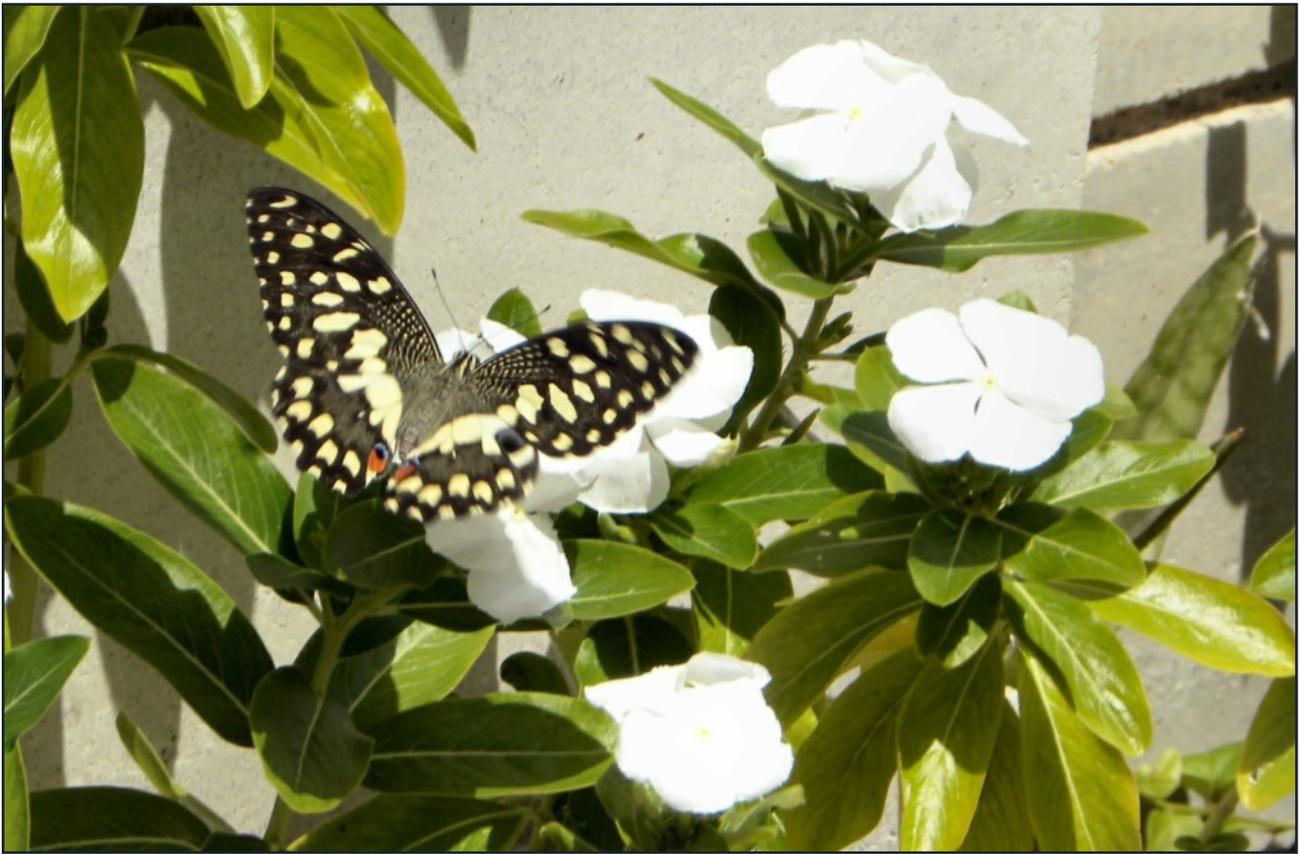




**ROYAL  
AIR FORCE**  
ornithological  
society



**Newsletter 106 Autumn 2018**



Swallowtail at Seeb - see John Le Gassick's article on a trip to Oman



Choughs at Machir Bay by John Le Gassick

**Front cover: Corncrake on Islay by Scott Drinkel**

# THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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## RAFOS AGM, 2018

The Speaker at this year's AGM will be Sacha Dench of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, who using a paramotor, flew with Bewick Swans from Siberia to Slimbridge on their on their winter migration.

The mix of aviation and ornithology made her subject really appropriate!

Do come along to hear of her fascinating experiences

## A Request

- **Are You Coming to the AGM?**
- **Do you have unwanted bird books?**
- **Are you willing to donate them to be auctioned to support RAFOS?**
- **Then please bring them along on the day!**

## **RAFOS GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATIONS STATEMENT**

Under the new General Data Protection Regulations, we need to tell you what we do with the personal information that you have supplied to us. RAFOS is committed to protecting your privacy and ensuring the security of your personal data. When you joined RAFOS you gave us your name and address for the purposes of receiving newsletters and other communications such as publicity for events. If you provided a telephone number and/or email address this may be used for direct communication on RAFOS matters.

Your details are held by the Membership Secretary and are available to some other Committee members who need to communicate directly with members. However, we do not contact our members for marketing purposes. The Treasurer holds details of members' method of payment of subscriptions and bank details if applicable. We will never pass on your details to any other person or organisation unless you ask us to do so, for example to your bank if you complete a Standing Order mandate to pay your subscription.

Your personal data is not used for any automated decision making or profiling. We keep your personal data for as long as your membership of RAFOS is active and may retain a record of your name and period of membership for archiving purposes.

You have the right to see the personal data that we hold about you and the right to have any incorrect information amended. You also have the right to request that your personal data is erased, or to object to its processing: however, we will no longer be able to communicate with you about your membership or to provide you with a newsletter or publicity of events. You also have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office if you believe that your personal data has been misused.

If you have any queries about your personal data held by RAFOS, please contact Jan Knight at [theknightsat2@gmail.com](mailto:theknightsat2@gmail.com) or write to her at 2 Old Place, Bognor Regis, West Sussex, PO21 3AU.



## Peter George Bean

8<sup>th</sup> October 1933 - 15<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Peter was born in Heathfield, Sussex, where he went to the local grammar school and at the age of 17 became apprenticed to the local garage to become a motor mechanic. This included some formal education at Brighton Technical College. On completing his apprenticeship in 1953, he became liable for National Service, so to obtain another useful trade, he volunteered for three years in the RAF as a radar fitter and was accepted. Training for this trade took over a year at Locking and included some specific equipment. After a couple of UK postings, he signed on for a further two years, did a tour on a mobile radar unit in Germany, then became a civilian again having attained the rank of Corporal.

In 1958 he was looking for a job, but he couldn't find anything he fancied – so he went back to the RAF and signed on to age 55. He was accepted as a Corporal and proceeded to a posting at Henlow where he joined one of the famous Fitting Parties who travelled the world installing new wireless and radar equipment on all our flying stations. He went to Malta, Aden, Germany, Masirah and the Hebrides – it was a good time to be in the Air Force!

Eventually, following more training at Locking and promotion to Sergeant, he was posted to 390 MU at Seletar, Singapore, and it was here that his birding career began when he joined RAFOS (Singapore Branch). The primary interests there were bird ringing and photography, led by Wilf Corris and Reg Kersley. Ringing took place on and around the three airfields: Changi, Seletar and Tengah and on sites further afield such as McRitchie Reservoir and the Jurong prawn ponds. Weekend expeditions were also undertaken 'up country' into Malaysia. Peter took part in all of these, and his elder daughter Deborah also became keenly interested in the birds. Visits on duty to Hong Kong, Butterworth, Penang, Labuan and best of all, Gan gave further opportunities for interesting birding.

Returning to the UK Peter had two tours on the staff at Locking, one in the Hebrides where he helped Colin Brown of the Nature Conservancy with fieldwork and one in Berlin where he joined Derek Elliot again doing fieldwork. He also became a life member of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust. Peter took part in the 1976 RAFOS expedition to Masirah and in the 1978 trip to Berlin. While in the UK he joined the annual Portland weekend on many occasions and attended the twice-yearly visits to Chew Valley Lake.

Finally leaving the Air Force in 1990 having extended his service to age 57, Peter took a job with Chubb servicing fire alarm and control systems in industrial units and hospitals, eventually becoming Area Supervisor for the South-West, which included responsibility for the installation in Hinckley Point power station and even one on Ascension Island! He finally retired at 65 to concentrate on his allotment and to take up a new sport – bowls. Sport had always played a major role in his life, starting with basketball and football. He played football until his mid-thirties, then qualified as a referee. He eventually became a referee assessor. Bowls in Wedmore included both indoor (short-mat) in the winter and outdoor on a green in summer, and Peter was soon on the committee helping to fit out the new clubroom. He also drove the minibus for the team's overseas trips to Europe, and he eventually played for the County.

In 1955 Peter and Jean married. They started their life together living in a caravan near RAF Henlow. For many years they moved through hirings and married quarters, with longish separations due to Peter's work. In 1969 they bought a house in Locking village, subsequently moving three times to finally arrive in Wedmore in 1998. Peter never lost his enthusiasm for travel, so on retirement he bought a VW Motorhome to tour in the UK. He and Jean took several cruises along the fjords and in the Baltic, and a trip on the train from Banff to Vancouver was also achieved.

The local community was an important part of Peter's life. He entered in the local Flower Show and eventually became a judge for the home-made wine classes. He also took on the job of stage manager for the Theale Amateur Recreational Theatrical Society (TARTS) where he helped with revues and pantomimes. He really did live life to the full for all his 84 years and is sorely missed by his wife Jean and daughters Deborah and Alison.



# Islay Mist 18

*by John Le Gassick*

This I believe is the eleventh Islay Mist Field Trip, my uncertainty comes from the fact that if I am counting more than 10 I must remove my socks! The party originally consisted of 13 members but sadly at the eleventh hour the Walker Family had to cancel due to a family bereavement, so the group was divided into three: "The Fieldgate Four", which consisted of Team Knight, Bill Francis and John Le Gassick. The days when there were three Johns and three Peters to separate are I am afraid just a distant memory. Ken and Sally Earnshaw with Peter Evans made up the second group leaving Scott and Donna Drinkel as group three. This was Donna's first visit to Islay and she settled into the routines and rigours of RAFOS from day one. I believe she is contemplating a return visit, preferably in the autumn when it will be dark enough for some astronomy. Their team obtained plenty of good records as Scott was out at 6 a.m. most days running, as part of his "Everyone Remembered" project for the British Legion. It reminded me of the old saying "The Early Birder catches the reeling song of the Grasshopper Warbler".

