



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society



Boat-billed Flycatcher

By

John Towers

Newsletter No. 98

Autumn 2014



Masked Shrike, Lesvos
By John Towers



Little Owl, Lesvos
By John Towers

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Spoonbill
Picture by Robert Somers Cox



**ROYAL
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Golden Jubilee Dinner

**Royal Air Force Club
128 Piccadilly**

20 June 2015

Following a poll of the membership after the last AGM it has been decided to plan an anniversary dinner in the RAF Club for the evening of 20 Jun 15 to celebrate 50 years of RAF birding. Accommodation will be available at the Club or nearby at the Victory Services Club for those wanting to make a weekend of it! Save the date and dig out your memoirs of ornithological adventure over the last 50 years to regale the assembled throng.

The Secretary Bird will be looking for expressions of interest, with no commitment, over the next few months but will be looking for firm commitments by Easter next year – more details at the 2014 AGM in November.



ISLAY MIST 2015

It's that time again. If you've wondered why people rave about Islay and would like to discover the island for yourself or you're overwhelmed with a desire to renew the acquaintance, now's your chance. This is the call to all those wishing to be Islay Misters and Mistresses in 2015. The number of places on the trip is limited by the beds available at the cottages at Kilchoman, which are booked for 9 to 16 May 15. Nearer the time we may suggest an optional break in the journey there and/or back with a day or more to visit Caerlaverock, Mersehead or some similar location. If you're interested in joining us as we replenish our stock of single malt, and spot the occasional bird (the average number of species seen by the group on the 4 previous Spring visits is 119, our personal average is 100 on 3 Spring visits), or you would like more information, please contact Dick and Jan Knight at theknightsat2@gmail.com or on 01243 920289.

From the Editor

After our bumper edition in the Spring, this RAFOS Newsletter is a little slimmer, but no less interesting for that. Articles from members cover far-flung areas of the globe from Trinidad and Tobago to the Greek island of Lesvos, via Cape Wrath, Findhorn Bay and Ascension Island.

There is an opportunity to join the next ISLAY MIST field visit in May 2015 and early warning of the 50th Anniversary dinner, to be held next June.

As you may know, I spend time each week as a volunteer with the Slimbridge Wetland Centre of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT). This organisation is the source of two articles that I hope that you will find interesting: one deals with the tagging of Greenland White-fronted Geese on Islay, the other with the ongoing efforts to save the Madagascar Pochard from extinction.

From its inception the WWT has been at the forefront of research related to wildfowl and these are just two examples of current projects. There is a lot more to Slimbridge than just a collection of exotic birds and a nature reserve.

I would also remind members that Newsletters will in future appear on the RAFOS website rapidly after their preparation is completed - in fact Newsletter No 97 was available there weeks before the hard copies were produced.

Best wishes

Bill Francis

RAFOS on Facebook



Members are reminded that there is a 'closed' group on Facebook for RAFOS members, called simply 'RAFOS'. This is separate from our public Facebook page, that is entitled 'Royal Air Force Ornithological Society' and is visible to all Facebook users.

The group is intended as a private social forum for RAFOS members, and is a quick and easy way of sharing news, views and pictures between ourselves. The group has 37 members so far.

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

British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Membership Offer - Join for £1!

What follows is the text of an email received from the BTO:

Mr W G Francis
wgfrancis@btinternet.com

Dear William

Please help us do more

Here at the BTO we are trying to increase our Membership and feel you are likely to know someone or several people interested in birds who are not members of our family. Why not ask them to try Membership for the rest of the year for just £1? There is no obligation to stay beyond that, but I obviously hope they will want to!

There are two stories just this week that show how Member's money benefits birds:

Understanding the reasons for decline of Spotted Flycatcher, Redstarts and Wood Warblers:

<http://www.bto.org/news-events/news/2014-07/mediterranean-conditions-affect-uk-breeding-migrants>

Ground breaking Cuckoo tracking project:

<http://www.bto.org/news-events/press-releases/chris-cuckoo-waves-goodbye-britain-again>

If you forward this message on they can click the button below to join, or find out more about the offer and our prize draw by following this link

<http://www.bto.org/support-us/join/membergetamember>

THANK YOU AND GOOD LUCK

Warm regards

Debbie Todd

Membership Manager

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Trinidad and Tobago – The Birthday Bash

by Karen Sims

Report 1 - To Trinidad

It was John's big birthday in March 2013 and I had asked how he would like to celebrate. This is what was chosen for the two weeks 18 September – 2 October.

We flew from Gatwick to Tobago with Monarch and were then to take the 20 minute hopper flight to Trinidad. We were 40 minutes late into Tobago due to one diversion to avoid a tropical storm and a second diversion to avoid a US missile test!

We arrived into damp and humid Tobago and were met by a rep from the company with which we'd booked the trip, Motmot Travel, a company which specialises in Caribbean holidays. We had our bags taken to the check in desk for the Trinidad hopper and waited in the small lounge for our twin prop to arrive. The flight across the strait into damp and humid Trinidad was a little bumpy, but quick. We were met in Trinidad by a driver from our base for the next week. We had chosen to stay at the famous Asa Wright Centre in the Northern range.

We had never been to that part of the world before and it was to be our first experience of the tropics and being so close to South America. As Trinidad is only some 17 miles from the coast of Venezuela the birds would include many from that continent. The drive was so interesting as every sight was new and different and although a couple of hours drive after the long haul flight it was a great start to the holiday. The driver was not a bird guide but he pointed out many species as we went, including a lovely pair of Saffron Finch in the airport car park.

Once at Asa Wright, we unpacked our cases in our bungalow and after a quick wash made our way to "The Veranda" for our first rum punch and the amazing sight of Hummingbirds only inches from our faces on the hanging feeders. After a very good dinner we joined some other guests for a night walk around the grounds and were introduced to a very large female Chevron Tarantula sitting by her nest, the open tubing of a hand rail!

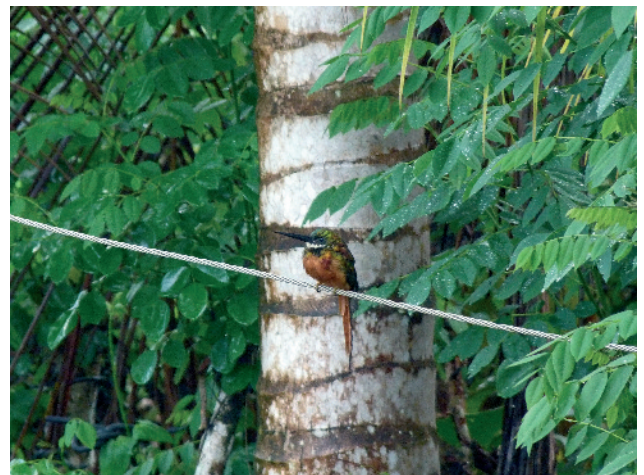
Day 2 - Thursday

After a good night's sleep we needed to be up early to see the dawn and the feeding stations, as all the birds came in for breakfast. We'd set the alarm, so after a shower made our way to the main building which was in darkness! Not a soul around and so dark with no sign of the dawn. On checking the alarm back in our room it became obvious we hadn't changed the clock and it was 3am not 6am!! Back to bed and up at the right time with very noisy **Orange Winged Parrots** calling from the trees around us. We had a welcoming cup of tea on the veranda and watched the birds coming in for breakfast before having ours. There was a strange call

Male Green Honeycreeper



Rufous-tailed Jacamar



coming from the far trees and one of the centre's guides pointed out the calling **Bearded Bellbird** straight out in front of the veranda. This bird appears on all the paper work for the centre and was one of the birds people came to see.

We had a morning orientation walk with one of the centre's guides so we could see the extent of the grounds and where we were likely to see certain species. There are both **Golden-headed** and **White-bearded Manakin** leks on sight as well as at Dunston Cave which is the most accessible site for seeing **Oilbird**. It was a lovely warm and sunny day - just what had been ordered. Back at the main building, a large group of Americans had arrived from a National Geographic cruise-liner. They were there just for the day and were very enthusiastic.

We had arranged with the centre to have 5 trips off the estate with local bird guides and our first was to be that afternoon and into the evening. You are very well fed at Asa Wright with breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, rum punch and dinner everyday. If you weren't on the grounds for any of those, the kitchen would load up the guide's transport with all the relevant items. So we left the centre mid afternoon with afternoon tea, rum punch and dinner on board.

Our guide for the first two trips was Roodal Ramlal. He was very experienced and had great hearing. We stopped en route for all the bird calls he heard and then he searched out the species. We arrived at Aripo Agricultural Experimental Station where livestock are bred to improve their meat and milk production. Large fields contained Water Buffalo, Indian Brahmin cattle and their crosses as well as sheep and goats. Further over was a large dairy unit but all the cows appeared to be kept indoors. At the centre we were also met by security from Asa Wright, as we were to be out and about at night they like to ensure your safety - not that there appeared to be any cause for concern. Roodal tracked down and showed us a calling **Tropical Screech-Owl** before it became too dark. There were waders in all the local pools including **Solitary Sandpiper**, **Southern Lapwing** and **Wilson's Snipe** as well as a **Striated Heron** and in the fields, **Black-tailed Tityra**, **Cattle Egret** and **Pied Water-Tyrant**. Once it had got really dark we slowly drove the tracks of the station and every few minutes we seemed to have either a **Common Pauraque** or **White-tailed Nightjar** soaking up the warmth; back to the centre and a very welcome shower and bed.

Day 3 - Friday

Another fairly early start and after breakfast Roodal collected us, our lunch and afternoon tea as we were going to be out all day. The plan was to go north up towards the coast along the Amina-Blanchisseus Road toward the coastal villages on the Caribbean. On the way we would go up to the summit of Morne Bleu and have lunch at Morne La Croix. However, there were so many birds to see that we didn't get anywhere near the coast. We stopped at Morne La Croix and ate lunch in the truck waiting for the heavy rain storm to blow over. Morne La Croix is a lovely small village with many gardens and vegetable plots - and great birds. After the rain there were even more birds about and we had great views of our first **Rufous-tailed Jacamar** drying it's feathers in a patch of sunlight. Then a large flock of **Blue-headed Parrots** flew into a stand of

Male Purple Honeycreeper

Female Purple Honeycreeper



large trees near the vehicle. These noisy, pretty birds allowed us to get a really good look at them. We turned round to go back to the truck and spotted a pair of **Collared Trogon** - such beautiful birds.

