



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society

Newsletter 107

Spring 2019



AGM 2018 Prizewinners



*Our new Publicity Member, **Jayne Lindley** achieved a double, winning prizes for the Best Written Article for 'A View from the Nest: Ex SIMMER DIM, Orkney, June 2018' in Newsletter 106 and Best Novice Photograph.*

***Dick Yates** receives the prize for Best Overseas Photograph for his picture of a Tawny Frogmouth, now on the front cover of this Newsletter*



***Martin Routledge** receives the prize for Best UK Photograph from the RAFOS Secretary, Jan Knight, for his picture of a Skylark. See on page 6.*

Contents

Title	Author	Page
AGM Prizewinners 2018		2
The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society		4
Chairman's Report to 2018 AGM	Martin Routledge	5
Notes from the Editor	Bill Francis	7
More of Mice and Men	Dick Knight	8
ISLAY MIST 2019	Team Knight	8
A Birding week in Southern Alberta	Dick Yates	9
SIMMER DIM 2018	Keith Cowieson	20
My Local - BTO Nest Reporting Scheme	John Wells	30
AOS Win Sanctuary Award	Sanctuary Magazine	38
Cape May, New Jersey, USA	Ken Earnshaw and Team Knight	40
Zimmer Dim	John Le Gassick	47



Best Novice Photograph, 2018

By Jayne Lindley

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Patron

MRAF Lord Craig of Radley GCB OBE MA DSc FRAeS RAF

President

VACANT

Vice Presidents

Air Chief Marshal Sir Joe French KCB CBE FRAeS RAF (Retd)

Air Marshal Sir John Baird KBE DL MBChB FRCPE FRCSE FFOM D Av Med
FRAeS RAF (Retd)

Air Commodore A C Curry LVO OBE RAF (Retd)

Air Commodore N Parton BSc MA MDA MPhil CEng FRAeS RAF

Air Commodore A C P Seymour RAF (Retd)

Committee

Chairman: Gp Capt M J Routledge CB BSc MRAeS RAFR

Secretary: Mrs J M Knight

Treasurer: Mrs S F Earnshaw

FALO/Expeditions Member: Gp Capt K Cowieson BSc (Hons) FCMI RAF (Retd)

Journal Editor: Mr K W Earnshaw

Newsletter and Social Media Editor: Wg Cdr W G Francis RAF (Retd)

Membership Secretary: Mr C P Wearn & Mrs J Wearne

Publicity Member: Sqn Ldr J E Lindley M Sc BSc (Hons) RAF

Production & Distribution Manager: Mr C P Wearn

Ringling Co-ordinator: Lt Cdr Julia Springett RN (Retd)

Web Administrator: Mr K W Earnshaw

Ex Officio Members

Scientific Adviser: Dr A G Gosler DPhil FLS MBOU

Library Co-ordinator: Gp Capt J C Knights FRGS RAF (Retd)

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2018 Annual General Meeting

I'd like to start by once again thanking Sacha for her presentation - many of us have flown in all sorts of things but I have to say a motorised para-glider has never been on my list of 'must try' aircraft!

As most will know, the position of President of the Society remains vacant so it falls to me as a life vice-president and slowest moving serving member to say a few general words about the RAF in a year that saw us reach our 100th birthday. Anyone who joined in any of the celebrations to mark that august occasion will I'm sure be glad that they did so. The parade and fly-past in London in July were quite outstanding and around the country the static aircraft tour attracted simply thousands of people. Commemorate, celebrate and inspire was the catch phrase and I think the events did just that. Capitalising on the inspire segment will see us continuing to invest in promoting RAF careers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics sectors - the STEM environment as it is usually called will be a key area for future engagement.

Our engagement in more operational activities has not let up either. The war against Daesh in Syria may finally be drawing to a close but at the same time there are signs of resurgence of trouble in Afghanistan so I suspect our involvement in the Middle East is far from over. We've supported NATO with the deployment of Typhoons to Romania to assist them with Air Policing over the Black Sea and are preparing to do the same over the Baltic Sea from Estonia next year. At home the resurgence of Russia as a bit of a pest has seen our Typhoons on UK Air Policing tasks more heavily used than at any time since the end of the Cold War and of course we remain in the Falklands so you can see that the small Typhoon Force is heavily tasked - effectively in 3 Continents at once. The Chinook force has been supporting the French efforts in Mali, our medical services took the lead for a UN hospital in South Sudan, recently handing over to the Vietnamese, and the Air Transport team flew emergency supplies to Indonesia after the earthquake and tsunami there. At the same time, we've supported some major exercises around the world from the Flag series in Nevada through a major NATO exercise in Norway and out to Oman for SAIF SAREEA where the exercise is just drawing down. On top of all this has been the introduction in to service of the new F35 or Lightning II at RAF Marham, and the work-up in the USA for the crews for our new maritime patrol aircraft, the Poseidon. Base reorganisation continues and as Henlow heads for closure we've also announced the move of basic airman recruit training from Halton to Cranwell, the closure of Linton-on-Ouse as the new flying training contract kicks in, the draw-down at St Athan and the closure of Scampton with the probable move of the Red Arrows to Wittering.

I noted last year that in such a busy Service, which is also undermanned by about 2000, it is perhaps not surprising that few have time for birding or to join a Society such as ours but we keep plugging our message and try to recruit more serving members where we can - indeed we've a few new Serving members this year than last and I'm pleased to say they've already become active on expeditions and one has been persuaded to stand for a role on the Committee! This leads nicely in to my task as Chairman.

First of all, let me thank you again for coming – it really is good to see the stalwart support we enjoy. We discussed last year whether we have got the format right and while there are twists and turns available to us, for the most part we seem to be content with the current arrangements. I note our membership figures have been revised and refined by the new Membership secretariat of Team W and while we've lost one or two in the process we've also re-engaged with some 'lost souls' and attracted a few newcomers. As we start our fifty-fourth year numbers are holding up and the activities of the Society are as interesting and diverse as ever. Importantly, once again we've supported the citizen science activities of a number of organisations but in particular the BTO, where our input is always welcomed and recognised in

their publications, and the Seabird Monitoring Programme. Now as usual I need to record formally some thanks:

Your Committee have worked hard this year and deserve your thanks as usual. Some posts are up for renewal and I'm grateful to those who will stand again to carry on the good work. Scott Drinkel has deployed to the Falkland Islands and has asked to stand-down slightly early as a result. Scott has asked me to thank all those who have supported his Royal British Legion (RBL) fund raising efforts on his run for the fallen and you might like to know he has completed 2372.98 Km, which is almost 1500 miles in old money, in the year to 11 November. He has raised just over £1200 for the RBL but there is still the opportunity to provide a little more via his Just Giving page at www.justgiving.com/fundraising/Scott-drinkel1. I'm pleased to say that Jayne Lindley has offered to step in to his shoes (as PR member not his running shoes) and we'll be seeking formal ratification of her appointment later. Among others, the role of Chairman is also up for re-selection and while I can stagger on for another year, after that I expect to be retiring from the RAF Reserves. Our constitution currently requires the Chairman to be drawn from the serving community so this leads to an interesting constitutional debate which we'll get to later in the Agenda! Can I just say at this point a firm thank you to those who have completed their tours of duty on the Committee and record formally the Society's thanks for your efforts. While it is slightly invidious to single out any member, I must thank Team Knight for once again keeping us all under control and I must note Colin Wearn's hand in sorting today's venue and catering out with the Mess Manager and his staff. Without all this support the AGM would not take place.

