



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society

NEWSLETTER No. 97

SPRING 2014



MIGRATING WHOOPER SWANS ARRIVING AT CAERLAVEROCK.
Ken Earnshaw



BEST RAFOS PICTURE OF 2013

Great Potoo, taken in Costa Rica

by

Daphne Yates

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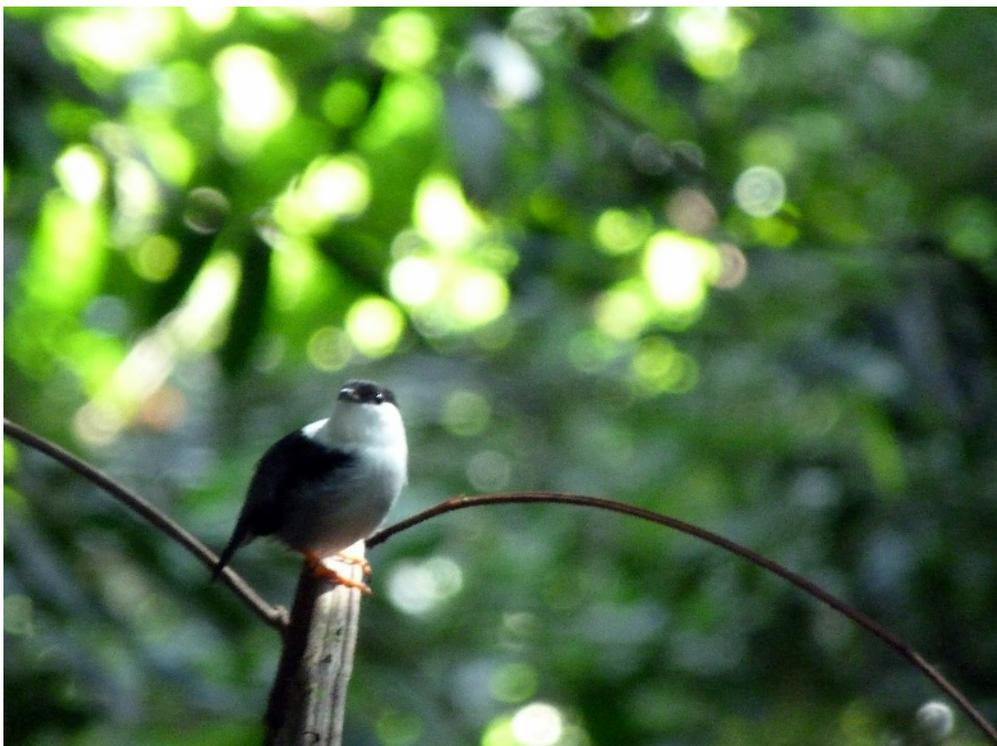
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CONTENTS

Title	Author	Page
Best Picture 2013	Daphne Yates	2
RAFOS Officers		3
Contents		4
Chairman's Chatter	Martin Routledge	5
Introduction	Bill Francis	6
RAFOS Secretary's New Address		6
Portland Bill	Stuart Walker	7
'It's to the Right of the Rainbow'	Ken Earnshaw	10
Money Well Spent	John Le Gassick	22
Compton Swallows	Julia Springett	23
RAFOS AGM: President's Address	Neville Parton	24
Chairman's Address	Martin Routledge	28
FALO's Report	Dick Yates	29
Post AGM Field Visit to Little Marlow Gravel Pits	Ken Earnshaw	34
RAFOS Expedition to The Gambia	Jim Hammersley	34
RAFOS on Facebook	Bill Francis	37
Some Notes on the Kiwis	A W Evans	39
Statistics and Geekery	Scott Drinkel	40
Electronic RAFOS Newsletters	John Stewart-Smith	42
ACROLA 2010	George Candelin	43
Springtime on the Solway	John Le Gassick	47
RAFOS Sponsored Expedition to Gibraltar 2013	Julia Springett	49
Birding on GIBEX 13	John & Sue Wells	51
This Sure Was a Lot of Fun! (WINTER DUCK 14)	Various	55
The RAFOS Newsletter – Hints for Contributors	Bill Francis	64



White Bearded Manakin by Robin Springett

Chairman's Chatter

Lunch or Evening Function for the 50th Anniversary?

In a quiet moment reflecting on the planning for Winter Duck I picked up an e-mail from those gallant and hard working Secretary types. Apparently we need to make a decision very soon on the 50th Anniversary celebration event which will take place in 2015. Now those who were at the AGM will have heard that the outline plan is either lunch or dinner in the RAF Club in Piccadilly – the Club provides a very good venue at a competitive price in a location which most members can reach relatively easily. The debate then centred on whether a lunchtime event; which might mean that many could do this as a day-trip or a dinner event (probably leading to an overnight stay somewhere in London) would attract more attendees. The cost of the event will be pretty much the same it's the additional costs that might be a factor in your thoughts.

The debate is finely balanced but the Committee's aim is to provide an outstanding occasion which can be enjoyed by the greatest number. As I said the AGM consensus was evenly split so I'm inviting the entire membership – or at least those who actually read the Newsletter (and the previous editor has his doubts about the general literacy of our Society!) – to express a preference which the Committee can take into account.

So please e-mail me at martin.routledge@gmx.co.uk stating a preference for a lunch event or a dinner event or your ambivalence between the two. This is not a commitment to attend merely an expression of which time of day would suit you more. Please let me know by the end of April if at all possible.

Newsletter & Social Media

On to other things – there has been some additional turbulence on the Committee so please return to your seats, fasten your seat belts and standby for a new Editor for the Newsletter in the shape of Bill Francis – a return to past glories it's true and a role entirely in keeping with his outstanding efforts on the official Facebook page. I hope you'll all agree the site is a good avenue for promoting the Society and I would also encourage you to consider joining Facebook and thus the RAFOS 'closed' group. Any member of the public can view the official site but only members who pass Bill's strict selection criteria can become members of the closed group. For those who show a degree of disdain for Facebook (and I was one) you really don't have to reveal any more of your daily life than you absolutely want to – I use it exclusively for birding contacts (much to my daughter's amusement).

OK enough from me – all that remains is to thank John Stewart-Smith for his excellent tour as editor of this august publication and to thank Bill Francis for stepping up and volunteering to take the task forward. Well done both of you.

Martin

Introduction - New Editor in Post

Some of you will be surprised to see that after a gap of 8 years I have agreed to resume editorship of the Newsletter. I must start by thanking Dick Yates and John Stewart-Smith for their sterling efforts in keeping the Newsletter so lively and interesting in the intervening period. I just hope that I can live up to their standards. One major change that has been achieved is the move to an all-colour publication – what a difference that has made to the quality of the illustrations!

As you may know, I was originally asked to rejoin your Committee to oversee the Society's publications on Facebook and Twitter, where the AOS and RNBWS are way ahead of us. We hope that by establishing our presence on these social media, we may come to the attention of younger birders who are serving in or affiliated to the RAF. They are also a great way of communicating quickly with our existing members

Our account on Twitter is **@RAFOSbirding**, and is used to publish short headlines about the Society's activities.

On Facebook we have 2 separate items: a public page '**Royal Air Force Ornithological Society**' and a closed group for members called '**RAFOS**'. Being a closed group means that although anyone on Facebook can see who the members are, its contents are only available to the group members, currently 30 in number.

The Twitter account and the Facebook public page exist for the general public interested in our activities, whilst the group acts as a way of communicating quickly between members on a variety of subjects. In the past, these have included pictures for species identification and reports from ongoing expeditions and field meetings (when the Internet is available where the participants are located). As the group manager, I control membership and anyone wishing to join must first become my Facebook 'friend' I appear on Facebook as **William Francis** (Bill Francis on Facebook is my grandson). Give it a try – it won't bite!

I hope that you enjoy this edition of the Newsletter. There is an interesting variety of articles to read, as usual, ranging from trip reports through AGM matters to an interesting proposal to set up a database of birds seen on RAFOS trips.

Details are also given of a proposed trip to Spain this autumn in a flier distributed with this Newsletter. Please register your interest as soon as possible if you wish to take part.

Good birding!

Bill Francis

The RAFOS Secretary Has Moved.

The RAFOS Secretary's new address is:

2 Old Place
Aldwick
BOGNOR REGIS
West Sussex
PO21 3AU

E-mail: theknightsat2@gmail.com
or rafos_secretary@hotmail.com

PORTLAND BILL 2013



By Stuart Walker

It appeared that something unprecedented was taking place when I walked into the main sitting room in the Portland Bird Observatory, John Stewart-Smith and Dick Yates were deep in conversation, with the most shocking revelation being that it looked like they were finally telling the truth. Thankfully, as I got closer and heard Dick state that it was the first time he'd carried out a low-level barrel roll in a Nimrod from the port beam I realised that reality had not shifted but that I was in the safe hands of the greatest storytellers to ever grace the parade squares of the mighty Royal Air Force (note 1).

This was mine and my families' first RAFOS adventure. Our entourage included my partner Laura, my parents (Geoff and Chris) and my two little boys, Harry (7) and Charlie (5), both of whom were very excited at the prospect of living in a lighthouse for 2 sleeps. My parents had arrived around 1700 after a long journey from Cumbria, with the rest of us arriving in my car at 2115, meaning we unfortunately missed that night's "call-over" (note 2).

What was immediately apparent though, was the warmth we received on our arrival. Everyone was welcoming and we discovered that dinner (and, importantly, dessert) had been kept to one side for us, which was great news after a long day. We were quickly shepherded to our accommodation and soon fulfilled the RAFOS Obligation of getting a glass of wine in hand as rapidly as humanly possible after arrival.

Saturday morning dawned with the prospect of good weather, even sunny spells. It was during this time that the moth boxes were brought in for examination, with the highlight being a *Convolvulus Hawk Moth*, a truly huge flying insect that I had not seen before. Related to this, apparently a young man had entered the kitchen at one point to ask "Are there any moths in the fridge? If so, where's the fridge?" RAFOS have been known to stock 'interesting items' in the fridge, but this was the first time that *Lepidoptera* had apparently appeared on the menu.

There was also the joy of experiencing the fascination on my boys' faces as they saw the rare treat of a Chiffchaff in hand, caught in the mist nets in the garden.

After an excellent breakfast, a quorum of us (little boys too) set off on the walk around the peninsula. The weather really did come good and the area showed why it has so much potential as a rarity hotspot. I have never seen three lighthouses so close to each other before, but it was reassuring as a sailor to discover that only one of them was now in use for navigation. The falcons showed themselves well, with a Kestrel first, followed by a Peregrine and then lastly a very rapid view of a low-level Hobby trying to strike at the heart of a flock of Linnet.



Two boys with two birds - Chiffchaff and Secretary Bird

Short-eared Owl showed well, with one being mobbed by gulls on the Saturday and a close fly-by during breakfast on Sunday. This was when another notable was seen by Jan Knight: Yellow-browed Warbler. Of particular interest during the weekend was the sighting of a Red-breasted Flycatcher, which left jealous faces on all those who weren't lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time.

The birding was very good, with 89 species seen in total. I'm not sure how this compares with past Portland visits, but it was a good tally nonetheless. As is typical of British weather, in the week after the RAFOS visit, the weather took a noticeable turn towards the cold with northerly winds hitting the UK. One can't help but wonder if the following weekend would have seen a greater list as all those migrational species decided to hightail it for the tropics; I'm not yet sure if John Stewart-Smith qualifies as one of these migrational species, perhaps BOURC could help us out on that one?

However, what did come through is how fantastic these RAFOS visits are. Thanks go to Dave and Anne Bodley for organizing the weekend, along with everyone who attended and carried out their respective domestic duties when the situation called for it. And a huge thank you must go to Val Kersley whose presence in the kitchen ensured that the food was piping hot and of a fantastic quality, her crumbles were amazing.

Well, that's it, I've got the RAFOS bug now! ISLAY MIST 2013 beckons next and I can't wait. Yet again I kick myself for not having joined RAFOS sooner. But the important part is that I have, along with my entourage, who are also all looking forward to the next expedition. I would like to thank everyone for being so kind to my two boys as well, I did worry that they would be out of place, but they were just treated like part of the family and I know they are looking forward to their next adventure too.

Pictures by the author

Notes:

1. For 'grace' read 'clean with toothbrushes'.
2. To the uninitiated who are not sure what 'callover' means, see "String" on the Wikipedia "Twitchers' vocabulary" website.

SPECIES LIST - PORTLAND 2013

Mute Swan	Barn Owl
Canada Goose	Short-eared Owl
Brent Goose	Kingfisher
Wigeon	Skylark
Gadwall	Swallow
Teal	House Martin
Mallard	Meadow Pipit
Shoveler	Rock Pipit
Tufted Duck	Yellow Wagtail
Little Grebe	Grey Wagtail
Great Crested Grebe	Pied/White Wagtail
Manx Shearwater	Wren
Gannet	Dunnock
Cormorant	Robin
Shag	Black Redstart
Little Egret	Whinchat
Grey Heron	Stonechat
Spoonbill	Northern Wheatear
Marsh Harrier	Blackbird
Sparrowhawk	Song Thrush
Buzzard	Cetti's Warbler
Kestrel	Blackcap
Merlin	Garden Warbler
Hobby	Whitethroat
Peregrine Falcon	Yellow-browed Warbler
Water Rail	Chiffchaff
Moorhen	Red-breasted Flycatcher
Coot	Bearded Tit
Oystercatcher	Long-tailed Tit
Ringed Plover	Blue Tit
Lapwing	Great Tit
Dunlin	Red-backed Shrike
Snipe	Magpie
Black-tailed Godwit	Jackdaw Rook
Whimbrel	Carrion Crow
Curlew	Raven
Common Sandpiper	Starling
Redshank	House Sparrow
Turnstone	Chaffinch
Black-headed Gull	Greenfinch
Mediterranean Gull	Goldfinch
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Linnet
Herring Gull	
Greater Black-backed Gull	
Sandwich Tern	
Feral Pigeon	Total for Weekend: 89
Woodpigeon	
Collared Dove	

“IT’S TO THE RIGHT OF THE RAINBOW”

An account of Islay Mist 13

By Ken Earnshaw

It has been eighteen months since the last visit to Islay so a team was there from 26th October to 2nd November 2013. The author, being new to the island, offered to write this account of the occasion. As in previous years the team was accommodated in four well-furnished and comfortable cottages at Kilchoman on the west coast of the island. The owners, Ian and Margaret Brooke, helped to ensure that we had as enjoyable a time as possible.

Four of the team, John S-S, Fran, Sally and I travelled on the 13:00 ferry from Kennacraig (on the Kintyre Peninsular) to Port Askaig on Islay and enjoyed reasonable weather, good views and a few select birds at least for the first half of the two-hour journey. Then the heavens opened and the islands of Islay and Jura, both close at hand, virtually disappeared from view. Islay Mist indeed.

Bill Francis had flown in from Birmingham via Glasgow and the rest of the team arrived on the 18:00 ferry from Kennacraig but diverted from Port Ellen into Port Askaig due to weather conditions. By about 21:00 on Saturday 26th the complete team were settled in at Kilchoman.

The aims of the visit were to monitor and record the birds present on Islay, sharing experiences and knowledge with each other and assisting the RSPB in surveys. Apart from one or two pre-arranged activities, members were free to pursue their own interests and itineraries during the day. Evenings were generally a communal affair held in the largest cottage where the daily call-over was held; with dinner being provided for all of us by each cottage in turn while wine and other brews were consumed amongst much banter and story telling in the traditional RAFOS manner.

The weather dominated the week with persistent strong southerly and westerly winds accompanied by heavy rain interspersed with periods of bright sunshine. Rainbows were a very prominent and striking result of the turbulent weather. The conditions dictated that most birding was done from close to the cars, opportunities for extended walks being rather limited.



Cottages at Kilchoman (picture by the author)

Map of Islay

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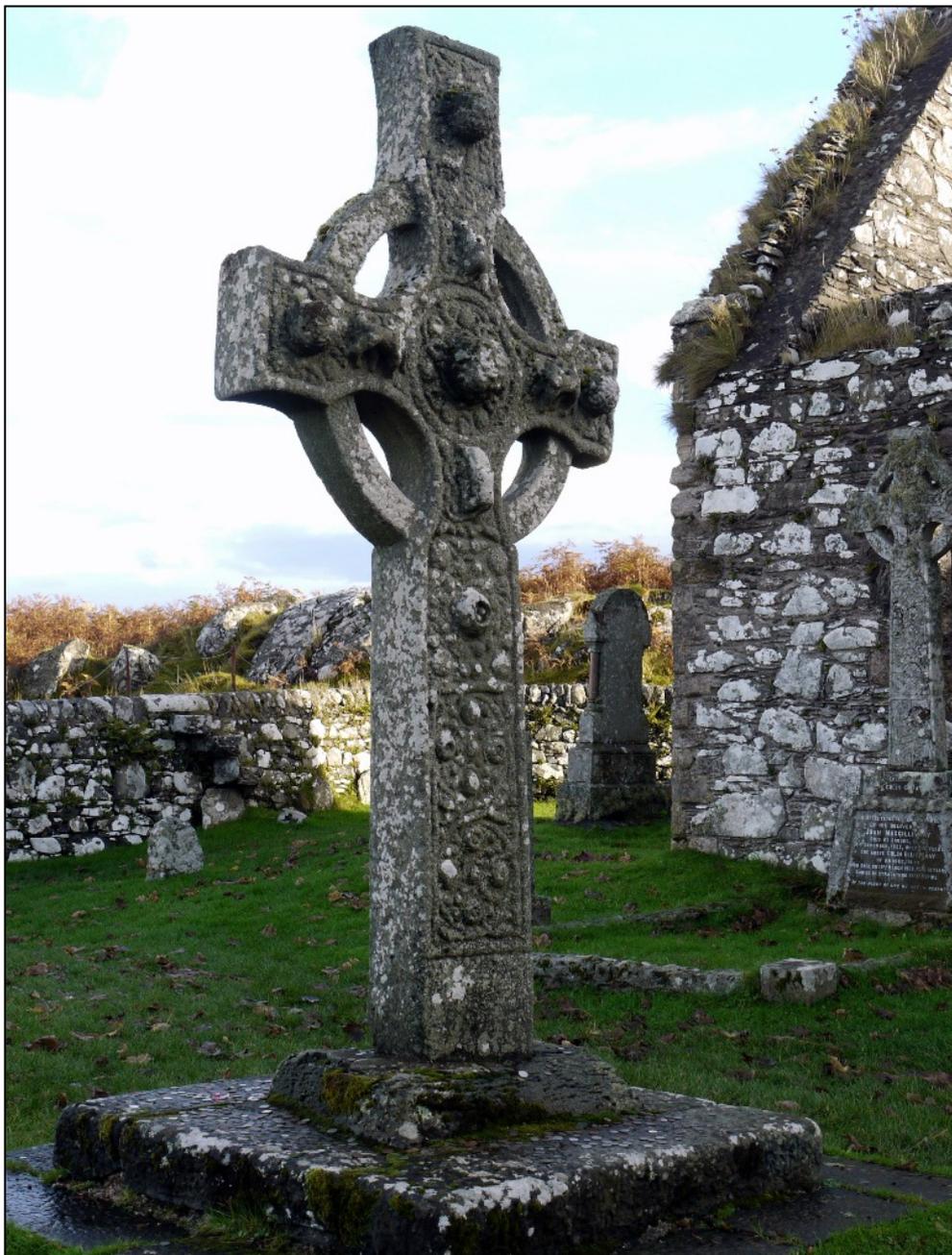
Islay is a relatively small island of some 25 by 20 miles and has a wide range of habitats within a lovely setting. There are approximately 3000 residents on the island with most living in the main town of Bowmore and in the smaller centres of Port Charlotte, Port Ellen and Bridgend along with numerous houses and farms scattered around the island. Employment is primarily within the whisky and maltings industry, ferry and transport services, farming and in tourism. The residents are quietly spoken, friendly and welcoming. There was virtually no evidence of rubbish nor any of unruly behaviour, which was good to behold.



The Western part of Islay

The west coast receives the full thrust of rough seas from the Atlantic and is rocky with some cliffs plus a fine sandy beach adjacent to our accommodation. The north coast is dominated by the long sea loch of Loch Gruinart while the north-eastern area has high moorland running down to the shoreline and has very limited access. This latter feature extends down the east coast to Bunnahabhain. The eastern side of the island below Port Askaig is also dominated by high moorland and again is of very limited access.