That day we saw some birds that we didn't see again on the trip - a **Band-rumped Swift**, **Black-throated Mango**, **Green-backed** (previously called White-tailed) **Trogon**, **Tropical Peewee**, **Speckled Tanager** and **Golden-crowned Warbler**. We also heard but couldn't find **Rufous-breasted Wren** and **Black-faced Ant-thrush**.

Back to the centre for a very welcome rum punch, sure do miss those, and another good dinner. There 4 new guests had arrived - two couples of American birders who were very interesting - one of the couples owned and ran a small reserve in Texas mainly for migrating warblers.

Day 4 - Saturday

We had a change of guide today, a nephew of Roodal, Mahese Ramlal. The 4 Americans staying were being guided by David Ramlal the son of Roodal - a real family business. Out early for the long drive to Waterloo and its extensive mud flats, we set off along the Uriah Butler Highway for the west coast. Trinidad has a large population of East Indians and Waterloo has many Hindu Temples and cremation grounds. One temple complex is built on an artificial island and was called The Temple of the Sea. This vast area held a large number of birds scattered over the glistening mud. We watched **Brown Pelicans**, **Laughing Gulls** and **Black Skimmers** fishing. Large groups of waders moved over mud all with different feeding actions. The **Sanderling**, **Semipalmated Plover** and **Ruddy Turnstone** were close into shore, whilst further out there were **Willet**, **Short-billed Dowitcher**, **Whimbrel** and both **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**. On the other side of the short causeway, groups of **Sandpipers** - **Spotted**, **Semipalmated**, **Least** and **White-rumped**, feeding in the muddy pools. A little further away and not so easy to see was a large flock of **Gull-billed Terns**. Further near the shore the mangrove roots pushed out into the mud flats we saw a **Little Blue Heron**, a juvenile **Scarlet Ibis** (very grey and boring) and a **Clapper Rail** dashing about after small crabs and fish fry. Walking back towards the car, noisy calls from the causeway shrubbery had us searching and eventually finding a pair each of **Yellow-chinned Spinetail**, **Bicoloured Conebill** and a very confiding **White-flanked Ant-wren**.

After lunch we moved on to Caroni Swamp to take a boat ride for the early evening show of **Scarlet Ibis** as well as mixed flocks of heron and egret coming into roost in the mangroves. Before we got on the boats we had time to look out over the agricultural area and saw a distant **Long-winged Harrier** quartering the fields along with **Osprey**. The fields here are used for growing food crops such as Okra, Aubergine, Chilli, Tomatoes and Pigeon Peas. The area had once been all Sugar Cane but that crop has now all but disappeared from the island.

This swamp is on the Gulf of Paria and we were taken out into the mangroves on large flat bottomed boats with outboard motors. The pilots stopped on the way to show us **Tree Boa**, **Ringed Kingfisher** and a sleeping **Common Potoo**. We also had the briefest glimpse of a pair of **Red-capped Cardinals** as they flew from one bank to another. The sky was filling with Ibis, Egrets and Herons all coming into a few islands in the centre of a vast open area of water. More and more arrived as the boats were pulled up along side the far bank and the trees resembled huge flowering shrubs as the **Scarlet Ibis** landed and settled down for the night. We stayed until it was too dark to see the birds and were then taken back up the waterway to the landing dock. Back at the truck, Mahese served us the Rum Punch and we sat back and sipped these as he drove us back to Asa Wright for dinner - "you drink I drive" Mahese had said.

Day 5 - Sunday

There was a nest in one of the shrubs outside our bungalow and at last we saw the adults attending it - a very colourful and striking pair of **Barred Antshrike** with their punk hair-do's.

It was Bio-blitz day at the centre today and there were people all over the site from the university and other ecology groups. They had been out over night and had put out inspection tanks in one of the outside rooms

filled with their findings. Lots of spiders, land crabs, a few snakes and the butterflies were on display together with a few moths. The white boards recorded plants, animals and bird species as they were seen by the teams. We decided to walk up the entrance road of the centre to the gates and find our own species. It was very hot and the humidity was particularly high that day. We had great close views of **Violaceous Euphonia** and two stunning male **Guanian Trogon** (previously Northern Violaceous). As we neared the main gates we spotted two large raptors circling above us and looking through the field guide thought they may have been Grey Headed Kite. As luck would have it the Americans came up the drive on their way out for the day and David Ramlal asked if we had seen the raptors. We had identified them correctly, so good to do that.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

During the RAFOS meeting at Portland in October I noticed a wooden figure standing in a niche at the bird observatory. The figure reminded me of a RAFOS member but I could not remember the name. I wonder if your readers could help?

Yours sincerely,

Dick Knight



Any ideas? Ed

Nine Days on Ascension

Martin Routledge

The very fact that an expedition bears the title BOOBY TERN 20 suggests it has been going for a long time! The military ornithological societies' study of Ascension Island (ASI) bird life has its genesis in RAFOS led work there in February 1987 and November 1988 with the baton passing to the Army Ornithological Society (AOS) in 1990 who have focused on the routine study of the **Sooty Tern** colonies known locally as the Wideawake Fairs. To quote the AOS's web site:

'British military ornithological societies have monitored the colony of Sooty Terns *Onychoprion fuscatus* and other seabirds on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic since 1987. The first population census was completed in 1990 ten years prior to the commencement of the RSPB cat eradication on the Island. Sooty Terns were closely monitored during the two years when cats were culled and now we continue the monitoring in the post eradication phase. The longitudinal study has focused on the breeding biology of the Sooty Tern and concentrates on establishing trends in the breeding population, identifying and recording levels of predation, site fidelity, sub-annual breeding, investigating nest and adult survival rates, and more recently to identifying their migration sites.'

The main aim of this long term monitoring programme is to facilitate the expansion of the breeding population by identifying and reducing threats to the Sooty Tern colonies. The following tasks are conducted:

- Surveys of the Sooty Tern breeding population are undertaken at regular intervals.
- The levels of predation in the colony are measured and recorded.
- A ringing and re-trap programme is maintained so that inter and intra colony movements can be monitored and survival rates determined.
- Perceived threats to the colony are investigated.
- Long term, quantifiable data that can be used as evidence for making conservation management decisions on Sooty Terns is collected and made available to interested parties.
- Since 2011 geo-locators have been fitted to a few Sooty Terns on each visit with analysis of the recovered data being undertaken by Dr Reynolds of Birmingham University.

OK so much for the purpose of this sojourn to the southern tropics now for some harsh realities – it's hot; there's no shade; it's very noisy; the Terns tenaciously attack interlopers; they have a habit of regurgitating food on you when handled; and they poop quite a bit too! But on the plus side the company is great; the Island fascinating; the pub serves cold beer; and if you get bored by being in the presence of 190,000 Terns there are always **Green Turtles** to watch on the beach; black trigger fish to feed; and a mountain to explore. It's even possible to chuckle in amusement as Colin Wearn falls flat on his face while chasing a **Masked Booby** chick – OK Germanic humour but still worth a grin.

BOOBY TERN 20 set sail on 14 May 14 from the RAF's hub at Brize Norton in our latest shiny aircraft the A330 Voyager – albeit this one was crewed by civilians from Air Tanker our partner organisation. The Voyager has very long legs and the overnight flight to ASI was completed in good order right up to the moment of descent when the news came in that as the Island was experiencing heavy rain showers we would have to hold off for a while – it transpires that the airfield is effectively visual flight rules only and with no precision instrument landing aids (and 3000 feet of mountain nearby) we had to wait for things to improve. I heard later that the aircraft could have circled for hours before diverting to Africa such was the fuel on board.

This expedition's merry band included Colin Wearn, Julia Springett and me from RAFOS (although as a bit of a schizophrenic Julia is also a member of the RNBWS so was really on their ticket), six AOS members and a civilian PhD student. We were all accommodated in the transit blocks at RAF Travellers' Hill and very well fed and watered in the Combined Mess.



Team photograph, at Mars Bay

Joe Stokil

The daily routine quickly established itself – breakfast at 0630 depart at 0730 and off to the Sooty Tern Fairs at either Waterside or Mars Bay. For the first few days the emphasis was on re-trapping previously ringed birds while mapping and getting a general feel for the current layout of the colonies. Each season the birds return and nest on slightly different areas within the same larger Fair. So while last year the Mars Bay colony were mainly to the East of that area, this year they were occupying ground to the West – this might be a cunning move to mitigate the impact of parasites. The colonies were also at different stages of development with Waterside, on the whole, being a couple of weeks ahead of Mars Bay in terms of timing –this is quite normal. What wasn't quite so normal was that each colony had birds at all stages of breeding from the initial courtship or night-clubbing stage through brooding to fledging. In the past the peak breeding period has been very narrow in timescale but in recent years this all seems to be spreading out more and the locals had commented that the Island had hardly been 'Tern Free' at all between breeding peaks. What was still quite apparent though was that the majority of birds in the same part of the colony were all at the same stage.



Sooty Tern
Tony Giles

Over those first few days we re-trapped nearly 600 Sooty Terns; two of these birds had been first ringed as adults in April 1998 which means they were now at least 21 years old. We also managed to re-capture 4 birds with geo-locators attached which means of the 50 birds fitted with these devices since 2011 we've now recovered 11 which is a very good striking rate. The geo-locators tell an interesting tale of this sea going Tern's adventurous life while away from ASI. It appears they spend many months around an area of the mid-Atlantic called St Paul's Rocks (01N 029W) but some roam far and wide around the Atlantic tropical belt and cover hundreds of miles before returning to ASI ten lunar months later to breed again.