Just in case any new Member reading this is unaware of the history of the connection of the RAFOS with Islay it all started back in 2002 when a work colleague of Bill Francis, obviously aware of his keen interest in ornithology, told him of a cottage she had at Portnahaven on the west coast of Islay. Bill formed a RAFOS Expeditionary Force of three brave souls consisting of Tony Marter, Kev Cairns and himself. They were there from 25<sup>th</sup> May to 1<sup>st</sup> June, enjoying excellent bird watching and recording 116 species. From this tiny acorn Islay Mist 02 (Islay Mist being the name of one of the Island's Malt Whiskies) 10 further Field Trips have been arranged and long may they continue. By that time the house originally used had been sold, and later visits were based in holiday cottages at Kilchoman.

On this visit the weather gods were kind, with smooth crossings both ways and during our week only one rainy day, but not enough to curtail our surveys, and one very bright cold day in a fresh northerly wind. This unfortunately was the day chosen by David Wood the RSPB Warden on the Oa for us to carry out our surveys for him, the more fortunate amongst us were able to hunker down for our two-hour observation period out of the biting wind! As in previous Springs one group of watchers was tasked to watch from three points chosen by the Warden along Glen Golach for any signs of Hen Harrier that would help to locate either of the two nest sites that he believed to be on this hill side. The other two groups "the walkers" hoped to discover signs of breeding Eurasian Curlew a species that has become of concern. The whole of the accessible part of the Island was visited during the week and the total of 118 species of bird were recorded. The birds observed in each 10km square were recorded and these sightings entered onto a laptop at the evening call over to be forwarded to the BTO's BirdTrack after the trip. One other task was to record species and numbers of birds within an eight Kilometre radius of Islay Airport to up-date their Manual. Cuckoos were abundant this year and present across most of the Island.

Throughout the week the three teams visited all the well-known locations on the Island which had good habitat for birds. Loch Gorm yielded some good species and was always checked out in the morning on leaving and in the evening when returning to Kilchoman Cottages. It was on this loch that Common Scoter, Red-throated Diver and for the larophiles, Glaucous and Iceland Gull parked beside each other. Unfortunately, the road from which these observations were made is also the main route to the relatively new Kilchoman Distillery so has lost its old peacefulness especially at the morning and evening rush hour. None-the-less it is still a lovely place. Saligo Bay was another close to home stopping point that yielded good birds and along this road there were many fields containing large puddles most of which yielded some wading birds such as Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Redshank. One of the Ringed Plovers was colour ringed. Many of the fields also contained good sized groups of Curlew and Whimbrel.



Coffees explained! (Left)

Cafe at Ballygrant

Spot the Tystie (Below)



Loch Gruinart from Ardnave



For bird watchers on Islay all roads eventually lead to the RSPB Reserve at Loch Gruinart, this road was no exception. This charismatic Reserve often yields some excellent birds with the bonus of lovely views across the loch to the hills beyond. Six Whooper Swan were present this year long after the majority had left for their northern breeding grounds, there was much speculation as to the reason for their presence but with no real answer as they appeared to be healthy unlike a single Barnacle Goose with a damaged wing. Good but distant views were also had here on our final day of a male Ruff resplendent in his black and ginger breeding plumage.

Another favourite route is to turn right and follow the road that runs close to the western shore of Loch Indaal, a large sea loch that has interesting species of duck and three species of diver in the Spring and the Winter. In World War 2, Sunderland Flying Boats operated from this loch, based at Bowmore. On Sunday 24th January 1943 an aircraft of 246 Squadron, Royal Air Force crashed in bad weather near Black Rock, with nine of the crew being killed when the depth charges in the bomb bay exploded as they were trying to rescue a trapped comrade. A memorial has been erected in their memory.

A must stop is at Bruichladdich, where the seaweed-covered rocks and tidal pools often throw up surprises. Three species of Tern are often recorded here and in the Spring, Black Guillemot nest under the end of the pier. A little further up the road is the charming village of Port Charlotte, the home of the Islay Natural History Society, The Museum of Island Life and the Port Charlotte Hotel. The hotel has had an honourable mention in all previous Islay Mist reports, at risk of being mistaken for a restaurant critic rather than a birder, an easily made mistake, the newly refurbished "Yan's Kitchen" is worthy of a mention. Especially the wood burning stove. From either the adjoining car park or the quay lower down, excellent views can be had of any birds in transit along the loch. We had good views of an Arctic Tern that obligingly settled on a buoy.

The most westerly point on this route is the picturesque fishing port of Portnahaven which always has plenty of seals hauled out on the rocks and sea birds seeking sanctuary in the well protected harbour. Port Wemyss just a short distance to the south, overlooking the small islet of Orsay, with its much-photographed lighthouse, is a good spot for a sea watch if the winds are from the right direction. One such watch yielded the only Islay sighting of Manx Shearwater and on every visit an elusive Corncrake "crex-crexed" away but never came into view. The return to Kilchoman is often on a parallel minor road through the Rhinns of Islay to re-join the main road at Port Charlotte, this road for the most part through moorland is especially good for raptors. Another good area is Ardnave Point, reached by following the road along the western side of Loch Gruinart. Cars can be parked on the grass beside the small Loch Ardnave and the rest of the journey, through the sand dunes, made on foot. This area is particularly good for sizeable groups of Red-billed Chough which are doing well on Islay especially the adult birds, but for some reason young birds have quite a low survival rate.

The woods at Bridgend are always worth visiting with lots of woodland species including Spotted Flycatcher and, on the River Sorn, breeding Grey Wagtail. The Islay Woollen Mill further down the road is always worth a visit for Dipper and Bullfinch. Beside the Mill there is a nice array of bird feeders and Siskin, Redpoll and Coal Tit visit them regularly. A little further along the A846 is the small village of Ballygrant from the small car park beside the road one can walk down the road and into the woodland surrounding Loch Ballygrant in a search for ornithological delights or if it is that time of the morning visit the delightful "Labels" for a quick "No Nonsense cup of coffee". After a quick refreshment a short diversion to Loch Finlaggen is always rewarding and the next left turn takes you along the winding road to the Bunnahabhain Distillery with its small beach and excellent views over the Sound of Islay. There is another distillery nearing completion which is the Ardnahoe Distillery overlooking the small loch of the same name. This will bring the number of distilleries on Islay to ten. Hopefully improvements will be made to the road to accommodate the increase in large vehicles. Then finally you arrive at Port Askaig. This is a good place for



Snipe at Loch Gruinart (left)  
and  
Jura from Port Askaig (below)



*In his article John suggests that we might need a flag - well 12 years ago on Islay.....*

*Editor*

close views of the Black Guillemot or Tystie, here they nest in holes on a grassy bank whilst at Kennacraig and Bruichladdich they prefer openings under the busy piers.

I think that I have possibly left the best to last i.e. Claggan Bay. Take the back road to to Port Ellen, where there is an excellent small beach to scope from, just beside the public conveniences, useful information for birders of a certain age. From this vantage point many interesting species have been noted. Continuing through Port Ellen take the right turn around the bay. The left turn finds you queuing for the ferry home. Leaving Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg distilleries well out to starboard, Kildalton Cross, just off the road, is always worth a visit, even if the only sighting is the "honesty" cake stall! The bay is a tranquil place backed by the high hills, always good for raptor sightings. Sea watching is always a pleasure from here and the Claggan River flowing into the sea here has produced excellent habitat for breeding Grey Wagtail.

I am a big fan of the RAFOS Field trips to this unique island I know they owe a lot to Bill Francis for originally realising the Island's potential and to enthusiastically organising the early visits. Today of course without the efforts of "Team Knight" it could so easily have become just a fond memory. Jan's organisational skills and enthusiasm coupled to Richard's meticulous record keeping mean hopefully that it will remain on the agenda and keep the RAFOS flag flying in Ornithological circles for the years to come. Come to think of it we don't actually have a flag, perhaps someone would like to knit one.



Here be Treasures!

# **RAFOS Winter Duck 2018 WeBS Survey Results delivered to HQ BTO at Thetford and a Liaison visit for Expedition 'Simmer Dim - 2018' in support of JNCC's Seabirds Survey. 6th April 2018**

*By John N Wells Aff IEMA MIET MSM*

*With: Martin Routledge (Chairman) & Keith Cowieson (FALO)*

## **Background.**

On a bright sunny 6 Apr 18, three members of the RAFOS 'Winter Duck' (WD) took the survey data set from this year's WD expedition to the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) team at BTO HQ Thetford.

The visit was two-fold in that our intrepid FALO also wanted us to have a planning meeting for the summer expedition to Orkney, Expedition SIMMER DIM 2018.

Keith had arranged a meeting with Dr Niall Burton, the BTO's Head of Wetland & Marine Research & Principal Ecologist and their liaison with, and member of, 'The Seabird Group' (SG). This would be the first of many discussions with that organisation for this summer's expedition.

The WeBS Team hosts were: Teresa Frost, Neil Calbrade and Heldi Mellan.

## **WeBS**

On arrival, I was met by Heidi (Admin Assistant) of the WeBS team at the reception where I was booked in. Here I found I was not last to arrive! Phew! Thankfully Martin was also held up in the same road works around Cambridge on A14/M11/A11 extension on his way up from High Wycombe.

We were kindly hosted with coffee and biscuits good humour and great camaraderie by the scientists and admin team. We led the way on our exploits in 2018 on WD and explained the data set of 220 Single Visit Core Count (SVCC) and the success of the latest *Winter Duck* which, although I'm biased, continues to go from strength to strength, gathering momentum like a snowball or Jim Bryden's wallet rolling down a steep Scottish loch-side.

We had taken the completed forms from the 3 separate teams from NW Scotland. The survey, for anyone new, is between Loch Carron by Plockton in the south and Balchrick, north of Kinlochbervie in the NW (Teams 1 and 2). Also, the NE (Team 3) dataset from John O'Groats/Wick to Durness /Cape Wrath in the north-west. Team 2 cover a further sector in and around Loch Carron/Kishorn Callikille route, and drive back to team assembly point at the Dundonnell base on the final day.

Heidi sub-contracts these (SVCC) paper forms out to be loaded onto the 'live' system as it is rather time consuming for the main team at The Nunnery.