By way of contrast the continuation of this coast as it turns south-west shows a profound change of character. The region from Claggain Bay towards Port Ellen is much flatter and softer, has several small bays and numerous islets, deciduous woodland and three whisky distilleries; all-in-all it is a very attractive area. There are sites of antiquity here including the Kildalton Cross, chapel and associated medieval gravestones; several other sites of crosses, standing stones, etc, are scattered across the island.



Kildalton Cross

The south coast is dominated by the long sea loch of Loch Indaal and by the high moorland landmass of The Oa. This latter area appears initially as bleak, barren and devoid of wildlife, however some good birding was had there. The south-west peninsular of the Rhinns of Islay down to Portnahaven provides excellent seascapes and is also particularly good for a wide range of birds.



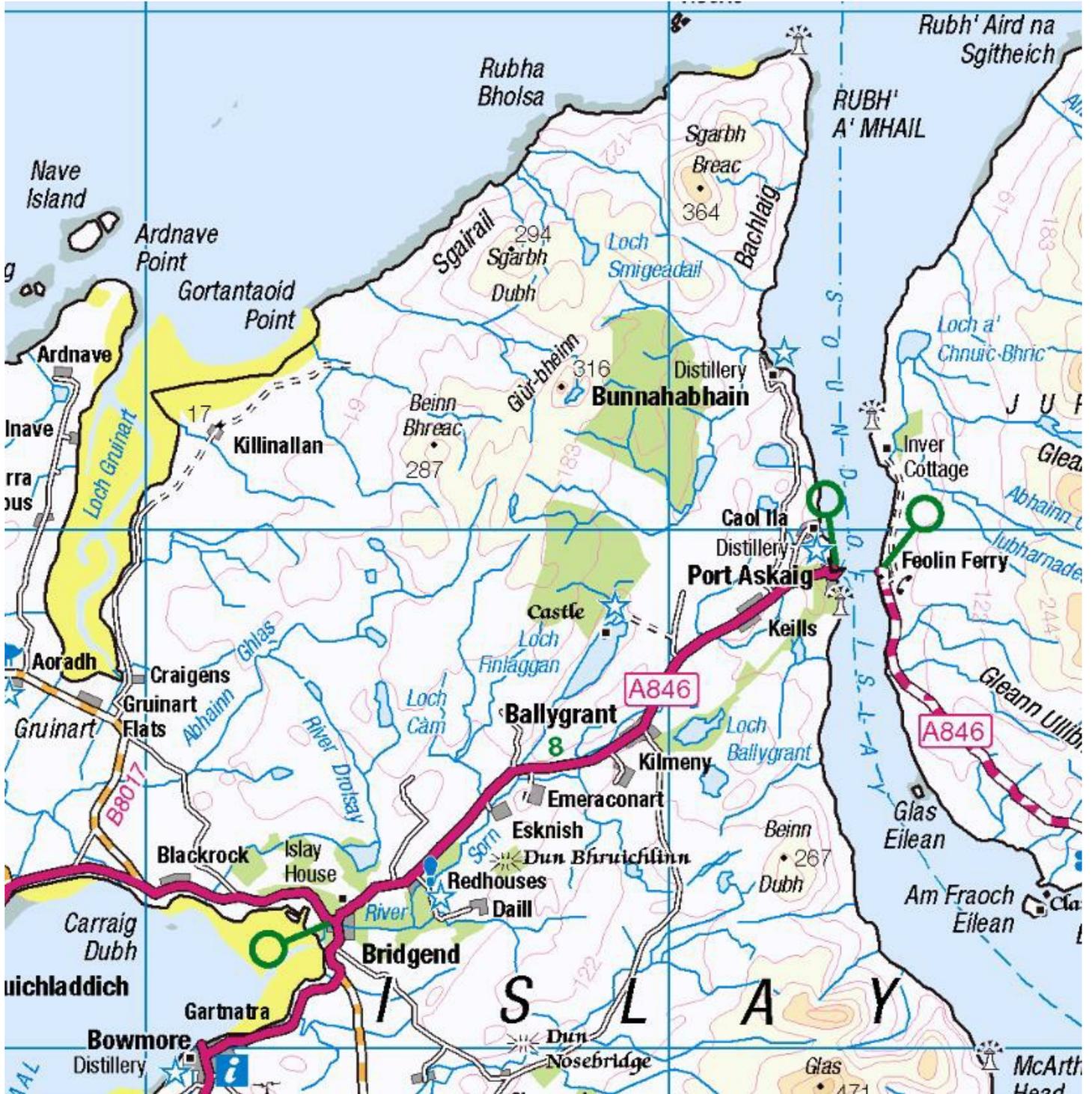
Rhinns Point on a quiet day.

The central areas of the island are largely low-lying marshy or grazing lands for sheep and cattle with some arable land. The variety of habitats across the island is due principally to the complex underlying geology of the island.

The area of low lying ground between Lochs Indaal and Gruinart and extending out to the west coast is the principal habitat for the huge over-wintering flocks of Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese. The calls from masses of these birds flying overhead is wonderful to hear. The extensive sand dunes near the cottages at Kilchoman and alongside Loch Gruinart are attractive to flocks of Choughs. We came upon a flock of up to 40 at Adnave Point; they promptly flew off and landed alongside John S-S who was reposing in his car some distance away. Loch Gruinart is largely an RSPB reserve, which, from its two hides and viewpoints, provided excellent close views of the geese flocks and other bird-life.

The top end of Loch Indaal was very good for waders at high tide particularly Godwits, Ringed Plovers, Golden Plovers, Turnstones, Curlews and Whimbrels while we were there whilst on the Loch itself a raft of about 100 Scaup, 30 or so Eider, numerous Red-breasted Mergansers, 8 Slavonian Grebes and an occasional diver were noted.

The only Snow Buntings we saw were amongst the Ringed Plovers on the shore of Loch Indaal at Blackrock ('Carraig Dubh' in Gaelic). The Woollen Mill between Bridgend and Redhouses has a fine walk through woodland but due to the heavy rain was not attempted. Team Knight however found the only Dipper recorded in the week on the River Sorn by the mill and they also had Siskins nearby.



North part of Islay.



Barnacle Squadron flyby at Loch Gruinart.

Sheltered and pretty Claggain Bay held all three diver species as well as Black Guillemots, the latter being in their winter plumage which is totally different from the summer plumage. The bellowing of a nearby stag in rut was something we had not fully appreciated before; a superb setting for his prolonged efforts. Fran Eggby, in asking “What’s that bird” remarked that “Its to the right of the rainbow”. Rainbows were particularly beautiful over the sea at this location. The bird turned out to be a Red-throated Diver. It was here that the only White-tailed Eagle recorded by the team was seen by Stuart Walker and his party, resulting in envious comments from the others at the call-over that evening.

The Oa contains an RSPB reserve consisting of farmland and moorland that is actively farmed. The RAFOS team was asked to carry out a survey, done monthly, of birds utilising the in-bye (the cultivated areas as opposed to the ‘out-bye’ being the moorland) within the reserve. Eleven members carried out a timed, co-ordinated survey in three teams one morning to the satisfaction of the warden of the reserve. Particular highlights here were a large flock of Twite (disturbed by a hunting Sparrowhawk), several Repolls, a party of Golden Plover and numerous Redwings. Hen Harrier and Merlin were also seen hunting during the survey.



Sparrowhawks like Twite.

Birding from within or close to the cars was reasonably good. There are a number of suitable off-road viewing points around Loch Indaal which minimised inconvenience to traffic or to the locals. However most roads are single track with passing places so stopping in these could be a bit iffy at times. Care and consideration is called for particularly when the call is made “stop, what’s that bird”. The narrow road up to Bunnahabhain had great views but needed care due to the size of trucks travelling to and from the distillery. The team managed the week without any bumps or scrapes with other traffic, sheep, cows or locals.

Several of the distilleries were visited but only to their shops or cafes. Bunnahabhain distillery is in a lovely setting in a bay north of Port Askaig below moorland hills rolling down to the sea. The buildings are mostly of a drab, battleship grey colour and matched the colour of the sea on the day, but a warm welcome was received there. Ardbeg distillery presented a most pleasing and welcoming aspect and the coffee was good. Free samples of product at both were of generous quantities. There is a good coffee shop and general store alongside the Bruichladdich distillery on the western shore of Loch Indaal, which was very popular and friendly especially so on a wet day. Others visited the new distillery at Kilchoman, (commenced production in 2005), which, I understand, is quickly gaining a wide appreciation.

Bill Francis gave an illustrated talk on the Wednesday evening to the Islay Natural History Trust, attended by members of the team, relating to conservation activities undertaken at WWT Slimbridge covering the Great Crane Project, Madagascar Pochard Conservation and the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Project. This was much appreciated by the audience.

Jon Orme and Peter Evans took the opportunity to visit Jura for a day via the ferry from Port Askaig and had a very enjoyable time in driving to the far end of the single road on the island while viewing the approachable wildlife including good views of a hovering Golden Eagle and more distantly of a Short-eared Owl. On the Friday evening the team had dinner at the Port Charlotte Hotel in the company of invited guests Malcolm and Carol Ogilvie and Ian and Margaret Brook. This was a most enjoyable evening in very pleasant surroundings with good food and good company.

And so the end of the visit was upon us. We departed Kilchoman on the Saturday morning in torrential rain such that the ferry crossing from Port Ellen to Kennacraig was in very poor visibility and initially was a bit bumpy. A good leisurely breakfast was taken but few if any ventured onto the open decks. A feature of the visits has been a lottery in respect of the total number of species recorded between leaving Kennacraig outbound and arriving back there at the end of the visit. A total of 107 species was recorded by the team during the week; the winning draw being shared between Jon Orme and the Recorder (Sally). *How come the Recorder happened to record the right number to win the draw? Editor.*

Thanks to Jan and Dick Knight for organising the trip and to all the team for making it so enjoyable and rewarding.

The team, grouped per cottage accommodation:

Dick and Jan Knight, Bill Francis.

John Orme, Peter Evans, John and Francis Foster.

John Stewart-Smith and Fran Eggby, Sally and Ken Earnshaw.

Stuart Walker and Laura Woods, Geoffrey and Christine Walker.

A selection of the birds noted by the team:

Whooper Swan: 11 near Kilchoman, smaller numbers elsewhere.

White-fronted Goose (Greenland race): possibly a thousand or so around Lochs Gruinart and Indaal and in the northwest of the island as a guestimate.

Greylag Goose: Loch Gruinart, Loch Indaal.

Barnacle Goose: a count of around 20,000 or so around Lochs Gruinart and Indaal and in the northwest of the island noted on Ian Brooke's blog. We saw most of them.

Pintail: a single bird recorded.

Scaup: c100 Loch Indaal off Blackrock.

Eider: c30 Loch Indaal off Bowmore.

Long-tailed Duck: 2 Loch Indaal off Bowmore.

Common Scoter: 1 Loch Indaal off Bowmore, 1 in Claggain Bay.

Red-breasted Merganser: common around the sheltered coasts.

Red Grouse: a single bird recorded.

Red-legged Partridge: a single bird recorded.

Red-throated Diver: several in Claggain Bay.

Black-throated Diver: 2 Claggain Bay, 1 Loch Indaal off Bowmore.

Great Northern Diver: 7 seen from the outbound ferry, 4 in Claggain Bay.

Gannet: small numbers were seen most days.

Slavonian Grebe: 8 Loch Indaal off Bowmore.

White-tailed Eagle: 1 adult Claggain Bay.

Hen Harrier: several males and ring-tails, near Lossit Bay, Loch Gruinart, etc.

Sparrowhawk: 1 seen to attack the large Twite flock on The Oa. 1 or 2 noted elsewhere.

Buzzard: fairly common.

Golden Eagle: several recorded. Kilchoman, Loch Gruinart (and on Jura).

Kestrel: 1 near Kilchoman.

Merlin: several recorded. Near Kilchiaran, The Oa, etc.

Peregrine: 1 over the cottages.

Golden Plover: Loch Indaal, Loch Gruinart.

Ringed Plover: numerous at Blackrock on Loch Indaal. Whimbrel: Loch Indaal.

Curlew: Loch Indaal.
Black-tailed Godwit: Loch Indaal.
Bar-tailed Godwit: Loch Indaal.
Black Guillemot: maximum of 5 at Claggain Bay.
Kittiwake: c 50 moving west at Ardnave Point.
Short-eared Owl: near Kilchoman (and on Jura).
Grey Wagtail: several recorded.
Dipper: 1 at the woollen mill.
Whinchat: a single bird recorded.
Stonechat: recorded every day, widespread.
Northern Wheatear: a single bird recorded.
Fieldfare and Redwing: steady movement mostly southwest through the island predominantly of Redwings.
Blackcap: 1 by the cottages.
Goldcrest: recorded by the cottages.
Long-tailed Tit: in scrub near Bridgend at the top end of Loch Indaal.
Trecreeper: 1 by the cottages.
Chough: c40 at Ardnave Point, smaller numbers at Kilchoman.
Raven: seen mostly in the vicinity of the cottages.
Siskin: recorded near the woollen mill.
Twite: approximately 200 at Kinabus Farm on The Oa.
Lesser Redpoll: several at Kinabus Farm.
Snow Bunting: 2 or 3 at Blackrock on Loch Indaal

Additional activities:

By way of breaking the journey home some of the team stayed at the Nith Hotel, Glencaple, near Dumfries on Saturday and Sunday 2nd and 3rd November. Dick, Jan, John, Peter, Sally and I enjoyed the hospitality on offer via an excellent Saturday evening meal and a Nith grill or kippers next morning. Sunday was spent at the Caerlaverock WWT reserve where we saw lots more Geese including 2 Pink-footed Geese. Amongst the typical birds to be expected were a Peregrine, Hen Harrier, Scaup, Green-winged Teal and several Buzzards.

One interesting aspect: while we were in a hide a WWT assistant warden was describing the birds in view and remarked that he had not yet seen, this winter, a particular pair of Whooper Swans identifiable from numbered leg rings. Just at this moment a pair arrived accompanied by 7 immature birds as a family party. It was possible to see at least one of the adults' ring number, which showed that they were the pair in question. They were shy and gave indications of having just arrived from their breeding grounds. Magic.

Peter and Jon departed for home at lunchtime on the Sunday leaving the remaining four to continue with the culinary delights of the hotel. This hotel provides very reasonably priced accommodation, excellent food and has a prime location alongside the River Nith in a very quiet, attractive area.

On the Monday Sally and I, while travelling down the M6, decided to call in at RSPB Leighton Moss. Bad decision. The place was overwhelmed with visitors following a televised visit by 'Autumn-watch' and from the presence of one or two rarities. We tried one largish hide but it was so crammed with people we decided to leave straight away. We heard that complaints were voiced to the RSPB from one person that the windows of the hides were too small for his large lens. Well there we are.



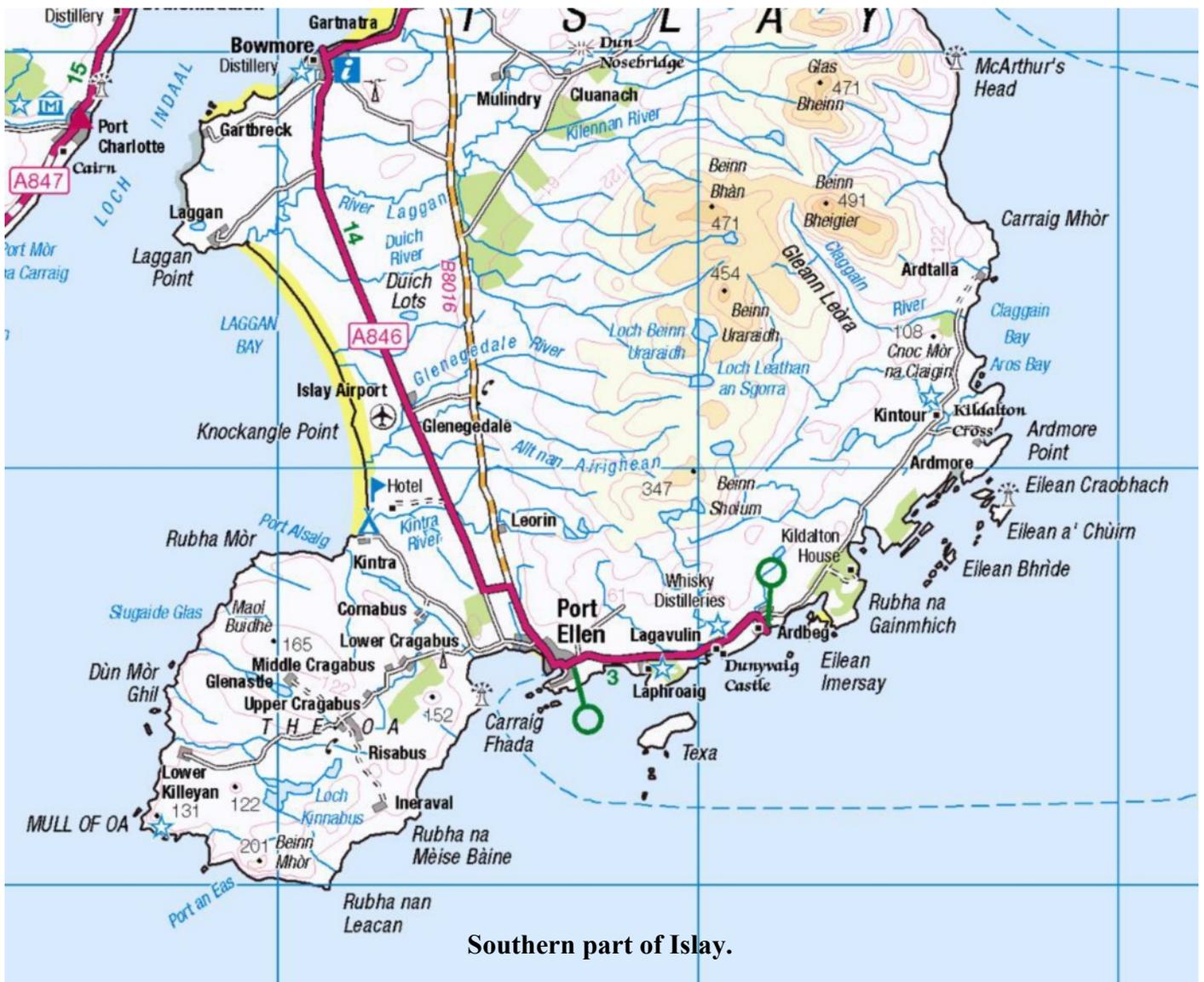
Team Refuelling at Kilchoman



One of the many Barnacle Geese



A pair of Whoopers arrived with SEVEN immatures! Surely some were adopted?



MONEY WELL SPENT

By John Le Gassick

I really enjoyed the RAFOS AGM this year and looked forward to the closing item “The Grand Book Sale”. I sat there with a few shillings clasped in my sweaty palm waiting for my moment, unfortunately as ever the bidding was fierce and much paper money was involved as the auction progressed. It seemed as though I was going to leave, taking with me only the pleasant thoughts of old friendships renewed (and I mean old!) and the warm glow of a decent buffet lunch. At the eleventh hour, actually ten after five, all this was to change when the final volume of the auction was waved aloft to a stony silence. With only a moments hesitation I heard myself say “I will give you a pound for it Mike” and seconds later, although it definitely seemed longer, the book was mine. The only down side of the transaction was the Hon Treasurer’s refusal to take a cheque.

The book in question was ‘Galapagos Diary- a Complete Guide to the Archipelago’s Birdlife’ by Hermann Heinzel and Barnaby Hall. This lucky acquisition has given me much pleasure and unusually for me I have read it from cover to cover. Incidentally it retails on Amazon at £16.99. My very first proper Field Guide was ‘The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East’ by Hermann Heinzel, Richard Fitter and John Parslow. My copy was bought in Valletta Malta in 1972 and is now well worn and sports a bodge-taped spine. Some of the younger members if they have read this far, may well not know about bodge tape an extremely tough black glossy tape used for mending aeroplanes. Every RAFOS Expedition worth its name took at least four rolls with it. This excellent Guide has accompanied me on every trip that I have made to Cyprus and elsewhere in Europe and has never failed me. To chance unwittingly upon this book ‘Galapagos Diary’ written and illustrated by one of my ornithological heroes really made my day.

