



**Newsletter No 91 - Spring 2011**



**Bluethroat – Raptor Watch 2010**

**Photo: Chris Patrick**

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



Asian Openbill Stork - Cambodia Jan 2011 - Photo by Dick Yates



Waxwing - Milton Keynes Jan 2011 - Photo by Ken Earnshaw

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Short-toed Treecreeper – Troodos, Cyprus by Robbie Robinson  
 Unless otherwise stated, all illustrations in the Newsletter are by Robbie Robinson

## Letter from the Editor:

Dear RAFOS Members,

This will be my last edition of the Newsletter as your Editor. I have been on the RAFOS Committee for 11 years now and Newsletter Editor for 5. My reasons for stepping down are twofold; first I feel that I would like a rest from Committee duties, but most importantly I believe that there comes a time when an editor starts to put too much of himself into the publication and it starts to lose its impact, and I think that time has now come. However, I am delighted to tell you that John Stewart-Smith has agreed to takeover the quill as of the Autumn 2011 edition. You all will have read some of his erudite and witty articles in the Newsletter and he brings a wealth of life and birding experience to the job. I wish him well.

This editorial change will coincide with a change in the format of the Newsletter, as those of you who attended the EGM will know. There has been a lot of debate in Committee about how the Society could afford to produce 2 Newsletters and a Journal every year now that we have to pay the printing costs. In essence we can't, and this dilemma was in fact one of the contributing factors that led to the cancellation/postponement of the 2010 AGM, a decision that was made by the Committee with the best of intention but one that, obviously, had not been thought through adequately – but that is all water under the bridge.

The new publication will continue to be produced twice per year but the front part will consist of Newsletter style articles and the back part will be extracts from the more scientific articles that traditionally would have featured in the Journal. These will now be published in full on the RAFOS website; but for those who do not have access to the web, and need a copy of the full report, you can request one from the Journal editor. We sincerely hope that you like this new format but I think that you can rest assured that John will produce a very readable and interesting publication.

In this, my last edition, I hope that you will find something of interest; perhaps something that inspires you to new birding experiences and/or moves you to visit places further afield. There are the reports on RAFOS Field Meetings and surveys as well as articles on birding from locations near and far. I hope that you enjoy it.

Finally, it just remains for me to give my best wishes to all RAFOS Members, please keep attending the Society's Field Meetings and Expeds and please put pen to paper whenever you have an interesting birding trip or experience. I am sure that John will welcome articles on any birding related topic. I hope to meet up with many of you in the field over the next few years.

Yours Aye,

**Dick Yates**

## NOTICEBOARD

### RAFOS Field Meetings and Expeds for 2011

10 Apr	Chew Valley Field Meeting - Dave & Anne Bodley
12 Apr-20 May	Austria Exped - BirdLife Austria Survey - Mike Blair
19-25 May	East Lincs - BTO Bird Atlas Survey - Jerry Knights & Jim Bryden
23-25 Sep	Portland Observatory - Field Meeting - Dave & Anne Bodley
5-9 Oct	Bucks - Ringing Course - Colin Wearn
23 Oct	Chew Valley - CVL Survey - Dave & Anne Bodley
28-31 Oct	Burnham Overy - East Anglia Field Meeting - Mike Hayes
22-31 Oct	Cornish Chough - Field Meeting - Jim Bryden & Martin Wightman
19 Nov	AGM at RAF High Wycombe
20 Nov	Post AGM Field Meeting Little Marlow Gravel Pits - Darrel Hamley

Note1. The East Lincs BTO Bird Atlas Survey will be based at Revesby near Woodhall Spa. Volunteers please contact the FALO, Jerry Knights 01782-379480 Mob: 07714-707401 or [jezrax@btinternet.com](mailto:jezrax@btinternet.com). See page ?? for more details.

Note 2. The 2011 Ringing Course will cost approx £80 for the weekend and accommodation is likely to be in tents. Please contact Colin Wearn.



Crested Lark - Lady's Mile Beach Ex Raptor Watch Oct 2010 Photo: Steve Copsey RNBWS

## EXERCISE RAPTOR WATCH 2010 OR TALES FROM THE PINTH

*By Dick Yates*

Exercise Raptor watch was a RAFOS led, Joint Service raptor survey in Cyprus from 16 Sep to 8 Nov 2010. Fifteen RAFOS members took part along with 3 RNBWS and 2 AOS members. AOS should have had one more representative but unfortunately he had a hospital procedure brought forward that clashed with his attendance. However, the remaining 20 participants managed to cover the period without too much trouble, but we were down to 3 members for the last week. So how did Raptor Watch 2010 come about and what were its aims?

**Background.** Following the first Gulf War the military erected 2 new, large aerals, designated P1 and P2, on the Salt Lake at Akrotiri opposite the Communications Site. It has to be said that, at first sight, these aerals do look like 2 very big 'fishing nets', and BirdLife Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) Game Fund were concerned that they could constitute a serious hazard to large raptors during the migration season. For security reasons we could not take photographs of these 2 arrays but the artist's impressions below gives some idea of what they look like.

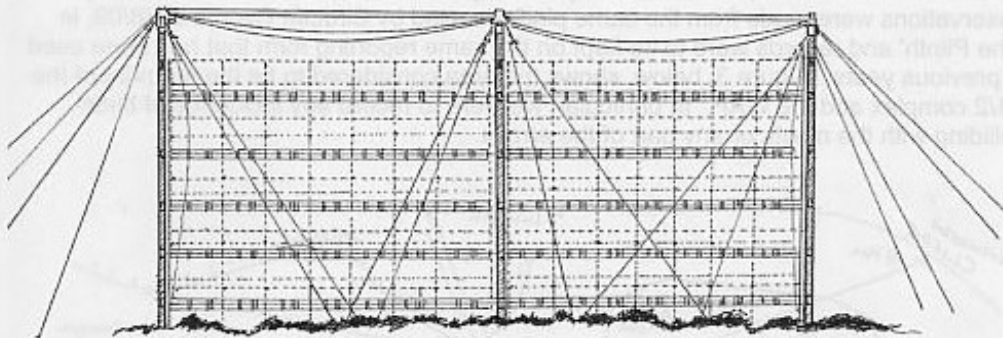
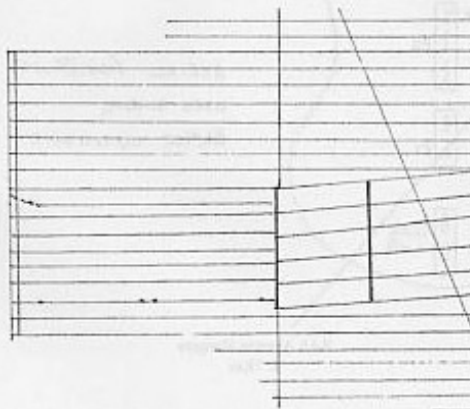


Fig 1 Above, shows the whole of the P2 array and Fig 2, left, is an expansion of a small portion.

*Drawings by Robbie Robinson*



To ascertain whether the arrays posed a threat the SBA Administration undertook to conduct a series of raptor surveys over the next few years, and to make the survey more complete they included the aerals to the west of the road in what is called the Western Aerial Farm (WAF). In Sep 2007 they employed a contractor who monitored the raptor migration from the Tower in the communications site for the whole month. In Apr/May 08 RAFOS carried out ExCypSurv08, (see Newsletter No 86 – the

back to front one) and the SBA requested us to assist by conducting a raptor survey during the Spring migration. We agreed and, again using the 'The B\*\*\*\*\* Tower', we provided 120 hours of monitoring during our time in Cyprus. In Autumn 2008 and Spring 2009 the monitoring task was undertaken by BirdLife Cyprus members and Game Fund officials and the plan was to hire a contractor for Autumn 09 and Spring 10.

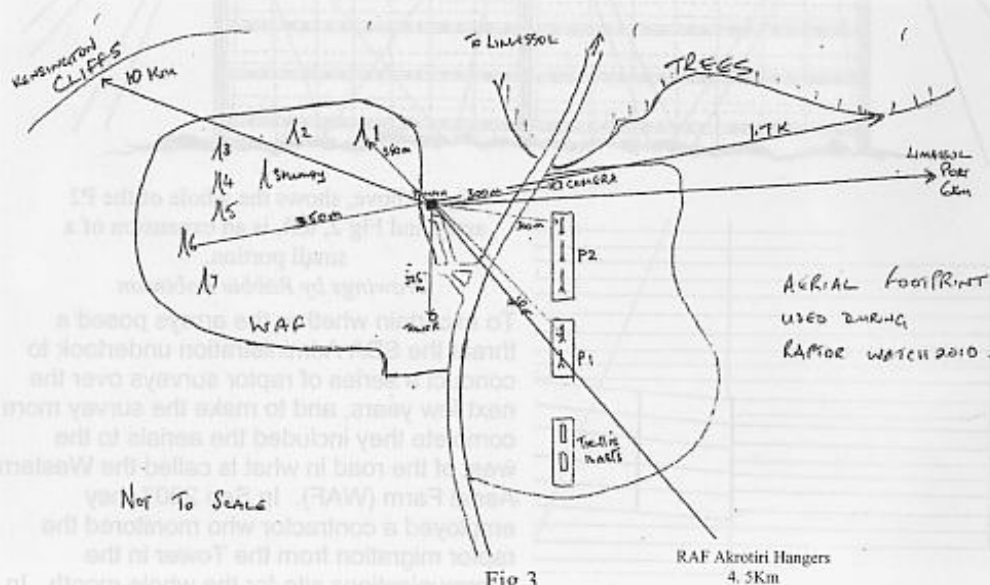
## EXERCISE RAPTOR WATCH 2010

While we were discussing the 2008 task with SBA officials I asked why they had been paying a consultant to carry out this work when the military had 3 ornithological societies who could probably do it for nothing. They thought that this was a good idea and over the next couple of years the plan for Ex Raptor Watch 10 was formulated. It wasn't quite cost free for the SBA as they agreed to pay for our accommodation and provide us with transport, we in turn would pay for our own airfares and food plus obtain a grant from RAFOS funds.

Ideally, the SBA would have liked us to undertake the survey from the beginning of Sep until the second week of Nov, some 10 plus weeks. This was always going to be beyond our capability so we settled for 8 weeks and we just made it. In hindsight perhaps we should have started a week earlier as the Honey Buzzard migration was well underway by the time we started on 16 Sep, but more of that later. Our daily watch cycle was from 0630–1130 and from 1530–1800, this changed slightly when the days grew shorter.

**Aim.** There were 3 aims for Raptor Watch 10.

1. The prime aim was to record all birds that flew within the designated footprint of P1, P2 and the WAF. To avoid unnecessary security worries and maintain consistency observations were made from the same platform used by BirdLife Cyprus in 08/09, ie 'The Plinth' and records were to be kept on the same reporting form that had been used in previous years. Figure 3, below, shows the area considered to be the footprint of the P1/2 complex and the WAF. In particular, we were to record any incidence of birds colliding with the masts or any part of the arrays.



2. The second aim was to continue with the Wetland Survey that we started in 2008 at Phasouri Reedbed, Zakaki Marsh and Lady's Mile and The Bishops' Pool.

3. Finally, we wanted to monitor the departure of Eleonora's Falcon from the Akrotiri and Episkopi Cliffs to their wintering grounds in Madagascar.

**The Raptor watch.** Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) make up about 97% of the large raptors that migrate through Cyprus in the Autumn and this passage was well under way when we started the watch on 16 Sep. As you can imagine the learning curve was pretty steep for the first team which consisted of Daphers and me and Dick and Jan Knight and I'm sure we made a couple of errors. Fortunately, On 18 Sep we were joined by Jerry Bilbao and his knowledge and identification skills quickly got us up to speed. Daily Honey Buzzard numbers built up rapidly and we recorded our biggest day on 21 Sep when we had 440 go through during the morning session. Incidentally, on the same day BirdLife Cyprus were conducting a Raptor Watch at Paphos Headland and recorded 690 in the day. They continued to come through in good numbers, 100+ per day, until the end of the month when the numbers started to tail off.



Honey Buzzards

On 27 Sep we were joined by the '3 Amigos', Dave Munday, Jon Orme and Pete Evans and the lively banter, both on and off Plinth, ratcheted up a notch. I picked them up at Paphos late in the evening and they declared themselves hungry and thirsty. Naturally, I

had plenty of beer in stock and Daphers had made some sandwiches for them when they got in; so Jon O started off in his traditional manner by spilling his beer and throwing his sandwich over the floor. He followed this up next morning when, on his first raptor watch and doing the recording, he fell sideways off his chair. Great merriment all round! But things soon settled into a routine and life on the Plinth invited some good banter. It was decided that Dick & Jan were definitely the "Knights of the Plinth". Then there was Lord Mandleson – "The Plinth of Darkness" and of course the "Plinth of Wales" couldn't be ignored. It was the latter that inspired Dick & Jan to design and construct the Raptor Watch crest.



"Ich Zähle" 'I Count'



"The Knights of the Plinth"

Other good birds during Sep were 8 **Booted Eagle** (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), 6 **Montague's** (*Circus pygargus*), 2 **Pallid** (*Circus macrourus*) and one **Hen Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*), several **Long-legged Buteo** (*Buteo fufinus*), **Common** (*Buteo buteo*) and **Steppe Buzzards** (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*), a single **Egyptian Vulture** (*Neophron percnopterus*) (I missed it) and away from the Plinth **Griffon Vulture** (*Cyps fulvus*) was seen around the Kensington Cliffs. **Osprey** (*Pandion haliaetus*) was seen on 3 days and from 26 Sep **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** (*Accipiter nisus*) put in an appearance, and on that day we got a pair of **Levant Sparrowhawk** (*Accipiter brevipes*) from the plinth. These are the subject of a BirdLife Cyprus rare bird report as is the **Caspian Tern** (*Sterna caspia*) seen by Dick Knight and Daphne Yates at Zakaki Marsh on 28 Sep. The **Red-footed Falcon** (*Falco tinnunculus*) passage also made a slow start in Sep.

Before we knew it, it was the end of Sep and time for Dick, Jan, Daphers and Jerry to leave, but on 3 Oct Mike and Sue arrived along with the first of our AOS participants, Andrew Bray.

At this point I must say a huge thank you to the 5 RNBWS and AOS members, they constituted 25% of the overall party and without them Raptor Watch 10 would not have been possible.

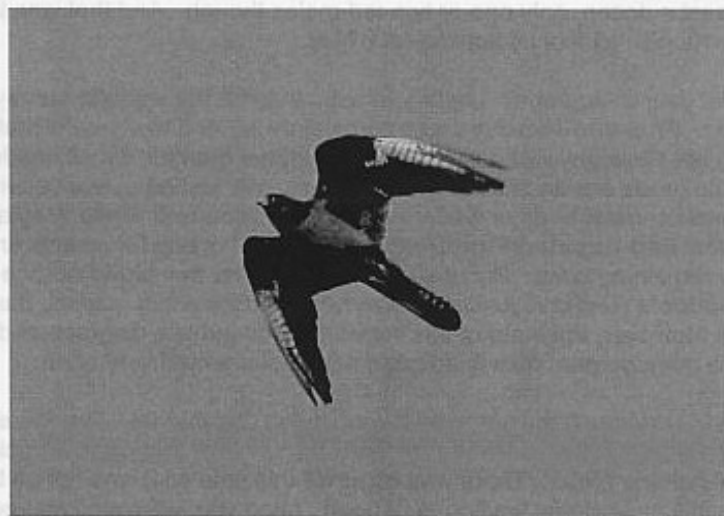
For the first week in Oct the daily **Honey Buzzard** count remained around 30-50 a day but after that it dropped to tens and low teens. However, other good birds were coming through in small numbers to keep us interested. **Marsh Harrier** (*Circus aeruginosus*) was seen daily in ones and twos and **Black Kite** (*Milvus nigrans*) was regular enough to

make sure we checked all birds thoroughly. **Bonelli's** (*Hieraaetus fasciatus*) and **Booted Eagle** were reported, with most of the Booted Eagles being the pale morph. **Red-footed Falcon** numbers increased, but the largest numbers were flocks of 65 and 41 on 4 and 6 Oct respectively. **Long-legged, Steppe** and **Common Buzzard** continued to be seen and 2 more **Osprey** were reported on 11 and 12 Oct. **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** became a regular species and the odd **Hobby** (*Falco subbuteo*) was seen from the plinth, but this species was more common at Bishop' Pool.

Oct 9 saw the arrival of Mark 'Slasher' Cutts and Steve Copsey, both RNBWS members; Rupert Ormerod arrived on 10 Oct and Andrew Bray and the '3 Amigos' departed on the 10 and 11 respectively. On 18 Oct Sue abandoned Mike to his fate and Chris Patrick (RNBWS) arrived on 19 Oct: 'Griff' Griffin, (AOS), joined us from Dhekelia for 4 days in the second half of the month.

The Raptor Watch continued to give good birds. On 15 Oct Mark and Steve, both with wide raptor experience from Gibraltar Raptor Watches, were on the plinth and observed 2 flocks, one of 37 birds and the other of 39 birds. Both agreed that they were Sparrowhawk; but based on the number of birds and the flocking activity they were assessed to be **Levant Sparrowhawk**. They submitted a Rare Bird Report, but, unfortunately, they were a long way away and Steve's photos only look like 'raindrops' and are not detailed enough for a positive ID; so we shall never be certain.

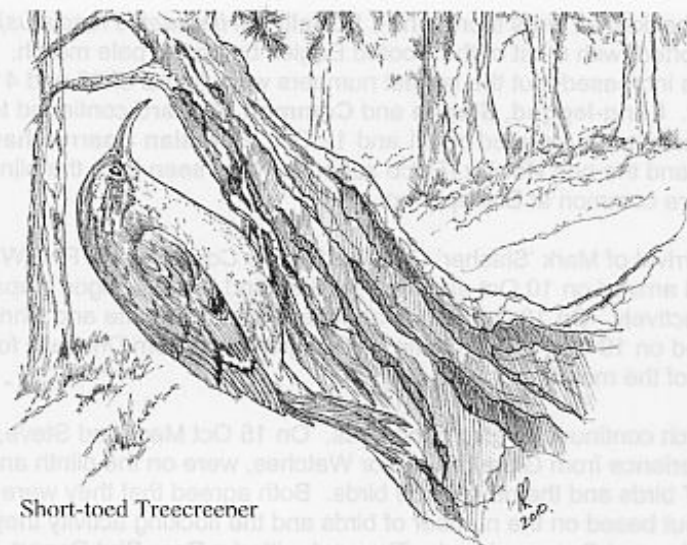
On 25 Oct Dave and Anne Bodley arrived and Al Jordan and Doug Radford pitched up on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Raptor numbers were definitely falling off now, but during the first week of Nov a late push of **Hen Harriers** came through. They were seen almost daily in ones and twos and on 2 Nov we also had 3 **Pallid Harrier**. **Red-footed Falcon** were now very thin on the ground, and in the air, but the occasional **Steppe** and **Common Buzzard** kept us watching.