I've said before that the Society thrives on the activities of the Members every bit as much as the attention of the Committee. We've had a busy year with WINTER DUCK, ISLAY MIST and SIMMER DIM all being major expeditions contributing to the Society's aims and objectives. But there is a diverse array of activities out there and next year we'll be adding ringing in Gibraltar to the list once again. Keith has some other exciting opportunities to share for next year's plan but remember anyone, and I mean anyone, can propose, plan and run an event or expedition - variety is the spice of life.

And on that note, I'll hand over to the Secretary Bird to get on with business.

Best UK Photograph, 2018

By Martin Routledge



Notes from the Editor

Welcome to Newsletter No 107! I hope that you find its contents as interesting as I did when putting this edition together.

One of the highlights of the AGM in November was the talk by Sacha Dench of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust recounting her experiences planning and carrying out a scheme to fly, using a paramotor, with the Bewick Swans for Northern Russia to Slimbridge, following their Autumn migration. One aspect of the flight was the ability to speak to the people living along the route about the problems that the birds experience on their journey. Apart from the logistical problems, she damaged a knee making an awkward landing and her paramotor had to be provided with an undercarriage to enable her to finish her trip. It was a fascinating and instructive talk. Her future plans also sounded exciting.



Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will find a calling notice for this year's autumn visit to Islay, where flocks of wintering wildfowl create some amazing spectacles. It is well-worth braving a Scottish autumn to see them and other winter migrants.

Other articles will tell you of birding trips to Canada and Cape May in the USA, as well as a visit to Iceland and Greenland and another to Southern Alberta. There is an interesting article by John Wells concerning his involvement with the BTO's nesting bird survey over the last 4 years; perhaps something you might wish to consider trying.

The article on SIMMER DIM 2018 is a copy of Keith Cowieson's report for the grant of funds for the expedition.

The article from *Sanctuary* concerning the winning of the Sanctuary Award by the AOS is included as anyone looking at the Photograph will recognise a familiar face. Colin Wearn, our Production Manager and Membership Secretary has been a major contributor to the work on Ascension Island resulting in the award.

My own birding in the last year has been very limited, although I really enjoyed taking part in ISLAY MIST 2018 last Spring. I travelled by slow train to Glasgow, and flew to Islay in about 20 minutes after a night stop at the airport. The weather on the flight was magnificent, and the views across the Isle of Arran, the Mull of Kintyre, Jura and Islay were superb. I then had a 6 hour wait in Bowmore before a promised lift to our accommodation at Kilchoman. Time was spent birding and eating and drinking in the town!

The first RAFOS event for 2019 was our usual start of the year with a visit to WWT Slimbridge. I do not know when it began, but it had been running for many years before I took over its organisation. 12 people attended this year, a slight reduction on previous occasions, but there was plenty to see, even if the centre was very busy.

Best wishes for 2019.

Bill Francis

MORE OF MICE AND MEN

A postscript by *Dick Knight*

In the last newsletter I told the tale of how we discovered that we had a Pipistrelle bat maternity roost behind our fascia, with a count of 187 in the week beginning 1 Jul 18. The tale later developed a twist!

The next week we had a similar tally but the week after that we saw only 2. Where had they all gone? Our bat expert, Colin Wearn, suggested that they shouldn't have left so soon. Another week on we stood in the garden at dusk in a vain hope of activity to find a number of bats coming from behind us. We counted 152. The ungrateful creatures had left us for our neighbours!

You may remember the summer heatwave of last year – unless you live in Scotland. We assume that our south-facing plastic fascia got too hot for them so they moved next door to our neighbour's east-facing wooden fascia. The departure flight path from their new home took them over our garden. The next night we had our 2 house guests sitting out with us to help with the counting, and we weren't the only ones interested in the bats. We were joined by 2 Sparrowhawks which gave us a spectacular aerobatic display as they chased bats in the gloom. We didn't see them catch any but part of their manoeuvring was hidden behind the hedges.

At the end of July the count of bats was down to 101 and by August they were finally gone for the year, apart from the odd one hunting around the garden. So that is the end of the tale – unless there is a post-postscript for the next newsletter.

ISLAY MIST 2019

Do you like the idea of being gently woken by the distant calls of hundreds of geese as they fly in to their feeding grounds? If you're not an early riser, as I am not, then the good news is that sunrise on Islay is not till about 0730 in late October. Or would you prefer the idea of relaxing in front of a coal fire after a good day's birding? We can't arrange peat for the fire but 8 distilleries can offer beverages with various intensities of the flavour.

We make no promises on what birds you'll see but the average number of species seen on the 5 previous Autumn visits to Islay by RAFOS is 112 (for the statisticians, range 107 – 121). There has been a Richardson's Cackling Goose at Loch Gruinart but, again, we can't promise it will still be there and I couldn't pick one out in a flock of Canada Geese anyway.

Islay Mist 2019 is due to take place from 26 Oct to 2 Nov 19. If you are interested, please tell Dick and Jan Knight on theknightsat2@gmail.com or on 01243 920289. We need to know by 1 Jun 19 so we can confirm the accommodation.

Team Knight

A BIRDING WEEK IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA
30th MAY – 5th JUNE 2018

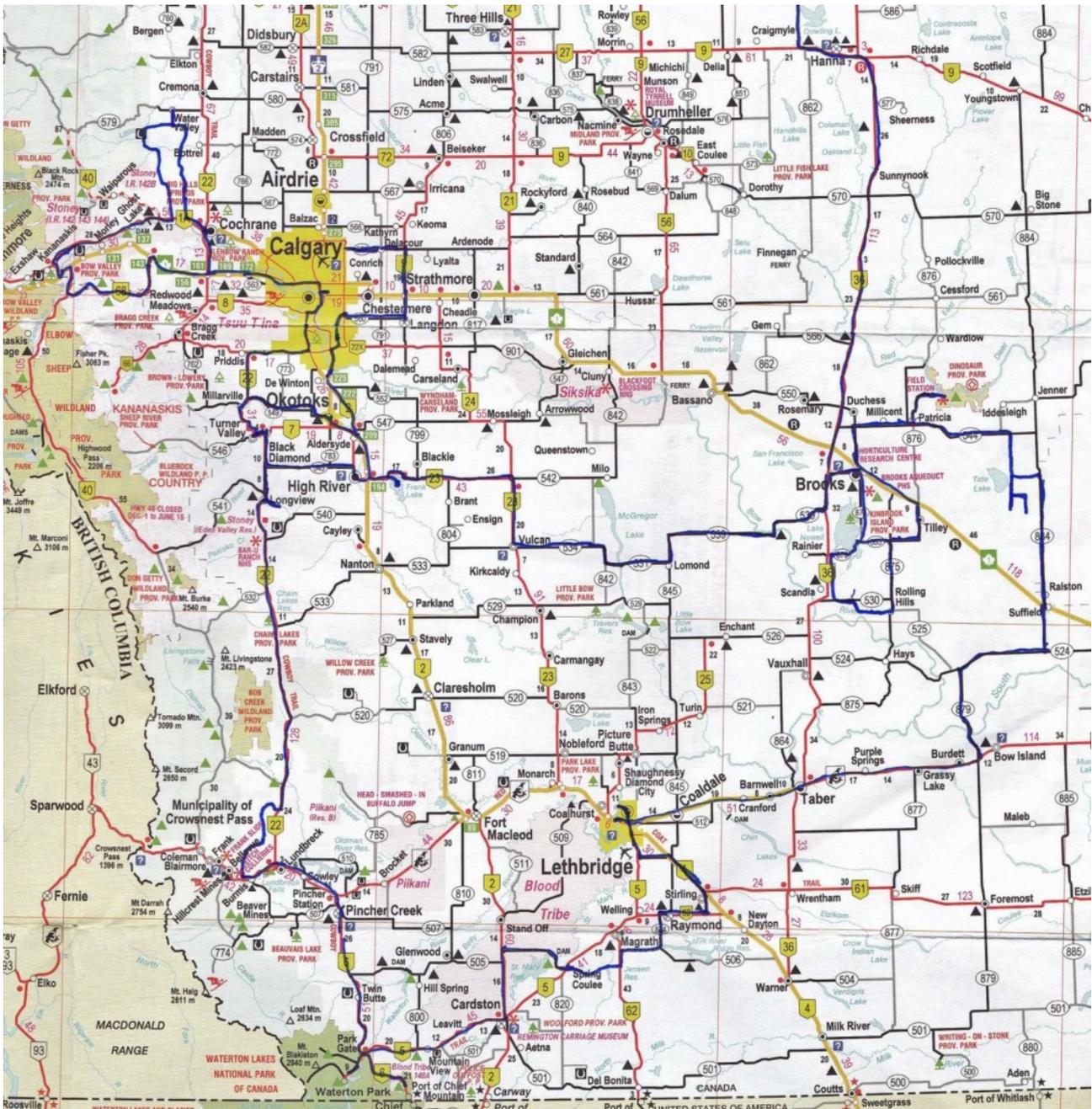
In early June Daphne and I spent a week birding in Southern Alberta with a guide called Daniel Arndt. Daniel has a full time job as a Terrestrial Biologist. OK I hear you ask, “What does a Terrestrial Biologist do”? I asked. The company Dan works for is employed by large organisations, like the government, oil and utility companies etc to conduct environmental impact studies before they go ahead with a new project, as required by Canadian law. Daniel’s specialisation is ornithology. In his spare time he guides groups or individual birders around his home patch of southern Alberta. He was a very good and entertaining guide and you can find him at www.bowvalleytours.com.