This unlikely duo of Heinzel and Hall have produced what I think is a unique book. Hermann Heinzel is a 71 year old ornithologist and renowned illustrator, and Barnaby Hall a 16 year old Bird watcher and photographer. Both had visited the Galapagos previously, Barnaby in 1994 and Hermann in 1971. It was Barnaby’s report of the abundant numbers of Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis*, a rarity on Heinzel’s previous visit that made Heinzel eager to return and see for himself. The visit was encouraged by Barnaby’s Mother and Father who organized the trip for them. They had the luxury of the 26 ton tour boat Espanola, with its crew of four to themselves and their guide.

The book is in two halves, the first half is a diary telling of all of the islands that were visited and the second half contains an illustrated list of the species recorded. Every page in the first half contains a plethora of photographs and the occasional small sketch. The majority of the sketches are of small maps plotting the journey of the Espanola and of the islands that were visited. These maps are all roughly hand drawn and annotated in scrawled hand writing, which I found very enchanting in our digital age. As I am, at the moment, unfamiliar with these unique Islands I would have appreciated a map showing the entire Archipelago on one page. The second half, the identification guide is full of Heinzel’s excellent sketches depicting the subject bird in a variety of postures all with screeds of handwritten notes such as we used write in our note books once upon a time, before we all had digital cameras. Barnaby of course used “wet” film and commented that on his first visit he had run out of film a thing that we do not have to worry about in the ‘digital age’. At the end of the first book, on page 153, there is a photograph of an immature Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* which won the young photographer the ‘Runner Up’ prize in the 15-17 year old group in the ‘British Gas Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year 1996’ Competition. His camera was a Canon EOS 500 with a 25-75mm and a 75-300mm lenses using Fujichrome Sensia 64, 200 AND 400 film. As there are strict limits of access on the islands it was not possible to get close to many of the birds. I think that non-the-less the pictures are good, being sharp and interesting and of a great variety. The field guide section, as to be expected, contains some lovely sketches especially of the many different ‘Galapagos Finches’ which are covered in great detail and enhanced with some nice photographs. At the end of the book there is a Complete Checklist of Galapagos Birds. This lists the Islands: Western, Central, Southern and Outlying, nineteen in all and the birds found on them including their status. They saw 66 species in total and this included 56 of the 59 breeding birds.

In conclusion as it was purely by chance that I came to read this really ‘quirky’ and easy to read book which is neither Field Guide nor Travelogue but a nice blend of both. It has made me realize that I would really like to visit these magic Islands and I would definitely have this book in my luggage. So Dick as you are the FALO how about it?

COMPTON SWALLOWS!

By Julia Springett

The Compton Abbas airfield swallows arrived some 4 weeks late in 2013, delayed by the cold, easterly wind. A dozen finally made it and at least 4 nests were established in and around the airfield buildings, a couple of miles south of Shaftesbury.



On Saturday 22nd June, Julia Springett arrived to ring those that could be easily reached and together with her step-brother, David (Mog) Morgan who flies from the airfield, they put rings on 13 pulli from 3 separate nests.



The following weekend saw the arrival of extremely hot weather, which caused one of the nests in the apex of the hangar roof, to be abandoned. One chick was saved from the hangar floor, fed some sugar water and re-homed in a cardboard box atop a locker, after a long-distance telephone consultation with Julia. The parents continued to feed it and on 14th July, when Mog was checking its condition, he was lucky enough to see it spontaneously fledge. Another Compton first solo!

The other 3 nests have successfully fledged over the last few days and the skies above Compton are now alive with young birds! It is sobering to think that their first solo navex will be to West Africa.

RAFOS AGM 2013
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

It is with great pleasure that I stand here to address you again, for what is my 3rd AGM as your President. I need to start my address by warning you that this is going to be a bit of a break with what I've done before, as my customary 5 minute pitch is being stretched out quite a lot this year – as I've got a lot more to say! In terms of what I going to cover – well - as usual, I shall be talking a little about the range of RAFOS activities that I have been able to participate in this year, before giving you an update on how things are going in the RAF. I am also going to talk about some activity I have been carrying out in support of the 50th Anniversary of RAFOS – as well as some thoughts of my own that have arisen out of this work. And I need to warn you in advance that this includes some potentially contentious elements – specifically designed to stir up some debate – which is the main reason why my address to you is a little longer than usual – but I do not intend to apologise for that as I believe the issues involved are too important for me to not say something! Before starting on that though, I do need to mention that, as some of you will be aware, I got married in July this year. And Sarah and I were delighted when we received a fantastic wedding card from RAFOS – which even included some highly-personalised gifts – and I am delighted to be able to take this opportunity to publically thank Team Knight for their efforts on your behalf!

So let me begin by talking about my birding year with RAFOS. This began in style at Slimbridge with the annual New Year field trip, where I not only managed to see and get some great pictures of a Water Rail, but also – and for the first time in some 5 years of visiting Slimbridge – actually saw a Bittern! In fact it was a good day out despite the rather grey weather – and as ever good to catch up with a number of familiar faces – and to enjoy an excellent hot chocolate at the visitor's centre restaurant. The next RAFOS run out was down to the Chew Valley for the first time – this time with my son Alexander. This was another great day out, and my report actually made it into the Journal – we enjoyed both the company and the birding, and especially the first Yellow Wagtail that we had ever seen.

My last activity this year was the Burnham Overy weekend – which Sarah was brave enough to accompany me on. Despite my having arrived without a sleeping bag (and it was still pretty cold in the windmill even in May!), we had a great time, and yet again saw a wonderful variety of birds in some fantastic locations – with great company in the evenings to boot. And Sarah did enjoy it – although I think she's still not entirely convinced that the early morning starts are that necessary!

Turning to our Service – this is the beginning of a very important period for the RAF as we have celebrated our 95th anniversary. Indeed a number of our squadrons which have Royal Flying Corps antecedents have celebrated their centenaries, and we have now entered the run up period towards the end of what has been described by some less-friendly commentators as the 'hundred year experiment'. 2013 itself has been a memorable year for the RAF for a number of reasons – perhaps foremost amongst which is the fact that we have a new Chief of the Air Staff – with Air Chief Marshal Sir Andy Pulford having taken up post at the beginning of August. And it would be remiss of me not to mention before anything else that we have seen the retirement of the backbone of the RAF's strategic airlift fleet, the venerable (and beautiful!) VC10 – which will always be to me the 'Queen of the Skies' – and NOT the 'Funbus' as it was described by the BBC!

However, the paramount duty of the RAF remains as it always has been – providing control of the air over the UK – and when necessary UK interests overseas – as exemplified in the recent deployment of Typhoon to Cyprus. Our QRA forces therefore remain at a high state of readiness and over the last year have scrambled on more than a dozen occasions to identify aircraft approaching the UK. We are also working hard to ensure our forces remain well equipped and are relevant to the demands placed upon Air Power in the 21st century – with an impressive forward equipment programme which includes the Lightning II multi-role fighter aircraft, the A400M Atlas and additional C17 Globemaster transport aircraft, Voyager tanker (and transport) aircraft, the new Rivet Joint aircraft to complement the Sentry airborne early warning aircraft, and the improved variant of Chinook.

That's not to say that there are not challenges remaining – we would still like to regain a maritime patrol capability for our island nation (and are investing in the seed corn necessary to rapidly rebuild this capability if economic conditions allow). And we have also slimmed down our headquarters staff by some 40% to ensure that our manpower is focussed on the front-line. However, our main effort is absolutely focussed on delivering on current operations. Whether that comes from our Tornado forces providing a rapidly deliverable and scalable set of effects to ground forces in Afghanistan, to the support helicopter force that moves them around in safety and recovers them incredibly rapidly – often in the most challenging of situations – when they are injured – to the AT forces which get them in and out – and the surveillance aircraft – such as Sentinel – and Reaper which provide them with the vital situational awareness that ensure they have a jump on the

enemy. And we stand ready to assist our allies around the world in our common fight against terrorism – as shown most recently in our support of French operations in Mali where our ISTAR and Air Mobility forces swung rapidly into action.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any future conflict where the range of air capabilities would not be required – and as ever, the RAF stands proud in assuring the country that all of its young men and women stand ready to do their duty – no matter how difficult or challenging the task.

That brings me to the subject of RAFOS 50. As I'm sure all of you are aware, we are now only 2 years away from the 50th anniversary of the formation of RAFOS – and I know that the Committee are actively working on a programme for our 50th year. As my contribution to the anniversary, I have volunteered to put together a short history of RAFOS – hopefully suitable for publication – and to that end I have recently commenced research amongst the archives in the library at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell. This has proven to be most interesting – as I have started by going through the RAFOS newsletters, in order to get a feel for what was going on at the 'shop floor' of RAFOS – a time consuming business but I'm hopeful that I will get it completed in time! (And I'll be writing out shortly to ask for particular reminiscences and pictures from you all to help bring it to life!)

I haven't had the chance to do much with this yet, but I have selected a few extracts that will hopefully be of interest. The first is that the issue of membership numbers has been a perennial worry since day one, and it was also noted that a number of adverse comments had been received on the standard of English and grammar displayed in the first Journal – which resulted in an editorial sub-committee being formed with 2 flight lieutenants press-ganged to assist the editor in the word-smithing role! Problems with printers for both the Newsletter and Journal also appeared to be a feature in those early years, although other problems definitely came under the heading of 'less-common'! The ringers out in Singapore were clearly busy – however one night they left the nets up and came back the following morning to find the unmistakable signs of the passing of a herd of elephants! The newsletter noted that fortunately only 1 net was destroyed (perhaps more fortunately no elephants were caught!).

It was also clear from the letters section that many members were also active ringers, and one noted that a Redwing he had ringed in 1965 was recovered in July 1967 near Serov in the USSR – in the stomach of a pike! Mention was also made of the spread of birding 'slang' for recording and whether it was a good idea! The examples given were Mipit, Tripit, and Rocket for Meadow, Tree and Rock Pipits respectively – and then it was suggested that 'Scrocket' would be appropriate for a Scandnavian Rock Pipit. In 1969 a brave Chairman wrote to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff to ask for survey flights by the RAF of breeding sites along the seaboard of the British Isles and outer islands – some to run in hand with census counts by ground observers (I haven't found whether that was answered yet or not!). And finally for this excursion into the archives – it was noted that a Cpl (W) Ann Lewis was volunteering to help the RSPB Young Ornithologists Club carry out local field outings – and the question was asked as to what other RAFOS members were doing to help future ornithologists develop?

As I read through these dusty documents, a number of particular themes and issues emerged which I suspect will echo throughout the 50 years – but one particularly resonated for me: which was – what exactly was the role of the President? Given that the first president was Lord Shackleton (although he moved within 3 years to become the Society's patron instead) – and he has been followed by a number of Very Senior People (at least until you go to me...) - it is evident that perhaps the President's role is mostly ceremonial. However, I also detected that there were two other important functions – the first is to support the members of the Committee as much as he can both directly with them and acting as a senior level interlocutor with the Service – and the second is to act as an honest observer of the Society's state, and perhaps say things that are possibly unpalatable.

And that brings me onto RAFOS' current situation. At present we have around 120 members – although of these only some 70 are active – and most of those are present here today. That confirms that we have a real problem – which has been the elephant in the room ever since I became a member of RAFOS. If we continue as we are – RAFOS has probably only got another 5 years of life left in it – 10 at the most – before – to put it bluntly – it will simply die as our members do. I have produced a small graph based on an analysis of the age distribution and a few factors from actuarial tables.

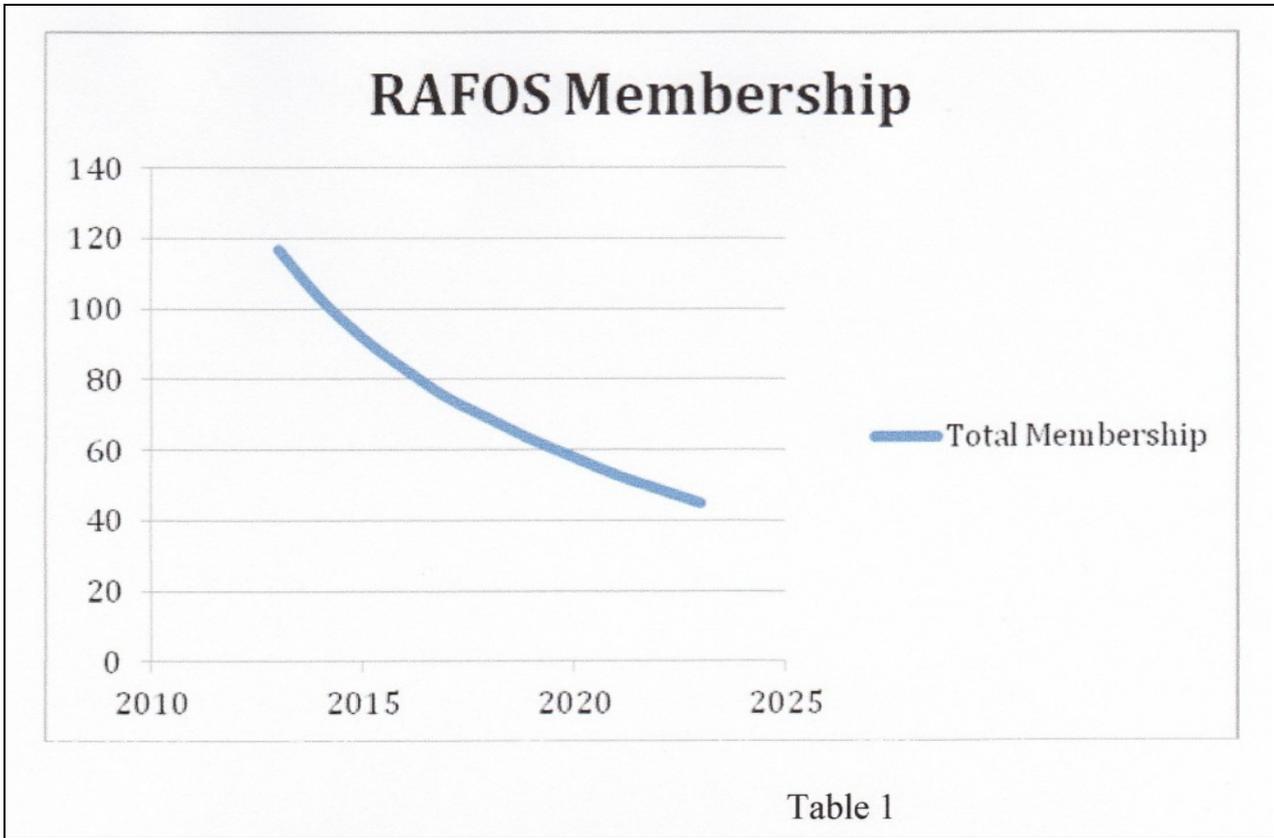


Table 1

The key point here is that unless we are able to get significant numbers of new joiners, within 9 years we'll be down to about 55 members in total – and only 10 of them will be under retirement age. Two further points here – I do not believe amalgamation with the other 2 service birdwatching societies is the answer, as they have the same problems as ourselves – so whilst it might delay the inevitable it will not provide a long-term solution (although that does not stop us working together more). And I do not see that removing the link with the RAF helps – as otherwise there is simply nothing left as a common thread for the organisation – and again it will simply die as the current members do.

However, I don't want to leave you with the impression that I think this is a lost cause – and I would therefore also like to take the opportunity to share some analysis that I carried out at the beginning of the year. You see – one of my contentions is that there are many people out in the RAF who have an interest – perhaps even a keen interest – in birds – the problem is that either they don't know about RAFOS – or what RAFOS offers is not of interest to them. Let me try and situate this for you. A little bit of research shows that there is obviously a great deal of interest in birds and wildlife amongst the general population – but that the majority of this is within the more 'general' end of the spectrum (and, not coincidentally, these are the ones with distinct youth groups).

Organisation	Membership /% of UK Population	Youth Group Size
RSPB	1,000,000/1.8%	195,000
Wildlife Trusts	800,000/1.4%	150,000
WWT	200,000/0.4%	-
BTO	15,235/0.03%	-

Table

Taking an average of the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and WWT figures gives us a figure of 1.07% of the population having an interest in birds and/or wildlife strong enough to make them join a wildlife organisation and pay annual membership fees. If we assume that the RAF's population mirrors that of civil society and apply that 1.07% figure to the RAF's predicted strength in 2020 – 31,500 – then we should expect there to be at least 330 RAF personnel who have an active interest in this area – all of whom ideally should therefore be members of RAFOS! And there must be at least that many out there today ... so the question is – why are we not able to connect with them – or to convince them that there is a benefit in membership?

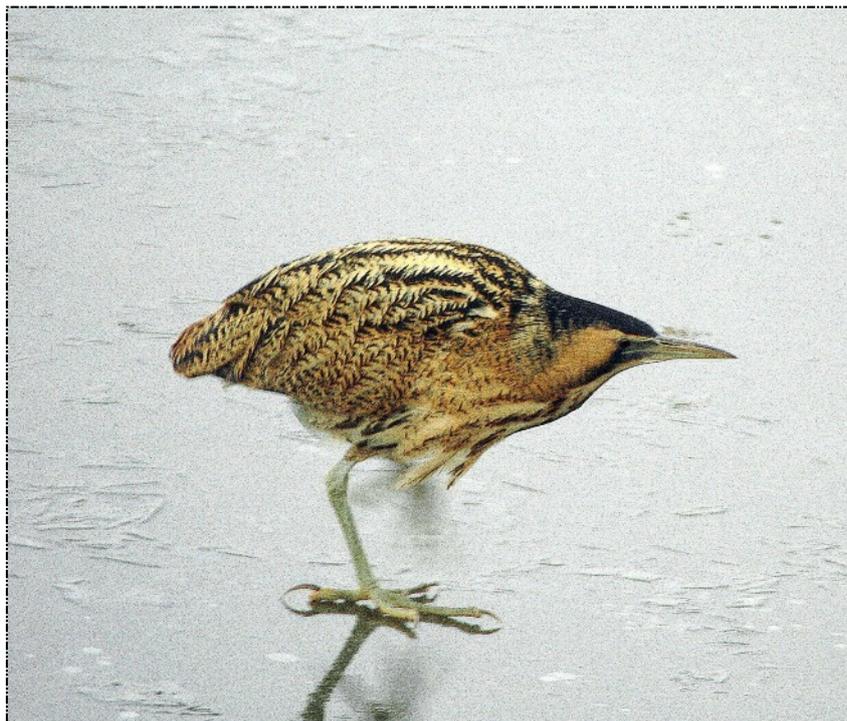
Now I don't intend to try and run through all of the reasons why that might not be the case – although I have produced an analysis of this which I have provided to the Committee – but I will just highlight a few areas. The first is that many of

the current activities (field trips) revolve around small groups, with the same people being involved each year, and are aimed simply at general birding, whilst the more adventurous activities (i.e. Winter Duck) are unlikely to be hugely attractive to the novice as they do not involve exotic locations or content that is obviously novice-friendly. It is also noticeable that there are no particular youth-friendly activities, or any specific teaching activities – i.e. events aimed at teaching the ‘how-to’ of ornithology. Examples might be – how to identify particular types of birds, how to improve bird-call recognition, how to improve photography of birds, how to qualify and work as a ‘ringer’ – and there are undoubtedly others. I also think there is still an issue with general visibility of RAFOS within the Service – I didn’t find out about it until I’d been in for over 20 years! Finally - RAFOS is not regarded particularly highly by the RAF hierarchy (if they know of it at all) - probably because it does not appear to benefit the RAF in any tangible manner - and this together with the lack of serving members makes it difficult to tap into RAF resources!

Now of course it would be unfair of me to simply highlight problems without thinking about what could be done – well – making the assumption that RAFOS wishes to grow and thrive in the future, it evidently has to succeed in attracting a significant number of new members, and also convincing the RAF hierarchy of its value to the Service. I would suggest that this would require a number of concurrent activities to enable an annual programme to be produced which contains a much greater number of ‘focussed’ elements: targeting the recruitment (and retention!) of new members, development opportunities for existing members, ‘adventurous’ activities open to all, and activities to increase understanding of RAFOS and its relevance to the Service amongst the RAF’s senior leaders. I also think that we should consider some linkage with organisations such as the RSPB – even if only so that members of the RAF who are already members of the RSPB might be able to find out about RAFOS – although I suspect there is much more that we could get from a formal relationship. But what we really need is an explicit future strategy for RAFOS – and ideally one that has deliverables associated with it, against which performance can be measured – enabling the strategy’s success to be determined and if necessary the strategy to be amended! But that strategy won’t work unless the members are willing to support the changes ...

