



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society



Best Picture 2014 Photographic Competition

Chaffinch by Dave Bodley

Newsletter No. 99

Spring 2015



Winners at the 2014 AGM:

Top left: Dave Bodley - Best Overall Photograph

Top right: Martin Routledge - Best Written Article

Bottom Left: Julia Springett - Best Novice Photograph

Bottom Right: Dick Yates - Best Novelty Photograph

2015 AGM

Please note that the 2015 Annual General Meeting will be held at

RAF High Wycombe on

14th November 2015

CONTENTS

The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society	Page 4
RAFOS 50 th Anniversary Dinner	Page 5
50 th Anniversary Special Frank Walker Award	Page 6
Programme of Activities 2015	Page 7
Leonard Eason <i>by Amelia Marriette</i> – Help wanted!	Page 8
Comparisons of BTO Breeding Bird Survey Grid Square TL2684 and Change of Land Use. <i>by John Wells</i>	Page 10
The Weather Forecast Isn't Always That Bad! RAFOS Portland Trip 10-12 October 2014 <i>by Scott Drinkel</i>	Page 19
Birding in the Sun <i>by Scott Drinkel</i>	Page 25
JARDIN OBSERVACIÓN DE AVES EN MALLORCA (Garden Bird Watch in Majorca) <i>by Team Knight</i>	Page 27
Algarve 2014 – A close encounter over dinner <i>by John Wells</i>	Page 30
The RAFOS Expedition to the Coto Doñana <i>by Ken Earnshaw</i>	Page 38
Wife and Five Bird Feeders to Support <i>by Martin Routledge</i>	Page 42
Trinidad (continued) <i>by Karen Sims</i>	Page 46
The RAFOS Newsletter	Page 48
Tobago 25th September to 2nd October 2013 <i>by Karen Sims</i>	Page 49
The Black Grasswren Tour <i>by Dick Yates</i>	Page 53
Looking at Gulls <i>by John Stewart-Smith</i>	Page 61

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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RAFOS 50th ANNIVERSARY DINNER

Where? The President's Room
The Royal Air Force Club
128 Piccadilly
London W1J 7PY

Telephone: 020 7399 1000

When? 20 Jun 15, 1900 to 2300 hrs

Open to? Any present or past member of RAFOS

Cost? £40 per head for 3 courses, coffee and petit fours. Cash bar. Wine will be available at about £17 a bottle for white, £19 for red (to be confirmed).

Dress? Minimum standard – jacket and tie for men, equivalent for ladies.

Accommodation? We are assured that there is plenty of accommodation in all price brackets available in the area.

Union Jack Club www.ujclub.co.uk 020 7902 6000

Victory Services Club www.vsc.co.uk 020 7723 4474

Premier Inn www.premierinn.com 0871 527 9334

Parking and Congestion Charge? See the RAF Club website, www.rafclub.org.uk

Interested? Please notify your interest in attending, including any dietary requirements, to the RAFOS Secretary:

by e-mail to rafos_secretary@hotmail.com

by post to 2 Old Place
Aldwick
BOGNOR REGIS
West Sussex
PO21 3AU

Deadline.

The last date that the Secretary can accept expressions of interest is 31 Mar 15.

Golden Jubilee Dinner Frank Walker Award



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As announced at the AGM in November, the Committee have decided to invite nominations from members for a special Frank Walker Award to be presented at the Golden Jubilee Dinner on 20 Jun 15.

The recipient will be a person or persons you feel has given special service to RAFOS; posthumous nominations will be accepted.

Voting is easy – either drop a short note to the Chairman at Hawthorn Barn, Buckingham Road, Weedon, Aylesbury, HP22 4DR or by e-mail to martin.routledge@gmx.co.uk.

Voting will close on 20 May 15.

2015 PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

2015	Date	Venue	Leaders	Activity	Sponsored	Attended Highlights
1	4 Jan	WWT Slimbridge	Bill Francis	Guided tour of Wetland Centre	No bid	
2	30 Jan - 7 Feb	Winter Duck 14	Martin Routledge	BTO/RSPB/WWT/JNCC Survey	£1300	
3	12 Apr	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	Field Meeting – Meet at CVRS Hut	No bid	
4	27-29 Mar	Norfolk Weekend	John Towers	East Anglian Migration Watch	£200	Contact John Towers for details
5	9-16 May	Islay Mist	Dick & Jan Knight	Island survey – 18 month rotation	£350	
6	Jun TBD	St Andrews Cross. Follow up Survey RAF Leuchars	Martin Routledge	MOD Bird Count at Airbase	£150	This still has to be confirmed
7	21-23 Aug	Bird Fair & Catterick	Julia Springgett	Ringling Experience	No bid	Meet with Julia at the Bird Fair
8	Sep TBD	Skokholm	Julia Springgett	Ringling activity	TBD	Ringers only – Joint Service
9	9-11 Oct	Portland Bill	Dave & Anne Bodley	Autumn migration viewing from Obs and environs	No bid	
10	Oct	Gibraltar	Julia Springgett	Ringling and Observation	TBD	GONHS backed. Joint Service ringling, observers welcome
11	25 Oct	Chew Valley	Dave & Anne Bodley	CVL Survey	No bid	
12	Oct/Nov	Cornish Chough or probably SE Scotland/NE England	Jim Bryden	General Obs & Survey	TBD (£150)	Check this Newsletter and website for updates
13	Nov	TBD	TBD	Post AGM Field Meeting	No bid	
14	2015/16	TBD	Keith Cowleson	National Seabird Survey	TBD	
					£2150	
					Max £2500	

2015 is an overseas exped year, therefore, the expenditure allocation is £2500. The Gibraltar Ringling Exped has yet to bid for funds but I propose to be a little more generous with UK activities. Note that this still gives me an underspend of £350 which I will hold in reserve for ringling activities or in case the National Seabird Count comes off.

Visualising the Second World War Diaries of an English Artist: Aircraftman Leonard Eason. by Amelia Marriette

In May 2014 I as usual visited my parents for a few days. On this occasion I put a note in my electronic diary to remind me to ask my father about his Second World War diaries. I had asked before and been given one from 1944, but I had not been offered the whole set. After a few moments hesitation, my father, who is now 89, rose in a sprightly way, hopped onto his stair lift and came back down from his study with 7 diaries covering the period from 1943 to 1948. He gave them to me a little gingerly. I took them carefully from him. I was delighted and promised to look after them. I am a professional curator: I think that this helped a little.

My father, Leonard Eason, was conscripted into the RAF in 1943 along with his identical twin brother, John. They were 18 years old. Their older brother, Dennis a Marine, was killed when his ship, HMS Arethusa, was torpedoed in November 1942.

The twins were sent initially to Cardington in Bedford. Very shortly they were packed off on their basic training to Blackpool. Soon after being conscripted my father suffered a bad bout of rheumatic fever and became separated from his brother, who was re-assigned to the Army and sent to India. My father went on to train as a Morse Code operator serving at RAF Camps in Compton Bassett, Newark, Norfolk and Penrhos, North Wales.

In fact, my father was never to see any action. His was a lonely, isolated and rather dull war. He served on RAF camps installing VHS radios into Lancaster aircraft and doing some work in charge of Tannoy announcements: announcements which most people seemed to have ignored. But he was also very lucky: boredom is not fatal. He was never in any serious danger, but he did find the work tedious and he did feel trapped. He missed his twin brother desperately and his parents. One also imagines (although he is very quiet on the matter) that he was grieving the death of his older brother too. He had also had to give up his job as a commercial artist, just as he was becoming quietly successful. As solace he turned to sketching and drawing and to nature and to his beloved birds. He and his twin were already passionate bird watchers. My father's diaries are filled with very specific details of birds seen. This extract gives a flavour of the difference that the birds made to his life on a daily basis.

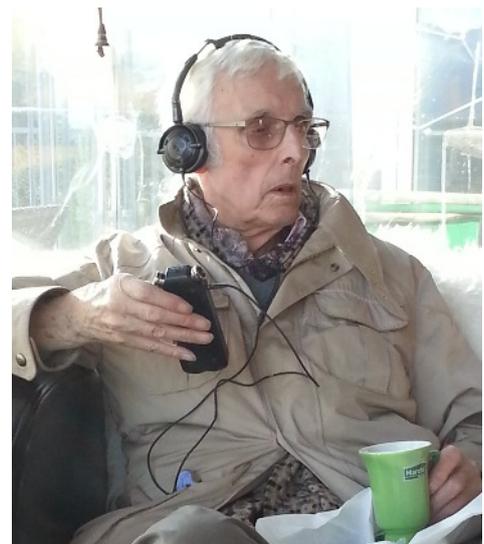
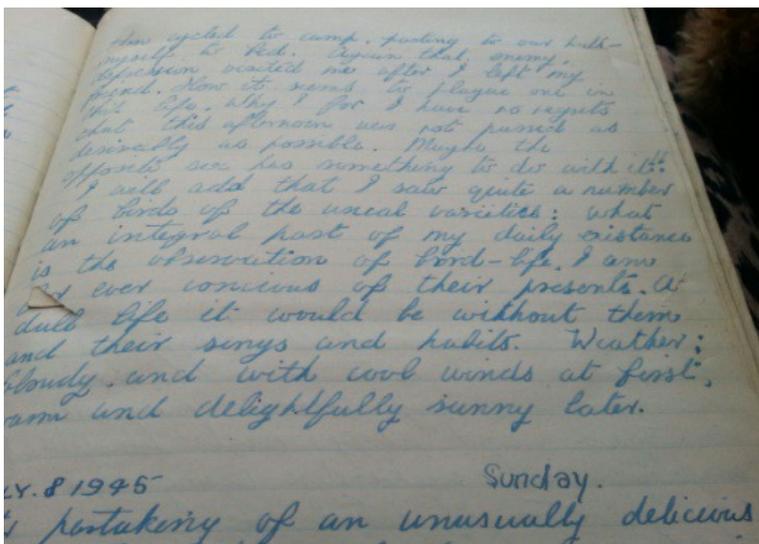


Image 1: "What an integral part of my daily existence is the observation of bird life. I am forever conscious of their presents [sic] a dull life it would be without them and their songs and their habits. July 7th 1945. Image 2: Audio interview: Lake Wörthersee with Leonard Eason, October 2014.

In 1946 my father was posted to Austria. Strangely, he travelled via Toulon, Port Said; Cairo; Heliopolis; Algiers; Naples; Rome; Pompeii; Bologna; Padova; and across the Brenner Pass to Villach and thence to RAF Klagenfurt.

In October 2014 I took my father to Austria to visit Klagenfurt and we met the Museum Director, Thomas Jerger, at the Landesmuseum. I showed him my father's diaries, and his artwork. We are now planning an exhibition. We are hoping to tour the exhibition in Austria and we hope to RAF Hendon.

As part of my research I am asking RAFOS members for help. In the Summer of 2015 I would like to visit as many places as I can in the UK and abroad where my father was posted. I would love to meet RAFOS members and gather their memories on audio as I am also a radio presenter. Data about bird sightings now (for comparison purposes) in the given locations would also be of great interest to me. The decline in bird numbers is something that my father, like so many people, cares about very much. If you think that you can help please contact the editor of the magazine. I look forward to meeting you!

Amelia Marriette, curator and daughter of an aircraftman.

marriette@btinternet.com.

<http://rovingcurator.tumblr.com>



Image 3: Lake Wörthersee with Leonard Eason and Amelia Marriette, October 2014

COMPARISONS OF BTO BREEDING BIRD SURVEY (BBS), GRID SQUARE TL2684 AND A CHANGE OF LAND-USE.

*By John N Wells Env Dip NEBOSH, Aff IEMA, Aff IET, MSM
NB: Article written in Sep 14-BBS Season.*

Introduction.

My BBS square is at OS Grid coordinates TL2684 in North Cambridgeshire. I came by the square having moved to Ramsey in 2003. The square was previously surveyed and administered very professionally I may add for the BTO by my friend and RAFOS colleague Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) Mike Hayes. This article will look at the current bird situation, past records and assess how maybe the change of land-use has affected bird species using the square. Also what species have been recorded since recording began and bird totals currently using the square. I also offer some words for debate on why there has been such a decline in our countryside birds.

Background.

From my house in Ramsey, North Cambridgeshire it is approximately 3 miles to the farm & airfield, as the crow flies. BTO Survey data (if you are a registered surveyor) can now be accessed on line from one's BBS portal. My article will therefore include some of Mikes' earlier survey records (From 1999 to 2003), as well as my more recent data (2003-2014). I took over from Mike in the breeding season 2003.

The article considers:

- My findings, on what I feel have been a change of use in agricultural practice on the land within the square.
- The change has possibly increased some species and or decreased bird numbers for others, as the case may be. Sufficient data is now held to determine these changes. This conclusion is based on my accounts only as an amateur and not those of the BTO.
- Consider if these losses are possibly due to a change of land-use and or other factors both nationally and local to this site? Also, we can consider comparison on land-types, the birds using the land, and perhaps those species affected by the change of land-use.
- It also picks out some points from other wildlife surveys; Butterflies, insects, and habitat records.

Handover.

A chat with Mike at Wyton one day in Physical Education circuits, led me to taking on the square. Mike was due promotion and was shortly to be posted to RAF St Athan. He said it was a good site and held a wide range of species. On referring back at the records it jumped out to me that there was a small paper on interest alone, hence my RAFOS Newsletter piece. Mike explained that during his time on the survey (1999-2003) he really enjoyed the place and knew by handing it over to me both I and the farmer (Stuart), would get along fine and also continue the good work for the BTO. Mike lived at that time at RAF Wyton MQ's, a good ten miles away from the BBS square. He knew I lived much closer in Ramsey. The site is closer to the village of Bury, Cambs. Hence its name ***Bury Lane Farm***.

Site Topography.

My BTO Square is located at ***Bury Lane Farm***, a private farm, and the square also encompasses the old RAF airfield and buildings at RAF Upwood. RAF Upwood has retained its name, but is decommissioned and no longer administered in any way by the RAF or USAF. The USAF also had a building and staff here until decommissioned in 2012. Some buildings remain as shown in my photographs below, which are included for interest.

A good percentage (about 75%), is airfield looking at an OS Map - See Figure 1. That reflects today's topography. The site's history and evidence of its past use is still there, albeit dilapidated. An aerial view shows the outline of the ex-WW2 airfield, and probably further research is required to say if any of the old airfield sites were demolished and or covered over by decommissioning work. Much of my square therefore lies on the airfield and its peripheral buildings. These are the original bomb stores (some now renovated, complete with new roofs), a disused water treatment and sewage filtration site, hard standings, taxiways and a grass strip airfield, used today by Nene Valley Gliding Club, with short sward grassland for their activities. The remainder of the square is arable farmland, (3 separate farm owners - names not included in the article), long grass wasteland and a small fenced off corner of the RAF Upwood site that is grazed by sheep, and more recently used for storage of various companies' assets and thus behind 'the-old-RAF-wire', also Stuart's new, recycling facility with mounds of stored green vegetation waiting riddling and or composting.

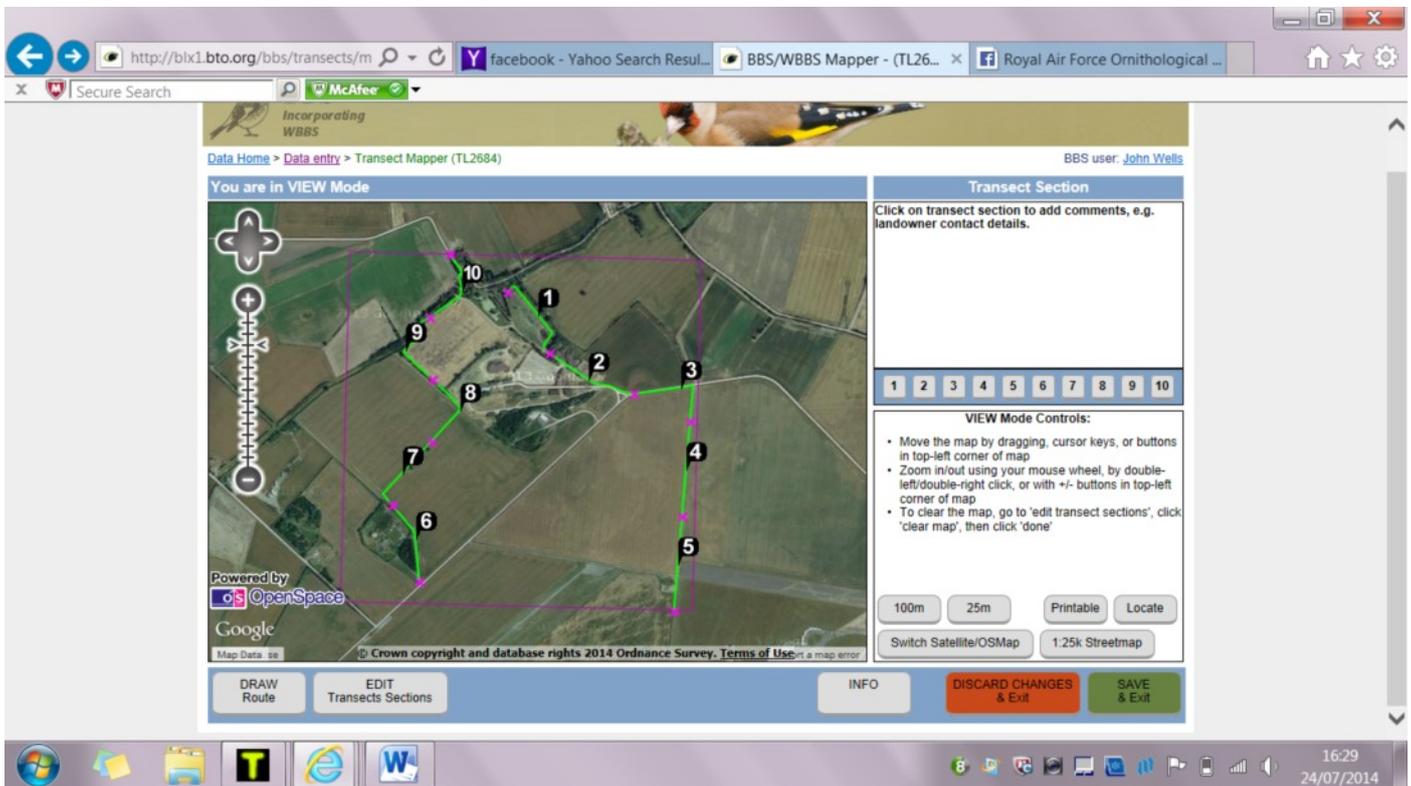
My car parking point is in the back yard of Stuart and Julia Bedford's house. My survey start point (Sector 1) lies on the edge of Stuart and Julia's drive and gardens. Their gardens contain two large carp ponds, a ditch with 3 small brackish ponds on the margins of mixed woodland, formal trees and shrubs, a lane which is a marked public bridle way and footpath through the square, a deep water brackish ditch on the left periphery and dense leylandii hedging at 60' high on Stuart's land - a real mix of different habitats. Adjacent farm fields are mostly arable with thin hedgerows; hence Stuart's area is by far the best for cover and density of birds within the 1 km square. Although the mixed land-use clearly holds different species, depending upon the birds preferred habitat, these areas are very good for wildlife especially the wet areas in Stuart's garden, but my tetrad walk only just cuts across these. As I walk the two transects (one-out, one back) I always stop on Sector 10 to pay these ponds a visit and to listen for birds in the gardens and in dense vegetation of the ponds, but also to count insects including butterflies and sample the vegetation for the insects' element of the Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey (WCBS), as the instructions state.

