



*The Royal Air Force
Ornithological Society
Newsletter*



No. 72

Autumn 2001

Front Cover Picture – Bearded Tit by Dave Lingard



Hooded Vulture and Wattled Plover - pictures by Robin Springett – see his article on a trip to The Gambia.



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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

By

Group Captain G S Harker

It's been another year of mixed fortunes. Unfortunately, the foot and mouth epidemic caused the cancellation of nearly all of our field meetings in the early part of the year. However, I am delighted to say that the Varangarfjord team has returned after a successful expedition, achieving the ornithological aims. In this newsletter is a preliminary report from Nick Smith. The other major good news is that the first joint service journal, 'The Osprey' has been published and you should by now all have received your personal copy. I hope you all agree that it contains some excellent articles and stunning photographs. As someone recently said, it is now a journal that presents our more scientific information in its best light. Much credit goes to Col Simon Strickland, based in the Athens Embassy who, as the leading editor, conducted most of the correspondence and negotiations with the publishers through the Internet. From our side, however, credit is also due to Mike Blair, who had to get all of his work done at the same time as organising and departing on his round the world trip. After his departure, the ubiquitous Nick Smith stepped into the breach to sweep up the editorial proof reading role. There were many others, I know, who were involved and I record the Society's thanks.

On the birding front I've had a splendid year.

For those who use the A1, stop off for an hour or so at Paxton Pits, nature reserve, just south of Buckden. During our early months there were plenty of wintering ducks, but as the spring developed so more and more warblers arrived. On April 6th I heard and then saw my first nightingale - but by the end of May there were known to be at least 15 Nightingales, with coach parties coming from all over the country. Even before this, the first chiff-chaffs, blackcaps and willow warblers had arrived. Then came reed and garden warblers and whitethroats. For the experienced birders, it probably comes as second nature, but I am proud to be able to distinguish all of the above just by song (well, most of the time). We also had a wonderful week in Norfolk, just Gill, me and Beth (the dog), where the highlight was a fleeting glimpse of a pair of nightjars at Wolferton, oh, and earlier in the same day a peregrine chasing several thousand knot at Snettisham.

One final plug for our website which was forced off the air for some time after our service provider went out of business. I'm pleased to report that Bill has managed to get us back on the ether at www.rafos.org.uk

As ever, I need to thank Bill for his splendid efforts with the newsletter - I hope you enjoy reading it.

FOR YOUR DIARY
RAFOS AGM
RAF INNSWORTH
17 November 2001

From the Editor – Or Once Bittern...

I write my piece having just returned (11 August) from a wonderful week's birding in Suffolk. The weather could have been better at times, but I managed to see some species that have eluded me for years, including the avocet, bearded tit, and bittern. The latter was just a short glimpse of the bird flying over reedbeds and settling down out of sight, but what a beautiful bird it is. The bearded tit has been a 'phantom' of mine for years; I have been to several places where they have been seen by other members of the same party but not by me. In addition I managed to see a pectoral sandpiper and a wide variety of other waders in all stages of moult from their summer to winter plumages. A thrilling sight was a pair of marsh harriers passing prey from one to the other in mid-flight.

In part, the trip was inspired by reading the article from Christine Williams that you will find further on in this newsletter. Thank you for your article Christine – it is so nice to hear from a new contributor.

Suffolk is a part of the world that was a closed book to me, and having had my pink chit signed by She Who Must Be Obeyed, I looked for suitable accommodation in the area. In the RSPB magazine I came across an advert for self-catering cottages for one or two people, and on ringing the telephone number given, found that they were a pair of what the owner described as 'similar to old people's bungalows' on the edge of Leiston. In view of my advancing years, I thought that they sounded ideal, and luckily there was a vacancy for the week that I wanted. It was a fairly long drive from Gloucester, (as I am sure that Tony Marter knows only too well from covering the same ground in the opposite direction when attending RAFOS committee meetings at Innsworth) but using

the Midland motorways and the A14 it took me a bit over 4 hours.

Most of my time I spent on the RSPB reserve at Minsmere, but there was so much to see there it was never boring. The bearded tits remained elusive until the Friday morning, when a small family party appeared close to the Island Mere hide.

After a wash-out of a Spring due to the Foot & Mouth epidemic, it was great to be able to wander and watch birds again.

Can I please draw your attention to the letter from Robin Springett, seeking the support of RAFOS members who are also members of the RSPB for his nomination to the Council of the latter society. Please give Robin your support – it could add to our society's visibility in the birding world as well by ensuring that some of our efforts, and those of the RAF, do not go unsung.

With this Newsletter you should receive the updated membership list giving the details of those members who have authorised the Membership Secretary to include them under the terms of the Data Protection Act (DPA). It is also to comply with the DPA that it has been decided not to publish the addresses of committee members in this edition. Those who are prepared for their details to be published appear in the Membership List.

Please complete Mike Hayes's proforma if you are interested in taking part in any of the events listed.

All my best wishes – hope to see you at the AGM

Bill Francis

LETTER FROM GROUP CAPTAIN ROBIN SPRINGETT

Dear Fellow RAFOS Members,

I hope I don't need any introduction to you all, having been Chairman for 4 years, a regular contributor to the Newsletter, and keen member of many expeditions and field meetings. Last year, I suggested to your Committee that they might like to consider nominating a member for the Council of the RSPB. The Council is the governing body of the RSPB, and for a long time I have felt that the RSPB uses organisations like RAFOS, without giving due credit, or even a thought to how the interests of birds can be furthered by our activities. My interest in Council was prompted by attendance at an RSPB Members Day (AGM) when the RSPB crowed about getting a tractor onto Ramsey, without the slightest reference to all the hard work done a RAFOS member to persuade the RAF to lift the tractor by helicopter to Ramsey. It would have cost nothing to have given us credit; we might have been able to help them get the RAF credit correct. As I recall the presenter said that the Chinook came from High Wycombe!! Needless to say I wrote a sharp note to the RSPB Chief Executive and didn't even get the courtesy of an acknowledgement. I appreciate that the RSPB is really just a multi-million pound business, but there has to be room for all the small guys out there who could benefit from a little encouragement.

Turning to Council, I received a number of emails from members keen to support my application; well, up to that point, I hadn't actually decided to put my name forward. The next step was to receive an email from RSPB Membership Services saying the Chairman of Council, Prof. John Croxhall would like to speak to me on his return from the Falklands. When he did ring, he knew a lot about me (from where I still wonder?) and the upshot was that he has invited me to apply for Council this autumn. Apparently, they are very short of people on Council who have experience of living overseas, or have been on self-supporting expeditions (as opposed to birding holidays); they are also under represented from the West of England, which is where I shall live when Julia and I return from Gibraltar. I have thought long and hard about this, as it will be quite a commitment, and have decided to put my name forward. It takes about 2 years from nomination to election; however, the first step is to find 25 RSPB members who will support my application. Hence this letter! I believe that it would be in RAFOS interest to have a member on the RSPB Council, and I would try to make a difference, however slight, to how the RSPB deals with small societies like ours. I would hope that the RAFOS Committee will endorse my application; in any event, I now need lots of support to have my nomination accepted. If you feel that you can support, please e-mail me at loggy@gibnet.gi or mail me at: The Tower, BFPO 52. And lets see if we really can make a difference.

Thank you!

Robin Springett.

LESVOS

(An excellent bird watching island at the eastern end of the Mediterranean)

by John Le Gassick

The idea of visiting Lesvos was planted in my brain, such that is left of it, whilst I was talking to an elderly gentleman in the Boquer Valley in Majorca last year. He was lamenting the massive developments taking place around Porto Pollensa and comparing it with twenty years ago. On a recent trip to Lesvos he assured me, a comparatively unspoilt bird watching venue, he had seen over one hundred and fifty different species. As at the time he was having some difficulty locating a bird that even to me was pretty obvious I thought that it sounded just the place for a "big lister" such as myself! Then, when I visited the Rutland Bird fair later in the year there was a slide show and talk by the photographer and author of "Birding on

the Greek Island of Lesvos", Richard Brooks, and this made me decide that like the Isles of Scilly and Fair Isle it was a place that every self respecting bird watcher must visit. It was impressed on us that in the Spring accommodation was much in demand so if we wished to stay near the best birding places early booking was essential. A few days later I was lucky enough to chance upon a small advertisement for Nature Photography Pro-Tours, run by the photographer George McCarthy, which had self catering apartments in Skala Kallonis (the place to be) and who would also organise flights, hire car etc. The first package holidays do not commence until early May with their direct flights to the Island's airport at Mitilini, so we had to

travel via Athens with Olympic Airlines. My visit to Lesvos was from April 30th to May 12th 2001.

Lesvos is 1630 Sq Km in area and is approximately 25 degrees East. Olive groves are one of the most striking features of the Island, apparently 11 million trees producing some 20,000

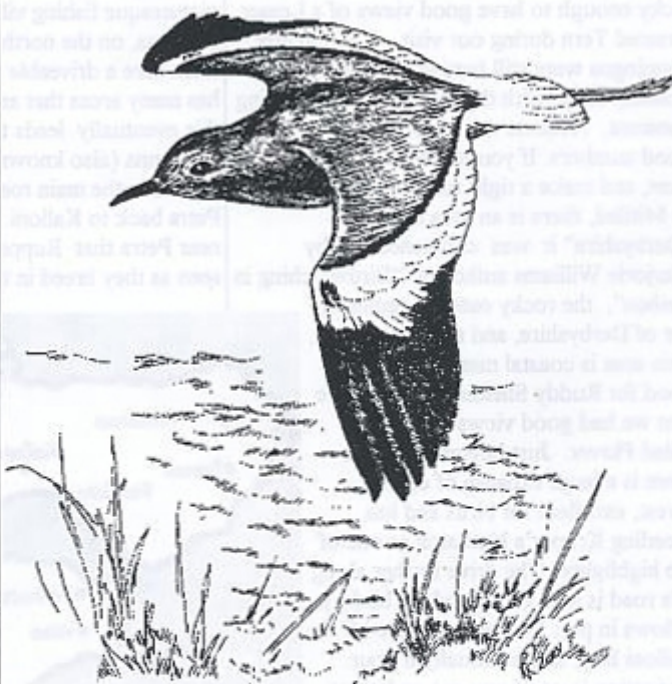


Turtle Doves

tons, a quarter of the olives produced in the whole of Greece. Hunting occurs on Lesvos, as it does throughout the Mediterranean, mostly of game birds and Turtle Dove. Lesvos has half a dozen resorts but they are still quite small, a decent two lane road system links the larger towns but the majority of roads are non metalled tracks with few sign posts and then only written in Greek. Before I go again I must learn the Greek Alphabet! Really it is just like Cyprus of thirty years ago. Fishing is one of the main occupations and seafood is an excellent buy at any of the many tavernas. This Island is such an excellent place for bird watching because of its position only a few miles off the Turkish mainland and has a large number of passage migrants both in the Spring and Autumn. As an extra bonus it also has a few species that are common on the Island but not throughout the Mediterranean region. Skala Kallonis is the place to stay because it is in the centre of the Island at the top of Kalloni Bay making it just about equi-distant from all of the good bird watching places. One such place is Kalloni Pool which is overlooked by two of the hotels favoured by British bird watchers and tour companies the Kalloni Two and the Pasiphae. Another very popular hotel, again with strong birding connections is the Malemi Hotel which is

situated just behind the Kalloni Two and is owned by George Kapsalis and has as an added attraction a thriving colony of Spanish Sparrows.