During the handover we discussed future Winter Duck capabilities, with the 3 vans and 5 accommodation bases, but also logistics of transport, military and civilian accommodation options, fuel costs, travel time in reaching and having 'time-on-task' to do the survey properly. The subsumed costs are met by the grant from RAFOS, thus our own Society funds as the BTO has little in the way of finances they can contribute, but they have been able to assist with easing our funds and by guidance on survey methodology that saves transport costs. A big factor is site definition on the BTO main server and printing and sticking site data by adhesive labels, which saves lots of time and effort in the field for us. Heidi is the main driver on this admin for Jerry Knights whereupon he gets delivered the forms for dissemination between the 3 teams.

In discussion we also regularly review and sometimes amend site definitions and tweak site periphery, sometimes even re-assigning a site if it was either unsuitable and or if it needed expansion or contraction on their map database using the BTO software tools. Heidi and Teresa Frost (Head of WeBS) were very helpful in this regard.

During the last expedition, after collection of Jim, Maggie and Vron, the East Coast van team had rather a lot of time on our hands, so rather than local birding around the village of Newtonmore or the pinewoods, we used the time wisely and had a sortie into the Spey Valley, west of Newtonmore to provide some WeBS Roving Records as we do not have SVCC forms for that area. What followed was a very successful afternoon and early evening's birding (See Newsletter 105 - article by Martin), and we were able to submit some new sites with WeBS data. At the meeting we agreed this area could be added to our data set for next year's visit, if time, vehicle serviceability and weather permit. Heidi did her 'magic' on the live system and assigned Spey Valley with two additional wetlands and a river course to our team.

Next year, let us hope we get the same weather and variety of birds that add value to the general day's bird watching as well as gathering extra data for WeBS.

## **Summary**

In all we provisionally added the following WeBS sites and areas; 3 sites to the free travel day (for the east coast van around Spey Valley). Plus, 1-2 inland sites to Team 1 near Ullapool. A couple of wetlands en-route for T2 when they drive south from Scourie to Sanachan Lodge and to start the survey SVCC again at Loch Carron, these 'odd areas' were taken previously as RRs. With 3 similar en-route sites added to Team 3's drive north to Wick and south to Dundonnell. The session was deemed productive and a very successful 'wash-up' meeting.

## **Seabird Survey – Planning for Orkney; *Expedition SIMMER DIM 2018***

Keith Cowieson and Niall Burton had arranged a meeting plus set up a conference call with a key BTO and SG contact. We were hosted upstairs in the glorious surroundings of the Grade 1 listed Nunnery's' Library conference suite and were afforded time for a very valuable SIMMER DIM 2018 planning meeting exploring logistics, priority target species and suggested methods. We learnt of the success of previous census studies and viewed some earlier datasets on maps and Orkney outer isle locations as well as discussing access routes by ferry and or hire of local fishermen's craft, to 'cadge a lift'.

We spoke directly to Dr Liz Humphries, one of the BTO Scotland's Senior Research Ecologists based at the University of Stirling. She specialises in Wetland and Marine issues and liaises with the BTO's Orkney Regional Recorder and SNH's on-island representative on seabird breeding matters as well as inland breeding species on low lying arable farmland and the more undulating terrain that Orkney offers. In the conference call and meeting it transpired the SG team want us to consider the Islands of Eday and Stronsay, the Stronsay Firth and possibly, dependent upon on team size and composition, the western part of Westray (subject to sufficient funding). A principle survey alongside nest colony data is to look-out and report leg colour coded rings on Skuas and to note any location of breeding sites and territories of these individuals. Also other breeding colonies of Tern species as well as Fulmar and any inland-nesting Gulls as well as coastal breeders. We also discussed how best to deploy the team of our size and construct but also the priority sites and transect surveying methods for targeting seabird colonies. Surveys here previously had focused on cliffs and coastal skerries. The islands also have geos and bays with potential for nesting Terns as well as the usual cliff nesters: Gulls, Razorbills, Guillemots, Shags, etc.

## Nunnery Lakes NR.

As the meeting finished just after lunch hour, I walked the 700 meters or so local Nunnery Lakes NR. This has often turned up some great records as reported by Neil Calbrade. I had approximately 30-40 minutes to spare before heading home. I took my packed lunch and walked to the flooded wetland and stream and had a bite to eat whilst watching: Marsh Tit, Wren, Coal Tit, Grey Wagtail (a pair chasing each other about, that I surmise was a territorial squabble or breeding behaviour), Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Sparrowhawk and Great Tit. It was lovely spot for a meal break and a short spell of birding. The Marsh Tit was especially nice as they are in decline in my region of Cambridgeshire. Just after my packed lunch I met Emma Douglas – Head of Fundraising who was walking her pet Labrador. We walked back to the car park and HQ together and I explained the work we (RAFOS) do in Scotland and I heard her interesting Role in BTO membership development.

Furthermore, subsequent to the visit, I saw on Twitter that another rarity, a Wood Sandpiper, a first for the reserve, had dropped-in on the flood meadows on 23 April.

Looking forward to our next visit.



WeBS Office - RAFOS and WeBS Team picture



WeBS Group by The Nunnery Entrance  
Handover of SVCC Forms



Nunnery Lakes NR Board



Flooded river and wetlands

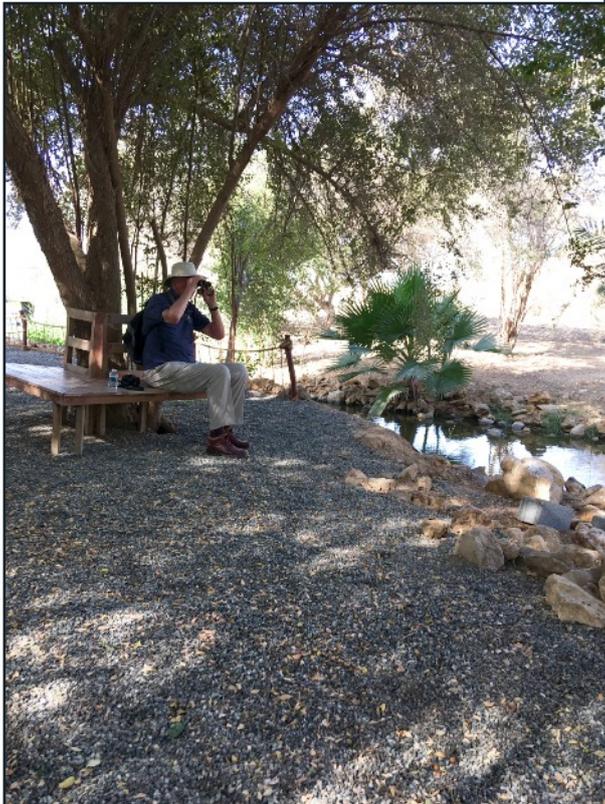
## Winter Sun 2

*by John Le Gassick*

Armed with my newly acquired copy of "Birds of Oman" by Eriksen & Porter, I made a return visit to Muscat. The dates this year were approximately a month later than the visit made in February 2017, from 21st to 29th March. The first thing that I noted was that in twelve months there had been quite a change in the English names: last year's Graceful Warbler was now (according to my new Field Guide) Graceful Prinia, Yellow-vented Bulbul was now White-spectacled, Red-wattled Plover was re-labelled Red-wattled Lapwing along with Spur-winged Plover which has also defected to the lapwing camp. Of course, I was aware that my record of Little Green Bee-eater should today be Green Bee-eater! In my defence I must confess that the Guide used last year was published in 1988. Although the species list was an increase on last year 68 as compared to 50, these numbers are quite low when compared with the dedicated bird watching holidays, but it must be remembered that they have the experience and the mobility to cover the whole country. The number of species was higher in March but the amount of over wintering waders was less, possibly because a lot of the marshy areas had dried out with temperatures reaching 32C+ most days.

The highlight of the visit for me, if you don't count the curries and cold lager to be had at the Bashah Hotel in Seeb, was the Al Ansab Wetland Reserve converted from the overflow pools of the Muscat Sewage Works. This is a lovely Reserve a truly peaceful spot and a credit to the authorities who have created it over the past few years. Since it became an official Reserve a visit has to be arranged in advance. The Reserve is not sign-posted off the main entrance road and we did arrive in the main area of the Sewage Works! Fortunately, our 07.30 a.m. appointment meant that we did not become trapped in a long queue of giant yellow liquid waste tankers and we were soon redirected to our rendezvous point. Here we were met at our appointed time by a delightful young lady, dressed in the hijab, driving a SUV and carrying a telescope. She obviously enjoyed her job, was proud of the Reserve and spoke perfect English. The meeting point overlooked the main lagoon and through the "scope" Green, Wood, Common and Marsh Sandpiper were identified along with Little Stint and Ruff. Waterfowl were easily identified, without recourse to the telescope Northern Shoveler in good numbers and Northern Pintail. Eurasian Spoonbill was also seen along with Cattle and Little Egret. The most common species of smaller heron seen throughout the Muscat region are the light and dark phases of the Western Reef Heron. What made our visit doubly enjoyable was that our party of three were the only people visiting that morning. Once we had squeezed as much as was possible from our overview of the main area the young lady drove us the short distance to the "new" hide and left us to our own devices. This was a delightful shady spot beside a stream falling down a weir, the surrounding bushes gave us great views of Squacco Heron in breeding plumage the blue bill of the Male being particularly striking. The appetites of the herons must have been satisfied as frequently small fish were stranded travelling down the watery slope and made easy pickings for any hungry bird. A Common Sandpiper plied its trade along the top ledge of this gentle cascade and all that we could hear was the sound of running water. The hide itself was constructed from bamboo and canvas and was deliciously cool. Difficult as it was, we eventually managed to tear ourselves away from this peaceful spot and walked along the track, through a shady picnic area, to the car. We departed at 0915 and already it was becoming too hot to bird watch. Our guide had told us earlier that the peak months for birds at this Reserve were October and November and from my own limited experience I would add January and February. Of course, we do have a RAFOS Member Stephen Robson living and working in Muscat in the Al Mouj area who is far more knowledgeable about such matters.

That brings me on to another three other locations that were new to me and all very worth visiting the Al Mouj Golf Course, the Al Mouj Culvert and the Al Mouj Beach.



## Al Ansab Wetlands Reserve



An evening visit to the Golf Course gave lovely views of Common Kingfisher fishing from a low branch over the large pool behind the club house. This location also surrendered Little Grebe, Squacco Heron, Gadwall, Moorhen and Black-winged Stilt to the list. The staff were quite happy with us viewing this pool but once we tried to go on to the course proper, soon gave us the red card.

