rare Sitatunga Antelope.

We were sorry to leave Moremi. It had been all we had expected, and some. We spent the last night in Botswana in the lovely Thamalakane River Lodge and we invited Grant, his wife and his father to join us for dinner in the restaurant. They were excellent company and it was an appropriate end to a fantastic trip.

We were due to fly back to Europe the next evening and felt that a night in a hotel with modern facilities would prepare us better for the long journey. Little did we know at that time that we would not be moving on from Johannesburg Airport for some time. After

Pete and I had checked in we slowly realised that one by one all the flights to Europe were being cancelled because of the volcano in Iceland. Pete and I were marooned in the Protea Hotel, Johannesburg for another week (courtesy of KLM) and eventually got back to UK via Dar es Salaam. Dick and Daphne prevailed upon Dick's cousin in Pietermaritzburg for some two weeks or more while Qatar Airlines sorted out their homeward trip.

As for the 382 birds, did Grant make it? Yes! After we had checked in for our flight to Johannesburg he hauled us out of the departure hall of Maun Airport to point out bird number 383. Cut-throat Finches had taken over the nests of some Lesser-masked Weaver and we got great views of a pair perched on the roof of the airport building.



The Lion by the
termite mound
Photo: Dick Yates

Grey Heron, Yellow-
billed Stork and
African Darter.
Photo: Dick Yates



Those Who Count Know..... **Those Who Don't Know Don't Count!**

By Martin Routledge

I hesitated over an alternative title of 'Blessed are the Bean Counters ...' but I knew that would only get the blood pressure of one or two members soaring!

So what's this all about? Many RAFOS members will be active participants in the BTO Bird Atlas project and/or their BirdTrack project. Essentially both systems seek to create and add to a vast database of information on the birds in Britain. Anyone with access to the internet can easily contribute on-line and even when the Atlas project finishes next year the BirdTrack system will store your records and allow you to retrieve them in a variety of ways – it really is a very powerful tool.

Combine the power of the BTO's electronic world with the MOD's Bird Count project and one can start to build a very detailed database of birds on the MOD Estate. In the past the MOD Bird Count, run by Defence Estates' Conservation Team, was a pretty patchy affair. It started as a single day count in May each year and then evolved into surveying during the breeding season but only on certain specified dates. The idea was to collect data on breeding birds and thus inform the MOD's conservation policies. But now with the power of BirdTrack the MOD survey is an all year round activity, vastly improving the understanding of the bird life on large tracts of MOD land from the major training areas, through barracks and airfields to some tiny sites. The data not only helps the MOD's conservation efforts but now also adds significantly to the overall picture of birds in Britain – often from areas relatively unwatched by the general birding community.

Understanding the bird life of the MOD Estate is a vital step in planning how to conserve and protect it. So how can you help? Any project like this relies on the volunteer surveyors to not only walk the ground recording the birds and evidence of their breeding, but also to input the data into the database so it can be used. The Army Training Estate is relatively well surveyed in some areas such as Salisbury Plain, Castle Martin and Catterick. By comparison the RAF's Estate is less well studied and yet we have some magnificent sites such as Leuchars and Kinloss with estuary boundaries and SSSIs at many airfields such as Wittering and Woodvale. Stations with Conservation Groups will be well up to speed on such things and I would love to see RAFOS members and the local conservation group working side by side on the Bird Count. Access for serving members is straightforward and for the retired cadre can usually be arranged through the local conservation group – if in doubt a good place to start is the Community Relations Officer on your chosen station.

To make life even easier the MOD/DE and BTO partnership have produced a drop down menu of MOD sites on BirdTrack. For those familiar with the system, having logged-on from the BirdTrack home page click 'Create New Site' in the 'Your Options' box then select the Option 2 'Top County Birding Sites'. A drop down menu appears with MOD as the third category. Clicking here will open a list of pre-defined MOD sites enabling you to set up BirdTrack for your favourite airfield, range or radar site. All records from these sites are articulated not only to the BTO database but also to Defence Estates. As Alexander the Meerkat would say – simple!