Geo-locators explained to the Saturday Club
Joe Stokil

On the Saturday we set up something of a demonstration area at Mars Bay for the local school Saturday Club. The school is in Two Boats village and the children were somewhat younger than we were expecting so my carefully prepared lecture on the taxonomy of seabirds had to be changed at the last minute; nevertheless they had a great time and saw a side to the wildlife of the Island that to most was an eye-opener. They were treated to three stands: one where they were able to watch Colin and Dr Jim fit geo-locators and take blood samples and various measurements; another where Julia and I were ringing Sooty Terns; and finally they were regaled by Roger Dickey about nest predation and told gruesome tales of **Common Mynas** *Acridotheres tristis*, rats, crabs and cats. Listen with Roger culminated in an exhortation to kill all cats on sight. OK he didn't quite put it that way but one of the teachers did say she was expecting questions from parents about why their children were now so anti-feline!

Meanwhile, having left the children pondering the circle of life, it was time to head down the fairs and keep re-trapping with the occasional break to ring **Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus* chicks when we found them. The Brown Noddys often choose to nest on rocky outcrops either within or close to the Sooty Terns –the theory is there is some predator protection from nesting amongst the thousands of Sootys. Chicks often hide away under boulders and can be difficult to spot but on this trip we managed to ring 30 or so and most of these were at nest sites already marked and observed by the ASI Conservation Team. We kept the effort going but on Sunday switched to Waterside Fair at the end of the runway. Waterside is also a good place to watch **White-tailed Tropic Birds** *Phaethon lepturus ascensionis* and **Black Noddies** *Anous minutus* cruising along the coast.

Brown Noddy
Martin Routledge



Our gallant leader decided we'd all done so well that Monday was declared a day of non-Sooty Tern activity. Instead we broke into smaller parties and climbed Green Mountain to see **White Terns** *Gygis alba* (known locally as Fairy Terns) or explored the town or beaches. A particularly fun time was had feeding left-over packed lunches to the fish with the **Black Trigger Fish** acting as the local equivalent of the Piranha and voraciously attacking anything thrown in. Some mad fools even went swimming! Monday night was Turtle watch and most of us joined the Conservation Team's formal patrol of Long Beach by Georgetown to see if we could spot a **Green Turtle** come ashore to lay her eggs. Mid May is towards the end of the nesting season for these transatlantic drifters who spend the rest of their lives off the Brazilian coast only returning to their natal beach for a spot of intimate canoodling just offshore and then a slow lumber up the beach to dig a nest chamber and lay their eggs. Because this was the end of the season we were treated to the sight of both laying and hatching on the same night.



Checking a Green Turtle with the Conservation Staff

Joe Stokil



Male Ascension Frigatebird cruises across the Fairs
Joe Stokil

Tuesday was back to re-trapping in earnest with the most regimented of creeping line ahead searches over the fairs making sure no stone was left un-turned or should that be Terned? We also undertook quadrat counts to try and estimate the total number of birds nesting. This technique involves a carefully judged length of rope on a stick which when used to describe a circle results in exactly 10 square metres. Count the eggs in the circle; repeat many time over as one traverses the Fair several times and hey presto and assessment of the number of eggs per square kilometre or hectare or whatever unit that clever device of Tony's counts in. Anyway we came to the conclusion that there were about 190,000 pairs of Sooty Terns spread between the two Fairs – a number fairly consistent with recent expeditions. The colonies were also in pretty good health with only moderate rates of adult and chick mortality apparent. Those birds that did regurgitate food when handled seemed to have more sprat than squid on board (the former being more nutritious) which was another good sign. Signs of predation were comparatively few too and we caught very few rats and saw only one or two Mynas. **Ascension Frigatebirds** *Fregata aquila* cruised the Fairs on most days and clearly were taking chicks when they could but even they couldn't make too much of an impact in the grand scheme of things. The Frigates also take the hatchling turtles when they can so at this time of year they were probably over-awed by the smorgasbord of prey on offer.

Having mapped the Fairs, analysed the nesting density, looked at predation rates and generally marvelled at the behaviour of masses of seabirds we began the next phase of operations – namely ringing a couple of thousand Sooty Terns. Most of those to be fitted with BTO bling were adults but we also ringed a few well grown chicks about to fledge. Colin and Dr Jim also fitted the rest of the geo-locators and took various samples. Dr Jim will explain more about his tracking project at the AGM where he is our guest speaker.

No trip to ASI is complete without a visit to the far south-east corner known as The Letterbox. This area, with Boatswainbird Island offshore, is a favoured haunt of the Frigatebird and is where they've started to nest again after many years absence – having found one nesting pair in 2012 this year there were 11 pairs nesting on Letterbox. It is a remote zone and a difficult, if spectacular, walk in which but is well worth the effort. Our target species here was the **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* and our aim was to ring chicks and thus help monitor their breeding success and also to see whether there was any interchange between the ASI population and those on St Helena some 800 miles away. Catching nearly fledged Masked Boobys isn't the easiest task in the world as they're surprisingly quick, if rather ungainly, over the lava outflow. Still we managed slightly more than 60 birds and monitored a number of nest sites into the bargain.



Julia and Lucy get to grips with a Masked Booby
Lynne Millard

All too soon it was time to pack-up, buy trinkets and trash from the gift shop and head back to Blighty on the magnificent Voyager. Happy times, good science and a return visit already in planning for March 2015. Thanks to all for making the expedition so worthwhile.

The following article has been taken (with the permission of the author) from 'The Splash' -the newsletter of the WWT Centre at Slimbridge. I thought it would be of particular interest to the members who have visited Islay, especially those from 2013, who met our neighbour at Kilchoman, Ed Burrell of the WWT. Editor

Tagging technology is tops!

By Baz Hughes

*Head of Species Conservation Department
Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust*

In March 2014 I headed up to Islay to attend a very successful conference on sustainable goose management in Scotland. Accompanied by our Research Officer on Islay, Ed Burrell, the first day was spent visiting farmers' fields to observe agricultural damage by geese (yes 42,000 Greenland Barnacle Geese and 6,000 Greenland White-fronts do eat a lot of grass and can cause agricultural damage).

The second day was conference day. After the opening address, I gave a presentation (prepared by Carl) on goose status and distribution in Scotland followed by David Stroud and Alyn Walsh on Greenland White-fronts. After various presentations on goose management, the day concluded with workshops on:

- How to measure goose impacts & economic losses on agricultural land.
- Options for practical management.
- Collaborative adaptive management of wild geese.

Needless to say there were diverging views on how the geese should be managed and whether the Greenland Barnacle Goose population should be reduced, but NFU Scotland should be applauded for this effort to



Tag 21 (light green) and tag 22 (dark green) on Greenland White-fronted Geese at RSPB Loch Gruinart

Photo Baz Hughes

bring together the various stakeholders in the planning stages of the Islay Sustainable Goose Management Project.

While Ed and I were at the workshop, Larry had travelled to Islay to try to download data from 11 of the 12 tags we had fitted to Greenland White-fronts this winter and one from last winter. And download he did – with successful downloads from 10 of the 12 geese. These included tags 21 and 22 which had been caught by Carl, Larry and Ed at the RSPB’s Loch Gruinart reserve in January.

For the first month or so these two geese had largely remained on the reserve, roosting and feeding in a relatively small area. It was interesting to see that neither bird crossed a small bank, preferring the area to the north, despite the fact that there were white-fronts on both sides of this bank. These birds can be incredibly site faithful!

On inspecting the GPS data for tags 21 and 22 over a pint in the Lochside Inn in Bowmore, we saw that they had recently changed tactics and had been commuting from the roost at Gruinart to a feeding site 10km to the southwest – on a very predictable flight line.

We therefore set ourselves the task of trying to see them the following evening and even to try to download more data from their tags as they flew to the Gruinart roost.



Tags 21 (light green) and 22 (dark green) commuted to Kilchiaran fields on a daily basis – a very different foraging habitat to Gruinart. Tag 21 also made visits to some other feeding and roosting sites.

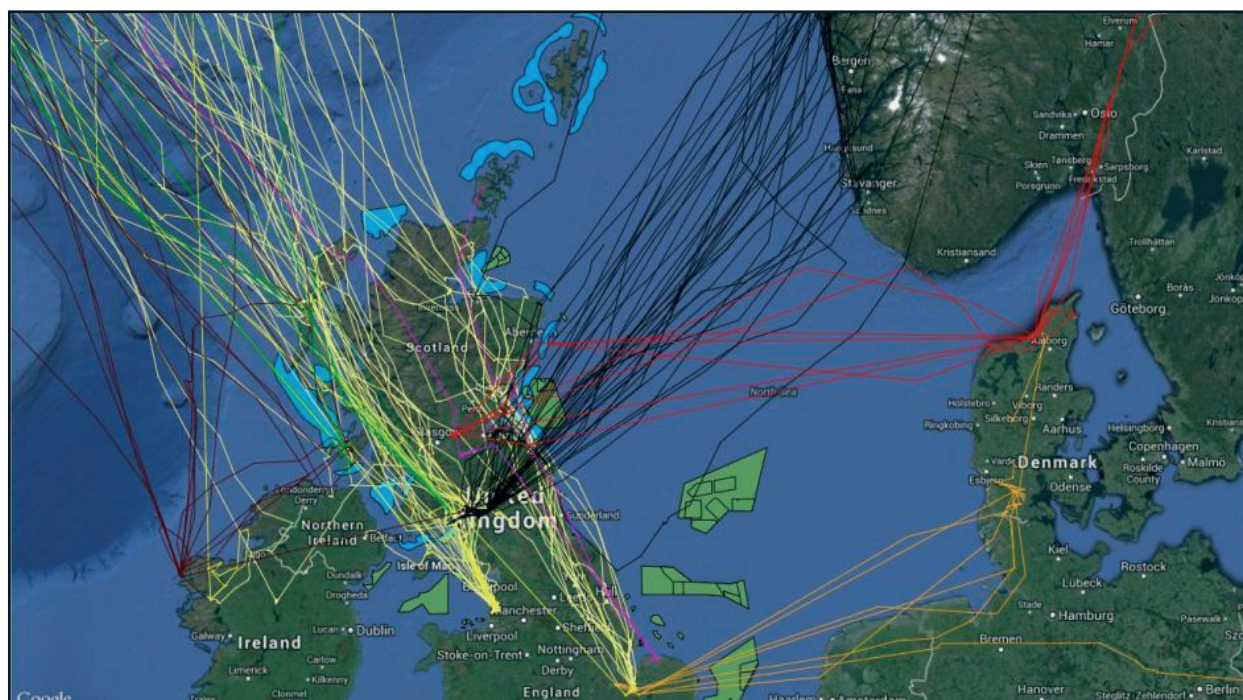
Photo Baz Hughes

Our top man on the ground on Islay, Ed, worked out the best place we could see them from and estimated that they would leave their feeding grounds at 6.45pm. Assuming a goose flies at 35-40km an hour, that would mean they'd fly over us at about 7pm. IF we'd got our location and flight time calculations right. We got into position in good time at 6.15pm – in a lay-by about 300m south of a farm called Sunderland Farm – good omen for me! We turned on the data receiver and waited - and waited -and waited. Then at 7.01pm a flock of about 150 white-fronts approached us in the evening gloom. The data receiver beeped – it had made contact with Tag 22. As the birds flew directly over our heads about 20m up, the tag downloaded its payload of GPS data. Bingo! All down to the field-craft of our men on the ground – Carl, Larry and Ed.