And that message is as much of a challenge to me as it is to you – because this is all about asking what I can do – thus linking this presentation all the way back to that very first RAFOS newsletter. So – I’ve arranged to do a presentation on RAFOS at my place of work – possibly looking at setting up a local group at Abbey Wood, and certainly aimed at ‘selling’ the benefits of RAFOS membership. And I have also recently started a dialogue with the RSPB – culminating in a meeting at their HQ a couple of weeks ago – to explore ways in which we might work together for mutual benefit – and am still working up a proposal to put to the RSPB and our Committee.

My closing comment therefore is quite simple – but a bit of a challenge. We have our 50th anniversary in two years time – and my question to you is – is it going to be a celebration or a wake? If we don’t want it to be the latter, then the whole society needs to lend its weight to the Committee in terms of enabling and empowering a range of activities that will be necessary in order to give the Society a future to match that of the RAF itself. I firmly believe that RAFOS could have a really bright future. The challenge is – what are WE going to do about it...?



Winter Bittern by Fran Eggby

RAFOS AGM 2013
CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

I'd like to thank the President for such a thought provoking start to the AGM – clearly we will need to take forward many of the issues he has raised in nurturing and developing the Society over the next few year. I had a variety of points I wanted to raise and following from the President's address I'm going to take them out of order slightly so that we can maintain the chain of thought.

Much of what we need to do centres on promoting, dare I say marketing, the Society within the Service. We can do this through Station Orders, Defence Council Instructions and good old fashioned posters on notice boards. But if 'marketing' gets our presence recognised we also have to make sure the 'offer', ie what we do and how we do it, is also right; and that it attracts the younger element. The expedition to Leuchars generated considerable interest from the Station's personnel but so far that doesn't seem to have translated into increased membership. Many of those showing an interest were already members of the Unit's Conservation Group and maybe it is this more local level of practical engagement that we need to concentrate on. We can also do something with the Air Cadet Organisation as getting the message through to them is relatively easy.

Closely allied to publicity and marketing is our communication in the round; communicating with each other and with our prospective membership. In this respect our on-line presence through the web site and Facebook pages is important as it is often the first place a prospective member looks for information about an organisation. Bill Francis is going to say a few words about this later on in the proceedings so I'll try not to eat his sandwiches now. The Newsletter is another excellent tool for communicating what we're up to as a Society and I know John Stewart-Smith would wish me to give it a plug. John is convinced only 15% of the membership can write (and is concerned that the others might not even be able to read). As you will have noticed the Newsletter has gone to an 'all colour' production which is a big step forward and it is also being made available in e-formats to save on postage.

There remains much to do to and this discussion has provided much good food for thought and your committee will apply their massive brain-power to the task!

So – good afternoon – thank you all for coming on this dank autumn day. Before I go any further I'd like to express my thanks to Team Knight and to Colin, is that an American Kestrel on your arm, Wearn for all their hard work in setting the day up. Without them nothing would happen! I'd also like to welcome Roger Dickey and Mark Cutts from our sister Societies in the Army and RN (note to self – don't crack the Cinderella and ugly sisters joke; it isn't very funny – oh yes it is). The 3 Societies have had plenty of contact this year with joint ringing activities and the expedition to Ascension Island – you may have seen all of us on Countryfile in the spring ringing at the Defence School of Transport at what I still think of as RAF Leconfield. Overall it has been an active year for the Society and Dick Yates will bring us all up to speed in his presentation.

I'd also like to express my thanks to the Committee for all their work over the year. There has been a significant change in membership with Ken Earnshaw taking on the Journal, Julia Springett becoming ringing coordinator and Dick Yates assuming the role of FALO. During the year, we decided we needed some specialist advice on social media and co-opted Bill Francis on to the Committee as Social Media Member – later on you'll get the chance to elect him properly. We also lost John Wells as Publicity Member during the year; many of you will know that John retired from the RAF recently and now has a proper job – so he feels he can no longer devote the time and attention that the post demands; so when we get to election of committee members I'll be seeking a volunteer for that post. I would at this juncture like to record a vote of thanks to John Wells for his many years of service to the Society.

You will recall at the last AGM we discussed the future logo and the RAF brand guidelines and regulations with which we needed to comply. I'm pleased to say that as a result of a competition in the spring we chose a new, and entirely compliant, logo which has been promulgated through the Newsletter. This will now be

used on official and informal correspondence and the next step is to work it up into merchandise – Julia Springett will say a bit more about this under AOB.

Finally, may I thank in advance the presenters. Such is my confidence in their abilities that I'm sure you're going to enjoy what they have to say – that's all folks.

RAFOS AGM 2013 **FIELD ACTIVITIES LIAISON OFFICER'S REPORT**

President, Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is my first report to the AGM as FALO, and after the tours de force that you have become used to from Jerry Knights, I feel a bit like the chap that follows on behind the Lord Mayor's Show. But, here goes.

If we glance at this year's programme (on separate page below) you will note that, apart from tomorrow's field trip and Robin Springett's trip to the Gambia which goes on 3 Dec 13, all events have taken place on schedule. I am also delighted to report that that all came in on budget. In fact, Martin Routledge managed to save £250 of the £350 he was allocated. But let's run through the activities as they occurred.

On 6 Jan 13 Bill Francis led our annual visit to the WWT at **Slimbridge** and 16 members had a very good day out, including the President getting his first Bittern as he mentioned in his address.

Winter Duck 12, our intrepid Scotland team, conducted their annual survey from 1 to 9 Feb 13. 11 members participated. This year the areas covered were as follows:

Team 1 Phase 1. Red Point to Kanaird Mouth (north of Rhue).

Team 2 Phase 1. Horse Sound (south of Badenscallie) to Balchrack (north of Kinlochbervie).

Team 3 Single Phase. Duncansby Head to Cape Wrath.

Team 1 Phase 2. Fearnmore and Fernbeg (Loch Torridon) to Lower Diabaig.

Team 2 Phase 2. Loch Carron to Callakille (north of Applecross).

Team 3 returned to the main base, at Dundonnell, on the penultimate day of the expedition.

1471 miles 'on site' survey miles were covered to survey **205 sites** of which 3 were new. A WeBS Form was completed for each site surveyed. 16 previously surveyed sites were omitted this year; 5 due to failing light at the end of the survey day and 11 caused by restrictions due to deer stalking.

On 14 Apr 13 Dave and Anne Bodley led the first of the year's visits to **Chew Valley Lake**. 19 members attended and after the drive round the lake to view the birds an excellent lunch back in the ringing hut proved to be the highlight of the day. Once again many thanks to Val Kersley and Anne for lunch.

The annual East Anglia Extravaganza at Burnham Overy took place between 10 and 13 May 13. It was an average year for birds; we are just too late to pick up the winter specialities and only just caught the beginning of the summer migrants. However, Pete Evans' smart new headgear impressed us all. Thanks go to Mike Hayes for organizing it – and still no Ring Ouzel, Mike!

St Andrew's Cross, RAF Leuchars – 6-12 Jun 13. Martin Routledge led a team of 7 members on this survey of the RAF Leuchars estate in general and some specific designated sites. Ringing took place on most days with 56 birds ringed of 13 species. Martin hopes to be able to conduct a follow up survey in 2014.

Our **Ringing Experience Activity** took place over the Bird Fair weekend, 16-19 Aug 13. Participants met up at the Bird Fair for a look round and a spot of lively social intercourse before heading to Catterick and

Foxglove Covert where the ringing was hosted by Tony Crease. One day of ringing took place on the reserve and the other on the high moor ringing meadow pipits. This was a joint RAFOS/AOS weekend and 2 RAFOS members took part. Thanks to Tony Crease for hosting it. The plan is to do the same again next year and perhaps a few more members will give ringing a try.

GIBEx 2013 took place on the Rock from 23 Sep to 20 Oct 13. This was a RAFOS led, tri-service expedition consisting of 4 RAFOS, 3 AOS and 1 RNBWS members. The aim was to undertake a constant ringing effort on the Upper Rock Nature Reserve by catching and ringing as many migrating birds as possible on a part of the Rock where it had not been done for over 25 years, thus providing new data. In addition, some members were engaged in counting raptors on migration.

324m of nets were erected for a circle of roughly 1/2 km circumference, at varying altitudes from 280 to 360m. The ringing station was situated at a mid-point beneath some overhanging vegetation providing some much needed shade for the birds, and ringers, during the heat of the day.

Numbers of birds processed daily varied from 11 to 147 and the total for the trip was 1143 of 34 species, including both Common and Red-necked Nightjar, Ortolan Bunting, Orphean and Sub-alpine Warbler and Iberian Chiffchaff.

The team was supported by the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society who provided the rings, other equipment and much appreciated local knowledge, and HQBF Gibraltar who provided vehicle: our sincere thanks to both.

Portland Bill Observatory - 4-6 Oct 13. Another Dave and Anne Bodley led activity. The weather was kind to us this year and we were able to visit all the usual haunts. Radipole gave us great views of up to 4 Hobbies on the Friday afternoon and the Saturday morning walk around the Bill provided good views of Peregrine, Kestrel and Raven. Saturday afternoon at Lodmore the Little Egret and Spoonbill showed well and on Sunday the party split into a group visiting Chesil Beach where Mediterranean Gulls and Black Brent Geese were present, and a group taking the path down by the church which was good for raptors as usual. It was all back to the Observatory for Sunday lunch before a mid-afternoon departure. 17 members attended.

20 Oct 13 saw 17 members attend the second visit of the year to **Chew Valley Lake**. Dave noted that water levels were well down – only about 50% full in fact and several waders - Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Knot and Little Stint - were taking advantage of the exposed mud. He also noted a large aggregation of Teal from the causeway. Most had completed their circumnavigation of the lake by 1300 and, as the heavens opened during lunch, the afternoon was spent watching a slide presentation by John Orme about the RAFOS trip to Sanda in 2006 and a miscellany of aircraft shown by Alex Smith. After ‘tea and medals’ at 1615 the meeting adjourned.

A small, but perfectly formed, team of 4 took part in this year’s **Cornish Chough** field meeting from 25 Oct to 3 Nov 13. Reduced numbers this year were through sickness (2) and unavailability (1). Once again, the team stayed at the Vineries Chalets at Polgigga and thanks go to Steve Heather who offered to use his car for the event when the normally used Wyton minibus succumbed to old age and crashes.

This year the team observed 136 species, somewhat down on previous years, and this was attributed to the strong to gale force winds and heavy showers blocking most passerine migration.

However, some good birds and numbers were recorded.

First Cornish Chough record of Hermit Thrush
Second record of Osprey and Black Guillemot
Fifth record of Garganey

In addition record day counts were made of:-

13,308 Gannet
370 Bonxie and
221 Balaeric Shearwater

15 RAFOS members took part in **Islay Mist 2013**, 8 of whom were Islay 'virgins', from 26 Oct – 2 Nov 13. The weather was euphemistically described as 'very mixed'!! Not that I'd call 20-30 mph winds in heavy showers for 6 days out of 7 'mixed'! But despite the weather the team managed to cover most of the island, with the exception of the high ground to the North and North-East.

On the Tuesday 4 teams carried out a survey of farmland birds for the RSPB including the improved farmland on the working farm which is also the RSPB HQ on the Oa. Because of the strong winds not much was showing apart from Hooded Crows, Stonechats, Golden Plovers and a huge flock of Twite. A team also surveyed Islay Airport but the only sightings worth a mention were a flock of 7 Whooper Swan and one of 7 Golden Plover.

Bill Francis gave a talk to 42 people at the Islay Natural History Trust on the WWT's Great Crane Project, the efforts to save the Madagascar Pochard and the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Project.

The final tally of birds seen was 107 species.

To come this year we have the field meeting at Little Marlow Gravel Pits tomorrow and Robin Springett's birding trip and survey in the Gambia.

Turning to next year's programme (on separate page below) we have the full range of UK based activities and, as next year is on the calendar as a non-overseas year, the allocation of funds I have to play with is reduced to £2000. However, there is no Islay Mist next year, so as you can see from the proposed programme I have a bit of spare cash. Karen Sims and John Towers have proposed a working visit to the Coto Doñana in Southern Spain and, with your approval, I will allocate a grant of £400 for that event. Karen and John will tell you a bit more about their proposal in a few minutes. You will note that, even with that grant, I still have £150 unallocated and I would like your approval to spend that as I see fit if something turns up.

Finally, this year we have had 133 members, plus those going tomorrow, engaged on field activities. This represents a good turn out considering our reducing numbers and, for some of us, advancing years; but it demonstrates vividly the points made by our President that we must recruit and retain new and younger members.

2013 PROGRAMME

	Date	Event / Venue	Leaders	Activity	Sponsored	Attended	Highlights
1	6 Jan	WWT Slimbridge	Bill Francis	Guided tour of Wetland Centre	No bid	16	
2	1-9 Feb	Winter Duck 12 N Scotland	Jim Bryden & Jerry Knights	BTO/RSPB/WWT/JNCC survey	£1200	11	
3	14 Apr	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	Meet at the CVRS hut	No bid	19	
4	10-13 May	Burnham Overy	Mike Hayes	East Anglian spectacular	£100	16 (1 new member)	
5	7-12 Jun	St Andrew's Cross RAF Leuchars	Martin Routledge	MOD Bird Count at Airbase	£350	7	£250 not taken
6	16-19 Aug	Bird Fair & Catterick	Julia Springett & Tony Crease	Ringing experience weekend	No bid	6 (3 + 3 AOS)	
7	25 Sep- 20 Oct	Joint Service Ringing Expedition to Gibraltar	Julia Springett	Ringing and survey work	No bid	8 (RAFOS 4, AOS 3, RNBWS 1)	
8	4-6 Oct	Portland Bill, Dorset	Dave & Anne Bodley	Autumn migration viewing from Observatory and environs	No bid	17	
9	25 Oct- 3 Nov	Cornish Chough	Jim Bryden & Martin Wightman	General observations and survey	£160	4	
10	26 Oct- 2 Nov	Islay Mist	Dick & Jan Knight	18 month rotation	£240	15	
11	20 Oct	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	Chew Valley Lake survey	No bid	17	
12	17 Nov	Little Marlow Gravel Pits	Ken Earnshaw	Post-AGM field trip	No bid	TBD	
13	3-17 Dec	The Gambia	Robin Springett	General observations and survey at Kartung observatory	£450	7	
					£2500		

2014 PROPOSED PROGRAMME

	Date	Event / Venue	Leaders	Activity	Sponsored	Attended	Highlights
1	5 Jan	WWT Slimbridge	Bill Francis	Guided tour of Wetland Centre	No bid		
2	31 Jan- 8 Feb	Winter Duck 13 N Scotland	Matin Routledge	BTO/RSPB/WWT/JNCC survey	£1000		
3	Apr	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	Field meeting -meet at the CVRS hut	No bid		
4	25-28 Apr	Burnham Overy	Mike Hayes	East Anglian spectacular	£150		
5	Jun TBD	St Andrew's Cross follow- up survey RAF Leuchars	Martin Routledge	MOD Bird Count at Airbase	£150		
6	Aug	Bird Fair & Catterick	Julia Springett	Ringing Experience weekend	No bid		
7	10-12 Oct	Portland Bill	Dave & Anne Bodley	Autumn migration viewing from Observatory and environs	No bid		
8	Oct	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	Chew Valley Lake survey	No bid		
9	Oct/Nov	Cornish Chough	Jim Bryden & Martin Wightman	General observations and survey	£150		
10	Oct/Nov TBD	Southern Spain	Karen Sims & John Towers	Assist with restoration work, ringing and survey Coto Doñana National Park	£400		
11	16 Nov	TBD	TBD	Post-AGM field trip meeting	No bid		
12							
13					£1850		
					Max £2000		

2014 is supposed to be a non-overseas expedition year, therefore the expenditure allocation is £2000. However, I recommend that, as there is no Islay Mist this year and, at present, there is no other in-country bid, we consider an allocation of £400 to the Spain expedition.

Post AGM Field Visit to Little Marlow Gravel Pits

Sunday 17 November 2013

Ken Earnshaw

The portents were not good as Pam Rees, Sally and I drove down to Little Marlow in fairly heavy rain. On arrival the rain had stopped and we joined Scott Drinkel, Karen Sims and John Towers in the car park at about 10:00 on what was a quite dull, overcast day but with little wind and it was not cold. Apart from Scott who was on time, the rest of us were late in arriving so our apologies to Scott. Our excuse was that someone had forgotten her wellies and her shoes would have been ruined in the expected mud so doubling back was called for.

Daryl Hamley had had to drop out but he advised us to vary the route due to a number of trees that were down across the path within the first few hundred yards alongside the lake. This had been caused by the gales of a couple of weeks earlier.

The revised path took us along the bank of the River Thames for about a quarter of a mile then across to the main lake. Speculation on the values of some of the properties fronting onto the Thames was made as we passed by. On the lake were quite large numbers of Tufted Ducks and Great-crested Grebes along with resplendent Pochards and Teal, and also a few Gadwall, Shoveler and Mallard. A solitary Egyptian Goose put in an appearance. The spit at the top end of the lake had a largish party of Lapwing, about ten Common Snipe and a single Oystercatcher along with a large gathering of Greylag Geese and Wigeon. Also there were a flock of Black-headed Gulls with a sprinkling of Common Gulls, a few Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single Great Black-backed Gull. All morning the Lapwings and gulls on the spit were very skittish which may have been due to herons, a prowling raptor or possibly to some people engaging in long-distance casting of fishing tackle from the bank out across the lake.

The little brown jobs were mostly noticeable by their absence. Apart from small parties of Long-tailed Tits there were a few Robins, Blackbirds, Redwings and Fieldfares and singles of Siskin and Chiffchaff. Four or five Ring-necked Parakeets squawked from high in the trees but were quite hard to see although a large range of calls were heard from these fair sized, bright green birds.

The only raptors seen were singles of Red Kite, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel.

To round out the morning Scott had good views of a Kingfisher skimming across the lake but I think he was the only one to see it.

A pleasant walk was had in good company albeit with not a very exciting range of birds to see. By about 12:15 we had vacated the car park for home.

THE RAFOS EXPEDITION TO THE GAMBIA 2 – 16 DECEMBER 2013

By Jim Hammersley RNBWS

Introduction

The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) expedition to The Gambia took place from 2 – 16 December, with 2 participants from RAFOS and five from the RNBWS. The expedition, organised and led by Robin Springett, was supported by funds from both the RAFOS and the RNBWS.

With a total area of 4,361 square miles (smaller than Jamaica) The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland with its borders mirroring the meandering Gambia River. It lies between 13° and 14°N and 13° and 17°W and is less than 30.0 miles at its widest point. Apart from the Atlantic Ocean on its western side, The Gambia is completely surrounded by Senegal. Approximately 500 sq miles (11.5%) of the country is water and the Gambia River is tidal and therefore saline well upriver. Only remnants of the original Guinea Savanna with their rich forest biodiversity remain within the country; other habitats visited by the team included beaches, mangroves, river banks, wetlands, Sudan savanna, farmland (with many fallow areas) and hotel gardens.

The expedition took place during the November to May dry season and indeed, encountered no rain at all. This season also has lower temperatures with the team experiencing temperatures in the high 'twenties' and low 'thirties' which were certainly bearable and became very pleasant when there was any coastal breeze.

Travel was by privately hired bus and minibus with a very professional driver (Lamin(2)). Two young guides were also used for the majority of the trip; Fatou Colley (the best of the few female Gambian bird guides see the website: <http://www.gambiabirding.com/index.html>) and Lamin (1) who were both eagle eyed and excellent on identification of most species. Lamin (the elder) was used for the first 2 days of the expedition as Fatou was working for a natural history company on those dates. Dinner was taken at local restaurants in the Kotu area or at the up-river camps. The local and excellent Julbrew beer was available and enjoyed at all the venues we stayed at.

Itinerary

The Gambia is a well-known birding destination and many natural history tour companies organize trips to it, often labelling them as a 'taster for Africa'. A jam-packed itinerary in the fourteen days of the expedition allowed the group to experience a great deal of this country and its habitats and produced a large number of birding highlights. The list below notes some of the birds seen amongst the plethora of species we encountered.