The ponds are not on my direct transect line: those of you who undertake BBS will know that you count a line (shown in green in Map 1 below) and set out to count the birds seen in the 4 distance categories. The ponds lie on distance category 3 from the outbound walk, and also lie (within 300 metres category) of the return walk to my car parked in the farmyard. The route chosen has changed somewhat from Mike's original, as elements have become impassable through natural obstacles as well as natural geographical features (wet ditches for example) that lead to this cross-over of tetrad routes.

Site Access.

Access to the square is via either of 2 routes, my preferred (and the one that is private) is from Ramsey Heights village on a drove road across farmland, past a new monstrosity of a dwelling - a pre-fabricated house with farm buildings for horses, sheep and chickens. What a really strange little dwelling this is! This homestead lies just outside my square. Once across the fields you come in the back-way to *Bury Lane Farm*. I deal directly on the site through Stuart. The other route is a marked lane and footpath off Biggin Lane Bury, the route in that Mike showed me, but Stuart has since granted me private access via the rear of his property.

When I took over the square from Mike, the farmyard on the site was run-down (possibly due to family circumstances), with long-abandoned farm vehicles, an ancient combine harvester, a rotary bale binder, and a beet cutter. All of these lay rusting in the yard and adjacent fields. There was an old ex-military Land-Rover, lots and machinery, woodpiles and stacks of metal detritus from a bygone farming age. All the unserviceable vehicles looked beyond help. A lot of this equipment is currently being recycled or taken away for disposal. This state may well have been due to Stuart's father or family circumstances, so I will not expand further. Anyway, the least that I say it that the farm has moved on massively and a change of use is a key factor in my findings.



**Map 1 – BBS (screen-shot) TL2684
Bury Lane Farm, Cambridgeshire.**

Farm Use.

The farm is now a major recycling facility. It takes compostable garden and municipal waste from all over Cambridgeshire (and possibly further afield) in the form of waste vegetation, with some shop perished food, vegetables and council recycled 'green waste bin' collections. Stuart processes these into top-dressing - a fine-tilled soil useable as a mulch. The site is on an industrial scale, with modern machinery, and controlled via the latest weighbridge to monitor what enters, 'drops-off' and then leaves the site. It controls haulage trucks and the other weighed goods vehicles on their in-route. Thus as the lorries offload their contents the site management knows what has come in.

The waste is passed through the filtration screen stages, leaving high grade fine farmland compost. After a period of natural decomposition at each stage, the machines rub down the matter through vibrating mesh machine screens and segregate and compost down the organic waste. Most of this process takes a considerable time, so the waste vegetation sits in huge rows of tall mounds between 15 and 30 feet high, some 500 feet long all across Stuart's site. These mounds steam as heat is given off and the composting degradation takes place. Some non-compostable waste items remain and are segregated for removal off-site later. The non-degradable waste used to be seen in high quantities and did lie around, but is seen less and less these days, so there must have been some changes to the waste is being delivered.

How can the process affect the bird life? I do not know what the site was like before, but Mike did and he may well be surprised at the huge scale of the new process. What species were there before? BBS does tell us this. Jumping straight into the stats, the quantities seen are reflected in brackets thus:*(13)*-1999, for **Common Snipe** below.

The numbers possibly reflect wetter fields and damp areas, now no longer apparent. A sample of the birds back then is as follows: **Common Snipe** (13)-1999 and none seen since. **Mute Swan** (40)-1999, but this species is not troubled nationally, only seen the once since. **Oystercatcher** (2)-1999, an unusual bird of the fen land, but occasionally seen in small pockets or pairs, which explains the 2 being found on the farm. It is quite odd that we find them this far inland, but waders do travel good distances. No Oystercatchers have been seen since on the farm, although we do get these around Woodwalton Fen, and outlying fields near

Peterborough. Also unusual was **Tufted Duck** (4)-1999. **Gadwall** (3)-1999. I wonder if back then maybe the 2 lakes were less reed-bound and more suitable to a range of duck species. Certainly **Mallard** were there in small numbers in late 90's and still linger occasionally. Surely the record of (43) in 1999 by Mike, hints that the ponds and wetland may well have been more favourable for dabbling ducks. These common species are seen in the ponds and paired up in water bunds elsewhere, such as open ditches and open fenland. Steve Heather and I jokingly call them '*Field Duck*', as we often see them in pairs sat out on the Fen. Mallard also often frequent open drains or ditches and open small reservoir water bunds on some farms around here. One of these is very close by at Ramsey Heights, off Oil Mills Road at approximately 800 meters from the square. On the square itself I suspect Mallard may possibly breed in the brackish ditch, alongside the marked foot path.

Out of the many losses most notably on the site but no longer there are the following species:

- **Kingfisher**; (nested 2002/3), but none seen since.
- **Coot** (nested in 2001), but none seen since.
- **Grey Partridge**; in 1's and 2's up to 2007, and none seen since.
- **Lapwing**; not seen since 2010.
- **Meadow Pipit**; not seen since 2006.
- **Marsh Tit**; only the 2 in 2007, none seen since.
- **Little Owl** a pair seen in 2003, by Mike is the only record. Though this is a difficult species to see during daylight hours, when short survey times of 2 -3 hrs dictate sightings.
- Mike had **Barn Owl** here the same year. I have attempted a re-introduction [see paragraph below].
- **Treecreeper**; only seen once in 2002.
- **Garganey**; 2 only ever seen in 1999 by (MH).

Have these species decreased or are they still there and perhaps missed by only two BBS; 2-hour session walks? Somehow my experience tells me most have been lost within the square. Perhaps Treecreeper remain, as they are elusive and hard to find in short period offered by BBS. Many of our UK conservation bodies tell us that some or most of those listed above are in decline. This will not come as any major surprise to most readers. Taking a step backwards and looking at the bigger picture; Stuart himself is a dedicated conservationist. He keeps records of my birds, as well as his own sightings and he has some good ones that I have not seen on my BBS walks (Little Owl as an example). Stuart permits other conservationists to survey birds. Prior to BBS selecting his farm, it had official visits from Government experts seeing what schemes he has set in place. There was also a local 'old-boy' who observed kept records and provided them to Stuart's father. One species Stuart was consistent about was **Grey Partridge** a pair seen here some time back (2008), now probably long lost in this part of Cambridgeshire.

Other Bird-watchers.

The friend of the family, who observed and kept records and provided them to Stuart and his father before him had some good knowledge and skills. His most notable record and one of interest was a calling **Golden Oriole** 10 years ago at Holme village approx. 9Km away, in a stand of Poplars. This may possibly have been an ancient breeding site. I feel these old records are an insight into birds from a bygone age in the Fens. The species is not completely lost to East Anglia - a pair has bred at Lakenheath Fen.

In essence Stuart knows what species used to frequent the farm, but it is doubtful he has ever sent these records to DEFRA for farmland grants. I don't think that he has, and after talking to my old-friend Jim Bryden maybe he should do, with the financial incentives available for the work he does on his land, because of the wealth of birds found here especially; **Yellowhammers, Corn Bunting, Common Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, and Reed Bunting**. Maybe even Barn Owl or Little Owl could make a return.

Set-Aside.

In talking to Stuart, I found out he has always had an interest in what was on his land. Today, he sets land aside, land unused from storing piles of composting process. Alongside the waste recycling and

composting, he has a massive sun-array to gather sunlight and reproduce electricity, probably just for the farm machinery and the large house. He has large areas of untilled land where he has crops of wild flowers, sunflowers, and White Poplar all with self-sown common wildflowers and weeds. These self-seeded and set-a-side areas are left alone to grow and are overgrown in many places. Stuart has replanted Willow and Poplar trees to add height and interest, but also to give open spaces height, undergrowth and varying levels of cover. He is very keen on enticing back the wildlife. The sunflowers are left for over-wintering Reed Bunting and Corn Buntings and most common Finches. We know that weedy areas and winter seed left on flowers and crops attract Finches and Buntings. Stuart works here every day so he naturally sees the things we miss on BBS, but I provide him with all my annual records. I know the people at DEFRA and BBS tell us that set-aside works for most of our species. Reed Buntings are doing well within the square, frequently seen on crops of corn, barley, and wheat but they really seem to do well on oil-seed rape, a main crop on the large open ex-airfield site.

Recent records in Sector 1 which also takes in the edges of the ponds and field margins.

The sector has also been set-aside and unused for many years. The small rectangular field also contains good wooded areas at the edge of the lane, a marked walkway and access route for walkers and the postman. I used to come in to the farm that way in the early years. Here large hedgerows lead to the field line with ancient Oaks containing nesting **Hobby**, recently seen here in 2014 on my Butterfly count on the square. Stuart knew they were there-of course.

Also lining the boundary are thick and very tall leylandii trees, holding Greenfinch. Stuart has also planted osiers and young poplar saplings as part of the set-aside that attract small birds. Common in this sector are **Chaffinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Common Whitethroat, Wood Pigeon, Blackbird** and **Duncock**. Sector 2 continues with the thick hedge on the left but takes a sharp left onto the track near the recycling office Portakabin. Here planted leylandii support the thin hedge but some Elms, Sycamore, a long-dead large Oak and under-storey Hazel provide cover for **Blackcap, Wren, Chaffinch** and our piece de resistance, breeding **Turtle Doves**. These are probably the most important species that use the square, closely followed by the **Marsh Harriers** that visit from nearby Woodwalton Fen NR. Turtle Dove is a regular breeder in most years, mostly around the Portakabin area. It is hard to determine where they nest, possibly in the dense Hazel and Hawthorn or the firs on the edge of the perimeter-track, or the lower trees behind the recycling piles. Although missing this year, they have been seen in 10 out of the 14 years around Sector 2 and also heard in the garden in Sector 10. Only this year, have I not heard one calling, which is a real downer. I estimated 3 pairs bred last year (2013). This BBS square is well known for them and I expect Mike will be disappointed when he reads this sad tale of their demise. The BBS Table bears this out. Let us hope it's not a permanent loss.

Interesting Records.

Two **Raven** in 2010 is an interesting record. The bird is uncommon in the county, I recall the pair were flying over and may well have been prospecting sites in the North of the county. The Atlas tells us the species is doing well across the UK.

Regular breeders are a pair of **Buzzard**, close to the farm house in Sector 9 in the corner of the field is a regular spot. The table records breeding in the past few years with birds seen in all years since 2007. This bears out my thought the pair is loyal to one another, as well as the site. Stewart and I have both reported young flying with the parents in the past. This year, I disturbed the sitting female just by walking my route, which happened to be directly under the nest. That close I could see her under-tail coverts before she took-off.



Picture 1 – Sector 2 - Office and weighbridge.

Picture 2 – The Sun-array. Aft of Sector 2. Picture taken from Sector 7.



Picture 3 - Sector 1 – View back towards the ‘start-point’ in l/h top corner of the field.

Picture 4 – Sector 1 - Planted willows & unused (set-a-side) and at the back; a soil stack.

Reintroduction of the Barn Owl.

Barn Owl has been seen by Stuart previously, apparently regularly in the past but not recorded in any BBS visits over 14 years. Being a nocturnal species, with a BBS visit start time around 10:00, it would be an unlikely find unless I disturbed a sleeping bird from an outbuilding or a broken or hollow tree, of which there are a few on the route. This season, I have attempted a trial to see if we can re-introduce a pair to the tetrad. Stuart has permitted me the use of an open ‘bomb-shed’, his machinery store, where I have acquired a suitable sized box - an ex-cricket bat storage box from the Cricket Club which has been put to good use instead of being thrown out. I converted it using the well-known BTO nest box guide. The location is excellent and some pellets were found on the floor of the bomb store where the box has been installed. The pellets I found were not fresh by any means. But where there’s life there’s hope.

Other Birds.

Other insect hunting birds include **Skylark** that has been seen in every year; a nice feeling is seeing and following them on their low forays as they are disturbed at crop margins. The flat arable land is very much to their liking, and high counts have been: (29)-2013 and 3 counts of (27), in 2004, 2007, & 2011.

Another lovely record was coming across a fall of 11 **Wheatears** at the top of the airfield, near the fence wire that pens in the sheep but now also the piled soil on the base. The birds 'leap-frogged' ahead of me and finally settled in and around the small rubble mound and lonely walnut tree they stayed chasing insects for ages as I watched nearby. No-doubt the walnut was self-seeded, dropped by Corvids to crack open the hard shell and taken from an avenue of walnuts on the old air base somewhere behind the wire and inaccessible to me. The fall was splendid and more memorable for the close views I was afforded. But you make your own luck in birding. Wheatears are fairly regular, mostly dependant on migration week and if I'm lucky to select a free day when they pass through. But seen in 6 of the 14 years is not a bad average for selecting migration day!

Spring Migrants.

A bird that stays long in the memory, was a spring migrant **Ring Ouzel** the year of my return from Gulf – Op Telic Det' in 2007. The bird was on and around the fresh top soil piles, that Stuart was spreading on his land North West of the house in the open farmland area. A great find for me personally. One of the best birds; on my 'birds-that-I-have found' list.

Marsh Harriers.

Single Male **Marsh Harriers** have been seen in 4 of the 14 years. When looked at in regard to the bigger picture, that really should not be surprising with a known breeding site some 4-5 miles NW of the site at NNR Woodwalton Fen. If my memory serves me right; 3 out of the 4 seen were males hunting for prey, probably feeding the female or young at a nest site. They can be seen at great distances of the flat fen and slightly higher ground. Other raptors include; **Merlin** (1)-2006, close to the lane by the house and **Peregrine Falcon** observed by MH, (1)-1999. Of the passerines; **Linnet**, Yellowhammer and Chaffinch are strongly represented on the site. The Yellowhammer population is thankfully stable, with records in all but one year of the 14 years. **Greenfinch** to appear to be doing well here (12)-2012, the highest count. Likewise an occasional **Bullfinch** seen in 6 years, an increasing trend following the good count of (6)-2009, now that 6 is a good count, especially in spring when not paired off or grouped as in Winter months.



Picture 9 - RAF Upwood-Hangar 1 of 4 left Serviceable and in use.

Picture 10 – Storage of top-soil of unknown origin.

*NOTE: The self-seeded **walnut** tree (from a bygone age when they were planted on RAF bases). I previously found another example at RAF Odiham of walnut being planted by SHQ and Admin areas of the RAF bases in the 1940s-50s.*



Picture 5 & 6 – The Site of my Barn Owl box (in an old bomb store), now a machinery store.

Yellow Wagtail.

Another major success on The Square is breeding **Yellow Wagtail**. The square holds between 1-3 pairs breeding confirmed in crops of oil-seed rape, beans, wheat and other cereal types. The picture below isn't great but it gives you a feel of the slight elevation on what is a very flat area, with a female Yellow Wagtail, centre of frame. The site looks obvious for a World War 2 airfield where Sterling and Lancaster bombers were based for their raids on Germany and from which many crews never returned.

The Yellow Wagtails seem to thrive in an undisturbed open space, with fewer walkers than used to be, since the lane has been fenced to prevent trespasser access to the old airfield taxiways and hangars from the fields. Previously vandals and yobs visited, and vehicles were often burnt out and left abandoned here at the top of the lane. Gypsies also used to rack-up and park up. Nowadays it is much quieter and more scenic. The birds are undisturbed from the top end of Biggin Lane off Bury road. We see Yellow Wagtails, Chaffinch and **Long-tailed Tit** along the field margins or in the fields at the top of the lane as well as in the centre of the square bordering the airfield cropped areas. Yellow Wagtails are mostly in dense crop cover but they do pop out to investigate you as you walk through their territory. Often calling overhead is another give-away, and a call worth learning and remembering if surveying areas for all or other Wagtail species.



Picture 7 - Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava flavissima*), a female from 2014 (visit 2). On late; oil seed rape. The view looking towards Woodwalton Fen LNR.

Picture 8 – Ringlet female (*Aphantopus byperantus*) seen on Wider Countryside Butterfly Survey (WCBS) on the same Square. The WCBS has been undertaken in all years (2010-2014).

The Airfield – Present and Future.

Also on the base are sheep, grazing to keep the wasteland and tall grass down on the old base, the other side of the wire. There is a plan to sell and develop this area for housing, which if it goes ahead will change the habitat for birds, but also ruin the local infrastructure: roads schools and leisure facilities. I understand that the plan includes new schools, shops, etc. but it will completely change the landscape if given the go-ahead. I think it is inevitable. The local infrastructure is at bursting point for homes and all schools are full to the brim.

Summary.

Bird species numbers are good to very good on the square. There is an interesting spread of species of interest. The square is very important to a number of species such as the following Red-Data List species: **Skylark**, Turtle Dove, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting. But also threatened species such as: Linnet, Hobby, Greenfinch, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Bullfinch and the occasional hunting Marsh Harrier. Other common species are here in good numbers: Chaffinch, and Wood Pigeon etc as examples. I feel Stuart could benefit from DEFRA grants and he should follow this up.

NOTE: I was informed by Stuart's son, Tom, that DEFRA already monitor the farmland and that they were on site Sun 30 Aug 14, whilst I was on my WCBS.

I hope the countryside improvements and initiatives that Stuart has in place bring about the changes for the future benefit of existing species and maybe add some new species, possibly even recovering some losses such as **Gadwall** and Little Owl. They might entice in **Snipe**, and **Teal**. Perhaps some of those species that have declined will return. Sadly it is too late probably for two of Cambridgeshire and UK threatened bird species, namely Grey Partridge and Willow Tit. Both are declining rapidly, but both have been seen here previously.

The habitat should help retain: Turtle Dove (let's hope for a return in 2015). The sound totals of Yellowhammer and Lapwing will be retained by the wealth of 'quiet space'. Migrants continue to pass through e.g. Wheatear and maybe **Osprey** is a possibility on the carp ponds, a stray wader such as a possible: **Greenshank** or **Redshank** or Oystercatcher returning would be nice. Still that's what surveys are all about – facts. The habitat and its suitability or not, as the case maybe.



Picture 11– Common Hawker (*Aeshna juncea*)- unusual on my square as it's a moorland species? Located at start Sector 1.

Picture 12 - Sector 9 – Planted White Poplar with maize and high boundary to ditch and public footpath.

Picture 13 - Turtle Doves. (*Streptopelia turtur*) Picture courtesy of Wikipedia.

The Weather Forecast Isn't Always That Bad!