The culvert underneath the main highway was an excellent spot for evening birding with the lovely low light and this was the only place that I recorded Ruddy Turnstone (a truly international species), Little Tern, Kentish Plover, Crested Lark and both phases of Western Reef Heron.

The beach is much better suited to snorkelling rather than bird watching but a short stroll to the end of stone breakwater gives good views over the entrance to the Al Mouj Marina and here on my last evening I had: White-winged Black, Greater Crested and Little Terns feeding on large shoals of small fish in company with Sooty and Baltic Gulls.

Additions were also made to the Garden List this year with Indian Roller, Indian Silverbill, Rose-ringed Parakeet and over flying Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Red-wattled Lapwing and Golden Eagle. The Golden Eagle sighting reminded me of returning to Kilchoman Cottages on Islay late one afternoon, after a none too exciting day in the field, to find John S-S sitting outside with a cup of tea telling us of the excellent views that we had just missed of a Golden Eagle! The Red-wattled Lapwing was a mystery for quite a few evenings, always flying over once it was dark emitting it's shrieking call. One evening it was early out of the blocks and confirmed our suspicions with good views of the culprit! The Purple Sunbird had its pendulous domed nest under a shrub in a shady corner of the courtyard garden, I presumed that it probably contained young as the female Sunbird visited it throughout the day. The Male deigned to pop his head in occasionally

Another very enjoyable, but short visit, to this delightful country. If I am fortunate enough to manage a future visit I think that it will hopefully be four or five weeks earlier than this one before the hot weather begins in earnest.



Seeb - Purple Sunbird's Nest and Purple Sunbird

# An Ethiopian Odyssey

*By Al Jordan*

“Hi Al” boomed Dick down my phone, “How do you fancy a spot of birding in Ethiopia?” As it happened, I fancied it very much and thus began our plans for a 3-week excursion. Dick found a local guide, Measho, (*pronounced Marsho*) and his driver, Awoke, (*pronounced Awoka*) while I booked flights with Ethiopian Airways – the only airline offering a non-stop journey.

What follows is a general account of the country as I saw it, our experiences and anecdotes, with photos provided by Dick. *\*Denotes endemic species.*

## Geography and Topography

Ethiopia is a large country situated in what is known as The Horn of Africa. Sudan lies to the west, Kenya to the south, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somaliland to the north and Somalia to the east. In other words, it's surrounded by quite volatile territories.

There are large plains, particularly in the south of the country, and the highland areas rise to about 4,000 metres with many forested regions. Eucalyptus trees grow prolifically and provide firewood and building materials in rural areas. Agriculture is a primary source of income – there are vast fields of cultivated grass crops, typically millet - while many people earn their livelihood tending goats, sheep and camels as they wander through the acacia trees and scrubland.



*Haystacks – A typical rural scene*

The variety of habitats makes for a good variety of birds – more than a thousand across the region – and we opted for the standard route to visit all the classic birding spots during our 3 weeks; little did we know what lay ahead.

## Arrival

We needed a visa to enter the country and this can be obtained on arrival at the airport in Addis Ababa, the capital. This is easier said than done. It took about two hours of queuing and hassle but eventually we made it through the chain of bureaucracy – not ideal after a 7-hour overnight flight. We tried to call Measho on his mobile without success and later learned that because Ethiopia had been swamped with illegal phones from neighbouring countries the government had somehow barred mobile signals. (To get phones working it would be necessary to visit a government office and get a modification to our phones. This was a lengthy process – more queuing – so we opted to continue without phones.) But eventually we located Measho and jumped aboard the Nissan Patrol which was to be our mode of transport for the next 3 weeks. The first night was to be spent in Addis Ababa but before that we enjoyed a pleasant stroll through the hotel gardens, and later visited a small lake, to begin familiarising ourselves with some of the local species. Among these were Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Brown-rumped Seedeater, Brown Parisoma, Blue-winged Goose\* and Black-headed Siskin.

## The Off

Next morning we were off early to Debra Libanos Monastery via Sululta plains. Brief stops on the plains yielded Abyssinian Longclaw\*, Erianger's Lark\*, Groundscraper Thrush, Black-winged Plover, with Lappet-faced, Egyptian and Hooded vultures trundling along about 30 metres away.

### *Lappet-faced Vulture*

In the wooded area by the monastery we found White-cheeked Turaco, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Banded Barbet, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Lesser Honeyguide and a magnificent and obliging Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk observing us with interest from its perch some 10 metres away. The Orthodox Christian monastery is an important establishment in this area and worshipers were constantly coming and going responding to calls for prayer, much like we expect in the vicinity of mosques. Apparently 40% of the Ethiopian population is Christian, 40% are Muslim and about 20% are Animist. Most regions seem to predominately follow one religion or another, although in some areas we saw large mosques and churches situated very close together.



That night we stayed in the Ethio-German Lodge at Debra Libanos, a run-down place overlooking a canyon which must vie with the Grand Canyon in USA for spectacular views. No food was on offer here so we ate dinner and breakfast in a small café not far away. Neither was there hot water – we soon found that although the best hotels do have electricity and water, these are not always available at the same time!

## **The Ethiopian Highlands**

We set off at 4:30 am to reach Jimma Valley for first light and to be met by a small group of local guides. This was to become SOP during the trip since a network of local knowledge helps to quickly pin-point elusive species. Small cash tips for key guides inject a little money into the local economy, encourage an interest in bird-life and keep the locals sweet! It is also worth noting this was the first time Dick or I had been escorted by an armed guide on any bird trip; in this case he sported an AK47! Good views ensued of Harwood's Francolin as well as Erckel's Francolin, White-throated Seedeater, Mocking and White-winged Cliff Chat, Black-winged Lovebird and White-billed Starling amongst others. Later that day we travelled to Debra Brehan for a couple of nights stay in the Getva Hotel, one of our better stops.

After checking in we drove to the Ankober escarpment, at about 4,000 metres, and Melka Jebdhu to look for localised endemics Ankobar Serin and Yellow-throated Seedeater but dipped on the former species. However there were plenty of other birds to see including Lammergeyer, Augur Buzzard, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Pied Crow, Fan-tailed Raven and Hammerkop. The next day as we departed for a return to the escarpment, we were subjected to an onslaught of calls from Hemprich's Hornbill, declaring his presence from the Hotel roof. We passed several horrific road accidents, some of which had recently occurred: a bus on its side with passengers milling around, and huge lorries which had crashed head-on along long straight roads, presumably in the act of overtaking.

Again, no Serin today but a 4-hour spell by a small river yielded a variety of birdlife including Red-billed Firefinch, Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu, Crimson-rumped Waxbill and African Paradise Flycatcher. As we chewed our way through a packed lunch of doorstep sandwiches and cold soggy chips, we watched cattle, donkeys and horses come down to drink from the river in the afternoon heat. A confiding pair of Malachite Kingfishers treated us to a great flying display as they fished from overhanging branches only a few feet away.

## **Cross Country**

There was lots of travelling on rough roads the next day en route to the Awash National Park. Before reaching the park we paused at the Aledoghi Wildlife Reserve where, fairly late in the day, we found a pair of Somali Ostrich – the male displaying while the female showed a distinct lack of interest - Arabian Bustard, Double-banded Courser, Secretary Bird and a magnificent African Swallow-tailed Kite.

Oryx, Lesser Kudu and Dik-Dik were also spotted. It was well after dark when we finally arrived at the Awash Falls Lodge. This was what we might term a 'basic Eco-Lodge' on the banks of the River Awash. The walls in our modestly furnished rooms were constructed from bare volcanic rock and doors were 'loosely fitted' to permit unhindered passage for various small creatures that might be heading that way.

The 756 sq km park has recorded 460 bird species as well as lions, leopards, cheetahs and other wild cats. Armed scouts are compulsory although, according to my Lonely Planet guide, the greatest risk here is from local tribes-people. The river, about 30 metres wide at the Lodge, flows on to the border with Djibouti and then disappears into the desert sands, much like the Okavango Delta in Southern Africa.



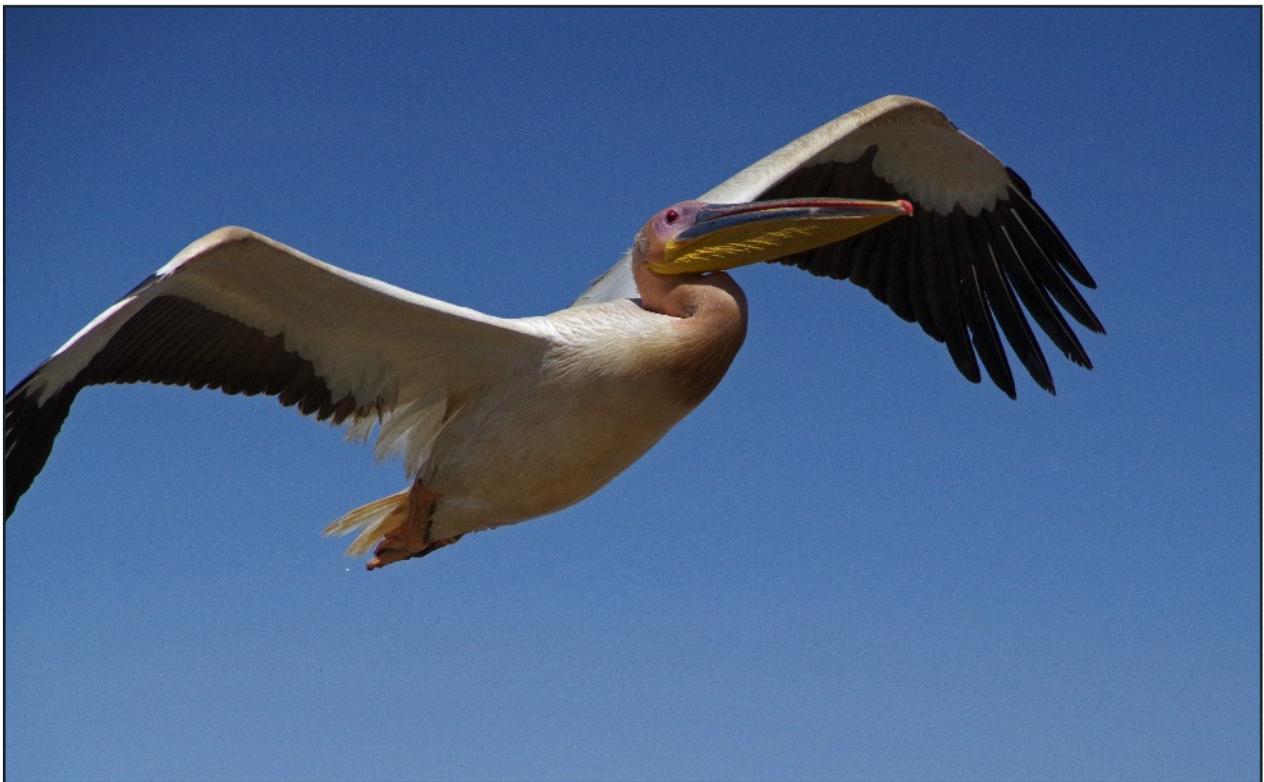
*Belsa Oryx (above) and African Swallow-tailed Kite (below)*



So birding here was outstanding and we recorded 55 species the next day. A selection of these included White-bellied and Buff-crested Bustard, White-bellied Go-away Bird, Red-billed and White-headed Buffalo Weaver, Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Bruce's Green Pigeon and Marico Sunbird.