Male Red-footed Falcon

Photo: Steve Copsey

I took the Bodleys to the airport on 3 Nov and now we were only 3. We were now starting the morning watch at 0630 again, after the clocks went back, and it was getting dark by 1700 so I agreed with the SBA people that we should do the Raptor Watch from 0630-1230 and drop the afternoon session since we were seeing nothing in the 2 hours that we were out there.



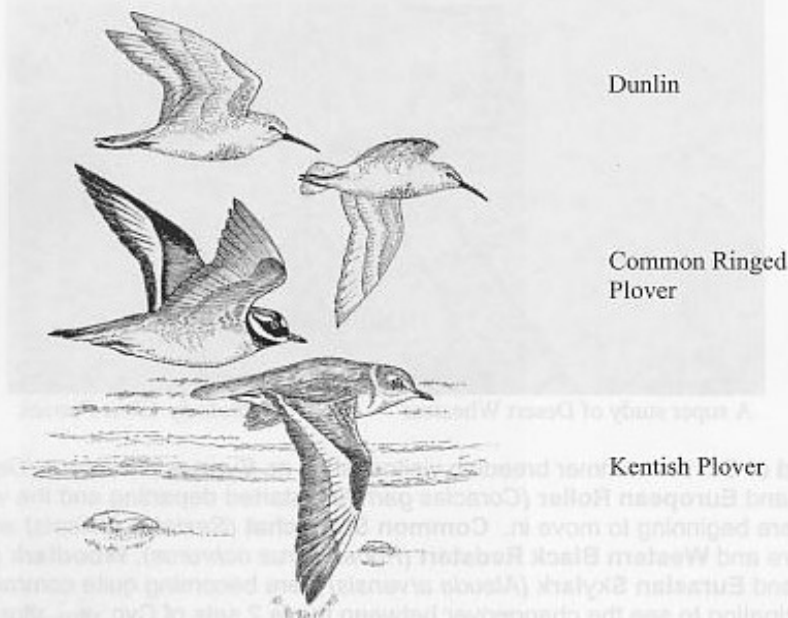
Short-toed Treecreeper

On the last Monday afternoon I managed to get both the military vehicles cleaned and returned to Akrotiri, along with the camp beds and bedding that I had borrowed, and left us the Tuesday free, so Al, Doug and I took a trip up to Troodos. Al & Doug walked round Mt Olympus, about 7km and only picked up **Cyprus Coal Tit** (*Periparus ater ssp cypriotes*) and the locally endemic ssp of **Winter Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes cypriotes*). **Chaffinch** (*Fringilla coelebs*) were abundant in Troodos Square and we spotted a **Blackbird** *Turdus merula*; but it was not until we took a walk round the paths surrounding the new visitor centre that we caught up with our main targets, **Red Crossbill** (*Loxia Curvirostra*) and the endemic sub-species of **Short-toed Treecreeper** (*Certhia brachydactyla dorotheae*). Personally, I have never seen so many Crossbills in that area, at least a dozen, only one or two red males though. And that was the end of Raptor Watch 10, with all 3 of us leaving on 9 Nov.

But, what about your other aims? I hear you ask. Indeed, the wetland survey continued on a daily basis. **Phasouri Reedbed** was completely dry and in an awful state. The Republic does not allow any water in during the summer months; it's all needed for the farmers, and the reeds are encroaching everywhere. We visited at least every 3 or 4 days; there were no water birds or waders and even Yellow and White Wagtails were scarce and a few **Red-throated Pipit** (*Anthus cervinus*) hunting for insects around the feet of the few remaining cows. But, it is indeed an ill wind that blows no-one any good, and **Zitting Cisticola** (*Cisticola juncidis*) have benefited from this neglect; they are all over the place. However, the state of this important wetland is a disgrace and it is essential that a management plan is adopted and implemented very soon.

**Zakaki Marsh** is very much the same as it was during CypSurv08. The Marsh is still flourishing but the port traffic continues to bowl up and down that narrow track to and from the illegal parking areas. There was no strike this time so it was not as bad as 08, but the area is still an accident waiting to happen. Mind you, we saw some good birds there. Early morning usually gave us the sight of 70+ **Grey Heron** (*Ardea cinerea*) at the back of the marsh and **Bluethroat** *Luscinia svecica*, **Bearded Tit** *Panurus biarmicus*, **Penduline Tit** (*Remiz pendulinus*) and **Moustached Warbler** (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*) were all present as they passed through. Also in evidence were **Common Kingfisher** (*Alcedo atthis*), **Sedge Acrocephalus** *schoenobaenus*) and **Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus scirpaveus*) while **Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybits*) and **Willow Warbler**

(*Phylloscopus trochilus*) did their best to challenge the ID skills of everyone. Other nice birds seen here were **Eurasian Spoonbill** (*Platalea leucorodia*), **Little Bittern** (*Ixobrychus minutus*), **Water Rail** (*Rallus aquaticus*) and **Whiskered Tern** (*Chlidonias hybridus*), plus a few waders.



Dunlin

Common Ringed Plover

Kentish Plover

Lady's Mile held the usual populations of **Kentish Plover** (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) with **Spotted** (*Tringa erythropus*) and **Common Redshank** (*Tringa totanus*), **Little Stint** (*Calidris minuta*), **Dunlin** (*Calidris alpina*), **Common Ringed Plover** (*Charadrius hiaticula*) and the occasional **Curlew Sandpiper** (*Calidris ferruginea*).

The least affected area is probably **Bishops' Pool**. Here we saw **Little** (*Porzana parva*) and **Spotted Crake** (*Porzana porzana*), **Ferruginous Duck** (*Aythya nyroca*), **Glossy Ibis** (*Plegadis falcinellus*), the odd **Wood Sandpiper** (*Tringa glareola*) and loads of **Coot** (*Fulica atra*), **Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus*) and **Little Grebe** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*). The surrounding trees also held good numbers of **Spotted Flycatcher** (*Muscicapa striata*), the regional race of **Great Tit** (*Parus major aphrodite*), and **Greenfinch** (*Carduelis chloris*) while **Goldcrest** (*Regulus regulus*), **Blackcap** (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and in the latter part of the survey **Robin** (*Erithacus rubecula*) were all spotted. However, it was the **Red-breasted Flycatcher** (*Ficedula parva*) that created the most interest. First seen by Al Jordan and Dave & Anne Bodley, who submitted the rare bird report, it was later found by Mike Blair and Doug Radford.

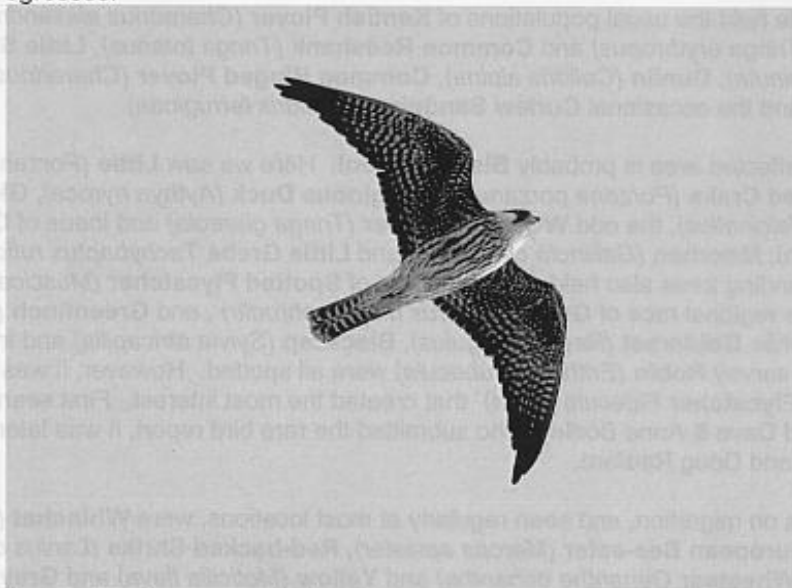
Other birds on migration, and seen regularly at most locations, were **Whinchat** (*Saxicola rubetra*), **European Bee-eater** (*Merops apiaster*), **Red-backed Shrike** (*Lanius collurio*), **Northern Wheatear** (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) and **Yellow** (*Motacilla flava*) and **Grey Wagtail** (*Motacilla cinerea*); while **Isabelline** (*Oenanthe isabellina*) and **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear** (*Oenanthe malanoleuca*) and **Lesser Grey Shrike** (*Lanius minor*) had a rather more limited distribution; Chris Patrick found the only **Desert Wheatear** (*Oenanthe deserti*) of the trip.



A super study of Desert Wheatear

Photo by Chris Patrick

By the end of Oct the summer breeding visitors such as **Cyprus Wheatear** (*Oenanthe cyprica*) and **European Roller** (*Coracias garrulus*) started departing and the winter visitors were beginning to move in. **Common Stonechat** (*Saxicola rubicola*) were everywhere and **Western Black Redstart** (*Phoenicurus ochruros*), **Woodlark** (*Lullula arborea*) and **Eurasian Skylark** (*Alauda arvensis*) were becoming quite common. It is really fascinating to see the changeover between these 2 sets of Cyprus visitors as the season progresses.



Eleonora's Falcon over Akrotiri Cliffs

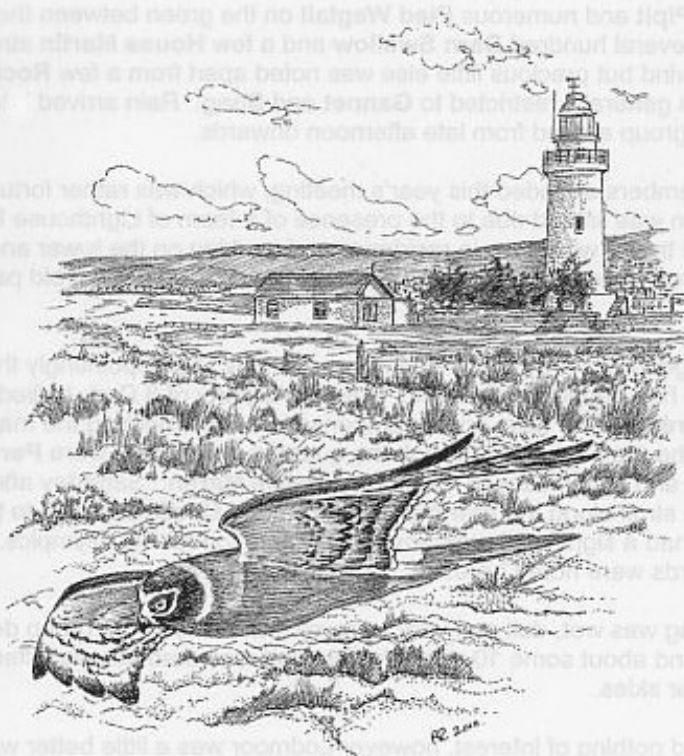
Photo by Chris Patrick

Finally, I must mention the **Eleonora's Falcon** (*Falco eleonora*). In 2008 we monitored their arrival, with the first birds being seen on 13 Apr and then just a trickle until the main body began arriving around 1 May with most birds apparently in by the time the survey

finished on 16 May. This year departure seemed to follow a roughly similar pattern, with no noticeable fall off in numbers until about 23 Oct. After that the numbers of birds counted on each visit, both at Akrotiri and Episkopi Cliffs dropped off quite sharply until 3 Nov when only 2 birds could be found at Akrotiri. A final visit to both Akrotiri and Kensington Cliffs on 7 Nov found no birds left at all.

**Conclusion.** Raptor Watch 2010 was one of the longest expeds that RAFOS has attempted in recent years and we only just had the numbers to complete the 8 week survey. However, we gathered a considerable amount of data which was given to both the SBA Environment Office and to BirdLife Cyprus and I believe that we achieved the aims that we were set. Regarding the impact that the aerials have on migrating raptors, I think it is safe to say that there is minimal risk to birds. We witnessed a number of near misses and several collisions, but none of the birds involved appeared to have been harmed by the experience.

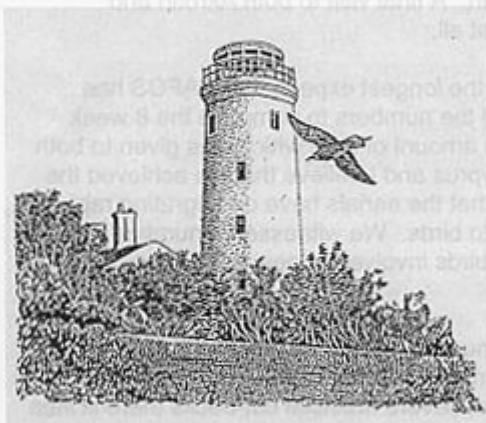
The state of the wetlands within the SBA continues to be of concern and management plans are badly needed to preserve these environments. The SBA Environment Office is working actively on these matters but in times of severe financial cut-backs there is little cash to spare for environmental projects. However, the author believes that the UK Government has commitments and responsibilities under EU Conservation Directives and, despite the fact that the SBAs in Cyprus have been specifically excluded from the EU, it should be doing more to protect these areas.



Pallid Harrier

By Robbie Robinson

## RAFOS AT PORTLAND 8-10 OCTOBER 2010



By Ken Earnshaw

Strong north-easterly winds were one of the dominating aspects of this year's visit to the Portland Observatory. During the Friday morning Ken and Sally Earnshaw checked out Radipole and noted **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Snipe** and **Mediterranean Gull** in particular. On arrival at Portland Bill they were treated to some 50 or so each of **Northern Wheatear** and **Meadow Pipit** and numerous **Pied Wagtail** on the green between the Observatory and the Bill. Several hundred **Barn Swallow** and a few **House Martin** streamed through on the strong wind but precious little else was noted apart from a few **Rock Pipit**. Seabird movement was generally restricted to **Gannet** and **Shag**. Rain arrived late morning and the rest of the group arrived from late afternoon onwards.

Only fifteen members attended this year's meeting, which was rather fortunate as accommodation was limited due to the presence of a team of Lighthouse Painters (a somewhat rare trade) who were in residence and working on the tower and the cottage, covering the ground around and the parked cars with large flakes of old paint. Nice guys to talk to.

Saturday was generally grey, misty and still very windy. Disappointingly the majority of the Wheatears had departed overnight. However a party of 8 Dark-bellied **Brent Geese** and a single **Grey Plover** were some compensation. Mid-morning the majority of the group walked the top fields and through the quarries. Highlights were **Peregrine**, **Sparrowhawk** and a split-second view of a possible **Merlin**. Saturday afternoon was given over to a stroll along the new marina at Portland Castle adjacent to the heliport. This area has had a significant make-over in preparation for the Olympics. An interesting sprinkling of birds were noted here.

Sunday morning was wet, dull and very misty so that some of the group departed after breakfast. Inland about some 10 miles the weather was dramatically different; warm and sunny with clear skies.

Ferrybridge had nothing of interest, however Lodmoor was a little better with 3 **Sandwich Terns** giving close views plus the usual range of wildfowl.

The remainder of the group took a walk from the old Pennsylvania Hotel down to Church

Ope and along the cliffs to the east. The terrain here - more old quarry sites - is remarkably well clad with thick, low scrub, and would appear to be suitable habitat for Wren, Robin, Dunnock and warblers and should also provide a good landfall for winter visitors and passage migrants like Wheatears and thrushes. However, once again it proved pretty well devoid of all interest, though it is a pleasant ramble.

The 2012 Olympic Games are having a significant impact upon Weymouth and Portland. Numerous road and bridge closures for infrastructure updates result in long diversions, traffic jams and much displeasure from the local populace; these were another dominating aspect of the weekend.

As ever, our thanks to Dave and Anne Bodley and to Val Kersley for organising the weekend and of course for so well attending to the culinary needs of the group.

#### Members attending

Alex Smith  
Ian Drake  
Michael Chatfield  
Richard Pike  
Rob King  
Peter Tithecott

Sally & Ken Earnshaw  
Jenny & Peter Gray  
Liz Mallinson & David Tattersfield  
Anne & Dave Bodley  
Val Kersley

A full list of species seen over the weekend is available if required.



Female Northern Wheatear – Portland 2010

Photo by Ken Earnshaw

## ISLAY MIST 2010

*By Beatrice Spotter aka Pete Evans*



*Just 5 of the Team – Bill, Jan, Dick, Jon O and Big John.  
(So where's the rest? Ed)*

*Photo: Pete Evans*

The island of Islay forms part of the Inner Hebrides chain off the West coast of Scotland and this year 13 members of RAFOS spent the period 30 Oct to 6 Nov on the annual whisky pilgrimage and ornithological field meeting.

The very name 'Islay Mist' conjures up a vision of a benign landscape bathed in the light of a watery sun with perhaps the outline of a stag in the distance. Indeed, we awoke on the first morning to just such a picture, except for the stag; but it wasn't to last. The weather for the remainder of our stay was locally described as breezy, which was something of an understatement, with a few showers. On our first morning Ian, the owner of the cottages in which we were accommodated and a keen naturalist, gave us an introduction and an update on the latest bird sightings on the island.

As this was Jon Orme's and my first trip to Islay we were given a guided tour of the island to familiarise us with the various hot spots and other points of interest such as the distilleries which, interestingly, were often quoted during call over as reference points and an awful lot of people seemed to spend a lot of time in their vicinity!

Sun 31 Oct was the only bright dry day and Fran, Catherine and Peter were at Ardnave which lies on the North West of the island. While walking along the beach there they literally stumbled across a **Grey Phalarope**, which seemed to be completely unfazed by their presence; to the point that they were able to get good photographs of it. Without doubt this was thought to be the best spot of the trip, but it got better.