I never cease to be amazed by this tagging technology. It has enabled us to plot migration routes, identify staging sites and breeding grounds of swans and geese in remote Arctic regions in Canada (Light-bellied Brent Geese), Greenland (Greenland White-fronts, Greenland Barnacles), Iceland (Whooper Swans), Svalbard (Svalbard Barnacles) and Russia (Bewick's Swans, and Red-breasted Geese).

As the technology has advanced, tags have got smaller, battery power greater, and GPS locations more frequent, allowing us to plot flight heights in relation to offshore wind farm sites. Initially we did this for Whooper Swans and Barnacle Geese – revealing that about half of the Whooper Swans from Martin Mere crossed wind farm footprints up the west coast of Britain. Similarly, about half of the Barnacles' tracks from the Solway crossed the proposed Round 3 wind farm site in the Firth of Forth.

This year, we're tracking Bewick's Swans from the Ouse Washes across the North Sea to Europe and hopefully to and from their Russian breeding grounds if the tags last the distance. We believe that in good weather and light conditions, most swans and geese will choose to avoid wind farms (why wouldn't they!) and this is being borne out by the few studies conducted to date.



Light yellow lines highlight Whooper Swan tracks from Martin Mere, Welney and Caerlaverock, black lines - Svalbard Barnacle Geese, red lines - Taiga Bean Geese from Slamannan, brown lines – Greenland Barnacle Geese tagged in northwest Ireland, green lines – Greenland White-fronted Geese at Loch Ken in Dumfries and Galloway. Darker yellow lines show Bewick's Swan tracks to the continent.

Photo Baz Hughes

However, we're particularly concerned about Bewick's Swans because they choose to migrate mainly at night. And they may well be crossing the multitude of planned offshore wind farms between south east England and Europe. If they do (and initial data suggest they do), this will allow us to advise developers that they need to include Bewick's Swans in their Environmental Impact Assessments.

Our Greenland White-front tracking expanded enormously in recent years as part of Mitch Weegman's PhD which aims to identify the causes of decline in this globally endangered goose population. Numbers of Greenland White-fronts have fallen from around 35,000 in 1999 to only 22,000 in recent years. Research by the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study Group has shown that this is due to poor breeding success and, more specifically, a reduction in the proportion of the population bringing young back to the wintering grounds (as opposed to a reduction in the number of birds attempting to nest, hatching or fledging success). An incredibly low (11%) of Greenland White-fronts ever breed successfully in their (up to) 20-year long lives.

Mitch's research is using tagging technology to try to gain insight into why females fail to breed successfully. "Accelerometers" in the GPS tags he is using allow us to track the birds' behaviour. This, in turn, will allow us to identify the stage at which the birds fail as the tracks will differ depending on whether the birds attempt to nest (they won't sit in the same spot for the best part of a month!), whether they fail later (and then start to move around more), or breed successfully (stay with their young until they can fly).

There are thought to be two main reasons causing the low breeding success in Greenland White-fronts. Firstly, competition for resources on the breeding grounds with Canada Geese which have expanded into Greenland in recent years. Secondly, and more likely, climate change resulting in heavier and more prolonged spring snowfall in Greenland – which means that geese arriving on the breeding grounds can't access the food resources they need to breed successfully.

So what on earth could we do about these two threats? I'm afraid the short answer is not much. But what we can do is to manage the habitat on the wintering grounds to give the very small number of successfully breeding females the best chance of breeding successfully.



Whooper Swans tracked from Martin Mere cross various existing and proposed offshore site footprints in the Irish Sea.

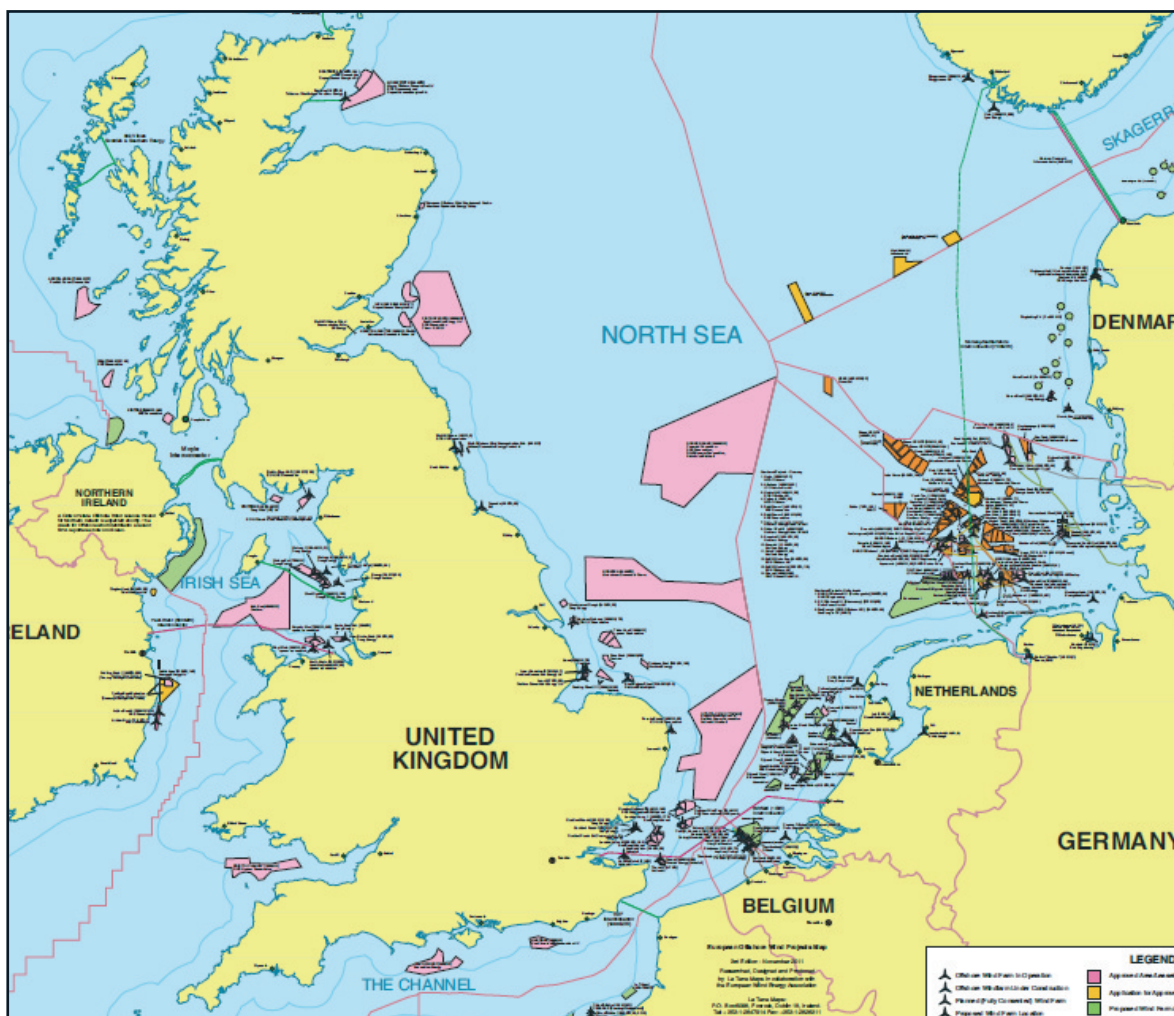
Photo Baz Hughes

In a partnership project with Scottish Natural Heritage, in 2012 WWT began tagging Greenland White-fronts on Islay. To date, 18 birds have been marked with GPS neck collars. With these new tags getting up to 12 GPS fixes a day, this allows us to study their detailed movement's right down to the individual field level (GPS fixes are usually accurate to about 10m).

This will allow us to determine which kind of fields they like to feed in, and which they don't. And then create more of their preferred habitat - whether that is natural and appropriately managed rush pasture, or specially created sugar beet fields. It will also allow us to identify their night time roosting and feeding sites and make sure they are protected.

The future of the Greenland White-fronted Goose, first described as a separate race by Sir Peter Scott in 1948, is far from secure, but WWT is at the forefront of the conservation effort to save it. We will continue to work with the local people on Islay to do this – whether they are farmers, conservationists, government officials or a nice lady called Fiona who put me up in her bed and breakfast in March.

The Islay locals are quite rightly proud of their strange bog-dwelling goose with a decidedly evolutionary unstable breeding strategy. One presenter at the conference I attended noted that there is probably the same number of human mums on Islay as there are Greenland White-front mums (482)! We wish them all productive and healthy lives!



Map of planned offshore wind farm sites

Photo Baz Hughes

LOST BIRDS

The following is an extract from a letter that is quoted in the book 'Birds in a Cage', that I bought at the last RAFOS AGM book auction. The book describes the life of four prisoners of war in World War 2, who returned after their release to become leading lights in ornithology in this country: The letter was written by Peter Thompson, a bomber pilot to his POW brother Barney. Peter was killed on operations later in the war.