Skala Kallonis has the East and West Rivers running down either side of it and a good area of salt marsh close to the resort, a few miles down the road there is the Potamia River and the Potamia Valley all good places for migrants. Skala is the Greek word for ladder and was the means of getting to the town from the sea! There is also a small lake about a mile inland from the sea unbelievably known as the Kalloni Inland Lake which is a really



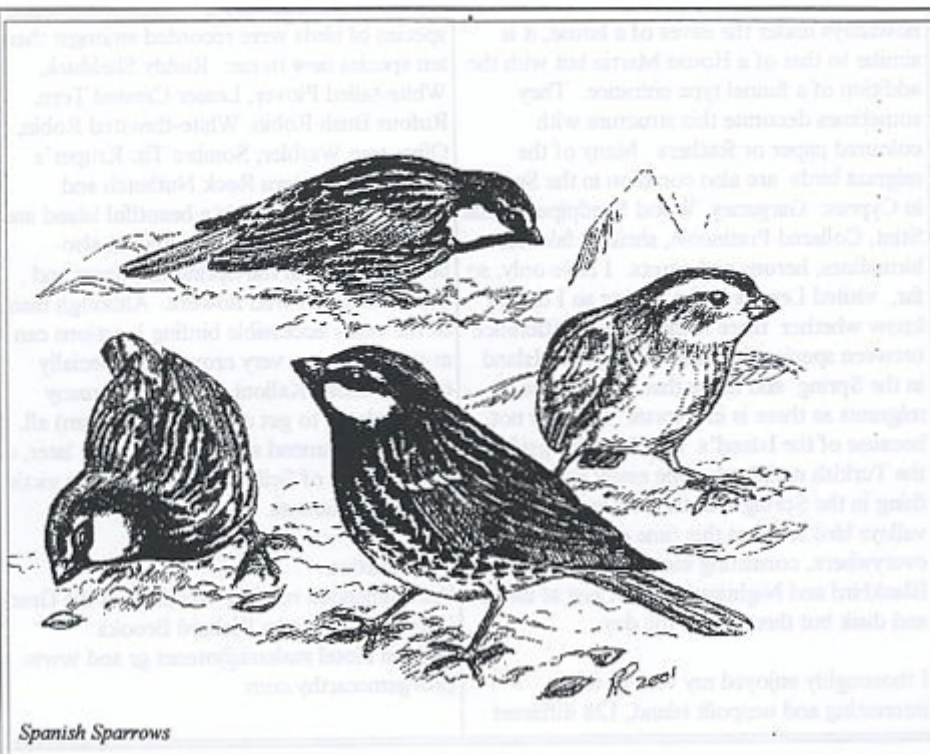
White tailed Plover

tranquil place and full of terrapins mostly Stripe-necked but there are also a few European pond. It is a good place to see Night Heron, Squacco Heron and Little Bittern. A few miles outside Kalloni there are the Kalloni Salt Pans so within this smallish area there are many places that are good for birds, some visitors use bicycles to visit these places and most of the passage birds can be seen in these areas. Personally I still prefer a hire car which also acts as a hide, especially when trying to photograph the birds, it is also far less tiring if you tend toward abject laziness and your chances of being squashed flat by a speeding local white van are much reduced! The salt pans near Kalloni are an excellent bird watching spot and they are very accessible affording close views of the birds from your hire car. Terns are here in good numbers as there is plenty of food in the canal that surrounds the pans and plenty of banks on which to roost and preen. We were lucky enough to have good views of a Lesser Crested Tern during our visit. The Greater Flamingos were still here in into early May, possibly to do with the water levels remaining constant. Avocets were breeding here in good numbers. If you travel past the salt pans, and make a right turn off the main road to Mitilini, there is an area known as "Derbyshire" it was christened this by Marjorie Williams author of "Birdwatching in Lesbos", the rocky outcrop reminded her of Derbyshire, and the name stuck. This area is coastal marsh and is very good for Ruddy Shelduck, it was here that we had good views of a White-tailed Plover. Just beyond this area there is a large expanse of conifer forest, excellent for birds and has breeding Kruper's Nuthatch as one of the highlights. The drive further along this road is also very good for birds, it follows in part the eastern shore of Kalloni Bay, and eventually if your navigation is good you can end up at the salt pans at Skala Polihnitou another area worth visiting. And yes

you guessed it the "ladder" leading to Polihnitos. Going on my own experiences I would, as much as possible, avoid going through any of the smaller towns. They all contain streets that were designed before the advent of the hire Opel Corsa and will at the best only allow passage by a rather undernourished mule. If instead of turning off the main road one continues a few more miles toward Mitilini then the extensive reed beds of Dipi Larsos can be visited. They are well worth visiting and are the only reed beds on the island.

A left turn off the main road from Kalloni to Mitilini takes you north through the Napi Valley, an excellent drive and a good place to see Olive-tree Warbler. At the moment this road is mostly unpaved but road works are in progress to build a highway through the valley. If you keep on heading north the road eventually leads to Skala Sikameneas, a picturesque fishing village with plenty of tavernas, on the north coast. Heading west from here a driveable track along the coast has many areas that are good for migrants, this eventually leads to the tourist resort of Mithimna (also known as Molivos). You can now take the main road due south through Petra back to Kalloni. It was beside this road near Petra that Ruppell's Warbler could be seen as they breed in this area.





Spanish Sparrows

Another must for the visiting birder is to take the winding but well maintained mountain road from Kalloni, past Skalahori, Vatousa and Andissa to Sigi on the west coast. On this drive stop off in the Grand Canyon, a steep wooded valley full of singing Nightingales, here Rock and Blue Rock Thrush show well. The other real "hot spot" is the monastery at Ipsilou further along the road, it is very good for migrants which feed on the wooded sides of the steep hill that leads up to the monastery. The road south out of Skala Kalloni crosses the Potamia River and two miles further on there is the Parakila Marsh good for duck, rails and passage waders. After this the terrain becomes very rocky and good for Sombre Tit, Rock Sparrow and Cinereous Bunting. Apotheke down a rough track leading off this road is well worth a visit, especially the river inlet just a little further along the coast. If the

main road is followed past Agra and Mesotopos the hills around here are excellent for raptors though one of the commonest sighting is of Little Owl. Eventually after much twisting and turning Skala Eresou is reached a very pretty tourist resort and well worth the drive.

A large proportion of the birds I had seen before on Cyprus during my many visits there. The Cyprus Pied Wheatear was of course absent, though its place appeared to have been taken, at least in the more rocky areas by the Black-eared Wheatear. Eleanora's Falcon is present but not in large numbers, a few pairs breed on off-shore islands. Cretzschmar's Bunting, Black-headed Bunting and Corn Bunting are wide spread breeding species throughout the Island as are Cinereous Bunting and Western Rock Nuthatch. The Rock Nuthatches build a nest on an over hanging rock face, or sometimes

nowadays under the eaves of a house, it is similar to that of a House Martin but with the addition of a funnel type entrance. They sometimes decorate this structure with coloured paper or feathers. Many of the migrant birds are also common in the Spring in Cyprus: Garganey, Wood Sandpiper, Little Stint, Collared Pratincole, shrikes, falcons, hirundines, herons and egrets. I have only, so far, visited Lesvos in the Spring so I do not know whether there is the marked difference between species that pass through the Island in the Spring and those that are Autumn migrants as there is in Cyprus. Possibly not because of the Island's location alongside the Turkish mainland. One really noticeable thing in the Spring was the bird song. In the valleys bird song at this time of year was everywhere, consisting mostly of Chaffinch, Blackbird and Nightingale. Not just at dawn and dusk but throughout the day.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to this interesting and unspoilt island, 128 different

species of birds were recorded amongst them ten species new to me: Ruddy Shelduck, White-tailed Plover, Lesser Crested Tern, Rufous Bush Robin, White-throated Robin, Olive-tree Warbler, Sombre Tit, Kruper's Nuthatch, Western Rock Nuthatch and Cinerous Bunting. It is a beautiful island and excellent not only for the birds but also butterflies and in the Spring meadows and orchards full of wild flowers. Although many of the easily accessible birding locations can at times become very crowded, especially close to Skala Kalloni, there are so many lovely places to get away from it (them) all. I would recommend a visit sooner than later, as like the Isles of Scilly, it may become a victim of its own success.

Information

Recommended reading Birding on the Greek Island of Lesvos by Richard Brooks
Malemi Hotel malemi@otenet.gr and www.georgemccarthy.com

Your Society Needs You

The committee has decided to try to re-introduce Regional Representatives for regions within the UK. There is already an Regional Representative in Scotland, where Dave Slater is doing a grand job. Could you take on this role for your region?

As a Regional Representative you would be responsible to the RAFOS Chairman for representing the interests of members in your area.

You would become an ex-officio (non-voting) member of the Committee.

In response to the needs of the local membership, Regional Representatives may organise field trips and minor expeditions, after liaison with the FALO and approval by the Committee.