The Red-necked Phalarope

Photo: Fran Eggby

A day or so later the photographs were shown to an island bird expert and he updated the sighting to a **Red-necked Phalarope**, a very rare Island record for this time of year.

At about the same time, Pete and Jenny Gray were at a remote area known as the Oa where they had good views of a Golden Eagle. Jon and I went there on our last day and apparently missed one by about ten minutes!

The Phalarope was revealed at call over that evening and several of us resolved to go the following day to see if we could find this rarity; but to quote the famous song 'What a difference a day makes'. Breakfast the following morning was taken to the sound of gale force winds whistling down the chimney. Before we reached the intended area several locals had told us that extreme weather was expected just before noon and when the islanders tell you that it is going to be rough, then it's going to be really rough!

It almost goes without saying that we didn't see the Phalarope. It had more sense and had probably sought shelter inland. However, all was not lost as a small flock of **Twite** were seen feeding at the edge of the beach and then J le G called a **Snow Bunting**. As we watched, a **Merlin** suddenly appeared from nowhere and proceeded to try and have Bunting for lunch, but although its flying prowess was spectacularly displayed, on this occasion it went hungry. By now angry clouds were visible and we decided to return to the sanctuary of the cars, a decision made not a moment too soon. The rest of the day was a wash out so we returned to the cottages and revived the ancient art of fire lighting.

Over the course of the following days we all travelled to various parts and some good birding was had by all. Quite large flocks of **Redwing** were seen but there were no **Fieldfares** amongst them which several of us thought unusual. Some species which we regard as being quite common turned out to be very elusive. Canada Goose, Wood Pigeon, Dipper and Grey Wagtail fell into this category and Moorhen and Coot were not sighted at all. White-tailed Eagle also eluded us although they are known to be present and even rumoured to be breeding. Of course, geese numbers were in the thousands with **Barnacle** being by far the most common with smaller flocks of **Greylag** and **Whitefront**.

On Tuesday evening Dickie Duckett gave a very successful talk at the Natural History Centre in Port Charlotte. Entitled "The Travels of a Wildlife Photographer", his brilliant display of the wildlife and scenery of the Falkland Islands was extremely well received.

During the week several tetrads were surveyed for the BTO bird atlas which on one occasion gave us some good views of a male **Hen Harrier**. Other areas which still needed to be surveyed were deemed too remote and mountainous for ladies and gentlemen of our advanced years!



Greylag, White-fronted and Barnacle Geese

The morning of our departure saw an early start as we had to be at Port Ellen by 0900 to catch the ferry. We boarded and headed for the restaurant for a hearty breakfast which was taken as we watched the beautiful scenery drift by. On the outward journey it had been dark so those of us who hadn't been before were unaware of what we had been missing.

Despite the inclement weather we had a good trip and most expressed a desire to attend the next one in spring 2012. On that basis Jan has made a provisional booking.

I must say I really enjoyed my first trip to Islay. The western side of the island reminded me of the wilds of Dartmoor whereas the Eastern side has much more woodland. The island is steeped in history and there is much evidence with sites of old habitations and burial sites. Legends of times gone by are everywhere. Perhaps it should be known as 'Island Myths'.

#### Postscript

*I'm afraid that the author missed out an incident on the ferry going over to the island. Gathered in the restaurant after supper the conversation turned to how each was to be hailed, given that there were 3 Peters and 3 Johns in the party. The Johns were easily decided; Big John (John Stewart-Smith), Long John (John Le Gassick) and JonO (Jon Orme). When the question turned to the Peters, one among us who shall remain nameless (but see the title) said "I always wanted to be called Beatrice!", causing much mirth among our party and a gentleman at a nearby table to almost fall out of his wheelchair.*

*A Sneak aka Dick Knight*

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#### RAFOS LIBRARY UPDATE. By Jerry Knights

It has taken a couple of years to sort out the RAFOS Library. The first step was to purge it of all the documents, mostly books that had been collected or donated over the years but were of no use to the modern birder. Most of these were auctioned at the 2009 AGM: some were sold commercially.

The remaining publications, comprising of books and pamphlets written by RAFOS Members, Newsletters, Journals and, of course, all our expedition reports and associated slides, have been carefully catalogued and each given its own unique serial number. The new library list can be viewed on the RAFOS Website.

The librarian of the Royal Air Force College Library, Cranwell has kindly agreed to store and operate the library on our behalf, and half a dozen shiny new boxes containing our history were delivered there on 23 February.

Until the system has bedded-in, any member requiring access to an item from the library should approach the FALO. Where appropriate, a copy of the document will be e-mailed or posted to the member. If an original item is loaned, then it will be the individual's responsibility to return it to the library. Remember that an increasing number of our Newsletters and Journals can be viewed in the members' area of the Website.

Last, our Webmaster is in the process of attaching "metatags" to the relevant articles, reports and scientific papers in order that the data collected over so many years can be made available, at cost, to any research ornithologist who picks up those "tags" while searching the internet for specific bird or site data.

In conclusion, the library is now secure in an atmospherically controlled environment, and is controlled by a professional librarian. RAFOS's history is now both safe and accessible to members and the data gleaned over many expeditions is available to contribute to future bird study.

## Farewell to 'The Pride'

By Pete Gray



"The Pride" in Bilbao

Photo: Pete Gray

It is pretty safe to say that I am not much of a bird lister – and steady on those of you who know me and may say I am not much of a birder! But whichever of my lists happens to be in use at any one time, the consistent message is that I am very light on sea birds and the ocean specialities in particular. How could I remedy this? The traditional approach is to spend the requisite number of hours on a coastal site which is renowned for the masochistic art of sea-watching, usually in wet and windy conditions that have driven the birds close enough to shore to be seen by those whose tear ducts are strong enough for the task. The other approach is to take to the ocean and try and see the birds in their own environment – a pelagic trip therefore seemed to be the answer, but which one?

A quick glance through the pages of the usual round of bird magazines includes adverts for these trips and most of the major specialist birding firms include them in their holiday brochures. For example, the July 2010 *Birdwatch* has a reasonable coverage. The Bird Fair is a good place to do your research, but a pelagic was not close to my list of priorities when Jenny and I went last year, not least because she views the prospect of anything longer than the Dover-Calais run as an endurance test. But in essence, the trips fall into three categories. At the top of the list are the dedicated birding trips, in a relatively small vessel, to known hot spots where 'chum' is laid to attract tubenoses in particular. Numerous trips run from the Scillies over the August and September period, taking several hours before returning their, often green, passengers back to shore. For the dedicated lister, similar trips have recently been advertised from Madeira. The interim category involves sensibly sized vessels, which have cabin accommodation and venture further afield in search of cetaceans and seabirds. And here lies the rub of the problem in that many of the folk with whom I chatted on my trip were frustrated that the emphasis was very much on the whales and dolphins and any seabird that was seen on passage was 'collateral damage'. Tales of woe included passing trawlers, with their attendant flocks of sea birds, at speed in pursuit of yet another school of common dolphin. The third category, which happened to be the most economical in time and money and promised to be quite comfortable (i.e. no need for seasickness bands and tablets!), was

to join a trip on one of the car ferries that ply their trade between the UK and the Northern coast of Spain. The choice quickly narrowed to the P&O route from Portsmouth to Bilbao, especially as the vessel, *The Pride of Bilbao* was due to be withdrawn from service on 27 September 2010. P&O seem to have concluded that plodding along at 15 knots is no longer commercially viable in competition with the new fast ferries that are attractive to the freight haulage industry, but are not conducive to wildlife watching.

*The Pride* offered a very logical route and is certainly 'nature-friendly' with a permanent staff of observers from the Biscay Dolphin Research Programme watching from the bridge and broadcasting 'heads up' on what is ahead. This is augmented by a walkie-talkie system linking the various group leaders. The Bay of Biscay sees the Continental Shelf come relatively close to the coast with an upswelling of nutrient rich water that attracts cetaceans and seabirds alike. Where time and weather conditions allow – usually on the way south – the Captain takes a route that skirts along the edge of the Shelf to maximise opportunities for observation.

Over the years, *The Pride* has built up a close and loyal following both among the tour companies and individuals. A friend that we made on a Naturetrek trip to Morocco a few years ago was on his 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive *Pride* pelagic and was accompanied by his wife, daughter, friends and extended family. There were at least five tour companies represented, including a French group, and a large, and very voluble, Spanish contingent. There was considerable regret that the route was closing and much scratching of heads as to what would provide the annual 'whale and dolphin fix'. The route, and what to expect where and when, is well known to the aficionados; the link to the bridge refines this with updates on likely arrival times over undersea cables and so forth.

The basic outline is a dusk departure from Portsmouth which sees *The Pride* off Ushant at dawn. A solid day sea-watching takes the vessel down into the middle of the Bay. The next morning is another early start in order to disembark in Bilbao for a morning's sight-seeing or birding with a lunchtime departure. The route north takes in the rest of the Bay through to nightfall. The final run into the south-west approaches and the Channel is relatively quiet as the waters become shallow, churned up and quite nutrient poor. This tends to be R&R time with call-over and gossip over twitches past and hoped for. A cetacean call-over is an interesting affair given that you only see the top 10% of the animal, groups can be mixed and views varied. Possibles become probables, numbers escalate, and even though one has spent the entire time huddled in the same 10 square metres of sheltered upper deck (the only spot sufficiently out of the wind to be able to lift a pair of bins) one starts to wonder if one was on a different trip! I can't wait for the tour report!

My trip was from 5-8 August 2010 and I chose to go with Wildwings; the group had 26 pax and 3 leaders all of whom were excellent naturalists in all respects, but with a main interest in the cetaceans – a recurring theme which increasingly frustrated those whose primary interest was in the seabirds. This was particularly evident when one asked what had been seen and the birds were an afterthought. The major problem, was that when a group of pilot whales, or dolphins, was encountered at short range, the leader effort was exclusively focused on identifying the animals omitting to point out to the birders that there were 4 Storm Petrels and a Balearic Shearwater feeding in the melee! Once this had been experienced the naive birders were able to concentrate on what was happening above the water than in it! Unfortunately, one or two only realised this at call-over!

The trip South started inauspiciously with a cold and strong wind limiting the amount of space on Deck 11 (bridge level with both sides available for observation) that was usable for birding. The sickening crash of very expensive optics meeting steel decking highlighted the hazards of trying to use a scope in such blustery conditions. The morning produced limited views of Manx Shearwater, Lesser and Greater Black backed Gull, and a finger four formation of Sanderling on passage. As the day wore on, the weather improved and the approach to the Continental Shelf brought the first Bottle-nosed dolphins sharing the food supplies with a flock of Northern Gannets. Great Skua were then relatively common (the term 'relative' is used advisedly as my notes show about an hour between each set of sightings), and in one instance a group of 7 harassing a lone Balearic Shearwater. The aforementioned Pilot whales were accompanied by a Storm Petrel as was a group of dolphins. The cetacean highlight for me was two distant, but clearly visible Sperm Whales, which, after a protracted period feeding at depth, were 'blowing' as they re-oxygenated. The trick here was to keep the bins focused on the spouts of water. As the breathing process was completed the whales, in succession, went from horizontal to vertical with a characteristic image of their flukes silhouetted against the horizon – stunning!

A number of options were available for the mandatory disembarkation in Bilbao including visits (by coach at extra cost) to the Old Town or to the Guggenheim Museum. In the finest interests of journalistic professionalism your correspondent dutifully elected to stay with the Wildwings group for a walk out of the harbour area up into the neighbouring hills. After hours standing on hard steel decks, it was good to be able to stride out (although not for long as the gradient became pretty serious). Even though August is often quiet for birding, we were soon into mixed, scrubby habitat with Melodious, Sardinian and Cetti's Warblers all showing well. Other highlights included Red-Backed Shrike, Tree Pipit, Serin, Crossbill, Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, and three Wrynecks as we made our way back down to the port. Gulls around the docks were mainly Yellow-legged and Black headed.

The trip back started in hot sunshine, but the wind quickly got up forcing the not-very-scarce lager drinking, much tattooed human version of the whale, and the vodka consuming females of the species, from the upper decks leaving the whale and bird watchers to find their sheltered piece of deck. Whales encountered included Fin, Cuvier's Beaked and stunning views of two Sperm Whales some 500 metres from the ship; the advent of stinging rain meant that the best sighting of the day was witnessed by only the hardy few – in contrast to the way down when the warm weather coincided with the bulk of the sightings for all to enjoy. Unfortunately, the birds were almost totally absent. There was one glimpse of a Cory's Shearwater, and one of a Sooty, I dipped on both even though I was on deck throughout, highlighting the frustrations of sea-watching. As evening approached, the high sea state and 4m swell necessitated a reduction in speed, which, combined with the adverse tides made us 2 hours late into Portsmouth.

The sea was calmer on the final morning, but the wind across the deck (a composite of the wind and the ship's progress at 15 knots) made birding difficult. Gannets and Fulmars were in evidence, mainly on their way to fishing boats. Quite understandably, they gave *The Pride* a wide berth preventing detailed scrutiny of the flocks feeding in their wake.

The call-over, just before lunch, has already been described in part. Of interest was the diversity and depth of experience in birds, beasts and butterflies: the vast majority of those participating were accomplished naturalists. There was considerable discussion, as there apparently had been on the evening in question between the tour group leaders,

over the identity of two of the animals seen with the Pilot Whales on the route south. From photographs taken at the time, it looked as if they may have been False Killer Whales – a mega-tick. I was happy with the Storm Petrel above them!

So what did this trip do for my seabird list? Unfortunately, not very much so the process will have to be re-visited all over again. Next time, I will be very cautious over anything that purports to be anything other than a dedicated birding trip. Cetaceans are brilliant...but! So it looks as if it is going to be patience with the 'scope at Portland followed by a trip to Boots for sea-sickness tablets, armbands and a nose clip to block out the smell of 'chum' and diesel fumes! Watch this space for next year's instalment of Pete's seabird non-list. And what of *The Pride*? She was looking pretty tired and in need of at least some TLC, if not a full refit. There seemed to be an air of resignation that this would not be a cost effective prospect and that the newer, high-speed vessels were too impractical to be used as viewing platforms. The consensus was that it was, very regrettably, the end of an era.

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### **RAFOS EXPEDITION TO EAST LINCOLNSHIRE 19 – 25 MAY 2011**

This year, in support of the new British Bird Atlas 2007-11, RAFOS will mount the 4<sup>th</sup> and final expedition to undertake survey work and we are looking for keen birders to join the 8 strong team carrying out the survey.

During the survey we will complete 29 Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) spread over nine 10 kilometre squares. Selecting the TTVs has been made easy with the help of the BTO Controller for East Lincolnshire, and our focus is on TTVs that were completed for the previous Atlas. Up to 2 hours observation will take place in each TTV, usually by walking through the area in order to ensure the different habitat types are all covered within the fixed time. The rest of our time outside the formal recording periods will be spent searching for specific species where evidence of breeding is required, but all observations will be gathered as "Roving Records".

Survey work will be carried out during the period of high bird activity (i.e. early in the morning), so the plan is to divide into teams of 2 observers, with each completing 2 - 3 tetrads a day. The number of survey sheets to be completed will amount to around 5 days work. Teams will record in notebooks then transfer to record forms later. The BTO will provide both pre-printed TTV and Roving Record forms.

We will hire the RAF Wyton PSI Minibus to get about, and accommodation will be in Revesby Village Hall where we will be self-contained and carry out our own cooking, supplemented by the odd visit to a local hostelry. Personal contributions should be under £100.

Ex East Lincs 11 promises to be another excellent field trip and will be our final contribution to the new national atlas. If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible.

Jerry Knights (FALO) 01782-379480 Mob: 07714-707401 or [jezrax@btinternet.com](mailto:jezrax@btinternet.com).

## **If You go Down to the Woods Today.....**

Martin Routledge

My usual patch is only just down the road – 2 miles or so and it's really quite good. My BirdTrack stats show I've recorded 66 species with breeding confirmed for 34 of them. Of course for leafy Buckinghamshire it has got quite a lot going for it even if it is on the outskirts of Aylesbury. To start with there are 2 pretty big lakes. The Eastern shore is a housing estate put up in the eighties but the other three sides are pretty much wild. There is arable farmland beyond with mature trees for Buzzard and Red Kite but it is the lakes and un-manicured scrub that draw the species in. Breeding waterfowl are the usual suspects complemented by good warbler numbers in the summer. Then winter time brings a more diverse clientele both on the lakes and in the hedgerow.

There are some reasonably new woodlands, obviously planted but maturing nicely and while loafing about in one of these areas in May, trying to confirm Blackcap that I was sure I could hear, I was distracted by a pair of Sparrowhawk obviously scoping out an old nest site for re-occupation. Now this pair could have chosen more wisely. For starters the old nest was about 35-40 feet up but in full view from the path that circles the lakes which was very popular with the dog walking fraternity, joggers and the occasional yooof on a bike. That said the little copse did seem to attract quite large numbers of passerines so there was a plentiful food supply to hand. Anyhow, I thought nothing of it but vowed to keep an eye on the site.



Male Sparrowhawk

Photo: Martin Routledge

A few weeks later and I once again spotted the Spawks as I wandered through the woods. The male was sitting near the nest while the female went about the business of rearranging twigs and other materials – well someone has to supervise!. She seemed to settle on what I presumed to be eggs but she might just have been settling lining material to fit – it was mid-May. I visited the site regularly over the next few days but my records show my next confirmed sighting was on 26 May when the female was obviously incubating as she gave me a beady stare. No sign of the male who obviously had decided his work was done – typical I hear the distaff side of the family say!

Over the next 2 weeks I visited regularly on my normal birding stroll but saw no sign of either bird. Abandoned nesting attempt I thought – not surprisingly as the location was quite public. Then on 26 June I spotted the female again sitting patiently in a tree near the nest. Perhaps the site was viable after all and my visits had just coincided with the memsahib popping out for a snack. I think male Spawks are supposed to wait hand and claw on their ladies but maybe my budding Lothario had met with a sticky end! With fingers firmly crossed I next visited the location on 6 July and was dead chuffed to spot a single fluffy chick sitting waiting to be fed. A week later and 3 youngsters were clearly visible with the female dancing attendance on her youngsters.



What You Looking At?