For our outbound flight with Air Canada we had booked premium economy and it was well worth it for the 9 hour trip. We arrived in Calgary early afternoon and Daniel picked us up from the airport and took us to the Days Inn where we spent the rest of the day recovering. Next morning, after a leisurely breakfast, we set out birding. Our first day was spent in the environs of Calgary finding and getting to know some of the more common birds and picking up a few birds that we probably would not find later. I had very limited experience of North American birding so many species were lifers for me; among today’s birds were Purple Martin, California Gull, Wilsons Snipe, Sora, Horned Grebe, Western Meadowlark – looking remarkably similar to its Eastern cousin - Brewer’s Blackbird, Wilson’s Phalarope, Tree Swallow, Canvasback, Foster’s Tern, 4 Sparrows – Clay-coloured, Savannah, Song and Le Conte’s, a very obliging Least Flycatcher which posed nicely for photos and my bird of the day Great Grey Owl with an owlet.



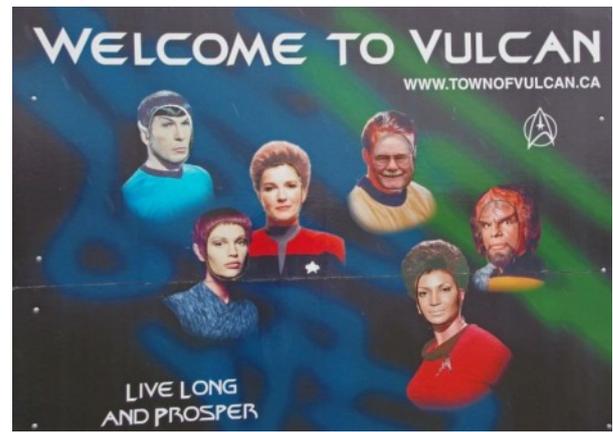
The next day, 31 May, we set out on the tour. We made a few stops closer to Calgary and then headed south-east for Brooks where we would spend the next 2 nights.

I think that you can just about follow the blue line of our route on the map below.



We visited several birding sites en-route and picked up White-faced Ibis, Eared, Red-necked and Western Grebe, Rufous Hummingbird, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-naped Sapsucker, Brown-headed Cowbird, 2 more sparrows – Lincoln's and Chipping - and Ferruginous Hawk. At one of the wetlands we found White-rumped Sandpiper about which Daniel was quite excited as it was a lifer for him and one of the very few records of the bird in Alberta. At all the wetlands we visited Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds were very common as were Blue-winged Teal and a good variety of ducks.

As I was ex RAF we also stopped at the old Canadian Air Force Base at High River where a good many RAF pilots were trained. There is not much left now apart from an old, rather dilapidated looking hangar that is used by some commercial organisation. We also stopped at a town called Vulcan, which I was expecting to have some association with one of the aircraft I flew; but it had a much more prosaic association as you can see.



There is not much left at High River now other than a rather old looking hanger used by some commercial company. OK spot the “ringer” at Vulcan



White-rumped Sandpiper

Photo:- Daniel Arndt

After a pleasant evening in the Days Inn at Brooks we woke up to rain on 1 June. Up till now the weather had been quite kind to us, overcast with sunny periods but quite chilly; today it was bucketing it down. Daniel decided that we should head up north to a lake near Hanna (top of map) to try and find Piping Plover, reported to be on the wetland. We would stop off at various points on the way, birds and weather permitting. They didn't, we arrived and it was still raining. Daniel went to prospect for the bird. He returned about 5 minutes later to say he had found it – prepare to get wet! We got wet and saw the plover, he was still quite a way off but came closer to give excellent views through the scope and close enough for Daniel to get a decent shot with his long lens.

We climbed back into the car and headed for Brooks and lunch. On the way the weather started to improve and by early afternoon we were able to get back to the main business of the day. Birding this afternoon brought us Eastern and Western Kingbird, 2 more sparrows – Vesper and Grasshopper - Red-eyed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Long-billed Curlew and Marbled Godwit, Cedar Waxwing and my favourite of the day Burrowing Owl.



Piping Plover *Photo:- Daniel Arndt*



Burrowing Owl *Photo:- Daphne Yates*

Grasshopper Sparrow and Cedar Waxwing



Today, 2 Jun, we left Brooks on our way to Lethbridge via the famous Dinosaur Provincial Park and a few other birding sites on the way. The weather had cleared up and we continued to look for the prairie specialists that we had lost out on the previous day. Good birds this morning included American Goldfinch, Grey Partridge, Baltimore Oriole, Western Wood Peewee, Grey Catbird, Brown Thrasher and Loggerhead Shrike. As we were going down the highway Daniel's sharp eyes spotted a pair of Sharp-tailed Grouse as well as a Pronghorn and Columbian Ground Squirrel.