On relinquishing their appointment Regional Representatives will be expected to hand over to their successor all records & files in their charge.

Interested? Then contact the General Secretary, Nick Smith.

DIARY OF A SUFFOLK HOLIDAY

By Christine Williams

My partner Graham and I decided we needed to get away following a very stressful family period. It couldn't be overseas in case we were needed to return in a hurry. We decided that Suffolk would be nice and that staying close to Minsmere would be ideal. Following a trawl through numerous magazines, we came across what sounded like just the place. It was a campsite near to Dunwich Heath, but had some lodges for hire. We booked a week in early May, but had no pictures of what we would be staying in. What follows is a condensed diary of our week.

Saturday: Left home early, it's a good 3-4 hours travel. We called at Weeting Heath for a break; the board reads that a number of Stone Curlews are showing well. Off we go to the first hide, and spend a lot of time checking and rechecking the field. There are a lot of rabbits and Mistle thrushes, we continue looking and spot what had looked like a rabbit, but in fact was a Stone Curlew. How did we miss it the first time you may ask? The answer, rabbit-brown in colour, it was sitting very still (we only spotted it because it moved) and it was the same size as some of the rabbits. We were both surprised at how large these birds are. The bird started preening and after a few minutes it took flight and went over a ridge, we could hear a couple of birds

calling but did not see them. After a short while we moved onto the other hide to see if we could see any more. Here we checked the rabbits very closely but no, non-to be seen, but we had a good view of a Woodlark, which landed only a few feet in front of us. We decided that it was time for some caffeine and chocolate intake before we continued our journey, whilst doing so, we heard a Green Woodpecker and watched a Sparrowhawk fly over. We set off and finally arrive at our destination in the early afternoon; once booked in we make our way to the accommodation. What a shock we had, we couldn't have asked for anything better. A wooden lodge in the grounds of a large house, set in among the trees and bushes, we even had a conservatory, and we were only 50-yards from the cliff edge with steps down

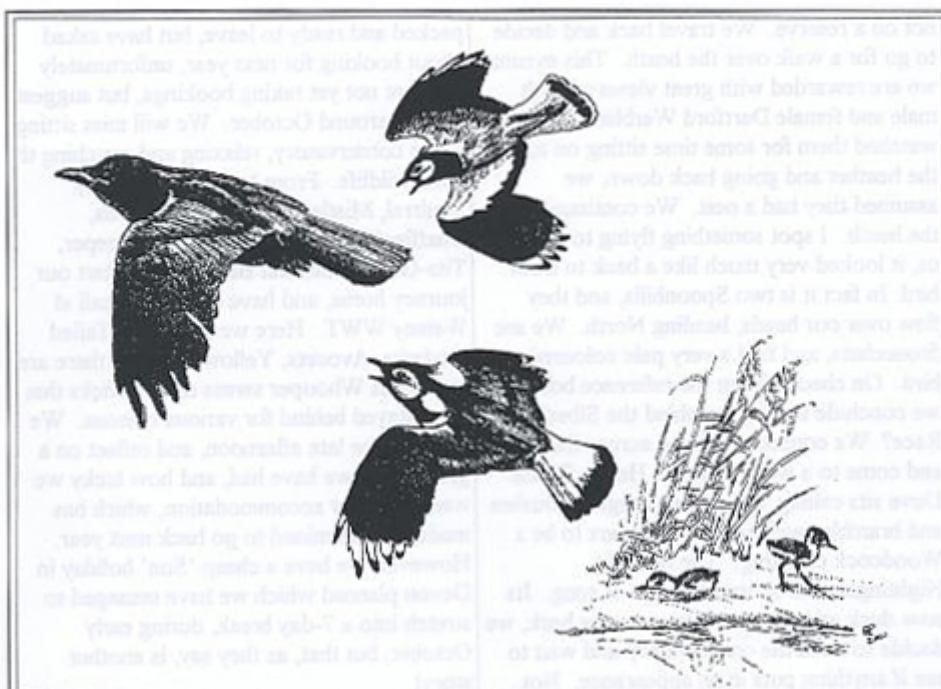


to the beach. But more important only 5-minutes walk from Dunwich Heath, and 10-minutes from Minsmere. We unpack and decide to go for a good walk on the Heath. But saw very little, on return to the campsite we heard a Nightingale singing. We sit in the conservatory and watch the local wildlife before calling it a day.

Monday: We decided to have a full day at Minsmere, this is only a few minutes drive from where we are staying, we arrive about 0930, it's a nice sunny day, but with a cool breeze. Having done a board check, which listed Cranes being seen, we began our walk. First taking in the reed beds, where Sedge and Reed Warblers were abundant. Next stop was the scrape with its numerous Terns, Gulls, and Avocets. Moving onto the Woods we see Redstart and two Muntjac deer from the canopy hide. We carry on to Island Mere Hide, from where we see our first wild otter, thanks go to the local who pointed it out to us. I had seen something dive, but thought it was a Tufted duck. We watched it make its way across the water and in fact it did keep going under just like a small black duck. Someone also pointed out a Cuckoo flying in the distance, which looked like a Sparrow-hawk in flight. There were Swifts, Martins and Swallows that appeared to have arrived en masse. We continue walking, and after

some time, I was in need of a seat. We came across a bench set in part of the wooded area - time for some caffeine and chocolate. Whilst resting, something caught our eyes in the bushes next to the bench. Two Garden Warblers, and such fantastic views, they didn't seem to notice us. We also heard the machine-gun rattle of a Lesser Whitethroat, but were unable to locate it. There were numerous waders with most being in summer plumage. The Cranes were not seen, and they must have moved on. There was a Purple Heron reported on the Birdline, but this proved to be elusive. Nightingales were reported to be singing well near to the visitors centre, but these also proved to be very elusive. What follows is the list of most of what we saw, having had a terrific day: - Garden/Willow/Sedge/Reed Warblers, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, Marsh Tit, Bearded Tit, Chiffchaff, Wheatear, Stonechat, Marsh Harriers, Avocet, Sandwich/Little/Common





Tern, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Knot, Black Tailed Godwit, Turnstone, Dunlin, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Lapwing, Common Sandpiper, Sand Martin, Swallow, Swift, Tree Creeper, Sparrowhawk, Black headed gull, Common Gull, Lesser black backed Gull, Greylag Goose, Meadow Pipit, Reed Bunting, Teal, Shoveler, Widgeon, Tufted Duck, Gadwall, Shelduck, Kestrel, Goldfinch, Linnet, Greenfinch, Redstart, and Bittern. We had such a good day, it was nice to get out and do some walking and bird watching, and Minsmere had only opened on the Saturday, following the foot and mouth restrictions.

Tuesday: Today we visit Walberswick, but unfortunately we are unable to park the car and get out for a walk, and this was due to a film crew taking over the place. We do manage to park outside of the village in an area that overlooks Westwood Marshes, and while having a picnic lunch we watch a Marsh Harrier over the reed bed. Returning to the

campsite, we decided to have a stroll over Dunwich Heath. We meet a fellow bird-watcher who tells us there is a Redstart near to the picnic tables, but no luck, so we are hoping for a view of the Dartford Warbler, but not today. We see Stonechats, Whitethroats, Green Woodpecker and a Marsh Harrier, which was over Minsmere.

Thursday: Languard Point beckoned; we met a local who told us that the breeding Black Redstarts are no longer around, due to the cleaning up that had gone on in the area. Continuing our walk, we see Blackcap, Whitethroat, Ringed Plover, Linnets, Willow Warbler, and numerous Wheatears. A Firecrest had been reported, but it always comes down to 'right place - right time'. We move onto an area called Snape Malting, which is a shopping complex that lies next to the River Alde. We again have a picnic lunch and watch a pair of Marsh Harriers displaying. This we enjoyed, because we were watching them in their true environment, and

not on a reserve. We travel back and decide to go for a walk over the heath. This evening we are rewarded with great views of both male and female Dartford Warblers. Having watched them for some time sitting on top of the heather and going back down, we assumed they had a nest. We continue over the heath. I spot something flying towards us, it looked very much like a back to front bird. In fact it is two Spoonbills, and they flew over our heads, heading North. We see Stonechats, and find a very pale coloured bird. On checking out the reference books we conclude that it resembled the Siberian Race? We continue walking across the Heath and come to a wooded area. Here a Turtle Dove sits calling, and from a tangle of bushes and brambles we hear what appears to be a Woodcock croaking! The resident Nightingale has sporadic bursts of song. Its now dusk and time to make our way back, we decide to sit in the conservatory and wait to see if anything puts in an appearance. Not long before we are watching bats flying around, a lovely end to a busy day.

Friday: We decided to have another day out at Minsmere today, following our last great visit. We are due to travel home tomorrow and want to get the walking and birdwatching in. There are still a lot of areas closed at home. We see a Lesser Whitethroat today, but nothing else different from our last visit. We have enjoyed the walking, fresh air and getting away from the problems of everyday life.

Saturday: We are

packed and ready to leave, but have asked about booking for next year, unfortunately they are not yet taking bookings, but suggest ringing around October. We will miss sitting in the conservatory, relaxing and watching the local wildlife. From here we saw, Grey Squirrel, Mistle Thrushes, Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Magpies, Jays, Treecreeper, Tits-Great/Blue, and Bats. So we start our journey home, and have decided to call at Welney WWT. Here we see Black Tailed Godwits, Avocets, Yellow Wagtail, there are numerous Whooper swans and Bewicks that have stayed behind for various reasons. We arrive home late afternoon, and reflect on a great week we have had, and how lucky we were with our accommodation, which has made us determined to go back next year. However, we have a cheap 'Sun' holiday in Devon planned which we have managed to stretch into a 7-day break, during early October, but that, as they say, is another story!



Mistle Thrush

ANTHROPOIDES VIRGO

By Ian Shields



"In front of a fountain, a demoiselle crane's head, erased proper"

Since the Royal Air Force is about flying, and we share our habitat with the birds, it is perhaps not surprising that many Squadron and Unit badges depict birds of various types. Number 47 Squadron, the Squadron that I have the great honour presently to command, is no exception, having as its emblem the Demoiselle Crane, *Anthropoides Virgo*. Being interested in ornithology and RAF history, I have done some digging around to discover why the Squadron has chosen this bird as its emblem, and to discover a little more about this member of the Crane family.