*Photo: Martin Routledge*

Someone else had obviously been keeping an eye on the nest as I noticed the scrub around the nest tree had been well and truly flattened. Thankfully my fears about nest raiders were assuaged when I noticed the first brancher sporting a shiny bit of bling on his right leg – yes someone had been in and ringed the pulli (which of course I'd been hoping to do with Colin Wearn!!) Soon all 3 Spawklets were sitting on the branches of the nearby trees with mum bringing in titbits for their dining pleasure.

Then on 23 July they were gone. No sign of them at all – I felt both sad and glad in equal measure. I was sad that my own bit of Springwatch was over but really happy that the mother Spawk had successfully managed to raise 3 chicks – apparently without the help of a mate. I saw the family one more time at the end of July when having heard the unmistakeable call of a Sparrowhawk I was lucky to see the female and her 3 youngsters fly through the copse on their daily hunting rounds.

I've had a Sparrowhawk in the garden since – generally causing havoc among the Goldfinches and Tits that gorge on the sunflower hearts provided. It was a female and having missed on the first pass sat catching her breath in the low branches of a Norwegian Spruce near the feeders. I like to think its one of 'mine' from the nest but she wasn't blinged up so it would have to be the mother. The other outcome of all this was I've joined the BTO's Nest Record Scheme so shall have to keep a good look out for more nests this breeding season.



Branching Out

Photo: Martin Routledge

## **EXTREMADURA – 6-11 NOV 2010**

*By Karen Sims*

On Sat 6 Nov John and I flew out from Bristol to Madrid and were met by our bird guide, Jesus Porras. Iain MacKenzie, who had wanted a few extra days in Madrid, had flown out from Gatwick the previous Tuesday and he also met up with us at the airport. Having collected the car we set off to Trujillo in Extremadura for 6 days birding (and wine tasting). Our guide was to take us to our hotel and then collect us each day for the trips out into the steppes and mountains of the region.

It was a 250km trip to get to the hotel, but we birded en route seeing **Monk Parakeets** flash past the car before we had left the city limits. We stopped at a garage on the side of the motorway with fantastic views of a hunting **Black-winged Kite** who obliged by perching on a nearby electricity pylon giving us even better views of this wonderful raptor. The next stop was the lakes at Arrocampo for the evening roost. There were huge numbers of **Cattle Egrets**, a few **Little Egret** and just one **Great Egret**; but the stars of the show were the many **Eurasian Marsh Harriers** who quartered the marshes sending birds scurrying in all directions. Jesus then got really excited as a few more Little Egrets arrived with a dark morph amongst them. He had seen this bird before and the theory was that this and a few others seen further south in Spain may well be hybrids with the Reef Egrets that had occurred in the Coto Donana.

We arrived at the hotel in the dark and would have to wait for the morning to get acquainted with our surrounds. The hotel, Vina Las Torres ([www.vinalastorres.com](http://www.vinalastorres.com)), was a beautiful country house surrounded with far reaching views and set in its own grounds about 10 km from Trujillo. From our lovely suite that evening we could see the castle walls lit up with spotlights. The walled town was the birth-place of Francisco Pizarro the conqueror of Peru, overthrowing the Inca Empire.



Checking for Griffon Vulture



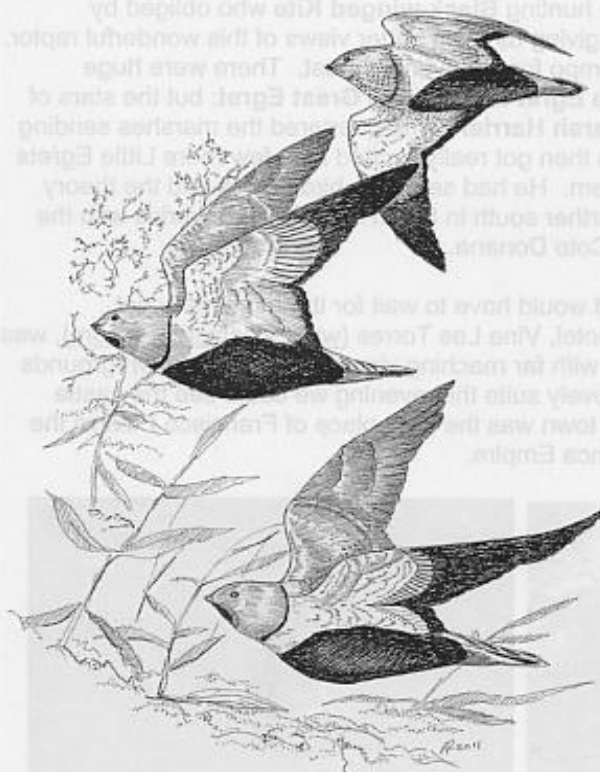
There it is!

*Photos: Iain Mackenzie*

Sun 7 Nov. After a leisurely breakfast, Jesus collected us at 0900 and we set off for Guadalupe, Pic las Villuercas, Caba as del Castillo and the Belen plains. There were birds everywhere with **Griffon** and **Black Vultures** patrolling the skies and we were to see both these species every day of the trip. Jesus knew where to find all we wanted to see and we were soon watching **Stone Curlew** and **Little Bustard** foraging around the plains. We had great views of a pair of **Golden Eagle**, the female much larger than the following male. It was great birding on a bright and sunny day in this amazing part of Spain with empty roads and bumpy farm tracks. That evening we had our first wine

tasting session with our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen Machado Calvo followed by Belen's Spanish home cooking and the very enjoyable Acorn liqueur.

**Mon 8 Nov.** A very wet and cold day dawned and it did not improve, so the day's birding was from the car and difficult. We started at 0830 and travelled to Zonta, Campo Luger, Embalse la Albufera and Embalse de Sierra Brave. This was an area of cereal and rice fields with large reservoirs. Despite the weather there was plenty to see with ducks and grebes on the water and waders, egrets, herons and storks on the cultivated fields. Although early winter there were already hundreds of **Common Cranes** in the fields along with **Lapwing** which appeared every day in all sorts of terrain. Driving slowly down a farm track through olive trees we found our first **Great Bustard** sheltering from the wind and rain and also a small group of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse

By Robbie Robinson

I had always wanted to see Great Bustard and even though the weather was more like England than Spain it made for an exciting day. A very damp Red Fox rummaging through discarded rubbish was a surprise sighting near the reservoir feeder canal.

**Tues 9 Nov.** At least it was dry this morning but there was still a cold wind, reminding us that it was November even in Spain. Again an early start as Jesus was taking us to his patch, Monfrague National Park. He is one of the guides for this internationally renowned reserve and he wanted us to get the most out of our day there. We stopped on the way at a small marshland reserve Embalse

Talavan where Jesus regularly had seen a family of **Otters**. The mother and two cubs did not show for us but the evidence was all around, with spraints and discarded crayfish shells. A feeding **Spoonbill** was a good sight along with **Green Sandpiper** and **Common Snipe**.

Then into Monfrague NP, where there were several **Griffon Vultures** flying around. These birds were nesting on the cliffs unlike the **Black Vultures** which nest in the pines in that area, and we saw one sitting in a pile of twigs watching the circling juveniles and other adults. I was surprised to see so many as I had assumed they were a rare sight, but not on this trip.

The highlight however was 3 **Spanish Imperial Eagles**, two in flight and the third perched at the top of the vulture roost giving us great views for over an hour. It was so good to be able to look at this magnificent raptor in the scope and identify it. I rely on others to tell me what passing Eagles are in many cases because they are usually high up and, to my inexperienced eye, look very similar at long range. Another pair of **Golden Eagles** and a dark morph **Booted Eagle** were added to the growing list. There were also good sightings of **Red Deer** in the park, mainly does with young and a few young stags. Here, the rut is in Sep/Oct so the large stags had all dispersed.

Wed 10 Nov. Today it was sunny and a bit warmer, although the wind was still a little cool on the wide steppes. The countryside in this area is varied, with large expanses of Cork oak and Holm Oak Dehesa, cultivated areas of cereals and rice, sheep and cattle farms and miles of steppe grasslands, home to the Bustards, Sandgrouse and Stone Curlews. The roads are quiet, in good repair and the motorways have hardly any traffic. We used small roads and farm tracks to explore the area pulling off to scan for birds.

We explored the Trujillo-Caceres plains which are justly famous for the steppe birds that we found in good numbers. The Stone curlews had been absent except for the one sighting on Sunday and we didn't see anymore this trip but Jesus said that the foot prints we found in a muddy lane were most likely those of Stone Curlew. We, John actually, counted 46 Great Bustards flying over, which then did a circuit and flew back over us to land from where they had originally taken off, unfortunately, it was too far for us to view even by telescope. Then we saw a group of 12 males squaring up to each other and fighting and earlier in the day we had had good views of 8 Great Bustards, 3 males and 5 females, all less than 2 years old, plus another 10.



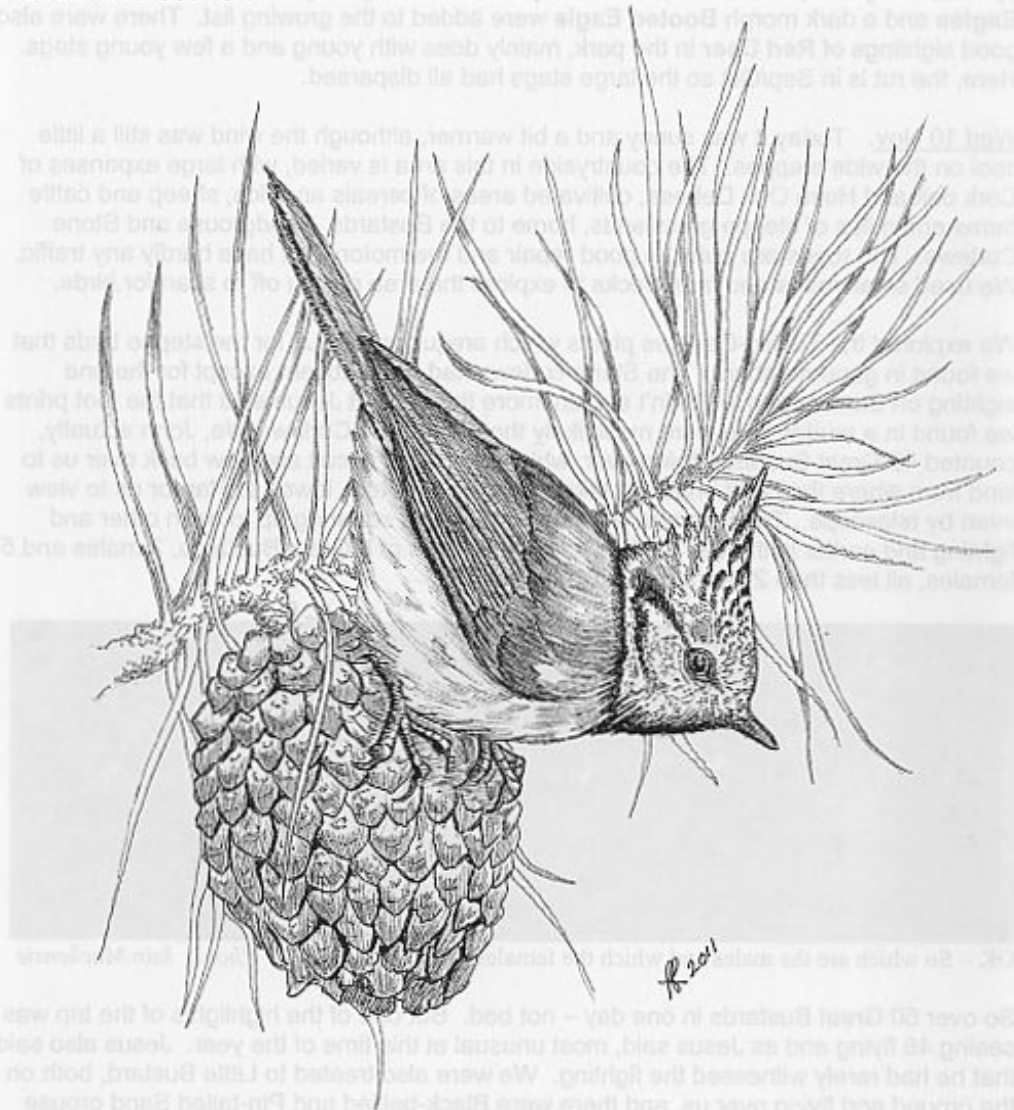
OK – So which are the males and which the females?

*Photo: Iain Mackenzie*

So over 60 Great Bustards in one day – not bad. But one of the highlights of the trip was seeing 46 flying and as Jesus said, most unusual at this time of the year. Jesus also said that he had rarely witnessed the fighting. We were also treated to Little Bustard, both on the ground and flying over us, and there were Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sand grouse both heard calling and seen.

Thur 11 Nov. Our last day, we had flights back from Madrid that evening at 2000hrs. Jesus collected us from the hotel for the last time and we said our good byes to our lovely hosts and set off to Madrid via a few new birding sites. We were up in pine woods and added to the growing list **Firecrest**, **Crested Tit**, **Grey Wagtail** and **Hawfinch**. Jesus picked up a **Bonnelli's Eagle** in the scope but I had to take his word for it as it was a long way off. Apparently, this was part of a territory for them and he had seen them here before.

We arranged for Jesus to drop us at the metro station Plaza de Espana on the west side of Madrid; it is a 500km round trip from Trujillo and it saved him the long drive around Madrid to the airport. After 25 minutes and one metro change we had arrived at Madrid Barajas Airport Terminal 1 with a couple of hours to spare before catching our flights back to Bristol and Gatwick.



Crested Tit

This trip fulfilled all our expectations and we would love to revisit in spring under our own steam and explore the area on foot. We can hire Jesus by the day for a visit to those special sites. It is a huge area and we would not have found the sites or the birds without his help. Altogether we saw or heard 117 species.

A full list is available from me at [karensims55@gmail.com](mailto:karensims55@gmail.com)  
Jesus Porras – [www.iberian-nature.com](http://www.iberian-nature.com)

# **A BIRDING TRIP TO VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA**

## **PART 1 - VIETNAM**

*Dick Yates*

For several years I had been thinking about doing a birding trip to Vietnam and when I broached the topic with the Commander-in-Chief she said, "Good idea, and I've always wanted to visit the Cambodian temples at Angkor Wat". Since we were going to spend Christmas 2010 with family in Australia it seemed sense to go from there: and so it came about that we spent 17 days birding in South Vietnam, visiting the temples at Angkor and finally a few days of Cambodian birding.

**Planning.** There are not many birding tour operators based in Vietnam; but I found "Vietnam Birding", run by Richard Craik, who operates out of Ho Chi Min City (HCMC), formerly Saigon ([www.vietnambirding.com](http://www.vietnambirding.com)). I e-mailed Richard and he responded immediately with his suggestions based on when I would be visiting, for how long and the degree of difficult terrain that we were able to cope with. Richard also said he could organise the Cambodia portion of the trip for us although he didn't have any of his own people on the ground there. Let me say right at the start that the organisation was superb. We were met at every location on time and all the accommodation and transport arrangements were first class.

The weather in northern Vietnam in January is pretty bad so Richard recommended his Southern Vietnam Birding Itinerary. This consists of 3½ days at the lowland Cat Tien National Park, we would then drive north and have a night stop at Di Linh, a medium level location on the edge of the Dalat Plateau and then 3½ more days at Dalat, an old French hill station in south central Vietnam. We would then fly to Siem Reap in Cambodia and have 2 days visiting the temple complex around Angkor and round it off with 3 days guided birding in the vicinity of Siem Reap.

**The Trip.** We left a very wet Brisbane, you may have seen the news about the floods in Queensland, on 10 Jan and flew, via Darwin, to HCMC arriving at 2230 and were met by the courtesy bus from the Park Royal Hotel where we spent a very comfortable night. At 0900 the following morning, 11 Jan, we were picked up and driven the 150km to Cat Tien. Despite it being only 150K this journey took nearly 5 hours, the roads and traffic in Vietnam are something to behold.



A few motorbikes outside our hotel window in HCMC



The Dong Nai Ferry

Photo: Dick Yates



Minh

Photos: Dick Yates

We were met at the entrance to the national park by our guide for the 10 days, Lê Quý Minh, 'Ming', and escorted across the Dong Nai River and to our accommodation, which was basic but quite adequate having both aircon and en-suite facilities. After a bite of lunch we were out at 1530 for our introductory bird walk. Birds on that first afternoon included, **Hooded Oriole**, **Vernal Hanging Parrot**, **Greater Raquet-tailed Drongo**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Blue-throated** and **Tickell's Blue Flycatchers**, **Blue-winged Leafbird**, **Scaly Thrush** and definitely the star bird of the day, the tiny, **Black-backed Kingfisher**.

The following morning, 12 Jan, was the 5km each way walk out to Crocodile Lake; and after an 0530 breakfast and 5 mins looking for the calling **Brown Boobook**, Minh and I leapt aboard the lorry at 0600 for the 10 minute drive to the head of the track. Naturally, this took over half an hour as we stopped to see **Wooly-necked Stork**, **Linneated Barbet**, **Wedge-tailed Pigeon** and a few others on the way. Right from the start we could hear **Bar-bellied Pitta** and **Germain's Peacock Pheasant** calling but they remained obstinately invisible. As most of you know rain-forest birding is very difficult and after about 4½ hours of chasing Bar-bellied Pitta inter alia, we arrived at Crocodile Lake with very little to show for our endeavours. However, things began to look up as we traversed the wooden walkway to the little collection of rooms that provided a few of the young park wardens with a home away from home. Here we picked up **Abbott's Babbler**, **Asian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Stripe-throated Bulbul** and a beautiful **Pale Blue Flycatcher**. The lads on the observation platform were just getting their lunch and they asked us to join them.



Park wardens having lunch at Crocodile Lake

While we waited for the bowl of soup and noodles we had **Bronze-winged Jacana**, **Grey-headed Lapwing**, **Common** and **White-throated Kingfishers**, a **Purple Heron** started a courting display for the benefit of his mate who showed absolutely no interest, an **Osprey** dropped in to catch his lunch and a flight of 19 **Wreathed Hornbills** provided us with the highlight of the day.

In addition, the reason for Crocodile Lake being so called turned up and tried to sneak up on a **Purple Swampphen** who had obviously seen it all before and easily avoided becoming crocodile lunch.



I'm only a log!



