

ROYAL AIR FORCE

ornithological society

Newsletter No 92
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Incorporating the RAFOS Journal



Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) Texas USA

Fran Eggby

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



Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) Texas USA

Johnny Stewart-Smith



Royal Tern (*Sterna maxima*) Texas USA

Fran Eggby

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Correction: Apparently the picture published on the inside back cover of Newsletter No 91 Spring 2011 is **not** a Honey Buzzard as captioned but is a Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* (aka ‘Short-trousered Buzzard’). Although the bird in the picture lacks *prominent* black carpal patches and the *black trailing edges* of a ‘typical’ adult Long-legged Buzzard it does have long legs sticking out of its short trousers. All buzzards have very variable plumage patterns and can cause a lot of head-scratching, particularly in areas like Cyprus, where species overlap. **DISCUSS**. Thanks to the raptorophile who spotted the error. *Ed.*

Note: Reading Mike Blair’s erudite piece on science, evidence and assertion (Newsletter 91) caused resurfacing of the long-held “Stewart-Smith Principle” that **“Researchers tend to find what they are looking for.”** This may seem like a statement of the blindingly obvious, but the point is that there may be a tendency to stop looking once you have found something to support your thesis, when really unbiased continued research may refute, or at least not support, the initial thesis. *Ed.*

Letter from the NEW Editor:

Dear RAFOS Members,

Well, here I am, the new editor of the RAFOS Newsletter, attempting to follow the spoor of Bill Francis and Dick Yates into the unknown. I thank them both for their advice and hope they will continue to warn me when I begin to stray too far from the path.

My editorial experience began at HQ Fighter Command, Bentley Priory, in the early 1960s, where, as FS1, I was responsible for the production of "Flight Safety." This publication went to all units of Fighter Command. I decided to increase the readership by publishing pin up pictures of scantily clad ladies on the back cover. This went very well for several months until I was called to the office of the CinC who said there had been comments from 'the Ministry.' The CinC advised me that I had reached the point of minimum coverage for the ladies. This was my first editorial lesson: "Always take guidance from the Boss."

When I volunteered for the post of RAFOS Newsletter editor, the old Royal Navy adage that "One volunteer is worth ten pressed men" crept into my mind. This was tempered by advice received from Sergeant Pritchard of the RAF Regiment who was my drill instructor and mentor when I began my three-year course at RAF Cranwell in January 1948. He said, "Never volunteer for anything." Soon after being commissioned I asked my father (Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force Retd. and font of all knowledge), what I should do when I found myself in the position of having no idea what to do next. He said, "Ask your sergeant, and do as he tells you." Good old Dad! Where are you now that I need you, sergeant?

I have been bird watching since my 1930s childhood in the Wicklow Mountains of Ireland. My time in the RAF gave me plenty of opportunities to visit interesting areas for bird watching, but not always enough time to watch birds while holding the Red Hordes at bay. On leaving the RAF I was commissioned into an Arab Air Force as fighter pilot, combat survival instructor, tp, QFI, PAI, IRE, Flight Safety Officer and a few other odd jobs. We had a private war going on in the area, but that was usually conducted from dawn to midday on a six-day-a-week basis so most afternoons were free for bird watching – a fairly gentlemanly arrangement. Arabia was then virtually unknown ornithological territory and my seven years there were put to maximum use for bird watching, recording and photography. Promotion to deputy/assistant/standby boss of the Air Force gave me use of helicopters and fixed-wing transport aircraft and the patrol craft of our Navy. The Ruler learned of my birding interests and gave me total access to the whole country as well as encouraging me to use our fighter recce aircraft to take pictures of seabird colonies, cetaceans and anything else that looked interesting. He was a keen conservationist and a benevolent gentleman. I found helicopters a bit noisy for regular bird watching, but I often used our BN "Islanders" to land almost anywhere in the desert and go on a bird photography walkabout. "Islanders" are a bit like 'flying Landrovers'. A group of ex-pats and locals got together to form the Emirates Natural History Group that still flourishes today, with links to the local university.

I flew Royal Navy fighters for seven years after my return from the Middle East, but this came to an end when I was partially disabled in an ejection that went seriously wrong. After much TLC from RN medics I kicked my bonedome into touch and joined Airwork Limited as Sales Manager. I eventually became Director of Marketing and Company Chief Pilot. This involved travelling widely to many African, Middle Eastern, South American and Far Eastern countries, and occasional odd places like Diego Garcia, always making sure I had at least a few days birding at each destination. A part-time occupation was as editor of "The Flight Safety Bulletin", the journal of the General Aviation Safety Council. GASCo was founded by fellow Irishman Air Chief Marshal The Earl of Bandon, aka "The Abandoned Earl." I was awarded a Royal Aeronautical Society Certificate for my 'outstanding contribution to the understanding of aerospace' for a paper on 'Lift Induced Drag and Wingtip Vortices.' I took up gliding and gained a Fédération Aéronautique Internationale Diamond award for an altitude gain of over 20,000 ft in a sailplane. My primary hobby is bird photography.

My brother Alex suggested that it was time for me to join him in RAFOS, so I did. I have enjoyed the company of RAFOS members at each meeting and on several RAFOS visits to Cyprus, Gibraltar, Islay, Portland, Chew, Slimbridge and Norfolk as well as other places I can't remember because of the quantities of wine consumed. By the way, the charge of "elitist" made against me at one RAFOS AGM still confuses me!

I will try to maintain the standards set by my predecessors but cannot do anything without the support and input from RAFOS members. Please let me have your formal reports and informal tales of birding from wherever you go. Each is equally important to keep the Newsletter readable, informative and interesting. Don't forget the pictures. Don't wait until the last minute. Don't hesitate to send your story because you have not previously written one. I've not previously edited the RAFOS Newsletter.

Thank you all,
John Stewart-Smith

Ringling in Cyprus with the Sorby Breck Ringing Group

Julia Springett

During the period 6th to 20th April this year, Robin and I were lucky enough to join Sorby Breck ringing group, led by Geoff Mawson and Steve Samworth, on their annual visit to Cyprus. Logistically it was not as easy as the RAFOS expedition we had previously attended three years ago, as poles, nets and all other necessary equipments had to be brought in from the UK. This was achieved in rather odd looking golf bags. The rings were provided by the Cyprus ringing committee under the control of Alan Crabtree.

We were centred on the Polis area and rotated ringing activity through five sites, the choice of which one to be used depended upon weather conditions and public holidays. We soon realised that our choice of hire car wasn't up to the job; we would have been far better hiring a 4x4 vehicle and would then not needed to beg lifts from other folk to reach some of the sites.

Spring this year in Cyprus had brought with it much rain and as a result the vegetation was exceptionally lush and various splendid orchids and other wild flowers were much in evidence. Work was required initially in order to clear the lanes, and to cut new ones, as areas where in previous years birds had been targeted coming in to drink were this season not a draw. The first of the five sites visited were Ayios Minas, an area of olive groves, carob trees, plough and intensive cereal crop; this produced the three species of black and white flycatchers, a Cyprus Scops Owl which had been ringed in a previous year by the Sorby Breck group, and Little Crake which was caught over a dried up irrigation ditch in the late morning.



Cyprus Scops Owl (*Otus scops cyprius*)

Julia Springett

The second site at Ayios Minas was near to the church and it covered some marsh and scrub, and reed beds. Nets in amongst the high vegetation produced a good selection of hirondines and a large 'fall' of Blackcaps. Lower Polis site combined a river with running water (which if extreme caution was not exercised filled wellington boots!), reed beds and eucalyptus trees. Amongst the usual selection of Reed, Great Reed, Cettis and Sedge Warblers, we did have the delight of Wryneck which never ceases to fascinate me and is of course very photogenic.



Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*)

Robbie Robinson

Upper Polis or Chrysocou again had pools of water and a flowing stream where we were lucky enough to trap various waders including Little Bittern and Wood Sandpiper. The final site to mention is at Evretou Dam where we had nets across the river as well as along the edges of fields containing cereal crops. Here again we had a good mix of migrants, although we never caught one of the many Great Spotted Cuckoos flying about!



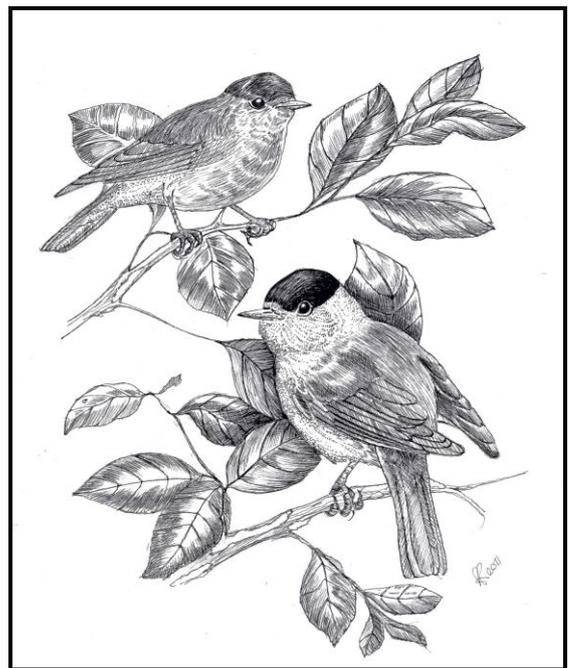
Little Crake (*Porzana parva*) Julia Springett



Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) Julia Springett



Sedge Warbler Robbie Robinson



Blackcap Robbie Robinson

The weather throughout varied enormously from burning hot sunshine in calm conditions to high winds and torrential rain. However, as can be seen from the attached spreadsheet (Next pages), we had a very successful 1367 number of birds ringed with 2 foreign controls and 56 species.

Thanks again to Geoff and Steve for passing on their knowledge and expertise particularly in identifying females of the black and white flycatchers!

	Agios	Upper	Polis	Evretou	Agios	Upper	Agios	Polis	Agios Minas	Upper	Evretou	Polis	Agios	Agios Minas	Agios	Individual Species Total
	Minas	Polis			Minas	Polis	Minas		Church	Polis			Minas	Church	Minas	
	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th	21st	
Blackcap	28	1	2	1	17	3	34	8	58	15	1	10	81	12	14	285
Ortolan Bunting	2				2				1							5
Sand Martin						1								1		2
Greenfinch	1		1				2		1	1		1	2			9
Tree Pipit	4				14	1	21	1	1	5	3	2	2		1	55
Song Thrush	2												1			3
Chiffchaff	1				1				1	1		1				5
Whitethroat	1						1		1	3			1	1	1	9
Bonelli's Warbler	1				2											3
Orphean Warbler	1				1						1					3
Sardinian Warbler	5	12	12	18	5	9	5	4	11	10	17	11	3	5		127
Lesser Whitethroat	7	1	1	4	1	1	7		2				2			26
Rupells Warbler	1															1
Nightingale	2		1	1	1	3	3		4	1		1	2	3	2	24
Pied Flycatcher	1				10	1	12		4				1	2		31
Great Tit	3	2	1	5	5	2	2	1	3			2	8	10	4	48
Cetti's Warbler	1	16	19	12		14	1	16	4	11	9	12		6	1	122
Redstart	1				1		4						2	1	1	10
Zitting Cisticola				1				1				2				4
Green Sandpiper						1										1
Semi-collared Flycatcher					5		5							1		11
Collared Flycatcher				1	10	2	9		3					3	5	33
House Sparrow	3				2		1	2			1	1			1	11
Sedge Warbler		13	13	2		4		19	1	8	17	37	1	1		116
Reed Warbler		7	35	2		19		45		21	7	101				237
Kingfisher		2	1	1							2	1				7
Swallow		2			1	5				1	3	1		4		17
Common Sandpiper		2	1								1					4
Great Reed Warbler		1	2	2		4		5		5	4	11				34
Wood Sandpiper		1				5				2						8

“Birding in Texas – AWESOME!”

John Stewart-Smith

It may be helpful to provide a few handy hints for those who have not been birding in Texas. The birds are wonderful, tame and plentiful. The people are open, friendly and helpful BUT they do not speak, or understand, English. It will only take a few days to realise that the vast majority of Texans are determined to share everything with everyone. It can be useful to follow the local habit of loudly interjecting “AWESOME” or “OHMYGOD” or “WOW” or a quizzical “REALLY?” at any apparent pause in a conversation. This will not interrupt the nonstop running commentary on anything that is happening within sight of the commentators, for the benefit of everyone within earshot.

Example: **“OH MY GOD JUST LOOK AT THAT AWESOME BUTTERFLY GOING TO LAND ON THAT FLOWER OH MY GOD NO ITS GOING TO LAND ON ANOTHER FLOWER WAY OVER THERE WOW ISNT THAT JUST AWESOME?”** The response is **“REALLY?”**

If you intend to retain the ability to walk after your first few days in Texas you should be sure to order food from the “For Stunted Children and Midgets” pages of the menu cards, otherwise you will find your legs will not support your belly after a few meals of Texan proportions. There are at least 95 choices at every stage of the menu. You will need a friendly translator when ordering food because everyone speaks in code. Muttering “awesome” or “really?” doesn’t help, -- and don’t say ‘BLACK’ coffee.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the above *caveats* Fran and I had a wonderful three weeks in the US, with *awesome* birds and unsurpassed photographic opportunities. We flew with BA from LHR to Philadelphia to spend a week with one of my sons and his family in Pennsylvania before moving on to visit my eldest son and his wife in Texas. We had a very comfortable flight to Philadelphia, arriving ahead of schedule due to atypical tailwinds across the Atlantic. This gain was negated by having to stand in line for 90 minutes to clear Homeland Security control. A small police lady with a frisky beagle on a lead approached our line. This dog took a great interest in Fran’s hand baggage. The police lady and her dog uncovered a banana concealed in Fran’s bag. OHMYGOD! You cannot import bananas into the USA. Fran’s offer to eat the banana didn’t help. The police lady confiscated the offending fruit and wrote a note on my clearance chit, with instructions to hand it to the officer on the desk when we got there. I told Fran the note said “Full Body Search.” That kept her quiet for several minutes. I use an Irish passport for visits to the US. (Don’t ask). The desk officer was a very friendly and attractive black (oops! Afro-American) lady who told me her name was also Smith, and her grandmother came from Ireland. I suggested the officer could be my sister, or at least a cousin. She thought about this while concentrating on taking Fran’s finger prints and recording Fran’s retina scan. The officer declined to do the same for me, telling Fran that I was much too old to cause any security problems. This raised Fran’s eyebrows, especially as we had watched a film called “RED” on the plane. RED means “Retired and Extremely Dangerous!” Fran also knew that I had worked with the CIA after Operation El Dorado Canyon. Our hold baggage was scanned and we were both searched (without the use of rubber gloves) for more concealed bananas before being released into Pennsylvania.

I don’t think the temperature in Pennsylvania ever got above freezing during the last week of March, so my birding was restricted to the garden and patio at my son’s home, with short sorties to a few local parks. The parks held flocks of American Robins, with a supporting cast of Northern Mockingbirds, Song Sparrows, Mourning Doves, Double-crested Cormorants, Black-capped Chickadees, Cardinals, Grackles, Egrets and American Crows. All bar the cormorants and egrets were to be seen from the patio at the house, so I tended to skulk there to avoid frozen assets. The garden (aka ‘yard’) produced a few surprises, including a low-level Northern Harrier.

After a very pleasant week with Hamish (USAF Retd), Jane and my two hilarious and extremely bright grandsons, Fran and I left the cool weather in Pennsylvania courtesy of an American Airlines MD80 flight to Dallas, Texas. There we stayed on board while the aircraft was prepared for the next leg, to complete the 1,600 mile flight from Philadelphia to Austin. Fran was beginning to get the idea that Texas is BIG. The weather during our entire two-week stay in Texas was sunny with blue skies, a nice breeze and temperatures hovering in the 90s F. Not bad for the first half of April!

Michelle, my Texan daughter-in-law, is an IBM programmer. She has a beautiful home at Round Rock, which is close to Austin. Their fenced and wooded garden had a selection of interesting birds and a raccoon that arrived each evening to Hoover up any left-over cat food, carefully washing the food in the cats’ water bowl before eating. Barn Swallows nested over the light in the front porch.

My son Johnny (USAF Retd) also has a “farm” (i.e. small ranch) out in the sticks where he has built an immaculate hangar-sized workshop and gathered a large collection of ex-military vehicles of all shapes and sizes, plus an extensive selection of firearms. The farm turned out to be a great birding spot and I spent hours sitting in the shade with hummingbirds buzzing about, taking pictures of many new birds that are undisturbed in this oasis of peace and quiet. Johnny and Fran walked around exploring the surrounding woods and pastures, trying for ‘ticks’ before my sedentary technique worked. The only other resident there is ‘Taco’, an impressively large stray dog who appeared whenever we arrived and stared adoringly at Johnny while he prepared food for her. I have never heard Taco make a sound, so she was always welcome, even while we were bird watching.

One highlight of our two weeks in Texas was a three-day trip to the south of the state, to the area around Rockport (28:00N 97:00W) on the Gulf of Mexico coastline. This involved a 250 mile drive each way through mostly open and flat, sparsely populated, Texan countryside. There were plenty of birds to be seen as we drove along, but we only seemed to stop for pictures when the birds were on the left side of the vehicle, occupied by my son and his digital Canon with big lens attached. There was a slight whiff of competition in the air. The ladies were in the rear seats of this huge 4x4 vehicle that is powered by a supercharged 6 litre diesel engine. Their windows were tinted so darkly that they seldom noticed they were missing birds until Johnny and I had finished our photography and we roared off again, southwards. We came up to a small herd of bison near the highway. Fran asked Johnny the difference between a buffalo and a bison. Johnny explained that you can’t wash your hands in a buffalo. Fran muttered something about ‘genes’. Michelle rolled her eyes. We drove on.

We checked into a very comfortable and good value motel right on the shoreline at Rockport and watched squadrons of pelicans drifting past at balcony level as we prepared for three days of amazing birding. The variety of species and the number of birds to be seen certainly surprised me. We were right on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The beach from nearby Port Aransas stretches unbroken to the south until it reaches Mexico, some 200 miles away and it looks as if it continues northeast all the way to Florida. A constant stream of Brown Pelicans drifted by, looking like squadrons of prehistoric V bombers as they shuttled from the ocean to the fish dock to await the evening arrival of the fishing boats and the cleaning of the catch.



Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

John Stewart-Smith

We followed them along the coast and found them to be remarkably tame and tolerant of very close approach for photography. There was one Great Blue Heron standing on the wooden fish dock. It didn’t seem inclined to move aside to make room for us to get closer to the pelicans. The heron was quite happy to stand within a few feet of us while it waited for the arrival of the fishing boats.