Digging around in the Squadron history has given me some strong clues about the reason why this bird was chosen. Uniquely in the RAF, Number 47 Squadron deployed immediately after the end of the First World War from the Balkans where they had been fighting the Bulgarians to Southern Russia to assist the White Russians under General Denekin against the Bolsheviks. The British Government was subsequently criticised in the House of Commons for becoming involved in

a Civil War within another country, but denied that we were actually there! The Squadron became "A" Squadron and even flew under its own flag – a flag that we still fly today outside the Squadron and all wear on our flying suits.

As is well known, we lost that particular campaign and withdrew, the Squadron reforming at Helwar in Egypt in February 1920 assisting the Egyptian and Sudanese Governments in mapping and general policing duties. The Squadron adopted an unofficial badge at that point depicting the pyramid of Zoser silhouetted against the rising sun with the motto *Sans Peur* and title *Khartoum*. The latter title was to mark the presence for many years of a float-plane detachment from Number 47 Squadron at the confluence of the 2 Niles at Khartoum. In the 1930s the Air Ministry dictated that all Squadrons were to adopt a more formal system of official badges, and the present emblem was adopted. The Demoiselle Crane was chosen because the bird migrates annually from Southern Russia to Northern Kenya, with Khartoum as one of its major resting over points on the migration, illustrating the movement of the Squadron from Russia to the Nile. The fountain represents the confluence of the Blue and White Niles at Khartoum and the motto translates as; *"The name of the Nile is an omen of our strength"*.

So much for the Squadron history, what of the bird? Much digging around in my bird books at home produced few results, so I spoke to the Natural History bookshop I invariably use to see what they had in stock. The answer came back: nothing! My next port of call was the Internet, where I had a little more success. The site for the Fort Worth Zoo, Texas, revealed one reason why I



Demoiselle Crane (*Anthropoides virgo*)

© Y. ShibbnaEv

had had so little success looking for information – I quote: “There was a great difficulty in finding information about the Demoiselle Crane. Not much information was found through the Internet. Those articles found concerned migration..... The facts found were either broad or varied. It seems that there is much more to learn about this crane”. This site goes on to describe the Demoiselle Crane as: “one of the smaller Cranes. The birds have feathery grey areas that range from the crown to the nape. A white line from the corner of the eye extends to the back of the head. The crane has black legs and toes. The bill colours are yellow, green and pink. They stand 1.5 metres high with a wing length of 51 to 59 centimetres”. Further sites largely confirmed that the Demoiselle Crane has attracted little research over the years, although I have been able to discover a little more after further digging around.

A good summary of the Demoiselle Crane’s status can be found on the International Crane Foundation’s web site of which the following

is an abstract:

“The Demoiselle Crane is the second most numerous Crane (the Sandhill Crane is the most common) with a population around 23000. Flocks containing 400 or more birds may migrate together from Eastern Europe and the countries of the former USSR to India, Pakistan and Northeast Africa. While Cranes prefer to migrate at much lower altitudes, some Demoiselle Cranes must reach altitudes of 22 000’ as they migrate through the high Himalayan mountain passes on their way to wintering areas in India.

The Demoiselle Crane nests in the uplands rather than wetlands, like most other crane species, and even inhabit deserts if water is available within 200 – 500 metres. Nests are sometimes made of pebbles but often eggs are laid directly on the ground amidst spotty vegetation tall enough to hide the incubating parent.

Like many cranes, the Demoiselle will defend its nest aggressively. This is especially true as

hatching nears since the pair has so much time and effort invested in this particular clutch of eggs. If a predator during early incubation takes eggs, cranes will often build another nest nearby and lay a second clutch.

Range: Demoiselles are found in a wide belt starting in Eastern Europe, across Central Asia to Eastern China. There are also small populations in Morocco and Turkey. The Demoiselle Crane over-winters in Africa, Pakistan and India.

Status: Although the range of the Demoiselle Crane has shrunk, the future for this species is more secure than for many other cranes as they are so numerous and adaptable. Its broad distribution makes the entire population less likely to be subjected to the same pressure across its enormous range.

Nevertheless, Demoiselles face several threats. Their summering habitat is attractive for agricultural development and while they

have adapted in some localities to foraging in fields they may damage local crops leading to confrontation with farmers. Pesticide use and egg collecting may also constitute a local threat. As the birds pass through Pakistan hunters capture them by hurling a weighted sling called a "soya" into the air to ensnare the birds. Many of these birds are subsequently released while others are kept as family pets".

More scientific data can be found on the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Centre's website. This site confirms further that the Demoiselle Crane has, indeed, been little researched, perhaps in part as it is clearly not an endangered species, but also because its winter and summer grounds are not immediate favourite destinations for ornithologists. This site does, however, indicate that in the Sudan the birds are actively hunted for their food; it also seems likely that habitat threat from the expanding tourism industry in both Turkey and Morocco



Demoiselle Crane migrating through the Himalayas in Nepal

© R. Suwal

may well cause the species to be threatened, or even become extinct, in these 2 countries.

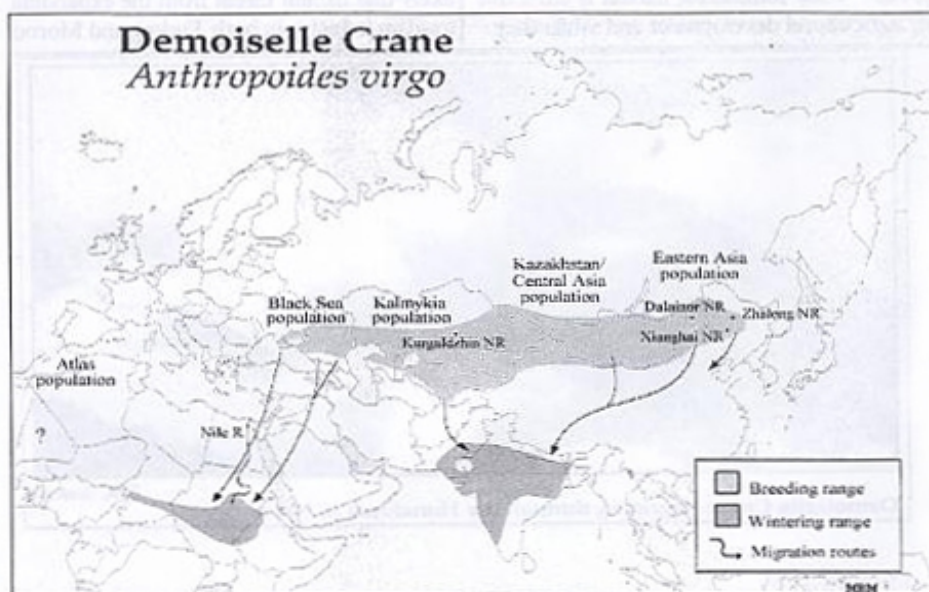
Of further interest, it appears that those Demoiselle Cranes that the members of 47 Squadron followed from Russia to the Sudan are, in fact, a minority group. The map on page 15 shows both the distribution range and migratory routes.

Finally, 2 further web sites that have particularly interesting information: first, there is a most interesting article about Demoiselle Crane conservation in Rajasthan titled: 'The Demoiselle Cranes of Kichan' detailing how one small village has attracted up to 6000 birds with a simple feeding programme. Second, by going to the AltaVista search engine selecting "photos"

and then Demoiselle Crane I was able to access literally thousands of excellent colour images of this most striking bird.

So there you have it – why Number 47 Squadron has the Demoiselle Crane as its symbol, and a little about the bird. I wonder what the history behind other Squadron badges portraying birds might be?

1. <http://www.whozoo.org/Intro98/lily/lilypage2.html> accessed 20 Mar 01
2. <http://www.savingcranes.org/species/demi.asp> accessed 4 Mar 01
3. <http://www.nps.gov/resource/distr/brids/cranes/anthvirg.htm> accessed 4 Mar 01
4. <http://www.orientalbirdclub.org/feature/demois.html> accessed 3 Mar 01
5. <http://www.altavista.co.uk>



NOTES FROM THE COMMITTEE

By Tony Marter

Well, this is my last 'Notes' for the time being as the position of Civilian Representative is 'up for grabs' as I have now completed my 3 years in post - it seems like no time at all since my unanimous (s)election at the '98 AGM. Despite the unrelenting 'workload' associated with my duties, and contrary to the calling notice put out by the General Secretary for the AGM on the 17th November, what I have actually said is that I will only stand again for a further 3 year term if there is nobody else who wishes to take on the onerous mantle. My journey distance to RAF Innsworth near Gloucester, where nearly all Committee Meetings are currently being held, is 241 miles each way, but despite the Committee having agreed a motor mileage allowance for civilian Committee Members attending meetings, I would not stand in the way of another nominee/volunteer. All applicants should send or e-mail their CVs to me, together with the customary orange Form 10, by the 1st November at the latest. :-))

I hope that the subject of the Frank Walker Award has crossed your minds with the arrival of the AGM calling notice. It has certainly prompted me into thinking about when the Award was first introduced, whether anyone has a partial or complete list of past winners or can lay their hands on any copies of the citations. Our General Secretary, Nick Smith has managed to provide me with a list of winners as far back as 1985 and he may be able to extract some of the citations from the vast number of 'closed' files which he holds. My reason for looking for this information is to possibly put together a small article on such winners, thereby re-acknowledging the contributions made by them to the Society over the years. The partial list of Award winners compiled so far is:

1985 - WO Frank Smith
1986 - Maj David Counsell
1987 - Dr Ian Lyster
1988 - Air Cdre Alan Curry
1989 - MAEOp John Le Gassick
1990 - FS Jim Bryden
1991 - Not Awarded - ???
1992 - Sqn Ldr Mike Blair
1993 - Sqn Ldr Brian Withers
1994 - Reg & Val Kersley
1995 - Vic Cozens & Bob Frost
1996 - Not Awarded - ???
1997 - Dave & Anne Bodley
1998 - Sqn Ldr Tony Marter
1999 - Robbie Robinson
2000 - Ch Tech John Wells

We now have 161 Members signed up to the Data Protection Act which will now allow a reasonable Membership List to be distributed, however, this total is still some way short of the best we should be able to achieve from a current membership of 252, a total that includes those who are 'lost' but still paying a moderately up-to-date subscription. So, come on those of you who have signally failed to come up with the goods, get that small form filled in and give the Membership Secretary a boost i.e. reduce his rate of hair loss, before he retires from the RAF next year. Please note that I consider that those of you who have not 'signed up' should not receive a Membership List in the next mailing. :-(((On membership, the Committee has decided that the fees structure should be simplified by offering just three types namely; Individual at £7.00 per year, Family at £10.00 per year and Corporate at £10.00 per year. These changes will, of course, need to be ratified by you at the forthcoming AGM.