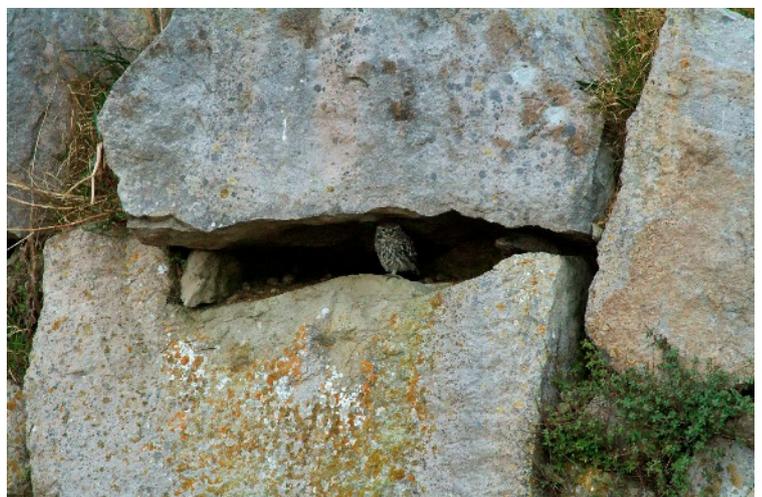
RAFOS Portland Trip 10-12 October 2014

By Scott Drinkel



Looking at the weather forecast for Portland on the morning of Friday 10 October 2014 did not fill me with confidence. Friday would be fair; Saturday would be dry between 07:00 and 09:00 with heavy rain for the rest of the day, improving markedly for Sunday. To make the most of what limited time would be available for birding (and in my case, photographing them), I set off, arriving at the Old Lower Lighthouse (which has been the Portland Bird Observatory since 1961) in the early afternoon. Soon the rest of the motley crew filtered in to the accommodation – Dave and Anne Bodley, Ken and Sally Earnshaw, kindly bringing Val Kersley (and her culinary expertise and delights) down to Dorset. Dick and Jan Knight, Alex Smith, Ian Drake and John Le Gassick all arrived in reasonably short order. These were joined by the final arrivals for our weekend by Stu and Laura Walker, adding to the tally of 5 Skoda vehicles for RAFOS in the car park – maybe a sponsorship deal should be on the cards?

Friday afternoon involved the standard familiarisation of the site, a gentle stroll past the quarry to see the **Little Owl**, now almost an unofficial mascot of the Portland trips. The fields showed plenty of the usual suspects, but the storms and strong winds of the previous days had taken their toll and around the coast it was quite quiet. Back at the Observatory, Peter the Ringer let the arrivals know of a **Red-Breasted Flycatcher** that had been caught, ringed and released that morning and had apparently been sighted in the little copse next to the bookshop, but unfortunately it remained elusive to the RAFOS contingent, as did the reported **Grey Phalarope** at Chesil Beach.



Friday evening saw some wonderful images provided by John, projected onto the screen testing recognition (and wit, initially, until it was noticed that the photograph's name was shown at the bottom corner of the image) of the assembled team. This was followed up by another set of great images and testing of our recognition skills by Ken. Around midnight however, the place reverberated with the wondrous sound of rolling thunder as a storm blew through. I say around midnight, but will clarify this to EXACTLY midnight as the unmistakable call of Tawny Owl was heard in between thunderclaps. Why exactly midnight? For those who do not know, the clocks in the observatory have images of birds at each of the hour markings. When the clock reaches that hour, the call of the bird sounds instead of a more usual chime. The bird at 12 is a Tawny Owl.....best not add Tawny Owl to the list eh Ken?

Saturday inspired early rising and making the most of the weather while we had it. Not venturing far (because bacon was cooking and NOBODY wants to miss out on bacon!) most trekked as far as the coast and the Point around Portland Bill. Looking out across the sea in the half-light available, the pink of the sunrise rapidly gave way to the yellow of the sun, breaking through the clouds. The weather was trying to be on our side, but would it hold.? Just opposite the Observatory, in the fields set up with mist nets, 2-3 male **Stonechat** were sitting nicely on top of the tall grasses and brambles. These were quickly joined by their females, hopping their way up the field and away. A **Whinchat** was also seen close by, but before breakfast nothing more was available and a heavy rain shower soon ushered everyone back inside.



Stonechat (see above) and Northern Wheatear (see below)

Breakfast saw Alex aggressively defending the Lurpak butter for his toast as eating 'edible axle grease' was not his style. Stopping short of a duel by butter knife, breakfast was suitably demolished in a comfortable truce. The group split into smaller parties to head slightly further afield, but mostly staying on the 'island' of Portland. Now more **Goldfinch**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Meadow** and **Rock Pipits**, **Merlin**, **Kestrel** and a couple of good showings from **Peregrine Falcon** added to the tally as well as the stares from a curious lone **Grey Seal** just a matter of feet away from the rocks on the eastern coast of the 'island'. The weather was still dry, warm and quite clear, allowing wonderful views of the migratory **Clouded Yellow Butterfly**. Looking from the top of 'Peregrine Point' southwards, one could see a very angry looking cloud front, so a retreat back to the centre was ordered. A very heavy downpour arrived as the majority stepped into the observatory, so it was time for a brew!

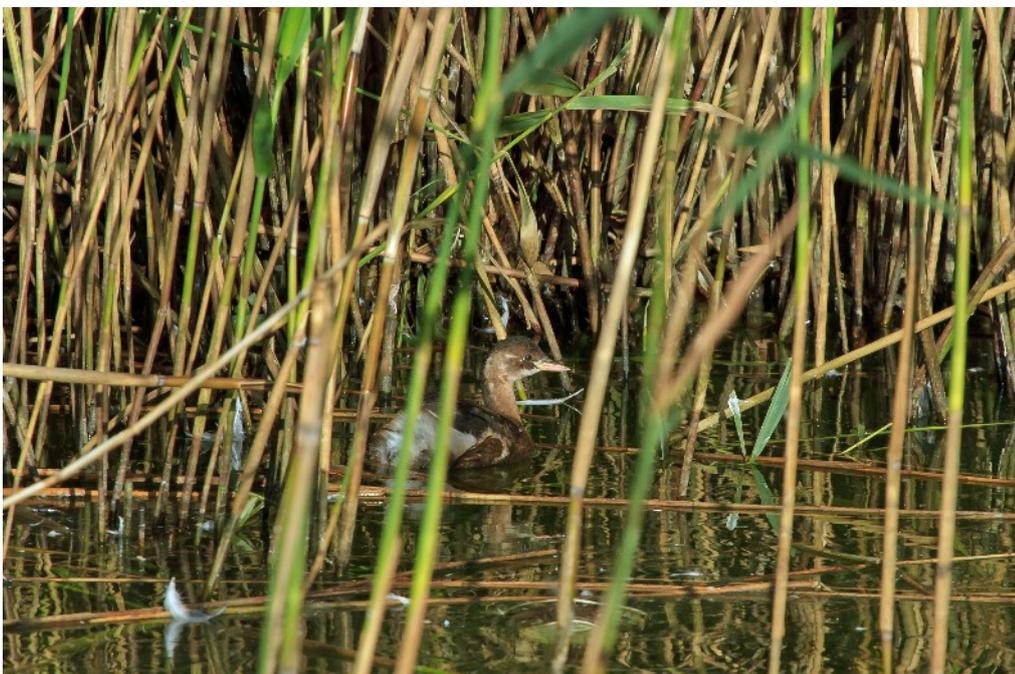
Lunch followed soon after and before the afternoon's trip to the RSPB reserves of Lodmoor and Radipole, a small period of contemplation was spent on the veranda overlooking the wonderful garden and pond. A distinctive call of one of the many wagtails moving south was heard from overhead, but it did not look right, causing a bit of head scratching. Soon after it was established that the call was from a **Grey Wagtail**, but it had no tail. Just to emphasise the point, the lovely little bird settled in the garden to drink from the pond, it still looked lovely but was most definitely odd!



Tiger Moth and Cormorant

Moving around the corner to the view point yielded a good view of a **Black-Tailed Godwit** and a feeding **Cormorant**, who had just caught an eel. It looked as though it was playing with it, flinging it into the air, before grabbing it again, letting it drop into the water and having a taste of freedom, before easily grabbing it once more. Soon it tired of playing and swallowed it in a huge 'gulp'. That should have been the end of it, but it looked as though the eel was still fighting, causing the bird to stretch a few times in an effort to keep the wriggling lunch down and drinking furiously (hopefully not with the intention of drowning it)! The weather was such that plenty of **Red Admiral** and **Speckled Wood Butterflies** were out and basking as we decided for a quick trip to Radipole.

Radipole information centre had several birds listed as being seen that day including the **Hooded Merganser**, so often sought after here and **Bearded Tits**. Both of these escaped the ever watchful RAFOS eyes, but **Black-Headed Gulls**, **Mediterranean Gulls** were spotted from the bridge at the centre. A group of about 8 **Snipe**, a **Water Rail**, **Tufted Duck**, **Mallard**, **Coot** and a very energetic **Cormorant**, who kept diving and could be seen swimming under water on the search for food were also seen. This activity disturbed a very small bird from the brush that literally ran across the water before diving beneath. The eagle eyes of Jan the Secretary Bird soon identified the **Little Grebe** that had made its way into the reeds, blending almost perfectly with the background. A 500 metre walk to the viewpoint brought forth a few new species for the weekend including **Gadwall**, **Shoveler**, **Great Crested Grebe** and **Pochard**. As the days birding drew to a close and parties headed back to their respective vehicles, thoughts once again turned to a glorious cup of tea and stickies.



Little Grebe



Onwards and outwards, the group split into car-sized groups to head out to the reserves, - Lodmoor first. It was commented that there was a distinct lack of tits through the visit, but at least Lodmoor heralded a small group of **Long-Tailed Tits**, moving their way through the hedge line. The stormy weather forewarned was not a figment of our imagination as the skies were clear blue and the sun shining brightly. A plastic **Grey Heron** had been set on one of the spits of land inhabited by **Canada Geese**, while a **Little Egret** fed nearby. After a while of scanning the edges of the lake, we moved on only for Dick to remark “The Heron has moved!” Indeed the ‘plastic’ heron had been so perfectly still on arrival it looked inanimate, but obviously not so.

A little further on a lone wader looked indistinct enough to warrant the field guides being dragged from the rucksacks. This led to it being positively identified as a **Ruff** but in moult making a confusing plumage. This bird was happily feeding amongst the **Widgeon**, **Northern Lapwing** and **Teal** thereabouts. As we moved down the hedgerow, attention was drawn to the lake side of the bramble bush at about waist height. A **Moorhen** was near the top of the bush, quite merrily picking off and eating the blackberries! It may not be unusual but it was certainly not something I was expecting to see, but then I was not expecting to see a **Tiger Moth Mk2** over-flying Lodmoor either, but there you go! !



After another wonderful meal created by Val, it was time for call-over, resulting in the following full list:

Mute Swan	Kittiwake
Canada Goose	Guillemot
Shelduck	Feral Pigeon
Widgeon	Wood Pigeon
Gadwall	Collared Dove
Teal	Little Owl
Mallard	Kingfisher
Shoveler	Greater Spotted Woodpecker
Pochard	Skylark
Tufted Duck	Swallow
Common Scoter	House Martin
Little Grebe	Meadow Pipit
Great Crested Grebe	Rock Pipit
Fulmar	Grey Wagtail
Gannet	Pied / White Wagtail
Cormorant	Wren
Shag	Dunnock
Little Egret	Robin
Grey Heron	Whinchat
Sparrowhawk	Stonechat
Buzzard	Wheatear
Kestrel	Blackbird
Merlin	Cetti's Warbler
Peregrine Falcon	Sedge Warbler C
Water Rail	Chiffchaff
Moorhen	Long-Tailed Tit
Coot	Blue Tit
Oystercatcher	Great Tit
Lapwing	Magpie
Ruff	Jackdaw
Snipe	Carrion Crow
Black-Tailed Godwit	Raven
Great Skua	Starling
Black-Headed Gull	House Sparrow
Little Gull	Chaffinch
Mediterranean Gull	Greenfinch
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Goldfinch
Herring Gull	Linnet
Great Black-Backed Gull	

Additional spots were **Red Admiral**, **Speckled Wood**, **Clouded Yellow** and **Small White Butterflies**.

There were numerous and varied **dragonflies** as well as the **Grey Seal**. The evening was rounded off with another wonderful set of images provided by Ian, ably demonstrating how much of a subjective and emotive subject photography can be. Regardless of how critical we were, there were some outstanding pictures taken by some talented people.

Up and at 'em on Sunday morning but the weather again changed from the forecast. The clouds were dull and grey and the wind strong and cold. Very little additional was added before breakfast where again the controversy regarding the butter once again spewed forth. Alex had been asked to put the "Lurpak Spreadable and the Flora (Edible Axle Grease)" onto the table. This translated into "Lurpak, Countrylife Spreadable and Flora" – the Countrylife not being the property of RAFOS. A faux pas of gargantuan proportions was quickly averted when Anne spotted this...but you cannot help but think this was Alex trying to protect his most precious spread!

As breakfast was cleared away, Peter and Martin of the observatory brought in a netted **Great Spotted Woodpecker** still in the hand. Fantastic to see the beautifully defined markings in such detail before also bringing out a previously un-ringed visitor, a **Yellow-Browed Warbler**, absolutely beautiful, it caught the attention of many a birder to see such a bird close up. After these little beauties, the parties again split into several groups. There were those staying at the centre and sea watching, those going along the heights of the cliffs, some heading to Church Ope a short drive away and others meandering along the coast. Despite the variety of the habitats being scoured, only a **Harrier (Sp)** was seen in the far distance and a **Sand Martin** in with a flock of other **House Martins** and **Swallows**.

All too quickly, lunch time came along with an approaching storm due to hit Portland at any time between 14.00 and 17.00. After lunch was time for goodbyes and for many a substantial journey homeward. Again, it was a great pleasure to stay at the lighthouse, enjoy some wonderful company, pleasant birding and some rubbish jokes (Alex) – these weekends are exceptionally enjoyable, with thanks to all who participate in them, especially Dave for arranging it. Until next time!

Scott's Tenuous Bird Related Factoid.

Peter Adolph was an RAF Veteran and keen ornithologist. He designed a set of table top games that mimicked the full size versions. He wanted to call the games 'The Hobby' but this trademark was rejected because the Patents Office thought it was too general a term. Inspired by his favourite bird's taxonomic name, he therefore approached the Patents Office with another name - 'Subbuteo' was born...and he still managed to call it the 'hobby' (well close enough)!



Yellow-browed Warbler

Birding in the Sun.

By Scott Drinkel

Out of area deployments are a part of business in the RAF and very few fit and healthy individuals are exempt – therefore it was no real surprise to be notified of my deployment; what was a surprise was the 3 weeks' notice I received. Apart from the completing the required training and sorting of family life and support, there was little time to prepare anything else. That said, on good advice from other RAFOS members and the superb service from Amazon.co.uk, I did manage to get a '*Birds of the Middle East*' field guide to help me out with potential new species for my tick list.

The 96th birthday of the Royal Air Force saw me flying out from RAF Brize Norton on the rather impressive new *Voyager* aircraft; I had plenty of time to read the book in comfort and in preparation for the bird life of my new home for the next 4 months.

The area was hot (40+ degrees C) for the most part increasing to 50+ on some days, barely dropping below mid 20s through the evening. These days were far more tolerable than the days of 40 +degrees, with 90% humidity – these days were a struggle. Arrivals brief had a very specific disappointment from my point of view – there was absolutely no photography allowed on base. This naturally led to a mini conflict in me; I am predominantly an amateur photographer with a growing interest in birding. For the most part, my 'List' consists of birds I have photographed as opposed to seen, but that is a different matter!

In the heat of the location, RAF policy now mandates acclimatisation, in the form of walks, starting in sports kit for a mile and a half and building to full kit over 3 miles. I absolutely loved the Heat Acclimatisation Training (HAT) walks – the route had areas of well watered greenery in amongst the desert. It was also undertaken as a group, meaning I had a captive audience as I astounded myself (let alone them) with identification and spotting of the variety of birds.

Laughing Dove	Hoopoe	Indian Silverbill	Pied Mynah
Red-wattled Plover	Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater	Arabian Babbler	Indian Roller
Feral Pigeon	Little Green Bee-Eater	Graceful Prinia	Great White Egret
Collared Dove	Crested Lark	Barn Swallow	Socotra Cormorant
Yellow-vented Bulbul		Greater Flamingo	Scrub Warbler
Red-vented Bulbul		Grey Francolin	Hooded Crow
House Sparrow		Long-legged Buzzard	
White-cheeked Bulbul			
Purple Sunbird			
Common Mynah			
Bank Mynah			
House Crow			

I have listed the birds identified in the table above. The birds in the left hand column were seen almost every day, in and around the compound. The Red-wattled Plover was particularly vociferous when we walked past or it was somehow disturbed. This was also the main bird I could recognise by the call in the middle of the night. There were several pairs at my location and they were still nesting and rearing chicks. On one occasion, the Plover was screaming in distress and looking closer, 3 chicks were seen on the road, with high kerbs that they could not climb. As we moved closer on one of the HAT walks, the chicks ran to the kerbside and disappeared, so we thought there must have been a drain or something that allowed their escape. This HAT walk brought us back past the same area and again we could see the chicks in the road. Watching them take shelter again, it was apparent this time that they were simply very well camouflaged as they hunkered down out of sight. This time, we spotted them and gently assisted them onto the footpath again, where they quickly ran to Mum and Dad. That felt good!

The bulbuls were also a daily sighting and had similarities between the species that could cause confusion for an amateur such as me. The White-cheeked Bulbul (as should be expected) has white patches on its cheeks, along with a yellow underside around its vent. The Yellow-vented, looked very similar apart from not having the white patches on the face, while the Red-vented looked the same as the Yellow-vented but the area around the vent was.....red! Easy to see when you know what to look for and that is probably one of the bigger birding lessons I took from this experience, but it requires looking, not glancing, at the birds to be sure.

The Purple Sunbird took some time for me to identify, mainly because it was so shy and fast, it was difficult to see any detail apart from looking like a 'Black Hummingbird'. However, as I became acclimatised to the environment, I started getting up about 04:30 to run and train. At that time in the morning, most of the bird life was quite slow and less jumpy, so birds like the Purple Sunbird could be seen resting on the compound fencing allowing a good look and appreciation of its colours.

Birds in the the second column were pretty common through most of the tour. I was quite chuffed to see Hoopoe, a bird I have not seen in UK. They are very distinctive and were regulars on the HAT walks, but as my time lengthened in this area, the heat increased and several bird species stopped being seen, this being one of them. The Bee-eaters were also around all the time, but were so very fast, it was difficult to see them, until I was given information by another (closet) birder. As a Sqn Ldr Regiment, he used to run around the 8 mile perimeter (nutter) but would always see the 2 species of Bee-eaters on the far side of the runway. Armed with this gen, my binocular and a Landrover, I went out incorporating this location as I transited one place to the next and was ultimately rewarded with up to 5 of these birds in a lone tree.

The birds in the third column were seen pretty regularly, but were in locations I did not frequent very often, while the birds in the last column were birds I only saw once. The Greater Flamingos were in a lagoon just outside of the capital city, which I visited twice in my tour, while the Long-legged Buzzards could be seen lazily circling overhead as I returned from a monthly visit to the border of the next country to renew the visa, a process everyone goes through every 30-40 days. After the first trip to the border, I took my binoculars as standard and was rewarded with quite good views of these buzzards.

When visiting 'Snoopy Island' as part of a day's adventurous training and after a visit to a memorial in the location, a lone Socotra Cormorant flew across the bay. This was good to add another tick, but had to play second fiddle to snorkelling with wild green turtles that were just 5 foot beneath us! Loved that day!

Finally, I have to say how impressed I was with seeing a glorious Indian Roller fly within 20 feet of the vehicle. I only saw it for about 5 seconds, but the colours are emblazoned into my memory and hope they will remain so for some time.