The first boat arrived and unloaded exactly three fish, so we realised that the professional fishermen were still at sea. Fran, Michelle, Johnny and I jostled for position to take close-up pictures of the heron until Johnny took first prize with a picture that showed nothing but the bird’s eye in extreme close-up. The heron remained unmoved. I shuffled off while they were not watching me and began to take pictures of the pelicans on the sea inlet. I though I had gained a few sneaky points in the pictures contest until Fran nudged me aside and fired away at ‘my’ pelicans. She can be so aggravating at times, especially as she takes excellent pictures without apparent effort. It was a mistake to buy that digital Nikon for her. I believe ‘Long’ John Le Gassick and Jan ‘Secretary Bird’ have now got similar cameras, so I expect to publish more high-quality pictures from them.



Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) waiting for the fishing boats to arrive.

Fran Eggby



Brown Pelican (*Pelicanus occidentalis*)

John Stewart-Smith

Next morning, after a very comfortable night in our suite that cost less than \$50.00 per night including breakfasts, we loaded our kit into Johnny's vast red machine to set off for the short ferry ride from the mainland to Port Aransas. Our departure was delayed by a Northern Mockingbird sitting on the car park wall and singing its socks off at a range of a few feet. House Sparrows, Grackles, Purple Martins, Laughing Gulls, Franklin's Gulls and the endless flypast by Brown Pelicans tried to delay us further, but we set off with a muffled thunder from the 6 litre engine and the clanking of bottles from the rear compartment.

We had not even made it to the outskirts of Rockport before cameras were in action taking pictures of birds feeding in storm ditches right at the edge of the main highway. There were Black-necked Stints, Long-billed Dowitchers, Semipalmated Plover, White Ibis, Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs, ducks various and all sorts of waders feeding in the muddy ponds, all within feet of the passing traffic. This was birding and photography in extreme comfort! Eventually there were a few mutterings about 'maintenance of the aim' so Johnny selected a 'go-forward' gear to get us to the ferry.

The short ferry crossing was a very professional affair with two ferries shuttling back and forth at high speed. We just had time to see several Bottle-nosed Dolphins hunting in the narrows before we were on Main Street, Port Aransas. This is a bright, clean and cheerful place with several eating places, a profusion of American flags, and a very helpful Wildlife Centre where lady volunteers answered our questions and gave useful hints about where to see what. We drove to the beach and began to drive along the tide line towards Mexico. The birds were still very tame and gigabytes were expended with all four cameras firing out the windows as we motored slowly along the smooth white sand. A low-flying Coastguard helicopter came scooting along the shoreline from the south, no doubt watching for illegal immigrants from Mexico and keeping an eye out for banana smugglers from Wales. The helicopter flew past but was soon replaced by a police car driven by a very polite sheriff who explained that we were not allowed to drive along the tide line and should stick to the 'road' that paralleled the shore closer to the sand hills. We retraced our tracks northwards, back to Port Aransas, where Johnny had noticed six-seater golf buggies for hire. We were soon on our way back to the beach in one of these open-sided machines with a sun roof that was even better for photography than Johnny's huge vehicle. The buggy was not troubled by the soft sand and we were soon pattering along the shoreline again.

The birds seem to be congregating to have their pictures taken and the main problem was not to run over the little ones – well, almost. We took pictures of Ring-billed Gull, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Common Tern, Forster's Tern, Least Tern, Sanderling, Willet, Killdeer, Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover (aka Grey Plover), Ruddy Turnstones, Redhead, Great Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, Reddish Herons and a Common Loon (aka Great Northern Diver). The number of species along the shoreline was remarkable and we were approaching overload when the same police car arrived to tell us that the buggy also had to stick to the 'road.' I noticed the police were always very polite and respectful and commented on this to Johnny. He later explained that the number plate on his vehicle begins with "DV" and in Texas this means "Disabled Veteran." A registered disabled veteran has many privileges in Texas, including no vehicle or road tax. The respect shown to disabled military veterans in Texas is impressive. Good idea, Mr Cameron?



Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*)

Johnny Stewart-Smith

I was surprised to see several male Redheads (*Aythya americana*) dozing on the beach by the tide line. These ducks look very similar to 'our' pochards, which is hardly surprising as they are closely related. Again, these birds tolerated very close photography as the sun passed the zenith.

It was time to leave the shore at Port Aransas and head back inland towards Rockport. I had expressed a desire to get pictures of Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds in coastal Texas, although I knew we were a bit late in the season and there are only about 200 of these majestic birds left in the world. We drove to the nature reserve favoured by the Whooping Cranes and parked the 'big red.' Loud mating grunts from alligators in the undergrowth deterred the cross-country approach on foot. The noticeable vibration of the pond surfaces in time to the loud grunts emphasised that the alligators were close to where we stood. I said that an angry alligator can run faster than a man. Johnny said this didn't matter as he knew he could run faster than I could, and that was all that mattered. Filial love is a great consolation! I got back into the vehicle and closed the door.



Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Johnny Stewart-Smith

We drove to a 'viewing point' constructed at treetop level and provided with telescopes on pivots – all marked 'For distant viewing.' Despite the large information board giving details of the Whooping Cranes, the nearest of two birds was at least a mile away. Apparently the other 198 Whooping Cranes had already left for Canada. "You should have been here last week," was the traditional helpful comment from a local birder. Well, I SAW a Whooping Crane, I think, but I didn't get a picture. Next time, perhaps?

This nature reserve is a vast area of coastal marsh and woodland with a great selection of exotic looking butterflies feeding on the masses of brightly coloured flowers. A solitary Osprey perched on a nearby post. Fran, Johnny and Michelle set off on foot to explore but I skulked on a bench close to the car park. I might no longer be able to run as fast as my son, but I was pretty certain I could get to the nearby vehicle ahead of any charging randy alligators.

To give an idea of the size of things in Texas there is one ranch near Rockport that covers 750,000 acres or about 1200 square miles. That's just about the size of Gloucestershire and larger than 31 of the 48 counties in England. This ranch has been owned by the same family for 150 years, since they shooed the previously resident Indians away. One serious word of warning: Texans take trespassing on their land very seriously and they are likely to shoot anyone found on their land without their specific permission. REALLY? Really! One warning notice said, "Trespassers will be shot. Anyone wounded will be shot again. Have a nice day."

Try to avoid commenting on the fact that the telescopes provided at viewing points in the many national parks and wildlife reserves all have large stickers attached that read "FOR DISTANT VIEWING." If you do remark on this fact then the locals will look slightly puzzled and gently explain that telescopes really are for distant viewing. I'm not sure if Americans have a terrific sense of humour or just feel obliged to state the blindingly obvious.

Our three days at Rockport came to an end all too quickly, but we still had plenty of bird watching to do on the 250 mile drive back to Round Rock and at Johnny's farm close to Round Rock.

My one regret on leaving the coastal area was that I had missed decent pictures of my first and only Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*). I spotted the solitary bird in a field and fired a couple of 'record' shots from the moving vehicle before the bird took off and continued its Spring migration towards Canada.

As we drove north along the highway I saw a Crested Caracara standing in the grass verge on the right side of the tarmac. Johnny did a swift 180 and now the bird was on his side of the car, posing prettily for his camera. I suppose one is required to encourage one's offspring in their photographic interests.



Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*)

Johnny Stewart-Smith

Back at the Round Rock house we downloaded literally thousands of pictures and got the books out to confirm our recognition of some of the more unfamiliar species. I still have a few recorded as 'unrecognised LBJ.'

We spent several more days at the farm, adding new species each day. I was finally getting the knack of taking pictures of hummingbirds in the air. Their bodies are smaller than my little finger, yet some of them had flown across the Gulf of Mexico direct from Central America. Some continue northwards to Alaska. Their wings made a gentle deep rumbling sound like a big bee and they had high-pitched squeaky voices used in constant arguments about who owned which nectar source. I spent hours in total fascination until I became so stiff I could hardly move when the others returned from yet another fruitless search for Roadrunners.

Our time in America came to an end all too soon. It was a holiday never to be forgotten. Thanks to everyone.

For our return flights I made the 'accidental' discovery that the best way to travel by air in the USA is to be in a wheelchair, pushed by sympathetic young ladies who bypassed all queues at the airports and assisted me to and from aircraft. Fran trailed behind, *sans bananas*. I must remember the wheelchair option for future journeys to the USA.

April is a very good time to go birding in Texas. The weather is pleasant, the people are friendly, service everywhere is outstanding and the birds are AWESOME. The birds were remarkably unstressed and allowed close approach. This holiday added 77 new species to my library of bird pictures. Most of the pictures of new species were taken on our three-day visit to the Gulf coast. There are c.2000 pictures by Fran, Johnny and myself on Picasa web albums. I will e-mail the links to these pictures to anyone interested. johnstewartsmith@btinternet.com

Here is our holiday list of birds seen in USA, with nomenclature following Sibley ISBN 0-679-45122-6, using American common names

Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	Franklin's Gull	<i>Larus pipixcan</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelicanus occidentalis</i>	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Neotropic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>
American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirunda</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Least Tern	<i>Sterna antillarum</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	Inca Dove	<i>Columbina inca</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	Chimney Swift	<i>Chaetura pelagica</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Ajaia ajaia</i>	Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Black-bellied Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna autumnalis</i>	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	<i>Tyrannus forficatus</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Canvasback	<i>Aythya valisineria</i>	Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>
Redhead	<i>Aythya americana</i>	Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Masked Duck	<i>Nomonyx dominicus</i>	Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonata</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>
Harris's Hawk	<i>Parabuteo unicinctus</i>	Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	Carolina Wren	<i>Thrythorus ludovicianus</i>
Harlan's Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>	European Starling	<i>Sturnella vulgaris</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinule chloropus</i>	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	Nashville Warbler	<i>Vermivora ruficapilla</i>
Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>	Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Seiurus motacilla</i>
Whooping Crane	<i>Grus americana</i>	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothypis trichas</i>
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
American Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerine</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolnii</i>
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	[leucistic Grackle]	(Uncommon but not rare)
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromas scolopaceus</i>	Texas Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromas griseus</i>	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		

“HAVE A NICE DAY NOW – Y’HEAR!”

To Chew Valley and beyond - Spring 2011

Jon Orme

To Chew Valley for the RAFOS annual spring gastronomic and birding festival.

Arrived to find the friends assembled although there were some absences due to travel in foreign parts (a poor excuse!). Travellers from the west gave harrowing accounts of starting their journeys in heavy frost but by coffee time the weather was glorious, and remained so all day. There was talk of Ferruginous Duck and Smew although these were not confirmed during the day.

Firstly to the Dam where last year there were good views of Water Rail and Kingfisher on the muddy patches left by low water levels in the main lake. Local television had been describing similar conditions this year due the drought but not so, levels were considerably higher, if not at their peak, and there were no muddy bits so no rails etc. However across the road there was a goodly selection of waterfowl including Shoveler, Pintail, Little Grebe etc. There was a surprising absence of hirondines of any sort unlike previous years when swallows and martins were much in evidence.

Onward then around the lake for more birding which, it has to be said, was decidedly sparse. And so to lunch which was, as usual, the great spread we've come to look forward to. I will admit to enjoying both soups and everything else (twice)

We were then treated to an archival early 19th-century slide show of RAFOS in its prime when people wore big shorts, drove antique vehicles, and looked sooooo young. That was when birding counted as adventurous training. Where did those exotic Far East posting go to?

Time for more nostalgia, tea and stickies, and a group photo before heading home having enjoyed a great social and birding gathering. A thoroughly enjoyable day, thanks guys.



A few old ducks at RAFOS Chew Valley Spring 2011

Jon Orme

WINTER DUCK 10 (2011)

Ten years of work – whilst it's "blowing a hooly"

FS John N Wells



Winter Ducks

John Stewart-Smith

The annual soiree to NW Scotland takes a good deal of planning nowadays, as it grows with its expanding survey areas. The chairman addressed the AGM and said that new expedition leaders are always required, and must come forward and learn the ropes. To aid this we have split the Winter Duck workload into two 'joint leaders' who can lead an expedition. With joint leaders, it can reduce what can be a considerable strain on your personal time. But by no means let me put you off, when it all comes together it is oh so rewarding and you feel you are helping to hold the Society together for the future. Well, we all do in our own particular way!

It was back in March 2010 that we booked the two Defence Estates (DE) accommodation halls of Joint Service Mountain Training Centre (JSMTC) Kingussie and Dundonnell, through the revised organisation of Landmarc Support Services, Stirling. Since that time they have moved to South Queensferry, Edinburgh. 'The Duck' team [as it has fondly been nicknamed], had changed considerably too. From an initial 12 personnel, the team were gradually depleted to the bare minimum of nine, with three per team. The loss of Veronica, who can be such a bubbly team player, great administrator and all round morale lift to all of us, but especially as assistant to Gerry Bilbao in Team 1. Veronica's non-attendance was a devastating blow in the week before departure. She had intended to meet up at some stage but with two extremely poorly parents and considerable logistics in visiting them both. We knew deep down this might not happen and events were to preclude her from attending her annual foray north. The other two guys, David Slater and Martin Godfrey, both had matters to attend to and likewise had to withdraw at some stage. The planning involves booking licence two SIF hire vehicles, arranging drivers and their licences clearance checks, payment and paperwork, plus Tom's own 4x4 needs his agreement. There is the small matter of five accommodation bases, two of which are civilian self-catering, to book and pay for, sponsorship to beg for, BTO Forms to compile and divi' up into teams, Admin pack-ups for three teams to make, maps to refresh, and probably the one longest and 'high up-there' with importance, the food to purchase, cook and freeze. These tasks were split amongst the majority of the team before the event and those with no jobs before the week's survey certainly play a part during the week. So, as with all expeds, they must be, and are, a team event.

Survey. The survey is The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), using Core Count Single Visit Forms. These are provided direct from the BTO WeBS team with accompanying A4 schematic maps of the coastline and water

sites. Each site or 'Sector' of a larger Site has its own dedicated count Unit Code. Sites are usually split sections of coast, bays, large sea lochs or small lochans with sizes varying from a 100sq meter lochan to up to 5-10 miles of Bay (such as Thurso Bay or Gruinard Bay).

Heidi Mellan at the BTO provides these WeBS forms, complete with pre-printed site title labels, on which the site code, site name and count unit number are already added for us. Usually the task of dividing up the forms into blocks and areas covered by each of the 3 teams goes to co-leader Jim Bryden. This sounds easy, but it is quite a chore, as maps and forms come in no particular order or sequence in relation to teams or their respective visited sites and sector areas. Therefore Jim sees to this aspect and batches them up accordingly. Stevie Heather had planned food for 11 at which time we lost David and provisions were pretty much already cooked and frozen into airtight freezer boxes. Stevie then had the matter of Vron cancelling, but Team 1 would just have more food to eat! Team 1 also having provision with spare capacity of all staple items should she be able to make it across to Dundonnell for a 'part week'. Plus Team 1 are based five days in one location so it makes sense that they have the bulk of ration strength.

Preceding Weather. The weather prior to Christmas was very cold. Tom Dewick reported -17° C at his house at Gilston, Nr Elgin. This would have a devastating effect on the numbers of birds, particularly passerines, seen on the survey. Jim and I had booked and paid for the Wyton PSI van and the two private houses using the sum of cash held in the WD Lloyds Bank Account back in October. Martin Routledge arranged the High Wycombe PSI Van for the second year running. What with this, the Wyton PSI and Tom's 4x4 Terrano we had three of the major 'headaches' sorted. Our accommodation 'bid' had been successful with DE / Landmarc. I just had to inform them that my work address had changed as the point of contact for RAFOS. Tom and Maggie had secured the use of the range hut accommodation at Faraid Head near Durness up at the NW tip of the UK, via Major David Halpins' team up at DE Tain.

Birds then. The teams left their respective homes and met up at the pre-arranged RV's. A fleeting look around the Peterborough housing estate in Sugar Way near the Silver Spoon Sugar factory close to where Alan Brimmell lives, drew a blank on **Waxwing**. Likewise so did all places north en-route to Newtonmore. Alan reckons '*They do not exist*' and are a figment in folk lore! I personally agree with him as they are little sods to see as the three of us dipped again.

Problems Start here. The caretaker of JSMTTC Kingussie called on the day before we travelled, with the 'bombshell' that the drill hall at Kingussie [our second night stop, and the 1st stop for the long drive from High Wycombe] had frozen pipes. Luckily Jim was available to do some last minute phoning around the MOD bazaars to locate alternative accommodation arrangements for eight folk. This was not easy! His great work produced the overnight stop at an 'old friend,' Pine Cottage, Newtonmore. This was hastily booked through HMS Naval Base Faslane and paid for up front by Jim using his own cash.

On the road we set off then; the Western (High Wyc) van travelled a day behind the Eastern (Wyton) van who had spent a leisurely drive north via Felkington, near Duddo for Jim and our first overnight stop. Hilda had laid on a lovely dinner and Jim had chipped in with home-made soup and some *rare* Islay malt whisky, *rare* in that we hardly see any! Let alone taste any! I jest, the bottle was shared by our host.

Garden Feast. The three **Tree Sparrows** and assorted finches, **Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Siskins**, also **Blackbirds, Dunnock, Robin** and **House Sparrows** were tucking in at Jim and Hilda's' garden banquet, until such time as the resident **Sparrowhawk** visits and they all hide. The two **Great-spotted Woodpeckers** also popped in around 3.30 pm as we unloaded the van for the night stop.

Up fairly leisurely the next morning and a breakfast of hearty egg and bacon baps before it's time to load the van again and head for Maggie Sheddan's collection at North Berwick, not before a quick un-scheduled ASDA visit. Unscheduled in that it wasn't in the Administration Order and Maggie (or affectionately known as Dazzle) was again unscheduled in that she needed a box of wine for the trip and wanted us to get it for her. Not that she had time herself to get any as the builders and plumbers and electricians were all in her flat doing modernisation and installing her new windows and new plumbing and heating. She was doing a runner to escape the mess the builders and their materials were making. Her flat was in a complete state of madness with no heating [a recurring theme] and brick dust everywhere. Apparently this was the only time the builders could do the job! 'Dazzle' was quietly annoyed about the mess she was leaving behind. Worrying what she would come back to no doubt. Maggs had palmed it over to her sister to let them in and out whilst she was away up north. So we told Dazzle to relax, she was on her 'jollies'. We three jumped out to collect Maggie's 'luggage train' that was an extensive selection of bags, cases and loose shopping, including the occasional oddity. For 2011 Maggs was bringing her bicep weights with her, just what every good survey birder needs!