### **An Interesting Interlude**

After an early breakfast we were off south towards Lake Ziway, reputedly one of the best birding sites in the Ethiopian Rift Valley. During our pit-stops, including one at Koka Dam, we saw Pygmy Falcon, Long-crested Eagle, and Woodland Kingfisher and a host of small waders and Herons. Our destination was the Ziway Tourist hotel but as we drove through a small town en route we were confronted by a moving wall of chanting youths followed by others waving weapons from the tops of lorries. We pulled over and while the melee passed us uneventfully I asked Measho what was happening. These were football supporters he said, but for some reason we remained sceptical! Our journey continued and after dropping our kit at the hotel we enjoyed a great evening's birding at the lakeside. Here we spotted Lesser Jacana and African Jacana, a few dozen Red-necked Phalarope paddling along together, Black Heron, a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos, Yellow-billed Stork, and for me top birds – a pair of Black-crowned Cranes. Meanwhile, numerous other species swam, flew or waddled past to make this a fitting end to the day.



*Close encounter with a White Pelican*

Next morning, Measho had news (not of the good variety): street demonstrations were underway to protest about the Government, roads were physically blocked (not by football supporters) and the Prime Minister had resigned. As a result we were 'confined to barracks' and the gates of the hotel were firmly closed! Hey Ho - we settled down to watch and photograph sun-birds, starlings and weavers as we sipped an early beer.

Our driver, Awoke, was staying at a different location and, with his ear to the ground, advised it was safe to leave the hotel on foot. Measho arranged an excellent boat trip on the nearby Lake Ziway to Gelila Island where, following a precarious landing, we saw Northern Carmine Bee-eater, African Fish Eagle and Black-headed Batis. Meanwhile a group of Senegal Thick-knees scrutinised us with their enormous eyes as they stood motionless in the shade of the trees. In addition,

Dick took some fine shots of Whiskered Terns flying in the wake of our boat, beating wings hard in much the same way as Herring Gulls during a trip to Skomer.

## Off Once More

On our return Awoke declared things were settling down following the Prime Minister's resignation and it was safe to continue to the next destination – Lake Langano. In fact, progress was slowed by residual protests for a few hours but police and military were gradually restoring order. We stopped to find Cape Eagle-Owl at a spot known to Measho and were greeted by a family group stationed on the roadside. We had good views of the Owl but there was much consternation in deciding who to reward after we were assisted in locating it: the matriarch, the oldest son or the young girl who had actually done the hard work! We weren't sure how Measho resolved the matter.

Eventually we made it, rather exhausted, to the lake-side resort at Langano. The woods, bush and steep cliffs behind the hotel proved a good birding spot and we steadily increased the tally with good views of Greyish Eagle-Owl and the huge Verreaux's Eagle-Owl within half-an-hour. In addition there was Black-billed Woodhoopoe, Helmeted Guineafowl, African Orange-bellied Parrot (the illustrations cannot do it justice), Superb Starling and, as darkness fell, a perfect fly past from Freckled Nightjar.

The next day we were off to the famous Bale (pronounced Bali) mountains to stay at Goba Wabe Shebelle Hotel where Dick found an obliging member of a Naturetrek Tour to sort out a problem with his camera. A full day on the scenic Sanattie Plateaux ensued with good views of Mountain Buzzard, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Slender-billed Starling and Moorland and Chestnut Francolin. There were also outstanding views of the striking Ethiopian Wolf, the rarest *canid* in the world, with about 500 remaining, 350 of which live on the Plateaux. We watched one playing with what we took to be a rodent, probably a Mole Rat and much like a cat with mouse, seemingly oblivious to our presence.



Superb Starling

## Heading Downhill

After a second night at GWS, where Dick's room was in darkness and my loo lacked a lavatory flush handle, we had a long day of travelling to reach Negelle. We stopped to bird at different locations en route where we started to pick up low-land species such as Shelly's and Golden-breasted Starlings and in particular the endemic, and until recently thought extinct, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco\*. At this location, as with many others, young people drifted out of nowhere to assist with our quest, whether we needed their help or not, and Measho proffered a few birr to keep them sweet/friendly. Often of course they were more of a hindrance than help as their excited chattering drove all avian life away!



*Prince Ruspoli's Turaco*

During a couple of days spent at Negelle we found the endemic and very localized Sidamo Lark after scouring the nearby Liben Plains in the drizzling rain, again with the 'help' of local youths. Apparently there are only about a dozen pairs of these birds in existence and they are found only on these plains. During the hour or so that we scoured the area, a small herd of cattle wandered across our route and these were accompanied by 100+ Yellow Wagtails of different races, fluttering like a moving carpet as they snapped up insects disturbed by the animals. Later that day as the sun warmed us we saw many good birds including Kori and White-bellied Bustard, White tailed Swallow\*, Shelly's and Golden-breasted Starling, Temminck's Courser, and Straw-tailed Whydah.

### **Unseasonal Weather**

Day 13 involved a long and dusty drive to Yabello with frequent roadside stops, to ease springs as well as find new birds. Among these were Black-capped Social Weaver, Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird, Von der Decken's Hornbill and Stresemann's Bushcrow\*. As we approached Yabello we saw a build-up of dark rainclouds and were subjected to a sudden cloud burst which quickly turned our dusty track into a mud bath. An adjacent wadi began to rapidly fill with rushing muddy

water and we wondered if progress would once again be halted. But Awoke persevered and we continued steadily to our motel where my room was found to be partly flooded from the aftermath of the downpour. A willing member of staff soon mopped up and in no time we were holding a call-over at the dinner table.

As usual, an excellent menu was offered but most meals were 'unavailable today' so we resorted once again to the go-to standby – spaghetti with meat sauce or spaghetti with tomato sauce. The next day (Dick's birthday) we enjoyed a full day of birding in the region (no long-distance travelling – hooray!) and picked up several new species as well as enjoying good views of others we had seen previously: White-bellied Starling, Somali Courser, Spotted Palm Thrush and Gabar Goshawk, amongst others.

That night we pushed the boat out with a couple of bottles of finest Ethiopian merlot to celebrate Dick's day. Except that it wasn't so fine! If ever you find yourself in Ethiopia I recommend you opt for the amber nectar rather than the vino. Suffice to say we didn't manage to finish the second bottle. For the first time in our lives we poured away half- a- bottle of red so Measho could reclaim a deposit next morning!

### **The Long Way Back**

Having reached the southern-most point of our travels at Yabello, the next day we began to head north back along the Rift Valley. This was the most unpleasant part of the trip – roads were bumpy, dusty and sometimes non-existent – and yet this was the main highway from Kenya to Addis. Much, or the majority, of the road was under re-construction even while streams of traffic tried to navigate the chaos. Apparently Chinese contractors are managing the project and, as in many other African countries, Chinese developers are building factories, hotels and roads everywhere. Safe to say they are all over it!



*African Grey Hornbill*

We had several stops – for birds and calls of nature – and eventually rolled into the grounds of the excellent United Africa Hotel on the banks of Lake Awassa. Here we had time for a stroll around the gardens before dinner and spotted(!) Spotted Creeper, a black and white bird which was surprisingly difficult to pick up as it clung motionless to a high branch above – at least, I found it so. Meanwhile, a large black and white Colobus monkey was enjoying himself swinging through the trees near the hotel restaurant.

The accommodation here was the best we had throughout the trip; it was the only stop – and for one night only – where my mosquito net actually fitted what was a very comfortable bed. Early next morning we had a quick stroll around the banks of the lake and picked up a couple of dozen species including African Fish Eagle, Goliath and Purple Heron,

Black Crake, African Pygmy- goose, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Malachite and Pied Kingfisher, White-browed Robin-Chat and Blue-headed Coucal. Not bad for a pre-breakfast perambulation!

### **A Change of Scenery**

Then we were off to the Wondo Genet forests and agricultural research centre for some very different environments. After some pleasant wanderings through the open hill-forest our local scout found us Narina Trogon, representing the only species of the family present in the region, Green Twinspot and Speckled Pigeon among others.



*Speckled Pigeon*

That night was spent in the Yejoka Hotel in Butagira where a group of regional government officials were due to meet at our hotel to discuss the recent troubles and public unrest. Consequently, the grounds and hotel frontage were stiff with police and military personnel checking ID's

while the car-park was jammed with large 4x4's. At dinner the VIP's seemed engrossed in their discreet conversations, oblivious to two weary Europeans munching pizza and pasta on an adjacent table.

### Almost There

The penultimate day of the trip dawned and we headed for Ghibe Gorge for Black-faced Firefinch and Abyssinian Waxbill, amongst other Ethiopian specialities. Dick had developed a throat infection, probably caused by the dusty roads, and was suffering badly so we headed for Addis and some R&R the next day. We took the opportunity to visit the National Museum to view Lucy, the 3.2 million-year old fossil skeleton of one of the earliest hominid species, together with a unique collection of pre-historic items from the Rift Valley. I asked "Why Lucy?" and was informed that the archaeologist who made the discovery was listening to the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" at the time. Strange but true!