To help give the Bird Count a bit of a kick start this year Roger Dickey of AOS organised a Bird Count Training Day at St George's Barracks Bicester. Our own Colin Wearn arranged a ringing demonstration and the day's programme was well supported by Su Gough of the BTO who explained the ins and outs of BirdTrack and gave some very practical advice on counts, surveys, recording breeding evidence, and a session on identification through bird song (wasted on my A2, jet noise induced high tone hearing loss!!). Clare Backman of DE explained the background to the MOD Bird Count and we also went for a practical tramp around the woods. It was an interesting and informative day out but one that was largely supported by MOD civilians from conservation groups rather than members of AOS and RAFOS. Nevertheless we all went away enthused to do more for the Bird Count and I encourage you all to do the same.

Martin, thank you for attending on behalf of the Society. I hope that a few members who live within striking distance of an RAF Station, or any piece of MOD real estate will take up the challenge and bird their 'patch' so that RAFOS can be seen to be making a significant contribution to the quality of the data. Ed.



Kingfisher ringed during Colin's demo at the Training Day

Photo: Martin Routledge

THE GAMBIA RE-ASSESSED – 27 JAN to 2 FEB 2010

By Robin Springett



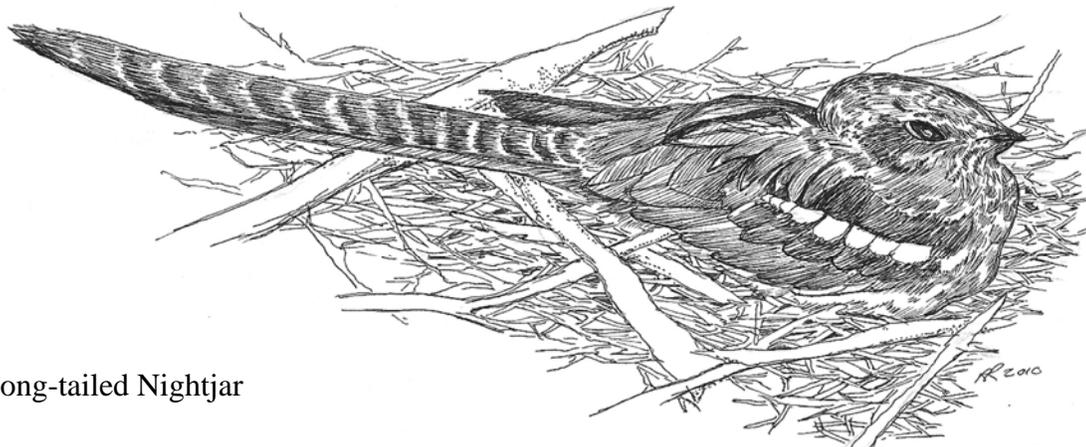
White Backed Night-Heron – Gambia 1 Feb 2010

Photo: Robin Springett

The Gambia is easy Africa; they use GMT, and it's only a 6 hour flight from Europe; they speak English, there is no crime, the food is recognisable, and prices are low. Around the turn of the century I visited 3 times in 2 years, but I hadn't been back since 2001. My bible then was Rod Ward's "*A Birdwatcher's Guide to The Gambia*" published in 1994 and I had been to every site mentioned in the book along the coast and up river. My Gambia list stood at 296, and hard work would be necessary to significantly improve that; probably something not worth attempting. However, I had a spare week and decided to see if the Gambia was still a good destination for birders. On my 3 previous visits I had birded with the young bird guide named in the book called Lamin Sidebeh. Lamin was a great guide, indeed he still is, and he is now the chairman of the co-operative called The Association of Bird Guides of The Gambia. All these things went through my mind in mid-January when I made a late booking with The Gambia Experience for a week B&B at the African Village Hotel. Actually, my first priority was a break from the awful winter we were having in UK this year (2010), but of course, I go nowhere without doing some birding. I had heard The Gambia had changed, now I was about to see how much. I sent Lamin an e-mail and got the expected response to meet up.

I flew Monarch from London Gatwick; the flight was on time, the food was good, the transfer from the airport to the hotel painless, and my room was simple but adequate. Lamin came to see me that evening and I outlined my plan for local birding mornings only, so I could relax by the pool in the afternoon. Lamin agreed a programme for the mornings, some sharing with another birder, some on my own. On the days when Lamin wasn't available, he would send a qualified, licensed, lady guide called Fatou Colley, a member of the Association. We agreed a dawn start for next day. (Note: The guides are still to be found by the bridge at Kotu, where they have a hut with many pictures and contact numbers, and this continues to be the best starting point for many birders who haven't made a booking in advance).