All of you will have by now received the premier edition of our glossy 'Joint' Journal,

The Osprey and are no doubt making comparisons, fair and otherwise, with our previous efforts, with the RNBWS Sea Swallow, and with many other magazines to do with 'birding'. Let me tell you that the 'birth' of The Osprey followed a very long gestation period and in the end, those involved in its final editing, had to work extremely hard to prevent the 'baby' becoming breached. I hope that you feel that the end result was worth the wait - the Journal is not perfect by any means, and in many ways is incomplete as there is only a token input from the RNBWS. However, the Committee thinks that the 'look and feel' of the publication give it credibility; the paper quality is good, the clarity of the text, tables and maps are excellent, and the use of colour photographs adds greatly to its 'status'. Overall, we believe that the first issue provides a firm launching-pad for future co-operation between the ornithological societies of the three Services. My main comment is that there is a slight feeling of 'Ornitholidays' in some areas and that 'people' photographs should only have a place within the main text of such journals in exceptional circumstances. Please take time to consider 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' points about the Journal and let the Committee have your verdict at the AGM or preferably, e-mail our Joint Journal Editor, Mike Blair. The next issue is already in the early planning stages with reports from the Outer Hebrides 'Seabird 2000', West Coast of Scotland, and Varanger Fjord expeditions in the pipe line.

The Committee have had long discussions regarding future RAFOS expeditions, how we should fund and mount them, and where the interface should occur between civilian and Service participants, particularly when considering those expeditions which have attracted Adventurous Training (AT) status. Hardly surprising you may say as all these matters have been the subject of much cogitation and agitated debate for many a long year. However, with regard to

expeditions which have been designated as AT, the rules governing civilians taking part have been considerably tightened up in recent times. :- (((Wot, no Flannans 4 ME? You will be hearing from the Expeditions Member at the AGM about the latest AT policy and how this will affect the way we must plan and mount future expeditions. It would seem that old codgers like myself may not be able to officially take part in any future 'official' AT expeditions, however, that will not stop me from suggesting that RAFOS should mount civilian-style 'AT' ones if that is what the non-Service element of the Society wish for. <bg> Let either myself or the Expeditions Member know where you would like to go.

Finally, well almost, I have noticed that the official attendance at RAFOS AGMs has been falling steadily over the past 15 years. In the mid- to late-eighties, numbers were in the 70's **excluding** Committee Members and in the early- to mid-nineties, numbers were in the 60's. Over the past 6 years, however, numbers have fallen dramatically to 37 and 42 for the last two years, **including** Committee Members. This trend does in part of course follow the reduction in Society membership but it does beg the wider question as to whether we are holding the AGM at the venue most likely to attract members. One of the main criteria to be considered is that arrangements for the AGM are handled by the General Secretary and, needless to say, he finds it easiest to arrange these at, or very near to, his parent unit. Perhaps we should arrange to post our Committee Members nearer the population 'hub' of RAFOS members?

Lastly, and really only marginally to do with 'Notes', some of us who attended the last Committee Meeting mentioned that we would be going to the forthcoming British Birdwatching at Rutland Water and that a RAFOS gathering for breakfast on the Friday morning would probably take place. Luckily, I still have a few Lloyds Bank coin bags with

some shrapnel (20p or less) in them so I might just be able to put down a deposit for my next Poyser. Hope to have seen some of you there. :-) Don't forget yours truly is still

awaiting your calls and e-mails on 01493-781555 or at tonymarter@cs.com - Open All Hours. :-))

I LEARNT ABOUT BIRDING FROM THAT

by Wg Cdr Wayne Morris

Was it fate or destiny that presented me with the opportunity to travel over 4000 miles in an LDV minibus (I kid you not) to the Varangerfjord and back, with a very sociable bunch of RAFOS guys. It seems only yesterday that I overheard Nick Smith telling someone down the phone that the exped was going to worms because they couldn't locate a JSMEI (Joint Services Mountain Expedition Leader). I confessed to Nick that I was indeed one of these, albeit that my knees were a bit knackered and that I needed to raise my fitness a bit.

He was very adroit in emphasising the pleasure to be had from being "on the hill" inside the Arctic Circle, and the buzz to be had from sighting so many "firsts"; the challenge of 10 days travelling in LDV's finest was less apparent. This is not the case now; many people have a few beers on detachment and succumb to the lures of the tattoo parlour, but only RAFOS expeds to

Northern Norway give you the benefit of a free "Leyland DAF Vehicles" imprint on your backside!

But it was all worth it, as I did indeed see so many exciting birds (and a lot I found less exciting, so I'm not completely converted - well, not yet). I am sufficiently fired up to put the Collins Field Guide on the top of my reading list and, of course, a decent pair of bins.

Editor's Footnote:

Wayne also added that he also had a lot of ducks pointed out to him - some 420 of which were Stellers' Eider, the object of the team's very long overland deployment to one of the last of Europe's wilderness frontiers, to add to the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust's knowledge of this threatened species. A summary of the ornithological highlights will be published in the next Journal.

FALO UPDATE

by
Mike Hayes

The River Survey in Morayshire went well until it was forced to be abandoned due to Foot and Mouth, Henry Thompson has written a very good article about this survey in the Osprey. Unfortunately Foot and Mouth affected the rest of the spring Field Meetings which had to be cancelled including Islay, Norfolk and Chew Valley. At the time of writing the autumn ones are still due to go ahead as planned. (See the programme below).

On the Expedition front The West Coast of Scotland Survey went very well in February, CT John Wells had to make some late changes to accommodate extra participants and 3 new Service members enjoyed their first expedition. Although this was the last of a three-year series we are looking to continue similar surveys for the WWT.

Varangerfjord was a great success; although I am not sure if many of the participants realised how far it was once you had crossed the North Sea. Keith Cowison obviously knew what he was doing when he decided to fly. I am looking forward to the presentation at the AGM.

The Flannan Islands expedition led by Dave Slater attracted a good deal of interest but transport proved to be a stumbling block which proved too difficult to overcome this year so the expedition was cancelled. However those that are in to cliff jumping may get their wish granted next year. As a seabird colony the Flannan Islands are protected and we were unable to get permission to land a helicopter on the islands during the breeding season and it is unlikely that this will be granted in the future. So on to plan B, our fall back plan also failed as we were unable to hire a boat and rib to make the

journey for a reasonable price. RAFOS does not give up easily and now we are now looking for alternative transport as I write and are confident we will find suitable transport for this exciting venture next year. (Rumours of the Royal Navy taking us by submarine are untrue. We are going to parachute in!!!)

Next year the overseas expedition is non-adventurous and will take place in the spring at Gibraltar. Our man on the Rock, Robin Springett, has made contact with the Gibratarians regarding manning their ringing nets and carrying out breeding surveys of Barbary Partridge and Rock Thrush on the Rock. There should be ample opportunities for birding in Southern Spain as part of this visit. Costs are expected to be minimal, civilian flight prices are low at around £140 return and accommodation is £8 pppn, this is before any subsidies or grants are applied. This is wonderful opportunity for many members to get together on a non-arduous expedition with lots of ringing opportunities. It will be similar to the Akamas expeditions in one of Europe's best migration watch points at one of the best times of the year, not to be missed.

In future years we are examining manning OCL watch points and mountain bird surveys in the Pyrenees in the autumn of 2003 and I am exploring the possibilities of going to Australia in 2004. By beginning planning so early we are hoping to attract some large grants and thus significantly reduce the cost to reasonable levels.

I have on offer a wide range of Field Meetings for 2002, including all the established ones at the usual times of the year. In addition, we have added Islay in May and Dungeness in September. Please Please

Please complete your expression of interest forms and return to me as soon as possible. This is so that we can assess numbers and decide if meetings and expeditions are viable before we commit society funds.

and under the guidance of the expedition's member, Phil Glendinning, we are exploring new ideas for our field activities both at home and abroad. If you have any ideas please contact me and we can have a chat.

The committee has some ambitious ideas to extend our activities as far afield as possible

Good birding

Mike Hayes

ACTIVITIES PROGRAMME		
Date	Field Meeting	Leader
5 – 7 Oct 01	Portland Weekend	Dave & Anne Bodley
19 – 28 Oct 01	Cornish Chough	Jim Bryden
4 Nov 01	Chew Valley Lake	Dave & Anne Bodley
Jan/Feb 02	Pilot River Survey in Scotland (WWT)	Henry Thomson
3 Feb 02	Slimbridge	Bill Francis
?? Mar 02	Chew Valley Lake	Dave & Anne Bodley
12 – 14 Apr 02 (provisional)	Burnham Overy Norfolk Weekend	Mike Hayes
22 Apr – 10 May 02 (provisional)	Gibraltar	TBN
25 May – 1 Jun 02 (provisional)	Islay	Bill Francis
28 Jun – 8 Jul 02 (provisional)	Flannan Islands	Dave Slater
?? Sep 02	Dungeness	Peter Lever
?? Oct 02	Portland Weekend	Dave & Anne Bodley
End Oct 02	Chew Valley Lake	Dave & Anne Bodley
?? Oct 02	Cornish Chough	Jim Bryden

THE GAMBIA AGAIN

by
Robin Springett

Readers of my earlier accounts on trips to The Gambia, will not be surprised to learn that the year 2000 had hardly turned into 2001 before I was off again to The Gambia to try and edge up my total species count for that country towards my self-imposed target of 300. This was to be no family holiday, but no frills serious dawn to dusk (and beyond) birding. The prospect of that was too much for Julia, and she declined the offer of another trip; this time I was to be accompanied by a friend called Keith from Gibraltar. Keith is an experienced birder, although only in his early 20s, but this would be his first visit to sub-Saharan Africa. The first week in January beckoned; this would get us back in UK to allow Keith to return to university in Leeds, and me to do some consultancy. We agreed to pursue my strategy for the Gambia; that is to book the cheapest flight and accommodation on a B&B basis. Keith's travel agent at university came up with a First Choice week at the Badala Park Hotel, considerably cheaper than anything I could find on the Internet; indeed, it was cheaper than the return flight from Gibraltar to UK! Many of you will know that I like the Badala Park Hotel; it is basic but adequate, with a good pool, and friendly staff, and being on the cycle path, opposite the Kotu pools, and near the Kotu stream, is ideally suited to birding from the hotel. We booked! At the same time, I wrote to Lamin Sidebeh, my guide from previous trips, and gave him our dates; I knew that he would meet us at the bridge over Kotu stream the evening we arrived.