Van loaded then and weights suitably wedged in somewhere, so as to not roll about the floor of the wagon and mix it with Dazzles flasks on the floor of the van. At about this time the Western Van had collected Jerry Bilbao from Droitwich and was heading North on the M6 for Jerry Knights collection at Sandbach Services. The driving was shared between Martin and Jerry on the long haul North, but no difficulties were reported to 'the Leaders' or none that wished to be shared out with the Admin Order timings anyway. Team 'East' took a short break in Pitlochry and after failing to find 'the loos' three members did find a homely pub with a raging fire to warm up whilst Jim did his tour of some new haunts. Whilst on his shopping spree he located some nice home baked ham baguettes for Maggs and himself. Alan and I made best use of the time and got a pint of heavy in - eating's cheating! Well it was a long haul North in the back of a van, and that was our excuse. We needed the fire that was for sure. It was lovely and warm in the pub and the others eventually succumbed and came in for a warm-up. Back in the van the 'heavy' was working overtime as an excited voice in the van mistook a lorry with a quote 'what's the bright red light on the front for' as the lorry drew nearer, it was clear the excited person was looking at a set of traffic lights...strong stuff that 80 shillings. The trip was moving apace, and with good weather and no road traffic hold-ups 'Team East' were at Newtonmore for approx. 15.00 all on time and aligned to the AO. On arrival at Pine Cottage in the village of Newtonmore, it quickly became apparent that the heating was non-existent. Unknown to us at the time and later informed by phone from Central Amenities Fund (CAF), HM NB Faslane's Mr Terry Heaney told us that that the house had also suffered a bout of frozen pipes in Jan/Feb and at great expense to his welfare funds Terry had to foot the bill. The builders had been in to recover the £7K of plumbing costs. Crazy the plumbers had locked the power room-outhouse with no key anywhere to be found in the cottage. So we were unable to get to the boiler, and they had also unbelievably locked the spare padlock key inside the outhouse well Duh! So after a few 'Faffing' phone calls we located the engineers to come and disc-cut the padlock off. At which time a smug remark from 'Team West' van stating "Faffing' at this stage of the itinerary, was NOT in the AO". Nice one Martin, this did not help our case! It was some two hours before we located a contact tel number then got them back to the cottage from the job they were on by which time we had spent an hour or so in a very cold cottage. Eventually the plumber arrived and got the timer sorted and eventually the heating came on with some reasonable heat and the house and team were grateful for that!

High Wycombe van. Team 'West' pitched up on time to the timings set by Jim (in the AO). 'Team West' were rather pleased we had sorted the accommodation and heating out, all they had to do was allocate which bed to drop their kit on and go to the pub. Easy for some I'd say. Mind you it was great to see everyone again. Martin looked tired, but he had undertaken a very tiring day and a very long one getting up and away from High Wycombe at 06.00 and taking on the M40/M6 never an easy drive all that way. After a hasty Admin and Survey brief, we didn't need to be asked twice when it came time for the Pub and Dinner. Earlier we set out the six dormitories and these were shared with 5 Royal Navy folk from HM NB Faslane who had also booked the accommodation. These 'Senior Service' chaps and chapesses were left with Dorms 2 and 4 and they arrived just as we were departing for the pub. Jim showed two of them around the cottage, but they had their own key and were self-sufficient so all was good. We went for some much needed warm food and real ale.

Evenings Soiree. Our table for eight at the Glen Hotel had been booked earlier by Maggs as we arrived in Newtonmore. Not a bad place to eat this, with certificates on view for all to see that they had won awards for best CAMRA Pub and Hotelier in the Badenoch region every year since 2004. The surroundings were warm and convivial with a splendid selection on the Menu card; 70 shillings, 80 shillings, plus two real ales from Scotland. Oh and the food was good! I'm sure after 2 years away the Landlord remembered 'us lot' from past trips. Having stayed in Kingussie for the last 2 years we had by-passed Newtonmore and thus had not partaken of his real ale. The evening was interspersed with gen' on the survey, RAFOS EGM mutterings and who was attending, on why and wherefore we needed a minimum of 25 for a quorum to pass voting rights out-with the Committee, mutterings plus lots of other ramblings and Maggie's windows and radiators, all things apt and pertinent to the Society. Most meals seemed to everyone's liking and went down well and were well prepared. Steve was ready for his bed and Gerry B accompanied him back. The rest of us stayed a good while as we all caught up on recent gossip and all things RAFOS. We were trying to drum up a quorum for the EGM you see and needed Al and Jim or a few more in attendance. The bills were paid, or so we thought. The barman reminding us that one meal had remained un-paid out of the eight orders. Jim picked up the bill and all was sorted. Slight memory fade, but none of us are getting any younger. The next morning, apparently, I came out of this one with flying colours from my 'roomy' in Dorm 2. Dorm 1 had five others in and looked a tad crowded but they were happy, apparently! I thought that it may not have been all sweetness and light! Some of the single bunk beds even came with accompanying squeaks, snores grunts and whistles or was it all Alan's fault? I doubt it but the blame gun was rife! No one in particular got named and shamed or threw nasturtiums about so I will stow the 'blame gun' away.

Transferring Maggie's kit from Team East's van to Team West's van whilst in the dark at Pine Cottage was not the best move. Someone came in for a blast and thunder from Jim whoever thought of that one was outside the AO! Eh Mr.B! Do not mess with the AO! I tell thee.

Another beauty was Jim not bringing his mobile phone charger for the week. Electing to give it to Hilda as her need was greater! Or was it our 'scheming Scot'? By doing so, he could buy himself a new phone for the week. Wonder if our Hilda worked that one out? Eh Jimmy.

Breakfast at Tiffany's – it wasn't. . Next morning we arrived on time for our pre-booked breakfast at the Newtonmore 'greasy spoon' – sorry 'Truckers Diner,' only to be out jumped by a rowdy bunch of seven local lads sounding like they were still 'out' from a stag night. The poor lass had thought she had cooked her table of eight 'big boy's breakfasts. We explained that the seven locals had taken our booking for eight and she had to start all over again. She did not look best pleased. No wonder the lady the night before was happy to take a table of eight! She wasn't cooking it, the poor Polish lass was, the next morning.

Jim tried the old black pudding ...wait till all done thenlate side order and brown bread option – trick, but she was ready this year and had black pud' already on the fryer and had no brown bread so our Alva individual was left with the same choices as the rest of us.



All done and suitably 'full', we needed a decision, not easy at an unearthly hour. Drive on to Shlocht and over to Inverness or try the local woods for **Capercaillie** and **Crested Tit**? No choice really, it had been 3 years since we had been able to drive to the Anagach Forest as deep snow had prevented the famil on past visits. We had a slight 'Faff' as no-one could remember where the access to the woods and suitable parking place for the 2 vans was. The false start near the golf club was put to one side, as we recovered the directions to the 'walk-in' at the now well trodden lay-by. We assembled boots, gloves hats and all things warm ready for a two-hour Caper hunt. The other species were out to play, but sadly no 'Caper' for our happy bunch of five. Maggs had greater expertise and had gone off-piste and into the bilberry and heather bushes to find a few fresh scats' on a scat post left by a male Caper and as she turned out to be the only lucky one to get a glimpse of this beauty. We were envious come the end of the two hours bumble with no reward. We did see some other good ones mind. On meeting Gerry B 'Dazzle' proudly explained the bird was "over 'there, by the van" at which point Gerry states, "The van is over that way"! Some 180 deg about face from Maggie's directions...not an easy place Anagach Woods you understand, easy to get lost don't we know it. It all looks the same. After call-over in the lay by; 2

Tree Creeper, 15 Scottish Crossbill, Chaffinch, Siskin, 2 Crested Tit, 2 Bullfinch, Great Tit and Coal Tit, and a splendid **13 Parrot Crossbill** and **2 Red Squirrels,** were recorded and entered into the 'trip 'log. Shortly thereafter we set off for Inverness, and supermarket No4 of the trip. [No2 had been in Edinburgh to change Jim's failed Brasher boots and No3 had been in Pitlochry]. Must keep the records straight for the Supermarket Journal records.

Shop-aholics. The TESCO run has become an area I cannot report on any longer, suffice to say I have been banned. It went smoothly this time and Steve and Jim had the shopping purchased and packed away in respective vans, complete with extraction of Maggie's Kit and dumb bells to Team 1's 'West van' which was heading to Dundonnell. Jerry K moved into Team East's van and John and Al moved from Team 'East's' van to Toms' 4X4 Terrano and trailer. The kit safely strapped into the trailer we were off north to John O'Groats ASAP to make best use of the light and survey time. The logistics held no worries of lost misplaced or forgotten kit this year, or if it did so, it went unreported to me. For the Newsletter one has to say some sadly boring times ahead for this article then. Team 2 (Jim, Jerry and Steve) had the Wyton Van and they were off to Elphin and Team 1 of Martin, Maggs and Gerry B were off for tea & cakes with Janey McDonald, the caretaker lady.

Team 2 had their bottled water for drinking and black buckets for tap water for their ablutions. The self-catering cottage, 'Knockan Crag,' had also been taken out badly by the pre-Christmas weather and had no running water this year and NO heating. We/they are a hardy bunch that Team 2, now re-named 'Team Braveheart' were left to scrounge 'brown' water to flush loos and live around a log burning stove for the next four days and nights, not pleasant, one wonders how much more this exped can throw at us but 'wait out' I continue.

'Team Tea & Cakes'. Team 1, were safely ensconced in Dundonnell with their Millionaires Shortbread for the week. They had no hot water to shower or wash with, but they did have Janey cakes for Tea and Tiffin. Janey had called in to Jim and Major Halpin reporting a fault with the shower system. Jim relayed this to me on my mobile on the day before we departed. This gave us time, well not long really, to make the decision that strip washes would be the order for the week at Dundonnell base camp. There was no way we were going to cancel the survey over no hot water for showers. We did consider using a local facility in the Dundonnell Hotel for showers but, timings dictated the use of the kitchen water boiler and large pans of water.

Quite how Dazzle would wash her hair every night was another logistical nightmare but we left 'Team Cakes' and Maggs personally to decide that call.

The J.O.G team had made a collective decision not to stop, unless it was to check-out WeBS species [Grey geese] that dictated a count and after a speedy journey we were well north up near Wick at Golspie, on the Dornoch Firth when we came upon a large group of 480 **Pink-footed Geese** with an unusual 2 **Barnacle Geese** in amongst them. Alan and I scoped the flock and with clickers and best efforts came up with a count that we both thought was accurate (480).

We decided against a fuel stop and pushed on to Freswick and Tofts House to drop off the trailer before trying one or two site /sector counts before we lost the light. This would start the survey off but would also benefit us in giving Alan an understanding of the survey methodology and getting the team ethos up and running order sorted as to who was completing what forms and who would do the Journal/RRs and WeBS. Also once set-up each knew what he had to carry with him each day [maps forms and clipboards etc]. Tom got us to Duncansby Head with approx. 45 min left of light. The seas were choppy and wind was not too bad, the visibility was excellent and we got good and accurate totals without snow and high winds like last year. **Fulmars** were in abundance at the geo opposite the car park. Out to sea, rafts of **Common Eider** could be located but took some counting as they bobbed about and got hidden amongst the choppy waters. We got our first diver of the trip a **Red-throated Diver** just offshore and 4 **Common Scoter**, the highlight of the sector. The usual common species were there in good numbers; **Shag** 34 **Herring Gull** 27 **Oystercatcher** 2, **Razorbill** 3 amongst others. Pleasingly 7 **Gannets** came along close to shore which was a good start as this species aren't an every day occurrence on 'Duck' off shore in late January. They are non-WeBS species but they are a nice addition for the records and reading of the RAFOS Journal and the Highland Bird Club records for a later date.



That evening's call over was broken by the obligatory call in to Jim (on his new mobile) and Jerry's teams to ensure all three of the teams were in place and as settled as we had planned to be. All three teams were set, but the heating and lack of water at Elphin must have been a real crippler for Jim, Jerry and Steve, as well as Steve's current failing health this would not have been fun for him in particular. We got the heating on in Tofts but it just felt so cold, we called in to the owners to check on the dehumidifier. No wonder the place was cold, there had been no occupants at Tofts since October. We had to warm the place up, but once on for 12 hours the place felt a whole lot better. Tofts held little in the way of passerines in the garden the next morning at first light; Tom saw **Blackbird**, **Great Tit** and **Robin** as he cleared the vans windows and prepped it for the

day. That evening we added 3 **House Sparrows** but there was just nothing in the way of small stuff or thrushes! The reindeer are still there but light was fading and dinner and call over beckoned.

I can't say for the other two Teams but here's a breakdown of our birds; Day Two saw us up well before first light, but with only a short drive to J.O.G and our second sector we were set and in place at dawn at The Ness of Duncansby. From the slipway at J.O.G. we had 51 **Eider** and 3 **Long-tailed Duck** (our first but there were to be many later in the week). It was readily apparent that there were fewer birds in the fields and around the hamlets; no **Twite** to be found no **Fieldfare** or **Redwing** flocks – where they had been seen in earlier years, even the unfrozen fields were empty of Grey Geese. As we moved between Sectors; the tiny water patch of Huna Mill Pond (a new site) held 17 **Eurasian Teal** and 20 **Mallard**, but counting from the road in dead ground was proving tricky. This being a new site meant a new CCSV form for that evenings call-over so we mapped

out the Grid Ref and circled the water course on the Master 1:50.000 OS Map for next year (sponsorship providing). Ness of Huna held 19 **Greylag Geese**, 8 **Dunlin**, 2 **Purple Sandpipers**, 52 **Turnstone**, 62 **Starling**, 28 **Sanderling** [a really good record for WD], 2 **Rock Pipit** 43 **Curlew**, 8 **Common Redshank** and a single **Lapwing**, now there's a rarity for the week! There were gulls sp and lots of those as well as previously reported species; so all in all a nice site to kick off the morning. Our eyes were 'tuning-in' to the survey work and it was going well we thought. Working as a team, taking species-'close to' were Gulls and passerines; Tom whilst Alan and I scoped 2 different areas at the same time to reduce the time 'on-sector' so to speak. This worked quite well and we divvied up the grand totals and moved on.

Gills Bay at 09.20 held our first **Great-Northern Diver** of the trip for Team 3. A single male **Pintail**, 1 **Red-throated Diver**, 1 **Shag**, 1 **Black Guillemot**, 1 **Grey Heron**, 1 **Goldeneye**, 3 **Widgeon** and the species list was rattling along as well as all the more regular species for the forms. But it gives you an idea of what we saw. 6 **Purple Sandpipers** 2 **Gannets**, **Rock Dove** and 16 **Common Eider** were also on that count plus others (previously listed sp). Between sites we counted corvids with **Jackdaws** and **Rooks** probing fields together and the **Hooded Crows** tend to bunch up and patrol together. Not many **House Sparrows** were seen in the towns but Thurso was usually full of them so we banked on that for some more frequent species to bolster the RAFOS Journal-counts. The sector count at Scotland's Haven was remembered (by myself) for the grim news that Andy Murray was taking a shoeing in the Australian Open! I stayed put with the Terrano and brewed up-whilest Tom showed Alan the site. I sadly had the awful news to tell, that there was no way back for our young Scot and Andy was beaten too...sorry Tom,...joke. Last year this site held a lovely male **Hen Harrier** hunting low over the fields and a definite bird of the trip. But sadly not for Team 3 - 'North' this year we saw not one **Hen Harrier** all week! So why was that? Had they not come over from Orkney, [a stronghold for **Harriers** I am led to believe] or had they moved south to warmer less frozen climes pre-Christmas. Or could it possibly be that the males and females were down on low-lying milder southern Scottish moorland or marshland, or even God-forbid affected badly by the cold and had perished? We will probably never know. All raptors, but in particular **Sparrowhawks**, were also scarce, we toyed with a few general suggestions. Why were females a tad braver? Had they stayed to tough it out? 'Musket males' [as JK affectionately calls them] were certainly nowhere to be seen. We had not caught-up with males yet and only had single figures (less than 5) females.



Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*)

John Stewart-Smith

Day 1 Team 3-'North'. Harrow Harbour, East Mey and Wester Haven were all completed ahead of schedule. The clear weather was a real bonus as we managed to stay ahead of our 'self-imposed' deadline to aim for completion of Team 3 for Thursdays drive south to Dundonnell all being well. The marked up maps and pre-ordained sites certainly helped. Also as an initiative for Team 3 Alan was adding to the 'quick and easy site guide' we had commenced with Taff and Maggie last year and 'Team North' were pushing the boundaries of site identification, vehicle access in and out, where to park (off-road/lay-by, on the kerb next to the Coastguard, Harbour wall, Jetty or fallen drunk you get the picture). Well maybe not a fallen drunk – he can get up when his brown bags empty.

Queen Elizabeth; Bowes Lyons' -(The Queen Mums') Loch. Tom headed off for some shopping and Alan and I headed through the gate to Loch of Mey (LNR), Geese were to be heard everywhere, and in the fields on our right a small group of **Greylag** headed off as we put them up. Just after this large loch was completed in about one hour solid counting, a nice flock of 40 **Twite** were located on the beach at Dunnet Bay.



Loch of Mey

John Wells

Team 1 at Dundonnell had a fairly steady day 1 and 2 but a good count of 96 **Common Gull** in the fields at Dundonnell near the estuary stood out. Also they had located the 'near' resident flock of 74 **Barnacle Geese** at Gruinard Island viewpoint; this would rise to 130 on the 4th Feb. Their day 1 -2 had the usual fayre. On their 2nd Sector at Port Henderson they had a splendid 5 **GND's**, 84 **Shag**. At Loch Kerry (fish farm outlet) they had a lovely 176 **Black-headed Gull** and 126 **Goldeneye**, 9 **Tufted Duck** all in the sheltered bay also the trips probable high count of 94 **Mallards**. A **Peregrine Falcon** at Sector 8 – Gairloch-Big Sand was possibly the bird of the day, I suggest. Sadly no 'white-wingers! [**Glaucous** and or **Iceland Gull** to the 'non-vermin watchers!

Tuesday. Team 3. We were aiming for Faraid Head today, Tom called in on his mobile linked from his radio sound system to Roberta Mackay the head warden and suggested an ETA of about 4pm. While we were just east of Loch Eriboll the snow was clamping in and bad visibility started to affect the counts considerably. The snow had started just at the top end of Bettyhill but was squally and driven by a strong wind. Bettyhill was surveyed ok, mainly because it is a narrow river estuary with binocular views and some scoping on bird id upstream from the coast line but also from the small bridge across the River Naver. After some time, 5 **Goosander** were a good find but with some stubborn resistance and awkward views we just managed to get a view of them looking into the sun high up stream amongst some boulders, on an island in the river. Tongue and Eriboll was completely different as it required long distant views. We decided upon lunch at Tongue and split in to two sectors instead of the four we agreed was the best method. We were a little confused as the BTO still had the four forms for four sectors and it has been some four years since we had counted in that method. So we did the coastal sector of Tongue first. A pan along the shore identified a good 200+ sized group of **Barnacle Geese** but too distant to count even with scopes and a 'clicker' so we settled for a drive closer to the geese. As we drove up the road on the far side of the estuary we saw the obligatory ducks sp these being; **Red Breasted Merganser** 2 also **Mallard** and the usual waders including 26 **Lapwing**, 2 **Ringed Plover**, 37

Curlew, whereupon Alan turned up a real surprise as a single **Grey Plover** [the only one of the trip-by any Team] on the Northern side of the causeway in our Sector as we drove across the spit. 43 **Oystercatcher** were amongst the shallows and the occasional **Redshank**, no **Golden Plover** this year there which was a surprise, perhaps even they had moved on with the prolonged cold spell at Christmas.