Kotu area (Bakotu Hotel) 4 – 6 Dec. The areas visited from this first base, included remnant pockets of forest (Guinea Savanna), cultivated areas interspersed with trees or flat salt pans (Pirang shrimp farm). During these initial days we visited:

Kotu Stream, rice paddies and sewerage ponds & Fajarah Golf Course – Blue-bellied Roller and African Golden Oriole,

Tujereng 'woods' –Lanner Falcon on nest, Bearded Barbet, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater.

Tanji Beach - Kelp Gull, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Little Tern

Banta Forest – Senegal Parrot, Violet Turaco, Pied Hornbill, White-spotted Flufftail.

Pirang Shrimp Farm –Mosque Swallow, Pin-tailed Whydah

Faraba - Banta area – Greyish Eagle Owl, White-Throated Bee-eater, Veillot's Barbet.

Brufut Woods – Greater Honeyguide, Black Woodhoopoe, Grey-headed Bristlebill.

Wanda beach- White-fronted Plover, Sanderling, Curlew.

Marakissa – Copper Sunbird, Blue-eared Starling, White-crowned Robin Chat.

En route to Tendaba 7 Dec - we returned to bird at Banta Rice Paddy for Yellow-shouldered Widow Bird and Pirang Shrimp Farm for African Spoonbill. We also tried, unsuccessfully, for Black-faced Firefinch at Bambakono Forest and birded Kamapanti, raptor watch-point, for Ruppell's Griffon Vulture, White-backed Vulture and Gabar Goshawk.

Tendaba Camp 7 Dec. This was an overnight stop on the way to Georgetown. More basic than the Bokuto hotel with some maintenance requirements notably involving water and lighting issues. Superb setting on the Gambia River, good food and beer available with very good birding on the old airfield outside the camp including African Hobby and Lanner in the same tree.

From Tendaba to Georgetown, we first birded at Soma and saw Mottled Spinetail and Helmeted Guineafowl. We then took a ferry to the North bank at Ellitenda then doubled back westwards to Kerawa for Northern Carmine bee-eater. Then it was eastwards all the way to Georgetown on the North bank of the Gambia River, birding at Sabaa with Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark and Savile's Bustard, the Kaur wetlands for Egyptian Plover and Njan wetlands for African Pygmy Goose (which did not show this time but we saw it later at Kartong).

Georgetown (Baobalong Camp) 8 - 9 Dec Again the camp is right on the river and also has some maintenance issues but the food was again very good. On 9 Dec we birded:

Jahally rice fields - African Hawk Eagle, African Fish Eagle and Black Coucal.

Brikamaba - Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Eurasian Griffon Vulture

Fulabanta - nesting Jaribu Storks

Jaramakut - Little Green Bee-eater

Wassu – a colony of Red-throated Bee-eater and also the Wassu Stone Circles UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Kuntaur Ponds - Bruce's Green Pigeon, Dark Chanting Goshawk (again no African Pygmy Goose).

Gambia River Trip 10 Dec. We travelled from Georgetown upriver for approximately 2 hours and then back passed Georgetown to Sapu for 4 hours. Having good views of 2 pairs of African Finfoot, Western Banded Snake Eagle, European Turtle Dove and Swamp Flycatcher as well as a delicious breakfast.

Dankunku – en-route back to Tendaba, we conducted a long but unsuccessful search for Black Crowned Cranes in this large swampy area, but both Hadada Ibis and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, on donkeys, were present.

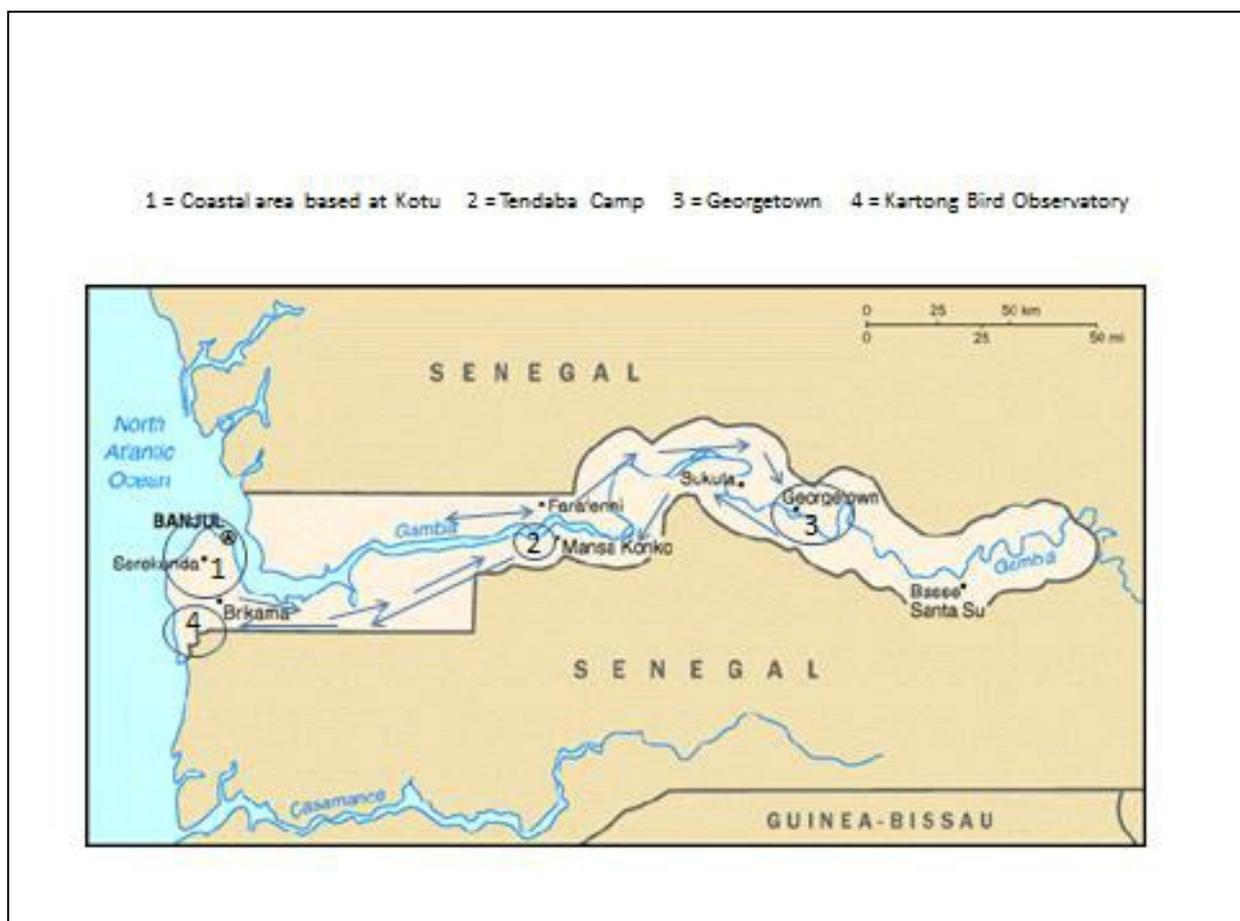
Tendaba Camp 10 & 11 Dec. Our second stop here as we headed back to the coast. We also birded Kiang West N.P. twice for Senegal Batis, Brown-backed Woodpecker and Pygmy Sunbird and the savanna area around the camp for Yellow White-eye. On the second day, we enjoyed a boat trip into the mangroves opposite the camp for Goliath Heron, Glossy Ibis, White-backed Night Heron and African Blue Flycatcher

Kampanti – en-route to the coast, we again tried for raptors and had excellent views of Bataleur Eagle and a Eurasian Griffon Vulture.

Bambakano –we again tried unsuccessfully for Black-faced Firefinch but did see Violet-backed Sunbird.

Kartong Bird Observatory (Boboi Lodge) – 12-16 Dec - on the very Southern edge of The Gambia. We took a river trip that actually entered Senegal, and explored the coastal area as well as the wader scrapes seeing Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Little Stint, Spotted Redshank, Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit and Whimbrel; making us feel very much at home. Some netting and ringing took place and use was made of the photographic hide positioned right in front of the reed bed. We also birded the coastal area for Palearctic migrants seeing Olivaceous Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Subalpine Warbler and a Wryneck.

Aboku National Park 16 Dec – a remnant forest pocket very close to the airport – Green Turaco, Western Bluebill, Ahanta Francolin, Snowy Capped Robin-Chat. A great way to end the expedition.



Ornithological Highlights

Two hundred and ninety nine species of birds were seen during the expedition with the vast majority being viewed by all of the participants. There were many highlights to the trip, not least being the overall pleasure of birding in a dry and hot environment during December. Rollers were among the stars of the trip with 4 species seen regularly, but the eight species of bee-eater competed strongly for the accolade of the most dazzling and stunning aerial display. I will only mention a few of the main ornithological delights of the trip:

White-spotted Flufftail. One of nine species of small rails that make up this distinctive genus and most are sexually dimorphic; a rare characteristic in the Rallidae. The White-spotted Flufftail is widespread but like all the others secretive and difficult to see. We were taken to a handmade bench in Banta Forest where the local forest guide, Kawsu, made sure we were sitting comfortably, but keeping very still and quiet. Then he called in the male bird, and within a few minutes it came across the forest path at exactly the predicted spot and then moved onto a small clearing opposite the bench and responded to his calls. It remained for two to three minutes before walking off into the forest undergrowth giving the whole group great views of, for many, their first flufftail.

Egyptian Plover. This is probably the main species that people come to The Gambia to see, famous for reputedly picking morsels of food from the jaws of crocodiles hence its other name of 'crocodile bird'. Described as feeding off insects on the ground or those that are low flying, it was still slightly disconcerting for the first sight to be of one feeding off road kill insects 30 metres away. An incredible wader, we were lucky enough to see them at 2 sites on the northern bank, Kaur and the Njan wetlands.

Netting a **Long-tailed Nightjar** at Kartong Bird Observatory. A fairly common and widespread species of African nightjar with a partially migratory northern population, this like many of its close relatives is a splendid looking species; especially in the hand. We had previously seen an individual on the ground at very close distance at Brufut Woods. At Kartong Bird Observatory, although it was a very blustery night, Colin Cross still netted one for us to view. Unfortunately the individual turned out to be a previously ringed bird, but still a fabulous bird and a great pleasure to see an individual of such a stunning species in the hand.

European Birds in their Winter Quarters - For many birders the highlight of the European year is the sight of returning migrants to their breeding areas in Europe. The Gambia provided a fabulous opportunity to see some of these birds in their winter quarters. We saw many Ospreys, a few Barn Swallows, one European Turtle Dove, six Whinchats, two Redstart, three Subalpine Warblers, one Whitethroat, one Wryneck and three Olivaceous Warblers. Next Spring as the birds return to Europe we will now have a good mental picture of the environment where some of them have spent the Northern winter.

Summary

A highly enjoyable 'jam-packed' two week trip to a small West African country that provided many ornithological highlights within a fantastic environment and superb climate. The geography of the country, virtually surrounded by Senegal, gives it the feel of an island and this together with the 3 river boat trips made the RN contingent feel very much at home.



RAFOS on Facebook

Members might like to know that there is a 'secret' group on Facebook for the use of RAFOS members.

It is intended to be a social forum for RAFOS members, and is a quick way of sharing news and pictures between us.

If you would like to join the group, please ask to add

William Francis as a Facebook friend and I will add you to the group's members.

All RAFOS members are welcome!!

I look forward to hearing from you.

Bill Francis

BIRDS OF THE GAMBIA



Smooth-billed Ani

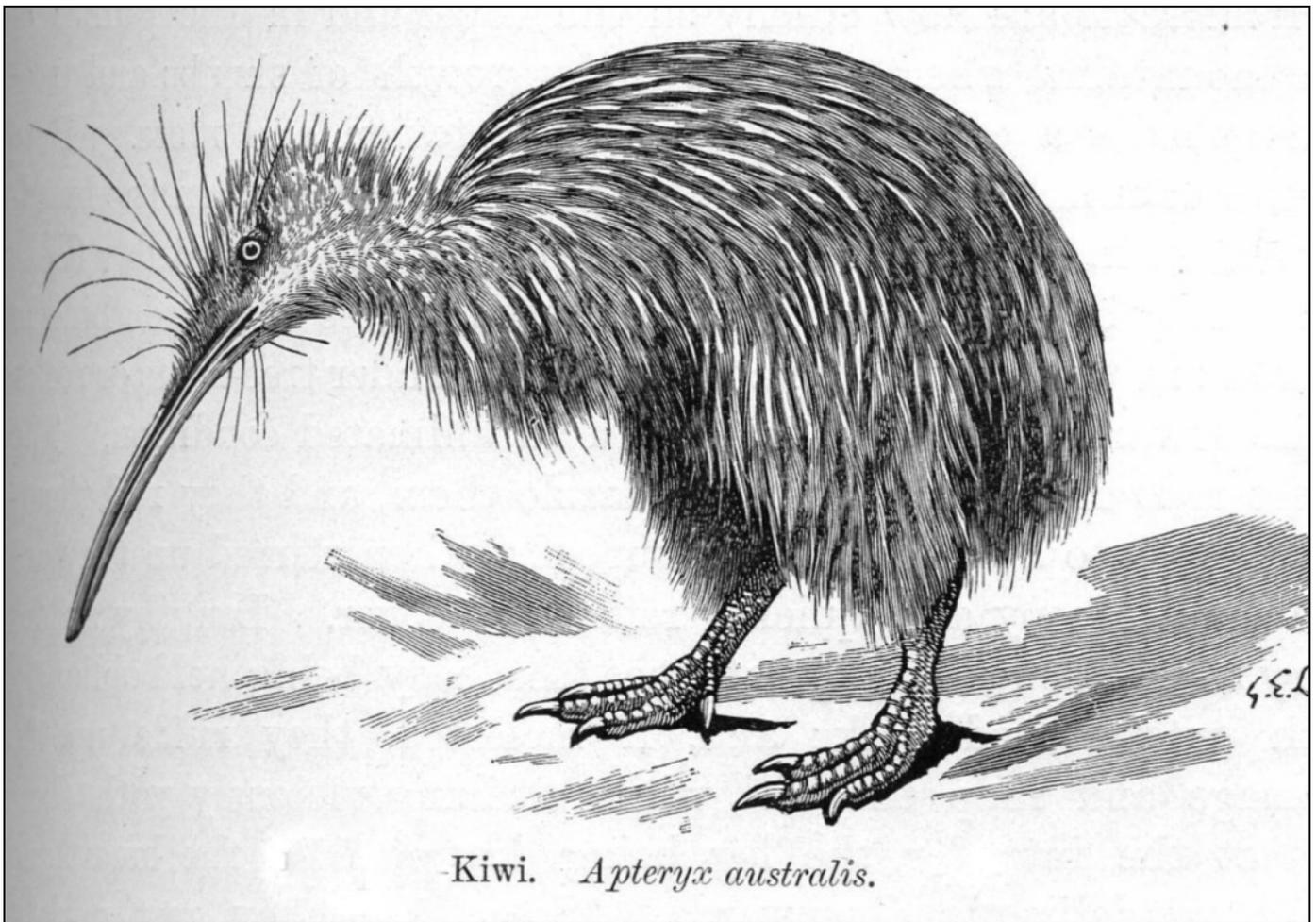


White-chested Emerald



Violaceous Euphonia

Pictures by Robin Springett



SOME NOTES ON THE KIWIS

By A. H. Evans, MA
Clare College,
Cambridge.

November 17, 1898.

Kiwis are at once distinguished from all their allies by their small size, and by their long, weak, decurved bill, which tapers regularly and has the nostrils placed almost at the extremity. Their head and eyes are comparatively small, as will be seen to be the case in the Dinornithidae. The legs are very stout and situated backwardly, a small elevated hallux is present, and the toes are provided with long, sharp claws. The moderate metatarsus is reticulated in the young, but is clothed with fairly large scutes in the adult, when it becomes much smoother. The wings are small-boned and invisible, with functionless quills, the tail is rudimentary, the aftershaft and fercula are absent, while many elongated hairs occur on the front of the head.

These curious flightless birds are confined to New Zealand, whence a specimen was brought to England as early as 1813. *Apteryx mantelli*, of the North Island, is deep red-brown with longitudinal streaks of yellowish-brown, the head being darker and the lower parts greyer; *A. australis*, of the South Island, is lighter, and feels soft instead of harsh when grasped. *A. oweni*, of both islands, is much smaller, and is light grey-brown, transversely marked with blackish bars. *A. haasti*, also said to occur in both islands, is a larger and darker form of the last named. *A. lawryi*, of Stewart Island, hardly differs from *A. australis*; while *A. maximus* of Verreaux, is a very doubtful species. Mr. Rothschild has founded a sub-species (*occidentalis*) on examples of *A. oweni* from the North Island and the west of South Island. In all these birds the lanceolate feathers have a hair-like texture, due to the disunited filaments of the upper portion, the lower part being covered with grey down, and the rachis more or less exerted. The tibia is feathered, the bill being yellowish, and the feet brown or black. The female is similar, but larger, the young blacker. Mr. Lydekker has described a fossil species, *Pseudapteryx gracilis*, from New Zealand, and Mr. De Vis *Metapteryx bifrons* from Queensland.

Kiwis inhabit wooded country and hills up to the snow line; they are still met with at low elevations on a few islands, but their retreats are now chiefly on the slopes and in the gullies of the mountains, where a dense undergrowth of shrubs and tree-ferns shades a carpet of creeping vegetation and moss. Here parties from six to twelve used to be seen, though in the breeding season they separated into pairs, but at the present day flocks can hardly be hoped for. In the daytime these shy birds hide in burrows in the ground, or natural cavities under tree-roots or rocks, while towards dusk they emerge in an animated condition. The direct rays of the sun seem to dazzle them, and they roll themselves up into a ball, if not disturbed; when stirred up they are somewhat sleepy and quickly retreat to cover. Lengthy strides carry them along at a great pace, the body being held obliquely with outstretched neck; and, if molested, they ruffle up the plumage and snap the bill, while striking viciously with their feet at the intruder, the leg being drawn up to the breast and the blow delivered downwards. Sometimes they rest upright with the point of the bill touching the ground, sometimes upon the whole metatarsus, but usually they are seen at feeding time cautiously moving from spot to spot, and tapping the soil with their long sensitive beaks. A sniffing sound accompanies this operation, and probably the smell of food assists in its discovery, yet the sense of touch is no doubt the primary agent. The diet consists chiefly of worms, in search of which the ground is deeply probed, and shows funnel-like holes scattered over its surface; when a capture is made the worm is extricated with a gentle wriggling motion, and is either beaten upon the ground to kill it, or swallowed at once with a jerk of the head. Grubs, beetles, molluscs and berries are also eaten, with grit or pebbles as digestives. The loud whistling note, which gives the name to the Kiwi, is chiefly heard on light nights, that of the female being shorter, the young uttering a chuckling or kitten-like cry. Growls are emitted by the birds when disturbed, and they have a curious way of yawning in the daytime. The nest is usually in an enlarged space at the end of a round tunnel in the soft earth, and said to be made by the female alone, the opening being under a tree-root, a stone, or a tussock of grass; it consists merely of a little dry fern, herbage, or a few leaves. The eggs – generally two in number, though one is often found, and three are recorded – are enormous for the size of the bird, and are equal to a quarter of its weight; they are pure white, or slightly green in hue, with a smooth surface, recalling by their appearance those of the Whooper. The Maories are very fond of the flesh, either roasted or boiled, and hunt Kiwis systematically with muzzled dogs, while of old the chiefs utilised the plumage for ornamentation. The cock performs most, if not all, of the duties of incubation, and attends upon the young. Females lay in captivity, but no chicks appear to have been hatched as yet under these conditions.

I found the above note while rummaging through some old ornithological textbooks at home. This book was published in 1899. I thought it may be of interest because of details not found in modern textbooks. I have some much older books on ornithology (going back to 1700s) that record many earlier discoveries. John Stewart-Smith

Statistics and Geekery (or a Confession of my Secret Obsession!)

by Scott Drinkel

I have been referred to by many in my sphere of work as a geek, a nerd, a ‘Sheldon Cooper’ just because of my mannerisms and interests – not so secretly, I am flattered. Why? I like logic, process, and statistics, and above all I have a huge appreciation, even love for, Microsoft Excel.