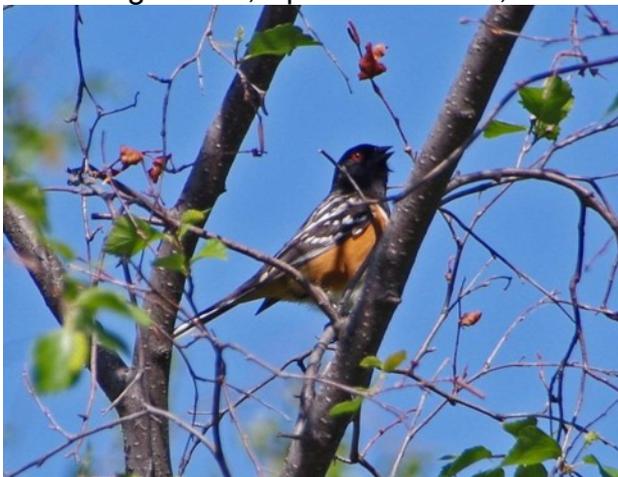




Dinosaur Provincial Park is a fascinating place and is one of the richest dinosaur fossil locations in the world. Fifty-eight dinosaur species have been discovered there and more than 500 specimens have been removed and exhibited in museums around the world. This huge accumulation of fossils led to it being declared a World Heritage Site in 1979.



We drove round the park and then had a walk round the Cottonwood Trail which revealed some more good birds. We had our first sight of the beautiful Mountain Bluebird, but we got much better ones a few days later. We added Violet Green Swallow, Rock Wren, Common Nighthawk, Spotted Towhee, Northern Flicker and Lark Sparrow to our list.



Spotted Towhee



Violet Green Swallow

We left Dinosaur Park and continued on our way to Lethbridge making stops on the prairie to pick up Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspur and Sprague's Pipit.

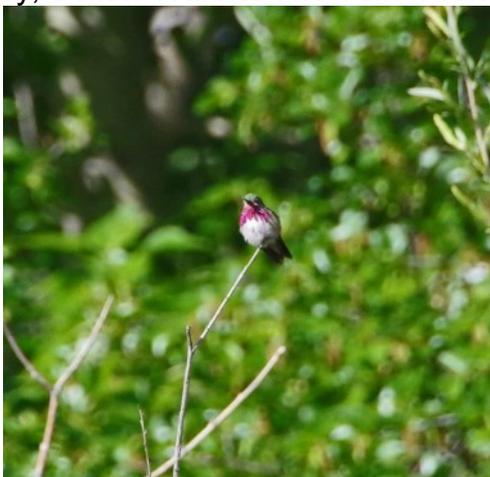
After a very pleasant evening at the Ramada Hotel in Lethbridge we made an early start on 3 June and first off visited Lethbridge Park and the Elizabeth Hall Wetlands. A beautiful walk by the river on a sunny but still chilly morning brought us House Finch and House Wren and Black-capped Chickadee.

We knew that freight trains in Canada were long but it was still a surprise to see one crossing the 2 Km wide bridge over the river in Lethbridge with the engines disappearing off one side before the final wagons arrived on the bridge.



For the rest of the day we made our way westwards towards the Rockies stopping for birds at various locations that Daniel knew, finally arriving at Waterton in the Waterton Lakes National Park. At one of our stops, Sterling Reservoir, we saw Franklin's Gull, White-faced Ibis, Green-winged Teal and Trumpeter Swan. A late afternoon walk round Waterton provided American Dipper, Stellar's Jay, MacGillivray's Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Chipping Sparrow, Philadelphia Vireo, Rufous Hummingbird and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Unfortunately, the Harlequin Ducks had gone AWOL as there was no sign of them that evening or the following morning before we left.

4 June, we spent most of the day birding around Waterton and in the foothills of the Rockies before heading back towards Calgary. Some of today's highlights were Calliope Hummingbird and Black-headed Grosbeak, Northern Waterthrush, Tennessee Warbler, Veery, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler.





Yellow-rumped Warbler



Chipping Sparrow

On the lakes and wetlands we found Common Loon, American Wigeon, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser and Franklin's and Ring-Billed Gull. We also saw a few animals.



White-tailed Deer crossing the street in Waterton and Bighorn Sheep on a hillside outside town



Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel



North American Red Squirrel

For the botanists among you we also came across a meadow full of wild flowers. Daniel had a very useful app on his phone that helped to identify most of them.



Wild Iris



Wild Lily

Finally, at a stake out that Daniel knew we were able to get good views through the scope of Prairie Falcon. We got back to Calgary in time to visit the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary where we finally caught up with Wood Duck and American Wigeon plus a few other birds.



5 June, the last day of our birding week and Daniel picked us up and we headed out west towards Banff. It was a beautiful sunny day at last and the light was a lot better for photography, hence I got some of the best shots of the trip. I also seemed to be able to get a lot closer to the birds than before and that helped in getting a few better shots. There were quite a few great birds today but I think that our 'bird of the day' has to be the Mountain Bluebird; they are stunning. (Male and female below)



Daniel has a series of nest boxes that he monitors as part of an on-going survey and these birds were occupying one of the boxes.



Bluebird eggs and the female returning to the nest box.



A Tree Swallow was nesting in another box we checked.

Other good birds we saw that day were Nelson's, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrow, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Cape May Warbler, Alder and Olive-sided Flycatcher, Hairy Woodpecker, Great Grey Owl, Blue-headed Vireo, Solitary Sandpiper, Northern Rough-wing Swallow, Pine Siskin, Hooded Merganser, American Redstart, Boreal Chickadee, Swainson's Thrush, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Great Grey Owl. In all a memorable days birding. Finally, Daniel took us back to the airport to pick up our hire car in readiness for our trip up to Jasper via Lake Louise before boarding the Rocky Mountaineer to Vancouver. Here a few shots of the birds seen on the last day.



Great Grey Owl



American Redstart (female)



Boreal Chickadee



White-crowned Sparrow



Hairy Woodpecker



I was looking out across the fields when this Wilson's Snipe landed on a fence post not 5m away!!

My final bird photo is a Rose-breasted Grosbeak.



But not quite the last photo; when you go to the Rockies a **must see** animal is a Grizzly Bear! We did not see one during our birding week but on our journey up to Jasper we had just pulled into the car park at Lake Peyto when people came running up the path towards us from the direction of the lake. “What’s up?” I asked. “A big Grizzly coming up the track behind us”, they panted. So I positioned myself at reasonably safe distance and got a few shots off as he wandered up the track past me and through the car park taking no notice of anyone.



This shot is full frame and not cropped at all. Just using the 200m lens at *almost* max zoom.

**Grant Report: Expedition SIMMER DIM 2018 – Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS)
expedition to Orkney, June 2018**

A volunteer, citizen scientist's perspective - Keith Cowieson, RAFOS Field Activities Liaison Officer



The 'Simmer Dim'¹ – John Nigel Wells

Every 15 years or so, I start to hanker after a week's seabird surveying on one of Scotland's magnificent Northern or Western Isles. Thoughts stray to the delights of dangling over the edge of some dizzying precipice counting auks, shags and kittiwakes on narrow ledges, crawling around on all fours sniffing peat hags or drystone dykes for the tell-tale musty smell of nesting petrels or steeling oneself to walk briskly, yet carefully, through a ternery, gullery or skua colony counting nests, eggs and chicks as the local inhabitants attempt to terrorise intruders into retreat through dive bombing, showering with guano or playing chicken with you during intimidating, low-level, head-on attacks.



Low-level, head-on, bonxie attack – Keith Cowieson

Therefore, after a couple of years of champing-at-the-bit as funding for the statutorily-mandated census of all breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland was finalised, it was with a sense of joy that I espied Daisy Burnell, the overall JNCC Seabirds Count coordinator, at last year's Scottish

¹ Orkney's latitude at 59 degrees north means the sun is above the horizon for 18 hours in mid-summer. It rises at around 4am and sets at about 10.30pm. But it is still twilight for much of the night as the sun only dips just below the horizon. This period of not-quite darkness is known in Orkney as the 'simmer dim'.