The Sector Kyle of Tongue, Arde Skijnid to Tongue causeway had previously been a certainty for Divers, this year they were few and far between with no **Slavonian Grebe** either. On approaching The 'Barnies' we decided to pull over short and scan from the wagon. This was a great plan till the door opened and they took-off. Luckily they weren't too spooked and they landed two fields up the road and still in an open area to count with some confidence. The flock totalled 200 confirming our initial approximation, but they were just too far to check for any readable leg rings. Lunch was taken after we had tried a new approach to the southern Sector of Tongue. We chose to drive down the 'yellow' B-road off the usual beaten track but far enough to scope a little way down the river. This area is usually not very productive and proved barren again this year. We settled for a small turning area off the road and contemplated un-hitching the trailer and driving a little further down the metalled road that was single track with passing places. After some communal chat and agreement we scoped and decided against driving the 3 miles, opting to scope from here and back on the causeway. Time was moving on and we had Talmine, Port Vasgo, Midfield, Strathan, and Loch Eriboll and few further sites up near Durness. A fairly hasty brew and lunch snack at the causeway confirmed only a **Little Grebe**, **Grey Heron**, 'Oyke', and a mixture of **Gulls**; **Herring** and **Common**, completed the site. The weather at Eriboll was now seriously

poor and with inadequate viz surveying out of the question so we opted to push on and see if we could drive through it and tick the box as 'not covered site' – low count. Things did improve just over the small stone bridge at the head of the Loch. Along the western edge of the Loch in a small sheltered bay amongst three fishing boats we found our first **Slavonian Grebes** of the trip, two were happily diving just inshore from the large rectangular salmon pens. Alan was pleased as us as we needed a break with a couple of 'nice finds' for a change. Just south of Durness there are two offshore islands that have become regular feeding sites for **Barnacle Geese** but it is tricky to count the birds with any certainty as the islands are some way off shore. The birds apparently move between here and the roost site at Balnakeil Farm just north of the small town of Durness. From the lay-by on the A836, we scoped the first Island and agreed a total of 270 on Eilean Hoan. That was pretty much it for the day, the remainder could be done from the base at Faraid Head. Tom decided it was time to head up to the Range Hut for the usual introduction, inventory checks and 'take-over' the Range Hut accommodation facilities. This would also free up the Boss; Roberta Mckay and her two range wardens (Tony & Fiona) allowing them to go home once all the formalities were done. The drive across the shoreline, sandy beach and dunes was uneventful as the tide was out. Once safely at the hut we unpacked the trailer, weather forecast was for very, very strong winds. Unbeknown to us but Teams 1 and 3 were suffering too in the strong winds. Bad visibility was also affecting counts somewhat. We decided to move the trailer to a safer location down near the gated entrance to the DE facilities in a quarry. Here we loaded it up with boulders to prevent it blowing away! The Range Staff had their ISO Container and Gas bottles here safely out of the exposed facility up at the top of the hill. The next day was uneventful really and Tom and Kenny the boatman elected not to try the short ferry boat (well small tin tub really) crossing to the Cape Wrath area. The winds were just incredible and the short hop across was out the question. Even the ferryman was not willing to risk it. It is only a small metal craft and with just a single outboard engine. If you meet difficulties here, then there would be no emergency cover for some time. You would definitely need the life jackets.

Team 'Shortbread' (Team 1) were on track with their survey, although in a different order and route due to road closures, bad viz' and changes to the plans. But in essence the AO itinerary was pretty much on track. Team 2; Jim, Steve and Jerry were now at Dundonnell and ensconced with Gerry, Martin and Maggie. Jim, Steve and Jerry had decided for the Thursday that the Applecross and Loch Kishorn road was achievable and hopefully would be passable and they would go for it. Team 1 would head for Loch Annat, Torridon, Upper Loch Torridon and Diabeg. There was a huge caveat and all agreed that if the going got iffy' they would stop, play it safe and return to Base at Dundonnell. The two large vans were not the best in the high winds and driving was hellish. Things got worse and after Jim Jerry and Steve had made it to Loch Carron they were able to survey adequately both here and at sites along the shore line. Kishorn Village had good counts: 34 **Widgeon**, 30 Mallard, 13 **Common Teal**, 3 **Red-breasted Mergansers**, 79 **Oystercatcher**, 4 **Redshank**, 22 **Curlew** were certainly worth the long drive south of Dundonnell. They also mopped up Slumbay to Strome, Strome to Ardaneaskan, Loch Reraig, and Achintraid before the final site unbeknown at the time was Kishorn Bay. From here the road climbs very steeply to Sanachan to Tornapress. At the junction the road heads on up a B-road to Applecross single tracked and in poor and worsening snow conditions with very high winds. Jim was struggling with viz and very high winds which were now buffeting the van considerably. The lads were not happy, with nowhere to go in the 'white-out'. Up ahead the flashing ambers of a snow plough coming down off the hill alerted the lads to the need for some serious decision making. There was no way the two vehicles could pass and Jim had a serious matter of reversing in God-awful conditions some considerable distance back down the windy hill on just two rear view mirrors. The windows were opened to aid viz as the wagon glass inside steamed up. The driver came down from his plough and assisted the lads in reversing but just then, as they hatched the plan on where to reverse back to; to permit a passing place a huge gust took Jims favourite winter hat out off his head and out of the open van window never to be seen again in the blizzard that had now completely enclosed the vehicle. You must understand in those circumstances taking one hands off the wheel to hold ones' hat would have put three lives at risk, so the hat was history. Jim in his amusing way surmised that it would have been across on The Isle of Skye by now. The lads made it safely off the hill and headed back, along the A896 cancelling all hope for getting over the minor road 'The Pass of The Cattle' to Applecross. The decision was taken to call it a day.



The next turmoil to beset the team was further North. Our Team 3 areas were well on track albeit busy and a tad rushed. This may have explained the next foul-up. We had planned to head south to Dundonnell on the Thursday late afternoon, but still had 4-5 sites to complete. The main one being the dawn (post roost) count at Balnakeil Farm for the **Barnacle Geese** that amass here in the low lying marshland. Alongside the 'Barnies' other geese, wildfowl and waders accumulate in good totals. So before first light we were up at Oh Cripes early, cleaned up the Range Hut and set off (without the trailer, to return later for that). As we came off the top of the sand dunes looking down to the sea Tom, Alan and I were met with a rising tide and one which with hindsight we all should not have attempted. Anyway 'push-on-itis' was to get the better of the three of us in the poor light. Tom put the 4x4 in off road selection, engaged differential, and went for it. Sadly in the dark the water off the outlying farmland had cut deep into the sand and grooved gullies that were passable last evening were now 4-6 inches deep and full to. The tide was heading in fast. Tom set off driving to the left, nearer the dunes for hopefully better sand, less tide, away from the encroaching waves, but in softer conditions. He tried to ride a gully and there was a massive thud as we hit the next gully. The front wheels dug to a halt and the

bumper and the number plate sheared completely off completely. We did not know that at that point we were grounded. We had cleared one gully but the next was too soft and had got the better of the Terrano and we were beached – literally. The tide came ever nearer and after 30-45mins sat helpless in a closed car with the tide rolling in and seaweed strewn across the windscreen we just had to sit it out. We knew the wardens were due at 8 am but that was about 1½ hours away. So what else could we do but sit tight and hope the door seals held tight? Luckily the water only came up to just above the sills at 6-8 inches above the sand. Eventually the wardens appeared at the far end of the beach by the access gate. They used their bins to see us from their location some 800 meters away. Roberta, Tony and Fiona hastily turned their 4X4 pick-up van around and went back to Durness to get someone who could help us off the beach - the local JCB owner! We could not contact them by mobile and they knew we needed help sharpish. Billy (who owns the JCB) clears the dunes up to the range hut and maintains the road clear of sand where tarmac exists. The dunes move and shift all the time at Faraid Head and Billy is contracted by DE for the Military anyway. He was out some 20-30 mins after being alerted by the wardens. By that time the tide had turned receded considerably and he could get to us and hitch the rear of the Terrano up and out of the sand. A lesson to be had, for sure. This shows the ever changing conditions of the area and how easy you can be caught out. We offered to buy him a dram, something for his trouble, but he politely declined and in the usual way of Scottish hospitality thought nothing of it. We were certainly grateful. Once we were all safely back at Dundonnell it transpired Maggie had cast her crystal ball and predicted the Bay of Durness event before it had happened. She had seen the tide tables and predicted we would have difficulty getting off the dunes that day. We always need an early start and with hindsight it would have been best to walk in to count the geese. Something to remember for the next visit? All three teams were now wrapping up their survey areas. The weather had a part to play that day on Team 1. They had also to cancel their day's survey late in the afternoon, and turn-around at the top of Loch Torridon. The narrow and extremely high road to Diabeg was impassable. Torridon village was the last place possible to survey in high winds today.



Jerry scoping at Mellon Charles

John Wells

Free Day Spectacular. The last day was spent a ‘free day.’ Driving to Applecross was out of the question and the 3-4 sites at Inveralligin and Diabeg were not worth the fuel. So we had a joined-up survey of Roving Records from a few of the popular areas in Team 1 region. One spectacular day was spent around Loch Ewe and Aultbea. It was showery, but the wind had dropped considerably. It quickly became apparent the Divers were ‘inshore’ and in the bays of the larger lochs. It was obvious that Loch Ewe held some different totals than when surveyed earlier in the week. Loch Ewe-Aultbea held 4 **Slavonian Grebes** all close inshore near the pub. The weather blew in squally. The weather **MUST** have an impact in what we were witnessing. Further up the coast at our old haunt of the military site (ex SBS/Marine craft site) at Mellon Charles where we were met with an area of flat concrete bases instead of Nissen Huts. They had completely demolished the old Nissen Huts,

food hall, toilet blocks and taken away the pre-fab galley we used previously from 'Duck 01' the first ever Winter Duck. Jerry and I noticed one of the hiring caravans had a window ajar so we investigated and found the window badly twisted in the high winds. It was seriously damaged, and had blown open allowing damp to get inside to the soft furnishings, bedding and TV etc. We agreed to report it to HM NB Faslane CAF when back home. About 20mins later just after that scoping session on the slipway at MC we parked up and scoped the mirror calm Loch and we were amazed to see 34 **Black-throated Divers** in two separate feeding groups 'working' the inshore areas feeding in coordinated parties all submerging and fishing together whilst all rising to the surface together - just splendid. That was not all, as we saw 24 **Great Northern Divers** as well. They were mostly singles or up to parties of 3-4. They stood out terrifically across the Loch and were easily identified in the light as it was close on perfect counting conditions. Why could the rest of the week not have been like this?

23 **Eider**, 16 **Shag** and 5 **Slavonian Grebes** were peak totals. At Gruinard Bay on the way back we had another good count; 13 **Great Northern Divers**, 3 **Slavonian Grebe** and 130 **Barnacle Geese** in the fields. Sadly no **White-tailed Eagle** for the T2/T3 guys today, but Team 1 had seen one here at Gruinard Island on the 30th Jan. All in all we had a good evening. After some packing, a recycling 'Faff' and waste transferral in and out of the Hall, we had the place looking ship-shape and Bristol fashion. Tom had headed back to Elgin on the Thursday as he had prior arrangements to collect his daughter for half-term. It was a shame he missed the free day and the spectacle that befell us to round off a terrific week. On the drive south we both (both wagons) had a trouble-free journey thankfully. We started well with a **Short-eared Owl** just as we drove through the pass of Dundonnell. Stevie calling it, as the headlights caught the bird. Later that day on the drive south from Inverness our Team East had a nice view of a **Golden Eagle** soaring on an updraft high in the Monliath mountains whilst running through the Glen of Dalwhinnie in all its majesty.



Ten years of survey effort had been completed and we were well pleased with our efforts.

Summary. In summary the three teams (9 members) had completed: **211** (203 in Report to Committee) WeBS Survey Forms – [Single Visit Core-Count Forms].

29 Existing sites not visited (bad weather/road access/incorrectly mapped-off our now set routes).

7 New sites were added-not previously recorded.

589 Roving Records [for the 2007-11 Atlas]

1370 'Survey Miles [approx] had been driven by the three vehicles

£1,015.77 had been spent on fuel (alone) for the survey.

Same again next year? Costs may be prohibitive, sponsorship will be a must but can we afford not to when a party of keen members want/wish to do it and The BTO wants/need us to continue?

EAST COAST PATROL 1972

John Stewart-Smith

December 1971 was a busy month, operationally, in the Middle East. There was general unrest in the Emirates. On the second day of December the British government formally renounced its special treaty relationship with the Trucial States, its responsibility for defence against external aggression and its representation of the overseas interests of the States. This unilateral scrapping of the Trucial States Treaty by Britain shocked the Arabs and reflected poorly on "the word of an Englishman." The expression, "the word of an Englishman" had previously been used by the Arabs of the Trucial States as the ultimate guarantee of integrity. The Labour government in Britain was apparently more interested in socialist doctrine than integrity.

Iran stepped into the power vacuum on the 6th December by occupying the Thumb Islands off the Northern Emirates. They claimed these islands belonged to them. The only causality reported on our side was a policeman who literally shot himself in the foot.

I flew solo photographic reconnaissance sorties in a Hunter F76A fighter over the occupied islands on 9th, 10th and 11th December. These flights were at very low level and maximum welly, flashing across the occupied islands with all cameras running. I had one fleeting glimpse of a parked C-130 Hercules and heard the high scream from a missile radar which tracked me for a few seconds. The films from my Vinten cameras were rushed off for processing, but whatever was recorded on the films was too secret for me to be allowed to see.

After these few exciting days I set off for England to be with my wife who had gone ahead for the birth of our son, expected just before Christmas. It had been decided by the local doctors that the medical facilities available in Abu Dhabi at that time were, perhaps, not suitable for a first delivery and that the birth should take place in the United Kingdom.

Ross was born at Peterborough on 19th December. I was dressed up in a full outfit of green kit for the actual birth and was holding Ross in my arms to show him to his mother when I realised that Jeni didn't recognise me because she was not wearing her glasses. My other abiding memory of that hospital is of the baby girl born to a lady with the unusual surname of Harbour. The Harbours named their new daughter Pearl --- and her father's name was Sidney!

As soon as I returned from England to Abu Dhabi in the first week in January I was told that I was to join a flag-waving expedition to visit the other Emirates. My job was to control and co-ordinate the fighter aircraft during the patrol and to arrange any airborne resupply we needed. The apparent aim was to enthuse the Rulers of the other Emirates about the concept of the proposed United Arab Emirates. As this was a rare opportunity for me to spend a few weeks on the ground in ornithologically unexplored country I made sure that my cameras, binoculars and a good supply of film went into my rucksack with my socks and underpants.

I packed three 35mm cameras, two Pentax and a Minolta, as well as a selection of standard and telephoto lenses. I found the Rokkor lenses of the Minolta gave superb resolution and used the Minolta mainly for close-up pictures of plants and insects. The Pentax were lighter and quieter, so I used them for most of my bird pictures. I seldom used any film other than 64ASA Kodachrome. Faster films were becoming available but were unnecessary in the usually brilliant light of Arabia.

I had missed the start of this expedition by being on leave in England for the birth of my fourth son. The Army chaps had set off with their armoured Saladins and Saracens and their Land Rovers to Al Ain and the Buraimi Oasis. I took off in a Caribou transport aircraft to join them at Buraimi, but found that they had already moved northward towards Manama. I collected some stores from the fort at Al Ain, clambered back into the Caribou, and headed for the stony desert landing strip at Manama. We landed there to find the place deserted, except for a few wandering goats. The crew of the Caribou helped me to unload my kit onto the gravel desert and then informed me that they were off back to Abu Dhabi for tea. I was sitting beside my belongings watching the Caribou prepare for takeoff and wondering if I could assemble a radio to contact the army people who were supposed to meet me when a plume of dust above the surrounding scrub announced the arrival of a Land Rover with two grinning soldiers on board.



DeHavilland Canada Caribou

John Stewart-Smith

They introduced themselves as my driver Suliman and my signaller Umran, and assured me that they would take good care of their Major John. The top Air Force rank was Lt.Col. so my recent promotion got me one step nearer the top chair. There was just enough space in and around the Land Rover for the extra kit I had brought. We set off, with my headdress flapping in the wind until I retied it in the Omani fashion, which earned a nod of approval from Suliman. The vehicle was well equipped with two A43 VHF/UHF radio sets and two HF Comcal sets for long-range work. A thicket of aerials swayed above the vehicle as we dodged the thorn trees and made our way across the desert plain into the hills towards Masafi -- all very "Beau Geste"!

We entered the bare, rocky foothills by driving up the very rough dried river bed of the Wadi Safi. The whole Land Rover exhaust system soon clattered off amongst the boulders and the unconfined roar of our engine reverberated around the hills. As we bounced from boulder to boulder I shouted to Suliman that we were lucky the whole car hadn't fallen apart, never mind the exhaust. He shouted, "Never mind the exhaust, yes sir!" Then he pointed towards the remains of another Landover that had taken an excursion over the edge of the wadi and rolled itself into an untidy ball of scrap metal.

We finally drew up to a flattish piece of land close to the TOS (Trucial Oman Scouts) camp at Masafi. I met the rest of our patrol where they had set up camp for the night. My tent, canvas chair, washstand and camp bed had been erected by Umran by the time I had finished chatting to the others. The sun set in the usual Arabian rush and I blundered around my tent looking for some form of lighting. Umran had just asked me if I would prefer an egg and tomato omelette or plain egg omelette for supper. We were discussing the source and likely age of the eggs when a very smart soldier in the grey uniform of the Trucial Oman Scouts appeared out of the gloom and invited me to join the CO of the TOS at Masafi Camp for dinner.

Suliman, Umran and I walked to Masafi Camp with our newfound friend. As I left them by the Officers' Mess I told Suliman and Umran that I would see them in the morning, God willing. They grinned and said that God was good, and vanished into the dark, hand in hand. There is nothing necessarily sexual in the Arab male habit of holding hands with friends; it is just an unsophisticated expression of friendship.

The TOS Commanding Officer, Major John Girelli, was a very pleasant host at dinner. Instead of eating dubious eggs off my knees at my own tent I sat to table surrounded by Mess silver, good food and relaxed conversation. We retired to overstuffed armchairs to be served with drinks and to put the world to rights. I filled my pipe with

Condor and had a large whisky at my elbow. As the evening progressed I discovered that John had his own way of calling a servant for more drinks. Instead of using the tinkle of a small bell on a nearby table, he drew a revolver from behind his chair cushion and took a shot at a row of battered Arabic coffee pots standing on shelves around the room. The roar of the gun and the clatter of the brass coffee pot hitting the floor brought another tray of drinks, served by a slightly nervous looking waiter. The battered coffee pots and the well-ventilated state of the mess walls and ceiling showed that this was a fairly routine procedure.