I see you

Photos: Dick Yates

We did the return walk at a much better pace, it only took 2 hours, and it proved to be a little more productive. At last I got a very brief glimpse of a **Bar-bellied Pitta** as it shot across the track and **Orange-breasted Trogon** started to call but stayed out of view; but I did get good views of **Green-billed Malkoha**, **Common** and **Great Iora**, **Oriental Pied Hornbill**, **Olive-backed Sunbird** and **Blue-eared Barbet**. Finally, on the drive back to the lodge a pair of **Red Jungle Fowl** appeared beside the road and a pair of **Black and Red Broadbill** posed nicely in a tree beside the track.

That excursion took most of the day but we did manage a short walk before dark and saw **Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike**, **Ashy Minivet**, **Little Spiderhunter** and a fly-by by a pair of **Black and Buff Woodpeckers**. **Ashy Drongo** was very common, as was **Coppersmith Barbet** which we heard calling every day at Cat Tien but never saw one.

Green Imperial Pigeon

Photo: Dick Yates

13 Jan saw us visiting open grassland habitats. In the morning we drove out to an area called Dac Lua where there were stands of bamboo and a variety of other trees breaking up the grassland. On the journey out we saw several new birds, **Fairy Bluebird**, **Wedge-tailed**, **Thick-billed** and **Pompadour Green Pigeon**, **Red-breasted Parakeet** and **Dollarbird**; and once in the grassland we quickly homed in on **Vinous Starling**, **Grey Bulbul**, **Asian Palm Swift**, both **Lesser** and **Greater Coucal**, **Chestnut-headed**



and **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Plaintive Cuckoo**, **Racket-tailed Treepie** and **Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker** to name-drop just a few. We also saw a few local mammals, most notably the rare **Black-shanked Douc Langur** and the more common **Long-tailed** and **Pig-tailed Macaque** to add to the **Stump-tailed Macaque** that

I had seen the previous day; and to round off the mammals we saw several **Striped and Pallas' Squirrels**.

The afternoon/evening session took us out in the other direction to an area called Ba Ta Lai where the main target birds were **Green Peafowl** and **Lesser Adjutant**, both of which we saw. Also prominent were **Red-collared Dove**, **Burmese** and **Brown Shrike**, **Verditer Flycatcher**, **Indian Roller**, **Pied Bushchat** and **Black-shouldered Kite**. We were also able to add the shy **Red Muntjac** to our mammal list and the sight of literally scores of **Large-tailed Nightjar** hawking over the fields as the sun went down was unforgettable.

Common Flameback

Photo: Dick Yates



**Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Green-eared Barbet** and a brief appearance in flight of **Heart-shaped Woodpecker**. On the trip back to the canteen for lunch we picked up **Orange-headed Thrush**, and **Blue-eared Kingfisher**.

After lunch we once again birded along the road towards Forest Floor Lodge, a new eco-lodge they are developing to bring a few more 'high-end' visitors into the park. This walk gave us **Dusky Broadbill**, **Grey-headed Parakeet**, **Chestnut-capped Babbler**, **Grey-faced Tit-Babbler** and **Golden-crested Myna**.

On our final morning, 15 Jan, we just had time for a quick walk after breakfast before the car came for us; and very productive it proved to be. As we set out we heard **Collared Scops Owl** and shortly after that we saw **Black-naped Oriole**, **Laced Woodpecker**, **Common Tailorbird**, and **Purple-naped Sunbird** as well as great views of **Pink-necked Green Pigeon** and **Green Imperial Pigeon** as well as **Spotted Dove** and **Oriental Turtle Dove**. As we approached the HQ building prior to catching the boat back over the river I spotted **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** in a tree near the Admin building and as we waited for the car on the far side of the river we got another **Osprey**, **Little Egret**, **Pied Kingfisher** and **Red-rumped Swallow**.

The car arrived with our new driver, Tui, and we headed off for the small town of Di Linh on the edge of the Dalat Plateau. En-route we added **Plain-backed Sparrow**, **Black Kite** and **Cattle Egret** to the list. After a delicious lunch in a small local restaurant we birded the forested mountain pass at Deo Suoi Lanh where 3 species of **Laughingthrush** and the endemic, **Black-crowned Parrotbill** can be found – if you are lucky!! Well, we got a pretty good haul that afternoon but only the **White-cheeked Laughingthrush** was seen well. At this point I should point out that while I was behind a bush answering a call of nature, Daphne and Minh got very brief views of **Black-hooded Laughingthrush** and

**Indochinese Green Magpie.** I dipped - and they were never seen again. Moral: don't go for a pee while you are birding!!

However the good birds that we did see well included **Annam** (Black-browed) and **Red-throated Barbet**, **Puff-throated**, **Flavescent**, **Light-vented** and **Black Bulbul**, **White-throated Rock Thrush**, **Maroon Oriole**, **Mountain Fulvetta**, the lovely **Little Pied Flycatcher**, **Grey-crowned Tit**, **Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher**, the huge **Mountain Imperial Pigeon** and without doubt my best bird of the day the diminutive and delightful **White-browed Piculet**.

The next morning, we had another visit to this area before setting off for Dalat. This time we added **Pin-tailed Green Pigeon**, **Greater Yellownape**, **White-bellied Epornis** (Yuhina), **Indochinese Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Grey-cheeked Warbler**, **Mountain Bulbul**, **White-throated Fantail**, **Blue-winged Siva** (Minla) and the 2 specialities for the area, **Dalat** (**White-browed**) **Shrike-Babbler** and the **Black-crowned Parrotbill**.



crossing Minh said:

We arrived in Dalat in time for lunch and checked into the Dreams Hotel which is right in the centre of town, and it was very nice indeed. In fact it appears as the hotel of choice in Lonely Planet. The rooms were clean and spacious and the breakfasts were outstanding. The lady who owned the hotel was nearly always on hand to help, there was free internet access and washing was done by the kilo; I think we were charged something under £6 for 2 very large bags of laundry. Dalat itself is one of the old French Hill Stations, but there is not much left that tells you of its colonial past. It is now a bustling, expanding town where the main industry is tourism, market gardening and flower growing. As everywhere in Vietnam the traffic is an eye-opener. The restaurant where we ate dinner most nights was just across the street from the hotel and the first time we tried

"Just step off the pavement and walk slowly and steadily to the other side and all the motorbikes will miss you. Whatever you do, don't stop and don't try to dodge them".

He was right and miraculously we made it every time. But it wasn't until the last day that I was prepared to try it unchaperoned. We had met up with Richard Craik at Cat Tien and he was due to bring his party to Dalat the day after we arrived. He explained the Vietnamese driving philosophy. Each driver looks after the bit of road immediately in front of them, anything to either side or behind is not their problem, someone else will look after that. Despite the chaos it is all very good-natured and no one seems to mind cars, bikes and people cutting in front of them. Mind you the traffic moves pretty slowly, it has to, and there seemed to be very few accidents. Minh said there usually are quite a lot but later in the day when the drunks are about.

But I digress, back to the birds. After lunch we headed out for the Ta Nung Valley a small but bird rich area of remnant evergreen forest about 10km from Dalat. Here the speciality

is Grey-crowned Crocias – and before you ask – no we didn't see it!! We heard it a lot and on the final day Richard's group visited another area about an hour before us and they did see it, but we dipped. Never mind, you can't win 'em all and we did see lots of other great birds, starting that first afternoon with **Vietnamese Cutia**. Also that afternoon we saw **Mrs Gould's Sunbird**, **Black-headed Sibia**, **Hill Myna** and **White-eared Laughingthrush**.



Lake Ho Tuyen Lam

Photo: Dick Yates

Next day, 17 Jan, we set out for Ho Tuyen Lam, a large man-made lake just 3km out of Dalat where we hoped to find **Vietnamese Greenfinch** – and we did. In addition we got **Black-collared Starling**, **Eye-browed Thrush**, **Green-backed Tit** – looking for all the world like our own Great Tit, **Yellow-browed Warbler**, **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker**, **Brown and Hill Prinias**, **Red whiskered Bulbul** and the 2 star birds **Grey-faced Buzzard** and **Slender-billed Oriole**. Also, a very obliging **Grey Bushchat** hung around to have his photo taken.



Grey Bushchat 1. Posing

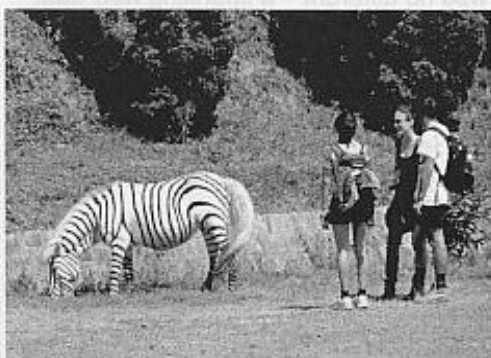


2. Pretending to be a Treecreeper Photo: Dick Yates

The afternoon session only added **Mountain Tailorbird** to our list.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Jan was the day for Mount Lang Bian, a 2000+m peak about 20 minutes out of Dalat. Here the prize would have been **Collared Laughingthrush**, a notoriously difficult bird to see, but again no luck. Instead we had to make do with such 'second-raters' as

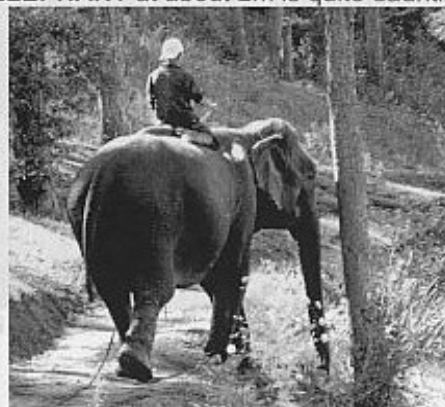
**Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, Golden-throated Barbet, Large Niltava, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Long-tailed Minivet, and Mountain Fulvetta.** But the best was yet to come. On our way down the mountain, and no we didn't get to the top, we heard a tremendous commotion in a tree seemingly not far off the path. A few minute of searching and we spotted the **Collared Owlet** perched on a lowish branch about 100m away; and giving him absolute rice, were a pair of **Red Crossbills**. Richard is convinced this Crossbill sub-species will soon be split and become Vietnamese Crossbill. We watched fascinated for about 15 minutes until the Owlet couldn't stand the ear-bashing any longer and departed the fix. But it was brilliant while it lasted.



On our return to the Park HQ at the bottom of the hill we saw one of life's quirky little sights. A Zebra in Vietnam? No a hugely embarrassed horse – dressed up for the tourists!!

In the afternoon it was back to Ta Nung Valley, but again no Crocias and the only new bird was a **Streaked Spiderhunter**.

Our last day in Dalat, 19 Jan, and it was time to visit the other side of Lake Ho Tuyen Lam. This side of the lake is seeing a certain amount of development with large private houses and a new eco-lodge for the up-market tourists. The place seemed singularly empty but all the trappings of tourism were evident from pleasure boats on the lake to elephant rides through the forest. This elephant crept up behind us as we watched an Osprey plunge into the lake and come up with a fish, we never heard it coming until it was right behind us. To suddenly be confronted by **ELEPHANT** at about 2m is quite daunting.



The Eco Lodge and The Elephant

New birds were getting hard to come by now and the very pleasant walk only gave us **Barred Cuckoo Dove, Scarlet Minivet, Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike and Red-throated Flycatcher.** On the final afternoon Minh and I went back to one of the previous sites where we had heard the Crocias for a last try. We started off by birding the road before getting to the track we wanted and it was here that Richard's group sailed past us in their bus. When we arrived at the right spot we met the others on the way back having successfully seen the target so we were quite hopeful. But it wasn't

to be, and although one was very close by he was determined that he had done his duty for the day and stayed in deep cover. They'd pinched my Crocias, the devils!! However, the afternoon wasn't a complete waste as we did get a fly by from a **Bay Woodpecker**, **Banded Bay Cuckoo** and **Indian Cuckoo**. Not great views but the last 2 were quite recognisable.

Early next morning we left Dreams Hotel for Dalat airport and the short flight to HCMC. As in many parts of the developing world the road leading to the new airport, where it is hoped that the hordes of tourists will arrive, is often very impressive and quite out of keeping with all the other local roads. This one was no different – a spanking new dual carriageway with a raised bed as a central reservation planted with roses.

At HCMC we transferred from the domestic to the international terminal ready for our flight to Siem Reap. We also had to say goodbye to Minh who had been a superb guide and our constant companion for the past 10 days. He would get one day back with his family in Da Nang before heading up north to Hanoi to meet up with the rump of Richard's group who were on a North Vietnam extension to their trip.



Burmese Shrike

Photo: Dick Yates

## **A BIRDING TRIP TO VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA**

### **PART 2 - CAMBODIA**

*Dick Yates*

The hour-long flight to Siem Reap was uneventful and we disembarked and headed for arrivals. We had been told that it was **essential** to bring a passport size photo in order to get a visa, but nothing had prepared us for the 'getting a Cambodia visa' process. Prior to the immigration desk was sign a saying "VISAS" so we queued up - this only got us an application form. Fill in the application, attach it, along with a \$US 20 bill and the passport size photo, to your passport and take it to the other end of a semi-circular desk with about 10 smartly dressed officials behind it, and queue up to hand it in. Now the processing of the passport begins. The first item on the agenda is the photo, which is removed and handed back as surplus to requirement, thereafter, I couldn't follow all the intricate manoeuvres that each official performed but suffice it to say it was passed from one to the next in line, due process being conducted at each station, until it reached the other end, where we had picked up the initial form, and the final man in the chain announced, in a very sombre voice, Richard Yates. I step forward, am inspected closely and my passport is returned with a lovely new Cambodia visa stuck inside. The whole process takes about 20 minutes and then you can proceed to immigration where the new visa is inspected minutely, presumably to ensure that the 'team of 10' have not made any errors and when the immigration officer is satisfied you are free to go. Customs is a formality and merely reminds you that you will beheaded, or worse, if you are caught with drugs or molesting children. (Not being flippant, this apparently is a real problem in Cambodia and the offenders are mostly Westerners.) Suitably chastened and determined not to transgress any Cambodian law we headed outside where a car was waiting to take us to the Bopha Ankor Hotel in the centre of Siem Reap.

The first thing you notice about the streets of Siem Reap is the lack of people, there are the usual motor bikes and tuk-tuks but nowhere near the mass of humanity seen in Vietnam. This is a very big country but with a very small population, approx 14½ million in 2010, and it is very poor. In addition, the average age of the population is only about 23. In Siem Reap itself the roads are quite good, and the main highway to Phnom Penh is well paved, but away from these roads the transport infrastructure is appalling, consequently, getting anywhere takes a very long time. On our birding trips we managed about 10Kmph. But let us move on to more interesting things.

**A Brief Temple Interlude.** The temples of Angkor are definitely worth seeing, but you must be prepared to see them with several hundred assorted Japanese and Korean tourists. We thought that getting on site by 0800 would enable us to beat the rush – so did several hundred Japanese and Korean tourists! We had a dedicated guide whose English was pretty good but whose accent and speed of delivery made him a little difficult to follow at times, or maybe we are just getting old. (This was true of our bird guide 2 days later)

The temples are pretty impressive and I am not going to try and give a potted history here. Suffice it to say that they were built by a succession of Khmer rulers between 800 and 1300AD, after that the Khmer empire declined for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the rise of the Siamese empire and the growing importance of Phnom Penh as a trading city. By the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century the Angkor area had become largely depopulated and the jungle started to reclaim its territory. There is considerable restoration work going on at a number of the temples and the tourist dollars that the site

brings in are a major source of foreign currency for Cambodia. If you Google Ankor Wat you can find out all you ever need to know, and more! The only birds of note during our temple visiting was a smart **Blue Rock Thrush** atop one of the temples, **Red-breasted Parakeet** and **Black Drongo** in the fields.



The Temple of Ankor Wat

Photo: Dick Yates

**Birding Cambodia.** Our guide checked with the agency before he left us and we were informed to be ready for our first birding day at 0530 the next morning. Sure enough, at 0530 our bird guide, Art Ourt, pitched up and we set out for the jetty to take a small boat out to the floating village of Prek Toal situated on the Sangkai River about 4km from the lake shore.

First a wee bit about Lake Tonle Sap. It is the largest fresh-water lake in SE Asia, in the monsoon season it covers an area of some 12,000Km<sup>2</sup> which shrinks to just over 2,500Km<sup>2</sup> during the dry season. The 'bird sanctuary' at the Prek Toal core area of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve has been called "the single most important breeding ground in SE Asia for globally threatened large waterbirds." The Biosphere covers 31,282 hectares at the NW tip of Lake Tonle Sap and contains such species as **Greater and Lesser Adjutant, Black-headed Ibis, Painted Stork, Milky Stork, Spot-billed Pelican** and **Grey-Headed Fish Eagle**. We managed to see all the above species bar the Black-headed Ibis. In addition there are large populations of **Asian Openbill Stork, Cormorants: Little, Indian and Great, Herons: Grey and Pond, Egrets: Little, Intermediate and Great** and we also saw several **Yellow Bittern** and one each of **Cinnamon** and **Black Bittern**. This was a fascinating if long and fairly arduous day out and Daphne is going to tell the story of the day in a short piece in this Newsletter, so I will stop there.

We got back to the hotel at around 1830 and Art said to be ready by 0530 again next morning for the trip to Ang Trapeang Thmor, a nature reserve based around a reservoir dating from the Khmer Rouge era. Today's targets: Sarus Crane, and other waterbirds. After a short drive on the tarmac it was onto the local tracks and the speed was cut to

about 10KMPH, if we were lucky. We drove through several small villages and the poverty of the people was evident, and yet they all seemed cheerful, smiling and waving whenever we passed.



Bronze-winged Jacana

Photo: Daphne Yates

First stop was at a lagoon and initial scanning indicated a good range of birds – having carted my scope around for 2 weeks this was only the second time I had used it and I was now glad I had it. Soon we had notched up **Cotton Pigmy Goose**, **Pheasant-tailed** and **Bronze-winged Jacanas**, several Egrets and Herons, and **Common Kingfisher**. Over the fields we had fairly distant views of

**Pied Harrier**, we were to get much better views the next day, as well as **White Wagtail**, **Siberian Stonechat**, **Sand Martin** and **Barn Swallow**.