Of course, birding is a very particular hobby (no pun intended) and many of the 'youngsters' in the service may not have as much of an interest. Being away on deployment, however, means that many personnel are keen for distraction, especially when the detachment is 'dry'. I had volunteered to write and run the monthly quiz, which was generally attended by about 80-90 personnel. After having talked at several personnel about the local birds, it was only right (in my mind) to have a round 'Sponsored by RAFOS'. This gave me a small platform to talk about RAFOS and increase awareness before putting out a picture round, showing 10 of what I thought were the more common birds in the country. Appreciating the audience, I simplified this even further but putting the 10 names of the birds at the bottom of the sheet, along with 5 names of 'other' birds and 5 names that were completely fictional...the best score was 3 out of 10! Maybe that needs simplifying further but at least it was just as difficult for everyone playing.

It seemed that in no time at all, I was already heading back home, my notebook with my spots in it, but still a rather heavy heart at not having any photographs of birds I may not see in the wild again. Still next time I might be lucky and get to the Falkland Islands again, but this time with my camera system!

JARDIN OBSERVACIÓN DE AVES EN MALLORCA

(Garden Bird Watch in Majorca)

By Team Knight

When our daughter in law asked if we wished to join the East Sussex branch of the family for 10 days in Majorca in May last year it didn't take long to say yes. She is an ace on the internet and sorted out the flights, the villa and car hire for all of us. We duly pitched up at Gatwick at the appointed time to take part in the Government's "Fitness by stealth" campaign – walking 100 yards in a zigzag path carrying 25 kilograms to go 10 yards to a desk then walking a mile carrying 5 kilograms to another desk at a gate. The flight was full and then there was the usual argument at the car hire desk at Palma de Mallorca about insurance for the 2 cars so it was after midnight when the 6 of us arrived at the hotel on the outskirts of town – thank goodness for Google maps or we'd never have found it!

After a hearty breakfast we drove to our villa about 5 miles from Pollença in the north-west of the island. It was in the middle of nowhere and it would have been interesting trying to find it in the dark after a long day travelling. The villa was typical of the area, large and spacious with tiled floors and heavy wooden furniture. In the garden was a large swimming pool beside an annex which had full-width folding glass doors facing the pool. Inside the annex were kitchen and dining facilities including a built-in barbecue, and a shower and toilet at the side of the building. With a full-width retractable awning and comfortable patio furniture it quickly became obvious that we would spend nearly all our time by the annex, using the villa only for sleeping. There was a lawn with a rose bed and a few palm trees between the house and the pool, a small orchard of citrus trees at one side, and shrubs by the embankment that marked the boundary at the back. In the grounds to the front and sides of the villa and behind the property were small fields of wheat. And the sun shone!

The grounds had the expected garden birds: Blackbirds, Great Tits, Collared Doves, Woodpigeons, House Sparrows, Goldfinches and Greenfinches. Swifts screamed overhead most of the daytime but there seemed to be regular distinct waves of migrating Swifts increasing the numbers. Much as we tried, we didn't spot any white underneath for Alpine Swifts but there were House Martins and Swallows to make one concentrate on exactly what we were looking at. Not what we're used to in our UK garden but Spotted Flycatchers, Sardinian Warblers and Fan-tailed Warblers (OK, Zitting Cisticola if you must, but I could see the fan tail, I didn't see any zits or cysts) were common. We often heard the tinkling call but it took a while to spot the Serins among the trees. Not counting as garden birds according to the BTO Garden Birdwatch rules, regular flypasts were conducted by Buzzards, Hobbies, Kestrels and Booted Eagles (thank you, Gerry, for the patient instruction on the Little Plinth).

Never have your binoculars out of reach. With binoculars we were able to confirm that the bird at the far end of the orchard one morning was indeed a Stone-curlew – not bad as a garden bird! We didn't need optics for the Hoopoe on the lawn or the Little Egret beside the gravel drive. Likewise, keep a camera handy. Needless to say there wasn't one within reach when the Cattle Egret came to the swimming pool for a drink one evening. Everyone stayed very still, difficult for the boys, and the Egret stayed for several minutes before flying off.

The grandchildren (aged 6 and 4) liked to play with our binoculars so we established rules:

Rule 1 – Keep the strap around your neck.

Rule 2 – Don't run with the binoculars.

Rule 3 – Remember Rule 1.

Ben, the elder, took an interest in what we were watching. Using the bird guide was good reading practice and we taught him how to use an index. We spent one afternoon collecting all the different forms of seed head and cone we could find in the grounds and, as it may not be legal to import some/all of them, we took photographs of the collection to show at school.

One of the Kestrels seemed to come and go from behind the property so we went in search. We found a track which led to an old building surrounded by rough grass with an olive tree in front of it. We stood beside an open barn full of agricultural machinery (and that's another story) with the telescope (for those with long memories, the little witch's inferior optics) which allowed us to positively identify it as a Lesser Kestrel sitting in the tree.

It was getting dark on Day 5 when a shape flew past at head height between the pool where I was standing and the villa. I didn't get a good view at that distance and in the poor light but, if I hadn't known better, I would have said it was a Shearwater. On Day 6, as it was getting dark, Jan saw a bird fly past in the same way. She got a better view



Villa garden

Black-winged Stilt at
S'Albufera



Nightingale at S'Albufera

than I had had and confirmed it as a Mediterranean Shearwater! What was it doing 5 miles inland, albeit heading for the sea? After that the Nightjar was no surprise. We heard a Curlew in the distance one evening but couldn't find it in the likely places over the next few days, and soon heard a Tawny Owl.

Walking the lanes close to the property we added Stock Dove, Linnet and Corn Bunting to our list, and got a soaking in a sudden rain and hail storm. Overflights of the garden included an Osprey, Black and Red Kites, Peregrines and Yellow-legged Gulls. As we were driving back from the supermarket one morning Jan got a fleeting glimpse of a large raptor over the ridge line. Needless to say there was a continuous line of trees lining the road for the next mile and no safe place to stop so the identity is conjecture – but it was big!

We didn't spend all our time at the villa, although I did do a lot of reading. When the East Sussex branch headed for the beach we made 2 visits to the nature reserve at S'Albufera. The Spanish Government has a similar "Fitness by stealth" campaign as in the UK. It's a kilometre walk with backpack and telescope to get to the entrance before you start walking round the reserve! At least the walk in is beside a river with roosting egrets and the odd warbler. May is a bit late in the year for wetland birds as most of the pools had dried up. We found only 5 species of wader: Black-winged Stilt, Kentish and Ringed Plover, Greenshank and Common Sandpiper. Red-crested Pochard was the best of 5 species of ducks and Little Bittern the best of 5 species of herons and egrets. There were plenty of Purple Gallinules by the drying pools, some with chicks, and some Red-knobbed Coots on the river. The only tern we saw was a Common Tern. Cetti's Warblers are supposed to be skulking birds but several posed at points along one of the paths to a hide. More surprising was the Nightingale which also gave us a good view as it sat on a branch and sang to us. The Great Reed Warbler was singing from the same reeds as a year previously. A Marsh Harrier and Eleonora's Falcons added to the list of raptors.

Our trip to Cap de Formentor was a failure but not completely wasted. The journey was slow, waiting for spots to overtake the many mountain bikers on the narrow twisting roads and, when we got to the lighthouse, it was complete chaos with nowhere to park despite the best efforts of a chap trying to help people. We turned around without stopping and headed back, stopping 5 miles down the road in a small lay-by near a viewpoint where we found Stonechat, Raven and Crag Martin.

Our list for the holiday (available on request) was 68 species. Not as good as the 86 in April 2011 but that was because of the difference in the water levels at S'Albufera. I think we need to drop hints to the East Sussex branch that we should do it again. And I still want to know what a shearwater was doing inland (please don't say "flying").



Little Egret at Port de Pollenca



Night Heron at S'Albufera

(Knight Heron?)

ALGARVE 2014 – A close encounter over dinner.

By J N Wells

A late summer break was planned and arranged for Sue and myself. The aim was to have a hard earned break for Sue and use the dates she had booked on her leave. This happily coincided with some sun, but all being well it would be a little cooler in late summer in the south of Portugal (PT). We had been three times before and this visit was back to the Guia/Valle Pera region of the Algarve. The valley where we stay is named Quinta Da Suadade, with a literal meaning we found out had no direct English translation but reads “the Farm of well-being”. The place has always been our favourite as the nearby marsh holds a good variety of birds with a chance of a rarity. The local residents and British staying in the Quinta form the largest community. The resident office manager and his staff are all local Portuguese with years of managing the community around British owners of the villas. All are friendly welcoming and hard working on the estate, plus with 2 pools, a restaurant, pony trekking, tennis, crazy golf and a BBQ area all on-site, it is a lovely place. I guess it is all that and the weather plus it is a known entity that appeals to us both. Our agent did the villa booking and left us to sort the flights and a hire car. The flight timings I booked allowed us travel to a UK airport by train and travel to the villa in the evening, hopefully in daylight.

Sunday 28 Sep 14.

The plans all went well. We had time for a meal at Gatwick, after a faultless run on the trains. I can recommend the Gatwick Express as it was on time and free of stops. A friendly Monarch flight got us in as planned and the small local car business, Zit Auto was outside waiting for us in the car park. The drive to the accommodation in the late evening went to plan, with the directions all correct from Melanie with the hire paperwork already sorted. This year most UK folk travel away from the main Motorway (the A2) as this attracts tolls, so we would be travelling A-roads, which meant we saw new sights on our route. Although busy at first, the traffic soon thinned outside Faro, but you do need your wits about you on local roads.

Arrival in the Quinta was at about 21:00, and we were met with a local **Tawny Owl** hooting very close to the middle-tier accommodation of the villas and hillside complex. That was just before our troubles started, as we when found what we thought was our villa, there was no key in the wall-key safe. It was also getting late and although we could see a light on in the next door neighbours, we knew the office reception was closed. The good neighbours at Villa 8B let us in for a chat and gave us a telephone number for the site manager - who as ‘sods law’ would have it was out. Then the penny dropped - our villa ‘The Cave’ was the studio villa beneath the one that we had tried to enter. The darkness had hidden the steps down to ‘The Cave’ whose Portuguese name was ‘Casa Elvina’. Although a little embarrassed, we were grateful to the British Villa 8B owners, for their help. The stairs down to our villa beneath 8A were dark, as the pathway light auto-sensors were not working, which certainly did not help us, and would have highlighted the steps down another level. I don’t know who was most relieved Sue or me, but we were grateful to be in, followed shortly by a welcome brew of tea from the tea bags in Sue’s suitcase - we always UK blend tea with us.

Day 1 – Monday 29 Sep 4 (Local day).

The first morning broke lovely and warm and soon we were both up and outside on the patio garden using the 2 sets of bins [x1 set from my mate Stevie Heather loaned for Sue] and scoping from the patio that overlooked the steeply sloped and wooded terraced hillside opposite. Among the varieties of trees and shrubs were some new beehives at the very top left of the rough ground. The local bee keepers were onto a winner. The ground looked very dry, as there had been little rain over the summer. Obvious birds outside and adjacent to the villa were **Red-rumped Swallow** (28), **Azure-winged Magpie** (38), and a single **Greenfinch** heard singing nearby, plus **Cattle Egrets** (estimated at 100) and **Little Egrets** (4) overhead as they departed the marsh for open agricultural land. This is a daily ritual as the birds went about their business from the marsh. A scratchy song revealed **Sardinian Warblers** (3) residing in the gardens below on the terraces of our side of the valley. Sue came up early-trumps over breakfast with a small group of **Serin** (7); comprising 5 Females with 2 Males feeding on dry seed heads just below the restaurant and alongside the stream to our right. Also nice, were **Common Waxbill** (3) that are reported to be breeding

locally (an introduced species to Europe from North Africa). A distant dark female **Marsh Harrier** could be seen over the marsh. From our garden patio we could just see the nearest corner of Pera Marsh, or Lagoa Das Salgados to give its true local name. Our view is the better third, as this is the corner where many waterbirds frequent the shallows as well as occasional passing raptors. **Grey Wagtail** (4), **Black-winged Stilt** (25), **Teal** (5), **Spoonbill** (1) and lots of **Greater Flamingos** (50-70) and other smaller waterbirds could be made out, but smaller birds were too distant to identify properly on the marsh and its edges.

Back in the valley a dark bird on the side of a telegraph pole gave me a headache, as I could not identify it. It was Great Spotted Woodpecker sized, but not a woodpecker species because the tail was not stiff enough and was not being used like a woodpecker. It was all dark blue iridescent purple like a Jackdaw maybe, or black with a longish beak. It flew off before I got a scope on it - very frustrating.

Changes at the Pera Marsh.

The reeds and actual water surface areas of the marsh appeared greater in size, possibly due to non-drainage from the marsh for watering the local golf course on the Valle Pera side. Furthermore, there had been some national and local interest in the bird species being protected here, and a certain amount of attempted protection for the birds had taken place. This is laudable. These are the changes I noted:

- *Increased substantial wooden boarded walkway* for walkers, across the dunes for protection of that sand/loose dry habitat and adjoining marshland.
- *A new pumping station* and associated covered overland pipes were additions to the marsh and local sewerage systems. I am unsure, but talking to others this appears to be its status.
- *New standing areas with bird viewing area* behind wooden high post screens with viewing ports for personnel with binoculars and scopes at head height.
- *Sunken 2mtr posts at 500 metres from the marsh-preventing vehicle access.* This unrestricted access provides NO physical barrier to walkers. Locals did not stick to these arrangements and often were seen inside the row of posts taking photos and generally disturbing birds on the shoreline. At least the posts stopped all vehicle access, particularly the quad bikes and local cars. A very positive improvement to my mind. Education on the other-hand is another matter.
- *New Information boards and maps showing the area as a protected site* (National status) and its areas of marsh and sand dune restrictions. Also the birds of the marshes.
- *The beach parking* also had new information boards informing bathers of the site National protection status.

These additions must be applauded as many Portuguese (including locals) and tourists would not be aware of the site's importance. New information boards and bird watching literature has tried to address this. Encroaching human interference comes in many forms such as that being acutely felt from the large golf complex to the East of the marsh. The complex infrastructure now has holiday apartments on-site and has become huge, with three very large two-storey accommodation blocks, and the infrastructure has much larger footprint. We did not go down to access roads adjacent to the course and the shops or the beach from that side. Also the land to the west of the marsh had not changed massively but was still used for sheep and goats grazing, being fed on the vegetation by local farmers mostly early in the day. Some new farmsteads and new housing are being added to the existing farms and small-holdings to the west of the marshland. Some new housing is starting to encroach from the West-to-East towards the dry beds and sandy arable areas from outlying vineyards, fruit trees and fig trees near the marsh. Local housing was certainly encroaching on the marsh but maybe this could be seen as affording some smaller form of protections as at least no golf complex could be laid on adjoining low sloped farmland if villas were present. The large general flat areas of farmland and now disused farm were probably still large enough to be bulldozed for a 9 or an 18-hole golf course mind.

Afternoon at Pera Marsh. Sue stated that after breakfast we needed to complete registration at the Reception Office, then shop for essential supplies. Drop off the food, as it was now steaming hot outside, then off down the marsh for an afternoon, or at least a couple of hours in the blazing sun before some shade and then evening meal using our own cooking skills. I agreed with the plan as it also gave us time to refuel the car and check out local amenities. From 15:00 we were at the marsh. The topography of the Quinta hadn't changed, but the local Pera Marsh certainly had. The overland pipes were buried into long bund-type



Ruined Farm - Pera Marsh



Our villa from the stream

strips that doubled up by segregating deeper and shallower pools. Some water areas had formed pools with muddy edges. This gave the marsh a patterned appearance from above I guess, and it is hard to say how it has affected the birdlife, perhaps longer term surveys would tell the national authorities more. The patterned appearance segregated the deeper areas of the centre of the marsh. The 2-3 meter high bunds were the favourite spot for larger birds, and it was here that **Herring Gull**, **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and **Greater Black-backed Gulls** stooged around daily, in their hundreds if not thousands. The bunds were certainly higher than previous visits and no-way were there this many Gulls. Shallower brackish areas held the waders and flamingos. The habitat had changed but it was difficult to say how much an impact; say with Purple Gallinule and Ferruginous Duck seen here previously, but unknown to me now anyway. Larger open areas of water held Gulls and **Shoveler**, **Mallard**, **Teal** and **Gadwall**.

My previous 4 visits were only short week at a time trips. Maybe someone local or with the knowledge that Michael Bennington has, someone who is a long-term frequent visitor over three week periods would know better. What we didn't know then but in the small Renault ten feet away, Michael was sketching his latest piece of artwork! How amazing was that. I had written personally on the birds seen on earlier visits and he remembered my letter and the fact that I was RAF back then. His wife was not with him to chat to that afternoon, as she was laid-up poorly in their villa. His visit was shortened as he explained his daily routines were fitted around his wife's medical requirements. So we let him get on, said our farewells. Like us Michael was staying in The Quinta, so we knew we would catch up with them both again in the week. On the water and in the margins were good numbers of waders: **Kentish Plover** (6), **Dunlin** (20+), **Curlew Sandpiper** (10), **Little Stint** (12), **Ruff** (4), **Black-winged Stilt** (30-50), and **Little Grebe**. Amongst the scrub; Zitting Cisticola or as I prefer; **Fan-tailed Warblers** (5) buzzed and scratched, **Pied Wagtails** and **Yellow Wagtails** flicked and sprinted for flies and a small mixed group of **Corn Bunting** (8) and **Yellowhammer** (1) circled, landed and searched the scrub, before another circuit when disturbed by **Snipe** plus other waders as they took off from the marsh. Also amongst the dry scrub were: **Stonechat** (2), **Crested Lark** (3) and **Wheatear** (estimated at 20), over the large dry areas. A good flock of 11 **Linnet** circled overhead. Putting in some hard scope-work I segregated a **Knot** from the large crowd of wading birds. We both saw a dark Marsh Harrier over the valley at 15:00, probably the same individual as earlier in the day. Late in the afternoon 3 **Egyptian Geese** flew in. Late in the visit 2 **Caspian Tern** were standing in the shallows behind the tufts of reeds. Some id work segregated a Knot from the crowd. Really pleasing to get good views just by moving our location a short distance and a scope on them rounded off the visit. We headed home shortly afterwards for dinner. During cooking on the patio we heard **Chaffinch** from the garden and saw a single **Willow Warbler** that was in nearby Pomegranate tree hunting insects. During evening a steady procession of the Egrets and Gulls flew back to the marsh for overnight security.