Wed 27 Jan - Kotu Area. We left my hotel at 0730 and caught a local taxi to Kotu rice fields, where we started our walk and I was introduced to Fatou, as Lamin had business at Kotu Bridge. We looked over Kotu creek towards Fajara golf course, and slowly made our way through the rice fields and palms, while I got used to Africa's birds once again. After an hour or so, Lamin came back and we had a break at his small holding, where he has a hide and sells soft drinks. From there we moved into Kotu Pools, a sewage farm where the charge is a reasonable D10 (about 40 US cents) for all day. After scanning every pool, we moved across the road to the lily pond alongside the Badala Park Hotel. It was now nearly midday and getting hot, so I opted to return to the hotel area for lunch, and the afternoon by the pool, rather than a walk along the Casino cycle track. My total was a modest 41 species, but really good views of everything and a great start.



Long-tailed Nightjar

Thurs 28 Jan – Brufut Woods. Again we left the hotel at 0730 for the relatively short taxi ride to Brufut Woods, where we parked the taxi and walked into the woods. Brufut Woods itself, although much reduced in size is now a protected area with 2 permanent wardens who have done much to preserve and improve the woodland, but on all sides it is being squeezed by development and farming; notwithstanding that, it is still brilliant. There is a very reasonable entry charge of D100 (about \$4 USD), payable to the wardens, and they also have cold drinks for sale. Sunbirds were everywhere, and we very quickly saw Beautiful Long-tailed, Copper and Splendid, with Variable appearing later. We heard an oriole, and soon found 2 male and one female African Golden Oriole. Pearl-spotted Owlet and a pair of Verreaux's Eagle Owl were also seen quite close by. We then spent a long

time in search of Long-tailed Nightjar, which we failed to find, but not to worry; one of the wardens helped us find a cryptic female sitting tight on the ground. At this point my camera battery ran out of juice!! Other good birds included Diedrich Cuckoo and Grey-headed Bristle Bill. In the surrounding farmland, we saw Walberg's Eagle and White-fronted Black Chat, plus a Common Whitethroat. By the time we got back to the taxi we had seen 63 species. That evening, I did a sea watch from the beach bar and added 7 more species.

Fri 29 Jan – Fajara Golf Course. Another 0730 start and this time Fatou collected me from my hotel with a local taxi for the short journey to the Golf Club. On my previous visits, the Golf Club had been very run down and access was easy at any point along the broken fence; if the golf was poor, the birding was excellent. Now, the fence is mended and much of the wild areas have been tidied, there are more golfers and less birds, but it is still well worth the modest D10 charge. Lamin, accompanied by another bird watcher called Richard, appeared just as we started to get into the birds; Subalpine Warbler was a good spot, and an Osprey flew over clutching a large fish. We spent a couple of hours birding and avoiding golf balls, whilst getting really good views of a family of Green Wood Hoopoe, a single Blue Bellied Roller and many others.



Green Wood-hoopoe

Three Sacred Ibis flew over and we got close views of a Grey Kestrel sitting in a palm. We wandered slowly to Lamin's hide for a cold drink, then onto the lily pond and back via the Kotu pools to a large disused clay quarry with water in the bottom and houses all around. The sign to follow says "Joint Officers Mess". Walk past this building, through someone's back yard and scan over the water. Lamin had been tipped off that Shinning Blue Kingfisher was to be seen and after a false alarm, which turned out to be Malachite Kingfisher, patience paid off and we saw 2 of the target birds. Richard got some photos;

good enough for identification purposes, but not really worth printing. On the walk back, we discovered that the 'Joint Officers Mess' is open to the public, and is a great and inexpensive place for a cool drink, lunch or dinner. A very successful morning's birding with 79 species recorded.