We moved on to an area that Art said had held **Sarus Crane** only the day before and after a bit of scanning the horizon we saw 2 birds flying low and landing in a dry rice paddy about a 1km away. We set out to get closer. As we bumped along we saw a few more birds flying but it was difficult to get much closer. Finally we stopped and set up the scope and at a range of about 7-800m we could see a quite large group of Cranes. Unfortunately, the heat haze made photography pretty difficult, but eventually we counted 112 birds in total and Art said that this was one of the biggest flocks seen for some time.

A few words here about our guide, Art. To be honest, from what Richard had said about the embryonic state of birding in Cambodia I had not expected much from our guide; but I was very pleasantly surprised. Considering that he had only been birding for 2 years, his knowledge of the birds was pretty good, especially the major target species, and he certainly knew the habitats in and around Siem Reap. He also had a good network of look-outs among the park rangers and wardens, who phoned him up regularly to report sightings. That was another surprise – the mobile phone network – even right out on the lake he had mobile coverage. The reason is that there is virtually no fixed telephone system in Cambodia and mobile phones and calls are very cheap, hence everyone has one – but back to the birding.

Having watched the Cranes for a while we moved on to the reservoir proper. This was another large expanse of water set among the grasslands and rice fields with patches of remnant dipterocarp forest. In among the inundated grassland were huge flocks of **Lesser Whistling Duck** and **Garganey**, which took off in huge clouds whenever a raptor strayed over them. Here we also found a small raft of about 40 **Northern Pintail**. They were quite a distance out and the heat haze and the fact that most were in eclipse plumage made identification tricky. Art boldly called the Garganey, but after careful examination of the raft I noticed that 2 or 3 of the birds were males in quite reasonable breeding plumage and the positive ID of Northern Pintail was possible. Art was very excited as it was a 'lifer' for him and apparently is quite an unusual migrant to this area. There were also a flock of **Black-winged Stilt**, a group of 35+ **Little Grebe** one or 2 **White-browed Crake** and a few **Moorhen** as well as **Oriental Darter**, **Painted** and

Asian Openbill Stork, one Yellow Bittern and a single Spot-billed Pelican. On dry land we found Asian Koel, Peaceful Dove, Zitting Cisticola and Pied Fantail.

We also came across 3 farmers taking their pigs to market. Strapped on their backs on the back of a motorbike may seem quite cruel, but when we passed them they had actually stopped to douse the animals down with cold water and it was only a few Ks to the market. Maybe no more inhumane than the way we cart animals halfway across Europe for slaughter.



Pigs on bikes!

Photo: Daphne Yates

After a long and bumpy day it was back to our very nice hotel for a well-earned beer, dinner and bed – another 0530 start had been ordered for the next morning.

25<sup>th</sup> Jan and the last day of our SE Asia birding trip. Today we had quite a long drive on the tarmac before heading off road and into the grassland of Kompong Thom, where the target was the elusive and critically endangered Bengal Florican. In the second village we came to we were met by 2 guys on a motorbike and after chatting with Art he told us that they knew where the Florican was, so off we went in pursuit. After another 20 minutes or so we stopped and the boys on the bike disappeared into the grassland. Nothing!! After about another 15 minutes, by which time we had picked up **Richard's Pipit**, **Yellow Wagtail** and had great views of **Pied Harrier**, the boys came back and we moved on. Next stop was by a small group of ponds and sitting on a bund about 300m away was a large duck with its back to us. We had just about convinced ourselves that it was **Spot-billed Duck**, a species that had eluded us so far, when it flew and was joined from the opposite side of the bund by a second. The pair circled for about a minute and then landed in a pond only about 100m away and we got an excellent view of them – indeed **Spot-billed Duck**. In the vicinity we also got **Pacific Golden Plover**, **Woolly-necked Stork** and **Striated Grassbird**. We moved on and caught up the boys on the bike who had gone on ahead. We could see them walking between 2 paddyfields about 200m away and suddenly one of them shouted. We all looked towards him and there in flight was a **Bengal Florican**. It flew on for about another 5-10 seconds before heading for the rice. When it landed it put its head up to check for danger and continued to strut warily about for the next 5 minutes. It then relaxed and put its head down to feed and

that was the last we saw of it. Not the greatest sighting ever but a real privilege to see this rare bird. Art explained that there are thought to be 7-9 pairs in this area and this is one of the largest populations of this species in Cambodia.



Striated Grassbird

*Photo: Dick Yates*

Job done we moved on to another area of wetland and here I have never seen so many Purple Swampheens – literally hundreds of them, along with many of the other species that we had seen before. We continued birding through the area for the remainder of the day making contact with **Paddyfield Pipit, Indian Roller, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Pied Bushchat, White-vented Myna** and **Black-headed Munia**. Finally it was back to the hotel and goodbye to Art after 3 really good days birding. Time for a swim and a final look at the resident Streak-eared and Yellow-vented Bulbuls, the little family group of Scaly-breasted Munia, a pair of Brown-throated Sunbirds and a beautiful adult male Oriental Magpie Robin that sat on the ridge of one of the hotel buildings overlooking the pool and sang to us every evening.



Oriental Magpie Robin

*Photo: Dick Yates*

The following morning it was back to the airport for our flight to HCMC and a day of shopping before catching a night flight back to Darwin on 27 Jan. Our flight landed at 0540 and the only direct flight of the day left for Brisbane at 0600, so we decided that we would have a day in Darwin. We got in on time, picked up a hire car and drove into the city to our hotel. We were lucky, there was an empty room, we checked in at 0700 and by 0800 we were on the road to Fogg Dam, about 75km away.



However, as we drove in a large sign informed us that we were not to leave the car on the way across the dam as a 4m saltwater croc had been inhabiting the area for about the last year and so far had evaded capture. We didn't need telling twice so we didn't use the 2 hides on the way across, but as there was no-one there but us it was OK to stop on the road and view the birds from the car.

Waders included all the **Egrets**, **Royal Spoonbill**, **Comb-crested Jacana**, the diminutive **Pied Heron** and **Maggie Goose** and **Australian Darter**. We continued to the other side where it was deemed safe to get out of the car and from the new hide we saw **Crimson Finch**, **Rufous-banded Honeyeater**, **Rainbow Bee-eater**, **White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Olive-backed Oriole** and **Forest Kingfisher**. After about 2 hours we

headed back to town but not before spotting a tree with a group of 5 **Whistling Kites** in residence. After a quick lunch we drove out to the Mangrove board-walk at East Point. By now it was about 1500 and very hot so we didn't spend long; just walking to the end, not far, and back to the car. But this is a good spot and during that brief walk we saw, **Shining** and **Lemon-bellied Flycatchers**, **Red-headed**, **White-gaped** and **Brown Honeyeaters**, **Silver-crowned Friarbird**, **Varied Triller** and a pair of **Orange-footed Scrubfowl** engaged in some heavy-duty earth-moving operations. By now we were boiled and dead tired so we headed back to the hotel for a kip before dinner and an early bed – we had to be at the airport by 0430.



Australian Darter hanging out to dry

Photo: Dick Yates

This was a memorable trip and I thoroughly recommend Vietnam as a birding destination. If you are interested please see Richard Craik's website and I can also provide a fair bit of info.

## SIT DOWN, YOU'RE ROCKING THE BOAT

*By Daphne Yates*

Sunday 23 Jan, 0530, and we are picked up from our hotel and driven through the streets of Siem Reap and out into the pitch black of the countryside. Thirty minutes or so later we arrive at the landing stage and are invited to board a smallish boat with a tarpaulin sunshade cover and several wicker chairs with cushions. (I thought that this was a small boat – little did I know!!) Life jackets were provided, but not wanting to appear doubtful of our boatman's prowess we forbore to don them. As soon as we, complete with rucksack and telescope, our guide and the boat driver were aboard we set off into the darkness. Gradually we noticed a few fires on the bank to our left and were told that we were passing through a village, then we saw a lot of lights illuminating a large crowd of people gathering around the fishermen who had been out all night and had just landed with their catch. We could hear that there was a lot of lively bidding going on as everyone bought their supply of fish for the day. Eventually we left the village behind and were heading out into dark and unknown waters. Fortunately, the waters were not unknown to the boatman, which was just as well as there were several obstructions sticking up out of the water, mostly poles marking the presence of submerged fishing nets.

After an hour the sky began to lighten and we continued on our way across the lake that stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions around us. In fact Lake Tonle Sap, the name means 'Freshwater Lake', is the biggest freshwater lake in South East Asia. We saw a few birds out here, **Cormorants** and **Darters** and a lot of **Barn Swallows** obviously on migration as they were all heading northeast. After about an hour and a half of travelling, by which time it was daylight, we were approaching the floating village of Prek Toal. Eventually we were heading up a channel and came to the first floating houses. As we progressed into the village it was interesting to see that not only were the people living in floating houses, but there was a large floating Church, several floating shops, a floating medical centre and a floating school. I guess the first thing the children learn is how to swim.



The Village of Prek Toal

*Photo: Dick Yates*

Travelling much more slowly now so as to avoid causing unnecessary wash we came to a floating house where we alighted for breakfast. This was in the form of a pack up provided by the guide and was perfectly palatable. We were able to use the loo here (always such a worry when one is confined in an open boat for hours on end!) and after

about half an hour we set off again for the Park HQ where, after a lot of discussion between our guide, the boat driver and the park officials, a man with a smaller boat arrived, towing two canoes. I immediately began to smell a very large rat, this looked ominous indeed. We were duly ushered aboard this much smaller boat where, instead of comfy wicker chairs, there was a wooden bench, with a thin cushion but with no back support. There was, however, a sunshade so one can't be too picky I suppose.

By now the day was bright and sunny and we chugged back through the village and onto open water again. Having been going for what seemed like hours and with one's backside getting very numb, we came to a post and rail fence which stretched for as far as the eye could see to the left and right, this apparently marked the boundary of the Prek Toal Core Area. We went through a gateway in the fence and continued on our way into what was in theory a no fishing zone. Soon the shore of the lake came into view and it was obvious that there was an incredible number of cormorants, darters, herons etc roosting in the trees at the lake's edge, an absolutely amazing sight.

A tree full of Darters Photo: Dick Yates



It had now been over 2 hours since we left the village and we were passing what appeared to be channels from the lake into the mangroves and a few minutes later we entered one. The most fascinating part of the trip began. The channels we travelled along, towing the two canoes, were seething with birds. Chinese Pond Herons and Bitterns, Storks and Kingfishers, flew up in all directions and as the channel became narrower and narrower we had to watch out for low hanging branches.

Eventually, my worst fears were realised, the channel had become so narrow and shallow that the boat could go no further. We tied up to a handy tree and were told that this was where we had to transfer into the canoes!! Well, what with my hip and Dick's knee this was quite a performance. Dick got in the front canoe with the boatman and I got in the second canoe with the guide and the boatman's friend who did the steering with an oar at the back. The front canoe had an outboard motor and we chugged along the channel, birds flying up in all directions as before. After about half an hour of extremely uncomfortable travel - we had to sit with our legs straight out in front of us - we arrived at a large tree almost blocking the channel. "Here we are", exclaimed the guide, pointing to the flimsy looking bamboo ladder tied up with string, "We go up". "Oh no we don't" I thought. I regret to say that I chickened out, blaming my dodgy balance and fear of heights. "I'm going", said Dick bravely. Well, trying to stand up in a canoe is at the best of times fraught with difficulty, but when you are fairly traditionally built, with a tin knee, it

becomes almost impossible. Nonetheless, my fearless hubby somehow managed to stand up, and place his good leg on the first step, which, by the way, was about a meter above the canoe, and hoist himself up. Slowly he ascended the bamboo ladder and amazingly the string binding it all together held and he reached the platform about 10m above. The guide swiftly followed him with the telescope.



The disappearing Yates derrier! The lad in the fetching hat is the boatman's assistant.

*Photo: Daphne Yates*

But it was worth it. The view from the platform was amazing. Trees full of nesting storks – **Asian Openbill**, **Painted** and – most exciting of all – 2 nests of **Milky Stork**. There was also a **Spot-billed Pelican** nest with 2 youngsters and in the distance Dick could just make out a **Greater Adjutant**. (*I got a very fuzzy photo that shows that it really was a Greater Adjutant. The guide also said he could see a Lesser Adjutant on a nest but I'm not so sure. Dick*)

During the 45 minutes that Dick was up on the platform I was abandoned in the canoe on my own, and they didn't even tie me up to anything. So there I was, merrily drifting about in the channel trying to find a comfortable cheek to sit on and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. But I guess it was all worth it to hear Dick's exclamations of wonder from above!

Now, if I had thought that getting out of the canoe and onto the ladder looked fraught with danger, the reverse procedure was an even more interesting, and entertaining, manoeuvre, certainly to watch. But at last we were all safely aboard and off we went back to the larger boat where the second transfer was nearly, but not quite, as tricky as the first. But again, the mission was accomplished and we set off back along the channel we had come up an hour ago. Suddenly, we were heading for the bushes and we rammed into the bank - it was lunchtime. The boatmen tied us up to a leaf, well it looked like a leaf, and the guide produced some rather dried fish, some cooked green leaves and rice, which we ate gladly as it was now about 1330 and we were quite hungry.

Lunch complete we set off back through the channels and out onto the lake for the 2½ hour ride back to Prek Toal. By now many birds had gone to roost and every post along the miles of fence separating the fishing area from the reserve had a cormorant perched on it, literally hundreds of them. We eventually reached the floating house where we had had breakfast for a well overdue comfort stop and very welcome stretch of the legs. About 10 minutes later our 'big' boat arrived and we were ready for the journey back to the jetty. We motored back through the village that we had come through in the dark that morning and we could now see the pretty squalid state the area was in. It reinforced what we already knew, that Cambodia is a country where a lot of the people are living on the edge all the time. We eventually docked at about 1800 and got the car back to the hotel.



The ladies of the 'floating home'.  
Photo: Daphne Yates



I think these are Indian Cormorant. But if you know differently please let me know.  
Photo: Dick Yates



Nesting Painted Stork. Note the number 125 in the top right corner. Every tree in the core area was numbered so that the wardens could keep a record of nests.  
Photo: Dick Yates

We had had a truly amazing day, with a terrific number of birds, but I can't help wondering how they would cope if we had been a party of 6 or 8. Of course, the beauty of the place is that there are very few tourists visiting – long may it remain so.

## SOUTH AFRICA PART 2 – THE NATIONAL

### KwaZuluNatal – Hluhluwe, iMfolozi and uMkhuze

The second half of 'Tithecotte's Tour' of South Africa in Nov 09 took us – Peter, Juliet, Ruth and myself – to Rhino River Lodge, a small private reserve off the main road from St Lucia to Pongola.



A spot of birding from Rhino River Lodge

Photo: Jenny Gray

We were accommodated in two huge, fully equipped self-catering, thatched log cabins, but the handful of other guests were in hotel/motel-like rooms, again all beautifully appointed and furnished from locally sourced materials. In the owner's absence, the place was run by two young South Africans who seemed to do

everything from manning the reception to supervising the catering and taking the clients on morning and evening safari drives. The reserve prided itself on its contribution to the conservation of White Rhino. There were no large cats on the reserve and hence no predators for the Impala and Kudu and most of the surplus animals were sold as stock to other reserves; but we did have the full range of kudu and impala recipes on the menu from kudu steaks and casserole to impala hotpot and a delicious impala pate.

The lodge was surrounded by woods and gardens that held a number of sunbirds: **Collared, Scarlet-chested and Purple-banded Sunbird**, as well as **African Firefinch, Bronze Manikin** and the ubiquitous **Blue Waxbill**, all from a leisurely stroll around – or indeed sitting with our feet up on our veranda. On the safari rides with Byron and Tamryn, who, like all game rangers were very knowledgeable birders, we saw **Natal and Crested Francolin** scuttling along the tracks. We also had good views of **Jacobin Cuckoo** and our first sounds of **Red-chested Cuckoo**. We were to hear this bird many times but it was only on our last full day in South Africa that we managed to see it.

One of the day trips took us to Ghost Mountain Inn where we had a very relaxed lunch in their beautiful gardens. The owners have gone to great lengths to keep the 5 acres of gardens that stretch down to the reed-beds at the water's edge, as indigenous as possible and we saw a good variety of new birds for the trip there: **African Hoopoe** pecking on the lawns; glimpses of **Long-tailed Paradise Whydah** flitting high over the bougainvillea covered veranda and Jacaranda trees and bright **Village Weavers** nesting near the summer house next to the swimming pool.

On nearby settling pools outside the grounds we spotted **Black Crake** and **Red-billed Teal**; and we had our first glimpse of **European Bee-eaters** and also **Woodland and African Pygmy Kingfisher**. Walking in woods alongside the water we heard an unfamiliar hooting sound that we later identified as probably a **Buff-spotted Flufftail**.

At Rhino River Lodge, we were also well placed for a day trip to Mkhulzi Game Reserve and Hluhluwe Game Park. uMkhuze, Hluhluwe and iMfolozi are the 3 oldest Game Reserves of Zululand and Maputaland. Hluhluwe and iMfolozi were established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and uMkhuze some twenty years later. Whilst not as large as Kruger National Park they are certainly extensive enough to stretch from horizon to horizon in every direction. They also hold the full range of African wildlife, including black

and white rhino, lion, leopard and spotted hyena. We didn't see any of the large predators, but there was still a good variety of the usual mammals - elephant, giraffe, and zebra wandering through the bush.

In Huhluwe we were able to pick up on fairly common African birds such as **Red Faced Mousebird**, **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill** and our first **Grey Go-away-bird** (Lourie) of the trip. A lunch stop in one of the camps in uMkhuze brought good views of **Cardinal** and **Golden Tailed Woodpeckers** and **African Green pigeon**. A picnic stop later in the day produced a host of good birds including **Common Scimitarbill**, **Green Wood-Hoopoe**, **Black-collared Barbet**, **Southern Black Flycatcher**, **Chinspot Batis**, **White-browed Robin-Chat** and **White-browed Scrub-Robin**. On the drive through the reserve we saw many grassland species such as **Cape Grassbird**, **Pale-crowned Cisticola** and the impressive **Red-collared Widowbird**. We also managed to spot a **Black-Bellied Bustard** before it ran away into the long grass. There were plenty of large birds of prey around: **Walburg's**, **Tawny**, **Bateleur** and **Brown Snake Eagle** and, as usual, we were seeing **Yellow-billed Kite** daily.