Excel is a hugely powerful calculator and in the areas I have worked, has rarely been used anywhere near its full potential. I am not claiming to use all of the power within the software, but I will go on record as saying I have created and improved documents at work (and home) that use more of the processing capability of Excel, making the use of the documents simpler and more efficient.

I have learned, through necessity, some of the abilities of Excel, building various documents that have assisted and informed decision making at work. Each day I used the document, I learned a little more of what it could do to both yield better results and make my job easier and quicker. I cribbed off others greater knowledge, read ‘Dummies guides’ and initially used the help screens to achieve my aims, but all the time

my knowledge was building. Seeing what this document could do meant it soon became the software of choice for a lot of my personal work at home too.

As many of you know, I am a keen amateur photographer. I have around 30,000 photos that I am particularly pleased with and needed some way of managing them. I needed a very specific naming convention that allowed me to be able to sort through them quickly and identify the exact image I was after.

This convention takes the form of a 5 letter abbreviation of the location, main subject, specific subject, additional information and finally an image number of that subject – the abbreviations are down to restrictions on the number of characters available to use in the name. As an example:

Bensn_Kestrel_American_AD12_Zoo_0012 corresponds to a photo taken at Benson (Bensn) – it is an American Kestrel, taken at the RAF Benson Air Day in 2012 (AD12), it is a captive bird (Zoo) and is the image number 12 of all American Kestrel Photos from the Benson Air Day 2012.

This convention is spread throughout my photo collection, including all animals (Birds, Mammals, Insects, Fish, etc.), Aircraft, Boats, Tanks, Landscapes and Family. Due to the range of photos and the number of specific locations and events that were ‘coded’ I needed a way of keeping track. I started creating these lists in Excel as this gave me the scope to do a quick search, making sure I did not duplicate codes (for example in Oxfordshire I have taken photos in ‘Cholsey’ (Chlsey), and in Norfolk, Choseley (Chosy)). It is also important (due to the fact it took me the best part of 2 years to get the naming convention applied to all of my images) that I kept all images in the same event named the same – having a table of previously used codes etc enabled this and all of my photographs were named and standardised.

This mentality fed my already ravenous need for list creation and completion – I am terrible for it. If I buy a DVD for my film collection, I have a compulsion to buy the sequels – no matter how bad they are, just to complete the set. Taking photographs of an aircraft meant I then had to build that list and take photographs of different aircraft AND take photographs of that same aircraft, but in a different location.

Then I moved onto birds and exactly the same need befell me, whether captive or not. Take a photo of a bird, then take photos of other birds in the same area and the same bird at anywhere I have gone, building my lists accordingly. I have to wonder if this compulsion is the same for all in the birding fraternity. Joining RAFOS has been fantastic for me in this respect, I have been able to take photographs of birds I would not have seen before and had the enthusiasm to travel to locations I probably would not have done off my own bat, the knowledge base of the group is amazing and as such, with help, my image library of birds began to get quite large. I needed something to strive for, so I set myself a goal (or a potential end to this list). I found a list of native British Birds, provided by the BTO and thought I could do something with it that would tick my specific compulsive boxes.

This was the start of my own Bird Database and the instigator of my pitch to RAFOS at the AGM 2013. I simply copied down the 597 birds listed at that point, and sorted them alphabetically. 2 columns list the birds so the main bird is listed followed by the specific bird. For example ‘Harriers’ are listed like so:

Harrier Montagu's
Harrier Northern Hen
Harrier Pallid
Harrier Western Marsh

Along the top of this list, I have created a header for each location and data that I have taken photographs of the birds. I have created some basic conditional formatting in this table to make the data pretty obvious to look at.

Underneath the British Birds list, I have simply added non British birds that I have taken photographs of at various Zoos and Wildlife parks. This list can be added to indefinitely, but rather than creating a document that lists EVERY bird in the world, I have kept it to all British birds as per the BTO list, plus others inputted as recorded.

For each location, I move down the list, simply inputting a ‘Y’ in the cell that relates to whether I have photographed that specific bird in that location. Because of my geeky tendencies, I have also created a ‘colla-

tion' column, that looks at all of the 'Y's inputted against a bird to let me see, at a glance, if I have seen the birds more than once, across all locations, just once or not at all, and colour coded the response in the typical military red, amber or green!

It is this sort of statistical data gathering that I would like to do for RAFOS. Certainly for the British locations that have been visited and I still see no reason not to continue in the same vein by inputting overseas birds as and when they were recorded.

This table would give us the ability to establish, against a standardised list (and I am not saying it is THE definitive list, simply a list that can be used to measure against), how many species RAFOS has seen and where. The table will still be pretty basic, in as much as only being able to identify if a species was seen or not (as opposed to numbers seen), but that should still be able to give us 'Big Handful' clues as to trends of species that have been seen at one point and then not. This could be something that may give rise to a RAFOS trip to look for a specific species in a location or carry out a bird count of the species to increase conservation knowledge and information at a given point in time.

What I am particularly keen to learn is, of the 597 species in this list, how many have been seen on a RAFOS trip? Have we already seen all native species as an organisation? Are we nearly at that target and maybe need to tailor a trip to look for the final species?

I am well aware that there are plenty of Public Access Databases for recording bird sightings out there. I must confess though, I have not really 'gelled' with any of them yet. I find inputting data quite laborious (in the few I have tried) and often have other difficulties, such as being awkward to input or adjust information retrospectively. A big spreadsheet works for me and this is probably just down to familiarity and fondness of the software – I find it easy to maintain and very easy to extract the information I want. Having played with Excel for a number of years now I am very aware of what it can do. Once the data is in there, we simply need to understand what we want it to provide and it can interrogated to do so and this can adapt and grow as time ticks on – the queries we look for need not be static. If we choose to do nothing with the data, we it is still no loss as it could easily be burned to a disc and archived.

In summary, lists are great, Excel is fantastic and smashing the two together could be beneficial. We have a huge amount of raw data that can be collated and potentially used for our benefit and to give us more information regarding the key subject to our organisation. I am more than willing to create the document, populate, publish and interrogate it, writing a summary document for all. I am simply missing all of the lists from the trips. The question I will ask is, Is this something RAFOS wants?

Electronic RAFOS Newsletters

Just in case anyone is interested in what has happened about my suggestion that we should consider establishing an electronic, full colour version of the RAFOS Newsletter in parallel with, or instead of, the current printed Newsletter, here is the state of play as I understand it. Nothing much happened for a few years and it seemed that there was little appetite for the idea among Committee members or RAFOS members in general. I thought that this apathy might be due to lack of familiarity with the concept of electronic publications, so went ahead and established an e-site to which I downloaded all the Newsletter I had edited since I assumed that role. This site is now operational in its prototype form and is paid for (by me) for the next ten years so does not cost RAFOS anything. The developed form would have been easier to access, without a complex password. The prototype meets one of my objectives of the e-newsletter: "To reduce distribution costs for the RAFOS Newsletter." The majority of the RAFOS Committee has shown a marked lack of support for my actions in setting this up, so I have decided to drop the idea. The site will remain live for 10 years, so if you would like to look at it you may do so at: www.rafnithology.org.uk/wp-login.php User name: **editor** Password: **5g^7d\$?1fh.**

I bequeath the site as a memorial to fruitless endeavour! *John Stewart-Smith ex-editor.*

ACROLA 2010

2 Weeks in Seine Ringing Camp
By George Candelin



Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*

A l'eau, c'est l'heure

Why am I driving through the night? I asked myself as I began to enter Dover Docks in the fog and half-light of a morning in late July. The answer of course was that it seemed like a good idea at the time; when I read the email appeal for ringers to assist with the annual '*Camp de Baguage Internationale de l'Estuaire de la Seine*' I thought of the adventure, the travel, the chance to meet new people and exchange ideas, the probability of handling new species and the scientific aims of monitoring migrating warblers in a French Reed-bed. Plus the clincher - the official camp language was to be English!

My destination was just outside Le Havre. The Hode Marsh is a National Nature Reserve (NNR), and part of a Special Protection Area (SPA), in the Seine Estuary consisting of over 1,000 hectares of reed-bed and wetland, it hosted its first ringing camp in 1983. An environmental association named '*Maison de l'Estuaire*', is responsible for coordinating the data collection and processing in the estuary and the lower Seine marshes, as well as running the Bird Observatory.

Histoire

Commencing from 2007, the camp officially invited foreign ringers for the first time. It was renamed "Seine Estuary International Ringing Camp" or *Camp de Baguage Internationale* (CBI) in French. This is the first International Ringing Camp in France. It was envisaged that the international approach would lead to rich exchanges in both technical matters and migratory bird conservation issues with other ornithologists studying migration in nearby countries. Therefore the CRBPO (French ringing authority),

set up a procedure to facilitate the validation of foreign bird ringing permits in France (e.g. BTO permits) in order to attract foreign ringers to the Seine estuary.

Conservation efforts in Europe to assess the status of the aquatic warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* led to an exchange of data that indicated the Seine Estuary reed beds to be an important resource for migrating birds. With this in mind, in November 2007 an Aquatic Warbler Working Group was created to devise a new project named 'Acrola' and from March 2008 this study was integrated into the French National Ornithological Research Scheme with the work commencing in the month of August 2008. This research topic plays a major role in the ringing efforts of the IRC, with the Seine Estuary being an internationally important stop-over site for aquatic warblers during their post-breeding migration. Standardised procedures used in the ACROLA project enable the evaluation and comparison of various ringing sites all over France. As a by-product it also facilitates work on the migration strategies of other *Acrocephalus* warblers and marshland species.



Normandy Bridge

The Seine Estuary reed beds consist of vast plains of common reed *Phragmites australis*, reedmace *Typha latifolia* and sea club-rush *Scirpus maritimus* with other vegetation being goosefoots, sea aster and a few small littoral species. All of the reed bed is tidal and subject to occasional inundation when the tides are high. The Normandy Bridge (*Pont de Normandie*) provides a magnificent backdrop to the site; it has an environmental centre with displays about the building of the bridge, the natural environment of the reed bed, creatures of the littoral zone and a boardwalk out into the Reedbed with illustrated information boards describing the flora and fauna along the way. The boardwalk ends at a typical brackish pool where birds and plants of the Reedbed may be seen.

There are ponds everywhere that resemble WWII bomb-craters; these are the traditional duck hunting ponds of 'Les Chasseurs'. Due to an unfortunate clash of dates, the hunting season actually commences on the second Sunday in August. As a result of this there was an exodus of local French ringers over that weekend but those remaining along with the British contingent, moved to a woodland ringing site and attempted to catch nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* and other woodland species. We were quite successful with the target species as well as a selection of thrushes, warblers, tits and a jay *Garrulus garrulous*

Mon Repos

Accommodation for the duration of the camp was provided in the village of Gainneville, about 5 Km from the ringing sites. We lived under canvas in a paddock, but excellent showers, clean toilets and gas cooking facilities were available downstairs and more were accessible in an upstairs room of the traditional style Normandy half timbered Gite (B&B).



The Gite

Despite the assurance that the *lingua franca* would be English, it soon became apparent that many of the French were weak English speakers and that most of the English were only able to offer Franglais as an option. This led to some interesting exchanges but everyone seemed to get on well and understand each other well enough to work in international teams, each of which was supervised by one of the French ringers.

Camp routine was for a 4am reveille, (in the dark), followed by a 5:30 departure to one of the four or five ringing sites, (still in the dark). Nets were opened before daylight, (in the dark), and consisted of three lines each of three 18 metre nets at each ringing station. Tape-lures of aquatic warbler song were played in the centre of each net-ride. Nets were closed at midday, (not in the dark), so afternoons and evenings were usually free time for sleeping, exploring, (not in the dark), more sleeping or socialising (in the dark). Some ringing did take place in the garden of the Gite, mostly we caught house sparrow *Passer domesticus* but also a spotted flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*. On another occasion we all trooped down to the port to watch and participate in the release of some juvenile greater black-backed gulls *Larus marinus* that had been convalescing in the maritime centre after being found starving or injured in the port area earlier in the year.

A few days were lost to wet weather but the climate here is generally mild and not dissimilar to the Channel Islands. Birding on these wet days could be fantastic with gulls, storks and waders available for those who fancied a stroll between the showers. At least the rain gave some respite from the mosquitoes *Theobaldia annulata*, these were a real pain for about an hour twice each day around dawn and dusk.

Qu'est que se passe

Over the month from 1st to 31st August 2010 a total of 8938 birds (41 species) were ringed, these came mainly from four stations each of which was located about 1Km apart; 7 days without ringing were lost due to

weather. 93 birds were of the target species, aquatic warbler. Other species included 55 sand martin, 17 swallow, 114 yellow wagtail, 393 bluethroat, 112 Savi's warbler, 82 marsh warbler, a single melodious warbler, 361 bearded tit and 347 reed bunting. It was also notable that the total of 4888 sedge warbler accounted for more than 50% of the birds ringed and a total of 2257 reed warbler was the next most common, being a further 25% of the overall total. Retraps included 24 sedge warblers with rings from England, Belgium and Holland.

Peak passage of aquatic warblers occurred on the 12th August when 25 were ringed in the Seine Estuary (1000 hectares of reedbed including 200 ponds), a few hundred aquatics probably migrated through on this day alone! More than 40 people helped in the ringing camp in 2010 and a special mention must be made of all the ringers and trainees from England.

Results are already coming in for this year's aquatic warbler data. The species breeds in Eastern Europe around the Polish marshes and migrates to western Africa for the winter. A bird ringed on the north French coast at Wissant in 2010 was captured in the Seine reedbed and six of the 93 birds ringed in the reedbed have been captured elsewhere. Five were caught along the French Atlantic coast and one was caught at Palencia Marsh in northern Spain. Results from this study have shown the type of habitat vital for stop-over sites, the food required by the species, the short length of stay and the typical flight durations when traversing through France.

Epilogue

So, would I go again? Yes definitely. It really was an interesting experience; good birds, good food and good company – but I must practice my French and remember that in English speaking company you should not say –

À l'eau, c'est l'heure (it means "To the water, it is time" – not Hello Sailor!)



Sunset - Marine Boulevard, Le Havre

Springtime on the Solway

by John Le Gassick

(A gripping tale of four hardy souls trapped in a hotel surrounded by snow and their attempts to obtain a reasonable list of birds, despite severe weather conditions through the dining room window despite the fact that some mornings the water in their respective showers was only tepid! Read on.....)

I think it was Bill who had the idea to revisit the Nith Hotel in Glencaple at the end of March, when ideally the balmy Spring breezes would be wafting in all variety of Summer visitors and also the added bonus of the spectacle of seeing the over-wintering Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese departing for Northern climes. Best we blame Bill anyway! Our journey north started in sleet and snow showers but by the time we reached our destination it was a cold bright day, so after checking into the Nith Hotel Glencaple (other spellings are available) we spent some time checking the muddy banks of the tidal River Nith. Here we had the first of many views of the long staying leucistic Common Redshank which was all white save for a few light brown markings. I found this most interesting as *Tringa tetanus* has very little black pigment whilst *erythropus* is as black, in the summer, as our old coalman used to be. If and when I manage to find some more information on this subject it may well form the basis for another piece. Theatrical groans off stage.....!

On the Thursday we enjoyed a visit to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust at Caerlaverock which is about 3 miles from Glencaple, on a very cold but dry and sunny day - beautiful conditions for photographing the numerous Tree Sparrows and Yellowhammers feeding on the spilt grain beside the track. I am not sure which was the highlight for me, it was either the large numbers of Pink-footed Geese that we passed in the fields on our way to Caerlaverock or the soup served up at lunchtime in the cafeteria. It was to die for! Friday 22nd March, despite having been assured only the previous evening that snow was a very rare visitor to this part of Dumfries and Galloway, we awoke to find that a heavy snowfall had blocked all of the roads out of the village. It continued to snow throughout the morning and we realized that we were trapped and had only paid for half board. None-the-less morale remained surprisingly high and the friendly staff members were only too happy to allow us to bird watch from the large floor-to ceiling windows of the dining room which fortunately overlook the River Nith and surrounding field. On a two hour watch from this location with only a pot of coffee and two daily Newspapers to sustain us we recorded: Pied Wagtail, Reed Bunting, a flock of Twite, twenty or more Skylark, Fieldfare, Meadow Pipit and Lapwing. Worthy of note also were four *Clupea harengus* in two pairs, briefly seen at the start of the period but quickly disappearing! Say no more. Those of you familiar with the geography of Glencaple will know that in front of the Hotel there is a small quay that many years ago was the port for Dumfries. Here a fine a wooden and glass building has been constructed, known as the Caerlaverock Shop and Tea Room, which was opened by Princess Alexandra on 7th September 2012. In addition to the shop and tearoom there are also Post office facilities and a Community Hall. It was the tea room that interested our brave quartet "The Fieldgate Four"* because it had a large window overlooking the River Nith and also a magnificent selection of delicious home made cakes and pastries, but disappointingly "nae Clooty Dumpling". After battling across the snow-filled road, a table close to the large window was attained making the somewhat hazardous journey well worthwhile! This venue was visited on both Friday and Saturday afternoons and after pot of tea on the Saturday two brave souls attempted a visit to Caerlaverock but although the roads out of the village were reasonably clear, deep drifts across exposed parts of the route meant that they had to reluctantly return back to the pot of tea so recently (and bravely) abandoned.

On Sunday 24th March the roads were manageable with care and the group undertook another visit to Caerlaverock. Here as if it had just been released from its “box” the adult male Green-winged Teal appeared as it had on all previous visits by the RAFOS. A young male Roe Deer was another sighting of note which gave some distant photographic opportunities. The next day a visit to the RSPB Reserve at Mersehead yielded some more new species, but nothing of note. Here as at Caerlaverock the raw easterly wind meant that bird watching had to be undertaken from the relative comfort of the hides.

In conclusion it was a very enjoyable week in good company with comfortable accommodation and, despite everything, a list of seventy bird species. We had taken with us a copy of “The Solway” by John Miles a book in the Best Bird Watching Sites series and had planned to visit some of the many interesting sites listed therein. I therefore recommend to the house a return visit to carry out this plan but preferably in May or June once winter has well and truly departed.

* Fieldgate was the name of the largest cottage at Kilchoman on Islay where the four participants have stayed on most of their RAFOS Field Trips to Islay. They are (sizing from the right):

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| John Le Gassick | Right Marker and Deputy Oenophile |
| Bill Francis | Organizer and Ideas Man |
| Dick Knight | Keeper of the List |
| Jan Knight | Chief Bird Spotter and Chief Oenophile |



The River Nith - before the snowfall



..... And after!



View from the old Peter Scott Hide at Caerlaverock(since replaced)

Pictures by Bill Francis

RAFOS Sponsored Expedition to Gibraltar Upper Rock 2013

By Julia Springett

Whilst ringing at Jew's Gate during 2012, the idea was hatched to gather birding data from a different area of the Rock, and after discussion with Charlie Perez, it was decided that an area of the Upper Rock Nature Reserve would provide the ideal site. RAFOS took the lead on a Tri-Service Expedition and over a period of four weeks six ringers and three observers from AOS, RAFOS and RNBWS monitored the site.

September 2013 saw the first four members of the team assemble and take up residence at Bruce's Farm. A vehicle had kindly been loaned from Headquarters British Forces Gibraltar and this was duly collected from Devil's Tower camp. Driving permits were secured and the team were good to start. The ringing equipment was provided by GONHS, this included all the mist nets and poles, rings, bird bags, pliers, rules etc, and of course the all essential bird guide books for those rarities we hoped to see.

The aim of the expedition was to catch and ring migrating birds in the area around Governor's Lookout on the Northern side of the Upper Rock, an area that has not been used for this purpose for over 25 years. Nets were positioned along the fire breaks which meant that little cutting back of the natural vegetation was required. At first a little haphazard, the team soon learned where best to set the nets and which were most likely to catch. A total of over 300 metres of mist nets were erected forming a circular net round of ½ kilometre at altitude varying from 280 -360 metres above sea level. The ringing station was carefully selected at a mid-point of the round beneath overhanging vegetation which provided much needed shade for the birds in bags waiting to be processed and also for the ringers during the heat of the day. The ringing station had the added benefit of affording glorious views across to Africa and the Atlas mountains as well as being able to see Algeciras and the Strait of Gibraltar. During quiet times it was also possible to watch the constant shipping activity, pleasure, fishing and sail boats as well as boats being rowed within the confines of the harbour.