### And Finally

We ended the day waiting for our transport to the airport while listening to England losing to Scotland at Murrayfield, and quietly reflecting on the holiday: Ethiopia is a fascinating country (allegedly the Cradle of Mankind) and well worthy of a visit by keen birders, I might say hard-core birders. It is a developing country and, as Measho frequently pointed out in response to minor irritations along the way, *"This is Africa, Alan."*

One thing that stood out in my mind was that each time we stopped there were birds everywhere, the species varied but the numbers didn't. I put this down to the non-intensive agricultural methods we saw wherever we went; it reminded me of the British countryside that I enjoyed as a small boy when farming practises were very different from those employed today. (End of rant!)



*Al, Measho and Dick*

We covered about 3,000 kilometres over 3 weeks and our tally was 425 species, including 10 of the 14 endemics plus many more regional endemics. This is the greatest number I've managed to notch up on a single trip – so far. Dick can provide a complete list for those who might be interested.

Footnote. It took us 4 hours to pass through security checks at the airport after which our aircraft was delayed by 90 minutes. *'But, that was Africa!'*



Lappet-faced Vulture

**Note from the Editor.**

*I looked up Prince Rispoli for whom the Touraco is named in the fascinating book 'Whose Bird?' by Bo Boelens and Michael Watkins.*

*Apparently, he was an Italian explorer who was in Ethiopia from 1891 to 1893. He died following 'an incident with an elephant' that he had previously wounded!*

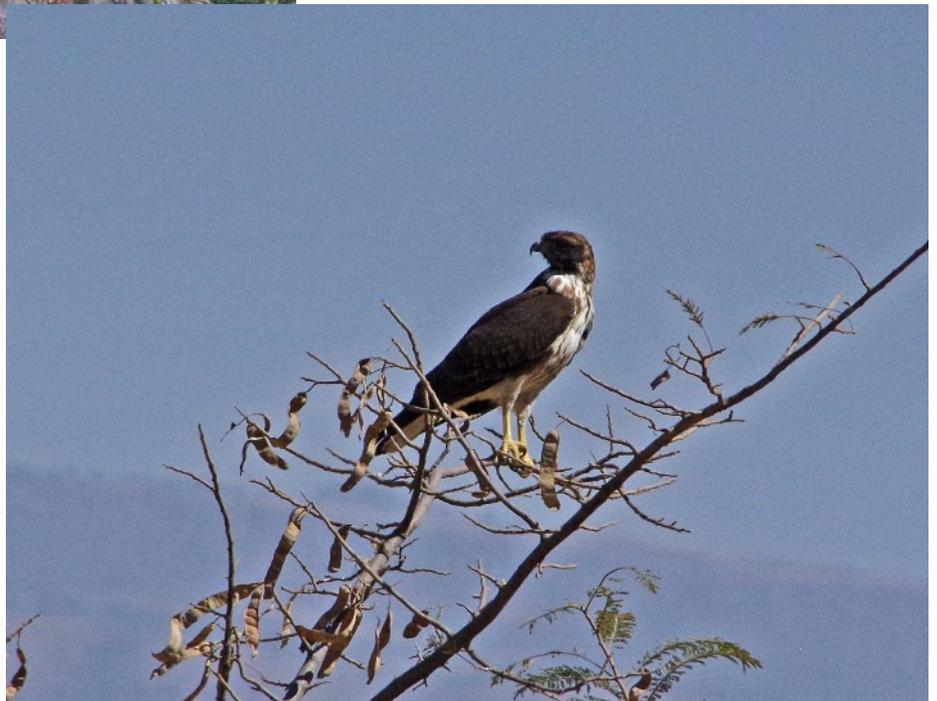
Birds of Ethiopia *by Dick Yates*

Ruppel's Starling



Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk

Auger Buzzard



Birds of Ethiopia *by Dick Yates*



Blue-breasted Bee-eater

Black Kite



Common Fiscal



Crete - Nigel Deacon, Tom Dewick and Al Kennedy (RSC)



Crete - Walking along a track above Rethymnon Gorge (TD)

# Birding in Crete

*By Richard Somers Cocks*

Crete is often overlooked as a destination by birders visiting the Mediterranean. While Mallorca and Lesvos have some great birding, the main areas can get quite busy. Crete in spring though is fairly quiet as well as being a wonderfully scenic island with a wide range of habitats. It is the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean, with peaks rising to over 2,600m and upland plateaus dissected by massive limestone gorges. Situated towards the eastern end of the Med it is on the route of many migratory species moving north from eastern Africa on their return to eastern Europe. The island also holds a great variety of resident species.

Four of us: Tom Dewick, Al Kennedy, Nigel Deacon and Richard Somers Cocks, booked a week-long trip there in April 2018. Given the size of the island, almost 260 km long, we chose to stay in the small town of Spíii which is situated inland roughly in the centre of the island. This was a good base to explore the central areas of the island and it was easy to reach the south coast through a couple of spectacular limestone gorges. To explore the extremities of the island at either end would really require another base.

Having arrived late at night in the dark on the Saturday we had not seen much of our surroundings. Sunday dawned fine and clear and we were greeted by a Black Kite flying past and a Turtle Dove singing on the wires nearby. On the cliffs above Spíli, Griffon Vultures were soon soaring, and we later saw a pair of Peregrine nesting there. In the garden Sardinian and Orphean Warblers were picking over the bushes, and sparrows were mainly the Italian sub-species with their brown head markings. We set off for Plakias on the south coast through the spectacular Kotsiphos Gorge. Just as we arrived at the gorge an Eleonora's Falcon flashed past and within the gorge Crag Martins, Jackdaws, Rock Doves, Chough, Kestrels and Blue Rock Thrush were all present and a constant stream of Griffon Vultures were circling on thermals above. Alpine Swifts were also moving through in good numbers. These species were typical of all the gorges we visited.

At the coast around Plakias the sea was fairly quiet, which is normal for the Mediterranean, with only Yellow-legged Gulls and a few Audouin's Gulls. Little-ringed and Ringed Plover were on the beach by the town and Whinchat were common on fences and bushes as they subsequently turned out to be on much of the island. An endemic butterfly, the Cretan Festoon was seen nearby. Our return to Spili took us through the Kourtaliótiko Gorge where we saw many of the species seen earlier in the other gorge. Here there was a sizeable group of Kestrel which were almost certainly Lesser Kestrel since this is characteristic of this species and the birds are common on Crete. A taverna in Spíli and a few glasses of Mythos finished the day off nicely. We returned to the villa and listened to the Scops Owl calling out intermittently through the night.

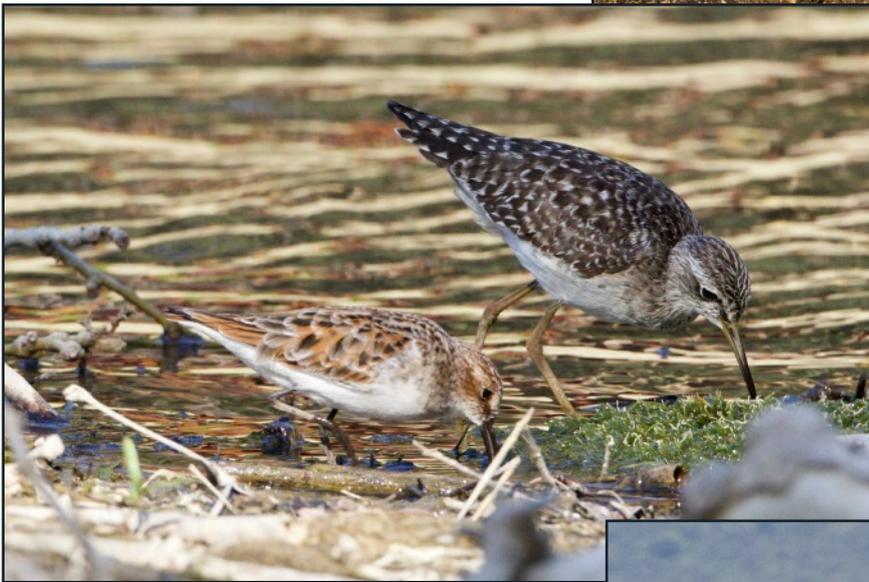
Climbing above Spíli the countryside turned to garrigue, or what we would term moorland, dominated by yellow *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Salvia triloba* and *Euphorbia characias*. Swallowtails, Scarce Swallowtails and other butterflies such as Skippers were widespread. On a plateau area a track wound its way around some small fields and provided a great walk for a couple of hours. Woodlarks, Crested Larks, Corn Buntings and Whinchat were common and a Chukar appeared on the hillside above at one point as well as an Ortolan Bunting. Several raptors flew past including Bonelli's Eagle, Marsh Harrier and Common Buzzards. In the fields a few wild Tulip, *Tulipa doefferi*, were still in flower along with various orchids on the trackside. Continuing over this plateau the road dropped down into the Amari valley, a wide lush upland valley famous for its raptors with a backdrop of Mount Psiloritis - the highest point on Crete and with remnants of snow from the winter. A taverna stop for coffee and cakes in one of the small villages gave us close views of Griffon Vultures as they flew overhead almost at rooftop height. The day finished with a return drive via the south coast taking in a small estuary with a few waders, Little Egret, Squacco Heron and Kingfisher.



Whinchat (RSC)



Greenshank (RSC)



Little Stint and Wood Sandpiper (RSC)

Griffon Vulture (RSC)



## Cretan Birds

Next day we returned to the south coast, this time the area around the Préveli Monastery perched high above the sea and a good spot for arriving migrants. The Monastery is famed for its role in supporting Cretan resistance and for sheltering many Allied soldiers, particularly Australians, who were stranded on Crete during WWII. Before the road climbed up to the Monastery it ran alongside the Megapóttamos river where we stopped for a brief while. It is one of the few rivers on the island that flows year-round and is a good spot for migrants. Several Wood Sandpipers and a Green Sandpiper were present, and subsequent visits also gave us views of Little Stints, Night and Squacco Herons. An added advantage of stopping here was the excellent taverna where you could sit and watch while drinking your coffee (or Mythos).

Continuing towards the Monastery we stopped just short at the monument and garden commemorating the support given to the Allies during WWII. Being one of the few areas of grass and shrubs in what was otherwise a fairly barren countryside, it provided a focal point for migrants. Northern and Black-eared Wheatears along with Collared and Semi-collared Flycatchers and a Woodchat Shrike were seen. Before leaving the area, we took a walk nearby down the cliff to the mouth of the river and Palm Beach, named after the *Phoenix theophrastii* palms growing along the lower stretch of the valley. On the walk a few Blue Rock Thrush and a Sardinian Warbler were showing well, and a group of Cattle Egret were resting by the shore. At one point a Montagu's Harrier flew east along the coastline. The river was quiet although a Common Sandpiper was working its way along. The taverna on the beach provided welcome refreshment before the walk back up to our car.