It seems really funny to fly from Gibraltar to London, to catch a flight to the Gambia, which goes back over the top of Gib, but that is the way it is. Arrival at Banjul airport was as normal, and we were given bottled water whilst waiting for the coach to fill; we also

used the time to change money with one of the many moneychangers. The First Choice representative who met us was once again Kwali, who entertained the new arrivals with the same stories and jokes, and still laughed at them himself. What was different was the fact that the coach no longer goes through Serekunda, as the new road along the coast from the airport is now open. Also obvious were the new villas springing up along the coastal strip; we were to learn later that these are mainly European owned, and being built by people retiring to The Gambia. No Brits at present, but Swiss, Dutch and German, and you can see the attraction, £30,000 buys a villa and a plot of land a short distance from the Atlantic; in Spain add on £100,000 at least. Still we were there to bird, and not to buy villas! On arrival at the hotel, it was obvious that the visitor numbers were down on previous years; we got the block, floor and nearly the room we asked for straight away. We unpacked and made for Kotu creek and had 34 species in no time. At the bridge over Kotu stream, we met Malik, Lamin's cousin, and a very competent bird guide. He told us that he and Lamin were going up river with two Swedish birders after breakfast next morning, and we were invited. This was not exactly what I wanted to do, as I really needed to cross the river to the north bank and see the birds there, but Keith was keen to go, and Tendaba is such a good place to visit, we agreed to go. With dusk imminent, we walked along the cycle path to the back of the Palma Rima hotel where, right on queue, we were surrounded by *long tailed nightjars*. There is little twilight at this latitude, and we walked quickly the 10 minutes back to the hotel. After getting cleaned up, we made our way to the Paradise Beach Bar for an excellent meal on the edge of the Atlantic. The meal, the beer and a taxi to the hotel cost

us less than £6 each; it was great to be back!

Next morning we were to be met by after breakfast for a trip up country in the company of the two Swedes, so it would be an early start. Over breakfast "al fresco" we had *broad-billed roller* in the bamboo, which was quite exciting. Our transport was late, and it transpired that the vehicle had broken down; decent of it to do so before we started, and not on the road in the bush miles from anywhere! The result was that we were almost 2 hours late away; this would affect us at our stops on the way, but nothing we could do about it, and this was Africa after all. The 6 of us (4 birders and 2 guides), plus driver, were comfortably ensconced in a mini bus, and we left via Serrekunda, which was a real eye opener for Keith with its crush of humanity, including women balancing loads on their heads. We changed a little money; odd really, as all the money changers offer the same rate, so how do the little guys on the street expect you to choose who to use? We put ice into the cold box to cool our drinks, bought bottled water and bread for lunch, and were on our way. We stopped off at Lamin rice fields, which proved fruitful with 26 species, including my first new bird - *black crane*. The game was really on now! Naturally we stopped off at Pirang, where we were told that the long defunct Scan-Gambia shrimp farm, closed in 1992, has finally been sold; to whom, or for what purpose we never found out. Not such good news for the *black-crowned crane* though; there were a number about, perhaps 18 on my last visit in November 1999, but there may be as few as 3 birds, 2 adults and one immature, left now. We did not see any, and the bird may now be extinct in The Gambia, but *osprey* and *long-crested eagle*, together with the almost guaranteed *quail finch* was some compensation. The road to Tendaba is as awful and pot-holed as ever, perhaps worse, as there was no evidence of the holes being filled. We did get a very memorable view of a *grasshopper buzzard*, plus Rüppell's and

white backed vulture to name only a few of the birds along the road. One very worrying sight was someone with a gun; the first gun that I had ever seen in The Gambia and, according to Lamin, now quite a common sight in the bush. No doubt a result of conflicts elsewhere in Africa, and it is probably only a question of time before some of the large birds fall victim to villagers with guns. Brummen Bridge is in the book as a good spot, but now it is almost not worth the stop; it certainly isn't if the children are there in numbers. Best advice I can offer is to get on to Tendaba and get in the pool and await the cool of evening.

Tendaba Bush Camp was very quiet on our visit; there were only 6 other visitors, and the quietest that I had ever seen it. In the cool of the evening, we visited the airfield to see the evening fly in of *four-banded sandgrouse*, and we were not disappointed, as over 100 came in to drink and fill their body feathers with water. What a sight; we were just a few yards away, and their excited chatter could be clearly heard, and their antics seen. We watched for sometime, and also saw *double-spurred francolin*, but not *ground hornbill*. Later, back at the bush camp, after dinner, and over a beer we sat in the Bamboo Bar, with the river Gambia swirling past under our feet and mulled over an eventful day. Next morning, the tide was perfect for a creek visit, and the 4 of us with our two guides and the canoe "captain" and local guide set off across the river. Dawn was just cracking the horizon as we left the jetty, and it was quite cool across the river. The tide was just about on the turn, as we slipped into the first creek, with the ubiquitous *hammerkop*, and a fine selection of *terns*, with *gull-billed*, *sandwich* and *Caspian* all coming to investigate the canoe. My target species were *blue flycatcher* and *African finfoot*, but knew that we would need some luck. All the usual birds were there in quantity, and great excitement was caused by a *Goliath heron* which twice got airborne and simply moved ahead of us,

before finally taking the hint and doing a large circle over the mangroves to get behind us. We collectively marvelled at the simply gigantic size of this bird; how apt is its name, and what a contrast to the *malachite kingfisher* flashing by just off the water! Most of the birds were new to Keith, and many to our Swedish companions, but new species eluded me; there was not even the call of the *blue flycatcher* to tease me. We took the usual route through the mangrove to an adjoining creek, and as the salt marsh was becoming exposed, we stopped to get out and stretch our legs. Hardly had we all disembarked when our "captain" shouted "Finfoot!" I was standing near him and immediately saw this long bodied and elusive bird. It disappeared into the mangrove, and we all waited in a high state of excitement what seemed like hours, but was probably less than 10 minutes, before it re-appeared, feeding quite happily in the muddy water, and oblivious to us. Everyone got a good view of a life bird for all four visitors. At the same time, we also got a very good view of *black-shouldered kite*. Lamin took us off into the tall grasses surrounding the salt marsh, as he said that he could hear some *cisticolas*, and they could be the hard to see *black-backed*. Indeed they were, and we had very good views. Back in the canoe, gave us *African fish* and *Walberg's eagle* amongst other birds. We also got *white-backed night heron* in a mangrove that was new to me. We headed back across the Gambia river in brilliant sunshine, and a quick count up gave us 71 species seen in 3 hours birding; not bad by anyone's standards!

After packing and paying our bill we set off for Georgetown; the plan was to spend the night in the bush camp in Georgetown and do some local birding. I had not liked the accommodation offered the last time we had been to Georgetown, and we had not stopped at that time, so I was apprehensive. However, Georgetown is the only place to see *spotted thick-knee*, and Lamin assured me

that with the lack of tourists, we would be offered a better choice of accommodation. We had quite a good run to Georgetown, if you ignore being stopped at a checkpoint by a dodgy policeman who insisted that it was illegal to place a cooler box on the car seat. He was obviously looking for a back-hander, but we didn't oblige, and after keeping us waiting in the heat for some 20 minutes, we were waved on. Somehow, whilst we were driving at about 50 mph, Malik spotted a *pearl-spotted owlet* in a tree, and we duly backed the vehicle up and got a good view - amazing! Georgetown is on an island in the Gambia river, and I won't dwell on the ferry across the river, as I have covered it before, but it was as much fun as ever, and the local people as anxious to talk to us or sell us fruit or peanuts. The delight of these rural people in meeting tourists in their country has got to be experienced, it is so different from the hassle on the tourist beaches of the coast. We went directly into our bush camp, and got reasonable accommodation, as the four of us and a South African couple were the only tourists, although there were quite a number of NGO personnel passing through. The evening walk did indeed yield the *spotted thick-knee*. We saw 3 of these beautiful birds; sadly, one seemed to have a damaged leg. The day ended with us having seen well over 100 species since rising. Especially memorable for Keith was a *male exclamatory paradise whydah* in full breeding plumage. Next day we were off to Basse, and an early start was essential if we were to get back to the coast to eat. Breakfast was the usual fare of bread and jam, and we had to chase the cook out of bed to get it. We had taken a chance and reserved a table at the Paradise Beach Bar back on the coast for their live music event that evening, so we had a lot to cram in, if we were to get back in time. The road to Basse included a kapok tree in one village totally full of nesting *marabou storks*. No guns in this village yet it seems, but plenty of children to give out sweets to! At the sand pits I had visited before, we saw the expected

red-throated bee-eater, cinnamon breasted bunting, white-crested helmet shrike and others, whilst Basse itself still had a number of the quite startling *Egyptian plovers*. So far that day I had seen no new birds, and was now unlikely to until we got back to the coast. The prospect of the long journey we must now take, made much worse by the many potholes we must negotiate, before I could sink into a chair in front of a beer, was now foremost in my mind. Others were anxious to see the many raptors we were likely to see on the way back, and although we did see *Beaudouin's short-toed eagle* amongst others, we didn't see *bateleur*, which for me is the most exciting eagle in that part of Africa. We tried Pirang on our way back, but no sign of the cranes; it was dusk, so if they were around, we should have seen them. We got back to our hotel in time to clean up and rush out to The Paradise Beach Club, where we indeed did have a table near the band, who were full of energy and enthusiasm. The bar was packed, the beer cold, and the food excellent; the road from Basse somehow suddenly seemed unimportant!