Sat 30 Jan – Old Cape Road, Camaloo Corner & Crocodile Pool. These sites were so close to my hotel that Lamin collected me at 0800 and we took a 3 wheel scooter taxi to Old Cape Road. As this was the last Saturday in the month and it was "Clean up Gambia Day", traffic was banned from 0900 to 1300, so we would have to walk wherever we went. It was hot, but delightful without traffic. We started from the football pitch, where nearby a circumcision celebration was under way, and quickly found many finches, bishops and waxbills, plus Red-billed Quelea. A gentle walk towards the pools produced Black-shouldered Kite, Little Ringed Plover, Redshank, Greenshank, Whimbrel, Caspian and Sandwich Terns. We crossed the road to mudflats and water, where we met a couple of friendly Danish birders, who kindly let us look at the Lesser Crested Terns through their scopes. We chatted and exchanged notes, before walking round the water to the women's gardens and rice fields at the back of Bakau, where we were offered palm wine, and saw Abyssinian Roller and Yellow Wagtail, before making our way to Camaloo Corner. There we saw Senegal Thick-knee, African Spoonbill and Black Crake amongst others.



'Now who's a pretty boy then?'

Photo: Robin Springett

We walked back via the gardens to the Crocodile Pool. This is a sacred pool, where couples come to improve their fertility and, I was assured, they then have children. Since I didn't want children I doubted it was worth the D50 entrance fee; but excellent views of crocs, both in the water and hauled out, a pair of Hammerkop and their enormous nest in a

large tree, together with the hard to see Splendid Glossy Starling and Oriole Warbler, plus close up views of Blue-breasted Kingfisher changed my mind. (We walked back through the shacks of Bakau, little more than slums, with festering open sewers along the dirt streets – people shouldn't have to live like this, and to my eye, it is worse now than 10 years ago). We got back to the hotel at 1300 just as the traffic curfew ended; it had been another good morning with 75 species seen.

Sun 31 Jan – Turejreng & Tanji Bird Reserve. Lamin had booked a 4x4 vehicle for the day, and I joined him and Richard for this trip, leaving the hotel at 0745. Being Sunday, there was little traffic and before long we arrived at Turejreng, which is an area of scrub with some large trees. It is mainly farmland, but some new houses are being built. The strategy is to walk along the main track and branch out at various points into the scrub, especially where there are flowering trees which are magnets for



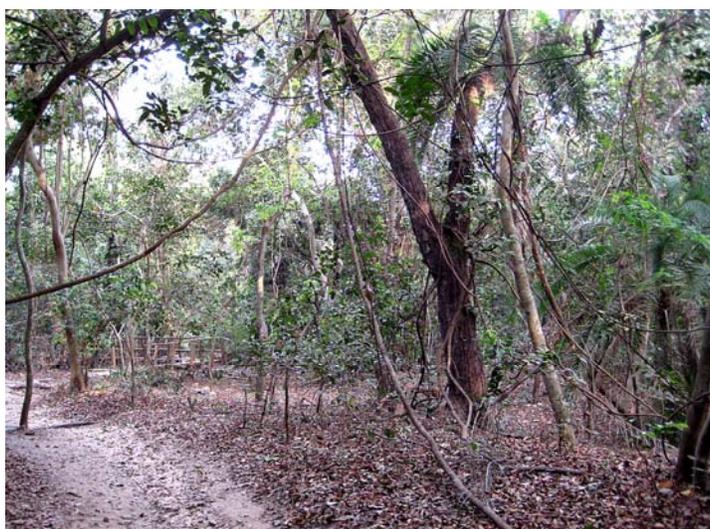
Turejreng Reserve

Photo: Robin Springett

sunbirds and many other species. Woodchat Shrike was a good early spot and soon we were seeing sunbirds; the best for me being my first Pygmy Long-tailed Sunbird of this trip. Grey and Cardinal Woodpeckers were no surprise, but African Darter was! The birds kept coming, Palm Nut Vulture, Chestnut Crowned Sparrow Weaver, Lesser White Spotted Woodpecker, Vieillot's Barbet, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Brown Snake Eagle, Eurasian Hoopoe, Striped Kingfisher, etc, etc. A total of 56 species by the time we stopped for lunch.

After lunch of fish in a local village, we started to head back and stopped at the south end of Tanji reserve, where we picked up another 16 species, including Lesser Crested, Royal, Caspian and Sandwich Tern, Kelp Gull, Osprey again, Blue-cheeked Bee Eater and Lizard Buzzard. We were back at the hotels around 1530 with a very respectable 72 species.