30 Sep 14 - Day 2 (Tuesday) – Estuary at Qunita Da Rocha.

After our breakfast we set out for a small coastal town of Alvor, basically for a look around but also a stop for a nice coffee for me and strawberry milkshake for Sue. The estuary looked promising in our handbook guide; *The Birds of Algarve* and we had not viewed the estuary before. En route we passed a huge group of **White Stork** (80-100) and Greater Flamingos (est. 150) on the Rio Arade estuary. The N125 passes close to

the large town of Portimao and here on the mudflats good numbers of waders and water birds frequent the river, but we could not stop on the road (freeway). After our stop in the village of Alvor and local walk by the sea, we did a check of the guide book for the route and found our way through open country with arable farm land, fruit farms, cork and olive groves and down to the far side of the estuary of Rio de Alvor. Here the Christian study centre and bird observatory is marked in the guide book. The centre is educating Portuguese children and adults in wildlife. We were happy doing our own thing but we did see the sign to 'Cruzinha', and the guide book states that the centre is open on a Thursday for foreign visitors. Further along the single track tarmacked road; **Red-legged Partridge** (3) were spotted in the fields scurrying away. The wetland here comprised open pools just inland of the sea. Around the corner was a rocky shoreline where surfers and bathers were busy. There was no need to walk-in as all of the water ditches and segregated open pools were this side of the dunes. Here **Spoonbills** (7), rested up on the sedge banks, Greater Flamingos sifted the clearer water alongside **Redshank** (3), **Bar-tailed Godwit** (1), **Dunlin** (1), **Ringed Plover** (1), Curlew Sandpiper (2), **Greenshank** (3) and a single Black-winged Stilt. Black-headed Gulls and single **Common Tern** passed in front of us before the bird of the day flew over - an **Osprey** that came from inland and circled the open sea and shallow coastal bays before heading back inland. The regular and common species were here too: Fan-tailed Warbler (2), Grey Heron (3), Sardinian Warbler, & Kestrel. After an hour or so, we opened the map in the shade and re-routed around the left hand side of the delta., as the guide book explained around the headland was good for small copses, less managed salt pans and open countryside grassland, walled fields with some wooded areas. This was lovely for birds albeit hot by mid-afternoon and offering little shade for us. We came across a single **Hoopoe** busy foraging the grass near a gated track, able to get closer views by military stealth afforded by trees on the left hand side of the gate. I got close enough for a record shot with my 'point-and-shoot' camera. Its' partner or sibling arrived shortly from nowhere! The two of them continued the search for grubs amongst the field margins, terrific at 20-25 meters where I was still partially hidden. From the car Sue managed decent views, but she was happy using the car as the hide. Stonechat were around the salt pans to the left of the road, with Wheatear (2) and frustratingly, as it never really showed itself, a Shrike was well hidden by a bend in the road and the low cover of the bush it was striking from. I feel the car was too much for it and it flew to the wooded cover as we got closer. Linnet, Willow Warbler, Common Sandpiper, Kestrel and Azure-winged Magpie (6), completed my note book list for this 3-5km stretch.

01 Oct 2014 - Day 3 (Wednesday) – The Walk, and a most unusual Birding-day.

Day 3 broke bright, still and warm, and getting up early in the Algarve is a real treat I feel. It is usually quiet, with no commuters of note, the occasional delivery van and small lorry but certainly no large lorries as they stay on the Euro-Routes and subsidised motorways. These motorways are now toll roads I understand. There were a few cars, the occasional moped and car on the bottom road and certainly busier than 4 years ago, but saying that aren't all roads here in UK like that. First up, birdlife-wise, was a **Short-toed Treecreeper** three trees down the line of the patio wall in the neighbour's garden along the terraced bank. It was a welcome first for the trip and also my first for Portugal on checking my data. Sue came outside in time to find a party of Chiffchaff (4) all hunting flies, gnats and spiders in the same Pomegranate tree, down and right from the patio in the lower garden across from the Restaurant. They were busy for good periods and seemed hungry, possibly returning migrants as they busily sped around the lower branches. A lone Cattle Egret passed overhead and the numerous Red-rumped Swallows were collectively hunting the valley thermals. A Grey Wagtail 'bounced down' the small stream opposite and Blackbirds (4) squabbled over territory, chorused by a Red-legged Partridge who acclaimed his patch from over the other side of the dry slopped bank. Just then a medium sized bird perhaps a woodpecker 'type' caught my eye some 200 meters or more down the Quinta. It landed on a telegraph pole and called a couple of times before flying off up the slope on our side and out from view. It was frustrating, as I was unsure of the species but in my mind could not get enough of it for to be a confirmed with any certainty. It was uniform in colour, all darkish but not black, but too small for Roller, so I left it at that, but made a mental note. Others around the villa that morning were: **Jay** (3), Goldfinch (2), Collared Dove and the unseen and extremely frustrating an Owl hooted again 4-5 stucco calls. Just enough to get binoculars on the general area and let me know it was still here and that I still hadn't seen him! Sue explained she fancied a walk to the Marsh this morning and a leisurely walk back maybe to break-in exercise slowly, especially as the sun looked like it was here for some considerable time. We timed our walk just before the group with horses broke out for the pony-trekking

session. As excited locals, possibly holiday makers, fed, watered, groomed and saddled-up the horses for their excursion into the countryside and the dunes and for their morning gallop along the shore-line. We were early enough at 10:45 to not to be put off by the sun. Sue got well ahead of me on the track on the far side of the stream to be identifying birds on her own and reporting back - good girl!

I was busy hunting down my elusive Owl in the lower valley, amongst lots of bushes, gorse and cistus as well as trees species most of which I could not name! Vegetation amongst the trees gave plenty of cover and dense areas aplenty on closer inspection. Surely it was dense enough to hide a **Little Owl** or possibly a **Scops Owl** for that matter or any other species. Far too dense really to see into were these shady areas from our balcony opposite and at any great distance. Whilst along the stream Common Waxbill (3) flew past, also a Sardinian Warbler, Robin, Moorhen and Stonechat at close range. The sighting of the morning if not the day, belonged to a mammal as Sue said that she had disturbed an **Otter** and she was absolutely positive of the sighting. I quizzed her on Water-rat, Water vole and all other water-mammals of varying sizes! But she was adamant hat she had located her first Otter. Quite how I can be sure is beyond me, but her say-so is enough for me. Just after that piece of excitement the horses came our way and distracted us from the debate. Wheatears appeared to be everywhere in the sandy, low growing, dry vegetation, chasing insects from their favourite perches. A single Yellow Wagtail flew overhead as we watched birds leaving the marshes on the morning ritual in and out of the valley to outlying countryside. Amongst the sedges and shallows, an adult Greater Flamingo with a ring: **KC/AX** in black lettering on a white ring was feeding voraciously. The ring was above the knee on such a tall long-limbed species. Feeding amongst 4 or 5 others (see picture below). Searching the other Greater Flamingos I picked out a juvenile [possibly 2nd Summer] with a yellow ring and black lettering; **JF/JX**. This youngster seemed content with other adults nearby and observers some 30-50 yards away. We were probably the closest with our scopes. There were 15 -20 Greater Flamingos in the shallows, amongst the sedge our favourite viewing spot.

Other Duck and waders included: Shoveler, Coot, Little Grebe, Ruff, Little Stints Redshank and the usual fare. These were around to keep us occupied and well interested also **Crested Lark** (5), immature Yellow Wagtail (4) flew over before circling a few times then and alighting back onto the muddy shallows. Observation of Curlew Sandpiper made for good and valued birding time; differentiating them from **Dunlin** is always a challenge and makes for great skills, although I wasn't always 100% on some of the decisions! One has to be honest with oneself in this exercise. Bill size, and plumage variations present a tough challenge. The juvenile [or sub-adult], Greater Flamingo was presenting a faded or discoloured Yellow leg ring with a metal ring [under water]. The plastic id letters were **JF/JX** which may have been split with the vertical line, slightly unsure?



Greater Flamingos
& Black-winged
Stilts

NB: I have contacted EURING, and the Greater Flamingo JFJX was ringed on 7 Aug 13 as a pullus unable to fly on 7 Aug 13 at Etg. de Fangassier. Bouches-du Rhone, France. KCAX was ringed as a pullus unable to fly at Salins d'Aigues-Morts on 6 Aug 14. Both were ringed over 1200 km from Pera Marsh.

We called it a day as it got too hot around 3 pm. Returning to the villa over the dry waste ground - on the walk back we picked out a *Clouded Yellow* 14:40. We walked briskly to get out of the heat and back to the shade of 'the basha' at 4 pm, with time to put our feet up over a cold drink. Then up to the pool for a light swim. Sue joined me poolside for a relaxing hour or so and a chat to two other 'Brits' on their birding experiences in Portugal and especially down the marsh, swapping notes and guide books, about birding Portugal accordingly.

Birding was definitely not finished for the day, as we sat on our little patio sun shade.



At about 21:30, I had the electric light on and was quietly going about my 'call-over' and beer and watching the fire whilst cooking the barbecue. Sue was preparing salad with the kitchen blinds up and window open on the insect screen, so we both heard the loud but unknown bird call; it was a deep scratchy 'chook-chack' as the bird came in to land just 3 feet from me on the garden patio wall. It was a stunning **Blue Rock Thrush** (*Monticola solitaries*). He called as I turned slowly whilst still only an arm's length away - I could have reached out to touch him! He took a quick look at me, called again and then flew away - amazing a Blue Rock Thrush so close up. I had no time to move or reach for a camera, just a privileged 5 second view. I was ecstatic. Sue was pleased too that she had heard it from the kitchen window as he passed close by. She wished she had seen him rather than preparing dinner. Then I began the mental processing: was this the unusual bird [the so-called woodpecker sp] I had been unable to identify earlier that week? Surely it was, as there was nothing else like it in the valley that it could have been. I was honestly shocked at the record. How and why would it be here, a bird of hillsides admittedly but precipitous outcrops of rocky hills and stone quarries? But on further reading it can and does inhabit buildings and churches on flat terrain and can inhabit lower levels, unlike its cousin the **Rock-Thrush** (*Monticola saxatilis*). The Song Thrush sized bird was definitely my 'bird of the trip' just for the extremely close encounter. I wondered if he was attracted to the light, or maybe he was after an easy meal - maybe the moths attracted to light. Was he disorientated by the external light? He was certainly a little stunner. Real-shame Sue had missed him, but she has seen one down by the lighthouse at Cape St Vincent on an earlier visit to the region. So it was already on her 'Portugal list' as we worked out on searching our records. Well that was dinner talk pretty much sorted, altogether a really nice day, topped off with a barbecue and a cold beer - what else could we want from a holiday? Over dinner we planned our next days' excursion which we felt needed to be a drive out to use the value in the hire-car. We settled on Castro Verde area, and I had selected a couple of belting birding sites in my guide book-*Birdwatching Guide to The Algarve* [Arlequinn Press], supported by a book borrowed from me from fellow 'Brit' at the pool: *Finding Birds in South Portugal* by Dave Gosney ISBN: 978-1-907316-40-1 - a paperback; A5 guide book that we found useful.

02 Oct 2014 Day 4 (Thursday) Castro Verde.

Up early then had a brisk breakfast, nothing unusual seen from the patio over breakfast the usual fare; Blackbird, Azure-winged Magpie, Blue and Great Tit. First stop was Aldea de Grandacos, a stunningly beautiful area with very large and ancient cork oaks and fruit groves. Here: **Golden Oriole** called beautifully, but sadly not seen, and probably hidden in dense evergreen understorey. Stonechats were in most if not every bush. Crested Lark hunted low in the long grass, only ever seen when flitting above the dry grass. Common species were Kestrel, Carrion Crow, Great and Blue Tit, but a **Common Redstart** along the track made me get out of the car - always a good sign. The target species were White-winged Black Kite, but I was unsure if they migrate away from their breeding sites at this time of year.

From an idea in the book, the second aim of the day was to drive to The Lige-por-Protection De Nature (LPN) Castro Verde, a tourist information and viewing centre for both **Little** and **Great Bustard**. The area was rolling plains, very dry and remote, but also very hot - so hot that even the locals working on the centre's roof broke for shade and cover for their lunch. From the centre we birded outside the reserve and saw: Wheatear, **Great Grey Shrike** [a singleton near the track], House Sparrow and **Scops Owl** [heard]. These were the highlights as sadly no Bustard were seen though we both felt we heard one some distance out and behind a wall frustratingly. From the LPN Centre we drove the short distance to Estradas and the cemetery; here apparently the Bustards do come to feed under Orange trees near the cemetery. Sadly none today! But we were appeased by Corn Buntings, Cattle Egrets, House Martins, Wheatear, Stonechat and Buzzard. The nesting White Storks at Sao Marco left an impressive nest platform of some 15 foot circular base size and we estimated it to be about 8 feet deep and that was all sticks! As time was against us, it was time to head back at 3pm in extreme heat and few birds out in the open. We had an uneventful drive back to The Quinta and Casa Elvina, returning about 5:00pm. From the patio we sat and watched the valley as usual, seeing Common Sandpiper, Little Egret (32), Yellow Wagtail, Pied Wagtail, B H Gull (20), Collared Dove (2), Greenfinch (heard), L B B Gull, and a single Curlew. Also Waders calling overhead and an unidentified raptor at full height bins-wise that was just that: unidentifiable.

03 Oct 14 – Day 5 (Friday) - Local days birding

Waking up early and going about my normal business of an early brew on the patio, Tawny Owl (2) were calling nearby, Sardinian Warbler in the garden below the villa and a Common Sandpiper passed overhead. Viewing through the scope and looking down the marsh, I could make out Avocet (4), Spoonbill and at 07:50 a dark [fem] Marsh Harrier floated over the shallows where the ringed Greater. Flamingos were feeding still - I guess they roost overnight here. Also around were Grey Heron (3), Kestrel and Cormorant (3), that flew off west from the marsh. Around 08:45 we headed down the marsh, making out good numbers of birds once there, we gathered a very long list of species, some of the highlights being: Little Stint (6), Kentish Plover order (10), Black-winged Stilt order (00) approx. 30, Ruff (2), B.T Godwit (15), Spoonbill (17), Little Grebe (10), Redshank (2), Grey and Pied Wagtail (1 of each), Little Egret and Greater Black-backed Gull (in the order of 000s) Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull were not quite as high but in their hundreds. Avocet totalled (3) and amongst the waders standing in the shallows were Caspian Tern (2), possibly the same pair as earlier in the week. We stayed around the marsh and walked up the board walk for a wider perspective of the water and higher elevation to view the birds for most of the day, chatting to a few Brits and sharing experiences. The rest of the day was spent lazily around the villa and pool. The highlight was a female **Booted Eagle** high above the Quinta and a darting **Kingfisher** at (13:28) along the stream both new birds for the trip. The evening was spent around the villa and more evidence of waders moving between the marsh and other inland sites was noted as at 19:40, with 'peeps' overhead, suggested Curlew Sandpiper and a single Curlew at 20:10 was heard moving. A notable group of Azure-winged Magpie (est 70) made for the highest count of my week as they flew across the valley, working the vegetation as they went.

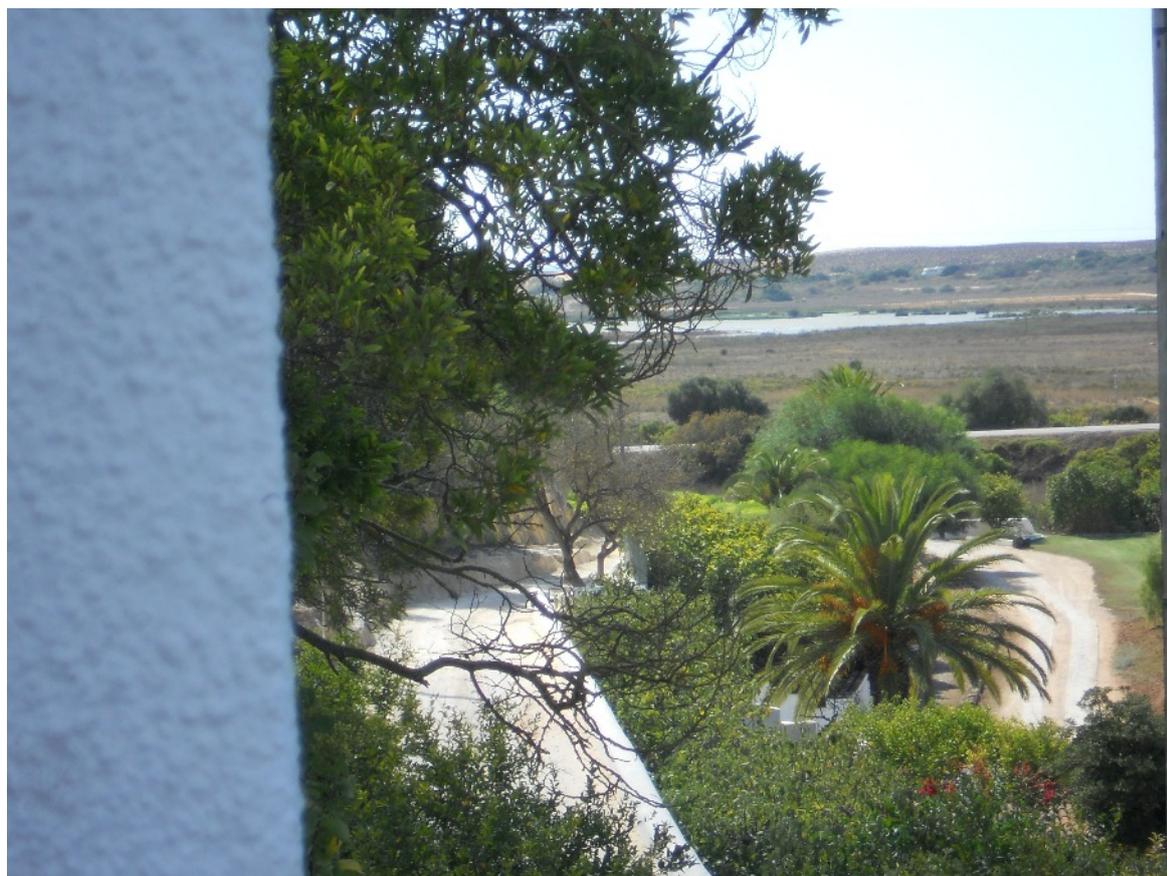
04 Oct 14 – Day 6 (Saturday) -Last day

Up around 06:50 to see Avocet (4), Marsh harrier (female) 07:25, a male at 07:27, and a pair of White Stork leave the marshes and fly off west at 07:37. A further Marsh Harrier at 11:38 was the resident male. A

male Shoveler flew close to the valley at 07:43. Through the scope a pair of **Spotless Starling** was foraging through the old Crane's nest on the fringe of the valley. Common Waxbill (3) buzzed nearby and a stunning Green Sandpiper flew low up the valley at 07:49. Four Linnet and 5 Red-legged Partridge broke cover on the hill opposite. In amongst the orange trees in the Quinta valley floor a **Common Redstart** was chasing insects. A nice Swallow-tail Butterfly was flitting between the low fruit trees in the heat. The total of Red-legged Partridge grew to 9 as we completed a circular walk around the tennis courts and back to the villa. We stayed around the villa until evening time, and just before we went out I found a female **Pied Flycatcher** searching for insects in the low trees just the other side of the stream beyond the tennis courts. Shortly after, we fancied one last soiree to the marsh from 17:10. The count of Greater Flamingo rose to 73, a Corn Bunting and Curlew Sandpiper (40) made possibly the highest count of this particular wader for our week. All the other usual fare was there including Knot (2), Ruff (2), Gadwall, Wheatear (15) and Black-tailed Godwit (8).

So our holiday had come to its end and we spoilt ourselves with a meal at the restaurant before a very early reveille at 04:00 as we headed to Faro to return the hire car, prior to our flight home. It was a superb weeks birding, albeit almost entirely local to the Quinta and mostly at Pera Marsh, but we are spreading our wings and finding new places and new opportunities for birds in the Algarve. We love our little valley and hope you enjoy reading about it.

John and Sue



Pera Marsh from the Patio

The RAFOS Expedition to the Coto Doñana, Spain

11th October – 1st November 2014

By Ken Earnshaw

Karen Sims and John Towers visited the Coto Doñana, Andalucía in March 2013 and from this visit the idea arose of a RAFOS field visit to the area. Karen attempted to arrange some voluntary survey and conservation activities for the reserves in the area but these offers largely fell on deaf ears except for one specific reserve, the Dehesa de Abajo, which lies to the north of the Doñana. That reserve became the main focus of the visit.