"24th July 1943

I discovered that the red-backed shrikes are still nesting near Churchdown. On three occasions I saw them in Badgeworth Lane and saw the old birds feeding the fledglings. I suspect that there are two pairs breeding, but can't be certain."

I now live in Churchdown and Badgeworth Lane is a now local rat-run and very busy. The M5 motorway runs under it in a cutting. No chance of seeing breeding Red-backed Shrikes along there these days!

Bill Francis

VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE WILDFOWL & WETLANDS TRUST (WWT)

The WWT at Slimbridge is short of volunteers for Visitor Services on some days of the week, especially Saturdays.

Visitor Services involve greeting visitors as they arrive, signing on new members, selling grain to feed the birds, leading guided walks and talks and 'smiley walks' i.e. talking to people in the grounds informally and answering their queries.

If you live close to Slimbridge and would be interested, please see:

<http://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/slimbridge/volunteer/>

If you live anywhere near any of the other 8 WWT centres in UK and would be interested in volunteering, please contact you local centre or look for details on the WWT web site.

50th Anniversary Newsletter

You will be aware that we reach our 50th Anniversary next year, and it is hoped to produce a special edition of the Newsletter with memories from our history.

Please put on your thinking caps and let me have any stories that are printable about RAFOS over the years.

I look forward to hearing from you

Bill Francis

Editor

The Island of Lesvos – Greece

by Karen Sims

3 -17 May 2014

Having wanted to visit this island for many years and after listening to a talk at our local bird club we booked flights and hotel over the Internet in October 2013 for the following May. The first direct flight was 3 May, the earlier flights would have meant a change and long wait in Athens.

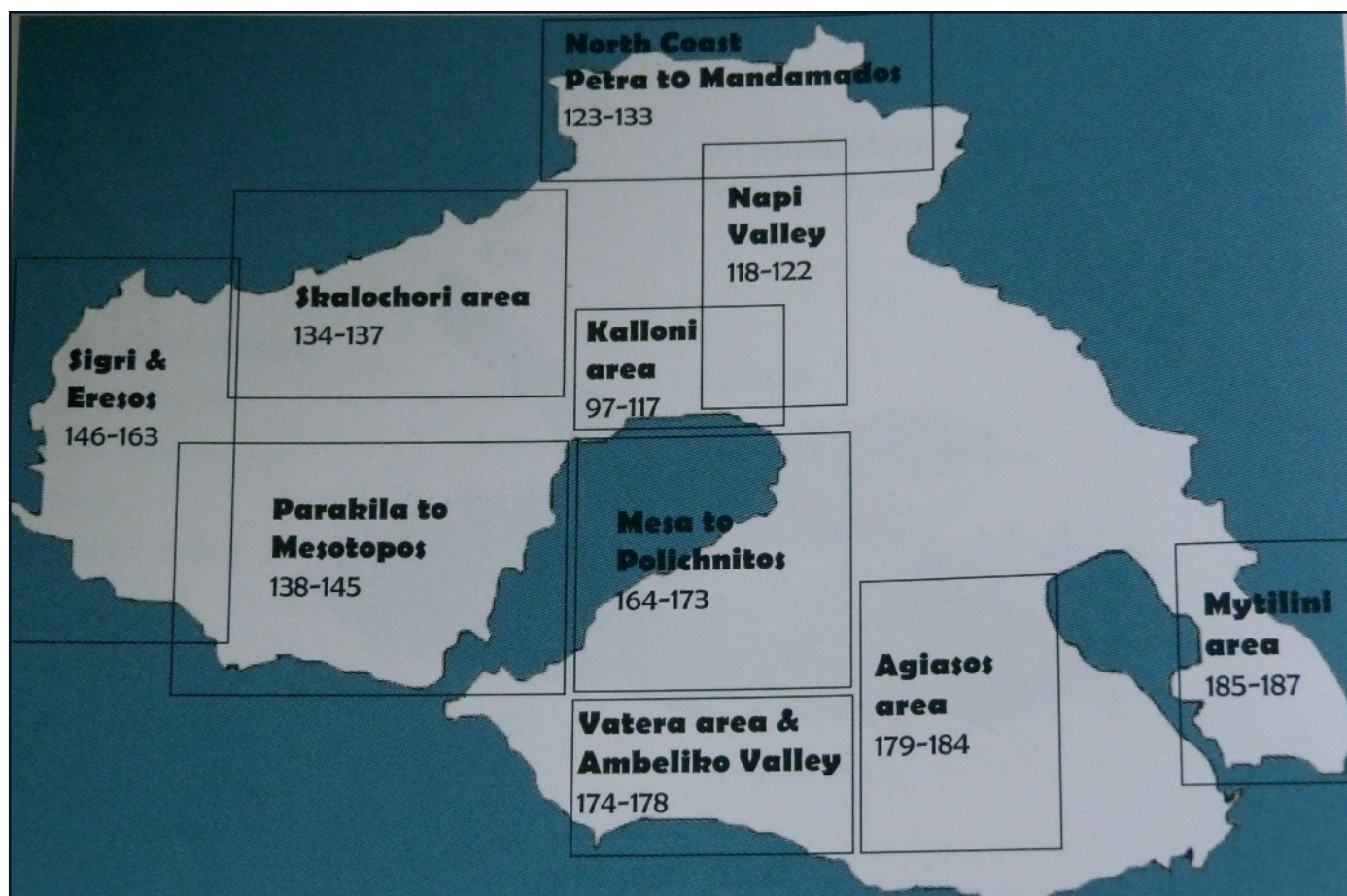
Lesvos is the third largest Greek island but has escaped the mass tourism suffered like so many other Mediterranean destinations. It's a very rural island with its main industry being the production of olive oil, famed as the best in the world. Small-scale arable farming, sheep and goats with tinkling bells are all over the island.

We stayed at the Malemi Hotel in Skala Kallonis in the centre of the island at the northern end of the Gulf of Kalloni. This made an ideal base as it was close to many of the premier birding sites and had good road links to other parts of the island.

Our hotel was owned and run by George and his wife Emmi, ably assisted by their daughter and staff. All the food was homemade and in traditional Greek style with much of the produce being from their own farm.

George arranged for us to be collected from the airport by taxi and also arranged our car hire for the remainder of our holiday.





Itinerary

The island is a well known birding destination and a premier migration hotspot with no endemic birds but a few prize specialists at the western edge of the range.

Kalloni Area: 3 - 5 & 16 May

Two rivers either side of Skala Kallonis, arable farm land, olive groves and small holdings.

Lower Tsiknias river - **Black Stork, Little, Common and Sandwich Terns, Little Bittern, Marsh Harrier and Black Headed Bunting.**

Christou river and marsh - **Wood Sandpipers, Black headed Yellow Wagtail, Short toed Eagle and Black Kite.**

Kalloni Salt pans – **Whiskered Tern, Greater Flamingo and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Stone Curlew** pair on May 16. On one day we did see a pair of **White Storks** on top of a silo tower and odd times near the salt pans but they were not very evident on the rest of the island.

Alykes Wetlands – **Broad billed Sandpiper, Blue headed Yellow Wagtail and Red throated Pipit.**

Napi Valley: 6 & 14 May

A long 14 km broad valley running north through the centre of the island.

Napi Valley - **Lesser Spotted Eagle, Eurasian Jay (the black crowned form) and Lesser Whitethroat.**

Plantania - Southern Grey, Masked and Woodchat Shrike, Little Owl, Northern Wheatear and Rock Nuthatch. On May 14 we had a male Red-footed Falcon, Hobby and Lesser Kestrel hunting together in the valley.

Kalloni Area: 7 & 13 May

Potamia Valley and Reservoir with Metochi Lake. Small lake and reservoir, olive groves and small holdings.

Metochi Lake - **Little Grebe, Squacco Heron and Moorhen.**

Potamia Valley area - **Common and Long legged Buzzard, Black-crowned Night Heron and Sand Martin.**

Purple Heron at the Tsiknias River ford on the way back.

Mesa to Polichnitos: 8 & 16 May

Seasonal wetlands, Achladeri Forest, Polichnitos Saltpans.

Mesa Pools - **Osprey, Eurasian Curlew and Great Egret.**

Achladeri Forest - **Short-toed Treecreeper and Long-tailed Tit** (this is the paler *A. c. tephronotus* lacking all pink tones and has a black bib).

Polichnitos Saltpans - **Greenshank and Curlew Sandpiper.**

Over the fields before the forest was our only **Roller** of the trip.

Rock Nuthatch



Sigri and Eresos: 9 May

The far west of the island. Open, barren and rocky countryside.

Ipsalou Monastery - set on a spectacular conical mound, highest part of the far western end of the island. Very windy day - Alpine and Common Swifts.

Sigri Fields and Faneromeni - **Golden Oriole** and a family of **Ruddy Shelduck** with 11 ducklings.

Meladia Valley - a very bumpy rocky 16 km track – **Whinchat**, **Stonechat** and **Lesser Grey Shrike**.

Limnos Monastery: 10 May - very obliging family of **Middle Spotted Woodpeckers** (*see below*) at a nest site in a telegraph pole in the car park. A resident **Little Owl** in a hole in the monastery wall. Good views of **Subalpine Warbler** presumably the Eastern race as it had a very pale underbelly.

Aghios Ioannis: 10 May

A small chapel set at the base of a small dry scrubby gully. **Black-eared Wheatear**, **Cretzschmar's Bunting** and **Eleonora's Falcon**.

Salt pans on the way home held pairs of **Ruddy** and **Common Shelduck**. In the Eucalyptus trees near the village on the way home one **Scops Owl** was found of the four that had been seen. The morning drive out had seen us find the **Long-eared Owl** in another group of Eucalyptus.

North Coast - Petra to Mandamados: 11 May

Kavaki north of Petra was a known site for **Ruppell's Warbler** but none seen after an hour's search.

Efthalou to Skala Simaminias -15 km rough track along the north coast. Great views of the Turkish coast only 5 miles away. **Ortolan Bunting** - a displaying pair. Had seen **Cretzschmar's** earlier so could compare the similar colouring. This was a very hot day with temperature's reaching 28c. A cold glass of wine at the harbour in Skala Simaminias with an hour people watching made it a lovely day.