Next morning we again teamed up with the Swedish birders, who I have neglected to mention, were father (Mikael Bauer) and son (Karl). Both were good birders, and Mikael especially was a very careful and analytical observer, who needed convincing for a sighting of any unusual birds; that made me feel very comfortable, as it is very much my approach to those elusive ticks. We headed to Brufut wood, which halfway through the dry season was still surprisingly green. It was as good as ever and yielded 50 species. An *osprey* with rings (yellow left and silver right) was a quite unusual sight for Brufut. I had 2 new species for The Gambia; I saw *common hoopoe*, which is almost a back garden bird at home in Gibraltar. The other was *yellow-throated leaf love*. We went back to the hotel for lunch, and had our first swim there since arriving. As the day cooled, we went to Kotu

pools opposite the hotel so that Keith could see the colony of *white faced ducks*. Several had young on the pools, but the were very wary, and we couldn't approach too close before they started to whistle, and then swam off. Other birds were much as normal. Next day, we had decided to stay around the Kotu area in the morning, doing the Fajara golf course and Kotu beach and stream. We met a couple of very nice lads who were trainee bird guides and we actually had a brilliant time, seeing 73 species. Again much excitement was caused by the appearance of a northern European bird, a *little gull*, as it was moulting and in a plumage which neither of us had ever seen before. It was hanging out with the other gulls on the Kotu stream, and made an interesting and unmistakable sight. We checked later, and several birders had seen it over the last few days. In the afternoon, we went with Lamin to Abuko nature reserve. The reserve continues to come under pressure from the sprawling Serekunda, and it won't be much longer before dwellings surround it, but not yet. From the steps on the main hide, we got the most amazing views of *Verreaux's eagle owl* in the palm trees, one on the nest, and its mate on a frond alongside. This pair was almost certainly sitting on eggs. We were so close and could see how huge this bird is. It regarded us from its palm tree with lazy, disinterest, and when it closed its eyes, the pink lids were clearly visible! I also saw a *green turaco*, a bird that had eluded me on my two previous visits, but is a resident at Abuko.

Next morning we teamed up with our Swedish friends for their last morning and went along the new coastal road where we got so close to the *black-bellied bustard*, that I am not sure who was more surprised. The bird we saw was an adult male, and once it got over its surprise, it flew about 50 yards, showing its white wing markings. We also saw *Temminck's courser* in fields now being built on, where it appeared almost tame and found *penduline tit* in the long grasses. I

added 6 species to my list; that magic 300 was getting very close. We were back at the hotel in good time and took our leave of Karl and Mikael. After lunch we walked around the Kotu area and ended up walking back along the cycle track as dusk fell heading for the nightjar spot behind the Palma Rima hotel. The cycle track never ceases to surprise; we saw *blue* and *Abyssinian roller*, *black-shouldered kite* and *green wood hoopoe* in the space of about 15 minutes. We had quite a while to wait until dark, but were not the only people waiting for the nightjars, and the evening seemed perfect, as the breeze was very light; we waited in hope. Nightjars never fail to surprise me by the way they erupt into the air; one minute all is quiet, perhaps the odd bat, and then nightjars flying everywhere. In Europe this is usually accompanied by the well known churring

noise, but not here in the Gambia, where the calls are much more insect like. Within a few minutes of the calls, we had probably the largest number I have ever seen in one go, and tonight, no doubt, both *long tailed* and *standard wing* were flying. What a way to finish our week; celebratory beers were called for!

On our last morning, I needed to go into the shops at the Senegambia area, so we went along to the bird garden in the Senegambia hotel. Keith was really keen to see *lavender waxbill*, as to date it had eluded him, and it continued to do so. We stopped our walk round the bird garden around 1030 and went onto the terrace for a cold drink. No sooner had we sat down than, as if on queue, on a bush opposite was not just one, but a small flock; that's birding for you, and at that point

I put my binoculars away! Back at the hotel, we waited for the bus and totted up our results. Keith had seen 258 species in a week, with 190 new to him! My total for The Gambia had reached 298; 2 short of my target! Oh well! But then it's nice to have something to go back for! The birding is still fantastic! I have successfully used Lamin Sidibeh 3 times, Malik twice, and Modou Jarju, Kebba Sasseh, Pa Jallow and Tijan Kanteh once. My message remains the same; get there while everyone is friendly, but it is Africa, so exercise due caution, and remember that malaria and other tropical disease are there, and you must protect against them. You will need Rod Wards excellent *A Birdwatchers Guide to The Gambia* published by Prion Ltd, and *A Field Guide to Birds of The Gambia and Senegal* published by Pica Press, and now in paperback I am advised. Remember the sweets for the children and the ballpoints for everyone! Have a great visit.



Robin with local children

BTO Update

Birdwatchers needed to Help Winter Mammals

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the mammal Society are calling for volunteers to participate in an exciting new mammal monitoring project. This is a pilot study to see how effective the methods are for long term mammal monitoring, so as you can imagine they are keen to involve as many people as possible.

The call for volunteers follows an announcement that the BTO and the Mammal Society have been awarded a government contract to design and run a multi-species mammal monitoring pilot over the coming winter. The study has been funded by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). It is hoped that the results will be used as a basis for more long-term future mammal monitoring projects in the UK.

The project has been met with great enthusiasm from both the BTO and the Mammal Society. Dr J Greenwood (Director of the BTO) said "The BTO has huge amounts of expertise in monitoring bird populations and working with volunteers. This joint project reflects the work that the BTO has done in suggesting how different approaches can be used to monitor mammals". Professor S Harris of the Mammal Society shared Dr Greenwood's enthusiasm for the project and said "This is an extremely exciting project, up until now there has been no national monitoring scheme for land mammals in Britain. This is partly because mammals are not always easy to observe and some are difficult to identify. However it is important to monitor mammal populations as they provide vital information about the health of our countryside.

If you would like to find out more or indeed volunteer to take part in this survey then please contact.

Mike Toms at the BTO on 01842 750 050 or you can email on mammals@bto.org

Alternatively you can contact the Mammal Society on 020 7498 4358, email enquires@mammal.org.uk

Extracts from the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum Newsletter – June 2001

What follows are extracts from the newsletter of the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF) Newsletter. In selecting extracts I have concentrated on articles concerning those territories that are likely to be of most interest to current and former service personnel – Ed

FUNDING AT LAST TO START ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION WORK ON ASCENSION

John Battle MP, Minister of State Foreign and Commonwealth Office announced in his speech to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Wildlife Protection on Monday 26 March 2001 that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was making available additional funding of £500,000 to support a two-year project, to be implemented by the RSPB and the island's administration, to restore the seabird breeding colonies on Ascension Island.

Mr Battle said "This project will be managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), whose national and international record on major habitat projects gives me confidence of success. The aim is to remove threats to the famous Wideawake Fairs-Ascension's breeding colonies of the Wideawake Tern; to make the whole island secure from introduced predators so that other spectacular seabirds like the Ascension Island Frigate Bird and the Brown Booby will be able to expand from offshore Boatswainbird Island to the main island; and to support the development of sustainable nature tourism - including the magnificent Green Turtle beaches - as a key part of Ascension's future prosperity.

This project is long overdue. Sadly, little attention was paid to conserving Ascension's natural heritage during the 20th century. The seabird colonies of this remote tropical Atlantic island should now be restored closer to their earlier size and diversity of species. Taking measures to repair damage by invasive

species is an important commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). That was one of the big achievements of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio."

Ascension covers an area of almost 100 sq km, is home to the Ascension Frigatebird *Frigata aquilla* - an endemic species that is declining in number. Ascension is also home to other seabirds including sooty (also known as wideawake terns) and fairy terns, red-footed boobies and white-tailed tropicbirds. It is also important for a variety of rare plants, fish and invertebrates and is one of the world's most important breeding sites for green turtles.

In order to restore this important island, the RSPB will fence-in livestock to reduce the spread of invasive plants, like the Mexican thorn, which was accidentally introduced in the 1980s and which provides food and cover for rats. Measures will be taken to remove other introduced species such as feral cats which have decimated the island's seabird and turtle populations. It is hoped that further funds will be raised to eradicate rats. The RSPB will also employ a conservation officer to ensure that the island's environment is conserved and enhanced.

RSPB International Director, Alistair Gammell said: "Conservationists have been campaigning to protect Ascension's wildlife

The web site for the UKOTCF
can be found at:

www.ukotcf.org

for many years during which time introduced species such as feral cats and black rats have been responsible for the death of many thousands of seabirds and baby turtles. These species have been responsible for the extinction of two bird species (a flightless rail and a night heron) and the decimation of seabird and turtle colonies. We welcome the FCO's support for this initiative to restore this island to its former glory." FCO minister John Battle said: "This visionary project will not only protect Ascension's wildlife for future generations, it will also support the people of one of the UK's smallest overseas territories through sustainable tourism."

Ascension Island's Administrator, Geoffrey Fairhurst, added: "On the 500th anniversary of Ascension's discovery, we are proud to be able to repair the damage done over the years and to make the island, once again, the most important seabird-breeding colony in the South Atlantic."

The Forum congratulates FCO on finding the resources in this case. The lack of a budget line for UK to fulfil its international commitments by major conservation projects has been highlighted in Ascension where, under current UK Government rules, there are no permanent local citizens to share the responsibility. The Forum hopes that UK government will look towards the development of a fund to allow for other major OT needs.

SEVERE DECLINE IN FALKLANDS BLACK-BROWED ALBATROSS POPULATIONS

Recent studies by Falklands Conservation reveal a dramatic decrease in numbers of Black-browed albatrosses breeding in the Falklands, which hold most of the world population of this beautiful bird. Breeding pairs have dropped by 76,000 from 458,000 in 1995 to 382,000 today. BirdLife International is now considering whether the

status of the Black-browed Albatross should be amended from Near Threatened to Vulnerable in the light of this new information. The most staggering decline of all, a loss of 41,200, is at the largest colony of albatross in the Falklands archipelago, on Steeple Jason Island, one of a chain of nature reserves to the north west of the islands. The results confirm a suspected decline reported last year on Beauchene Island, the second largest Falklands breeding site for albatross

Albatrosses have made headlines recently, attracting royal support from Prince Charles for their protection. They are globally under threat from long-line fisheries, which hook and drown the birds as they dive for the baited lines. "Illegal and unregulated fisheries around the world are having a disastrous effect on these birds" said Dr Nic Huin, albatross scientist working for Falklands Conservation and leader of the albatross census team. "This decline in the Falklands albatross population may well reflect the numbers of birds dying each year in Patagonian Shelf longline fisheries. It is essential that control is taken over unregulated fisheries and every possible mitigation measure put into place to stop this downward trend".