I slept the night in my armchair and woke early, just before dawn. All was quiet, and there was no sign of my host, so I wandered around the garden outside. I saw my first unrecognised bird of the patrol. I knew that it was a sunbird, but I could not recognise the species. The plumage was mainly grey and black, with a pale yellowish wash on the chest. It had a long black sickle bill and a nervous "tsee-tsee" call. I'd be pretty nervous myself, living just outside the thin walls of the Trucial Oman Scouts Officers' Mess at Masafi.



male Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*)

John Stewart-Smith

I later found that this bird was a male Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*) in non-breeding plumage. It was darting busily around a *ghaf* tree that is a kind of acacia with monster thorns. I could not see what it was collecting for breakfast. It took me quite a while to realise that the male of this species changes his plumage quite dramatically in the breeding season, and that the two very different plumages did not belong to two distinct species.

We had a quiet morning around our own camp area. Suliman and Umran gave a few sheepish grins as they went carefully about their business, so I supposed I was not the only one to have misbehaved.

In the afternoon I was persuaded to fire a 7.62 mm automatic rifle in a "falling plate" competition arranged between the Abu Dhabi forces and the TOS. I surprised our soldiers by hitting the targets rapidly and regularly. Umran said he didn't know that pilots could shoot guns. The noise of shooting was bad enough for my sore head, but the running about nearly killed me.

Later I drove off alone along the border and looked for birds. I saw Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*) and Pied Wheatears (*Oenanthe pleschanka*), Desert Larks (*Ammomanes deserti*) and a few Palm Doves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) but none were stalked for close photographs. The shooting competition had not done anything to cure the feeling of having a head full of cotton wool. I was surprised not to see any Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) around the village and camp at Masafi. There probably wasn't enough waste to interest a vulture. These mountain people, the *jebeli*, certainly did not seem to have anything spare to throw away. . The soldiers decided that the wings on my uniform and my interest in birds meant that I was "Father of the Birds," and so I was known thereafter.

Later, I realised that Masafi was just about on the northern edge of the Egyptian Vulture's range whereas they were quite common around Al Ain. They bred in some numbers on Jebel Hafit, the large whale-backed

mountain just south of Al Ain. The western slopes of Jebel Hafit also proved to be an excellent place for finding interesting fossils.

Next day our patrol meandered down the Wadi Ham into the state of Fujayrah. The gravel track was pretty rough but there was some sporadic road making and even some bridge building going on. There were isolated pools of water standing in some of the bends of the wadi. The whole countryside was noticeably greener once we had crested the divide and begun our descent towards the shores of the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula. This side of the mountains has a fairly regular annual rainfall each monsoon season, not quite as regular as occurs further south. I did not visualise that one day there would be a multilane highway down this same wadi, allowing tourists to drive from Dubai to Fujayrah in a matter of hours instead of the days it was taking us.

The town of Fujayrah was a small, peaceful place built on the level ground between the towering Hajar mountains and the beach, which extended for miles in both directions. The water of the Arabian Sea was smooth and deepest blue. The lovely old fort was still the home of the Ruler, Sheikh Mohammed as-Sharqi. The walls of the fort had a few old shell holes in them, reminders of some previous visit from a peacekeeping frigate of the Royal Navy. The Ruler was having a new, modern style, palace built nearby but the old fort was to be preserved. The scattered houses were mostly washed in shades of white and pink, seeming to magnify the reflected glare of the sun.



Fort on the way to Fujayrah

John Stewart-Smith

We drove our convoy of military vehicles to the Fujayrah airstrip and pitched our tents at its edge, halfway between the date gardens and the beach. The airstrip was an ill-defined patch of gravelly sand. The terminal building was a large, spreading thorn tree that provided shade for potential passengers and living space for a pair of small owls. The owls departed as we arrived. The great mass of bare mountains made an impressive backdrop to our camp by the sea. Suliman and Umran made it politely clear that I would be better employed elsewhere while they arranged our home for the coming few days. I took a camera with a long lens, and my binoculars, to explore the edges of the village of Fujayrah by tramping through the date gardens.

The first interesting birds seen were Little Green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*). These very pretty little birds were hawking for insects, each bird operating from a favourite perch. A catch was brought back to the perch, wiped carefully on the branch and swallowed quickly. The birds then searched the sky with rapid head movements before launching themselves for another airborne capture. The birds around Fujayrah were of the cyanophrys race, with much more blue about the chin and throat than other Little Green Bee-eaters I had seen

elsewhere. I spent time taking close-up pictures of these lovely birds, without them showing the slightest interest as I crept closer and closer to their perches.



Little Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis cyanophrys*)

John Stewart-Smith

There was a large population of House Crows (*Corvus splendens*) around the village. My field notes on this species, new to me, record that my first impression was of a sort of small raven/hooded crow. This attractive bird, rather noisy, was a skilful and buoyant flier but the least tame of all the birds seen in the area. I tried to take pictures of the House Crows but they were far too wary to allow close approach. They seemed to pass their concern on to others of their race as I tried to stalk them in the date palms. Perhaps they mistook my camera for a gun or were just wary of strangers. I was soon surrounded by a wary and noisy group of crows which were not at all convinced by my attempts at looking innocently about the palms and ignoring them. I gave up, and wandered away from the House Crow territory, followed by the sound of their mockery.

Palm Doves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) and Rock Doves (*Columba livia*) were common all around Fujayrah. Apparently, the Palm Doves were of the *cambayensis* race, but I did not discover this fact until several years later. I was walking through an open space when I saw an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) flying directly out to sea, flapping in a laboured manner. I wondered where it was bound, heading directly eastwards away from the coastline.



I was startled to see a brilliant Roller as soon as I entered the next patch of trees. I knew it was very unlikely to be a Common Roller (*Coracias garrulus*) because I had assumed that they were only passage migrants through Arabia, not to be seen in January. This bird looked too highly coloured, with too much blue, to be an Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*). The bird settled quite close to me and I took pictures, at the same time recognising it as an Indian Roller that just happened to have particularly brilliant light and dark blue wings which had flashed in the sunlight and misled me on first sight.

I had walked around in a circle and was close to our camp site once more. I went there to borrow the Landover to explore a little further into the many narrow valleys that run from the coastal plain into the sun-baked and rocky mountains. As soon as I got into the first valley I saw Desert Larks (*Ammomanes deserti*), which were numerous and very tame. I stopped the Landover and took picture while sitting in the vehicle. There were a few wheatears around which I took to be winter visiting Desert Wheatears (*Oenanthe deserti*) because of their all-black tails. I was distracted by a more interesting bird when I spotted a dispersed group of Black-crowned Finch Larks (*Eremopterix nigriceps*) feeding among patches of grass. The male birds, with their black and white heads and black bellies are very easy to spot unless they are in broken shadow under bushes. The females are a very cryptic sandy colour and are often invisible until they take to the air and show their black underwings. I have spent a good few hours searching carefully on the desert sands for the nests of this little lark, without any success. When I mentioned this failure to an eminent ornithologist I was told that nobody had described a nest or the eggs of this bird -- but I expect this gap in knowledge has been filled by now. I was also told that I was probably the first person to produce coloured pictures taken in the wild of this species. These birds have the peculiar ability to appear in quite large flocks and, just as suddenly, apparently disappear into the open desert.

There was no obvious alternative track to take me back to camp so I drove onto the firm beach, which stretched to the horizon, and followed the coast back towards Fujayrah. There were crowds of Slenderbilled Gulls (*Larus genei*) and Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) roosting on the beach. There were also many different waders along the shore but the sun was falling rapidly towards the mountains and the shadows were racing across the plain towards the beach, so I didn't stop for a closer look. Time had escaped once again.

I arrived back at my tent to be welcomed with an excellent meal of stew followed by a LARGE whisky and water. I told myself that it was necessary to have whisky in generous measure because we were not sure of the quality of the water. A few minutes talking about my discoveries of the day, and then I climbed into my sleeping bag, tired, tanned and delighted at a wonderful chance to explore an area which had been previously inaccessible to me. I fell asleep without even having time to wonder what had gone into that delicious stew.

Next morning I discovered that the plan for the day did not involve any Air Force participation. My duties were completed after I had spoken by HF to our Operations Room in Abu Dhabi, reported that all was well and ordered a resupply of whisky and film on the next flight to Fujayrah. That left me with a full day to continue my exploration of the East Coast with Landover and camera.

I had learnt that there was no track parallel to the beach. Why would anyone need a track when the beach itself was firm and usually perfectly passable? If the tide covered the beach then one was required to be patient until the tide went out again. I set off southwards to Khor Kalba, planning to look at the extensive mangroves that I had seen from the air.



Main road from Fujayrah

John Stewart-Smith



Khor Kalba mangroves from the air 1971

John Stewart-Smith

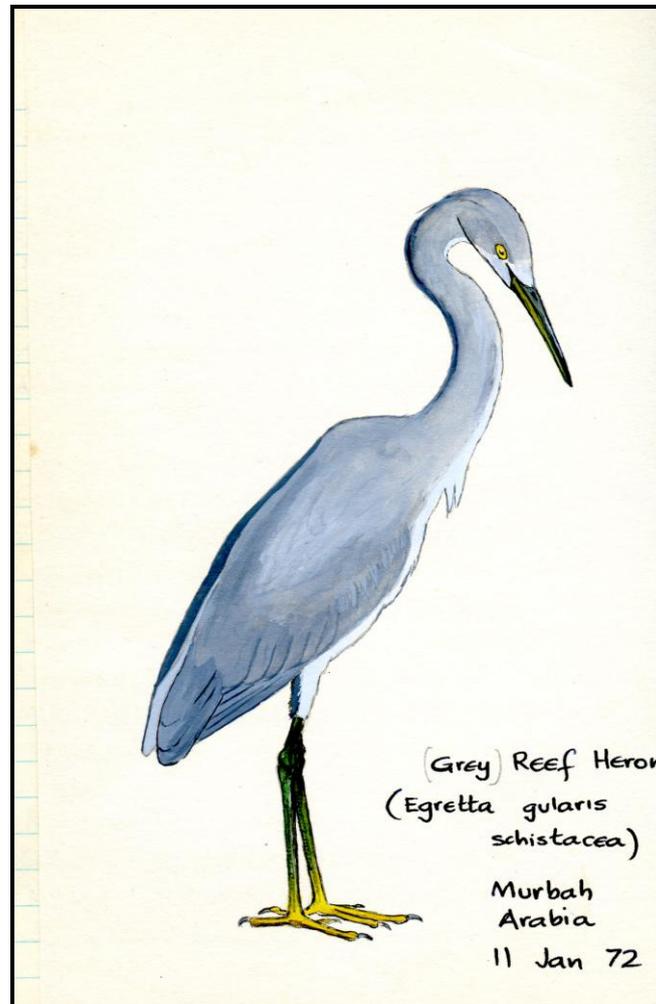
A young man of Fujayrah had looked through the pictures in my bird handbook and told me that there were "different" kingfishers, unlike the ones in my book, in the mangroves. He said they lived in small numbers in the mangroves to the south of Kalba. When I arrived at Kalba there was no easy way to travel further along the shoreline because of a shallow sea inlet. The mangroves were close, but unreachable. There were many Indian Rollers at Kalba and one Great Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) in the trees. I decided to reverse my direction and visit the village of Saqamqam, just to the north beyond Fujayrah. Perhaps I would have a later opportunity to return and discover what kind of "different" kingfishers lived in the mangroves. In fact the young man of Fujayrah was correct about a "different" kingfisher. Years later an isolated colony of resident White-collared Kingfishers (*Halcyon chloris*) of a local sub-species was confirmed exactly where he said they were. These endangered kingfishers apparently live mainly on crabs caught in the shrinking area of tidal mangroves.

I drove along the dusty track close to the village of Saqamqam and parked at the edge, not wishing to drive in without an invitation. Residents were soon on the scene and I had a hearty welcome from the gathered group of people, which seemed to include all the ladies and children of the village. They showed me around while I talked with several families who were very interested in all the local gossip about just why the soldiers were in their part of the country. They asked if the Persians were going to attack them. I assured them that the Persians were our friends and would not attack anyone. I explained that I was going to visit the Ruler, but he was away from his fort at present. I was told that he had been called away to Dubai, but was expected back in a few days, God willing. I talked with one young boy who spoke excellent English that he was learning at the local school. I admitted to him that I had never met the Ruler and didn't know how to recognise him. It was a hazard meeting an unrecognised dignitary because, except on very formal occasions, all the men dressed in the same plain white clothing. I had visions of getting my meeting off to a bad start by offering my first greetings to a casual bystander instead of to the Ruler. I asked the English-speaking lad how I could recognise the Ruler when I met His Excellency. The boy said it was easy. "The Sheikh, he look just like, how you say, Christmas Father." He was exactly right. I met "Christmas Father" a few days later, and a charming gentleman he was, too.

I wanted to get on with my bird watching around Saqamqam. I was pressed to join a group of the people who were gathering at the centre of the village with coffee, sherbet, dates and oranges for an impromptu picnic. I met the village Waali. Each village had a headman, or waali, who seemed to be elected in some mysterious way and kept the job so long as he behaved himself and served his people fairly. We sat together, drinking small cups of tangy coffee and eating the locally grown dates. I complimented them on the excellent flavour of the dates, but they, with Arab modesty, said they were perhaps not too bad but they were rather spoilt by the saltiness of the water so close to the sea. I've never tasted better dates than those grown at Saqamqam. Having had my polite share of their coffee and my fill of their lovely dates I was offered a dish of the big juicy oranges grown along this coast. I did not want to outstay my welcome, and wanted to get on with some bird watching, so I declined the oranges and said I was full to the gills. We parted in friendship. I drove away from the immediate area, parked the Landover and set off on foot. I saw two tiny warblers/flycatchers that I could not recognise immediately, and then realised that I was being watched by at least two people hiding in some cover.

Rather than cause the local people any concern about just what I was doing I got back into the Landover and drove away to the shoreline.

The beach provided a great selection of waders and gulls. There were Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Greenshank (*Tringa nebularis*), Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*), Slenderbilled Gulls (*Larus genei*), Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*), one immature and seven adult Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*) and a solitary Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). Further along the beach were both white and grey morphs of the Western Reef Heron (*Egretta gularis*). I took some very close pictures of one of the Reef Herons and used them as references for a painting when I returned to Abu Dhabi.



I left the firm sand of the beach and risked the softer dry sand of the foreshore. I saw Desert Larks, House Crows, Black-crowned Finch Larks and then a few swifts hawking around at low level near a rocky outcrop. I watched them carefully through my binoculars and decided that they were Pallid Swifts (*Apus pallidus*). My guess was proved correct many years later when Pallid Swifts were found breeding at just that spot. I find it difficult to be certain that one bird is paler or one inch shorter or longer than a similar species when there is only one bird species to look at in the air. I have made some grossly incorrect estimates of the size of an unrecognised bird when that bird is first seen in a virtually empty landscape, with nothing to provide an immediate size comparison.

On arrival back at my tent I was greeted with two bits of good news. Tomorrow was another free day, and a special delivery of whisky had arrived by air for me while I was away. We gathered together in my tent, which had suddenly become the Officers' Mess where officers and their guests were permitted to drink, for a formal sampling of the new whisky, which was of course purely medicinal and necessary to purify the water. (Allah be praised.)

Next morning I was off, bright and early, in a fully fuelled Landover. I drove northwards along the beach past Qurayyah, Murbah, Qidfa and into Khor Fakkan. The mountains came right down to the seashore near Murbah. There was a track slightly inland to take me onwards to Khor Fakkan and then on to Hiyawa and Luluiyah,

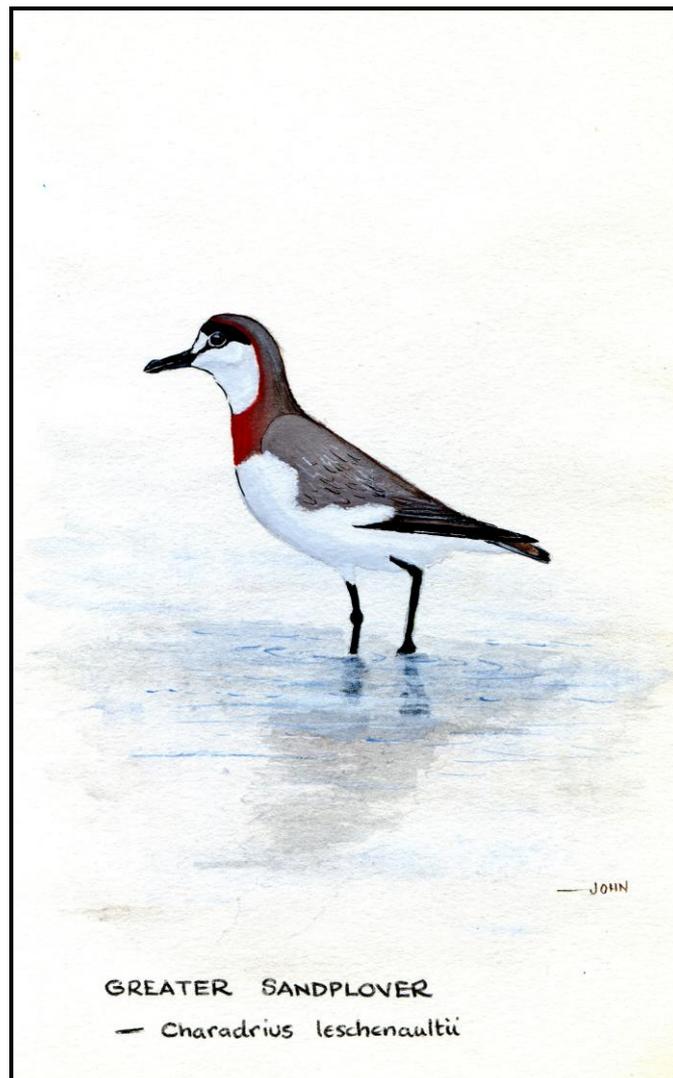
before returning to Fujayrah as the sun set. This was a thoroughly wonderful day spent bird watching and taking pictures. I saw no less than five species new to me and took pictures of thirty-one different bird species.

I had driven less than a mile at the start of the day and was taking pictures of Slenderbilled Gulls in the air above the Landover when I spotted a Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) sitting on the sea, close inshore, and watching me. There he was, all alone on the Arabian Sea. His tiny bill and stumpy end showed as he dived several times. This was the first live Little Grebe I had seen in Arabia, although I had picked up a dead one at Abu Dhabi several months earlier. I took a few pictures but was beginning to think that I would need to conserve my stock of films. Calling for another airborne resupply of 35mm Kodachrome film might cause questions to be asked back at headquarters.