A daily routine was soon established; out to the site before sunrise to open the nets while it was still dark, though there was plenty of ambient light coming up from the city. The birds begin to feed shortly after dawn, and that would be time for the first net round. On several occasions we were lucky enough to catch Common and Red-necked Nightjar; both of which make a strange hissing noise when handled and uncannily prehistoric in appearance. The day would progress with checking the nets at regular intervals, extracting and processing the birds until early afternoon when conditions became very warm and the birds would stop feeding...This would be the time to close and furl the nets and retire to our accommodation, snatch a quick siesta before transferring data onto the computer at the Jews' Gate Bird Observatory and then having supper and preparing for the following day ringing.

Male Redstart



Nets & Gibraltar Town



The weather conditions over the period were mostly good, with heavy Levante many mornings which would clear slowly and keep the birds feeding locally rather than moving off to the South. Few days were lost completely to unfavourable weather, but we never experienced the type of weather that would have produced a large fall of migrants; perhaps the weather was too warm right into late October. The numbers of birds processed daily varied from 11 on the lowest catch to 147 which was the very best. The total for the trip was 1136 of 34 species. Of course, there were changes on the Upper Rock as the summer heat faded; perhaps the most spectacular was the sudden appearance of Southern Autumn Crocus in huge numbers a few days after heavy rain showers. In our last few days, the Paper White Narcissus were just beginning to open; did they last until Christmas?

Numbers of Apes patrolled the site and it was quickly discovered that they were totally uninterested in the birding activity, happily dodging under the nets and ignoring any birds which may have been caught and were awaiting extraction. The team also became a little complacent over the apes activities until on one occasion supplies of fruit were stolen from an open rucksack and eaten in full view of the ringing station!

It was agreed by all that the month had been a huge success in gathering data from the chosen area, which could be compared with results at Jew's Gate. It also provided the team with an opportunity to handle and gather data from species not normally seen in the UK; Ortolan Bunting, Subalpine Warbler, Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, Iberian Chiffchaff and Orphean Warbler to name just a few. Disappointingly, no birds were caught having previously been ringed in another country, though one Blackcap was caught with a ring which had been put on the bird during September 2011. It was also possible to monitor and report the migrating Raptors and sightings were made of Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Short-toed and Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Egyptian Vultures and Storks. In all, a very successful Expedition, which was well supported by RAFOS, AOS and RNBWS members who took part. Thanks also to GONHS, especially Charlie Perez and Eric Shaw, and to Major Juri Williamson RGR, and the staff in the HQBF Gibraltar MT Section. Hopefully, the data obtained for GONHS and the BTO is of sufficient value to justify repeating the Expedition?

Processing a Nightjar



Red-throated Nightjar



Birds processed on Middle Hill 23rd September - 20th October 2013

Sparrowhawk	2	Subalpine Warbler	3
Eurasian Nightjar	6	Sardinian Warbler	74
Red-necked Nightjar	3	Reed Warbler	1
Hoopoe	1	Bonelli's Warbler	2
Tawny pipit	1	Common Chiffchaff	22
Wren	10	Iberian Chiffchaff	39
Robin	170	Willow Warbler	17
Nightingale	4	Spotted Flycatcher	2
Northern Wheatear	2	Pied Flycatcher	62
Black Redstart	3	Great Tit	3
Redstart	23	Blue Tit	30
Stonechat	2	Chaffinch	5
Song Thrush	29	Greenfinch	11
Blackbird	52	Ortolan Bunting	1
Dartford Warbler	1		
Grasshopper Warbler	2		
Blackcap	488		
Garden Warbler	55		
Orphean Warbler	3		
Whitethroat	7		
		Total =	1136

Birding on GibEx13 The Recorders and Observers (Non-Ringers) Perspective

By John and Sue Wells

Background. Julia and Robin Springett arranged with local Conservation Warden, Charlie Perez of Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society (GONHS), for RAFOS to undertake a ringing study on military land, named 'Middle Hill' during late summer 2013. In parallel with RAFOS there was another contingent of British ringers based at Jews Gate further down 'The Rock'. Charlie would oversee and collate the data and ensure it was recorded electronically on the master database back to BTO HQ each day, an essential daily task for our ringers. The site that the RAFOS team were working was predominantly open hillside, with scrub and some woodland. Within the woodland, cleared fire-breaks were used for the net rides on the rocky scree and grassed areas. The area was previously used as a military radar aerial farm on the slopes of The Rock of Gibraltar. Robin and Julia were our joint Team Leaders, with ornithologist participants from all three Service bird-watching societies and their partners. Some team members, including Robin and Julia had previously ringed birds here whilst stationed on The Rock. One of the team; Mark Cutts (RNBWS) was still stationed here. For Sue and me it was our first ever trip to 'Gib. The full term of the expedition was nearly 8 weeks, requiring a 'full' commitment by RAFOS and one which should rightly be applauded, as it was quite a challenge.

The Aims were to undertake ringing of migratory passerines as they migrated through the SW mainland of Europe across to Africa. Local species would also be ringed if attracted or trapped in the grounds of Bruce's Farm, our accommodation. In addition, raptor species observed would be identified and counted wherever possible by the non-ringing volunteers as well as the ringers during their daily business, as the raptors flew overhead. This element of the work was very dependent on weather; likewise the ringing had low-count days as well as very busy periods when weather and prevailing wind conditions were suitable. The 'viz mig', (visual migration), was my intended input to the science of the study. The plan was for me and Sue to integrate and help wherever we were wanted on net furling and unfurling each day, general maintenance of

the nets and assisting the ringer and recorders in their work. The dates of the Wells' support to the exped were Sat 4th to Sun 12th Oct 13.

Our Story. It so happened, that GibEx13, tied-in with Sue's annual holiday from Tesco. I therefore booked a week's leave with my Company-Ebeni Ltd. The next step was to plan and book the flights, and the hotel for an early flight from Birmingham airport. I decided we should hire a car at the other end, a plan that would give us an opportunity for sightseeing when not required on the Rock. Also it would provide an extra set of wheels if required for shopping etc. I had also arranged a days birding into Spain with a local British guide.

The rest of the planning, logistics & ornithological arrangements were all logistically & expertly arranged by Julia and Robin, in time-honoured RAFOS (with RNBWS and AOS) fashion. Sue and I only had holiday insurance, savings and baggage packing and allowances left to sort out. Robin and Julia were brilliant on receiving our offer of 'non-ringing' help. Quite what we as keen birders but non-ringers could achieve would be limited, but Sue was willing to give it a try! So flights were booked and Julia booked our accommodation at the idyllic but very dated and slightly run-down Bruce's Farm, high up on the sloping hillside of 'The Rock' The Farm itself was the subject of much debate while we were there. It is a real throw-back to colonial empire living. Solidly built, with wrought iron balustrades, each front of the house room has balcony, overlooking glorious views across the straights of Gibraltar to North Africa. The building had 2 foot thick arched walls and interior furnishings dating back to a distant past. It reminded Sue and myself of a recent film based in India ; "*The Marigold Hotel*," a fictional account of a young entrepreneurial Indian fellow, who renovates a dilapidated up-country Indian hotel especially for an ageing troop of British Tourists; "mmm sounds familiar" and properly suited to RAFOS' needs! You get the picture. Well that is Bruce's Farm. The Farm comes complete with its own 'ratter', a flea-bitten dog named Cody. He is a rescue dog who was cared for by the ape wardens. He was a character - he would look after the place when it was empty and we were on the hill. He was fed and watered daily by the wardens who looked after the apes on the rock and the lab/veterinary clinic for the apes which was also at the Farm. The Farm building doubles up as accommodation for volunteers who assist GONHS; their base was a small building unit adjacent to the house, where facilities were a good deal more recent as they held care studios and vet facilities for the wardens who manage the Gibraltar ape colony. The building itself is not like a farm at all, but it may have been back in the 1890's. It must have been a glorious building in its hey-day, set in its own gardens. It is getting a little tired just now, but money needs investing in the house massively, and moves are afoot to do this - I hope that they can pull in the funds they require!

Outward Journey. The overnight stay in Birmingham Ibis for the outward flight was straightforward, in smart surroundings. The Monarch Airways check-in arrangements were all to time and uneventful. On arrival at Gib Airport at 10:30 am, Julia met us as pre-arranged. The timing was not great as it transpired. To be honest, the timing could not have been worse from a ringer's perspective-in hindsight! The team of 5 ringers had been depleted by 2; RNBWS's Mark Cutts having left, to go back on RN duty the week we arrived whilst Robin had to return to UK on Morris Dancing business as the Association's Chairman. Sue and I quickly gathered that Julia's time at the airport needed to be limited, she was an essential team member and was required back at the ringing nets to assist the 2 other ringers soonest. Roger Dickey and Carl Powell (both AOS) were the ringing team with Julia for the week, so we hastily signed out the hire car and I made slow but safe progress sticking onto Julia 'coat-tails' in the hire car through some 'racy' traffic and scooters in Gibraltar town itself. The one-way system in Gib' is bewildering at first but we got used to it and found our bearings by about day 3 of 7! Our second car drive was back into town for a shop in convoy with Julia (again in case we got lost), for the team rations. All very challenging when you have no map and no clue having never been somewhere before! Sue let me drive and after a short while driving on the wrong side of the road (yep they do albeit a British colony), does come back to you.

Day 1 – pm. At the farm Sue and I made acquaintances with Carls' good lady Anne Powell. Anne was likewise on her holiday. Carl and Anne had taken 2 week to assist with the ringing. Anne is not a ringer and being disabled she was reliant on Carl and the others to help transport her into town and back for any shopping and sight seeing. The hill was too much for Anne, so she had her Kindle Fire and her literature to read and take in the sun and the view from the balcony. Ann was pleased to have some company and quickly we all made friends. Sue and I just love watching overhead for raptors and soon we had our first of many **Booted Eagles** that came very

close to the farm. In the garden **Sardinian Warblers** ‘chacked’, **House Sparrows** noisily rustled their family quarrels in the thicket to the side of the garden and the odd **Robin** and passing **Blackcap** made an appearance in the dense garden cover. A net to the side of the Farm was placed strategically, but as the team were down to 3 it was not fully utilised as time was tight after a full ringing day. The evening also needed suitable light conditions as nets can quite easily be seen by the birds in shimmer of low light in evening conditions.

Probably the highlight of that first afternoon along with the very good views of passing **Booted Eagles** and the 2 local **Peregrine Falcons** mobbing the pair of **Kestrels** high up the Rock was the **Twin-tailed Pasha-butterfly**. That Anne kindly pointed out for us both. He was a real stunner as he floated by on rather large and occasionally un-flapped gliding wings. In size I guess about 6 cm wingspan. Eventually the brown and white dazzler settling on the tenuous and somewhat ageing and oozing fruit from a ‘prickly pear’ tree in the garden and once he was settled he allowed us a lot closer views. Carl took some lovely photos of him later that week. At this juncture I wished I had a SLR-digital camera rather than a ‘point-and-click’ option but my little scenery camera would have to do for now.

The remainder of the team arrived between 3 and 4 pm after a short trip down to Jews Gate to enter the ringing study records from their days endeavours. There is a name for the recording system and I’m sure it will take a mention from Julia in her article. Sue and I had already had about 4 cups of tea, and I was now into tucking into my first beer that Julia offered from the exped rations as we continued our introductions. I had met Roger at an RAFOS AGM before but had not spoken at length and the remainder of the team (Springetts’ apart obviously), were all new to Sue and I.

Ringing Days’ Routine. The plan was for an early start the next morning. A tentative enquiry from Roger went something like: ‘Will Sue be ok with a 7 am departure for The Rock and the nets?’ I gave it a careful thought and before agreeing checked with Sue, who was upstairs unpacking, and basically that was the end of a lie-in for this trip. Not that that bothers us as usually on holidays away I’m up early and Sue floats around plans. In Portugal Sue would do breakfast after my early morning excursion to the bird reserve and back for breakfast – a great start to one’s day. Sue was ok with that, she just needed a morning cuppa and ‘tab’ and she was fine with it! Breakfast would be short and sharp before heading out in the van with the ringing kit. Once on the hill it was ‘no-lights; head-torches or noise, and we must all be as quiet as mice as we walked some 50m up the inclined track to set up the base table, folding camp chair and went about the business of unfurling and checking the nets for any overnight intruders. I carried the CD player (lure) plus kit and food and spare fingers gripped baggage and ringers’ kit of all shapes and sizes. The normal routine was for Julia to set the tape lure and the rest of us, ably supervised, would unfurl the nets and check for any overnight damage from wind, sticks, or stray Apes!

07 Oct 13. The first ‘pass’ on the net rides after they were unfurled was always the most exciting for Sue and I. Sue’s job (once we had set up ‘base’: a table 4 chairs and assorted rocks, boxes of ringers kit, scales, books, food and other assorted equipment) was to ‘man the fort! This Sue did expertly and with her own binoculars (kindly loaned to her by my mate Stevie Heather-I must add), Sue would log anything local or overhead for the ‘Viz-Mig’ log set out by Julia and Robin and required by Charlie at GOHNS. This first morning sweep of nets was always the most exciting for me personally; as it tended to set the day. If the conditions were going to be good one could usually (but not always), tell at first light.

The species of birds seen included: **Siberian Chiffchaff (sub-species)**, **Willow Warbler**, **Common Redstart**, **Common** and **Red-necked Nightjar**, **Blackcap** (in their tens if not hundreds). Julia’s report will have the full totals. One of the most unusual birds that first morning was collected from the net adjacent to the path as we walk up which joined the concrete wall line of nets. A largeish speckled **Pipit** which in the early light looked interesting and was safely put into a bag for later. The task in hand was to extract netted birds as soon as possible and get them back to the table for processing. The daily routine soon built and we all knew who was doing what. **Pied Flycatchers**, **Robin**, **Greenfinch** and **Wren** were quickly processed before or best little beauty the Pipit was left to last to be determined. It looked like a pipit I had never seen before. Well it proved quite a challenge, but after a lot of reading and sizing and literature searching we positively agreed on **Tawny Pipit**. That same day we had **Black Redstart** and **Common Redstart**.

My favourites were the **Nightjars** - they were (nearly) scary! The USA term; 'Frogmouths' properly sums them up. Also seeing them in the hand with open gapes and veinous mouths was a proper descriptor. An aspect to birding that even took me by surprise as they hissed their way through the whole event! T

Tues 08 Oct 13. The day started badly with no running water for the showers, we first thought the shower was u/s, but soon realised the whole place was down. Bird-wise the **Booted Eagle** count was slowly creeping up, we had 4 by 12:15 and a pass of 14 later the same day. In a call from Charlie we understood the water was 'off' for the whole of the 'Upper Rock' as engineers were installing new pipes further along the hillside. The blue bowsers gave the game away as they were dotted along the roadside, thankfully fairly close to walk to in the evening or early morning to fill a bucket or two for boiling and food preparation. We saw and photographed some nice moths including **Crimson Spotted Moth**, which was probably my best day-flying moth ever seen. The bird total that day was 109 with 15 **Garden Warblers**, 71 **Blackcap** 3 **Iberian Chiffchaffs**, 2 **Pied Flycatchers** 1 **Stonechat** 2 **Greenfinch** 3 **Willow Warbler** 2 **Song Thrush** and 8 **Robin**.

On the **10 Oct** I added; Crag Martin, Lesser Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and **Peregrine Falcon** (pair).

Sun 13 Oct. We had a nice **Wheatear** in the hand shots as well as the usual fare, and local **Yellow-legged Gull** round and about the hillside in plentiful numbers. On a half-day off, out to sea; new birds from Europa Point were **Corys' Shearwater**, **Mediterranean Shag**, **Gannet** and **Yellow-legged Gull**.

Andalusia. 9th Oct was our day's birding extravaganza in Andalusia with Mr Bob Buckler of Wingspan Bird Tours. Bob came recommended to us via Julia's friend. I can concur and if anyone wishes I can get in touch with Bob for you. Here is his Web Site: www.wingspanbirdtours.com. The intention was to drive across the border and meet Bob at the Café adjacent to the border crossing point. Right on cue Bob was there in his silver car. We left our hire car at the airport for the day and took the short walk across the crossing. Bob headed out with all three of us getting views immediately of **Storks** nesting on chimneys. My day list reads 73 - too many to list here. Some of the day's highlights (there were so many) with such a knowledgeable guy, but **Glossy Ibis**, **Short-toed Snake Eagle**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **Audoin's Gull**, **Eurasian Griffon Vulture** are just the new European birds seen for my life list. There were some lovely views as we toured the various towns and villages; Palmones, Tarifa, Cazalla Raptor watch-point, for **Short-toed Eagle** and **Booted Eagle**, Los Lances beach for **Sandwich Tern** and **Audoin's Gull**. On route through Benalup we came across a marvellous green lizard. Also on the return leg, Montenmedio Golf course complex for **Spanish Sparrow**, **Melodious Warbler** and **Eurasian Spoonbill**. My bird of the day (as well as the butterfly of the day, which was an Emperor butterfly), among the views of the many tens of overhead raptors namely; **Griffon Vulture**, Short-toed and **Booted Eagles**, **White** and **Black Storks** and probably the **Egyptian Vulture** that Sue recorded (saw) first was best.

We both had a terrific week with raptors a plenty and terrific close-ups of many European rarities. The food and company were terrific, and the weather held. What more do you want on exped? Even Cody trapped down killed and brought us a **Black Rat** indoors for good measure. Brilliant.

This Sure is a Lot of Fun!

(an unexpurgated tale of Winter Duck 2014)

Winter Duck

The aim of the RAFOS Expedition Winter Duck is to make a significant contribution to the Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS) which is a long-running survey undertaken by a partnership of the BTO, the RSPB, and the JNCC in association with the WWT, while at the same time furthering the overall aims of the Society. The expedition was the brainchild of Martin Godfrey and under various leaders has morphed and grown over time - this year saw the thirteenth expedition to the north-west of Scotland to gather data in an otherwise unrecorded part of the land.

The overall plan sounds simple – deploy to Scotland; split into 3 teams; survey allocated areas; report back; recover to home base. Classic 4 phase military operation: prepare; deploy; engage; and recover! The 3 teams are allocated areas as follows: Team 1 based at Dundonnell in a military adventurous training facility survey from Red Point by Gairloch to Kanaird Mouth just north of Ullapool over 4 days then drop south to survey Loch Torridon on day 5. Team 2 based initially at Kylesku cover the area from the North of Kanaird Mouth to Kinlochbervie also over 4 days then join Team 1 at Dundonnell before surveying to the south around Loch Carron and Applecross. Team 3 meanwhile cover the north coast from John O’Groats to Cape Wrath initially based at John O’Groats and then in the range facilities at the Cape Wrath range. This area takes them 5 days to cover before they too join the rest of the expedition at Dundonnell.

All along the way we record WeBS counts for the allocated sectors (some 223 separate sites) while at the same time recording all other birds seen for the BTO BirdTrack scheme in some 58 ten kilometre squares. Citizen science at its best but also highly rewarding time spent in glorious scenery with good company.

The Duckmeister’s Tale

I first went on Winter Duck in 2010 and have been back every year since. It was immediately apparent that this was serious surveying in what might from time to time be arduous weather.

In those far off glory days the enterprise was organised and led by John Wells and Jim Bryden with considerable catering support from Steve, the willowy giant of the Fens, Heather - but this year, as other duties and the general pressures of life beckoned, none of these individuals was able to guarantee their participation so – in a moment of complete inattention during a RAFOS Committee meeting – John slipped me the leadership baton and told me to get on with it! This was upwards delegation in keeping with the finest traditions of the Service.

Now as any Serviceman knows getting on with something that is in essence a repeat performance means digging out the file, changing a few dates to protect the innocent and then replaying the whole issue with the minimum of changes – if it ain’t broke don’t fix it. So that’s just what I did although a few things needed tinkering with mainly to try and keep costs within a manageable envelope.

Funding Winter Duck has always been a challenge. Mounting a long-range expedition requiring vehicles, fuel, accommodation and food was never going to be cheap but as the expedition hits so many of the Society’s aims the RAFOS Committee generously granted £1000 towards the costs. This coupled with the £1500 from personal contributions and a drawing down of £250 from the previous expeditions’ funds gave me a working budget but I had to bring in some frugal measures such as no puds on the dinner menu. In the end the budget was considerably eased by Teams 2 and 3 electing to fund their own evening meals rather than dine on the tinned rations that Team 1 were using so imaginatively and by Al Monkman, once again, providing a magnificent piece of venison for our ‘last supper’ . We were also helped by having a big squad this year with 14 participants split as follows:

Team 1: Gerry Bilbao, Alan Brimmell, Richard Clement, Jerry Knights, Martin Routledge, John Wells and Vron Wootton.