#### **Journey to Kruger – hailstones and highway patrols.**

After three very productive days at Rhino River Lodge, we started the long journey to Kruger National Park. This wasn't the easiest of journeys as we were beset by long stretches of road works that you have to join a convoy to get through; and if you just miss one, as we did on several occasions, you can be waiting up to half an hour for the next one. This adds a considerable length of time to an already long journey.

We intended to break the journey at Barberton, a place of ancient geological interest, but once in the mountains we encountered a tremendous thunderstorm and again our progress was slowed. In fact, the danger was deemed so great from poor visibility, huge hailstones and potential aquaplaning that the local highway patrol cars saw fit to escort the traffic through the storm area, rather like the safety car on a grand prix circuit.

As well as the mountainous terrain around Barberton, the journey took us through some fairly remote grasslands and we saw several roadside notices warning of crime and car-jacking in the area. We knew that South Africa had a reputation for violent crime and we were always careful to arrive at our destination before dusk and were careful to lock the car doors from the inside when going through Johannesburg and some of the rougher looking townships, but throughout our 3 weeks we never once felt threatened, or saw any sign of anyone else being threatened. Indeed the outskirts of the country towns where we stopped for petrol felt very much the same as small bustling towns in Europe. Clearly security and safety issues are never far from the minds of the residents of South Africa, which I think is why Kruger has become such a national treasure, not just for tourists, but also for the residents of the nearby large cities. The park is about half a day's drive from Johannesburg and Pretoria and about a day's drive from Durban. As well as catering very grandly for the wildlife, the park provides safe and secure rest camps for families and groups of friends as well as birders and wildlife enthusiasts.

#### **Kruger National Park – a holiday camp . . . and some**

The Zululand and Maputaland Reserves are impressive but Kruger is truly magnificent. We entered the park at the Malelane Gate at the southern end, and over the week, made our way north to where South Africa borders Zimbabwe and Mozambique, some 450K. The park is vast with mountain bushveld and lush woodland, interspersed with the huge granite boulders, in the south and west, giving way to open savannah in the centre and finally riverine forest, with its iconic fever trees and their distinctive peeling bark, in the north, reflecting the varied geological substructure and the increased rainfall from north to

south. During our journey north we saw a wide variety of game and we also doubled our bird list for the trip. There was no problem with hoards of other vehicles waiting to see the animals. Even at a kill with lions or hyenas, of which we saw several, there were no more than two or three other cars at the roadside and more often than not we had the road or track to ourselves.



The Kruger is very well served with rest camps every 60–80K, this one is Letaba. These vary in size but generally consist of a reception area with a restaurant and shop and typically up to a hundred individual self-catering, thatched rondavels. There is usually a swimming pool and a camping and caravan area as well. The careful layout and landscaping is such that even in the larger camps you are not aware of the full extent of the accommodation. These camps are a very viable economic option for self-drive safaris. The cost of a rondavel, accommodating up to 3 people

and including a small kitchen and private bathroom was about £60 per night and although the rondavels are self-catering, it is possible to eat very well and economically in the restaurants and cafes. We ate almost exclusively in the restaurants and it usually cost less than £10 a day for a cooked breakfast, a toasted sandwich type lunch and a full evening meal.

Our first stop was at Berg-en-Dal, the rest camp nearest to the Malelane Gate in the south-west corner and convenient for the 2 big cities. My first impressions were that of a French camp-site; small children were riding bikes; young parents strolling with pushchairs and toddlers; grandparents and grandchildren hand in hand; and at least one party of twenty-somethings enjoying a weekend away from the office. It was lovely to see people relaxed and enjoying themselves but not quite the Out-of-Africa experience that I had been expecting.

Skukuza Rest Camp

Photo: Jenny Gray

Our plan was to move quickly up through the camps, moving off at dawn and stopping for breakfast and some birding at the next camp. This worked well as we could have a few hours birding before it became hot in the middle of the day. It also meant that we very quickly left behind the holiday camp party atmosphere of the most southerly camps and could appreciate the vast scale and isolation of the rest of the park. We had just one night stop at



Skukuza, the largest of the rest camps and the commercial hub. While all the camps had a restaurant, petrol and basic food supplies this was the only one with a bank/ATM and public internet access. It also has a doctor and medical centre, post office, police station and a car hire and repair centre. The social centre of Skukuza was a central court with various food outlets situated around two large, thatched, open-sided circular buildings that provided shade for people eating their picnic lunch. All the people were sitting around the edges, so I had no problem in securing a well shaded table in the centre of the building while Juliet and Peter went off in search of cold drinks. It was only when

Peter came back and pointed to the roof some 7m above our heads that I saw the reason why everyone else had positioned themselves on the edges. The structure was home to several dozen very large Wahlberg's and Peter's Epauletted Bats roosting in the thatch of the shelter. Some of these bats are the size of small cats. Clearly, any 'movement' from them and we would have an unwanted addition to our toasted cheese sandwich.

#### Birds of the central grasslands – hornbills and starlings

One of the first new birds for the trip we saw was the unique and aptly named **Hamerkop**. There were many **Grey Hornbills** inside and outside the camps but as we travelled towards the eerily deserted hot dry grasslands of the centre of the park, we managed to have good views of more specialized savannah birds such as **Southern Ground-Hornbill**, **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill** and **Secretarybird**. We also caught up with a group of **Arrow-marked Babbler**, the only Babbler in that region. However, there were plenty of different **Starlings** to be seen; **Cape Glossy**, **Meve's Long-tailed**, **Violet-backed**, **Red-winged** and **Greater Blue-eared**.

Satara rest camp was the only one without a waterfront. It had a parched and slightly ominous desert feel to it and we didn't stay there long. However, there tends to be a greater density of the large cats in the scorched savannah land around it and shortly after stopping there for breakfast we came across a large group of lions feeding on a recently killed giraffe. The small trees nearby were full of some four or five different species of Vulture waiting for their turn to peck at the carcass. Most of the rest camps were either overlooking a lake or were on the side of a river and the thickets on the waterfronts throughout the camps held a colourful mix of woodland and thornveld birds such as **Grey-headed Bush-Shrike**, **Black-crowned Tchagra**, **Magpie (African Long-tailed) Shrike**, **African Paradise Flycatcher** and **Olive Thrush**. The waterside birds included a host of storks; **Yellow-billed**, **Marabou** and **Saddle-billed Stork** (now quite rare in South Africa) and **African Open-bill**. From the hides we observed **Red-headed**, **Spectacled**, **Red-billed Buffalo** and **Thick-billed Weavers**. Whilst keeping an eye on the wily Vervet Monkeys at Skukuza we were entertained by the full display of a male **Black-backed Puffback** as it fizzed back and forth between two trees at little more than head height. Mopani rest camp, another breakfast stop, is situated overlooking the Pioneer Dam and this was home to **Black-Winged Stilt**, **Ringed Plover** and **Three-banded Plover** – as well as Crocodile and Hippos.



Oliphants River Valley Photo: Jenny Gray

But the most spectacular of the rest camps was most definitely Oliphants. Perched high above the Oliphants River it gave breathtaking 360° views to the distant horizons. The river divides into half a dozen or more separate streams at that point and when we were there we were lucky enough to see a herd of some 50 or more elephants, comprising all ages

and sizes, wandering through the river. We stayed at nearby Letaba camp. This is a quiet and attractive site and we were able to explore the nearby Letaba River and Englehardt Dam. Apart from the tame Bushbuck wandering around the grounds, it was quite exciting to see large numbers of both **European** and **Fiery-necked Nightjars** flying around when we were on our way back from the restaurant to rondavals in the evening. We made several sorties into the bushveldt and were rewarded with sights of **Natal**, **Swainson's** and **Crested Francolin** scuttling into the bush, and we were also lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a splendid displaying male **Red-crested Korhan**. At one

overlook, Juliet managed to spot a very well camouflaged **Brown Parrot**, a bird that was incredibly hard to see.

Swainson's Francolin  
Photo: Jenny Gray

#### **Punda Maria – Smuggler's Corner and the far north.**

Our last stop in Kruger was at the tiny and remote Punda Maria rest camp in the North West corner of the park. The weather was warmer here and there had been recent rain nearby and thus plenty of insects in the air. Straight away we began to pick up the local flycatchers such as **Ashy Flycatcher** and **African Paradise Flycatcher**, and we also saw some of the European migrants such as **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Red-backed Shrike**. In addition, there were also the intra Africa Migrants such as the non-aquatic **Woodland Kingfisher** and **African Pygmy-Kingfisher**.



We had one very memorable pre-breakfast drive along a river track just outside the camp when we saw **European, Lilac-breasted, Purple and Broad-billed Rollers** more or less simultaneously. It was particularly pleasing to see **Broad-billed** and **Purple Roller** as these are quite localized, and Broad-billed Roller was right on the edge of its range. On the same outing we were treated to fly-bys of **Great Spotted, African** and **Levaillant's Cuckoo**. After a careful look at the understory we eventually found **Brown-crowned Tchagra** and **White-crested Helmetshrike**. Small flocks of **Red-billed Firefinch, Blue Waxbill** and **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting** foraged around in low shrubs and sandy ground. Not unexpectedly we saw **Pin-tailed Whydah** – a bird that parasitises waxbills and similar small birds. Peter managed to spot a **Crowned Hornbill** on a distant perch – another new bird for the trip and we managed to catch sight of a **Double-banded Sandgrouse** before it ran into the undergrowth.

From here we were also able to explore dense tree and bush savannah along the Luvuvhu and Limpopo flood plains and, of course, visit the so-called Smuggler's Corner at the point where South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe meet. The river banks were home to **Black Heron, White-backed Heron**, a variety of storks and **Black-winged Stilt**. The 'mighty Limpopo' was anything but when we saw it as there had been very little rain in the catchment area so far that season. However, **Black-winged Pratincoles** and **Whiskered Terns** swooped over the pools left in the sandbanks and **Three-banded** and **Kittlitz's Plover** scuttled through the mud – as well as the more familiar **Wood Sandpiper** and **Greenshank**. The most impressive bird for me in this area was the huge **Giant Kingfisher**. At least two pairs were nesting in small trees on the Luvuvhu River. It's not a rare bird but it was the first one we had seen on the trip.

On the journey back to Punda Maria, as well as seeing the familiar flight of the **Bataleur**, we also saw both **Gabar** and **Dark Chanting Goshawk** – both very elegant birds. It had been an early start that day and to stay awake on the way back I'm afraid to say that Peter and I indulged in a juvenile game of "Will the Car Clear the Elephant Poo" - of which there was copious quantities every hundred yards or so. I don't know what Thrifty thought of the underside of the car when we returned it to Jo'burg Airport.

#### **Louis Trichardt and Nyslrvley - The End Game**

We were sorry to leave Punda Maria. Of all the areas we had been to, it was probably the most productive area in terms of birds. After leaving Kruger we travelled through some very poor rural areas of subsistence farming, but Louis Trichardt itself seemed a

bustling and prosperous regional town. We were staying about 20K east of Louis Trichardt, and had to negotiate several kilometres of very rough dirt track to Shiluvuri Lakeside Lodge; a private lodge set in several acres of gardens and thornveldt. The restaurant and accommodation here was excellent. The lodge comprises about a dozen rooms mostly in individual buildings around the grounds. The proprietors pride themselves in involving the - very accomplished - craftspeople and artisans from Elim, the local village in designing and making much of the furniture.

We spent 2 very relaxing days here birdwatching. It was very easy to see many of the woodland birds that we had seen previously on the trip – **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, **Long-billed Crombic**, **African Oriole** and so on. We had heard the distinctive "weet-weet-weeoo" of the **Red-chested Cuckoo** many times throughout our trip but had not managed to get good views of it, so Peter and I were delighted when we spotted one patrolling its territory by moving from one high, but visible, perch to another, stopping to call loudly from each one.

After Shiluvuri, we made our way back to Johannesburg Airport for an evening flight back to Cardiff via Amsterdam. We made a short detour to Nyslivivley Nature Reserve, a RAMSAR wetland site near Polokwane. There was very little water there at that time of year and we only managed to add one bird, **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver**, to our list and so rejoined the motorway and made our way uneventfully to Jo'burg.

This account is basically the second half of a 3 week self-birding tour of north-eastern South Africa arranged by Peter Tithecote using mostly national park accommodation and access. At the time we were there, I worked out that a 10 day self drive safari/bird trip for two people, including flights, car hire and accommodation in Kruger would cost in the region of £2000 to £2500. I can only imagine that this must be a well kept secret, given that a trip to sub-Saharan Africa with a commercial UK tour operator could cost twice this for one person!



Lilac-breasted Roller

Photo by Pete Gray

## AND NOW ABIDETH SCIENCE, EVIDENCE AND ASSERTION, THESE THREE, BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS ASSERTION<sup>1</sup>

(or, Stringers are not confined to birdwatching)

By Mike Blair

In this issue of the Newsletter, just for your entertainment, I am going to go off on a slightly cathartic rant. Let's take a look at just how terrified the movers and shakers of our world are of data and information being used knowledgeably. Who, you might ask? Why, the politicians, the media and especially those to whom the meaning and purpose of a classical education is tarnished by the hint of science, mathematics, and God forbid, engineering<sup>2</sup>. It seems that such people are comfortable with facts and evidence only in one field, that of the law. On the surface, that might seem reasonable, but do bear in mind that even today, judges may insist that the only acceptable evidence is that which is understandable by the man in the street<sup>3,4</sup>. Taking that into account, you can see why Tony Blair (a lawyer) had such a propensity for defining every circumstance in terms of the most restrictive legal concepts of 'evidence'<sup>5</sup>. Keep experts well away in the hope they might lose interest, or die! That's not to say that 'expertise' isn't a two-edged sword, but wouldn't it be better to see an 'expert's' errors contested through knowledge instead of through a confusing bluster orchestrated by lawyers well-versed in the adversarial approach? Stay tuned – bird watching does feature eventually!

The government's Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs was set up as a body to offer independent advice. Before the 2010 election, the Labour Minister of Health, Alan Johnson, was wrong-footed by a number of these experts concluding that, overall, the bad effects of alcohol were worse than the bad effects of some (only some) of the illegal drugs in terms of total cost to the NHS, degree of permanent damage to individuals and to the proportion of 'users'. In particular, Professor David Nutt<sup>6</sup> had spoken at a number of meetings and conferences<sup>7</sup> about the difficulties in getting policy-makers to examine conclusions arrived at from evidence, and the subsequent need for an informed debate on the subject so that these conclusions could be validated or found wanting<sup>8</sup>. The Advisory Committee had also noted that individual responses to alcohol and drugs vary and so there would always be people who were physiologically vulnerable to damage, no matter what policies were implemented in the future. They made the point strongly that because illegal drugs by definition are seldom made to agreed standards, partial legalisation would reduce harmful impurities and very probably reduce the numbers of users suffering damage to their health.

<sup>1</sup> With passing resemblance to 1 Corinthians 13: 13, which itself is based on Roman (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) writings about Sapientia (Greek for Wisdom, in Latin Sophia) and her three daughters, Fides, Elpis & Agape (Greek for Faith, Hope and Charity, in Latin Fides, Spes & Caritas), but this in turn is based on Ancient Greek myths.

<sup>2</sup> Oh, and the loopy wing that the Green movement wished it didn't have – you know the ones, those that enthuse about mystic pyramids and the like. The only mystic aspect is that people are willing to pay £59.99 to help them suspend their disbelief. Rule of thumb: ignore any advert with the word 'quantum' in it.

<sup>3</sup> Note that even today, they don't even begin to consider the 'woman in the street'. Perhaps it's the adjacency of the words 'woman' and 'street' in the same sentence?

<sup>4</sup> Remember, the legal mind has long been nurtured by the peculiarities of English society: toilet training, boarding school sex education and the ingrained superiority complex of classical education. If you think this is exaggeration, just watch a few *Newsnight* programmes; in almost every one Jeremy Paxman makes the open assumption that a technical explanation is boring and therefore unimportant – in episodes of *University Challenge* he steers openly if a contestant hasn't heard of minor poets or artists. This could be a well-cultivated persona created to enhance the *JP* image, of course, but that would make his attitude even more trivial.

<sup>5</sup> He actually defended the teaching of creationism in some UK schools as representing a balanced approach. Aye, right, about as balanced as a 20-stone ballerina in Swan Lake.

<sup>6</sup> You just could not invent the serendipity! If there had to be a professor whose name the press would immediately transform into the old Disney film title, it had to be one named Nutt (for the younger generation, it was Jerry Lewis in the title role of "The Nutty Professor" of 1963). Fred MacMurray had taken the role of the Disney film "The Absent-minded Professor" (1961). Hollywood has reworked (not for the first time) the story in animation (with Jerry Lewis's voice) under the later title. In any case, for the real Professor Nutt, it was a lose-lose situation as far as national debate was concerned.

<sup>7</sup> The press seized upon only a couple of these occasions, the most recent.

<sup>8</sup> Am I alone in thinking that egos might have been dented by the inevitable publicity generated by misinformed press reaction to this story? As a corollary, are you amazed that the context of these speeches and talks was never mentioned in the initial press reports?

The reactions of the media and of Alan Johnson were little different in practice – avoid mention of the evidence, don't debate it and revert to *ad hominem*<sup>9</sup> tactics. It was bad enough for the Home Secretary in the House of Commons to bemoan that he had lost confidence in Professor Nutt because the suggested evidence was contrary to Government policy<sup>10</sup>, but did you notice how many (then) opposition members were quick to stand on their feet and support the government<sup>11</sup>? Alan Johnson subsequently revised his position while claiming to say the same thing; now the Professor had openly stated a view opposite to government policy without letting the Home Office know beforehand and had done so despite knowing that he had to do so. Mr Johnson clearly had not read the Committee's Terms of Reference (validated by the Home Office), but of course, if he had done so, he would have had to accept written evidence as fact. The media avoided this inconvenient aspect like the plague. Even when there are knowledgeable journalists<sup>12</sup>, often they are not assigned by their editors to their specialist subject – note that almost none of the broadsheets have used their science and medicine specialists in leading articles on this subject (the rest of the press no longer have specialists – they get in the way of a story). I have no real idea if partial legalisation of some drugs and their production to agreed standards is a lesser evil than the present arrangements – my Parliament is united in preventing me from coming to an informed opinion<sup>13</sup>. As of January 2010, Professor Nutt and four of his former colleagues on the Advisory Board formed an independent group that will invite open debate from professionals involved in researching and tackling drug addiction and its consequences; results will be published.