I drove on with the big lens and shoulder stock on the camera. Three Stone Curlews (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) were at the edge of the beach. They are supposed to be common in Arabia, but this was only the second time I had seen them. These three birds were very tame and I walked right up to them before they flew a short way and provided me with a few flying pictures.

There were Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) wandering along the beach beside the Landover, but I was beginning to be less certain that all of these birds were really Lesser Black-backed Gulls. I am certain that there is a fair amount of confusion, at least in my mind, about the various gulls to be seen in the Emirates. I don't think that anyone has yet studied these gulls carefully enough.

Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*) dashed and flittered ahead of the Landover, almost as if giving half-hearted distraction displays. Three Greater Sandplover (*Charadrius leschenaultii*) dashed about, unused to Landrovers on the beach. They shouldn't have been here in January, but perhaps they don't read the books about birds.



I had been trying to learn some of the local Arabic names for the birds of this region but found that there was great variation in names, even over a very small area. I suspect that some of my informants invented a name on the spot rather than admit they didn't know the name of a particular bird I pointed out. One day when I was up in the Hajar Mountains and was flickering through a field guide to show a picture to one of the local residents, he stopped the pages of the book and assured me that THAT bird lived just over the other side of THAT mountain. The picture he was pointing to was of a Golden Pheasant! I was about to politely change the subject when he said, "Oh yes. It's called tawoos." As tawoos is apparently a local Arabic name for pheasant, he now had my attention. Perhaps he had seen a picture of a pheasant somewhere or other --- or perhaps there are pheasants in one of the wooded valleys in the Hajar Mountains, but I doubt it!

I continued my drive along the beach, towards Murbah, watching several Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*) fishing offshore. They were accompanied by one immature bird that was keeping up a raucous begging call and being avoided by the mature birds as they tried to concentrate on their fishing.

Murbah was a small fishing village, close to the beach, with a large date garden between the houses and the sea. A boat, being rowed by ten men, was paralleling the shore. Their boat had beautiful slim lines. The oars were very crudely made and the men propelled their craft by sitting with their backs to the gunwale, pushing on the paddles. They moved through the water well enough, even if they appeared to my foreign eyes to be doing it all backwards. A little further along a totally different kind of boat approaching the beach. This was a very basic, two-man job, made of bundles of palm fronds lashed together so that each end of the boat had an upcurved point where the fronds tapered together. It looked as if it was designed by the same chap who designed the reed boats of Lake Titicaca, some 8000 miles away in the Bolivian/Peruvian Andes of South America.

The two men rode astride their unstable looking vessel, legs dangling in the sea, as they paddled towards me. Perched in front of them was a huge semi-spherical fish trap made from wire netting. They dismounted in the shallows and unloaded their catch. They had various kinds of snappers, parrot fish, red mullet and several fish they called camel fish. I had never seen the camel fish before. It was a small, solid looking, angular fish which appeared to have a pale greyish shell on the outside of its body. It looked like a bony box with tail and fins poking through holes in the box. The boat was quite well waterlogged and there was much more of it below the surface than I had noticed at first. I asked them if they were afraid of sharks, with their legs dangling in the water as they moved along. They looked at me seriously, and said, "Yes." That was the end of that topic of conversation. I tried not to ask any more stupid questions.

I heard one of the radios in the Landover chattering to itself, so I went back to the vehicle to see if somebody was calling me. It was an airliner, far out of sound and sight, asking somebody else to call Bahrain. Another world still existed. I spent a few minutes fixing my position at 25 degrees 17 minutes North and 56 degrees 22 minutes East, and wondered if that was close to my actual position, on the beach beside Murbah.

I continued to talk with the fishermen as they arranged their catch. I asked permission to go into the date gardens beside the village and they both seemed pleased and surprised that I wanted to do so. An old chap arrived on the scene just in time to be detailed as my guide, to look after me. I explained that I wanted to look at the birds and take pictures. This obviously struck all three as a very strange occupation, but they were delighted with the performance of my binoculars and the big telephoto lens on the camera. They had thought the camera was some sort of new-fangled gun, but were convinced when they couldn't find a hole for the bullet to escape. They had a good laugh and then got on with their work, leaving the old chap and me to wander into the trees.

Dozens of very tame Little Green Bee-eaters were feeding amongst the beached fishing boats and along the thorn fences by the date palms. I got some very close pictures. The old chap watched me stalking closer and closer to the birds but, as usual, I ignored the passage of time and tried the old chap's patience to breaking point. I was focussing on a Yellow-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), after a careful stalk to close range, when my guide snapped, "Huh! Barba", and kicked a tin into the bushes. The bulbul dashed into cover, but I added another local bird name to my list -- I think. The old gentleman and I shook hands carefully, wished each other "Go with God" and parted. He went to the village and I went back to the bee-eaters, *beemantu* to my pal the bulbul scarer.

I met the two fishermen again, just as an Indian Roller flew past. When I asked them what that bird was called they told me its local name was *dhadhadh*. This convinced me not to bother too much with the local names as another local had told me only a few days previously that a Hoopoe was called *dhadhadh*. I continued to write the local names into my notebooks as I collected the names, but I have never tried to use them.

There were House Sparrows all around the village and I assumed that these were *Passer domesticus indicus* without paying too much attention to them. I was to learn to pay more attention to the sparrows in this part of Arabia because there are sometime rarities amongst them. A couple of White Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) strode beside a little runnel but they were also ignored as a solitary Richard's Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*) appeared from nowhere. I got a good look at this long-legged, upright pipit but as soon as I tried to pick up my camera instead of my binoculars the pipit was off, another picture missed. A picture of a Desert Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca minula*) made up for the missed pipit.

I decided that I had better continue my journey towards Khor Fakkan if I planned to get back to camp that day. The Landover stood on the beach with all the valuable equipment, totally safe. Theft was virtually unknown in those days and the only time I have ever had anything stolen in Arabia was when I lost a camera -- to a fellow expatriate.

I had been careful to cover the steering wheel and the seat of the Landover before leaving it in the sun. This prevents welding your skin to the vehicle after it has had a good soaking in the heat.

Pallid Swifts, House Crows and Palm Doves flew around as I started the Landover and left the beach for the inland track to Qidfa and into the narrow rocky pass that leads to Khor Fakkan. The two fishermen stood watching as I drove off, no doubt having their own opinions about the strange fellow who took pictures of birds.

Khor Fakkan was, in those days, a very attractive and unspoilt old seaport. Work had just begun on constructing a stone breakwater. I parked the Landover right on the front and met the local TOS major. He was a charming man who had lived near Khor Fakkan for some 14 years and become pretty well integrated into the local community. He owned land nearby where he grew vegetables and raised grapefruit, oranges, limes and lemons in the extensive gardens stretching from his small house to the rocky seashore. He seemed perfectly at ease and I could understand his contentment in such a beautiful place.

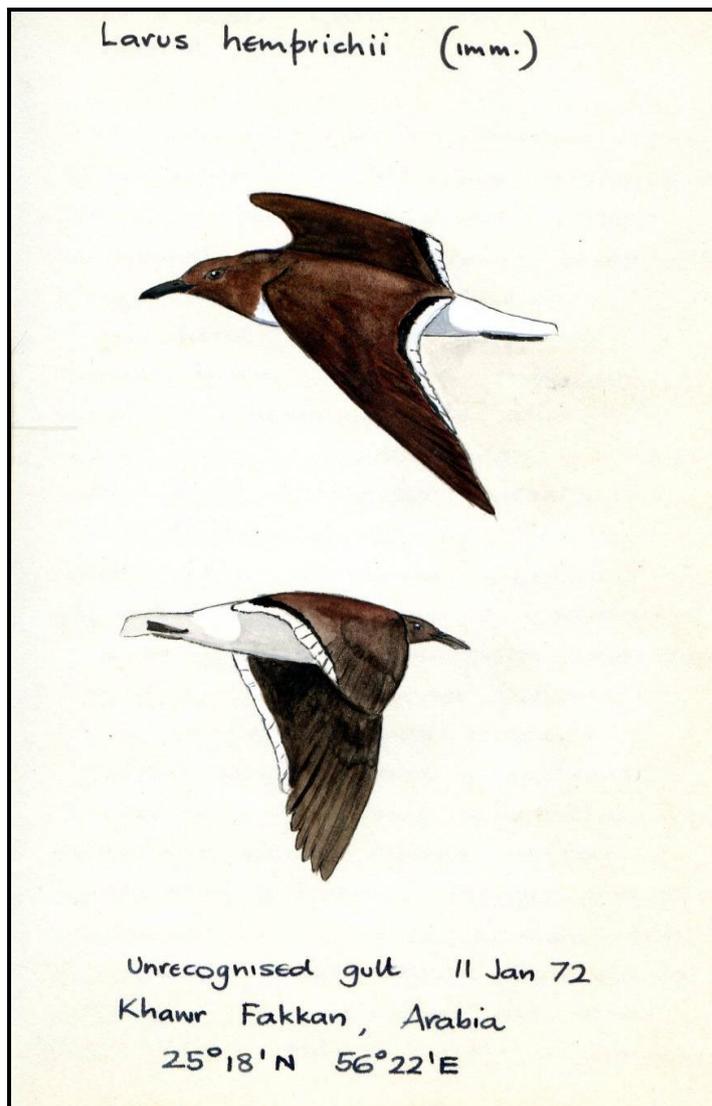
The deep green of the leaves of the citrus trees, the brilliant orange-yellow of the big grapefruit and the sea of a thousand different blues left me with a lasting impression of a blaze of colours. The moist shade under the trees was fed by an ancient single-cylinder diesel pump that puffed quietly to itself and slurped regular rations of underground water to the surface. I can still hear the moist put-put sound of water pumping to the citrus groves of my memory.

I was honoured to be invited to have a meal in the modern meeting-house at the centre of Khor Fakkan. I enjoyed meeting several of the local dignitaries as we ate together in the cool shade. Nobody asked me what I was doing in their part of the country, but I was sure that everyone there knew everything possible about me long before I had driven through the narrow pass into Khor Fakkan. Secrets are few in Arabia.

After we had finished our meal and made polite conversation I went off to visit the TOS major's house and was surprised to find that he had his niece there, visiting from England. They showed me around their gardens and I admired the huge grapefruit hanging from the trees. It seemed odd that there was an apparent abundance of citrus fruit grown along the coast of Fujayrah while all the fruit on sale in Abu Dhabi came from as far away as Europe and Australia.

I said goodbye to my hosts in their cool, quiet house by the sea and returned to the harbour at Khor Fakkan. What a wonderful selection of birds there were to be seen there! Kingfishers, Whiskered Terns, Caspian Terns, Slender-billed Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gulls were in abundance in and around the harbour area. Then I saw another new bird that caused me some confusion.

My notes and sketches recorded a chocolate brown gull halfway in size between a Common Gull and a Herring Gull (wrong!) that flew like a Herring Gull. It had a noticeable white trailing edge to the wings, a white belly and a white collar. The tail was all white. I got good pictures of this gull that I had never seen before, so I hoped to be able to recognise it eventually. This bird turned out to be Hemprich's Gull (*Larus hemprichii*) and to be a common breeding resident of the Emirates.



A group of small boys were leaning over the edge of the jetty, obviously fishing. When I went to watch them I found that they were trying to catch Slender-billed Gulls, using pieces of bread attached to fishing hooks on the end of lengths of nylon line. The boys said that the birds were good to eat. I thought about it for a while and concluded that there was no real difference in catching fish to eat or catching gulls to eat. Anyway, I was a guest in Arabia and felt sure that I'd be asked as soon as anyone felt in need of my opinion.

I went through a public garden that had a good profusion of trees, shrubs and shade. There were several little brown jobs flitting around in the branches. I just didn't have enough time to sit and watch for them to present themselves for photographs. I recognised a Booted Warbler (*Hippolais caligata*) and a Graceful Prinia (*Prinia gracilis*) but the only picture I took in that garden was of a beautiful brown and white speckled butterfly.

I had delayed so long that it was beginning to look as if I would not make it back to Fujayrah before dark. I sometimes found it hard enough to follow a track in daylight and had no intention of blundering down a mountainside in the dark. I set off from Khor Fakkan in a determined manner; determined not to be diverted by bird watching on the way to my tent. I reached the beach by Murbah without stopping, leaving a high trail of fine dust in the air above the inland track. I paid little attention to the Stone Curlews, herons and waders as I applied maximum welly to the Landover and sped along the ultra-smooth wet sand. I was back in my tent soon after dark, listening to Curlew calling to each other as they flew overhead in the calm evening sky.

Next morning, Suliman woke me with a mug of hot and very sweet tea, clutching a perforated tin of condensed milk in one hand, ready to add more to the already thick brew. I hadn't told him that I prefer my tea without sugar. Arabic tea is always sweet. Umran appeared with our breakfast of eggs and tomatoes and the three of us sat outside my tent as the sun rose out of the Arabian Sea and painted the hills behind us in diluting shades of gold.

A bird called from the date palms, sounding like a mixture between a woodpecker and a blackbird. Suliman said it was called *sufraet* but couldn't find anything he recognised as a *sufraet* in my handbook. I had no idea what it was. We had just finished our breakfast when a soldier arrived by my tent, carrying a zinc bucket. He stood to attention as we exchanged greetings, but had a bigger than usual grin on his face. Arabs are great practical jokers, so I suspected that the soldiers had been planning something for my benefit and had visions of being invited to perform my morning ablutions in the bucket.

He brought the bucket closer and showed me that it contained an agitated black hedgehog! It was very much alive and scabbled about in the bucket, attempting to get out. It had a huge tick behind one ear, but was otherwise apparently fit and well. I took it from the bucket, carefully removed the tick with my lighter, and took a few pictures of the hedgehog. I had no idea that hedgehogs existed in Arabia and had never seen one with such long ears. I said that the animal was now perfectly fit for duty, and let it go. The hedgehog dashed off, on its toes, and vanished into the scrub. This sight so amused the Arabs that they were almost helpless with laughter. "Fit for duty" became the greeting passed from mouth to mouth for the rest of the day, each time producing undiminished mirth amongst the soldiers.

I finally had some serious work to do which culminated in a demonstration of firepower using the armoured vehicles from our patrol, the personal weapons of our soldiers and the combined weaponry of a flight of helicopters and a squadron of ground-attack jet fighters which I conjured up by radio. The close air support arrived on the exact second and I think even our own soldiers were impressed by the awesome effects of the skilful application of concentrated firepower.

The air strike aircraft were gone just as dramatically as they had arrived. The dust and smoke hung in the air and the mountains still echoed to the awful roar of simulated war as the thunder of jets faded into the distance. We stood and sat around, looking at each other, rather like a lot of naughty boys who had been caught while up to mischief.

We had already folded our tents and prepared everything for departure, so we left Fujayrah in close convoy. I was to meet the Ruler in his other residence at Deera Dubai where he has been delayed.

My only slight disappointment as we made our way back up the wadi to Masafi was that I had hoped to see Crab Plovers (*Dromas ardeola*) in Fujayrah, but no luck this time. I called the fighters to return later to provide top cover (and a bit of swank) for our convoy as we drove past the TOS camp at Masafi and down from the hills onto the gravel plains at Manama. We left the Hajar Mountains like an unruly crowd of hooligans, dragging a cloak of dust behind us as we went.

Things calmed down a little as we arrived at Manama airstrip and although I was feeling tired I decided to take a look about, leaving Suliman and Umran to erect my tent, which they decided was to be called the Manama Hilton. It was about 7 feet square, so didn't really compete with the Abu Dhabi Hilton that was then being built on reclaimed foreshore at the edge of our home town.

There was a male Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) sitting in the lower branches of a thorn tree that spread above my tent. The light was fading too quickly to try for a picture, so I stood enjoying the changing colours of the cloud-rimmed sunset over the desert as the soldiers said their evening prayers, bowing westwards towards Mecca and the sunset.

My first task on the following morning was to fix our position. This amused Suliman and Umran as they were not in the slightest doubt that we were at Manama. I explained that I wanted to find out the exact position of Manama. "Here," was Umran's patient solution to my problem. Then he poured some more tea into my mug, obviously hoping that my recovery to reason would not take too long. I fixed our position at 25:19:45N 56:01:00E but didn't feel all that much better for that knowledge. I thought of the old Bedu I met in the desert near Al Ain. I was on the west side of Jebel Hafit, looking at fossils, when he appeared. He had walked out of the edge of the Empty Quarter, leading a couple of camels, and I was interested in how he navigated across the desert. He obviously did not understand my questions about how he found his way around what looked like an empty sea of sand to me. The whole concept seemed to puzzle him. Eventually I asked if he had ever been lost in the desert. I still recall his politely amused answer. He said, "How can I be lost when it doesn't matter where I am?"

The real answer came to me later, after a few more years in the desert. The desert is not at all a featureless, empty place. The shapes of the dunes, the colour of the sand, the texture of the sand, the plants and even the smell of the sand all provide a constant stream of clues to one's location even when one cannot see mountains on the horizon. Your ever-present shadow was as good as a compass.

An Army officer and I set off in the morning to make our way to a meeting with Sheikh Mohammad as-Sharqi, the Ruler of Fujayrah. Most Arab meetings take place after sunset and we were not due at the ruler's Deera residence until evening. We drove to the Sharjah base of the British MAT (Military Aid Team) that had remained behind in the Emirates after the British political withdrawal. These men were from a very elite group with a home base at Hereford. They spent long periods alone in the desert, going about their business with minimum fuss and maximum effect. This war was private, so nobody in the UK ever mentioned it.

We arrived at the Sharjah base where I was an invited member of their Mess. We were soon enjoying a cool shower and a change into clean uniforms at the Officers' Mess. We collected some personal mail from England, were brought up to date on the latest happenings, paid a visit to the Medical Officer to admire his collection of live snakes and then sat together enjoying a few cold beers.

We drove along the sand track between Sharjah and Dubai just before sunset, and made our way to the appointed meeting place. We were ushered into a smallish room where a number of people from Fujayrah were gathered. As soon as I entered the room I was able to recognise the Ruler without any difficulty. There he was, "Christmas Father" to a tee! We talked about this and that as politeness demanded, before approaching the purpose of our meeting. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed but I could not help seeing that the Ruler had a loaded .38 revolver tucked beside the cushion which lay on the couch between us as we sat together. Perhaps he was going to order a round of drinks? In fact, this was a time of great upheaval and uncertainty for all the people of the area. I wondered if the civil servants of Whitehall, sitting in comfortable offices, were aware of the effects of their decisions, or if they cared.

The Ruler of Fujayrah offered refreshments, and coffee was served in traditional style. Then a servant walked around the room with a vast tray of very tasty looking oranges. I was slightly surprised when I was passed by and not offered an orange. My dry mouth did its best to water as the others tucked into the large juicy fruits. When everyone was totally relaxed and talking freely the servant reappeared with the replenished tray of oranges. Again, I was the only person not offered an orange! Curiosity overcame politeness as I asked the Ruler why I didn't get an orange. He said that he thought that I didn't like oranges because I had refused an orange when offered one a few days previously at the village of Saqamqam. The local Intelligence System was certainly up to scratch.