Mon 1 Feb – Abuko Nature Reserve. Abuko has been a reserve since 1967, but the last time I had visited this remnant of mature riverine forest it was getting very run down and its edges were under attack by wood collectors and poachers, so I was delighted to find that it has finally had some money spent on it. The perimeter fence has been renewed, entrance and exit is through the same gate, and a large buffer area of scrub and savannah now surrounds it on 3 sides. Casual visitors can also hire binoculars and a guide at the entrance for a small fee and the rangers have a



Abuko Nature Reserve

Photo: Robin Springett

smart uniform. New hides are under construction; fortunately the very noisy workers are late starters! Today I was with Fatou and we arrived shortly after the 0800 opening but we were not the first in. Common Wattle Eye was calling everywhere it seemed and we got very good views. Soon Fatou's sharp eyes had found Western Bluebill, an Abuko special, and helped others to see it. At the crocodile pool Fatou spotted White Backed Night Heron, and this bird obligingly came into the open to be photographed by us and two more parties of birders. One of them kindly let me use his scope to take some photos. We spent a very pleasant morning slowly going round this reserve; not really seeing anything else outstanding, but getting good views of birds like Violet Turaco and Fine-spotted Woodpecker. The "Animal Orphanage" does have cold drinks, but is a very sad place to my eyes. It is hard to see why many of the animals are kept in cages; I am cynical enough to think that it is only to extract money from tourists, but I may be wrong. Our 4 hours produced just 41 species, but you always live in hope in Abuko and it is well worth a visit!

I had hoped to go to the Medical Research Council (MRC) garden in the afternoon. This is a private area along the Atlantic Road, opposite the British High Commission, which sponsors it. I have never had a problem getting in before and had just pitched up with my binoculars round my neck and passport and got access. Silly me! I forgot about 9/11 and all the other events this century which had angered many in the developing world, so security in this European enclave is tight. I got no further than the gate; to get in I would have to apply in writing, or try my luck next morning at 0900. Despite speaking to lots of people, all of whom seemed to have no authority, I failed, and gave up.

Tues 2 Feb - Botanic Garden. My last morning, with a 1330 departure, I decided to walk along the Atlantic Road north from my hotel towards the junction with the Old Cape Road. Right there on the edge of Bakua is the Botanic Garden and Medicinal Garden; they are separated by the entrance to a residence and entry to both is D50. Probably not worth it if one is just birding, but they are well kept and pleasant, and there is a small restaurant for lunch or cold drinks almost opposite. I spent a couple of quiet and pleasant hours here with a pair of Vieillot's Barbet courting and mating being the highlight. Good views too of Klass' Cuckoo, Northern Puffback, first of the trip, Shikra, Senegal Parrot, Long-tailed Glossy Starling and other common birds gave me a total of 26 species and left time for lunch and an ice cream before the transport arrived.

Conclusion & Re-assessment

This was almost a spur of the moment decision to go back to The Gambia and I was not disappointed. Despite hotel development and new housing estates for ex-patriots this is still a brilliant destination for bird watchers. It has it all, great birds, friendly and expert guides, it is very safe, with hotels to suit every pocket, good food, nice weather during the northern winter and it is not expensive. I saw 164 species and added 10 to my Gambia list and I still recommend Rod Ward's "A Birdwatchers' Guide to The Gambia", (ISBN 1 871104 04 1), despite its obvious shortcomings and need for an update.

I chose to use guides arranged locally from the bridge at Kotu and highly recommend the two I used: Lamin Sidebeh +220 9909 365 or +220 7411 019 (try both), email: laminkulanjangtours@yahoo.co.uk and Fatou Colley +220 7790 535, email: fcolley2008@yahoo.com. There are others on www.Birdingpal.org. It is worth

remembering that local guides arranged direct are cheaper than guides booked via hotels or tour companies, and all the money paid to them goes straight into the local economy.

If you haven't been, try the Gambia, if you have been before, now may be the time to go again; it is easy Africa and fun! I got flights and hotel for £320 and I spent about the same again on birding and food, say £700 or \$1,000 USD with tips.