Ornithologists' Club's winter conference. Daisy was actively recruiting volunteers for this, the 4th Periodic Seabirds Census, and a quick 15-minute chat later, we were on, with Daisy promising to allocate RAFOS some under-recorded Scottish islands or stretches of mainland coastline to survey. And following discussions with Daisy, Drs Liz Humphries and Niall Burton of the BTO and Kate Thompson of SNH, we were allocated the Northern Orkney Islands of Eday and Stronsay. (Previous RAFOS seabird censusing forays had been to Mingulay and Berneray in 1979, Mingulay again in 1985 for the Seabird Colony Register, the Flannans in 1998 and Benbecula, North & South Uist for Seabird 2000, so Orkney would represent exciting new ground for us). Ringing round some of the RAFOS old guard revealed that despite a distinct greying and general diminution of hair, expansion of girth and stiffening of various joints over the years, most were up for it and raring to go.

So it was with a sense of keen expectation that our 2 parties of 6 enthusiastic citizen scientists each, disembarked on a glorious evening in mid-June at the jetties on Eday and Stronsay, having had our first taste of things to come watching local Arctic and great skua (scootie-allan and bonxie in Orcadian parlance), arctic terns (pickieterno) and guillemot, razorbill, puffin and black guillemot (aak, baukie, tammie norrie and tystie) from the decks of Orkney Ferries' inter-island services. Our task was to survey all 103 main island SMP sites on Eday and Stronsay, and as many of the outlying smaller islets as time and resources permitted. This account is focussed on Eday and its outliers, where I was to spend the next week.

Seabirds Count Priorities. During pre-expedition planning, it was stressed that the priorities for Seabirds Count should be on skua, tern and gull colonies, as some of these species were those giving rise to the greatest conservation concern. For example, the State of the UK's Birds (SUKB) 2017 (JNCC 2018) states that kleptoparasitic Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) numbers have declined by a whopping 76% since 1986, and 64% since Seabird 2000 – the greatest decline of any UK breeding seabird over the period. Conversely, great skua (*Stercorarius skua*) numbers have continued their seemingly inexorable increase with SUKB 2017 charting a 53% increase in numbers since 1986 and 18% since Seabird 2000 (JNCC 2018). Reviewing the Seabird 2000 results for Eday on the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) website revealed that Arctic skua had been 3 times as numerous as great skua 18 years ago, so it was interesting to speculate what we might find. Similarly, SUKB 2017 held that Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) numbers had steadily increased over the period 1986-2017, by an average of 18% - albeit mainly in England - yet anecdotal evidence in recent years recorded widespread breeding failure of some tern colonies in UK's northern isles. Again, we looked forward to discovering the level of change, if any, between Seabird 2000 observations and our own.



Recently hatched 'Bonxie' chick, still with egg-tooth – Keith Cowieson

Observations. So, what did we observe during our survey and what tentative conclusions were we able to draw? The task on Eday was simple, walk the entire coastline and visit all 43 seabird colonies counted during Seabird 2000 and conduct a snap-shot, single visit survey, with repeat visits to particularly large, difficult-to-survey colonies if time permitted. Our observations are tabulated below, alongside Seabird 2000 results:

Changes in seabird populations on Eday (inc Faray and Calf of Eday, 2000 – 2018)²

Species	Seabird 2000	Seabirds Count	% Change
Northern Fulmar	7533 AOS	3099 AOS	-59
Great Cormorant	138 AON	187 AON	+36
European Shag	56 AON	52 AON	-1
Arctic Skua	76 AOT	58 AOT	-24
Great Skua	26 AOT	104 AOT	+300
Black-legged Kittiwake	779 AON	148 AON	-81
Great Black-backed Gull	1520 ind	41 ind / 74 AON-AOT	N/A ³
Lesser Black-backed Gull	38 ind	1 ind / 49 AON-AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	70 ind	40 ind / 42 AON-AOT	N/A
Common Gull	512 ind	83 ind / 217 AON-AOT	N/A
Black-headed Gull	20 ind	11 ind / 2 AOT	N/A
Arctic Tern	727 ind	161 ind / 62 AON	-78(ind)
Common Guillemot	2610 ind	5524 ind	+112
Razorbill	100 ind	101 ind	+1
Black Guillemot	349 ind	100 ind	N/A ⁴
Atlantic Puffin	0 ind	48 ind	-

Source: Seabird Monitoring Programme On-line Database <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/smp/Default.aspx>



Calf of Eday mixed seabird colony – Keith Cowieson

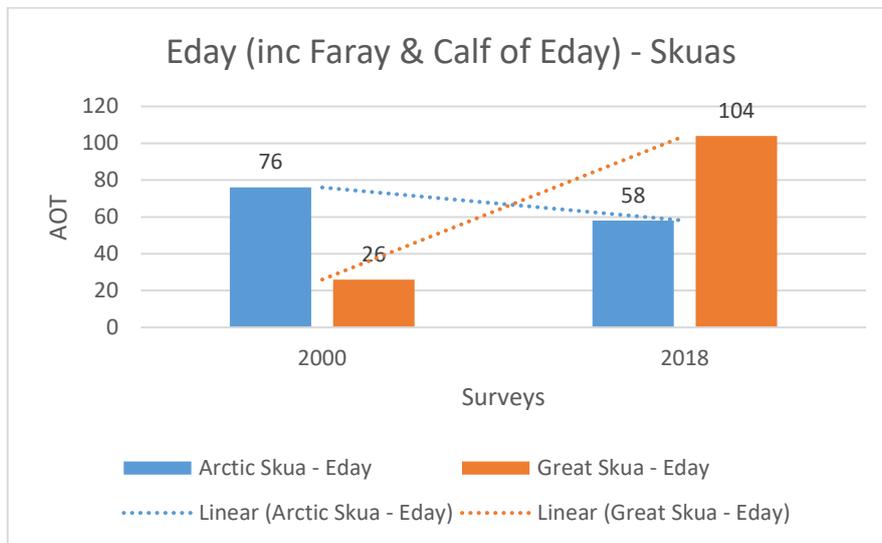
² Health warning – 2018 figures not yet checked

³ Different emphasis in gull census unit methodology employed in Seabird 2000 & Seabirds Census

⁴ Suboptimal timing period for 2018 counts

While clearly only representing a specific, small island, snap-shot sample, the declines in Eday’s Northern fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and red-legged kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) populations at -59% and -81% respectively, are almost double the overall SUKB trends (-31% and -44%). Meanwhile the 78% decline in Arctic tern numbers is not consistent with the positive overall SUKB increase. Trends in gull populations are harder to discern as it seems that a different emphasis in recording methodology was employed by the surveyors in Seabird 2000, with less emphasis on nest/territory recording. On auks, the positive trend for common guillemots (*Uria aalge*) at +112% was very encouraging, although very few young or eggs were spotted on the nesting ledges.

Skua observations. On Eday and the outliers that we were able to visit (Calf of Eday and Faray), our skua observations mirrored the SUKB trends, if not the scale of the reported national Arctic skua decline. Arctic skua numbers were down 24% from 76 to 58 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT) while great skua numbers had increased by 300% from 26 to 104 AOTs.