Tom wanted to meet up with an old friend who lived in the SW corner of the island which was going to be quite a long drive from Spíli. As a result, we decided to stop off on the way and visit Ayia Reservoir, a small wetland site southwest of Chania. Water is scarce on Crete, so any areas that exist on a permanent basis are a focal point for waders, wildfowl and many other species. The reservoir had good numbers of Wood Sandpipers as well as Ruff and Common Sandpiper. Among the wildfowl were Pintail and Garganey. Other species included Baillon's and Little Crake, Little Grebe, Moorhen, Coot, Squacco and Purple Heron. Several Marsh Harriers were also flying around the margins. The highlight of our visit to the southwest corner was the discovery of a pair of Lanner Falcons nesting on a cliff - an increasingly rare bird. After a great lunch in a beachside taverna we made our way back to Spíli stopping off at another wetland area by Georgioupolis. Not so much on show here other than a brief glimpse of a Pygmy Cormorant and somewhat surprisingly, a Common Pochard. At the nearby mouth of the river a very smart Greenshank was showing well.

Back at Spíli the next day we explored some of the country to the south - high hills with extensive views and a mixture of garrigue and small fields. Several close views of Griffon Vultures as they soared along the ridges, but despite looking we could see no sign of Lammergeier. Crete is one of their last strongholds in the Mediterranean and although there are only a small number, mainly in the mountains, this was an area where we may have seen them. We took a circular walk around this area and once again saw plenty of Corn Bunting, Whinchat, Stonechat and a few Ortolan Bunting. In the valley below Turtle Doves were calling.

Our flights home were in the evening from Heraklion which gave us time to visit a few more sites on our way to the airport. We drove north out of Spíli towards the Rethymnon gorge and Platanos River. On its upper reaches a large reservoir has recently been constructed. A flock of Yellow-legged Gull were on the water and a few Heron and Egret were on the edge but otherwise it was fairly quiet. A large group of Alpine Swift descended on the area at one point which was a fine sight. Further north we found a way to the edge of the highest part of the gorge and had great views of Griffon Vultures as they soared along the cliffs, but still no Lammergeier. The river flowing north had dried up, probably because of the reservoir, but a small pond had formed at the coast. This had a good selection of waders including Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover. Lunch was spent at a nearby rather overpriced taverna. The north coast has been extensively developed for the package tour industry and prices are much higher than the villages that we had visited in the interior and south coast.

**Cretan birds**

Corn Bunting (RSC)



Little Crake (RSC))

Little Ringed Plover (ND)



It had been a fabulous week in Crete, but we had only looked at the centre of the island. At either end there are some great upland plateaus with Lassithi in the east and Omalos in the west, but these need separate bases to fully explore. The Omalos Plateau also gives access to the huge and remote Samaria Gorge. We never reached high into the mountains which would provide another habitat for bird life on the island. So, there is plenty left to explore on a return visit.

Guidebooks:

A Birdwatching Guide to Crete by Stephanie Coghlan. Now out of print but provides a good summary of sites on Crete and the status of birds to be found.

Collins Bird Guide 2nd Ed by Lars Svensson. The standard reference book.

Birds of the Mediterranean by Paul Sterry. A photographic guide with good illustrations.

Wild Flowers of the Mediterranean by Marjorie Blamey & Christopher Grey-Wilson.

Collins Butterfly Guide by Tom Tolman & Richard Lewington.

The Rough Guide to Crete. A good guide to the history, culture and sights of Crete.

Picture Credits: ND = Nigel Deacon, RSC = Richard Somers Cocks, TD = Tom Dewick



Sardinian Warbler (RSC)



Spili village

The view from the villa  
(RSC)

Wood Sandpiper (ND)



Squacco Heron (ND)

Ortolan Bunting (ND)



Species Seen in Crete:

Mute Swan	Green Sandpiper	Willow Warbler
Mallard	Wood Sandpiper	Spotted Flycatcher
Garganey	Common Sandpiper	Semi-collared Flycatcher
Pintail	Yellow-legged Herring Gull	Collared Flycatcher
Common Pochard	Audouin's Gull	Pied Flycatcher
Black Kite	Rock Dove	Blue Tit
Griffon Vulture	Woodpigeon	Great Tit
Marsh Harrier	Collared Dove	Golden Oriole
Montagu's Harrier	Turtle Dove	Woodchat Shrike
Sparrowhawk	Cuckoo	Chough
Common Buzzard	Scops Owl	Jackdaw
Booted Eagle	Common Swift	Hooded Crow
Bonelli's Eagle	Alpine Swift	Raven
Lesser Kestrel	Common Kingfisher	House Sparrow
Common Kestrel	Hoopoe	Italian Sparrow
Red-footed Falcon	Wryneck	Chaffinch
Eleonora's Falcon	Crested Lark	Serin
Lanner	Woodlark	Greenfinch
Peregrine	Skylark	Goldfinch
Chukar	Sand Martin	Linnet
Quail	Crag Martin	Cirl Bunting
Little Crake	Swallow	Ortolan Bunting
Baillon's Crake	Red-rumped Swallow	Corn Bunting
Moorhen	House Martin	
Coot	Tawny Pipit	
Little Grebe	Tree Pipit	
Pygmy Cormorant	Yellow Wagtail	
Little Bittern	White Wagtail	
Night Heron	Wren	
Squacco Heron	Whinchat	
Cattle Egret	Stonechat	
Little Egret	Northern Wheatear	
Grey Heron	Black-eared Wheatear	
Purple Heron	Blue Rock Thrush	
Little Ringed Plover	Blackbird	
Ringed Plover	Cetti's Warbler	
Temminck's Stint	Sedge Warbler	
Little Stint	Sardinian Warbler	
Ruff	Orphean Warbler	
Greenshank	Blackcap	

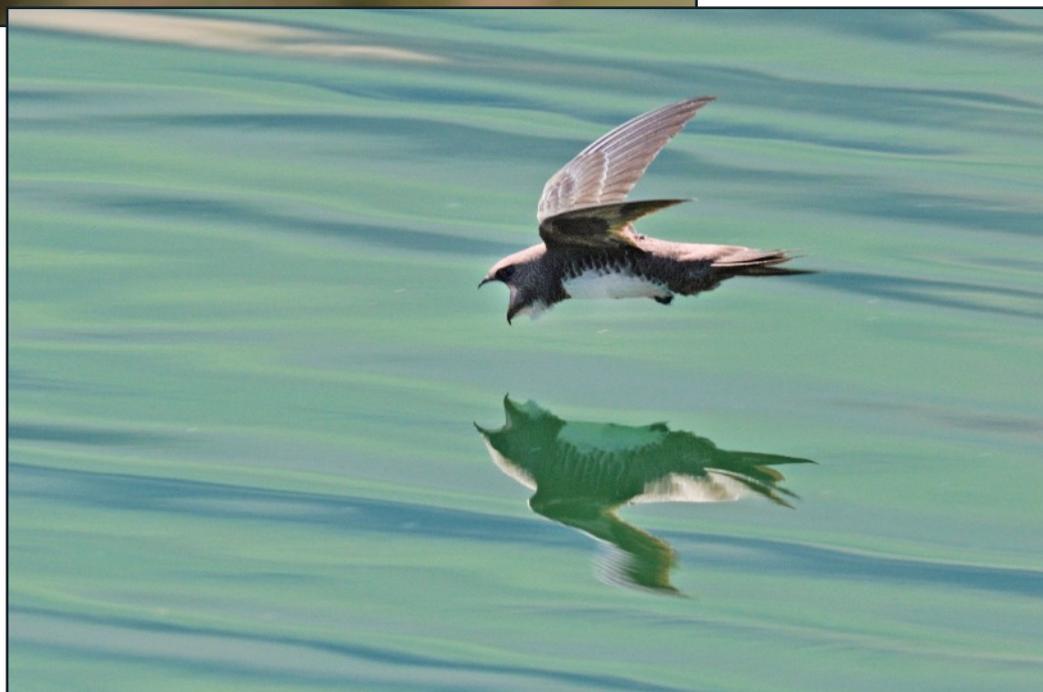
**More Cretan Birds:**

Juvenile  
Night Heron (ND)



Collared Flycatcher  
(ND)

Alpine Swift (ND)



## **Of Men and Men or Tales of the Occupation**

*By Dick Knight*

We have mice. We are quite happy with the Wood Mouse which probably visits our squirrel-proof feeder daily (or nightly) for the peanuts and in previous years we have also had a Yellow-necked Mouse using the feeder. They keep to the bottom of the garden and are not a problem. At the beginning of June, we saw a House Mouse in a plastic bowl on the lawn eating the stale mashed potato put out for the birds (dare I admit it? Herring Gulls). It was midday on a bright sunny day, Jan was about 3 feet away when she spotted it and it didn't run away so we assumed it was not well. As it is before the 9 pm watershed I can't recount its fate the next day, but it involved a Crow and a birdbath.

A couple of days later the team arrived to replace the double glazing. While getting ready for them, we noticed a few mouse droppings on the living room window sill outside and also some on the spare bedroom window sill. Oh blow, we've been occupied! We have some agricultural strength rat poison so some was placed under the living room window in a tunnel made from a plastic butter tub.

The next day the number of droppings had increased. Oh blow!

The replacement windows were going in. The team had an apprentice and it was fascinating listening to all the points to check and how to fit windows properly. I love work – I could watch it all day. A certain franchise may have fitted the windows quicker, but this was a proper job. When it came to the spare bedroom window, the 2 of the team upstairs, aged 32 and 18, said they heard a chattering noise above them. Out came the team i-Phones, onto the internet for some research, the consensus was that the droppings were not from mice but from bats. There is a difference in the droppings. It is amazing what you can find on the internet. We have occasionally seen a bat hunting over the garden at dusk, on rare occasions 2, so we knew they were in the area. That evening I was taking down the non-squirrel-proof feeders at dusk and saw 4 bats in the garden while Jan saw 5 going past the side of the house.

The next evening, we got 2 garden chairs and settled down to stare at the south facing gable end of the house from 9 pm. The upper storey has hand-made tiles on the walls with lots of crevices for a bat to hide behind. The first bat appeared at 9:20, not from under a tile, but dropping out from under the fascia near the ridge and flying away. After a slow start the rate of appearances increased with sometimes 3 or 4 dropping out at a time. Most came from the left-hand side of the house but some from the right. Nearly all of them turned right and disappeared in a westerly direction. We gave up counting at 9:50 by which time the rate of appearance was very slow and it was getting difficult to see them against the dark background. The final tally was 153. We have a bat maternity roost!