A total of 15 members spent from one to three weeks on the expedition, travelling via Faro airport in Portugal and were based in the Pequeño Rocio hotel in El Rocio. This hotel's facilities and food were good and it had a friendly and helpful couple running it. The village of El Rocio is famous throughout Spain for its annual religious festival at Pentecost, when the village is swamped by pilgrims and at which time the Doñana visitor centres are closed. Otherwise it slumbers for the rest of the year but it remains a very interesting place to visit. A particular focus is on horses for which the village is well suited.

The weather during the first week was variable with temperatures in the middling 20's and some rain. The remaining two weeks were characterised by hot, dry weather, clear skies and cold nights and with daytime maximum temperatures ranging from 29 to 36 degrees C. There were numerous flies and midges particularly on the rice fields and a considerable number of bites were received. Dragonflies were in their thousands but appeared to be of a limited range of species, e.g. Red-veined Darter and Hawker types.

The Coto Doñana is a very large area of marshes, woodland and sand dunes lying to the south-west of Seville and extends out to the Atlantic coast. It was formed from the delta of the Rio Guadalquivir and was used as a hunting preserve for hundreds of years and then became a wildlife refuge in the late 1960's. It has several components: the main reserve which is primarily closed to the public, four visitor centres, access to part of the Cork Oak forest near Matalascañas and an extensive buffer zone. This buffer zone is much less restricted than the main reserve and has woodland, marshes, cotton fields and vast areas of rice fields, the latter feature attracting large numbers of birds. The buffer zone coupled with the four visitor centres and the Cork Oak reserve enables visitors to experience the Coto Doñana to a good degree without disturbing the wildlife within the main reserve.

Just to the north of the buffer zone the recently created reserve, the Dehesa de Abajo, is attracting a good range of marshland, woodland and scrub species including several rare breeding species. It also has the advantage of lying adjacent to extensive rice fields. We spent most of our time in this area.

The rice harvest was well underway during our visit utilising large harvesting machines which were almost as wide as some of the roads. While a field was being harvested large flocks of egrets, herons, storks, gulls and Spoonbills would descend upon it to feed on the crayfish, amphibians and insects exposed by the harvesting. Large numbers of Purple Swamp Hens live within the reed beds adjoining the rice fields while overhead Marsh and Hen Harriers patrol and regularly cause the Swamp Hens to frantically scamper to the safety of the reed beds. The rather elegant Black Stork was present in small numbers; they tended to be rather shy and are primarily a migrant and winter visitor to the area. Flocks of several hundred Glossy Ibis moved around the area with a few feeding in the rice fields near to the roads. A large party of Yellow-crowned Bishops including three bright yellow males and smaller numbers of Black-headed Weavers were found during a walk around some of the rice fields.

The team's conservation activities were centred upon the Dehesa de Abajo reserve, some 35km north-east of El Rocio. The reserve has a largish, shallow lake attractive to ducks, waders and flamingos. It also has extensive Cork Oak and Stone Pine woodlands where Booted Eagles and Spanish Imperial Eagles breed along with shrikes, warblers, etc. White Storks nest there in wild Olive trees in considerable numbers. A pleasant and welcoming visitor centre provides very good facilities and from this centre, which sits on a low hill, there are good views across the lagoon and woodlands and also across the rice fields out to the horizon.

Birds counted here by the team included c3000 Greater Flamingos, 2500 Black-winged Stilts, 8300 Shoveler, 250 Avocets and small numbers of Ruff, Greenshank, Ringed Plover, Red-crested Pochard and a few Marbled Ducks. An approximate total of 283 stork nests were also recorded, mainly by team members advancing through the woodlands in line abreast but with one member getting disoriented and temporarily lost. Other birds noted on the reserve included Spanish Imperial Eagle, Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Red Kite, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, White Stork, Black Stork, Iberian Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Whiskered Tern, Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Northern Wheatear, Dartford Warbler, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Fan-tailed Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and Black Redstart.

During the first week, on the 13th October, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, a North American species, was found and photographed by the team near the lake in the Dehesa de Abajo. This was potentially the 2nd recorded occurrence for Andalucía and the find by RAFOS very much pleased the reserve manager, Beltran de Ceballos Vasquez.

A useful and very satisfying activity undertaken by the team was the cleaning up of a particular area of the reserve that had been used as a dumping ground for farming type materials by previous owners and users of the land. This activity was carried out on the 15th October and again on the 22nd October. As it turned out we had chosen the hottest day (22nd) for this activity when it reached about 35-36 degrees C but the task was completed satisfactorily. Whilst lifting a large crumpled piece of brown plastic sheeting a rather nasty looking spider emerged. It quickly disappeared and was not identified. The reserve manager noted later that the local mayor had undertaken to arrange removal of the piles of rubbish that we had built up and also warmly applauded our contributions to conservation activities on the reserve. A television film crew were present on one occasion to film us doing our bit and to interview Beltran. The filming was a part of a programme covering conservation activities in Spain, Italy and Lebanon with a focus on the conflicts of human needs, water utilisation pressures, farming and wildlife needs.

At the southern edge of the village of El Rocio the large lagoon, which is within the main Doñana reserve, still had a good deal of water and so attracted a fair range of birds. It was very popular during our free time and was within metres of elevenses in the shade of a large olive tree fronting the Hotel Toruño. El Rocio also has one of the four visitor centres of the Doñana, one which boasts a rooftop viewing area. The marismas extend from this lagoon east and southeast for many miles. Birds noted at El Rocio, mostly on or around the lagoon, included several Penduline Tits, Bluethroat, Cetti's Warbler, Spotted Redshank, Black-winged Stilt, Common Snipe, Greater Flamingo, Grey-lag Goose, Pintail, Great, Little and Cattle Egrets, Spoonbill, a party of Waxbills, Iberian Grey Shrike, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Spanish Imperial Eagle and on one occasion some 130 Griffon Vultures which were seen to arrive at high altitude and land just east of the village.

The woodland visitor centre at El Acebuche, some 12km south of El Rocio, allowed close views of Iberian Magpies and held good numbers of Dartford Warblers, Firecrests, Crested Tits and Black Redstarts, etc. but no wetland species were seen due to the acute dryness. The Iberian Magpie, *Cyanopica cooki*, was seen to be locally very common here and was a fine sight. It has recently been split as a distinct species from the Azure-winged Magpie, *Cyanopica cyana*, of eastern Asia. While the team were having lunch at this visitor centre an Alpine Accentor hopped around near the tables; a rare visitor to the Coto Doñana from its normal mountainous haunts.

The third visitor centre is just south-west of El Rocio at La Rocina and again is primarily a woodland habitat. The fourth, the José Antonio Valverde (JAV) visitor centre is way out in the marismas and is on a long circuitous road around from El Rocio. On the way to the JAV birds such as Purple Heron, Short-toed Eagle, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture and numerous Kestrels and/or Lesser Kestrels were noted. Close to this visitor centre Karen's party came upon a horse carcass being devoured by a very large number of Griffon Vultures. The marismas surrounding the JAV were largely dry but the lagoon at this visitor centre had a decent amount of water but not a lot of birds. All four visitor centres were found to be worth visiting and each had its own particular attraction.

On Sunday 19th October eight of the team joined a local guide Manu Mojarro on the marshes of the Rio Odiel opposite Huelva. A mix of old salt-pans, salt-marsh and a long breakwater form the principle birding area. Caspian Terns, a few Slender-billed Gulls and Stone Curlews along with some Kentish Plovers, a significant number of Ospreys and a large number of Audouin's Gulls were seen. The latter species is particularly welcome as it is making a comeback from very low numbers only a short while ago. After refreshments in a tapas bar Manu suggested going to see a Mediterranean Chameleon not too far away. At Laguna del Portil there was a well camouflaged adult in a bush with a couple of young ones nearby. Thirteen Little Stints and four Black-necked Grebes were on the lagoon.

The following Sunday the whole team were with Manu this time to the north of Seville in the hills above Guadalcanal to see what raptors there were. Unfortunately they were mostly quite high up and distant but were numerous. Reasonable views were had of a couple of Golden Eagles grappling in flight, several Spanish Imperial Eagles, a Black Vulture, numerous Griffon Vultures and also a Hen Harrier which was quartering the fields. Corn Buntings and Crested Larks were well in evidence along with a single Theckla Lark. On the return journey a party of 4 Great Bustards were seen at sunset to the west of Seville.

One afternoon (21st Oct) we called in at Matalascañas on the coast but there was very little by way of seabirds except for one skua on the sea several hundred yards out. Michael Chatfield duly swam out towards it but it soon flew and revealed itself as a Great Skua. Michael then swam some way along the coast before returning to shore apparently due to the attraction of some topless sunbathers. They were out of sight of the rest of us who had to be content with a winter plumaged Spanish Sparrow.

It had been a tiring and intensive visit but it was very satisfying. The objectives had been generally met and although a planned Little Bustard survey was inconclusive the management of the Dehesa de Abajo reserve were well pleased with our efforts. A large number of bird species had been recorded and many on the team had a number of 'lifers' to add to their individual tallies. On the last Friday evening of the visit we enjoyed a barbecue then took our leave of our hosts at the hotel, Juan and Maria, and most of us departed for Faro airport before dawn on the 1st of November but with Dave and Linda Munday leaving later that day.

References:

Portrait of a Wilderness, the story of the Coto Doñana expeditions (of 1952, 1956 and 1957). Guy Mountfort, Hutchinson. 1958

A Birdwatching Guide to Doñana. John Butler. Trafford. 2007

International Ornithological Committee (IOC) World Bird List v4.4

Team members:

Karen Sims	11 Oct – 01 Nov	Leader
John Towers	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Pete Evans	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Mick Carroll	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Keith Cowieson	11 Oct – 18 Oct	
Al Jordan	11 Oct – 25 Oct	
Michael Chatfield	17 Oct – 25 Oct	
John Orme	18 Oct – 25 Oct	
Dave Bodley	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Anne Bodley	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Dick Yates	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Ken Earnshaw	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Sally Earnshaw	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Dave Munday	21 Oct – 01 Nov	
Linda Munday	21 Oct – 01 Nov	



Coto Doñana, 2014

Wife and Five Bird Feeders to Support

By Martin Routledge

Do you feed the birds in your garden? Of course you do – for most of us it's the experience of garden birds that starts us off on the long voyage of discovery that is birding, or for the more serious - ornithology. But do you really watch them?

Perhaps, like me, you record birds seen in the garden as part of the BTO's Garden Birdwatch scheme. Or maybe you only record them once a year for the RSPB Great Garden Birdwatch. Whatever your interest let me share some of my observations.

Habitat – my garden and other weeds.

Gardens differ – obvious statement but one that is worth exploring a bit more to set in context all that follows. My house is part of a farmyard conversion project that was completed in 2001. We're in the countryside but only 5 miles from Aylesbury; we have a main A road running across one end of the property and fields at the back. The field margin is scrubby – mainly nettles and brambles and the field is planted in a fairly standard 3-way crop rotation: winter wheat, spring barley and oil-seed rape. The garden has grass (I'd not call it lawn!) some good conifers, a couple of silver birches, some ornamental planting, wild roses, breech hedgerow, hawthorn hedgerow, 3 apple trees, 2 plum trees and a whole host of weeds (sorry, wild flowers). Sounds a lot but it's not that big and the diversity plays its part in providing natural food and shelter.

The menu

OK so what food do I actually put out? Routinely I provide nyger seed, sunflower hearts, peanuts, mixed seed and through the winter fat based food. I've also tried dried mealworms, white millet and dried fruit. Surprisingly most birds, when hungry enough, eat most things even when they're not supposed to! Obviously they can't all get at the feeders as some lack the agility but those that can't are quite happy to rummage about in the grass beneath the smorgasbord picking off what they can. Some are jolly clever too – one of my visiting Magpies for instance leaps from the ground and attacks the fat feeder with a series of lunges which dislodges food allowing him to then wolf it down from the ground. I've even seen a Collared Dove sit on the branch supporting the mixed-seed feeder and give it a shake to spill seeds onto the ground whereupon it drops down to feed. There is clearly a whole range of natural food too and I get Goldcrests picking about in the conifers and the Greenfinches seem to love the *Rosa rugosa* hips more than the seeds I provide. There is a Rowan in one corner which is stripped bare of berries by Starlings well before those European winter thrushes put in an appearance too. As the title suggests I've usually got 5 feeders on the go one for nuts, one for fat, and 3 for seeds of various sorts.

The usual suspects

Which all leads on to my garden species list which of course contains all the usual suspects: Great Tit, Blue Tit, Dunnock, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Collared Dove, Magpie, Blackbird and Robin, together with some regular if slightly unusual friends such as Pheasant, Woodpigeon, Pied Wagtail, Reed Bunting (especially when the field is planted with OSR I've noticed), Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wren the full gamut of winter thrushes when the Continental temperature drops and more recently quite good numbers of House Sparrow. Then there are the rarer, sometimes spectacular, visitors such as the Redstart which dropped by for just a couple of minutes a few years back, the Jay that was checking out the fall-out from the nut feeder, the very occasional Coal Tit and Siskin and the magnificent Sparrowhawk that having swooped through the feeding site stopped to get his breath back on the fence. Then come summer we get Whitethroats and Linnet in the scrub by the garage (which don't count as being 'in' my garden as far as the BTO Garden Birdwatch record goes) and of course Swallows nesting. Overall I've recorded just over 40 species using the land that I might reasonably call mine and this doesn't include the fly-bys such as Swift, Crow, Rook, Raven, Buzzard, Red Kite and various gulls.

Feeder etiquette

There is a distinct pecking order around the feeders and some interesting behaviours which deserve further consideration. If I were writing an etiquette guide for fledglings I think it would say something like Blue Tits give way to Great Tits; Goldfinches give way to Greenfinches except when they outnumber them by at least 4 to one. Everything moves out of the way when either the Great Spot or Magpie arrives but then they all gradually sneak back in. The finches by and large sit on the feeder ports and eat to their hearts' content – Greenfinches are particularly messy feeders but both they and Goldfinches will sit there chowing down even as I cut the grass. Both Great and Blue tits seem to grab a seed or a nut and then retire to a safe distance to consume it before coming back for another. The Great Spot is another bird that clings on for ages while enjoying nuts and fat and seems largely unconcerned with human activity. Oh and Starlings are thugs – clearly the adolescent louts of the garden who mob about the place generally being antisocial. The potential for serious behavioural study is enormous and I've been intrigued by the fact that the birds clearly exhibit preference for feeder location (understandable) and feeder type (slightly less obvious).

What do I mean – well I hang most of my feeders in the branches of the various trees but I move them around to prevent the build up of disease in the soil below. I also practise safe feeding by cleaning the feeders regularly to prevent disease contagion. Most of the feeder locations have good cover by them so the birds can hide when the Sparrowhawk puts in an appearance so these are well favoured and are emptied first. I have 2 sites that are a bit more exposed and quite reasonably the birds come to these last or when the others are occupied. Again, all pretty obvious stuff. But I often put sunflower hearts in 2 different 4-port feeders - one has a squirrel protection cage around it the other is a classic tube. Even when hung next to each other the birds (mainly Goldfinches and Greenfinches) have a clear preference for the straight tube over the squirrel cage. The first tube can be emptied in 36-48 hours while the caged version often lasts twice as long. But if I hang the favoured feeder in the less favoured, slightly exposed, site then the birds empty the caged feeder first. So the simple scientific deduction is that a location preference (survival instinct) outweighs an ease of access (hunger) preference. This of course is science that can be used by Scottish birders to make sure they put their feed out in the least favourable locations in the least favoured feeders and thus reduce the rate of consumption, hence cost, of bird food!

Dawn Patrol

One of the extra studies the BTO commissioned last year was an 'Early Bird' study to assess the order, and time, that birds arrived at feeders. This was first done as a shortest day study in 2004 and repeated in 2014 on 9 January. The idea was to get up before first light and watch ones feeders - recording the time at which they could be seen then the arrival times for the first 10 species to visit the garden. So armed with bins, notebook, a double espresso and a piece of toast I settled down in my normal viewing spot. The feeders were loaded – all we needed now were the birds. The feeders were discernible at 0713 but the first bird, a Blue Tit, didn't show until 33 minutes later - by 0825 I'd clocked my 10 species in the following order: Blue Tit, Great Tit, Magpie, Dunnock, Chaffinch, Starling, Woodpigeon, Blackbird, Great Spotted



Woodpecker and Long-tailed Tit. The national survey showed that Urban birds seemed to get up later than rural birds and that my list was slightly unusual in that nationally the first birds were spotted 11 minutes after first light and the prize of earliest bird went to the Blackbird albeit closely followed by the Blue Tit.

BTO Garden Birdwatch Scheme

OK I've plugged the BTO scheme quite a bit so perhaps a few words of explanation are in order. I Joined at the back-end of 2011 so have been sending in weekly records since then. The whole thing is done on line so is really easy and the idea is that each week is a repeatable offence in that you should have about the same view of the garden and watch for about the same amount of time. This isn't quite as rigid as it sounds. The BTO's own blurb on scheme can be found at <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw> but says:

'Garden BirdWatch monitors the changing fortunes of birds and other garden wildlife through its network of 'citizen scientists'. Observations collected by BTO Garden BirdWatchers are analysed by BTO researchers and published in leading journals. BTO Garden BirdWatchers have charted the decline of the House Sparrow, the rise of the Woodpigeon, have discovered that urban birds get up later than their rural counterparts and have alerted conservationists to the impact of an emerging disease in Greenfinches.'

There is a mass of information on the web pages with wildlife gardening advice and the results of various sub-studies as well. One of the important sub-recording studies is on bird mortality and disease as recorded in gardens. In my garden I've found a few dead juvenile birds mainly suffering from poor condition and malnutrition this last summer. Incidents of birds hitting windows have also been quite high but there have been no losses to cats who are often blamed as major predators of birds – and although my cats are housebound there are 3 others in the neighbourhood who roam through the place.

All in all this is a very worthwhile birding project – it's easy bird watching and useful science.



My Records from BTO Garden Birdwatch

Weeks recorded to end of 2014 = 137

Species	Weeks Recorded	Reporting Rate
Dunnock	137	1
Goldfinch	137	1
Collared Dove	134	0.98
Great Tit	134	0.98
Chaffinch	134	0.98
Woodpigeon	133	0.97
Magpie	133	0.97
Greenfinch	131	0.96
Blue Tit	128	0.93
Robin	120	0.88
Blackbird	108	0.79
Great Spotted Woodpecker	91	0.66
Starling	78	0.57
House Sparrow	62	0.45
Swallow	59	0.43
Wren	46	0.34
Long-tailed Tit	45	0.33
Pheasant	34	0.25
Pied Wagtail	25	0.18
Jackdaw	19	0.14
Fieldfare	9	0.07
Whitethroat	10	0.07
Song Thrush	8	0.06
Goldcrest	7	0.05
Reed Bunting	7	0.05
Sparrowhawk	4	0.03
Redwing	4	0.03
Green Woodpecker	4	0.03
Blackcap	3	0.02
Chiffchaff	3	0.02
Jay	1	0.007
Coal Tit	1	0.007
Mistle Thrush	1	0.007
Bullfinch	1	0.007
Siskin	1	0.007
Stock Dove	1	0.007
Barn Owl	1	0.007
Yellow Wagtail	1	0.007
Redstart	1	0.007
Buzzard	1	0.007

This data comes from the system but you can also compare against regional reporting rates and check species reporting rates against months of the year to give a seasonal perspective.