African Darter

Photo: Robin Springett

(Thanks for the article Robin. I haven't been to the Gambia for nearly 20 years. I must give it another try. Ed)

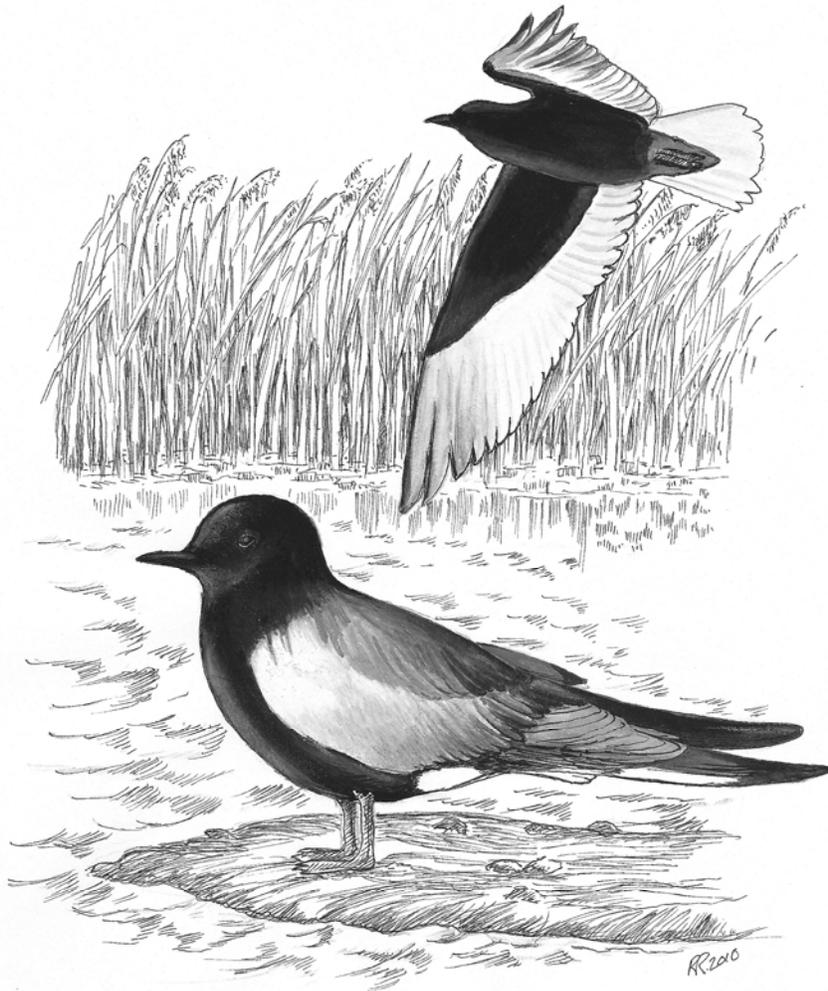
Lesbos 24 Apr to 1 May 2010

By Julian Quail

In my quest to see all the warblers in the Western Palearctic before I am 50 Lucy and I planned to bird North Spain during the Spring migration this year, primarily the Picos de Europa National Park and Pyrenees. However, we changed our minds and settled on a visit to Lesbos instead, which was supposed to be fabulous during late April and early May and I took it as a splendid opportunity to pick-up a few new warblers.

After an overnight flight from Heathrow, via Athens, we arrived at 0630 feeling a trifle jaded; but, fortunately, the hotel had arranged for a local taxi to pick us up. We stayed at the Aeolian Gaea Hotel which is in a small village just outside Skala Kallonis near the middle of the Island and it gave us good access to most of the main birding areas.

On arrival at our excellent hotel we spent the morning birding the immediate locality, picking up **Reed Warbler**, **Nightingale**, **Black-headed Yellow** and **Grey Wagtail**, **Crested Lark**, **Kentish Plover**, **Short-toed Lark**, **Spur-winged Plover**, **Hooded Crow** and **Little Egret** - not bad for just over an hour's birding.



White-winged Black Terns

We returned to the hotel to pick up our hire car and after lunch we headed for the local salt marshes. These were only about 15 minutes away by car, but negotiating Kallonis, which was between us and the salt marshes, was interesting as there are very few road signs on the Island, but you quickly get a sense of which way to go. The salt marshes provided us with a new bird, **Collared Pratincole**; not the best view in the world but nice to see anyway. The area is quite productive with a good population of **White-winged Black Terns** and some **Lesser Flamingoes** and **Glossy Ibis**. Lucy was particularly taken with **Wood Sandpiper**, which is quite dainty.

That evening we ate in a local fish tavern in Skala Kallonis; in fact we ate there all week bar one night. The people were very friendly, they kept giving us free drinks – fabulous; and the swordfish and local vegetables and salads were incredible - they actually tasted like they should.