Changes in skua populations on Eday, 2000 - 2018

It was also apparent that where great skua colonies were most dense, Arctic skua were least common, and generally located on the fringes of the bonxie colonies often in boggy, lower-lying wet terrain than that favoured by their larger cousins. Although no ‘top down’ intra-guild predation by great skua of Arctic skua eggs or chicks was observed on Eday, the ‘bottom-up’ pressure of decreasing trends of some host/victim species’ numbers (kittiwake & terns) coupled with the burgeoning population of competing/predatory great skua does conform to the broad thrust of the ‘combined bottom-up / top-down pressures’ effect judged to have led to catastrophic Arctic skua declines in Scotland - as detailed in a recent Journal of Animal Ecology paper (Perkins *et al*, 2018).



Dark phase Arctic Skua and Arctic skua chick still with egg-tooth – Keith Cowieson

The catastrophic decline of the Arctic skua populations in Scotland also raises the age-old conservationists' dilemma of whether to intervene or not. Perkins *et al* explore a range of 'direct intervention' conservation solutions, such as supplementary feeding of Arctic skua and predator control i.e. great skua management at certain colonies with low host/victim numbers and high bonxie density. Such potential national level intervention considerations have of course to be seen in the context of the global picture where Scotland's Arctic skua population represents only 1% of the world's widespread and abundant Arctic skua numbers, while the Scottish great skua population represents 57% of world great skua numbers (Perkins *et al*, 2018). Finally, it is worth noting that globally, both species are categorised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as of 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International, 2018).

Non-native species. Meanwhile, ground-nesting seabirds (and all other ground-nesting species) benefit tremendously from the lack of mammalian predators on UK's northern and western islands. Indeed this is one of the reasons why these outlying islands are so vital for the internationally and nationally important populations of seabirds, waders and some ground-nesting birds-of-prey that they hold, and why major efforts are being made by national authorities and NGOs to clear islands of destructive, non-native species that have established themselves in the region – black and brown rats, American mink, hedgehogs and most recently on Orkney, stoats (SNH 2017a). So it was with a sense of dismay that we spotted a European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) trundling along one of the roads on Eday, not far from both a small moorland arctic tern colony and a large mixed gullery. The hedgehog is a non-native species in the Orkneys and has wrought significant damage to the internationally important populations of wading birds (and others) on the Hebridean islands of North & South Uist and Benbecula since their unfortunate introduction there in the mid-1970s (SNH 2017b). On reporting our sighting to the authorities, it was surprising to learn that there was no hedgehog removal programme in place, unlike that in the Hebrides where significant efforts are underway to protect vulnerable ground-nesting species (SNH 2017b). The last thing some of our vulnerable ground-nesting seabird populations need is another pressure added to those already combining to depress populations – climate change-related factors, over and under-fishing and its effect on prey availability, off-shore wind farms, disturbance, land-use changes etc. It will be interesting to see what actions the authorities eventually contemplate, if any. For example, an extensive stoat trapping programme has been rolled out on some Orkney Isles to counter that particular threat (SNH 2017a).



Predated tern – Keith Cowieson.

Some Lessons Identified. A spell of concentrated surveying effort always helps identify useful lessons for the next time round and for sharing ‘top tips’ with other contract and volunteer surveyors. Most of these ‘lessons’ are not new, but nevertheless bear repeating. The question of how best to survey terns, gulls and skuas, whether to walk transects or to view from suitable vantage points, is addressed in the ‘Seabird monitoring handbook for Britain and Ireland’ (Walsh *et al*, 1995) and was discussed in detail with Liz Humphries and Niall Burton as part of our pre- expedition planning considerations. Our experience leant heavily towards transect walking. Even on the relatively flat, gently undulating moorland of Eday, many skua territories would have been missed if we had not slogged to and fro across the peatlands. Much ‘dead ground’⁵ existed on the island, including significant areas of historical peat diggings, meaning that large tracts of suitable terrain and habitat could not be satisfactorily surveyed from SMP-defined vantage points. It was surprising how many hitherto hidden birds & territories were revealed during walked transects using what were essentially old-fashioned ‘flush count’ techniques (Bibby *et al*, 1992) over areas that appeared devoid of birds when scanning from vantage points.



‘Skua transect’ surveyors on typical peatland terrain – Keith Cowieson

One other good giveaway for locating great skua (and great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*)) territories and nest sites were the vivid patches of well-manured, green plots in the otherwise uniform brown peat and heathland-dominated landscape. These invariably indicated historical breeding sites and lookout posts, well-fertilised by guano and the decomposing corpses of prey over the years, and sometimes with previous seasons’ nest bowls clearly visible, close to the current nest.

⁵ An area of ground hidden from an observer due to undulations in the land.



Great skua nest & egg in signature, well-manured 'green plot' on coastal heath & current and previous year's great skua nest bowls, side by side – Keith Cowieson

Disturbance. Disturbance to nesting seabirds is a well-known hazard and one that surveyors must always strive to minimise. It was instructive therefore to note just how sensitive and vulnerable to disturbance a great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) colony on our patch was. This particular colony is on the Calf of Eday SPA, a little-visited site according to the local boatman. The usual landing point for the island is directly onto a convenient shelf of rock by a small geo, some 2-300 metres from the moorland edge-based colony. On the day of our visit, a sea-haar⁶ was just lifting, limiting visibility to around 2-300 metres. It became apparent that as we approached the landing site by small boat, several of the closest cormorants were flying off their nests into the adjacent water below. This served as a timely reminder for us to 'box' around the colony once ashore, giving it a wide 150 metre berth before we started transect walking outbound and when returning later to re-embark. The colony itself was ringed by 3-4 pairs of nesting great black-backed gulls, ideal for 'convenience' foraging when the cormorant nests and young were left unattended, as the rather pathetic remains of indigestible cormorant flippers by the gull nesting areas reminded us. In our subsequent in-house debrief, the utility of using 'drones' for surveying such colonies of easily-disturbed seabirds was discussed, but they are not without their own issues and may increase the risks of disturbance in untrained hands (SNH, 2018b).

⁶ In meteorology, sea haar or sea fret is a cold sea fog. It occurs most often on the east coast of England or Scotland between April and September, when warm air passes over the cold North Sea.



Cormorant colony on Calf of Eday, in the haar, and from Eday – Keith Cowieson & Brian Lyon

Seabird Nest Incorporation of Plastic. Dr Nina O’Hanlon of the University of the Highlands and Islands had requested that surveyors note any seabird nest incorporation of plastic during their work, in order that the proportion of nests affected could be ascertained. Although small amounts of plastic litter were apparent on Eday’s beaches, only two nests were definitely identified with plastic incorporated, that of a shag, on the western coast of the outlying island of Faray and an old raven/crow’s nest that a fulmar had expropriated on the Calf of Eday. The shag’s nest was one of a small colony of 15.



Shag 'trace' nest incorporating plastic – Keith Cowieson

Non-target bird species. Eday's appeal was not limited to seabirds either, there were good numbers of wetland birds and waterfowl such as eider, grey-lag goose, mallard, red-throated diver, red-breasted merganser, shelduck, teal & tufted duck; resident breeding raptors included buzzard, hen harrier, kestrel, peregrine, short-eared owl & sparrowhawk; waders abounded including curlew, dunlin, golden plover, lapwing, oystercatcher, redshank, ringed plover, snipe & whimbrel and passerines and doves included blackbird, collared dove, hooded crow, sea cliff-nesting house martin, jackdaw, linnets, meadow & rock pipit, mistle & song thrush, raven, reed bunting, rock dove, sand martin, skylark, starling, stonechat, swallow, twite, woodpigeon and wren. All in all a fantastic assemblage of birds for an island only 14 x 4 kms and 2,745 Ha in extent.