As we took our leave of Sheikh Mohammed he presented me with a large velvet lined case which held a magnificent silver coffee service. The coffee pot, cups and saucers and all the other bits and pieces gleamed in the light and showed the detailed workmanship and engraving known locally as *asmara* work. I had no gift to offer in return, which was a great failure of manners on my part. The Ruler put me at ease and said, "Just tell Zayed that I want a proper airport at Fujayrah." His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Ruler of Abu Dhabi and eventual President of the United Arab Emirates, was my ultimate superior, but not a person with whom I had daily meetings. However, there is now a proper airport at Fujayrah, although I've never seen it.

It was late in the evening as we left our meeting with Sheikh Mohammed so it took very little to persuade me to spend that night at the British Officers' Mess at Sharjah, rather than drive all the way back to my tent at Manama. I slept well.

After a very British breakfast of sausage, bacon and eggs we went to our Landover just in time to meet our patrol coming out of the desert after an early start from Manama. We had completed our task on the East Coast and I had just one more free day before I had to return to Abu Dhabi and my normal tasks there. I decided to spend this extra day looking at the Northern Emirates and to ask for a helicopter to pick me up at Dubai on the following day, thus saving the long drive across the sand and beach from Sharjah to Dubai and on to Abu Dhabi. There was, as yet, no paved road linking Dubai to Abu Dhabi.

We moved my personal kit into a spare Landover and I left the patrol, having arranged that I could leave the Landover at Sharjah when I flew back to Abu Dhabi on the following day. I took my leave of Suliman and Umran who were to drive back with the patrol to Abu Dhabi. As we parted these two grinned at me and said in unison, "Fit for duty, sir", and both dissolved into laughter. These two soldiers were great chaps who had, indeed, taken very good care of me.

My time at Khor Fakkan, on the East Coast, had been memorable for the number of new bird species seen. This day was to be remarkable for pure numbers of birds.

I drove north from Sharjah, along the coast to Ajman and Umm al Qaywayn. It was pleasant to be on a hard road again and to be able to look about as I went. There were a number of waders on a small lagoon at Ajman. After careful study through my binoculars I had counted 68 Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*) drowsing together on a

sandbar. There was one white Reef Heron and several groups of Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) and a large flock of Slender-billed Gulls on the shallow water.

I got the Landover bogged down in a patch of wet sand with underlying glutinous and stinking mud, but finally got free by reducing the tyre pressures, stuffing bundles of camouflage netting under the wheels and a fair bit of digging. I found a firm sand ridge a few hundred yards further on and drove to a narrow isthmus. There were what I called Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) along the shore so I took pictures of them in the hope of resolving the identities of these gulls. I was never totally confident about all the gulls in the Arabian Gulf and came to suspect that *Larus argentatus heuglini*, *L.a. taimyrensis* and *L.a. cachinnans* all wandered into this area of the Arabian Gulf.

Forty-two White-winged Black Terns (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) were flying in their slightly laboured manner as they picked insects from the water surface. On the mud, just beyond the shoreline, there were 2000 Slender-billed Gulls, 200 Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), 50 Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), 250 Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and no less than 250 Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*). There were a total of 57 Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*) in scattered groups. So much for Meinertzhagen's statement in "Birds of Arabia" that "Grey Herons do not occur in Arabia." There could be a breeding colony of Rocs in Arabia without anyone in the world of ornithology being aware of them!



Another sketchbook page

John Stewart-Smith

A few cormorants sat about, too far off for me to be certain exactly what kind of cormorants they were. Little Ringed Plover whizzed along the edge of the lagoon and I stopped counting them on reaching 500. This lagoon held many more Greater Flamingo in groups that varied between 18 and 54 individuals. There were about 500 of them altogether. The place was teeming with birds.

I drove onwards to Umm al Qawayn where I stopped bird watching for long enough to be shown over three boats being built there. Two brothers were the designers and builders. They worked without drawn plans and explained that they just think and build. The lines were really lovely. I took quite a few pictures as the brothers explained their methods. The hull planks were bent without any steam or water, just slowly, as the wood took up the correct complex curvature. If a plank split it was the will of God, and another plank was offered up to the hull. The tools used were primitive to my eyes but the results produced were beautiful. An adze, like a small pickaxe, was used to shape the ribs and it seemed to me that the chap wielding this tool stood a great chance of removing a few of his bare toes as the wood-chips flew in the confined space. They used a bow type hand drill and all the nails were hand made and clenched over through the planking. Even the handsaws were different in that they cut on the pull stroke, so working backwards to my eyes. The ornamental carving was very attractive. I was told that they get their wood from Hindi, which was either Pakistan or India or somewhere in that direction.

We were joined by the young son of the household as I chattered away and took pictures of these two men exercising vanishing skills. He had a school satchel over his shoulder and was off to his studies. His uncle smiled at the boy and said to me, "He learns to read and write but he does not learn to build boats."

The village of Umm al Qawayn was untouched at the time of my first visit and had an active fishing industry. The bulk of the fish caught were like small sardines and were laid on the sand to dry in the hot sun. I think they were used to feed the camels and as fertiliser for the crops.

There were flocks of Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) out in the khor and there were crowds of waders too far off to recognise in the shimmering mirages. A Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) led me a merry chase among the beached vessels before finally posing for his picture on the side of one of the small rowing boats. This bird's lower mandible was bright red in marked contrast to the black upper mandible. A Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) patrolled the bay but didn't see anything to take his fancy.

I was joined by a small group of children who were all eager to have their pictures taken. Sadly, I did not have my Polaroid camera in the Landover so these little charmers couldn't see the immediate outcome of their carefully held poses. Their laughing faces were recorded in my 35mm camera and, despite peering carefully into the viewfinder, they never saw their own images on that day. The girls wore jewellery of necklaces and bracelets despite being only toddlers. One of the boys had a very dark complexion and seemed to be the leader of this band. I had been told that the darkest people in this part of Arabia are descended, sometimes very recently, from slaves brought from Zanzibar. I was assured that the darker they are, the smarter they are. The fact that the fellow who told me this piece of local wisdom was himself as black as the ace of spades may cast some doubt on the assertion.

On the road back to Sharjah I saw 46 Brown-necked Ravens (*Corvus ruficollis*), one Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) and a few wheatears. Back at camp, I took a few pictures of Crested Larks (*Galerida cristata*) and the local House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) just before the sun set.

I was waiting at the Dubai Air Wing headquarters on Dubai Airport next morning when the Jet Ranger helicopter arrived from Abu Dhabi to collect me. We loaded my kit on board as the pilot looked at my cameras and binoculars and asked what I had been up to this time. "Having a wonderful time", was my reply. I had been doing just that.

The primary aim of my visit to Fujayrah was to meet Sheikh Mohammed as-Sharqi. During a subsequent flying visit to the Fujayrah airstrip to bring a supply of fresh fish from Abu Dhabi to feed some ADDF soldiers on duty in the area, I met the Ruler again. He came to the strip as I landed the Islander on the gravel and parked it in the shade of a large tree. The Ruler invited me to walk with him to his fort and see the damage that the "English" Navy had caused some time in the past. I explained that I was half Irish and half Scottish and had nothing to do with the English. He said that was alright then, and we parted in a friendly atmosphere. I never understood the need to fly fresh fish from Abu Dhabi to Fujayrah, where the sea was teeming with fish. There was no reason: it was just policy.

There was more unrest in the Emirates during the last week of January and I flew several armed patrols along the borders, looking for intruders. We were not sure where these intruders were supposed to be coming from, but didn't see any anyway. Trouble erupted in Sharjah as the Ruler's Palace was attacked by a group of dissidents, apparently led by a deposed member of the ruling family.

Frank Grimshaw, Jim Parker, Steve Hodgson and I flew a section of Hunters across the Palace at first light on 24th January, in co-ordination with our troops on the ground. We roared around, low and fast, making plenty of noise over the Palace while our troops surrounded the area. One of our soldiers was lying behind a wall with one foot sticking out from cover. He got a bullet in his heel for his carelessness. The chaps inside gave themselves up soon after our first low pass in the rocket-carrying Hunters, unfortunately not before they had reportedly killed some of their hostages. Our fire power demonstration at Fujayrah must have impressed someone. The leader of the dissidents and those directly responsible for the alleged killings were later brought to Abu Dhabi, blindfolded and in chains, on board one of our Caribou transport planes. We continued regular low-level patrols over Sharjah until calm returned to the area.



Hawker Hunter F76 on patrol

John Stewart-Smith

NOTE: This article is a 'last minute filler' cobbled together to take the place of "The RAFOS Journal" that could not be produced by the deadline because the Journal editor was deployed overseas on duty. It is planned to return to normal for the Spring 2012 issue of the combined RAFOS Newsletter and Journal.

I beg members who are not constrained by duty to submit their copy (and pictures) in reasonable time to allow editing and layout to be completed before the deadline dates. *Ed.*

The Gambia – A visit to an old friend.

Karen Sims

On March 8 this year, John and I left Birmingham Airport for Banjul in The Gambia for a week's birding holiday. We were going for our first visit and would be staying with an old friend of ours and her Gambian husband. Heather and Moses have built four holiday lodges in the countryside in the south of the country. These lodges are designed for couples and make for a quiet and relaxing base from which to explore the country. The deluxe Farakunku Lodges, with a plunge pool and restaurant, are near Tujereng.



Farakunku Lodges

John Towers

After the six hour flight we arrived at Banjul to the hustle and chaos of an African airport. Having collected our bags, well most of them, (more of that later) we chased our porter through customs to find Moses and our friends from Sussex waiting for us. David and Therese had arrived ten minutes before us on a flight from Gatwick. The airport struggles to manage one international flight let alone two in the space of ten minutes. Moses then drove us the 45 minutes to Farakunku to be met by Heather and long cool G&T's. Then John realised that one of the rucksacks was not in the truck, this bag with all the important gear must still be at the airport. It contained 4 pairs of binoculars, ours and 2 pairs we had taken out for Gambian guides as a present from Robin Springett, the new camera and the I-pad. "No worries," says Moses, "I will ring my friend who runs that part of the airport and we will go and pick up the lost bag." We had an anxious wait while they drove back to Banjul. About an hour later Moses called to say all was well and they were on the way back with the bag and all the gear. It helps to have friends in high places!

So John got his G&T, a good shower and dinner a bit late.

Our intentions were to explore a corner of The Gambia with Moses and, by hiring bird guides for different days, to make the most of the area. Our first full day was warm but with a good breeze coming in from the Atlantic. We were not right on the beach but it was about a 2 hour walk through the bush and not that far by car but the breeze gets well inland which helps on those really warm days. Heather and Moses have marked trails around the lodges which are easy to follow and allow you to explore without the danger of getting lost in the bush. We decided to stay local and set off in search of the birds. Not having been to Africa before we were armed with the Helm Field Guide - Birds of the Gambia and Senegal. Our friend Therese was from Zimbabwe and so was familiar with many of the bird families even if not the actual birds so that helped. Of course we had been doing our homework but it is never easy when you have never seen the bird before as it flashes past.

There was plenty to see around the grounds in Heth and Mo's garden before we even left the compound. With lots of drinking bowls tucked around many birds, including Hooded Vultures, come into drink at all times of the day. We had been woken by the Laughing Doves which nest on the security lights. The heavily planted compound is home to Red-billed Firefinches, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, Yellow-backed Weavers, Green-

backed Eremomela, Common Bulbul, Variable and Beautiful Sunbirds. The large palm trees around the area held Senegal Coucal, Green Wood Hoopoe, Blue-bellied Roller, Western Grey Plantain-eater and Hooded Vultures. Back at the lodges in the evening the large Fruit Bats flew through the open sided restaurant to drink out of the pool. During the day Little Bee-eaters and Little Egret come in to drink from the pool at set times.



White-faced Scops Owl (*Otus leucotis*)

John Towers

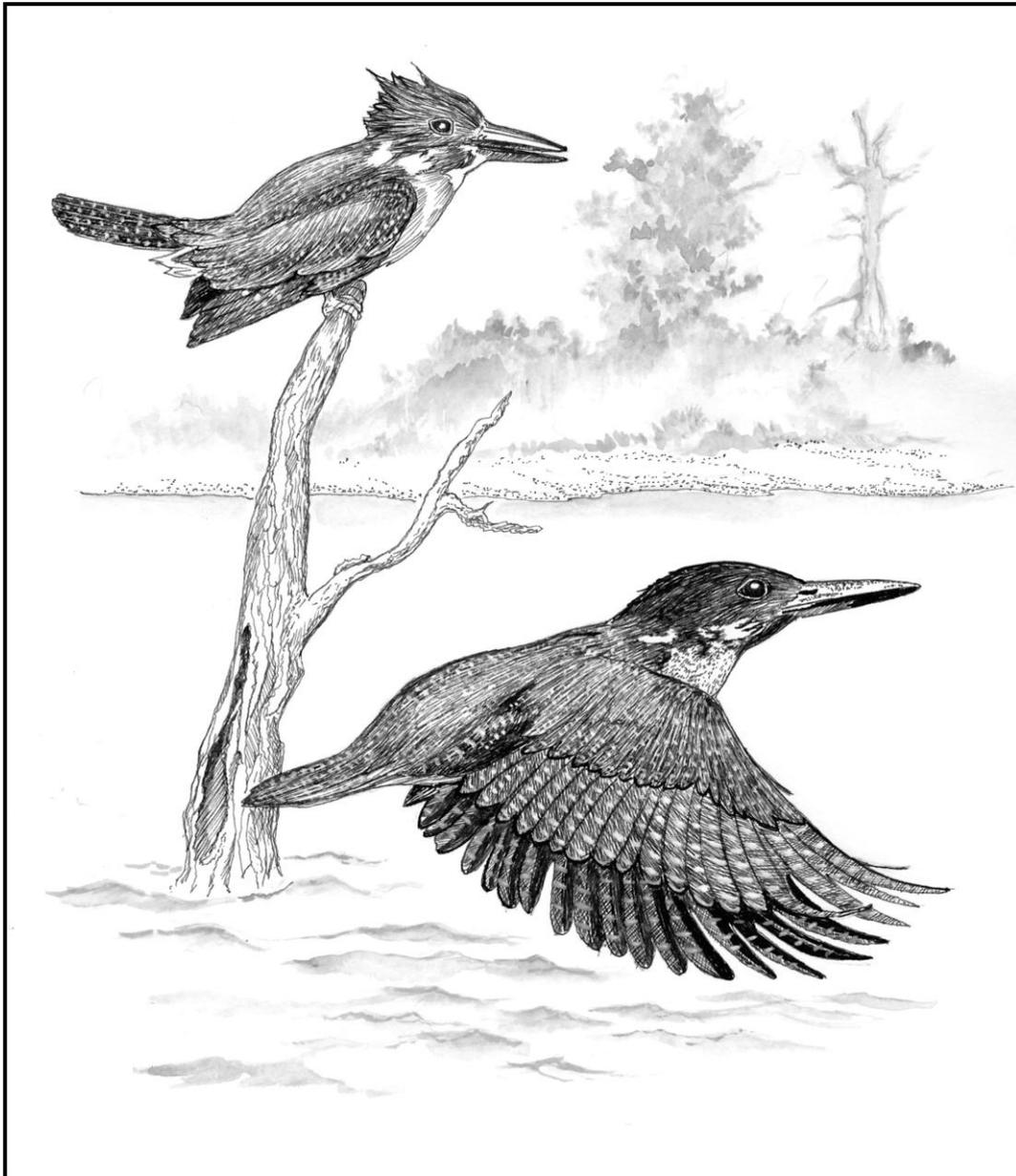
On our second day we set off with Moss to Abuko Nature Reserve where we collected a local bird guide used by our hosts for the birding clients. This is a great place full of new and wonderful birds. a large wetland area We saw 12 different Herons in a large wetland area here and at the nearby Lamin Lodge and Rice Fields. With so many new things to see it was hard to pick out one bird above the others. We all had different favourites, Violet Turaco, Bearded Barbet, Palm-nut Vulture and Pied Kingfisher. But for me it was the Black Crake in the rice fields and for John the Striated Heron. Whilst walking around the rice fields I spotted a long legged wader and struggled to identify it although my brain told me I knew what it was. How embarrassing to be told by Bax, our guide, that it was a Greenshank. We have these all the time in Devon but it looked so out of place. We saw 80 species that day, a huge majority of them new to all of us. What wonderful colours many of them are and so different to anything we have at home.

After another lovely dinner and a great night's sleep we had a really early start the next day. We took breakfast with us and set off for Kartong Reserve Ringing Station. We had been invited by a friend of Heth and Mo called Colin Cross, who is a BTO ringer based at Kartong. We were to spend the morning with him and a group of British ringers who were hoping to trap and ring migrants. We walked around and saw what came out of the many nets set up in the scrub and in the wet areas. It is just in from a great long sandy Atlantic beach and attracts many migrants as well as the resident birds. A pair of African Jacana took some extracting and the ringer suggested that these were an adult male and one of his offspring. One of the most exciting catches for me was a Stone Partridge which was particularly difficult to untangle.

The land around the station consists of a flooded quarry area, lakes and ponds and vegetable gardens full of happy smiling Gambians. We had lunch at Stala Lodge, a small fishing camp, and a pirogue trip on the Allenheim River on the border with South Senegal. There were lots of birds on this tidal mangrove-lined river which had both black and white mangroves. There were plenty of Western Reef Herons, Pied, a Giant and Malachite Kingfishers. We had really good views of fishing Osprey and a lone African Fish Eagle. The strangest site amongst the piles of oysters shells on the banks were 6 Ruddy Turnstones perched on the mangrove stems and Senegal Thick-knees standing on the shell strewn beach. This area had been inhabited for centuries

until the fresh water resources became contaminated with salt water and the population had drifted away. The mounds of oyster shells are bagged and sold for paths and driveways. Heth and Mo use them in the compounds. This was another great day with 78 species, many new to us all.

The next day John and I decided we would follow the way-marked trail to the beach. Heather had told us this was a nice but long walk and the new road works might cause a few problems. We set off and agreed we would ring Moses later that day and he would drive over and collect us. So, armed with plenty of water, sunhats, sun cream and the phone, we set off out of the gates into the surrounds following the well marked trail. Well marked that was until we hit the new road works. We spent sometime searching the scrub on the other side of the dirt road until we picked up the blue arrows again. It was a long hot walk, but well worth it. We came to a long sandy Atlantic beach backed with sand dunes. The best bit was the fresh water pools full of birds hidden behind the dunes. The first sight was a group of Hooded Vultures which had been bathing and were now spread around the sand sunbathing and drying wings like cormorants. The pools had huge numbers of Caspian Terns, Grey-headed Gulls, a Pink-backed Pelican, Long-tailed Cormorants, Spur-winged, White-fronted and Wattled Plovers, African Jacanas and a beautiful male Giant Kingfisher.