Trinidad (continued)
By Karen Sims

Newsletter No 98 contained the bulk of an article by Karen describing a holiday in Trinidad to celebrate John Towers's birthday. Unfortunately in moving the text from a MS Word document to a Scriph PagePlus publication I managed to truncate it!

What follows is the remainder of Karen's article about their stay in Trinidad. It is followed by another article describing their following week in Tobago. Editor

Day 6 - Monday

Another full day out with Mahese - this time to Nariva Swamp. First of all we stopped off at Aripo Livestock Station for the grassland birds and waders. Mahese was also hoping for good views of cuckoo. There were plenty of birds about again and one caused Mahese a bit of head scratching. I said it looked like Greenshank and he said that was very unusual for them to get these but he agreed after a very hard look at it. The pools here were very muddy and the bare parts of the birds were caked in mud making it hard to tell the colours of legs and bills. In the grassland were Grassland Yellow-Finch which were first recorded on Trinidad by Mahese in February 2004 at a Waller Field farm. There were also Blue-black Grassquit (Johnny Jump-up is their nickname) doing their funny jumping display. Two other interesting species were Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and White-shouldered Tanager. The waders included our first and only sightings of Western Sandpiper and Black-bellied Plover.

We had a long drive to Manzanilla on the coast for the lunch stop. This was a typical Caribbean scene of long pale sand, blue sky, crashing surf and palm trees. There were Brown Pelican soaring the waves and Magnificent Frigatebird's patrolling the sky.

After lunch, off to Nariva Swamp which is a vast area of wet ground with channels of water dividing up small properties on the higher ground and larger areas of cultivated fields around the edges. These fields grew water melons and around the houses there were small vegetable plots. In one of the first water courses we saw a mixed group of birds included Black Skimmers, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Southern Lapwing and Gull-billed Terns.

A large tree had shed enormous waxy pink blooms on the ground and the fruit were large, round hard-shelled nuts giving the tree its common name Cannonball Tree. Around the edge of the fields was a vast wooded area from which Red Howler Monkeys were calling and we watched Red-breasted Blackbird's fly across the sea of grasses. In one field bamboo canes were topped with Barn Swallows and Grey-breasted Martins.

One of the target birds for the area was Red-bellied Macaw which we did find and had good if a little distant views of 4 of these beautiful parrots. As we were watching these, Mahese picked up something coming fast and low over the reeds. To paraphrase the Meatloaf song it was a Bat Falcon going like "A bat out of hell". So quick that it was hard to keep in the binoculars. Behind us strange calls heralded the arrival of a pair of Crested Caracara. These stunning looking raptors are localised and may even be resident and breeding on the island.

It was another really good day despite the long drive over busy roads. Our guide Mahese made sure we saw all that he had picked up and it made our total count for the week so far, 162 species.

Day 7 - Tuesday

Another early start today to see if we could find a few more species that had eluded us during the week. We set off for Aripo Livestock Station as there was always so much happening there, and then over the road to the savannah area. We had a good flock of Lilac-tailed Parrotlet over the station fields, a Zone-tailed Hawk, a lovely Squirrel Cuckoo and a beautiful singing Striped Cuckoo up near the sheep centre. With the wooded

edges to the savannah hosting birds that prefer the trees to the fields, we added Lined Woodpecker, Grey-throated Leaf-tosser, Plain Antvireo, Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, White-winged Becard, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Masked Yellowthroat, and Trinidad Euphonia to our list. Many of these birds were amongst the most colourful or unusual looking that we had seen on the trip. That doesn't include the Long-billed Starthroat I recorded some where on the way.

We then drove to a small town called Chamano which has a large resident population of Yellow-rumped Cacique. These birds live in families and weave large hanging nests like the Crested Oropendola do. They like large trees often an isolated one next to houses or in this case the police station.

We then went back to Asa Wright for another wander around the grounds and had lovely close views of a Blue-crowned Motmot. Only the second time we had seen one and both times at Asa Wright. They were to be more common on Tobago.

Later in the afternoon we were taken by one of the centre's guides down to the Dunston Cave to see the reserve's Oilbird colony. These are strange Nightjar like birds that feed entirely on fruit and are even thought to smell the ripe fruit when searching at night on their feeding forays out into the forest. The colony at Asa Wright is well protected and the birds accepting of people staring into the cave, but no photography is allowed and we were asked to stay quiet whilst viewing them.

Day 8 – Wednesday

Mahese took us to the airport this morning for our short flight to Tobago for the second week of our trip. We set off in plenty of time so we could do a little more birding on the way down from Asa Wright and out of the Northern Range. We saw Grey-headed Kite shortly after leaving the reserve and many of the more common birds on the way into the airport.

We had a fantastic week with very good accommodation and fantastic guides. They were all so patient and took time to explain where the birds were and in some cases why they were that species and not another. In the case of the many Flycatchers it was not easy to tell some apart. If you have not been to this area of the world we cannot recommend it highly enough. It's easy birding, a great place to stay and all the staff and people we met were helpful and friendly. As an introduction to birds in that part of the world it could not have been better.

We saw 167 species and heard 4 others that were identified for us by the guides but could still not be seen after much searching. There were many butterflies, moths and dragonflies that we still need to identify from the photos we took and so many trees, shrubs and flowers that made the whole trip such an interesting one.



Rufous-vented Chachalaca
National bird of Tobago



Mangrove Cuckoo

We travelled independently but had used a specialist Caribbean travel company called Motmot travel to organise the two week trip. They had sorted all the travel and accommodation after we had said what we wanted to achieve and the Asa Wright centre had organised the guides for the trips we wanted to do once we got there.

Striated Heron,

www.motmottravel.com

www.asawright.org

Notes for Potential Contributors to the RAFOS Newsletter

Brief contributions are always welcome.

Illustrations (Photographic or Art Work) are always welcome.

Please send written articles as soon as you can.

Please send pictures separately from text.

Please avoid footnotes, spreadsheets and tables.

Please send articles as attachments to emails or on CD/DVD.

Pictures can be sent by email, CD/DVD or hard copy -

if the latter let me know if you want them back!

The closing date for Newsletter 100 is 17th July 2015

Please send contributions to:

Bill Francis

100 Moselle Drive

Churchdown

GLOUCESTER

GL3 2TA

Email : wgfrancis@btinternet.com

Tobago **25th September to 2nd October 2013.**

By Karen Sims

Wednesday 25th

The 20 minute flight from Trinidad was smooth and it was another hot, sunny day. We were met by a driver from our hotel, The Blue Waters Inn, Speyside for a very comfortable 1 ¼ hour drive to the NE of the island.

It appeared on the drive that Tobago was more affluent than Trinidad. Since the visit I have spoken to a Trinidadian who said more people owned cars/vehicles on Trinidad than Tobago although they're older whereas more people on Tobago could not afford to own a vehicle. The vehicle we were in was a very smart air-conditioned SUV as opposed to the tired old vans on the other island. The main road from the airport was lined with beautiful Flamboyant Trees, which have huge red flower clusters and set in beautiful mown lawns.

The drive took us up the Atlantic coast past small towns and villages on very quiet roads into Speyside and then the private drive to the hotel. This looked like your typical Caribbean photo with blue sky and sea, bent palm trees and white sand set in a cove overlooking Little Tobago and Goat Island.

Our room was right on the beach with its own patio and Hummingbird feeder. A very nice large air-conditioned room was sheltered by large fruiting trees filled with noisy Rufous-vented Chachalaca, the national bird of Tobago. These had been absent from Trinidad so another new bird.

We had lunch in the hotel restaurant which was open to the beach and watched the Brown Pelicans fishing with squadrons of Magnificent Frigate Birds patrolling the skies. Newton George, the island's internationally known bird guide, met up with us to arrange our island trips for Friday and Monday with an early start both mornings.

The afternoon was spent exploring the beach and watching birds. On the shoreline I found a very small Green Turtle which had a damaged head, probably a bird attack. This appeared to affect its swimming and I was not sure it would survive. We grabbed a few beach chairs and sat on the edge of the waves reading and soaking up the sun. A little way down the beach a Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret stood on the bent trunks of the palm trees.

Thursday 26th

After a lazy breakfast we spent the morning reading and swimming. That afternoon we had arranged with the dive boat teams at the hotel for a trip to Little Tobago which is a bird sanctuary. This small island, only 1 mile long is one of the most important seabird sanctuaries in the region. The sea was a little rough and the glass bottom boat did not give us very clear views as we headed out past Goat Island to the landing stage. There were Brown Noddy, Brown Pelican and Common Tern on the rocky reefs. Our guide walked with us up to the top of the island and around to the viewing platform that overlooked one of the main nest sites. The air was filled with Red Billed Tropicbird, Brown and Red Footed Booby and the Frigate birds.

Here were all three morphs of the Red Footed Booby present, sat on the cliffs, on nests and flying across the bay. Back down to the boat we had great views of Blue crowned Motmot, Bananaquit, Bare-eyed Robin, Blue Grey Tanager and Crested Oropendola. We also saw a Brown Crested Flycatcher, a bird we hadn't seen on Trinidad and back at the jetty an Osprey was fishing.

Back on the hotel beach a Yellow Crowned Night Heron perched on one of the bent palms and the floating dive platform was used as a resting place by Caribbean Martins.

Friday 27th

Today was the first trip out with Newton George with a really early start. We were joined by two American couples, Karen & Paul Wentzel from Port Isabel, Texas and Scarlet & George Colley also from Texas. George & Scarlet ran a small reserve on the Gulf of Mexico mainly for migrating Warblers which stopped there to feed up on migration. Scarlet also takes visitors out in her small boat into the Gulf for wildlife and Dolphin watching. Anyone who is familiar with Dave Gosney's video on Texas will see him aboard with Scarlet and Rozzi her dog.

George drove us slowly through Speyside and along the coast to Roxborough. The day's plan was to see what we could find and hopefully get some of the islands specialities – we had great views of Great Black Hawk, Spotted Sandpiper, Royal Tern and Orange Winged Parrot. After a stop for breakfast which we had brought from the hotel, we walked part of the Gilpin Trace into the rain forest. This was full of bird calls and song, lovely plants and plenty of insects.

On Tobago there were several species not found on Trinidad and these included the beautiful White Tailed Sabre-wing - a hummingbird, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Green Scrublet, Venezuelan Flycatcher and Blue Backed Mannakin. The Mannakin has a very comical display dance; think Michael Jackson Moonwalk and you will be close! On the day we saw 8 species of Flycatcher and 3 of these we did not see again. This was a very good site but the birds were hard to see because of the dense canopy of trees which made it dark and hard to pick them out.

That evening the hotel gave a beach barbecue and a traditional steel band provided the entertainment.

Saturday 28th

We walked from the hotel up onto the Starwood Road. This sounds grand but was actually a grass track into the trees and scrub up above the bay looking down on to the hotel grounds and water beyond.

The track wound its way around the headland into the next bay north of the hotel and was full of calling birds and lots of different plants and butterflies. I found a very large Blue Morph that was the size of my hand on the track and was very still. It was a very hot day and we had clear views across the bay to Little Tobago. We heard more birds than we saw but had good and plentiful views of Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Blue, Black and Black-faced Grassquits.

On the beach in the next bay were Spotted, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret. The ladies manning the hotel security gates at the top of the drive-way were very knowledgeable. They told us that they had all been on the bird courses held by the hotel and run by Newton George. The hotel offers the staff each year a chance to go to the Bird Fair at Rutland Water and several of them had done this.

Sunday 29th

Another very hot day and this time we walked into Speyside passing the old sugarcane processing plant and its huge metal water wheel. A small stream ran into the sea from the edge of the woodland. It seemed to be full of waders and herons. A juvenile Yellow Crowned Night Heron foraged at the side of the road and in the trees was an adult along with Red Crowned Woodpecker which is a Tobago speciality.

The water was full of weed and plenty of flies being picked off by Spotted and Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Ruddy Turnstone.

The track leading from the old plant was noisy with birds but they were impossible to locate.

We had lunch of grilled fish and salad with very refreshing fruit punches in a beach side restaurant which had a raised deck over the sand. Some fisherman had left fish offal on the sand which was greedily being picked off by Frigate birds. One of the males had two yellow wing tags. We later learned that these were from a survey that had been carried out a year or so back.

From the hotel drive on the way back a very large turtle was swimming over the reef edge. The barman said it was most likely a Green as they did breed on the north end.

Monday 30th

Today was our round island trip with Newton and another early start. Having collected our breakfast from the restaurant we set off south to Scarborough and Tobago plantation. This was a huge area of lakes, golf courses, very smart homes and a large hotel. There were plenty of waders around including a large group of Short-billed Dowitcher and Black Skimmer on the edge of the golf course. On the lakes we had good but distant views of Belted and Green Kingfisher. The highlight of that area was very close views of a beautiful Mangrove Cuckoo near to lily ponds filled with large pink blossoms. A little further down the coast was Bon Accord Sewage Ponds. The birds here included White Cheeked Pintail, Tricolour Heron and Greater Yellowlegs. A drive around the airport perimeter produced very little before our lunch stop. The afternoon was on the Caribbean side of the island with stops at Grafton Estate and the bird sanctuary which Newton explained was not as well maintained as in previous years but we did see the areas special bird – Fuscous Flycatcher.

On the coast at Grafton we saw Willet and Whimbrel on a small stream. On the way we heard and saw Green Parrotlets high up in very tall trees and in the Arnos Vale Bay area near Plymouth we again saw White Fringed Antwren.

We drove on north through Moriah, Runnymede, Coffe River, Castara Lookout & Bay, Parlaturier, Hermitage, Cambleton and Charlotteville around the top of the island into Speyside. In Speyside we stopped off at Newton's home to watch his is Hummingbird feeders for a good half hour. This allowed John to get some really close-up shots. Along with Rufous Breasted Hermit, White-necked Jacobin ad Copper-rumped Hummingbird (in huge numbers) was Newton's pride and joy, the White-tailed Sabrewing which came out of the forest to his feeders on a daily basis.

Newton had advised the hotel to change the solution in their feeders as they were using white sugar which was harmful to the bird's digestive system. They did not appear to have done so. I said we would comment on this which we did.

Tuesday 1st October

It had been a very stormy night and there were leaves and branches down all over the hotel grounds. The ground staff were busy clearing up and cleaning the beach. The dive boats jetty had had the odd Ruddy Turnstone on it all week but it was now up to 11 after the rough night and there was a Semi-palmated Plover on the beach. Having walked up the hotel drive we entered the woods at the top of the grounds and saw a very smart male Barred Antshrike and lots of unusually shaped large grey-green lizards. There were also lots of Red Crowned Woodpeckers in the grounds both male and female right in close to the hotel buildings. After lunch in the hotel while another heavy rain storm worked its way through we met up with Benjie. Benjie was a taxi driver who had taken the Americans out the previous day and they recommended a trip with him. He took us to Sharlands place on the edge of the Roxborough – Bloody Bay road on out past Gilpin Trace. This private house had many bird feeders hanging in the garden and after the rain stopped they were filled with feeding Hummingbirds.

There was at least 2 male and 1 female White tailed Sabrewings coming in at any one time along with all the other species. We carried on for a very pleasant drive to Charlotteville and a place where Benjie knew held a small population of Blue Backed Mannakin. These he did find for us but they were very difficult to see in the heavy tree canopy and not good enough to photograph. It was a good afternoon though and we did see close up views of Blue Crowned Motmot, Rufous tailed Jacamar and a Barred Antshrike pair. After 4 hours he took us back to the hotel.

It was to be another wet and stormy night but with no damage.

Wednesday 2nd October

Home today with a 17.15 flight from Trinidad so a quick flight over the straights. The morning was overcast with heavy showers but very warm. A smooth flight despite the weather.

A fantastic week, very different from Trinidad, more leisurely and a huge variety of birds again.

The highlight for me were the Hummingbirds especially those very special White tailed Sabrewings.



White-Tailed Sabrewing (above)

White-cheeked Pintail (right)

Red-crowned Woodpecker (below)



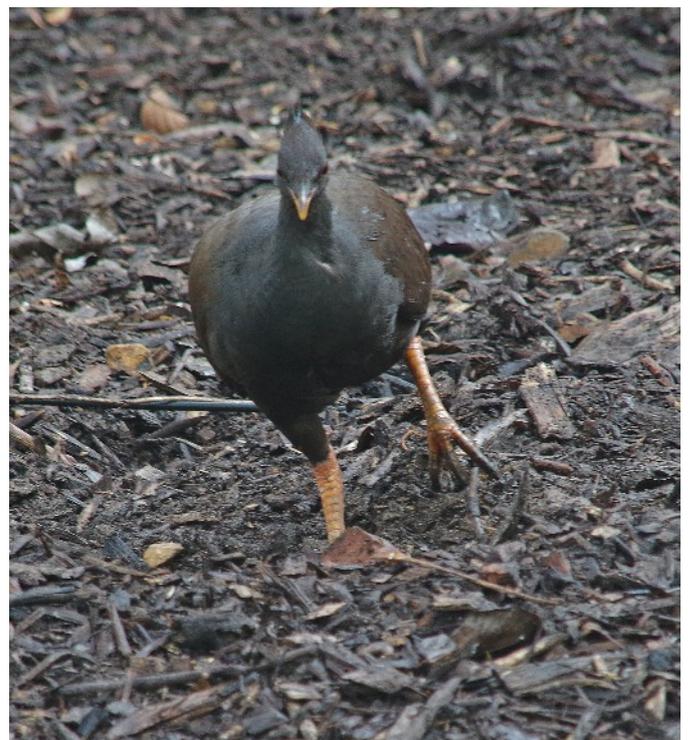
THE BLACK GRASSWREN TOUR

By Dick Yates

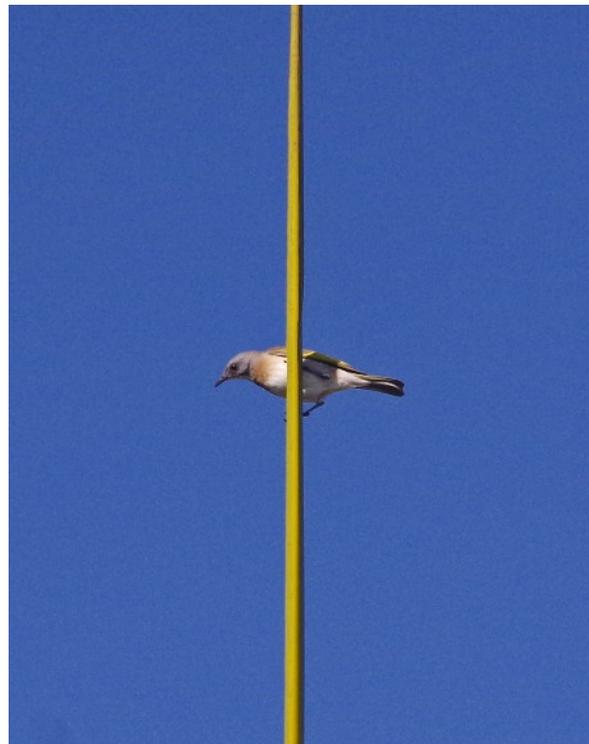
On our last visit to Oz in Sep/Oct 2014 Daphne and I took a birding trip to the Top End with Klaus Uhlenhut, of Kirrama Wildlife Tours. This was our second trip with Klaus, we had been on his Cape York Bird Week in Jan 2006. Indeed, in our group of 8, all had been with Klaus at least once or twice before. He has a very loyal client base, and while his trips are not cheap, they are always very well organised and he is an excellent guide and a very nice bloke. Every time I meet Klaus I am surprised by his continued German accent, he has been in Oz for 35 years but to hear him speak you would swear he got off the plane yesterday.