Team 2: Jim Bryden, Steve Heather and Martin Wightman.

Team 3: Keith Cowieson, Tom Dewick, Alan Kennedy and Al Monkman.



WINTER DUCKers 2014

Now expeditions like this don't come together without help and as the Duckmeister I must record my thanks to all involved, to Jerry for help with the survey maps and sites, to the treasurer team of John and Steve and to the galley slaves of Dundonnell who showed remarkable talent in the kitchen. Drivers, observers, raconteurs all came together to create another successful expedition but in the best Canterbury Tales fashion it is now time to let others tell their stories, so pour yourself a drink, pull up a sand-bag and

The Team One Techie's Tale

My WD14 started with a journey to RAF Benson with Alan Brimmell, to collect their SIF van for the East Coast deployment as the 'old-dog' (van) from RAF Wyton; had finally been laid to rest. The van was only a couple of years old and as we inspected it with full techie interest Martin was heard to remark drolly 'you're not buying it' – well we knew the main driver would expect us to check everything was in working order before setting off! We recovered to Ramsey, loaded and next day (Thursday) we set off with Steve Heather and Martin Wightman for the bandit country that is the Borders and home of one James Dunsmuir Bryden. Overnight at Jim's and a leisurely drive north to Dobbies Garden Centre Perth for a great breakfast then on up the A9 (clear of snow at this stage) to Newtonmore where we settled into Pine Cottage - our overnight stop. Now the weather was a bit *dreich* so we took shelter for the afternoon – I'll leave the reader to guess where.

Dug-in at Newtonmore we began to hear from the West Coast team; first that the Perth crew had been collected safely, then that there was trouble on the A9 and finally that the A9 blockage had been cleared and the team would arrive about 8 pm and could we reserve some of the locally renown fish-pie for one or two members. Eventually the West Coasters rolled in tired, hungry and in need of fresh banter and general jocularly. A great night ensued – again I'll leave the reader to fill in the gaps!

Saturday's plan was to move to Inverness to meet up with the Team 3 chaps before splitting to our survey areas. Traditionally the day starts with 'a walk in the woods', at Granttown-on-Spey looking for Capercail-lie. The potential 'felt good' the product was the best ever! We'd split up to explore different bits of the wood and I was phoned by Martin Wightman to come back some 500 yards on the track and move to his

area where he'd flushed a male Caper up from ground cover into a tree. Problem was they weren't sure which tree. The 'big-lad' (the Caper that is!), stayed put for about 30 minutes as the 8 of us closest to the site, descended on the area. We've carried out this caper hunt on most of the Winter Ducks over the last 13 years and finally been rewarded as with 8 of us moving through the woods the Caper had clearly had enough and flew off giving us pretty good views. We were so-so pleased for Martin Wightman in that he (alone) had found this rarity and got us onto it – a special start to the expedition indeed. Flushed (sic) with success the East Coast van then headed off to twitch an American Coot reported on a loch on the back route to Inverness while the other van headed directly for the rendezvous where we met up with Tom Dewick, Alan Kennedy and Al Monkman. The Northern lads being all prepped were chomping at the bit to get off and get North in Al's 4x4 but they had a stowaway a certain 4-legged man's best-friend called Bren – turns out he was the best behaved of the entire Team!

The Teams went their separate ways from Inverness and Team 1 arrived safely at Dundonnell in the mid-afternoon. Our survey start-point for Sunday morning was 40 odd miles away at Red Point and we knew that it would take a while to get there so all things considered alarms were set for 0530! The weather wasn't good – blustery and wet but we still managed some good sightings such as the 4 Golden Plover, at Red Point and a single Pink-footed Goose hiding in a gaggle of 40 Greylags. Moving on we arrived at one of our favourite haunts – the fish hatchery at Loch Kerry. It didn't disappoint and we recorded 226 Goldeneye here; almost 100 Mallards and a whole pile of gulls including 2 Glaucous Gulls. After Loch Kerry we moved through Gairloch town and up the coast towards Melvaig but the tide was high, the weather poor, the sea choppy and all told it was pretty difficult – consequently low-counts were recorded and we stacked for the day. Despite the poor conditions this had been a successful first day with reasonable numbers of various species but we were beginning to notice a trend that would be reinforced over the next few days: diver numbers up; sea-going duck numbers down.

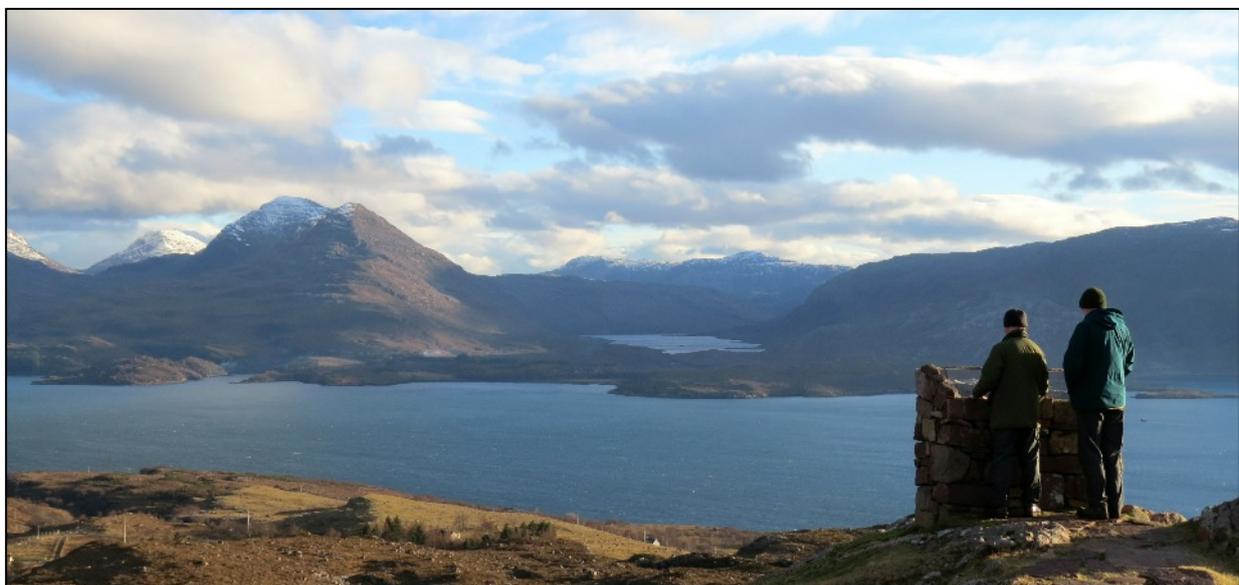


Team 1

Our second day involved the anti-clockwise circumnavigation of Loch Ewe starting at the NW tip by the Second World War gun emplacements and finishing at Mellon Charles. Our leader (who would often test us without warning) allowed a slightly relaxed reveille time of 0600 but we were still in place and brewing up while waiting for the light. The weather was much improved and though showery the wind was off the land so watching conditions were good and before long an odd looking white bird was spotted in the near bay below the gun emplacements. Further observation revealed a leucistic Great Northern Diver. Cue a very excited Jerry Knights and others with 'previous' as this was almost certainly a bird that had been christened Snowflake when first observed by RAFOS Duckers in 1999 and then again in 2009 - amazing! We were ecstatic! This bird, now at least 17 years old, had seen in the mouth of the same sea loch (albeit previous sightings had been on the NE side at Mellon Charles). The previous record had been by Jerry and again, Jerry was on hand to see it. It also suggests that Great Northern Divers return to favoured wintering spots year on year. The first sighting 'Snowflake' had been on -3 Mar 99, early one morning pre-breakfast. This time we managed a record shot to support the analysis (see the Paramo Girl's Tale below). Our day carried on in a glow of pleasure after this sighting and other notable records were high numbers of divers including Black-throated and our first Slavonian Grebes; we also did well for small waders with Ringed Plover, Redshank and Turnstones. Loch Ewe is big and much of our day had been spent scanning the open water picking up divers but even we were surprised at call-over to find we'd recorded over 40 divers but less than 20 sea-ducks.

Tuesday's task was to survey Gruinard Bay and an early viewpoint was just above Mellon Udrigle with fabulous views into the bay and out to sea. This was a favoured bay for divers probably because of 'the bowl' effect and natural shelter - in very good viewing conditions, the diver count soon started. The tide was high as we reached the mid-point of the bay at Laide but while snacking at the camp-site we found Rock Pipits feeding in the seaweed. Also my log states our first White-tailed Sea Eagle was seen from here, albeit distant on Gruinard Island. The bay along the road at Little Gruinard held 2 Slavonian Grebes, and various Auks including good views of a Little Auk which for many was a life first. Moving around the bay we found the gaggle of 80 or so Barnacle Geese in their customary field - another species set in its wintering habits! Given we had made such good progress we decided to start what would normally be Day 4's work on Little Loch Broom. Good call - a stunning 15 Great Northern Divers were on the Loch, together with Black-throated Divers and various Auks. Overall, a stunning day with 52 species recorded including over a hundred divers, from all 3 species, and almost as many auks.

That night we needed to have a bit of a re-think. Normally, Wednesday would see us cover Loch Broom and Ullapool and join up with Team 2 to give Jim a chance to buy us all coffee and cakes. Then Thursday would see both teams head south to Lochs Torridon and Carron. But Team 2 were running a bit behind (too many birds to count apparently) so were delaying their move to Dundonnell and the forecast for Thursday was poor; so it was decided to cover Loch Torridon the next day and give Jim a second chance to buy the coffee on Thursday. A 'topper' of a day broke and the weather and forecast gilded the lily.



The day started well with a Golden Eagle and 3 separate sightings of White-tailed Eagle above Sheildaig, we think it was 3 separate individuals, but they do travel great distances very quickly. This was a quiet day for water-birds with only 12 divers found but we did have 28 Grey Heron and 7 Little Grebes at various spots around the Loch. Gulls were as plentiful as ever (over 300) and sea-ducks scarce (just 1 Common Scoter) but once again auks were more obvious than usual with some being very close to land.

Thursday's task allowed for a much more relaxed start and had us up a little later in the kitchen for breakfast duties. The main effort was to be Loch Broom down to Ullapool then out to Rhue and up to Kanaird Mouth our final spot. Again good weather embarrassed the met man who had been forecasting a plague of frogs, as we set out to record at the top end of Loch Broom. The tide was high though and water-birds down so we had to be content with a field of geese before moving on down the Loch towards Ullapool. Timing is everything and we wanted to wait for the tide to drop a bit before carrying on to Moreside to look for waders and gulls on the river mouth. So the obvious plan was a visit to the outdoor shop come cafe for a kit shopping fix and some quality cake, coffee or homemade soup. Very civilised and just what we needed to brace ourselves for the final push. Bird numbers this day were down although we did find 3 Red-throated Divers but only 5 Great Northern Divers; once again sea-ducks were virtually absent but over 70 auks were found. Formal surveying was completed at Kanaird Mouth but on the way home, with a more favourable tide, Alan turned up a belter; Red-necked Grebe and a pair at that! We were so impressed we went back the next day but couldn't find them but it was great to finish on a high!

That night all 3 Teams got together at Dundonnell to exchange views, tales of daring do and general banter while Team 3 cooked up a feast – bambi never tasted so good! Team 3 recovered to Moray the next day, Team 2 headed south for their final surveys this year being augmented by 2 refugees from Team 1 namely Gerry and Jerry. The rest of us enjoyed a so called 'free day' – actually it was a reserve day planned for ticking off additional sites and generally mopping up. So we tried to find the Red-necked Grebes, and the Sea Eagles – all to no avail but we did turn up a first winter female Common Scoter trying its damndest to look like a Black-necked Grebe ~ but the Team 1 Techie saw through her disguise!



Paramo Girl

The Paramo Girl's Tale
(some observations on birding with Old Blokes)

My adventure started on 31st January at Tesco's in Perth (note to committee target Tesco's for sponsorship) where Richard Clement, Keith Cowieson and I were collected by the West Coast van. Martin had told us to travel light but Keith clearly hadn't read that message and had at least 4 more bags than myself! As we left Perth there were warning signs that the A9 was closed – we ignored them and pressed on (in fairness the alternative would have been a half day detour via Aberdeen!). As we approached Blair Athol we spotted an officer of the law waving his hands about; Keith quipped in his Aberdeenshire accent “That can't be because of midges at this time of year!”. Grumpy of the Scottish Police advised us that although the snow hadn't closed the road there had been accidents in it and he had no idea when it might reopen. So we decided to route via the old A9 and wait for the road to be cleared. In the end we were stuck for a good 3 hours. Sat in a van with 5 old blokes on the A9 was an experience for this shy, retiring lassie from Moray! The conversation was varied, educating and interesting swinging from the nonsense of reintroducing extinct species into areas no longer suitable for them, through the machinations of the football transfer window, to the issue of Brown rats on the Island of Rum being tagged because they are “bothering” the Manx Shearwaters...”Bothering them....they're freaking eating them!” – Keith Cowieson.

It is now dark, cold, and we are all needing a wee and are hungry....our main concern at this point was the fear that we may miss our fish pies at the hotel in Newtonmore. Thankfully we made it to Newtonmore in time for the delicious fish pies that John Wells kindly ordered for us in our absence. The next excitement was in Grantown Woods on the great capercaillie hunt when Martin Wightman flushed one up a tree for us. First time in 8 years that I had seen one so a life tick for me. Martin now rechristened Martin Frightman! Bird identification is always a challenge with the old blokes....Richard Clements classic to Alan Brimmell “Al that looks like a black throated gull” oh how we laughed.

The 3rd of February found us at the gunning point Loch Ewe where Al Brimmell discovered Snowflake. It is amazing to think that Snowflake keeps making the journey back to the top of Loch Ewe. Snowflake was quite far away and drifting out of sight quickly so no time for tripod and I had to use my new canon SX50 on 50 x optical zoom handheld in the wind so apologies for image quality of Snowflake. (Note to self...man up and take fewer clothes next year so room for my Canon 60D and all the lenses.).

Dundonnell accommodation was first class as always with new breakfast choices on offer this year including the Full Dundonnell (*similar to a full Scottish but without the attitude Ed*) and Porridge with sausages! Alan Brimmell tried left over sausage with his porridge and was disappointed as he normally had ketchup on his sausages but sugar on his porridge!!!! Waste not want not was the order of the day and Wellsey was determined that we would eat everything in his big white boxes.

Out on survey I could smell fox wee in the van and thought I must have stood in some. Obviously I apologised if I smelled of fox wee.....it was only on the 3rd day of my remarking how I could smell fox wee again that Jerry fessed up that it was his boiled sweets – something from Sweden called Scope Anomie I think called !!!!

One morning at 0600 as we left Dundonnell in the minibus Martin Routledge was slightly concerned that we could see no stars (reminds me of a Woody Allen play I was in at the Fringe in 1998 playing a lesbian prostitute and one of my lines was “You can see a lot of stars...did you know that light travels at 186 000 miles per second...” In my best American blonde accent!) ...anyway Jerry Knights asked “Do you need those to navigate by?” to which Martin replied “Yes cannot use the sextant without the stars” to which Jerry commented “another essential piece of winter duck minibus kit”. This proves that even at 0600 old blokes are still very witty.



Old Blokes Scoping

The old bloke ID problem even crept in to Martin (who is really not that old he just had a tough life flying fighters) when he got me very excited by telling us there were 2 sea eagles on Gruinard Island cairn....for the rest of the team to identify them as Ravens. I then ID'd a brown raptor sitting on a rock on the island, only head and shoulders visible...team said it was a stone....it then flew off but was sadly just a buzzard.

The recording system with a team of 7 didn't always work to plan. Team members were allocated a species for the day that they were to call back to me at end of each site...some members were quite astounded when far more of their species had been seen than they had recorded....anyway day to day this gave us some laughs....it's a good job I was basically not trusting the old blokes and recording everything anyway.

Team 3 invented some new species with Alan Kennedys Purlaw...he thought it was a peregrine when it was actually a curlew. They also had some fun when Al Monkman forgot to put handbrake on...running along and jumping into moving vehicle does sound fun. They also had the old bloke ID syndrome when a golden eagle was called that turned out to be a cairn on a hill.

Team 2 were very loyal to each other and would reveal no funny stories. It was commented however that they looked like they should be in an identity parade for 3 old bald blokes wearing green gear....that reminds me as Paramo girl another note to committee let's try Paramo for funding.

T

A first for winter duck was a record of 2 Ptarmigan seen up An Teallach by Richard Clement. We saw Richard up the mountain from 13kms away on Jerry Knights scope as he came down from the summit silhouetted against the beautiful blue skyline. Richard is posted shortly back to England so was given a day off to bag the munro that is right outside our accommodation at Dundonnell. At least Richard used his ice axe for its intended use not just smashing ice for G&T's in Team 3 as Tom Dewick did.

We did see lots of lovely golden eagles and sea eagles and otters.



We all had our usual encounters with the locals... some more close up than others!

All in all another very successful and enjoyable winter duck. To quote one of our senior members “This sure is a lot of fun”.

The Recorder's Tale

OK now for the science bit. We surveyed 94% of the 223 allocated WeBS sites with the un-surveyed areas being mainly off limits because of deer stalking or because of failing light. For BirdTrack reporting some 56 lists were completed in over 50 ten kilometre squares. The most numerous diver was the Great Northern but the interesting analysis was that Razorbills were the 10th most commonly reported bird (last year they were in 78th place) and Guillemots were 11th on this year's list compared with 49th place last year – clearly up, perhaps as a result of stormy weather at sea. All the usual gulls were found in very comparable locations to last year again occupying positions 3-6 on the list. But Eider and Common Scoter came in further down the order than last year with Eider slipping from 18th to 36th and Common Scoter from 46th to 55th. All of this is subject to further work as the BirdTrack recorder is still trying to get some records accurately put on the system - if it throws up any more really interesting factoids I'll update readers in the next addition. Overall 108 species were recorded during the trip (102 last year)

End Piece

A good time was had by all and some excellent records provided for 2 important surveys. Most of this article has been about Team 1 but Teams 2 & 3 put in some outstanding effort as well. Team 3 had been called the 'Harum Scarums' by Vron, but this scurrilous claim was completely discredited given their normal evening pursuits of Scottish poetry recital, fine art appreciation, amateur culinary competitions and modest wine-tasting sessions – suffice to say the Team leader's quote was that Bren the dog was the best behaved of the lot of them (and I know he'll have included himself in that remark!). As for next year who knows but it would be a crying shame if this important and enjoyable expedition came to an end.

Contributors:

Martin Routledge aka The Duckmeister

John Wells aka The Team 1 Techie

Vron Wootton aka The Paramo Girl

Some Old Bloke aka The Recorder



Three Wise Monkeys



The A9 on the way up!



'Snowflake'



Red Deer Stag

WINTER DUCK 2014

The RAFOS Newsletter

Is published twice each year and the Editor welcomes all contributions.

Notes for potential contributors:

The length of the article does not matter – there is usually room for shorter items, and they are preferred to an epic novel.

Illustrations are always welcome. As the Newsletter is now published in full colour, we can do justice to colour photographs.

Please send written articles as soon as you can. This helps spread the load for the Editor.

PLEASE SEND PICTURES SEPARATELY FROM TEXT. Please do not embed them into a text document. Files in .jpg format are preferred.

Please try to avoid using footnotes, spreadsheets and tables. They make the editor's life difficult!

The editor looks forward to receiving written contributions in the following formats, listed in order of preference:

1. As an attachment to an email.
2. On a CD.
3. As typed copy.
4. Handwritten (least welcome!)

Illustrations can be submitted by email, CD or hard copy; if the latter, please let me know if you want them back.

The closing date for items for Newsletter 98 is 17 July 2014

Please address contributions to:

**Bill Francis
100 Moselle Drive
Churchdown
GLOUCESTER
GL3 2TA**

E-mail: wgfrancis@btinternet.com

RAFOS Web Site: www.rafos.org.uk

RAFOS Facebook Page: [Royal Air Force Ornithological Society](#)

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