Giant Kingfisher (*Megaceryle maxima*)

Robbie Robinson



Northern Black Flycatcher (*Melaenornis elodioides*)

John Towers

We had a very pleasant lunch at the beach bar with a few soft drinks and enjoyed the beach until Mo collected us later in the afternoon. The lodges are so peaceful and after a long hot day it was great to relax with a cold drink and wait for dinner. The showers and lighting are all solar powered and the lack of generators adds to the peace and quite. A nice G&T by the pool as the sun sets and the Hooded Vultures come in to feed on the palm nuts.

Another bright breezy day and Mo dropped us at Tanji Bird Reserve which we explored with David and Therese. It is only a small woodland reserve but was the first for the country (see Newsletter 90 "The Gambia-Reassessed" by Robin Springett) It is on the coast and a very narrow strip between the beach and the road. We had good views of Red-billed Hornbills and Yellow-crowned Gonolek. But my favourites were the Bronze Mannakins which we had seen briefly in Heth and Mo's garden but today we could study them more closely.

Moses collected us after a couple of hours and we stopped at the Tanji Museum for some cultural lessons and shopping. The museum guide had a very battered bird book but was keen to show us the resident White-faced Scops Owls. At the end of the week our friends donated their Helm Guide to Bax, one of our guides, and asked that he pass on his less battered book to the museum guide. This has since been sorted out for us by Moses. Not so many birds today but still enjoyable.

Our last full day and we had hired Lamin Sidebeh who Robin had recommended. We were able to hand over his new binoculars and those for a fellow bird guide. Lamin came and collected us from the lodges with a driver and we went off for the day to Brufut Woods, Koto Bridge, the golf course and the cycle track, all well known bird sites. In Brufut the wardens are in evidence and they prevent wood cutting. There is a big demand for wood for cooking and also to sell to the Tanji Fish Market were vast quantities are used to smoke the day's catches.



Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*)

John Towers

Lamin took us right to a Long-tailed Nightjar which ignored us as we clicked away with the cameras. At the top of a very tall tree was a beautiful sleeping Verreaux's Eagle Owl which has the most amazing pink eyelids. It was hard to get clear photos which was a shame. Lamin was very excited by a pair of Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weavers that were out in the fields, which he said were not at all common in that area. They were beautifully marked and posed well for quite some time. Again it was the colourful birds that caught my eye, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Orange-cheeked Waxbill, and Greater Painted-Snipe. Lamin was a very good birder and we had a great day with 88 species and I am sure we missed a few more in the trees.

Well it was our last day. We stayed around the lodges and walked around the local vegetable gardens and bush. We had plenty of Blue-bellied and our first Abyssinian Roller. The tall palms had the very long winged African Palm Swift zooming around them.

We enjoyed it so much and John and I are already planning to return next year. The people are so friendly and helpful. As an example, on the day of our trip with Bax he took us to a neighbour's garden who had a roosting Barn Owl. No sign when we arrived so we all trooped back to the truck. Then someone came running after us to say the bird was out of his hole so back we went. We had the most amazing views with it on a branch a few feet above our heads. It watched with great interest as we all took loads of photos, including Mo who normally is not sure what birders are all about. We thanked our hosts and asked Bax to hand them some money for their kindness in letting us traipse through their grounds.



African Barn Owl (*Tyto alba affinis*)

John Towers

The Gambia is a poor country which relies on tourism, but many tourists go for questionable reasons. The more birders who go the better as it will encourage better reserve management. They need the conservationist money so if you have not been, do go.

You won't regret the long flight and the birds are wonderful. Stay away from the tourist areas though as they do not give you the true feel of the country. If you want a relaxing week or two with great birds, food and wonderful accommodation, check out the Farakunku website below.

We ate out on several occasions at lunch time and none of us had any health problems. I thought the biting insects would get me, as they usually do, but I think I had one bite the whole trip.

If you want the trip list please email at karensims55@gmail.com

Heather and Moses email at heather-moses@farakunku-lodges.com

and their website <http://www.farakunku-lodges.com>

Lamin Sidebeh is at laminkulanjangtours@yahoo.co.uk

BIRTHDAY GIRL

Dick Knight

Some of us became aware that Val Kersley had a “significant” birthday approaching: as a gentleman I won’t say which one (do women acknowledge their age when they reach 90?). Such an occasion should be marked and so Dave Bodley was elected planner for a celebration of the event. A small group of us would meet at the White Horse, Winterbourne Bassett, between Swindon and Devizes, on 2 Jul 11 as it was the nearest Saturday to the actual birthday. By that date the numbers had grown to 12 in addition to the birthday girl.



Val’s Birthday Party 2011

Ken Earnshaw

Getting to the venue was interesting. Jan and I set off in plenty of time, not knowing how long the journey would take. Despite the warning signs for the carnival we got through Wroughton without a hitch and found we had time to kill. Seeing a White Horse on the hillside below the Ridgeway we turned off to investigate, at which point we saw the Earnshaw’s car going the other way. As we would thus not be the first to arrive at the venue we turned around and followed, rejoining the main road as 8 Stoats ran across in front of us! Dave and Anne Bodley had collected Val from home and they arrived just after us. Pre-lunch drinks were taken on the patio until the company was assembled. Those living nearest were last to arrive, but they had been delayed by a neighbour. Lunch was taken in an area described by the landlady as the wine bar. Off the main bar, it was just the right size for the number of tables to accommodate us, laid out in a horseshoe pattern, which made us a private party (and we didn’t intrude on the locals). A separate table was used to take the presents of flowers and cards for Val. The landlady had partly lost her voice due, she admitted, to a very noisy session the night before, but she quickly got our measure and got us under control. She explained how she wanted to take the food orders, starting at one end and working round. Alan Curry tried to get his order in first, and was immediately designated a trouble maker! We enjoyed a splendid meal and convivial company. After coffee Dave proposed a toast to the birthday girl, pointing out that recent research has suggested that birthdays are good for you – the more birthdays you have the longer you live! Having loaded armfuls of presents into the Bodley’s car we posed for a group photograph: I make no comment on Ken Earnshaw’ nifty turn of speed from behind the camera to the front while the timer counted down. Our thanks go to Dave for organizing the celebration and our congratulations to Val on her birthday. When was the last time you had a meal with RAFOS that you didn’t cook or wash up afterwards?

Here is another stunning example of the beautiful artwork of Robbie Robinson that has long been a feature of the RAFOS Newsletter. Thank you, Robbie, for your continued support.



Ring Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*)

Robbie Robinson

STRESS LEVELS IN WILD BIRDS.

A recent item in the 'Conservation Research News' section of "British Birds" deals with research that examined some causes of stress levels in Capercaillies (*Tetrao urogallus*) and the physiological effects that result. The item reproduced here was written by Dr. Guy Anderson, Research Manager RSPB and first appeared in "British Birds" July 2011(www.britishbirds.co.uk). It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Roger Riddington, editor of "British Birds" and of Dr. Guy Anderson. The Conservation Research News section of "British Birds" is provided by the RSPB (www.rspb.org.uk).

'Wild birds and mammals, especially those that are (or were formerly) hunted, respond to the close presence of humans. The behaviour may be obvious, for example cessation of feeding or taking flight. However there is also a physiological response – the activation of hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal glands and the release of glucocorticoids (corticosterone in birds) into the bloodstream. This stress hormone readies the animal for flight, if necessary. However, repeated or lasting increases in this hormone keep the animal at a heightened state, and this can eventually affect the body condition, immune function and ultimately survival. Consequently, in areas where birds and mammals are continually being disturbed, there is likely to be a lasting effect, initially through chronic stress followed by the abandonment of an area.

Over the last 100 years, outdoor recreation has taken people to more and more remote parts of the countryside, where larger birds and mammals have their last refuges. During winter, mountains throughout northern and central Europe cater for the growing skiing industry, which is important for the economy of alpine regions. This includes off-piste activities and as a result human disturbance can occur virtually anywhere. An earlier study found that Capercaillies *Tetrao urogallus* in one part of southern Germany with winter sports facilities had high levels of stress hormones. The same team has now extended their study to include the Black Forest (Germany), Swiss Jura Mountains and Swiss Alps. Again, they found that Capercaillies had increased levels of stress hormones in areas with winter recreational activities, showing that this is a general and widespread problem (Thiel *et al.* 2010).

It appears that the physiological effects of disturbance take some time to wear off. After a single flushing event, a Black Grouse *T.tetrix* retains elevated levels of stress hormones the following day (Arlettaz *et al.* 2007), showing that even low rates of disturbance can lead to chronic stress.

Capercaillies may be particularly sensitive to human disturbance because they are restricted to feeding on conifer needles in winter. This is a low-energy food, high in difficult-to-digest cellulose and anti-herbivore compounds such as monoterpenes. Capercaillies must therefore maintain a high food-input rate during short winter days. Any additional activity, such as escape flights due to off-piste skiers, may mean a negative energy balance. The only reliable solution to this potential conservation problem is to separate human recreation from the remaining areas inhabited by Capercaillies.'

I found this item thought-provoking when linked to bird watching and photography. We have a duty to be aware of our potential to cause stress to the subjects of our interest. It also occurred to me that the 'day after' elevated levels of stress hormones in the Black Grouse mentioned in the article just may be related to the actual repeated capture activity? I suspect much of the disturbance of wild animals is caused accidentally and could, perhaps, be reduced if more people were aware of the potential to cause stress without even being aware of the animals' presence. *Ed.*

PORTLAND BILL REMEMBERED – 5th to 7th October 1990

Brian York

I had never before entertained the idea of a RAFOS trip, but having joined the Society as an ex National Service Airman and with added pressure from my eldest son, aged 19, to go on a bird-watching trip, Portland seemed as good a starting point as any.

I made contact with Reg Kersley, who at that time organised the weekend with his wife Val, and Andrew and I were booked in. We would travel down on the Friday afternoon, the only requisite being to bring some booze with us. So armed with two 1½ litre bottles of wine (1 red, 1 white) we set off from our home in the Midlands.

The journey took us just over 3 hours, arriving just in time for “tea and stickies”, a RAFOS tradition.

There were 26 of us in all, the RAFOS contingent being supplemented by members of the Wiltshire Ringers Group.

As newcomers we were very quickly put at our ease and were taken under the wings of Wilf Corris and Ron Bowers (apologies for the pun). Andrew still talks about the Spag Bol that was served up as our evening meal that first night, I think he had three helpings! Everyone has to do their fair share and we were put on breakfast duties for the Sunday morning, leaving us otherwise free to do our own thing. Wilf took us for a quick trip round the Observatory. After the evening meal one of the Wiltshire Ringers entertained us with a slide show of GB Birds 1989, which was excellent.

Saturday morning dawned cloudy with a force 5/6 wind, ideal for a sea-watch. This produced 50 Gannets, 3 Razorbills, 2 Kittiwakes, a Guillemot and a Pomarine Skua in addition to the numerous Lesser and Greater Black-backed and Black headed Gulls, Cormorants and Shags. By the time we returned to the Observatory we were ready for the wonderful breakfast that awaited us. Val and her team did us proud.

In order to let the breakfast go down Wilf and Ron took us for another walk round the Observatory. The best birds were Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Swallows and House Martins in abundance and a flock of 100+ Goldfinches all obviously getting ready to leave these shores when the conditions were right. Back at the Observatory a Melodious Warbler was caught in the mist nets, a first for Andrew and myself.

We then split up in cars to go to Radipole RSPB where my son and I had another lifer in the shape of a Cetti's Warbler – an explosive call followed by the briefest of views as it crossed the path in front of us before ‘exploding’ again! Other birds seen here were: Water Rail, 2 Kingfishers, Curlew Sandpiper, 3 Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Little Gull and Bearded Tit.

After an exhausting day we were ready for the marvellous barbecued chicken, jacket potatoes etc, followed by an excellent slide show from Reg Kersley.

Sunday morning was bright, still and warm but Andrew declined to come for a pre-breakfast sea-watch, as we were on breakfast duty, but I think it was the hangover from the night before! However, he did jump out of bed when word came of a Firecrest caught in the mist nets. This was another lifer, this time from only 3 inches away and before breakfast.

Breakfast surprisingly passed without incident, except for interruptions from the Ringers. Firstly it was for another Firecrest, then a delightful Wryneck which Wilf photographed as a proud Andrew held it at arm's length. The bird was another lifer and seemed smaller than we imagined from pictures in our bird guides.

Another walk of the Observatory gave us a Redwing, Garden Warbler and Blackcap while the ringing team produced a Goldcrest and more Blackcaps but no more surprises. Back for elevenses and our last “tea and stickies”. Then one final walk which produced a few female Wheatears before we were sitting down to lunch followed by the exchange of addresses and telephone numbers.

Sadly, Wilf and Reg are no longer with us. Andrew and I, however, will never forget their kindness and assistance all those years ago; we both remember them with much affection and still stay in touch with Val and Pam through Christmas cards. Who knows, we may just make another RAFOS trip!

“THE WRITE STUFF”

This page will be reserved for a trial period in future issues of the RAFOS Newsletter for letters from members to the editor on any matter and for the insertion of Wants and Disposals and Notices.

Address: The Editor, Mathry Hill House, Mathry, Pembrokeshire SA62 5HB or johnstewartsmith@btinternet.com

CALLING NOTICE:

ISLAY MIST

Where does the time go? Although it seems like only a short while since we got back from the last Islay expedition, it's time to call all those wishing to be Islay Misters and Mistresses in 2012. The number of places is limited by the beds available at the cottages booked at Kilchoman House. Given the dates booked for the accommodation the planned dates for the ferries to the island are 12 May 2012 outbound and 19 May 2012 return. Nearer the time we may suggest an optional break in the journey there and/or back with a day or more to visit Caerlaverock, Mersehead or some similar location. If you're interested in joining us or would like more information, please contact Dick and Jan Knight at theknights@ntlworld.com or on 01993 840029.

To Bill Francis, instigator and esteemed leader of 5 Islay Mists, will this be Islay Mist 7, as seventh in the series, or Islay Mist 12, after the year? We must debate this over a dram or 3 (or a coffee).

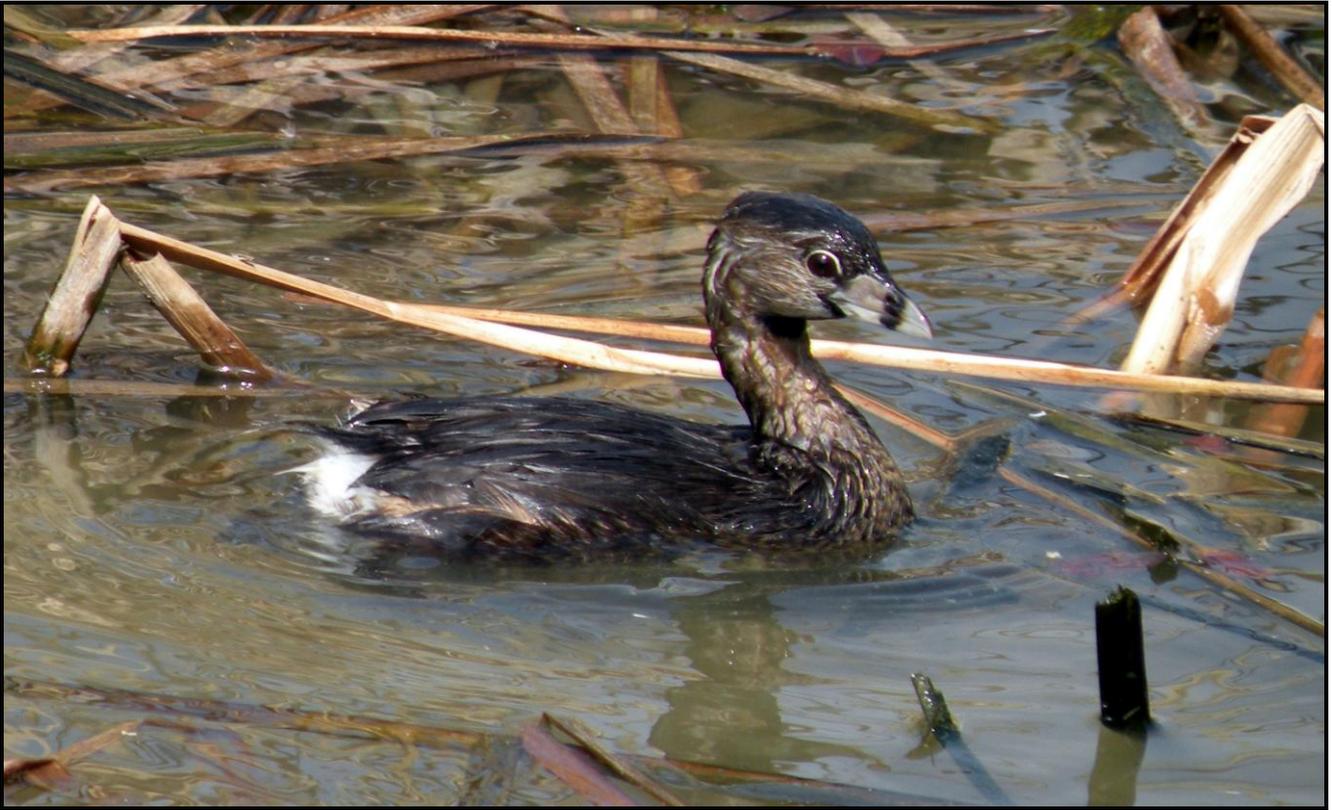


CONGRATULATIONS DICKIE DUCKETT! Dickie Duckett features among the prize winners in the 2011 'Bird Photograph of the Year' competition with his picture of grumpy Black Guillemots on Shetland. Well done, Dickie. (See 'British Birds' August 2011).

WANTED URGENTLY. Reports, birding tales old or new and pictures all wanted from RAFOS members for the Newsletter. Don't wait until the last minute – this only annoys the editor and he is grumpy enough already. Awards are available for best articles. Bribes and inducements are always acceptable. No connection with the News of the World.

SIX AMAZING FACTS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW.

1. RAFOS spelled backwards is SOFAR.
2. The combined age of current RAFOS members approaches 9,000 years.
3. The total number of bird species recorded on Earth is about 10,000. There are 12,000 known ant species, 41,000 spider species and over 900,000 insect species. Birders must try harder!
4. If all RAFOS members were laid end-to-end we'd probably fall asleep.
5. The two commonest waders ('shorebirds,' for our American reader) overwintering in Britain are Woodcock (1.4 million) and Common Snipe (1 million). REALLY? Really!
6. The WWT magazine reports that they use knicker elastic to attach satellite tags to geese "*because knicker elastic falls off once the study is complete.*" (I've studied and studied without any such result. Am I doing something wrong?).



Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) Texas

Fran Eggby



Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromas scolopaceus*) Texas

John Stewart-Smith



Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) and Red-eared Terrapin Texas

John Stewart-Smith



Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerine*) Texas

John Stewart-Smith