Now, what about the data hacked from the UEA computers? According to Lord Lawson, (Remember Nigel Lawson as Margaret Thatcher's Chancellor of the Exchequer<sup>14</sup>), "on the face of it, it looks as if the raw data was being manipulated in order to prove what they wanted to prove", but does he actually cite any proof? Much seems to hang on the phrase "trick of adding in the real temperatures to each series for the last 20 years [1988-2008] and from 1961 for Keith's [series of data derived from completely different procedures] to hide the decline"<sup>15</sup>. The scientists involved have explained<sup>16</sup> the technical aspects of this passage, but lo and behold, George Marshall in the *Guardian* excoriates them for compounding the problem by not adopting professional PR techniques<sup>17</sup> to smooth things away! From the *Guardian*, where UEA climate scientists might most expect some support in the media, they got instead advice to be trained how to lie! Marshall is a very good writer and communicator, but seems now to accept that presentation is all in every case – that's the very basis of the denial industry! Would you rather have smooth 'don't worry' operators or scientists who are somewhat unworried, sufficiently so not to realise that thorough checking before talking is not what the journalists want when things go wrong?

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Paxman would be delighted to tell those of you without a classical education that this means 'to, or against, the man', but perhaps the idea is better conveyed by the football idiom, 'play the man, not the ball', the philosophy of the 1960s Leeds and England midfielder, Norman 'Bite Yer Legs' Huxter (check out the old videos – his tackling was fearsome). The origin of the phrase also shows that even in Roman times, politicians were quick to resort to personal insult and innuendo when presented with an argument based on inconvenient facts. Getting the sense of perennial schoolboy?

<sup>10</sup> Did you see the unelected quango head (a rather inarticulate lady that reminded me of an 'attack chihuahua') who attempted on BBC News to smear Professor Nutt's previous research work by labelling it 'mince' and 'sidetracked'? Her triumphant conclusion to her pejorative rant took the form of a very bad imitation of Margaret Thatcher at her most imperious: 'Well, there's science and science' (try it with varying the emphasis on 'science' – it still remains unutterably feeble).

<sup>11</sup> I'll leave it to you to decide whether this attitude towards potential evidence is akin to the MPs' views expressed concerning the fraudulence or mere greed alleged in their expenses claims? Did you react positively to their 'no business of yours' reaction? (There were an honourable few, but do check out the new mob.)

<sup>12</sup> Believe it or not, there are still quite a few, despite the number 'let go' or resigning.

<sup>13</sup> I'll leave this subject with just one question: to which option would you rather listen – Professor Nutt's lucid and articulate exposition (the man speaks in paragraphs like a foreign footballer in the Premier League) on any aspect of his talks, or to Alan Johnson's blustering phraseology, full of stirring clichés, but light on any mention of evidence or fact? Now, AJ may actually have been a very bright and a pretty capable Minister otherwise, but I do know someone who remembers him when he was a human being.

<sup>14</sup> Well, maybe you don't.

<sup>15</sup> Two e-mails out of about 3000, I believe. No mention of the thousands of other documents since made available.

<sup>16</sup> And so have many from unrelated disciplines, as detailed (only) in *New Scientist*.

<sup>17</sup> By the way, what synonym do you prefer for 'professional PR techniques'? Spin? Gloss? Lies? There are others, usually with a preceding adjective...

Returning to the e-mails in question, anyone who has done maths beyond O or CSE level will have encountered basic differential and integral calculus and have had to work these out laboriously from first principles<sup>18</sup>. The next step is to learn techniques that provide the same answer, but much more quickly. Even in the 1960s, these short-cuts were known as 'tricks'<sup>19</sup>. Suppose you didn't do maths to this level – your reaction is 'I have no idea what you're talking about', yet people with even less mathematical awareness than you have are not prepared to admit that circumstance when informed of scientists who routinely use rigorously-tested 'tricks' in incredibly complex calculus and statistical techniques<sup>20</sup> – instead they accuse the scientists of cheating and lying.

Turning now to 'hiding a decline', that phrase too has several routine uses when the original internal organisation of complex rigorously-checked data from a project differs from that in which other projects wanting to use the data. Unless the original data can be re-organised so that the second project's computer analyses can accept them in the same way as the data already installed, the resultant graphs and trends will be less accurate than can be achieved. In other words, there can be a decline in accuracy as more data are added. Reorganising data, if done piece by piece, might take as long as the original project, if not longer. This problem is a common circumstance, which is why mathematicians and statisticians have derived techniques (again rigorously tested) that can shorten this process considerably, thus delaying the onset of any decline in accuracy, if not countering it completely, thus 'hiding the decline' and improving accuracy<sup>21</sup>.

It is unrealistic to expect scientists, statisticians and mathematicians to write every e-mail for subsequent interpretation by people who do not have their expertise, yet there are many websites whose theme is that there is a huge conspiracy of such people to lie about certain subjects<sup>22</sup> in order to secure tenure at universities. Now, if concealing findings hostile to earlier conclusions had actually been a prime mover of thousands of scientific staff attending conferences and meetings across the globe, I contend that the anti-hacking software at UEA would have been of 'Star Wars' standard, not embarrassingly basic and lacking updates. Much more impressive would have been the superb organisation and control of these groups, never before equalled in business, government or civil service, without a hint of a leak by disenchanted 'moles'!

The scientific world is often very open, but nowadays it obtains much data from commercial sources and so by legally-binding contract the details cannot be made public<sup>23</sup>. Sometimes the conditions under which these data are supplied require the scientists to destroy or return the data after it has been used for the purposes contracted. I think that's an abominable restriction on knowledge, but contracts have to be honoured. Note that the Meteorological Offices around the world have now agreed to remove the 'Commercial-in-Confidence' grading of the material sent to UEA. This action will decrease their revenue, but strangely enough, some who had criticised them for not

<sup>18</sup> Statistical analysis and all other branches of mathematics are similarly constructed. Much of their continuing development is as a consequence of insights revealing 'short-cuts' that improves their application.

<sup>19</sup> Calculus was invented independently by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727), but using very different notations. Both men suffered accusations ranging from deviousness to sorcery, and both were far pricklier than Phil Jones of the UEA (read on).

<sup>20</sup> By the way, if you want to exercise your right to decide that such techniques are nonsense and play no part in your life, I would ask only that you be consistent in this respect, and that you never again watch television, travel by aircraft, use modern optics in birdwatching, use a bank card, accept advanced scanning treatments for serious illnesses or keep a mobile phone. I can supply a longer list on request to help your new ethical lifestyle.

<sup>21</sup> I don't want to frighten you any more than I need to, but there is a basic concept of producing a graph with 'error bars'. The accuracy of data presentation in a graph, when the data are complex, is tested by statistical techniques that show the limits of accuracy – error bars indicate the extent of accuracy achievable. If this idea really frightens you, then don't go near jet engines or passenger aircraft and don't use any electronic device made after 1970! Do you think any of the critics had sufficient knowledge to be aware of these aspects?

<sup>22</sup> Feel free to choose your subject: global warming, climate change, causes of autism, MMR, NASA faking the Moon landings, 9/11... Need I go on?

<sup>23</sup> 'Rock-and-a-hard-place' territory, by pretty much any definition – however, many former government departments in 'privatised' form have to make money.

releasing data have attacked them for their change of policy<sup>24</sup>. Note also that in the USA, official bodies are not permitted to release information about hacking attempts on their computing systems in case it prejudices any subsequent legal action<sup>25, 26</sup>.

The climate models used by UAE and several other (usually very much larger and better-funded) organisations all approach the task in very different ways, and so their use of the same data is likely to produce very different results unless the quality of the mathematical modelling is very high. The fact that the conclusions reached by all these organisations are broadly in agreement speaks less of conspiracy to fool people than of solid groundwork.

In every assembly of human beings, there is likely to be a rogue or two. I really don't see Professor Phil Jones fitting that bill; it's possible that he is irascible and injudicious in his personal responses, but if he has set out to fiddle the books, it's strange that in such a competitive field none of his immediate associates have been whistleblowers, something that certainly would bring them kudos and advancement. From what has been published so far, it would appear that he was fairly unworldly and that the research unit to which he belonged had few support staff, so that he and his colleagues always had to carry out the routine work in every project rather than concentrate on their research. It also appears that he was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of 'freedom of information' requests: responding to them in the detail specified by regulation would have kept the research unit fully employed for months, bringing research to a complete halt<sup>27</sup>. Whether even the UEA itself could have provided the additional resources is questionable, but it seems that Professor Jones simply viewed the research as more important and so the 'freedom of information' requests could wait or be fobbed off by brief responses. I note that all bodies investigating the claims of fraud, while agreeing that Professor Jones had been injudicious in his decision, emphasise the huge difficulty of deciding which of the several dozen 'freedom of information' requests were genuine! I also note the suggestion<sup>28</sup> that an idealistic member of UAE staff, said to believe in total freedom of information at all times (a not unworthy viewpoint), may have acted impulsively on personal initiative to assist in the hacking attempt, but didn't realise the reaction it would cause.

The point is that public perception of scientists and of climate research has been damaged as a result of this furore (and of that concerning the IPCC report, where the Chairman decided on his own to include mention of the only paper that had not been peer-reviewed). There are perhaps two main reasons for this: firstly, the general public, despite improved education everywhere, are nowadays less scientifically literate

overall<sup>29</sup>, and secondly, the media are now all-pervasive and seldom report anything in medical science in terms other than those of magic – 'another miracle cure!'<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The Met Office has to be largely self-funding, but I'll give you one guess who will have to meet the revenue gap. One response to the Met Office's decision to make their data openly available has been for Viscount Monckton and Christopher Booker to attack the head of the Met Office because he 'helps head the climate-change conspiracy'. By the way, Booker also sees conspiracies elsewhere – for example, according to him, neither smoking nor blood salt levels have any effect on health, and the carcinogenic form of asbestos is just talcum powder. He suggests all the data have been faked by a left-wing (communist) conspiracy to create jobs for scientists and to cause noble businessmen to have to pay more. For a thoughtful refutation of Monckton's oft-repeated points, listen to the carefully-researched (and long – it has to be to be free of sound-bites) presentation by Professor John Abraham on <http://www.stthomas.edu/engineering/abraham/>. Even better, read John Abraham's blog and Monckton's responses. Decide yourself who is rational, reasonable and right.

<sup>25</sup> Hence the application to extradite Gary McKinnon from the UK to the USA for his alleged hacking into US Department of Defense computer systems. McKinnon certainly had Asperger's Syndrome, often characterised by obsessive behaviour, although in this case his obsession is claimed to be with UFOs and the suppression of 'evidence' of their existence.

<sup>26</sup> As an aside, a number of individuals and small companies subcontracted by NASA and NOAA on climatological data-processing reported intense hacking attacks or even burglaries in the months immediately before the UEA data theft was thought to have occurred, probably coincidences?

<sup>27</sup> I have seen conflicting reports on the number of such requests, but the lowest number is over 70 in the year before the incident.

<sup>28</sup> Pearce, F. *The Climate Files* Fred Pearce is a well respected science writer (who is not a climate-change sceptic) and *New Scientist* contributor. Guardian Books.

<sup>29</sup> There is simply so much more information nowadays, much of it complex, that making sense of it demands considerable effort. Is there any modern local equivalent to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century 'Working Men's Improvement Clubs' that helped produce, through personal interest, scientifically literate generations? However,

In any scientific discipline, research results need meticulous analysis before a word of the paper is drafted – this is when the validity of the mathematical and statistical techniques used is tested. Then, on submission, the publication editor sends the paper out for independent (and usually anonymous) assessment, a process called refereeing. After publication, others in the same discipline have the opportunity to challenge the methodology used and the results and conclusions reached. No one would claim this system to be perfect, but it has worked very well generally. It does permit ample opportunities for informed scepticism. However, many papers are so complex that people without that level of expertise may find it difficult to accept the results or their implications. Nevertheless, most subjects are covered well in 'popular science' publications, but of course people have to be willing to read them! There are therefore the means to express scepticism long after conclusions have been published.

So, what's the difference between scepticism and denial? A sceptic will happily read any evidence submitted that may not support his (or her) scepticism. Science needs sceptics. Denialists will cherry-pick only what she (or he) considers supports the doubting position. Nobody needs denialists. More sinister are the denialists who endlessly assert that any inconvenient scientific evidence is wrong, and will always avoid supplying any kind of proof of their assertions. I am indebted to Sami Grover of North Carolina for this succinct description:

*"First, cast doubt on the science as something irrational, dogmatic and religious; second, repeat the mantra that the public will be worse off if action for a safe climate is taken. The idea that the climate consensus exists only because dissenters have been victimized is a tempting meme for sceptics and denialists to push – everybody loves a plucky victim, right? But when those 'victims' tout freedom of speech on the one hand, and then cry foul when it is used on the other, it seems only fair to call them out. And when they accuse others of being Nazis (or witch-hunters or anything else) simply for subscribing to a different version of reality than themselves (that just happens to have the support of the vast majority of the scientific establishment), they do themselves or their 'sceptic' compatriots no favours on the credibility front".*

To that I would add only that denialists seem content to abandon, without comment, many of their assertions they have constantly repeated<sup>31</sup> when these assertions crumble in the face of evidence. I'm sure you'll have noticed that the Green loony wing also does the same, but from a different muddle of thought<sup>32</sup>.

No subject is immune from this approach. In ornithology, we have had the life-long frauds of Meinertzhagen<sup>33</sup>, but he operated at a time long before advanced statistical techniques were applied to collected data. Indeed, through careful statistical analysis applied to the specimens associated with him in museums across the world actually proved the extent to which he was prepared to deceive. Down at our level, all we have to deal with are 'stringers' of bird records. However, there are still many examples of people who really believe that they can change reality simply by repeating assertions. For example, take the annual instances of letters in the media claiming that all the songbirds have been wiped

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perhaps this example is unfair, but usually the answers on TV quiz shows to any science-based question amply illustrate this point. Now, how many people do you know buy and read books in the 'Popular Science' category? Most are very well written and thus are a good read? By the way, how many do you have?

<sup>30</sup> Between 5 and 24 June 2010, I made a point of counting such headlines in the newspapers. I counted 7 instances (not all papers mentioned all 7). All were shallow, 3 were plain wrong, and only two had a 'Medical Correspondent' byline.

<sup>31</sup> Man in the pub stuff, but said by people who are much better off and convinced they speak for the working class (Viscount Monckton's term, not mine).

<sup>32</sup> "These are my principles; if you don't like them, I have plenty more"; the immortal words of Groucho Marx, probably paraphrased somewhat.

<sup>33</sup> Garfield, B. 2007. *The Meinertzhagen mystery – the life and legend of a colossal fraud*. Potomac, Washington DC, USA.

out by raptors that are unfairly protected and so exist in huge numbers<sup>34</sup>. As soon as a low-key, rationally-expressed response is published, isn't it odd how often the original correspondents adopt the *ad hominem* tack – 'what do you expect of townies?', or 'the rules are made by people with no understanding of the countryside', but always phrased as if victimised<sup>35</sup>. Now, my understanding of the syllabi of Agricultural Colleges are that they are soundly based on proven mathematical and statistical techniques when covering such things as weed growth rates and densities, and spraying methodology. That tells me that many farmers are well aware of the value of scientific method, so could it be that the newspaper letters' pages are being filled by 'country people' who never speak to farmers?<sup>36</sup>

Of interest from a personal viewpoint are the reactions of many to the new Collins Bird Guide<sup>37</sup>; 'They've changed the order', or 'What's wrong with the Voous List?' I'll make two brief observations. Firstly, the changes actually are a mish-mash of acceptances and rejections. They don't align with any overall ornithological authority. Retaining the sequence of families from the 1<sup>st</sup> edition would certainly have been an option, perhaps a disappointing one, but it would have had the merit of being a consistent approach<sup>38</sup>, and so the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in a decade or so will still have the power to shock! Secondly, Karel Voous was baffled by the tendency of British birders to treat his work as gospel<sup>39</sup>. Yes, he had produced it only after years of careful research, but as a scientist, he recognised that it represented only the best interpretation of the data then available, and as research techniques improved, the relationships between bird families and the placement of species within families were bound to require the sequence previously adopted to change (assuming the principles of the same general rules were applied as consistently as possible). When I mentioned this to the 'Voous List stalwarts', some conceded that changes were inevitable, but others immediately said I was lying, although they declined vociferously to say why the Voous List should not be changed, one even stating, 'Because it's right, that's why'<sup>40</sup>.

Try Ben Goldacre's website, 'Bad Science' at [www.badscience.net](http://www.badscience.net) for examples of perspective in understanding science<sup>41</sup>. It should keep you interested, amused, horrified and well-informed in about equal proportions. It's addictive.

<sup>34</sup> The consensus from a huge number of studies (including those from the Game Conservancy) of predator-prey relationships is that the numbers of meat-eating raptors depend solely on the availability of prey – when the latter decrease, the former decrease. Although matters may not be quite so straightforward for omnivorous predators, which can compensate for the shortage of one kind of preferred food, such circumstances are almost inevitably local.

<sup>35</sup> As per the comment I cited above by Sami Grover and in the responses of Muscleton to John Abrahams (footnote 24 above).

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps that should be 'never listen to farmers'.

<sup>37</sup> Svensson, L., K. Mullarney and D. Zetterström, 2009. *Collins Bird Guide, 2nd Edition*. HarperCollins, London, UK.

<sup>38</sup> Note that the sequence of families as listed in Dickinson (2003)<sup>38</sup> had actually been available informally to the authors of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition fails to align at all well it.

<sup>39</sup> From personal correspondence with Karel Voous 1994.

<sup>40</sup> When this kind of response comes from an 8-year-old, I can handle it...

<sup>41</sup> My rant has its origins in anti-science hostility expressed in birding circles, but reinforced by comments since CBG 2. Hasn't my rant grown? Ben Goldacre employs humour to great effect, but he is at his best at nailing those who seem really to believe that assertions can change reality.



**Honey Buzzard – Raptor Watch 2010 Cyprus**  
**Photo by Chris Patrick**



**Pied Heron - Fogg Dam, Northern Territory Jan 2011**  
**Photo by Dick Yates**



**Grey-headed Kingfisher**  
**Moremi Game Reserve - Botswana April 2010**  
**Photo: Dick Yates**