The following morning the intention was to go birding early, but we slept in. After breakfast another couple who were birding the Island showed us a very good birding spot called Metochie Lake. We stayed there all day and birded the entire lake and immediate area. This provided us with **Little Crane**, **Little Bittern** - the best views that I have ever had, as it hung to a large reed feeding, a pair of **Rock Nuthatch** feeding their babies and fabulous views of a **Booted Eagle** which was sitting among the rocks on the hillside. It was a wonderful sight as it spread its wings and soared higher and higher. There was of course the ubiquitous **Cetti's Warbler**, **Nightingale** and **Squacco Heron**.

After a bad night's sleep, which is becoming the norm for me as I get older, I dragged Lucy out of bed early and set off for the West coast to bird the area between Erosos and Sigri. It was quite a long drive and involved many hairpin bends as we wound our way up and down a series of hills/mountains (I'm not sure what the difference is!). Having negotiated our way through Erosos, thanks to Lucy and the instructions in the absolutely vital book on birding Lesbos by Steve Dudley we stopped at the top of the first hill/mountain. There was a lot of song but it was difficult to pin the birds down. Eventually we found our first **Black-eared Wheatear** and although we were to see a lot of these fabulous birds during the week, we never got bored with them. We continued to wind our way down through the valley picking up both **Ortolan** and **Cretzschmar's Bunting** before we stopped at the bottom, a dry river bed, and saw what might have been a **Finsch's Wheatear** - Lucy is absolutely convinced and it is quite possible, given that the next day only the second official record was confirmed from the same area. Who can say? By the end of the week it seemed anything was possible.

The ford also providing excellent views of **Cetti's** and **Olivaceous Warbler**, **Semi-Collared Flycatcher**, **Sombre Tit**, **Squacco Heron** and **Little Grebe**. We continued along the valley floor to Sigri, stopping periodically, and picked up **Levant Sparrowhawk**, **Eleanora's Falcon**, **Lesser Kestrel** and a large flock (50+) of **Yellow Wagtail**.

We stopped in Sigri for lunch. I had the local sausage, which seemed like a good idea at the time, while Lucy, being the more sensible member of the team, decided to have something less "challenging". After lunch we drove back to the hotel on some quite rough roads and saw a few more birds but nothing which we hadn't seen already. Back at the hotel I decided to have a sleep and about 6pm Lucy woke me to get ready for dinner. We never got to the restaurant - the revenge of the sausage struck me down!

Next day, we decided to bird the local area and avoid any "challenging" meals. This mainly involved spending time walking both sides of a local river. It was lovely walking

through all the wild flowers with the mountains in the background and the birds singing. Lucy spotted several birds including **Cirl Bunting** and **Woodchat Shrike** and on our way back we saw an **Olive Tree Warbler**; again not brilliant views, but good enough to claim. I didn't realise how challenging it was to see these birds, despite being a 'bruiser' of a Warbler they remain far too well camouflaged for my liking. Maybe I'll bring a rock to stun them next time; for there will be a next time. On the other side of the track we picked up **Red-backed** and **Masked Shrike**. Later on in the afternoon, about 6pm, we returned to the salt-pans, where Lucy found a pair of **Red-Footed Falcons** which, those familiar with Hortobagy will know, is a wonderful bird. In many ways the female is the more attractive, with that fabulous ginger hue.

By supertime I had recovered adequately to tuck into a Mousaka, prepared by the wife of the chap who owned our local restaurant. Beer, some free, was consumed, along with wine and Greek coffee. God I love birding! On the way home Lucy found a **Little Owl**.

This was the day we headed north in search of **Rüppell's Warbler**. We stopped on the outskirts of Petra and walked along a rough track into the next valley. No Rüppell's, but reasonable views of **sub-Alpine Warbler** and **Blue Rock Thrush**, which was nice given that we had never seen either bird before. The sub-Alpine Warblers were a particular pain to pin down, never standing still for one moment - maybe it's time for that rock again! By now it was lunchtime and there was only one thing to do - retire to Petra for a light snack.

Fully revived, we went back to 'hunt down' the Rüppell's Warbler. Hurrah! Not only did we see a pair but we found more sub-Alpine Warblers than you could shake a stick at. Clearly they heard about the threat of the rock! A good day by anyone's standards.