Short-eared owl – Keith Cowieson

Overall, 103 SMP main island sites, 2 outlying island sites and 2 new main island sites were surveyed by RAFOS personnel on Eday and Stronsay ie 107 of Orkney's 1,200 seabird breeding sites. The sites ranged in character from 250ft vertical cliffs, through heather moorland and peat bog, to glorious stretches of sandy beaches. Personnel covered between 5-12 miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 15 species lists for BTO's BirdTrack at the 10 Km square level. A total of 589 BirdTrack records were created in the survey area with 74 species recorded. Meanwhile, 1 x British Birds Rarities Committee, Rarity

Submission was raised, many individual nest and colony nest record cards covering 25 species are in the process of being generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme, 14 individual birds from 5 x species were ringed on Stronsay, 2 x Nest Incorporation of Plastic Monitoring Forms were generated, a non-native hedgehog sighting on Eday was forwarded to SNH and the Orkney Mammals Recorder and 3 x Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database – including that of a great yellow bumblebee (*Bombus distinguendus*), one of Britain's rarest.

Finally, the RAFOS Chairman and Committee would like to express their sincere gratitude to The Seabird Group and to the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society for their generous grant and donation towards the costs of our 2018 expedition.

Roll on the Seabirds Count 2019 season.....

References:

Bibby C. J., Burgess N. D., Hill D. A., Mustoe S. H. (1992) *Bird Census Techniques, 2nd Edition*, Academic Press.

BirdLife International (2018) *'IUCN Red List Criteria'* [Online] Available at <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/spcredcrit> (Accessed 16 September 2018).

JNCC (2018) *'The State of the UK's Birds 2017'* [Online] Available at <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/2017%20SUKB.pdf> (Accessed 9 September 2018).

Perkins A., Ratcliffe N., Suddaby B., Ribbands D., Smith C., Ellis C., Meek E., Bolton M. (2018) *'Combined bottom-up and top-down pressures drive catastrophic population declines of Arctic skuas in Scotland'* [Online] Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2656.12890> (Accessed 5 September 2018).

SNH (2017a) *'Orkney Native Wildlife Project'* [Online] Available at <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/land-and-sea-management/managing-wildlife/orkney-native-wildlife-project> (Accessed 14 September 2018).

SNH (2017b) *'Uist Wader Research'* [Online] Available at <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/land-and-sea-management/managing-wildlife/uist-wader-research> (Accessed 13 September 2018).

SNH (2018) *'Drones and Wildlife: Operators warned against misuse'* [Online] Available at <https://www.snhpresscentre.com/news/drones-and-wildlife-operators-warned-against-misuse> (Accessed 5 September 2018).

Walsh, P.M., Halley, D.J., Harris, M.P., del Nevo, A., Sim, I.M.W., & Tasker, M.L. (1995). *'Seabird monitoring handbook for Britain and Ireland'*. JNCC / RSPB / ITE / Seabird Group, Peterborough.

My Local - BTO Nest Recording Scheme (NRS)

By John N Wells (MSM, PIEMA)

How I got started on Nest Recording for the BTO is somewhat unclear. I remember reading of The Nest Record Scheme (NRS), probably in a BTO publication, and thinking; that with 4 nest boxes and a suitable colony of House Sparrows doing rather well in my 2 'House Sparrow terraces' on the side of the house, that I should consider the survey. I also had other various boxes dotted about the garden that were successful, so why not get involved?

Having been drawn into another BTO Volunteer survey (that's 8 now) listed below:

- WeBS (RAFOS Winter Duck 1999-2018), bar 2 whilst serving in the Gulf, the additional:
- Non-Estuarine Water bird Survey (NEWS).
- The 4 years efforts for Breeding Atlas 2007-11 - with RAFOS and local Atlas squares.
- Woodcock Roding Survey - undertaken in Hook, Hants and both locally here at Holme Fen near Whittlesea, Cambs.
- House Martin Survey - nest counts (2017), opposite our house in Bury road.
- Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) - The enduring and twice yearly visits, for BBS (since 2001-current date), on Bury Lane Farm.
- The Winter; Farmland Survey (whilst at Odiham) 2001. That was walking for the sake of it!
- Also, now freshly ensconced in 2018 - Tawny Owl Point Survey and Tawny Owl Calling Survey.
- Last summers; Seabird Census 2018 with RAFOS for The Seabird Group ('Exped Simmer Dim 2018')

Possibly even more that I've forgotten, so some time back in Spring 2014 it was time to sign up for The BTO NRS.

I have currently the following 10 nest boxes around the garden:

- Front Cherry - Stonecrete [Tit/Sparrow box]
- Front Cherry - Wooden [Tit/Sparrow box]
- Side of House (Upper) - House Sparrow terrace - 3 sections
- Side of House (Lower) - House Sparrow terrace - 3 sections
- Eucalyptus Tree - Stonecrete [tit box] - rear garden
- Eucalyptus Tree - Open fronted - [Flycatcher type/size] - rear garden
- Shed Apex - [tit box, small diameter] - rear garden
- Rose Trellis - [tit box, - small diameter] - rear garden
- Jacobi-Jayne [Open fronted type-Robin/Blackbird size] - rear garden on silver birch.
- Eaves above bedroom; House Martin (artificial nest)

It's best if you know the names and by giving them names rather than numbers, I find it easier to recall them for the BTO NRS forms. Also, easier when reporting in note books used on the days when you erect the ladder and go around and check them all for signs of build state/eggs, young, fledging and post fledge status. As well as maintenance and cleaning out!

The article also covers the occasional naturally built nest I have located locally, whilst undertaking NRS, but I have gone specifically looking for nests as is the usual modus operandi of the scheme.

Home Sites

That is sites within boundaries of our house, 12 High Street and comprises a mixture of home-made wooden boxes, mostly purchased locally from a building supply merchant, or purchased from garden centres. The Stonecrete boxes are purchased. I feel they are the better value and offer better protection for birds. I will breakdown each box, it's history, success in usage and its construction and repair as we go.

Front Cherry - Stonecrete. One of my first boxes erected at the house was one we brought with us from Hook, Hants. It has been erected in the old flowering Cherry on the drive. We moved here in late 2013 and it was explored in Spring 2014 by House Sparrow and Great Tit pairs. It is north facing, which offers protection from the sun at its hottest during most of the day. The sun goes around SE to NW on the orientation of the house, so had the hole faced the opposite way, the young would possibly overheat. Also, by facing north, we see the activities around the box and entrance hole throughout the day from the kitchen window. This aids nest recording considerably, giving supplementary dates when I don't want to get the ladder out, quite a chore with a double aluminium ladder and low fragile branches on this tree. In **2014**, my first NRS season, it was taken by the resident House Sparrows. They laid some dry grasses and the box showed signs of being used as a roost with droppings inside from over-winter, but they didn't breed. In July that year a male House Sparrow showed increased activity and interest, possibly a late or second brood attempt but sadly it came to nothing. I think **2015** was the year the Great Tits and House Sparrows competed for it. We have a large colony of House Sparrows that frequent the Lime trees on my neighbour's boundary. These 12 trees overhang our front drive and offer Ivy as cover as well as dense Lime leaves offering shade in summer as well as roost thicket every night and nest cover in spring. The dense ivy has encircled the trunks and lower branches is a favoured spot for our colony, that has grown and fluctuated since we moved in. In spring 2018 a pair of House Sparrows bred in the Limes in natural vegetation for the first confirmed time. I was unable to see the nest as it was on my neighbour's property.