Agiasos area: 12 May

Agiasos is below Mount Olympus, the joint highest point on the island with Mount Lepetimnos in the north. Surrounded by Sweet Chestnut forest with 'rare' island woodland birds such **Robin, Song and Mistle Thrush**. We saw **Wren** and **Robin** and heard **Song Thrush**. The woodland walks were lovely and we heard many birds but saw very few. The supposed orchids were very noticeably absent with only a few seen but there were plenty flowers of the Cistus parasitic plant – *Rufflesia cytinus hypociotis* and a few *Anemone pavonina*. A fox hunting in the long grass, oblivious to our presence was a treat.

Skalochori area: 15 May

Lardia Valley - deep gorge running east-west along 3km of the Lardis River. Good views of **Crag Martin** and after much searching, **Rock Sparrow**.

Perivolis Monastery - small monastery next to the Lardia and Voulgaris Rivers. Olive groves, small holding and river side track. Full of bird song, flowers and insects. **Middle Spotted Woodpeckers** in the orchard. **Hoopoes** in the vegetable plot. We were told by another birder that we could hear but could not find **Olive Tree Warbler**. A very nice walk in this valley with good views of a pair of **Short-toed Eagles**.

Voulgaris River mouth - large sand dune area with noisy **Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Black-headed Buntings** and **Bee-eaters**.

16 May

Our last full day was spent at a few sites including the Mesa wetland area and a forest edge. Lots of **Chaffinch**, signing **Nightingales** and a **Great Egret** on the small river. We decided to donate our packed lunch to the needy cats and dogs and had lunch at a small taverna on the edge of the Gulf of Kalloni just before Achleleri army camp. This was right on the beach looking across the gulf to Skala Kalloni and Parakila. Beautiful fresh Red Mullet and Greek Salad.



Black Stork



Cinereous Bunting

We made our way back to the Kalloni Salt pans and walked both the east and west moat banks. From the southern hide we saw a pair of Stone Curlew on one of the dry dividers between the pans.

17 May

Although our flight home was not until 12.25, we decided to leave in good time as we had to return the hire car and navigate the one way system in Mytilini. This seemed to be a maze when we arrived and were driven through it by the taxi driver. George said it was not that bad and there were signs to the airport.

Passing the salt pans we had our last views of the Stilts, Avocets and Greater Flamingos. A very heavy rain storm arrived before we reached the capital but soon passed over. The drive through was not as bad as we feared and there were airport signs when we needed them so we arrived well on time for our flight home.

The Highlights

The **Kruper's Nuthatch** at their nest site in the Achladeri forest. This is the easiest place to see these true Asia Minor diminutive nuthatches. This is the only place in Europe that they occur. The adults were calling and appeared to be brooding, as one adult would appear with food for the other. We heard others in the forest but only saw one pair.

The **Cinereous Buntings** - we saw two singing males at the Ipsalou Monastrey site. This species on a European scale is confined to Greece. This is the western form *Emberiza cineracea*.

Rose-coloured Starling - On our way to the airport we had a flock of at least 50 flying along side the car past the salt pans for several hundred metres. We were travelling at 80km per hour and they were doing the same. A smaller flock of around 25 did the same a few kilometres further on. They were beautiful in their pink and black. They occur in varying numbers during May-June and we had heard that some had been seen in the past few days.

Meladia Valley - On the day we took this route we had considered turning around as the track was so bad but we met a Dutch birder who we'd seen several times on different days. He was going in the opposite direction having come from a chapel site further on. He had seen three 'very important' birds but did not know their names in English so we carried on. On reaching the site there were two other English birders who told us there were 4 birds there earlier in the day but that the **Barred Warbler** appeared to have moved on. In the pines surrounding the chapel we spotted the 3 birds mentioned by the Dutch birder and had lovely close views of **Icterine Warbler**, **Wood Warbler** and **Red-breasted Flycatcher**. This made the tricky drive well worth it.

Melemi Hotel

One evening the hotel was packed when we got back as it was Mother's Day and all the mothers of Kalloni appeared to be having a great party. There was live music with a Bazooki player and a few songs from the village priest who had a surprisingly good voice. A large majority were up dancing and a few hotel guests were persuaded to join in along with George, who did not seem too need much persuading.

The hospitality in the hotel was very good and we would both recommend it to any visitors.

Other wildlife - I found a very small terrapin on one of the tracks and carried it to the river as it appeared very dehydrated. I assume they are born on land but this had some way to go to get back to any standing water.

At the Perivolis Monastery we found a very tiny kitten that was being bullied by the older cats around when we offered them some of our lunch. I could see no sign of a nursing mother and it certainly did not appear to be old enough to have been weaned. Luckily, before I had made up my mind to take it away in our car and find somewhere safer for it, a 3 wheeled motorbike appeared (**wasn't it an ATV?**). The woman driver had come to feed the stray cats and on seeing the very small kitten I was holding, took it from me and put it in her pannier box. Apparently she feeds cats in several locations and I am sure the kitten would get a better chance than if we had left it alone. I know cats are destructive to wildlife but the poor little thing was only a few weeks old and not able to fend for its self.

This was a fantastic two weeks and we would recommend it to anyone. It is easy birding with generally good weather at this time of the year. There is plentiful accommodation and the island is easy to get to. We may have been better going a week or so earlier. It seemed that much of the raptor passage had already taken place, but this would have meant a split journey via Athens.

Considering what we might have seen in the previous two weeks, it might be worthy of another visit.

The following article has been reproduced, with permission, from the WWT's Magazine Waterlife. It gives one example of the Trusts' work, world-wide, in species conservation and the attendant problems.

Sofia so good

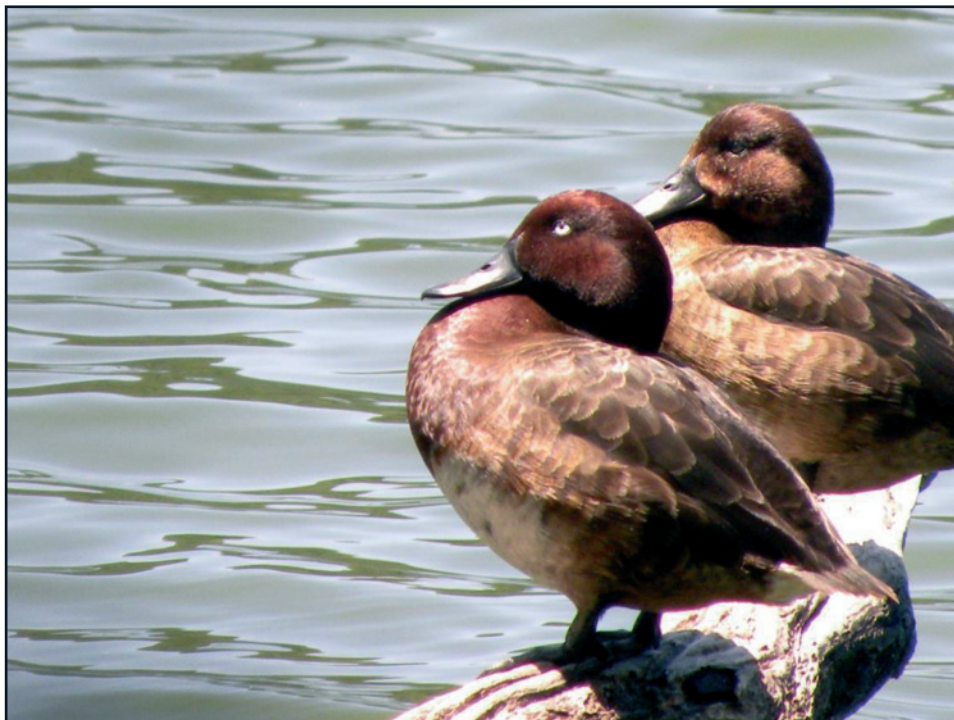
It's early days, but, as Peter Cranswick of the WWT reveals, a new home for the Madagascar Pochard just might have been found against all the odds. Welcome to Lake Sofia

Consider this. The only way to reintroduce a species to the wild is to find a new site suitable for it, but if a site doesn't already house that species it's because it isn't suitable. It's the conservationist's catch-22 and, if looked at with the cold eye of logic, there would appear to be no way round it.

The world of conservation, however, is not entirely reliant upon the cold eye of logic. It is also fuelled by the warmth of optimism, the coolness of rational thought and the radiant heat of hard work. And in the case of the Madagascar Pochard, those combined assets just may have found a way of unravelling the paradox.

It all began in the early 1990s when the Madagascar Pochard was first thought to be extinct. As regular readers of *Waterlife* will know, the duck was discovered many years later, clinging on to existence in one last lake, near Bemanevika, where a mere 20 birds were eking out a living and where ducklings hatched, but no longer seemed to survive. An emergency expedition, led by Nigel Jarrett of the WWT, flew in and collected three clutches of the Pochard eggs. Reared initially in the bathroom of a hotel in Antsohihy, an aviary was built in the grounds to enable the hatchlings to grow to adulthood. The conservation breeding of the Madagascar Pochard, its last chance of survival, had begun.

Madagascar Pochard





Madagascar Pochard Ducklings

That was four years ago, and those youngsters have grown and had offspring of their own. There are now more than 55 birds at our breeding centre in Antsohihy. In just four years, we have almost quadrupled the world population of the Madagascar Pochard. Stage one of the rescue plan, although ongoing, is proving a great success.

This brings us to stage two. The day will come when it's time to release birds back into the wild, and we have to work out where that will be. For several reasons they can't be released back to Lake Matsaborimena – the last site at which they breed – so we need to find another Malagasy lake that will do the job. And here's the nub of that apparent paradox. If a lake is capable of housing the ducks, why aren't they already there?

Last year, we began the process of finding a new home for the Madagascar Pochard. Using satellite information to give us an indication of the suitability of the surrounding habitat of each lake, we narrowed our shortlist to around 30 sites. After preliminary visits over several months in the summer, we whittled that list down to six. Then, in November, we went out to check each one of them in more detail.