The birds breeding in the Falkland Islands travel vast distances during their winter migration. Recent satellite-tracking studies by Falklands Conservation have shown they are exposed to threats from longline fisheries in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and out into international waters, for both toothfish and tuna. Dr Huin, who has been studying the albatross in the Islands for three years, adds "The safeguarding of these populations is something that requires a huge international effort. While every attempt can be made within the Falklands to protect them and their habitat, co-operation and international agreement will be needed to make this effective".

The latest figures are the result of a census of Black-browed albatross in the Falklands carried out during October and November 2000 as part of a 20-month investigation by Falklands Conservation to determine the reasons for the decline in the black-browed albatross population. A Falklands Conservation team of ship-based surveyors estimated the numbers of breeding birds at each site using photography, transects and direct counts for comparison. A major appeal has been launched to fund this study which has received support from the RSPB and Falkland Islands Government. A further £10,000 is still urgently needed to ensure completion of this essential research. Donations to the Appeal are welcomed. Credit card/ telephone donations should be made to 020 8343 0831. Postal donations should be sent to Falklands Conservation at 1 Princes Avenue, Finchley, London N3 2DA.

Further Information

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www.falklands-nature.demon.co.uk

SUPPORTING CONSERVATION PROGRAMMES IN THE UK'S OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

The UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) are important parts of the UK. Although small in size, they are home to many animals and plants, some not found anywhere else in the world. The UKOTs are not foreign. Because they are British, they are not eligible for most international grant sources –but they are not eligible either for most domestic British ones! The UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum works to help people in the Territories to conserve their biodiversity, unique species and ecosystems, as well as other aspects of our shared heritage. The UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum is funded by donations from government, companies, trusts and from people like you.

You can support our valuable work by becoming a Friend of the Overseas Territories or by making a donation to the Forum. Please contact:

Frances Marks,
Forum Co-ordinator,
15 Insall Road,
Chipping Norton,
Oxon
OX7 5LF.

Cheques should be payable to the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum.

THE DECIMATION OF THE WORLD'S BIRD LIFE

*What follows is an article that appeared in the news digest magazine
THE WEEK dated 7 July 2001*

Mauritius, home to the unlucky dodo, was also where the Mauritius red hen met its end. It was eaten by sailors, one of whom wrote in 1638: "They bee very good Meat, and are also Cloven Footed, soe that they can Neyther Fly nor Swymme." Being smaller and less noticeable than the dodo, the red hen might have escaped but for one flaw: it was irresistibly and fatally drawn to anything red. Caps, socks, shirts - any piece of red cloth dangling from a stick would bring the once common red hens of Mauritius running. Add to that misfortune the catastrophic coincidence that the standard sailor's hat in the 17th century was made of red cloth and you have the makings of a peculiarly unlucky extinction.

Extinctions have a lot to teach us. It is in looking into the details of an extinction that you discover the really useful information that seems to apply to our own predicament as a species with suicidal tendencies. Take the great auk, or garefowl. The northern hemisphere version of the penguin, the great auk was hunted to extinction in the 19th century by sailors anxious for the flesh and feathers of this flightless bird. The last major colony was on Funk Island, off the coast of Newfoundland. The colony was huge, numbering tens of thousands of birds. But, every year, sailors would come and capture as many as they could take away. They even built stone corrals to hold the birds before slaughtering them. It wasn't that the great auk didn't have a chance. It had lots of chances. The birds could swim, and there were many inhospitable islands nearby to which they could have escaped. But they didn't.

The problem for the great auk was the size of colony needed before action can be taken. For great auks, that is thought to have been about 10,000 birds. When their number fell below

that, they were paralysed into inaction, waiting for directions that never came, doomed to be knocked off one by one. Biologists call this quorum-sensing. It has even been observed in the lowly bacterium: below a certain number, bacteria are "unintelligent", but once a colony grows, all sorts of clever moves become possible, including the formation of a protective biofilm by those bacteria nearest the surface. The great auk was dead long before the last bird was killed around 1844 on a remote sea stack off Iceland. It died when the will of the "community" to keep going was lost.

We see ospreys and peregrine falcons clinging on in their ones and twos. If one is in the mood to make comparisons, one can enjoy the vague smugness of knowing that, unlike them, we have numbers on our side. The sheer ubiquity of the human race makes it psychologically hard to 'conceive of our total disappearance. But if the history of extinctions tells us anything, it is that big populations are vulnerable, too. Take the passenger pigeon, once the most numerous bird on earth, blackening the skies of North America, blocking out the sun with their vast continental journeyings, so profligate in number that in a 19th century hunting competition a minimum of 30,000 birds needed to be killed to win a prize. Such numbers are almost inconceivable in this age of vast fields of factory food whose summer silence is broken only by the buzzing of electricity pylons overhead and the combine harvester crashing through genetically enhanced identical stalks of corn.

The passenger pigeon was first observed by the French navigator Jacques Cartier in 1534, off the coast of Prince Edward Island. In 1749 it was noted that a multitude of such birds stretched over seven miles when they

alighted in a wood, covering every tree like a plague of locusts. In flight, such a crowd could measure four miles from the leaders to the followers and at least two miles in width. In the 1830s, the ornithologist John James Audubon wrote: "The air was literally filled with pigeons; the light of noonday obscured as by an eclipse... pigeons were still passing in undiminished numbers, and continued to do so for three days in succession."

By 1900 there was only one wild passenger pigeon left. It was shot by a 14-year-old named Press Clay Southworth. It was stuffed, and is still exhibited in a museum in Columbus, Ohio. The very last passenger pigeon of all, a female named Martha, died in a Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. The passenger pigeon once accounted for 40% of America's bird population; within the life span of one human being, it was lost entirely. But why? The bird was fast, capable of over 60 mph. The incubation time was short - from egg to chick in 12 or 13 days, with a nesting cycle of only 30 days from start to finish. They could escape, and they could breed - so why did they so completely disappear?

The key lies in the 1870s. At the beginning of that decade, there was no noticeable decline in pigeon numbers, despite decades of heavy hunting. Ten years later, the population had been ravaged and, more importantly, scattered into small groups all round America. No hardened hunter sought out these isolated groups to polish off, systematically, every last member of the species. There wasn't any need. Once the big flocks were broken up, the passenger pigeon, like the great auk before it, just gave up, quit breeding, and died. By some quirk of evolution, the pigeon just couldn't exist below a certain huge flock number.

One is reminded of the mysterious and worrying plummet in sparrow numbers - from 2,603 recorded living in Kensington Gardens in 1925, to the grand total last year of eight. It has been estimated that 94% of all avian species that ever existed are now extinct;

more than 80 species have vanished since 1600. The birds that disappear are usually the ones that cross the path of Western man out to squeeze a profit in a remote and inhospitable place. Birds on islands do particularly badly: dodos, of course, but also the Marquesas fruit dove, the broad-billed parrot, the Molokai O'o, the Cuban red macaw, and the grotesquely unlucky Stephen Island wren. Perhaps the only perching bird incapable of flight, the Stephen Island wren was discovered by the cat of a lighthouse keeper on Stephen Island, a rocky island close to New Zealand. For a few months in 1894, the lighthouse keeper's cat set the ornithological world alight by bringing in example after example of the hitherto unrecorded species. Unfortunately, this feline accessory to science brought in every specimen dead - and before the year was out had ceased to bring in any more. No one has ever set eyes on a Stephen's Island wren since. (This may be the only example of the extirpator of a species also being its discoverer.)

During this runaway age of industrial capitalism, more species of bird have disappeared per decade than at any time in history. In making things and enjoying them immensely we have lost sight of a great deal. We have become mired in pointless extravagances on a planet which has enough for everyone if we can learn how to be human again, how to love without limit or sentimentality or hope of reward. What size would such a community be for it to feel itself alive, for its quorum-sensing requirements to be met?

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The Extinction Club by Robert Twigger is published by Penguin at £12.99.

Extinct Birds by Errol Fuller is published by OUP at £25.

THE RAFOS NEWSLETTER.....

is published twice per year and the Editor welcomes all contributions.

The following guidance is offered to potential contributors.

- ♦ The length of the article does not matter - there is always room for shorter items.
- ♦ Illustrations are always welcome. "Line" drawings such as pen and ink reproduce very well. With our new arrangements for printing, it is possible to reproduce colour photographs more effectively, although these have to be located on the front and back covers.
- ♦ Please send written items as soon as you can, as this spreads the load on me and, more importantly, on our hard-working Illustrator-in-Chief, (Robbie) who would prefer requests on a phased basis instead of a last minute panic.
- ♦ I look forward to receiving written contributions in the following formats, listed in order of preference:
 1. On a floppy disk from a word-processing application. I use Word for Windows 97 but that will import from most other mainstream word processors. If in doubt, use Windows Write, but don't worry - almost anything will work (but, please tell me what it is!). Strongly preferred - this really does save time and trouble. Please avoid anything too fancy in the layout. In producing this Newsletter I use MS Publisher, and it can be a bit fussy at times. **Please send any graphics separately, preferably as .jpeg files, rather than incorporating them into the document. Publisher is not fond of Excel spreadsheets, so please avoid if possible.**
 2. By e-mail (wfrancis@dircon.co.uk is the address) either as email or file transfer.
 3. As typed copy, black on white so that it can be scanned into my PC.
 4. Hand-written and I'll type it in myself (least welcome!).
- ♦ Illustrations are relatively technology-proof. Please send them well packed to the address below - **and please let me know if you want them back.**
- ♦ **Closing date for contributions for the next edition : 1 February 2002**

Best Wishes,

Bill Francis

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Two more of Robin Springett's pictures from The Gambia:
A Little Gull and Marabou Storks