But I digress. The trip was for 13 days in late September. It, started in Darwin and then headed into the Kakadu National Park; on down to Timber Creek and Katherine, then back up the highway to Darwin; birding all the way. We then flew to Kununurra and after some birding round that area we had a day trip into the Kimberley to Mitchell Falls to seek the Black Grasswren.

We flew to Darwin from Brisbane on 16 Sep and over-nighted in the Frontier Hotel. Not a great one but adequate; it had the advantage of being within walking distance of the Botanic Gardens. The tour started at lunchtime on 17 Sep, but Klaus had told us that if we met in the lobby at 0630 he would take us out for the morning in the Botanic Gardens. So, at the appointed time, 7 members were gathered in the lobby all introducing themselves to each other (our 8th member didn't join until the second week). Nothing special seen on that walk but we had nice views of a Forest Kingfisher, perched, and an Orange-footed Scrubfowl, mud-moving.



After lunch Klaus picked up the van and we all went with him to get the trailer, and thereby hangs another tale. Suffice it to say it took an hour and half to get one that had electrics that worked! After that we went out to Nightcliffe where rumour had it we could find a Rufous Owl. It turned out to be a Tawny Frogmouth, nice find nonetheless, and Rufous-throated Honeyeaters were quite common.



Then it was off to the mangroves at Bay View to look for Chestnut Rail – no luck! But the more common Buff-banded Rail was found.

Next morning, 18 Sep, we left Darwin for Kakadu and the first stop was Fogg Dam, a brilliant wetland. Here we picked up over 30 species in about 90 minutes including Varied Triller and Rainbow Bee-eater below.



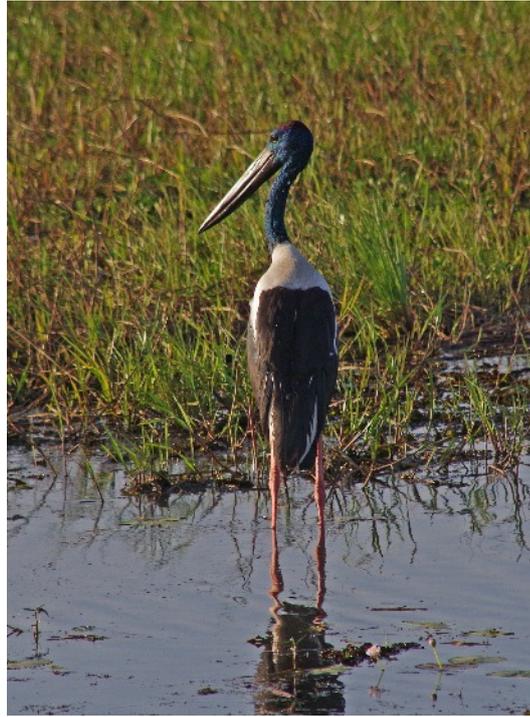
I also got Paperbark Flycatcher. This had been an armchair ‘tick’ for me as I had seen it in its previous incarnation as Restless Flycatcher, but it was split about 8-10 years ago, now I had it the flesh.

Next stop was the Adelaide River where I got my first 2 proper ‘ticks’, Arafura Fantail and Broad-billed Flycatcher; unfortunately, both proved too difficult to photograph. Also a gorgeous Mangrove Golden Whistler showed well as did Lemon-bellied Flycatcher. Then it was onto Mamukala Wetland where we found the largest group of Purple Swamphen I have ever seen. At a rough count we got over 500. There were also large numbers of Egrets of various species, and a big flock of mixed Plumed and Wandering Whistling Duck. Australian Pelican, Green Pygmy Goose, Black-necked Stork, Darter, Magpie Goose, and Comb-crested Jacana were all present. It was now getting very hot so we gratefully piled into the airconned van and headed for Kakadu and Coinda Lodge where we would spend the night. But this was not before we had a Yellow Waters boat trip in the late afternoon. This was the second time Daphne and I had made this trip, the first was in 1998, and it was just as magical. Our first time had been in the early morning so it

was nice to see the sights, and birds, in the afternoon and evening light. Here are some of the highlights I managed to get a shot of:-



Nankeen Night-heron



Black-necked Stork



White-bellied Sea-eagle



Plumed Whistling-duck



And it wasn't all birds. There were hundreds of Estuarine Crocodile (Salties) and quite a few buffalo. Finally, we pulled up with several other boats to watch the sun go down; warm, balmy evening with barely a breath of wind and egrets flying across the setting sun. Brilliant!



An early get up as usual and we headed for Nourlangie Rocks to look for the elusive Banded Fruit Dove. I was also after my third lifer, White-lined Honeyeater. However, first up was a Grey Butcherbird, the Silver-backed sub-species, which is a possible future split. Finally, after about an hour's wait a single Banded Fruit-Dove put in an appearance, much rejoicing all round and finally I got my White-lined Honeyeater into the bargain. A well satisfied group headed to our next RV at Anbangbang Billabong. Another good collection of water birds with Royal Spoonbill showing well but no other real surprises, and after a quick stop at the South Alligator River it was on into Pine Creek to find overnight accommodation. Klaus had booked us into the Mary River Roadhouse, but as we approached we saw that it was roped off and a big notice told us it was closed. We asked in Pine Creek and apparently the indigenous owners had just shut up shop and gone off for a few days quite irrespective of any customers. However, the upshot was a very nice motel in Pine Creek for a couple of nights.



The late afternoon was spent birding the Waterfall Gardens in Pine Creek in search of another 'lifer' for me Hooded Parrot. It was not too long before the cry Hooded Parrot went up and my score had gone from 3 to 4 lifers in 3 days. Not bad, since, over the years my Oz list has grown to well over 500 and now it isn't all that easy to get lifers. Other good birds that afternoon were Banded Honeyeater, Red-winged Parrot, the Top End sub-species of Rainbow Lorikeet known locally as Collared Lorikeet. This species has been split and then re-lumped over the years so nobody is sure if it is a full species or not. But it is a very attractive little parrot and the bright orange collar certainly makes it stand out from its more southerly cousins.

Next morning, 20 Sep, we headed back into Kakadu to visit Gunlom, a site for Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon.

On arrival Klaus said it was “up there”. Up there being a very rocky and quite steep path over the nearby ridge. I had seen this particular species before and the state of my knee was unlikely to survive the climb so I stayed behind and Daphne and I birded the local area at ground level so to speak. We managed a nice list of 7 Honeyeaters, Pheasant Coucal, Bush Stone Curlew, Great Bowerbird and a great view of Blue-winged Kookaburra in the scope. After lunch and a siesta we visited Copperfield Dam. A nice spot and I got a reasonable shot of a Galah and the best bird was Bar-breasted Honeyeater.



Little Friarbird



Galah



Bar-breasted Honeyeater

The following day was more birding en-route to Katherine. Again, many nice birds but nothing new or unexpected. We stayed overnight at Knott’s Crossing a very nice motel cum cabin park.

22 Sep saw us up well before dawn to get to a ‘stake out’ on a creek off Edith Falls Road that Klaus knew as a spot for finches; in particular Gouldian Finch, which was a must for most of the group. Dawn was just breaking as we left the road and headed up a track for roughly 2km, we then walked about 750m before coming to the small pools, which were all that was left of the creek. So we sat and waited. Several birds came and went, doves, honeyeaters, Mistletoebird, a Nankeen Night-Heron and a Little Pied Cormorant, but no finches. We were getting fidgety, rocks are quite hard on the posterior after a couple of hours; and suddenly there were finches. They began to fill the surrounding trees and bushes. First came Crimson and Double-barred finches; then the Long-tailed and Masked Finches came down to drink in small groups and then someone spotted Gouldians in a nearby tree. We held our breath and down they came in groups of 3-10. They didn’t stay long, just a quick drink and off, to be replaced by another small group. The whole show lasted about 30 minutes and suddenly there were no more finches. It was a great feeling to have at long last seen Gouldians after looking for them so many times and being disappointed.

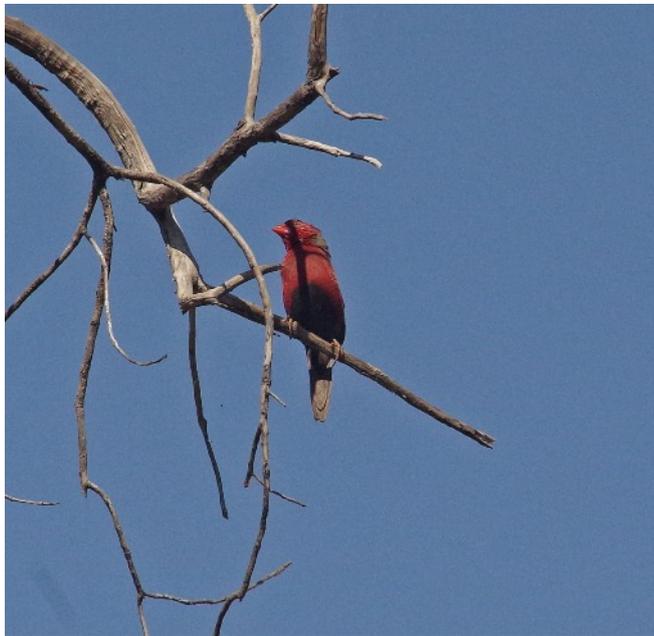
“Anyone see any Zebbies?” someone asked. And we then realised that no-one had seen a single Zebra Finch, usually a very common little bird – strange! But a well satisfied group headed back to Katherine for breakfast.

Over the rest of the day we visited Katherine Gorge and Katherine Waste Water Treatment Plant. Birds new for the trip were White-faced Heron, Common Sandpiper, Straw-necked Ibis, Red-Kneed Dotterel and Golden-headed Cisticola.

The following morning, by common consent, it was back to see the finches and the same routine occurred. This time the Gouldies sat in a tree down sun and we got great views. Unfortunately, they were a bit too far away for decent photography. We also had our only, and rather distant, sighting of Northern Rosella.



Gouldian Finches in tree (above)
and by water (below)



Male Crimson Finch



After the finches we returned to Pine Creek and a last look for Hooded Parrot. Success. We also found Red-winged Parrots, Silver-crowned Friarbird and Grey-crowned Babbler



A pair of Collared Lorikeets drinking from a leaky sprinkler was a nice sight.

By about 0900 we were settled into the vehicle for the long drive back to Darwin with only the call of 'Emu' to keep us awake.

We called in at Howard Spring on our way and my goodness how it had changed since my last visit in about 1986 during my tour with the RAAF. In those days it was just a swimming hole, today it is a full blown tourist attraction, but still quite pleasant. On arrival we heard Asian Koel calling but couldn't find him for love nor money. Then we heard Rainbow Pitta and it was off into the bush to find this elusive bird. He normally calls from a branch quite low to the ground, but when we tracked this guy down he was right at the top of a huge tree. On our way out of the bush we flushed a pair of Large-tailed Nightjar when one lady nearly trod on them and frightened the life out of herself. We watched them until they disappeared down into the ground cover but we couldn't find them again. While all this was going on Klaus had been off prospecting and on his return he took us to see a roosting Rufous Owl that he had found. Lifer No 6.

After Howard Springs we continued into Darwin and again checked into the Frontier Hotel. We then headed out for Knuckeyes Lagoon. Another excellent wetland close to the city with all the usual water birds and in the surrounding bushes we found Large-billed Gerygone.

24 Sep, our last day in Darwin, and it was up early and away to Buffalo Creek, not too far out of the city, to stake out again for the elusive Chestnut Rail. It was heard, and a few members of the group headed off into the mangroves to try and find it. I took one look at the twisted tangle of roots and ditches and decided it was too much like a viscous obstacle course with built in man traps for me to have a go at. Wise move, they came back about 30 minutes later very muddy and still without visual contact on the quarry. We were also close to the beach and between the creek and the beach we managed to pick up 13 waders, including both Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, Eastern Curlew, Great Knot and Red-necked Stint. We also had Crested, Lesser Crested, Common, Little, Gull-billed and Caspian Terns plus 2 Ospreys. Other birds of note that morning were Yellow White-eye, Little Bronze Cuckoo, Red-Headed Honeyeater, Green-backed Gerygone, Spangled Drongo, Grey Whistler and Leaden Flycatcher. By about 1100 we had all had enough and the tide had gone so far out that any chance of Chestnut Rail was negligible, so we departed into town for lunch and a rest during the heat of the day. We were to head out to East Point at about 1530 for our final birding session in Darwin. Here the target was Rainbow Pitta and we all got very good views of this smart bird; this time at more or less ground level. Such was the press by the "long-lenses" for the best picture I never got into a position to take one! However our continued walk through the area did turn up a group of Bush Stone-Curlew, Eastern Reef Egret (dark morph), Pacific Golden Plover, Grey-tailed Tattler, our only Pied Oystercatcher of the trip and a Brahminy Kite.



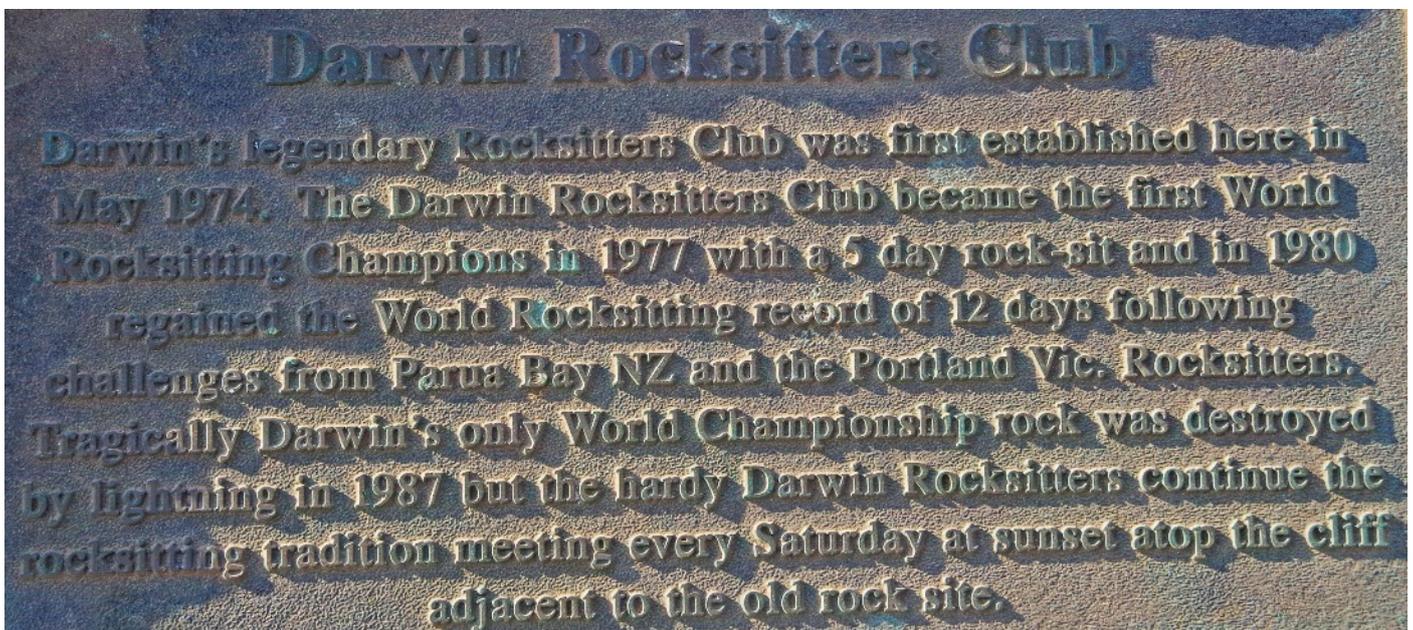


Bush Stone-curlew



Eastern Reef Egret

As an aside, and apropos nothing at all, I also found this plaque attached to a rock at East Point. It proves they do have a sense of humour in the Top End!



The following morning, 25 Sep we flew to Kununurra for a few days birding in that area and our day trip into the Kimberley. Bill advises me that he has more than enough copy for this edition of the Newsletter and he is keen to put it to bed. Combine that with the fact that I haven't written to Kununurra end of the trip yet we will hold Part 2 over until the Autumn.

Looking at Gulls

By John Stewart-Smith.

Gulls are a large family of birds that are mainly associated with the seas of the world. As the seas cover a major proportion of the surface of the Earth, gulls are distributed widely and some a great wanderers. They are intelligent, versatile and quick learners that exploit many habitats, both inland and coastal, where they feed on a wide variety of food and they can be extremely abundant in numbers.

Being generally quite large and with conspicuous plumage adult gulls are fairly easy to recognise as gulls but they are most challenging to separate at species level, especially in their variable immature plumage. It is generally accepted that there are some 43 species of gulls in Europe, Asia and North America but there has always been considerable confusion (especially in my mind!) about some of the gulls coming from the eastern borders of Europe and the western edges of Asia. Now that world-wide recreational travel is commonplace more of us have the opportunity to explore pretty well any corner of the globe and come face-to-face with “new” gulls – or variations on familiar ones.



Taken at Chew Valley. It may be a Herring Gull. What do you think?

An excellent guide to “The Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America” by Klaus Malling Olsen illustrated by Hans Larsson published by Christopher Helm in 2004 (at £45) is an valuable starting point to begin exploring gull identification. As you wander beyond the geographical limits of this guide you will need to refer to more area-specific tomes. You will eventually turn to the multi-volume “Handbook of Birds of the World”. When your copy of Volume 1 of “The Illustrated Checklist of Birds of the World” arrives on your desk (At some 9+kgms) your head will begin to hurt. Don’t despair. The checklist is a goldmine of facts and figures all backed up by beautiful illustrations of what appears to be each and every species and subspecies of bird to be found in the world today. The first volume will keep me occupied for many years to come. Now I’m concerned that I will never find time to open the second volume when it arrives next year.

I thought it may encourage newer RAFOS members to look more closely at gulls and to learn more about them and their habits if RAFOS published a simplified introduction to some of the gull species to be seen around our coasts (and inland on our rivers and lakes).

If I wander off to other corners of the globe, just put it down to passing years and lack of “Selection and maintenance of the Aim.” I hope Carl Philipp Gottfried Von Clausewitz will forgive me.

Any takers? I know of at least one member who I consider a gull expert! Ed.

*If you are looking for a cheaper way to learn a little more about the Gulls, can I suggest that you consider buying a copy of ‘**The Helm Guide to Bird Identification**’ by Keith Vinicombe, Alan Harris & Laurel Tucker (ISBN 978-1-4081-3035-3).*

This very useful book is an extended version of the popular ‘Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification’ that was originally published in 1989. Its aim was (and is) to assist with the identification of the more ‘difficult’ species, and includes the gulls as well as many other confusing species.

Bill Francis



A couple of my own pictures taken at WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre recently.
Hope they are good enough to pass muster!
Green Sandpiper (top) and Water Rail (bottom)

Bill Francis



Alex Smith & David Counsell had to return to the UK

RAFOS Masirah Expedition 1979
A blast from the past for our Golden Jubilee