Suitability requires more than just water, and the research team had many issues to consider. First there was the quality of the lake's habitat. Data needed to be collected on aquatic vegetation – was it floating, or growing from the lake's bed, forming marshy areas? Did quantities of invertebrates? Had the larger wildlife, such as birds and mammals, that used each lake increased or declined in recent years? And were the species that were present generalists, which are comfortable on most water-bodies, or specialists that required specific environmental conditions?

We then had to find out how people were using the site, what type of agriculture is practised around each lake, and whether pesticides are used. Is fishing an important part of a lake community's life and, if so, have their yields improved or worsened in recent years? What are the water levels like, and how clear is it? Has there been any deforestation in the area and, if so, consequent erosion of the land that can cause lakes to silt up?

Some of these questions could be answered by survey, but many required detailed discussions with the villages and communities that live and rely upon the lakes. This also helped to answer the final, perhaps most important, question: would a lakeside community actually be willing to accommodate the Madagascar Pochard into its daily life?

For almost a year, we had pored over maps, analysed and made site visits, refining and honing our searches and investigations. The results were not encouraging and we began to doubt that any lake remained in Madagascar that was suitable. One we investigated was huge, boasting reasonable environmental conditions, yet it was fringed by about 50 different communities, each of which had its own views on how the lake should be used. It could take years to find accord among them all. Another lake supported a mere handful of communities, but land erosion had silted it up badly, and wildlife was already struggling upon it.

After some 10 days of the November visit, WWT's Rob Shore and Andy Bamford, part of the research team, were beginning to think that the task was not so much 'which is the best lake?', as 'which is the least bad?' And then they reached Lake Sofia. At a little over 2km² Lake Sofia is a large lake, but fairly shallow, and it's surrounded by marsh. Beyond the marsh lie extensive areas of rice cultivation, which is the main source of income for the area, along with fishing. There's very little forest left, and what remains is mainly introduced eucalyptus. On the face of it, therefore, Lake Sofia does not sound ideal, yet its shallowness – mostly less than two metres deep – is just right for diving Pochard to feed in. The marshy area provides a reasonable barrier between the lake and the rice fields, and the latter have not grown significantly in size for decades. There has been very little erosion in recent times, and although the underwater invertebrate count proved to be low, the lake does appear to be supporting several rare species, including Meller's Duck and the diving Madagascar Grebe, suggesting that disturbance and fishing pressures are not too high. The team also found Red-billed Teal, White-faced and Fulvous Whistling Ducks, Malachite Kingfisher and more using the lake.

But here was the clincher. There are only three villages that live and work alongside Lake Sofia and, although three can be more than enough to make agreement difficult, the team discovered that something rather special was already going on. Unlike every other group of lakeside communities that the team visited, this trio had already formed its own cooperative, managing the resources of the lake and its surrounding lands under their own rules agreed by mutual consent. This federation was formed to prevent the overuse of resources, limit their use by others from outside the area, and to ensure that the natural resources are shared fairly between the villages: in short, it's a type of conservation plan in its own right. Not only does this cooperative mean that lake welfare is already embedded in local thought, but in the months and years ahead in which discussions about improved water quality and management will take place before the release of the Pochard, the communities will be able to speak as one voice. There are two further benefits. The first is that, within a reasonable distance of Lake Sofia are smaller lakes of similar shallowness. These can act as supplementary habitats for birds, and could help in the long-term building of a strong population of Pochard.

The second upside of Lake Sofia is more political. The lake upon which the few remaining wild Pochard live is itself in Sofia Region, which means that we'll be able to continue working with the local government with which we have built up such a strong relationship. So will Lake Sofia become the new home for the Madagascar Pochard? Only time will tell. Hydrological work, further testing, ongoing negotiations with the local community cooperative and much more lie ahead before we can be confident about the outcome. But the signs are promising, and with hard work and patience the paradox can be overcome. The fate of the Madagascar Pochard depends upon it.

Peter Cranswick is WWT's Head of Species Recovery. For further information, please visit wwt.org.uk/mp. This project is a partnership between WWT, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, The Peregrine Fund, Asity Madagascar and the Madagascar Government. It has been generously supported by the Darwin Initiative, Mitsubishi Corporation Fund for Europe and Africa, Fota Wildlife Park, BBC Wildlife Fund, a private donor, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Synchronicity Earth, Aviornis UK, WWT and Durrell members.

Operation Skua

Surveys of the Cape Wrath Weaponry Range

By Tom Dewick

The Cape Wrath Weaponry Range is one of the most remarkable and least known of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) ranges. This celebrated and well-named peninsula was called ‘Hvarf’ by the Norsemen, which in their language meant a ‘turning point’, where the coast at the lighthouse on the extreme Northwest coast of Scotland turns South. The coastal area was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in December 1971. In December 1993 the area became a Special Protected Area (SPA) under the EC Directive. There is around 15km of sea cliffs that are internationally important for breeding seabirds. This extraordinary wilderness has also one of the most varied sections of coastal landscapes in Europe. In March 1996, the Scottish Office announced the designation of the Cape Wrath peninsula as a SPA (SPA/RAM Code 123A) to include the coastline 4km South of the lighthouse at Cape Wrath along the Northern coast to Faraid Head, the range headquarters on the Eastern side of the Kyle of Durness. The principal interest is the breeding seabird station with nationally important numbers of Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin. The Guillemot and Razorbill are both red data registered and listed under the Berne Convention.

Commissioned in February 1933 the range’s prime use is live naval gunfire and aircraft weapon training. It consists of 1092 hectares to the South of the lighthouse track that is owned by the MOD and 2046 hectares to the North that was purchased by the MOD in 1999. Operations are monitored from Faraid Head some 12km to the east of the range. There is a modernised house, called Inshore that is utilised by the range wardens, the deer management and conservation groups. At Kearvaig, there is a cottage owned by the MOD which has been recently refurbished. The cottage is also used by the “Bothy Association” and the general public.

The predominant underlying rock type is Lewisian Gneiss which is overlain, most notably at the coast by Torridonian sandstone. Both rock types are base poor and when weathered form nutrient poor acidic soils. The interior of the range has a varied relief with open heathland and small areas of broken ground. The area is interrupted by numerous unremarkable hills, separated by stream valleys interspersed with lochans, pool complexes, and blanket mire and bomb craters. At the southern extremity is Fashven (457m) the highest point

of the range that has extensive steep sandstone outcrops on its west and north faces and fell-fields which extend along the top of the hill. The coastal area is of significant importance to wildlife and consists of several hills, large sandstone cliffs, sea stacks and several small islands. The primary soil type is peat apart from small tracts of lithosol which have developed on inland outcrops of rock. The peat forms extensive blankets on



level expanses where drainage is poor. The most spectacular feature of the region is the 5km long precipice of “Clo Mor” that towers to over 200m, the highest coastal cliffs on the British mainland. To the East of Clo Mor above the cliffs is the hill of Sgribhis Bheinn (370m), a Special Area of Conservation, (SAC) with an interesting range of dwarf montane heaths at an unusually low level. The moorland of the range presents a complex variety of habitats that are typical of the North West Highlands of Scotland. The predominance of heather and its influence on the microclimate restricts the diversity of plant species. The stream valleys provide some shelter from the prevailing winds with and improved nutrients that support more luxurious vegetation types. The most varied and botanically interesting plant community of the range can be found on the ledges and the moderate gradients of the sea cliffs.

The maritime influence on temperature ensures that during the summer months, the Cape is regularly the coldest recorded site in Britain. Prolonged frosts are rare in the winter but gales and strong winds are common.

The range hosts one of the major seabird breeding stations in Britain. The rich and substantial feeding grounds which lie in close proximity to the coast and the suitable nesting environment on the cliffs are the fundamental requirements to support the myriads of breeding seabirds. Most of the breeding birds arrive at the cliffs during early May, by mid August many birds are back at sea after completing their breeding cycle. Golden Eagle, Black and Red Throated divers, Greenshank and other rare and sensitive bird species occur in the interior albeit at rather low densities. At the summit of Fashven, Ptarmigan have bred in the past. This is the lowest altitude and most northerly point that this species of grouse has been recorded breeding in Britain. The group has been inputting data into “Bird track” since 2011 (four seasons of Skua). In that time we have recorded 72 species; 17 migrants and 55 resident species. Notable highlights were a pair of Ring-Necked Ducks, up to two pairs of summering (none breeding) Whooper Swans, and a pair of Black Throated Divers with a single Juvenile. Among the passerines species diversity is low but the high population of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits (and the abundance of large caterpillars) support good numbers of Cuckoos and Stonechats that breed in many of the stream valleys.