A week later the count was only 136 but we don't claim to have seen all present, and the trend was to turn left on exit, and the following week it was 153. We had a feeling that one was on its first solo as it stayed around the garden and made several practice approaches to the fascia exit point rather than disappearing off. We also had one doing the high diving board act. It appeared on a tile just below the fascia where it stayed for at least 5 minutes, then inched back to the fascia in several stages before crawling back under cover.

On 1<sup>st</sup> July the count was 187, with several looking like first solos. Early the next morning I was putting out the non-squirrel-proof feeders when I saw a little brown shape on the lawn. Ah well, in an operation this size you're bound to have losses. I fetched the camera to get a photo to help

with identification. The victim's face was covered in cobweb – and it moved a leg – it lives! I put it on a garden table and tried to get the cobweb off its face with tweezers (don't let on to Jan) but with little success, so we put it in a butter tub (but not the rat poison one. I told Jan there was a reason I was saving them) on a layer of folded kitchen paper towel and took it to our local wildlife hospital. They confirmed the identity as Pipistrelle species and said that this one was severely dehydrated. Four days on, we haven't heard from the hospital about collecting it for release so we assume it didn't survive.

We are happy with the occupation. The bats are outside of the brick wall, not in the attic. Forty years in the vicinity of jet engines means I don't hear them and they don't bother us apart from having to clear droppings off window sills and clean little urine streaks off windows. Apparently, they should leave in August. But the question is, will they be back next summer?

Below: Left: Cobwebby Bat, Right: Wood Mouse, Bottom: Bat Maternity Suite



## **A View from the Nest: Ex SIMMER DIM, Orkney June 2018**

*By Jayne 'the Fulmar Fancier' Lindley*

Little did I imagine, having mixed gin with the talk of birds (goldfinches to be exact) at a formal function with a hitherto unknown fellow enthusiast, (Pete 'the Younger' Barker) that I would end up in the Orkneys with a group of ornithological wizards (and by that I am not referring to grey beards, pointy hats and long staffs although they were evident in abundance). RAFOS's best brains (or those that were available at the time) converged on the islands of Stronsay and Eday in the Orkneys in order to undertake a major sea bird survey for the JNCC, an event which takes place every 15 years in order to assess how well our seabirds are faring, in addition to BirdTrack information for the BTO. As a fledgling RAFOS member that has barely left the nest, I want to share a few first impressions about RAFOS and its wonderful work.

Firstly, as volunteers, the members generously give up their time and expertise for the benefit of bird conservation and share a genuine passion for birds and wildlife in general – with some members being experts in botany and pollinators in addition to possessing a wealth of ornithological know-how. Moreover, they are keen to share their knowledge to new members. All you need to get started is enthusiasm, a desire to learn and general fitness. Oh, and a willingness to 'muck in', peel potatoes and help with team tasks always goes down well.

Until the trip I wasn't sure what to expect – the great outdoors certainly, but 25 kt winds and driving rain despite a heatwave in the rest of the UK was the first atmospheric challenge. Coordinating water proofs with a contemplation as to how much 'bird kit' you needed or could manage to carry for the best part of 2–4 hours of trekking and observing/counting (binoculars, telescopes, tripods, camera – lenses that could detail the moon or the pocket happy snapper). Trial and error gave way to pragmatism. Turns out waterproof binoculars are really useful! And you should always have a notebook for if (when!) the voice recorder batteries fail. Gaiters are a great way to stave off wet grass, sea water and ticks and a good pair of walking boots is always a good investment.

Right from the outset the organisation was meticulous – planning accommodation, transport, routes, ferries, victualling, survey kit and transects and a group of 13 people over a collective distance of around 4000 miles over land and sea without a hitch was nothing short of a miracle (stand fast a RN lodge double booking at the half way staging point in Aviemore by a group of army John O Groats to Land's End cyclists). Keith Cowieson and his merry band executed the Ex SIMMER DIM plan with military precision, appearing swan-like at all times and ultimately ensuring its success.

I was in Team Stronsay – a team of 6 charged with surveying 56 km of coastline ranging from rugged sheer cliffs, home to 100s of nesting birds, to a shoreline of bladder-wrack seaweed-encased rocks interspersed with the occasional welcome sandy beach, home to a plethora of birds and some rather striking purple jellyfish. We were not unduly concerned – the risk assessments had been filled in and we were more likely to come down with a mystery illness due to bread mould spores and Vitamin C deficiency than any slips, trips or falls. We were given a spectacular sunset the night we arrived at Stronsay youth hostel – which in a former life had been the fish mart! What a wonderful way to spend a birthday (37 again, again!)

With a late start to the season, most birds were still on the nest, holding territory, or gathering food with just a few fledglings observed, from a safe distance. On Stronsay we observed an average of 42 species per day including Fulmar, Shag, Guillemot, Greylag Goose, Great Skua, Arctic Tern, Curlew, Eider, Oystercatcher and a rare sight of a Long-tailed Duck. It was a thrill to see them with their young in such ideal coastal and lake surroundings. Over the course of the week we observed over 60 different species - not bad for such a small island. I heard for the first time the sound of a Redshank drumming as it swept over the group as we surveyed waders on the shores of a small

lake (Lochan). Also memorable was feeling the rush from the wings of a swooping Great Skua holding territory and the indignant squawks of Arctic Terns warning us to stay clear of their nesting site. The hospitality of the 300 or so islanders on Stronsay was fantastic – with many sharing their local knowledge and stories with us, and we integrated fully by entering the event of the year - the pub quiz, doing slightly better than the England football team by coming a close second.

We all understood the importance of accurate reporting and upholding the great reputation of RAFOS with other national conservation organisations such as JNCC and BTO, who rely largely on volunteer conservationists. Us novices now understand the term ‘call over’ and ‘transect’, although we were already familiar with the word ‘pub’ and ‘shopping’ (which is a past time the wizards particularly enjoy).

I learned that despite no longer being classified as AT, ornithology and surveying in particular certainly attracts an adventurous spirit and teamwork – and also a sense of humour which was never lacking even when we had to traverse 12 barbed wire fences in the driving rain in just 1 sector or retrace steps and find an alternate route after reaching a cliff edge waterfall impasse.

It was a privilege to be involved in such a worthwhile project and I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who is interested in preserving our wonderful wildlife and habitats. Thank you to Martin, Pete the Elder, Pete the Younger, George and Brian for helping me develop my flight wings.



Simmer Dimmers on the ferry to Kirkwall

*(by Maggie Sheddan)*



The perils of surveying - not Pamela Anderson in Barb Wire, but Jayne Lindley under it!  
*photo by George Candelin*



Great Skua Chick (left) and the rarest of Britain's bumblebees, Great Yellow Bumblebee (Right)

*Pictures by John Wells*

## **Pictures from SIMMER DIM**

Fulmar (Right)

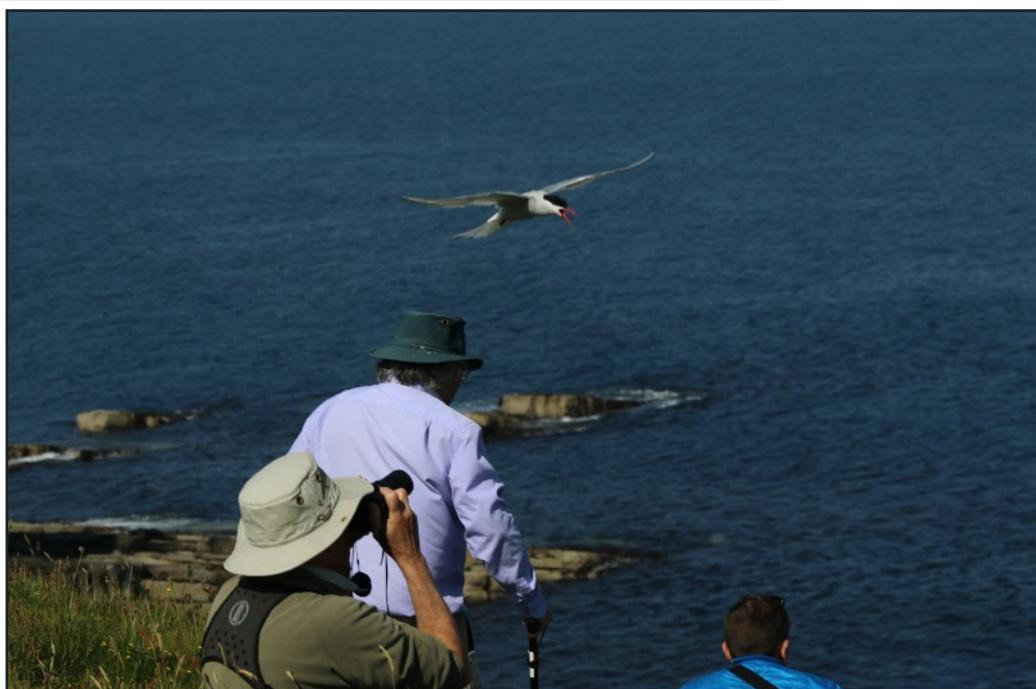
Black Guillemot (Below)

And Martin, George and  
Pete taking a tern(Bottom)

*Pictures by Jayne Lindley*



**SIMMER DIM**





Midnight on Eday (*Maggie Sheddan*)



A spot survey (vantage point) looking for Great Skua (*Jayne Lindley*)

**SIMMER DIM**

# The RAFOS Newsletter

Is published twice each year

The Editor will be most grateful for pictures and articles to grace the next edition.

Letters to the Editor to raise any issues, birding book reviews and details of goods for sale are always welcome too.

Please remember the following:

- Brief contributions are always welcome.
- Illustrations (photographs or art work) are always welcome
- Please send written work as soon as you can. If pictures are included, please send them separately from the text.
- Please avoid footnotes and tables – they are difficult to import with my software!
- Articles can be sent as attachments to emails, on a CD, DVD, memory stick or card.
- If pictures are sent as hard copies, please let me know if you want them back.
- Digital images should be in .jpg format.

**The closing date for inclusion in Newsletter 107 is 21<sup>st</sup> January 2019 and any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 108.**

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