On the penultimate day we headed south to find **Krüper's Nuthatch**. Lucy has grown to hate this bird (a slight exaggeration) due to the failed attempts to see them in Turkey. This was a bit like 'birding by numbers' but was much easier. Basically, we went to a well known site and found the tree that had been marked with a bright red flash – the only thing missing was a neon sign! However, it is a very handsome bird and we got good views of both the male and female.

But our first stop of the day (pre-Krüper's) involved some great views of **Black-Eared Wheatears**, which only went to reinforce our view of the Finsch's Wheatear. Part way along the track we came across a couple of pigs housed in a small brick building. Clearly pleased to see us they rose up and placed their front trotters on a small wooden gate, naturally a photo was called for (not shown). Unfortunately, five minutes later the farmer came along and shot one of them. We were not happy, but accepted this was the normal state of affairs. And things became even more fraught following the sighting of the Krüper's Nuthatch, when two adorable - but clearly abandoned - puppies attached themselves to us and followed us around the forest. Eventually, Lucy couldn't stand it anymore and we headed back to the car. Fortunately, as we approached the car, God knows what we would have done with them, they ran off and attached themselves to another couple, who were having a picnic. The pig shooting and the thought of 2 abandoned puppies rather spoiled the day – tears were even shed - what a couple of softies. The evening was spent in the local restaurant watching Liverpool lose to Atletico Madrid.

Our final day was very special and the story I am about to tell is so outrageous I almost don't believe it myself. Since it was the last morning we decided to get up early to bird Metochie Lake one last time. So I set the alarm for 0600 because we had heard that

the lake can get very busy first thing and there had been an influx of new birders the previous day, as travel conditions got a little better following the Icelandic volcano. However, on arrival there was only a small group of birders from a mini-bus.

As the sun rose and the mist began to drift across the lake the Hirundines, mainly **Barn Swallows**, which had roosted in the reeds, were just rising and filling the air with their calls, as were the Whiskered Terns. Slowly a cacophony of noises filled the air, including the unmistakable kronking of **Great Reed Warblers**. I love their ridiculous song. Within a couple of minutes we had seen our first **Little Crake** (female) on the edge of the reeds nearest us, so close you didn't need binoculars. Slowly she crept through the reeds, completely ignoring us.

The tour party left leaving Lucy and me, and two other chaps scanning the reedbeds on the far side, about 30 feet away. I spotted a crake; so did the other two chaps, but it turned out that we were all watching different birds. As I watched a male Little Crake, another Crake came into view and we all seemed to converge on these two birds. It then became obvious that one of them was **Baillon's Crake**. I had heard so much about this elusive bird, I couldn't believe I was actually seeing one in the flesh. You could see clearly the white flecks on its back and it was about 15% smaller than the Little Crake. The Baillon's started climbing up the reeds until it was about 10 feet from the base and right next to the male Little Crake. Suddenly it all went crazy. A female Little Crake flew into the Baillon's and duffed it up. The Baillon's shot off into the reeds never to be seen again and all four of us just looked at each other! We couldn't quite believe what we had seen. The only other sighting I can compare this to was the Hazel Hen I saw with Mike Blair on the RAFOS trip into the High Tatras in Slovakia a few years ago. Clearly, there was only one thing to do after such a wonderful experience - go back to the hotel for breakfast. Later on we went to look for Cinereous Bunting and Rufous Bush Robin. No Cinereous Bunting, but we did see the **Rufous Bush Robin**, a **Rock Nuthatch** and a couple of **Stone Curlew**. So another terrible day in the field!



Rufous Bush Robin

Photo by Kurt Buchelt

We had wonderful a holiday. The local people are warm and friendly, the Island has not been spoilt by tourism, there are no 18-30 yobs, the food and drink is wonderful, and the scenery is beautiful. We would recommend Lesbos to anyone.



Verreaux's (Giant) Eagle Owl (*Bubo lacteus*)
Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana. 13 April 2010
Photo by Pete Gray



Water Thick-knee (Dikkop) (*Burhinus vermiculatus*)
Okavango Panhandle, Botswana. 30 March 2010
Photo by Pete Gray



White-fronted Bee-eater (*Merops bullockoides*)
The Okavango Panhandle, Botswana
30 March 2010 - Photo by Pete Gray



Slaty Egret (*Egretta vinaceigula*) Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana
13 April 2010 – Photo by Dick Yates