Greenshank

When the MoD purchased the area to the North of the road, it was agreed, at a conservation meeting to remove grazing sheep from the range and a new boundary stock fence was erected. The beneficial effects of excluding sheep on the vegetation inside the range fence are now clearly visible. The resident Red Deer do well in this remote location and their numbers are carefully monitored and controlled to ensure that this fragile ecosystem is not damaged by overgrazing. The range is primarily a hind forest but mature stags will arrive from neighbouring estates over the late summer months and can often be seen on the hill tops away from both man and midge until they break out for the rut in October. All deer management activities are undertaken by a small team of dedicated stalkers from the



Kearvaig Bay, with cottage
(Left)

Red Throated Diver on the
nest. (Right)



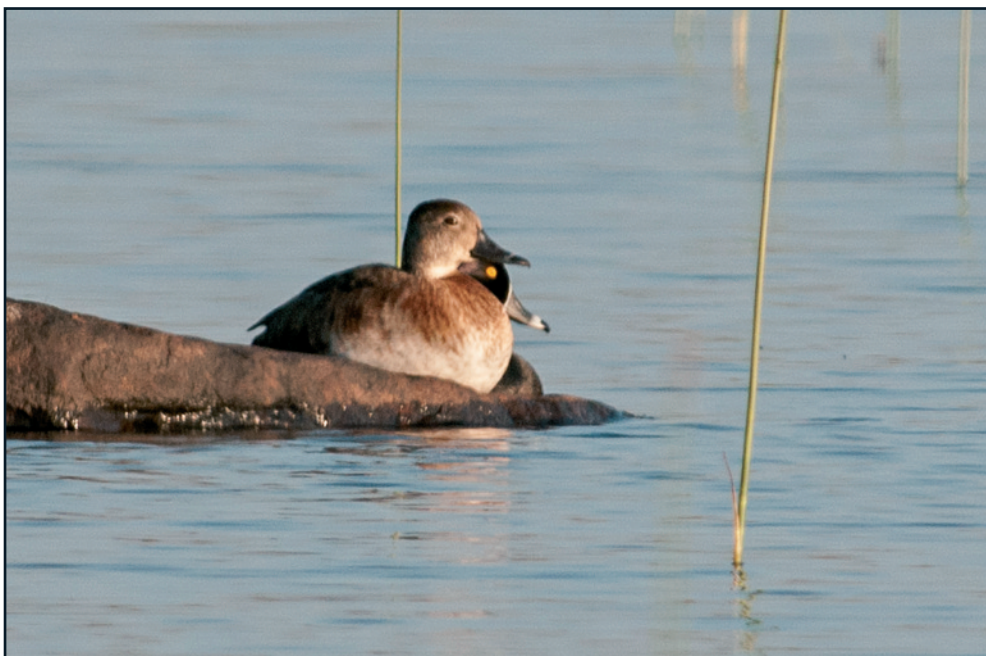
Red Throated Divers
(Below)



Defence Deer Management Organisation on a voluntary basis; there is no commercial stalking at Cape Wrath.

Wildlife expeditions have been taking place on the range since the mid 1980's. Various bird ringing and other monitoring projects have been undertaken. Operation Auk, a week long project, first commenced in July 1992 and was supported by the staff officers of the then Flag Officer Scotland Northern England and Northern Ireland (FOSNI) at Pitreavie Castle, in Fife. The use of marine boatmen and their patrol boats from HMS Faslane has enabled ringing and seabird counting to proceed during the week in locations that would be otherwise inaccessible. Other surveying activities including vegetation, mammal and archaeological have also been carried out during the week over the years. Operation Skua commenced after a breeding Red-throated Diver was found on a loch at the edge of the range. Arctic Skua numbers had also increased so it was agreed by the group that an earlier expedition be mounted to ascertain the breeding status of divers and skuas for ringing and monitoring purposes.

Into the future we intend to continue with the monitoring of the birds and mammals of the range, but also to pay more attention to the invertebrate populations. During Op Skua 2014 we found the Moss Carder Bee *Bombus muscorum*, a rather scarce species in rapid decline in the UK, to be present on the range, but there is much more work to be done in this area. We also propose changes to some of the small islands on the lochs for breeding divers by modifying the edges and improving the vegetation.



Ring-necked Ducks
At Loch Inshore
(Left)

Inshore House
After Midnight
(Right)





BIRD-WATCHING IN FINDHORN BAY

By Robert Somers Cocks

Moray in the north-east of Scotland has a wonderful variety of habitats for bird-watchers ranging from the high tops of the Cairngorms with breeding Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting and Dotterel, through the heather moorlands, forests and onto the Moray Firth coast. Much of the coastline consists of long sandy beaches often backed by some nationally important pinewoods. Areas of low lying cliffs particularly in the east of Moray provide habitats for small colonies of sea birds. In between these features are 3 estuaries formed by the major rivers in the region. The Spey and Lossie estuaries are relatively small but can provide some good bird-watching. By far the largest though is Findhorn Bay which is a spectacular, almost land-locked tidal bay covering some 6 square kilometres. The importance of this bay for waders and wildfowl has been recognised by its designation as a RAMSAR site and a Special Protected Area under a European Community Directive. In 1998 Findhorn Bay was also established as a Local Nature Reserve.

Like anywhere, the seasons vary for bird-watching and although the summer is fairly quiet as water-sport activities take over much of the bay, there can still be some good bird-watching available for anyone visiting the area. However, it is late summer and autumn when the bay really comes to life as large migrations start. Towards the end of August numbers of Redshank rise rapidly to well over 400 and most will stay in the bay over winter. At the same time a 1000 or more Dunlin arrive forming spectacular large flocks. At low water the bay almost dries out so the sand and mud flats provide a valuable source of food from the worms, crustaceans and molluscs. Knot can also be quite numerous at times but their numbers fluctuate throughout the winter.

Smaller numbers of waders also migrate through the bay stopping for a while to take advantage of the food available. The Ringed Plovers are most numerous in the autumn and spring migrations, occasionally rising to 600 or more, but only around 30 remain over winter. A few also stay on for the summer and breed on some of the nearby shingle banks. Black-tailed Godwit occasionally appear as they move to and from their breeding grounds in Iceland but Findhorn is too far north for them to stay over winter. Their cousins the Bar-tails do however remain all year but not in any great numbers.

Other waders breed locally and are present year-round including Oystercatchers and Curlew, although even these will drop in number slightly for a while in the summer. But by August several hundred of each can be seen. The Golden Plover breed on the moors inland and by October their



Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin and Ringed Plover

numbers are often over 300. Other less commonly seen waders include Greenshank, Grey Plover, Sanderling and Curlew Sandpiper.

The bay, as well as providing a haven for waders, is also well known for its wildfowl. Apart from Mallard and Shelduck that are present year-round and breed locally, most of the duck will not arrive until September. Wigeon are the most numerous and will typically reach 2000 plus but even this number is well down on the figures that were being seen 20 years ago. The reason for this decline is not clear - perhaps climate change, breeding success, food sources, habitat loss or probably a combination of several factors. By contrast, only a handful of Pintail could be seen 10 years ago, but in the winter of 2013/14 there were regularly over 200 and their numbers seem to be steadily increasing year after year. Teal and Goldeneye will also be around all winter, but in smaller numbers. A few other types will be seen in on an occasional basis including Shoveler, Gadwall, Scaup and Tufted Duck.

A short walk from the bay, Findhorn Beach provides good bird-watching over the Moray Firth for many of the sea ducks that over-winter. Eiders will usually be seen feeding off the mouth of the bay where there are large areas of mussel banks. Long-tailed Ducks arrive offshore in October and at the same time Scoters, both Common and Velvet, start to appear in good numbers. Most of these species will stay out at sea, but a few will venture into the bay and close up views can be obtained. Also out at sea over the winter will be Divers: Red-throat, Black-throat and Great Northern. The Black-throats always seem to keep fairly well off shore but the others will come in much closer and occasionally will even venture into Findhorn Bay. The Great Northern do not breed in the UK at present and return to Scandinavia in summer, but some of the Black and Red-throats breed on the lochans inland, particularly up in the north-west of Scotland, and some non-breeders are occasionally seen offshore during summer. One breeding Red-throat was even spotted fishing on Findhorn Bay during July 2014 and flew off in a southerly direction with a fish, which probably indicated that there was a lochan with a breeding pair a bit inland, but where it was located remains a mystery.



Great Northern Diver

For those who have visited RAF Kinloss or Lossiemouth in the past, they will remember the large numbers of Geese that spend the winter here. In years gone by there was usually a mix of species with many Greylags included. Although the Greylags breed on the moors to the south, they are only to be seen in small numbers on the bay; the vast majority are now Pink-footed Geese. At the height of their migration in the autumn of 2013 over 21,000 were recorded. These numbers drop as the winter progresses but many thousands remain. Flying in and out of the bay at dawn and dusk they provide a memorable sight and sound on a winter's day.

As one would expect, the bay also provides a home for many gulls and other sea-birds. Herring and Common Gulls are abundant and around 20-30 Great Black-backed Gulls are usually present. The Lesser Black-backed Gulls though are relatively uncommon, which seems to be in stark contrast to the situation further south in the UK. Black-headed Gulls do not breed in the area, and in fact a survey of breeding sites throughout Moray in 2014 has revealed a large drop in breeding through the region. Of the 450 or so birds that returned to the bay post-breeding in 2014, only about 2-4% were juveniles born this year. Terns are another summer visitor, but these too do not breed in the Findhorn area. Sandwich Terns arrive in the spring before going off to their breeding sites and then returning for a while before starting their migration to southern Africa. From observing the colour ringed birds, it is interesting to note that some newly ringed birds from as far afield as the Farne Islands and the Netherlands actually move north to Findhorn after breeding before starting their migration south, which seems a little surprising.

As mentioned earlier, the summer is the quietest time of the year but it is also when one of the most spectacular birds is present - the Osprey. The females arrive at the start of April, followed by the males and nest in many of the surrounding forests. They can be seen flying around the bay throughout the summer, with sometimes as many as 10 or more fishing or perched on logs and posts in the bay. The last birds depart in mid September for their migration to southern Europe and western Africa.

Just occasionally some more unusual birds turn up in the bay and in the last year we have seen Pectoral Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper (which coincided with a Little Stint), Little Egret and most recently several Spoonbills.

There are some pressures being placed on the habitat in the bay and although it is designated as a Local Nature Reserve there are other activities that take place. The village of Findhorn was once a fishing port and although this ceased many years ago, it has developed into a popular sailing venue. This has a fairly minimal impact on the bird life as most of the activity is in the summer and concentrated in the northern half of the bay. Other water-sports such as wind-surfing, and in particular kite-surfing, have grown in popularity and take place over much of the year and frequently on the southern half of the bay. How much this has affected bird numbers is hard to assess without long-term records, but a certain amount of disturbance does arise. Findhorn Bay is also popular with wild-fowlers during the winter season. The number of birds shot is a fairly small proportion of the geese present and the disturbance is probably more keenly felt by the residents of Kinloss rather than the birds on the bay.

Notwithstanding these pressures, Findhorn Bay remains a wonderful place for bird-watching, so the next time you find yourself in the north-east of Scotland then take a visit to Findhorn. There are not many villages where you have a choice of pubs that you can sit outside enjoying your pint while watching Ospreys fish!



White-rumped Sandpiper and Little Stint

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. Artwork is also very welcome.

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 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 99 is 17 January 2015

Please address contributions to:

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