My boxes I feel have supported this 'Lime tree colony' pretty well over the past 5 years. In **2015** the House Sparrows commenced in April and built a nest that was lined, and by 25 May and 3 eggs were counted. But there were no eggs on 7 Jun and breeding was unsuccessful. Perhaps the nest was predated, or the birds abandoned or broke the eggs - who knows? In **2016** the box was left unused. In **2017**, it was a very successful year with 2 successful broods. The first attempt commenced on 18 Apr 17, a female observed carrying feathers to the box. On 9 Apr the nest was at code N3 which is $\frac{3}{4}$ built but not lined, but it did contain some feathers in the build. On 13 May one egg was laid, and on 22 May the nest was at stage N4 and lined with 5 'live' eggs laid. 5 naked and blind young were seen on 1 Jun. By 10 June the young were at the entrance hole and I needed my cloth to prevent them bursting out. I wedge a cloth in the hole as I open and do the inspection, it works, thus preventing inadvertent escape or too early a fledge when they are unready for the wild. On 14 June the young had departed, and the nest was empty. I am surprised how quickly these young developed. It must have been a bumper year for insects. A second successful breeding attempt began around 20 July, when adults feeding young was noticed. They must have laid again unbeknown to me, and I did not count eggs or young! However, adults feeding was observed on 20, 21 and 22 Jul. I am unable to give numbers of chicks successfully hatching. The last visit by birds was a female checking the empty nest on 25th July. In **2018**, my first visit was on 9 June and at that stage the nest was well advanced with 4

eggs laid. With the RAFOS Orkney expedition taking two weeks; 17-30 June, this represented 2 weeks of lost data, so my next inspection was on 01 Jul, when 2 live young were well advanced and not far from fully feathered. Again, it is odd how failed eggs or unsuccessful eggs are disposed of, as parents must remove them somehow, possibly eating the shell and content. The two youngsters did successfully leave, as both parents tempted them out on 4 July.

Front Cherry (Wooden) All Records listed refer to House Sparrows. Purchased prior to Spring **2015** from a local building supply merchant, this box is built in strips of 1" wide x 1/4" strip batons and built up in an unusual manner. It has proven to be successful. The first year it was erected it was taken to readily by House Sparrows with 4 eggs laid mid May. It faces the drive at 90 degrees to the Stonecrete box and on a bough facing the drive entrance, thus easily observed as we arrive into the drive. The second visit confirmed 3 Young at 'blind' stage - 06 Jun 15, x1 sterile egg remained, 2 young survived on a check on 17 Jun. 2 Young fledged, successfully, last check confirming an empty box 28 Jul 15 with well-trodden nest linings.

2016 The first of 2 broods in 2016 commenced on 16 May, when 4 eggs were confirmed, the female exiting the box as I erected the ladder, she had most likely been sitting tight as I disturbed her from her duties, 4 eggs were confirmed warm and uncovered. On 30 May, 3 live young survived, and the young were still blind on so my first visit, they must have been freshly laid eggs. On 4 June, 3 healthy chicks with feathers in sheaths were counted. Nearby audible parents were scolding me quite vociferously. The 9 June was much the same, but advanced feathering was seen, with noisy agitated parents nearby. On many visits the adult alarm call alerts the chicks to my presence and they then hunker down. This can sometimes make counting tricky, as they merge together forming a mass of feathers. Counting yellow gaps is easiest. On 21 June a successful 'nest empty' code of NE was recorded. Interestingly Ivy leaves were observed as nest lining for the first time. The second brood of 2016 commenced 13 July with 5 live young (a record for me), counted having missed the egg laying stage, as I say, I minimise disturbance as it causes agitation I feel to the birds, especially when sitting. The 5 healthy young were noisy on 18 July and the primary feathers were recorded as Code FL, Large - more than 2/3rds extended from their sheaths. 2 further visits on 22 Jul confirmed 5 still alive, but 1 was a good deal smaller. It did not survive though, as on 31 Jul I had to remove the dead chick on final inspection (Code; JD juv dead). The 4 successful young birds had all left by that date.

2017. Another very successful year for this box, with three broods producing 5 young over the 3 broods. Sadly the first brood of 4 eggs only produced the 1 chick that fledged successfully. Nesting commenced 18 Mar, with both adults exploring the nest box, copulating on 21 Apr observed in a nearby branch, 4 eggs on 21 Apr but only 1 successfully fledged around 13 May as a youngster hopped out of the box during my visual checks. The second brood was confirmed on 22 May with 3 eggs, one noticeably paler than the others. These young were the hard to count with any degree of confidence, with 2 or 3 sitting tight on 10 June and well buried beneath the dry grasses. Only 2 young successfully grew to fledge with both at code FM, (Feathers medium in length from sheaths) on 14 and 15 June. This may have been an underestimate as by 18 June they had fledged, and the nest was empty. I entered a successful code on the card. The final brood probably caught me out again. I had one entry on the NRC of three blind (BL) and naked (NA) on the NRC on 14 Jul, but nothing thereafter. Probably I was busy elsewhere mid-summer on cricket. They were most likely successful as whenever I've emptied boxes, they have been well-trodden linings and no dead chicks in this box.

2018 - 1st Brood was started when a pair were first observed at nest box on 19 Apr 18. Successful laying, albeit only 2 eggs. These two went the distance and the pair raised the 2 young successfully. I was away on expedition 'SIMMER DIM' late Jun 18, so no visits then, but my last visit recorded a vacated nest and empty with well-trodden lining by 7 Jul 18.

2018 - 2nd Brood. Male visited and was seen at the nest box on 10 Jul 18, almost immediately after the first brood! Both the female and male made regular visits up to 17 Jul, and the eggs were probably laid over this period. On my following visit on 26 Jul there were 4 naked, blind young present, the parents openly and audibly alarmed, as they flew nearby. All 4 were seen alive and well on my check dated 4 Aug 18, when in warm temperatures it must have been a challenge for youngsters in the full heat of summer in the sun most of the day. Perhaps it is as

well there are narrow 'vent' gaps between the boarding on this homemade box. These 4 fledged successfully. I missed the fledging date as I was away. Last check was on 18 Aug 18.

Side of House - House Sparrow Terrace (Upper) - Description

A wooden built box, with 3 chambers, purchased by mail order and used in Hook before moving to Ramsey, Cambs. The box has 3 elements: One chamber at each end and a central outward facing chamber. This is a purchased box from CJ Wild Bird foods of Shrewsbury. It needed some attention at 6 years of age this year, as the back board became separated from the front three chambers with rot, so I made a new extended back-board mid-breeding season. The box is located on the side of the house on the end wall, directly above the side access by rear gate to the garden. Attached to the wall with 4 large screws and attached on to the white painted cement fascia. Above the other 3 nest - terrace box (Lower). [See Photo 1.](#)

Side of House - House Sparrows (Upper box) - Left Compartment.

2014. Nest building commenced 4 Apr 14 with nest at the $\frac{3}{4}$ stage by 10 Apr. 2 Eggs confirmed by 15 May. I find that sometimes a considerable gap between nest completion and egg laying is apparent with House Sparrows. Only 1 egg was fertile sadly as 1 chick was doing well on 6 June, the other egg remained in the nest but unfertile. On the 10 June we estimated the parents tempting the chick to fledge from the nest. On the final check on the 16 June the nest was well trodden and empty. I removed the other egg in case there was a second brood attempt, which sadly there wasn't as I checked again on 4 July.

2015. First observation, was on 28 Apr as I exited the back door a bird left the box. With 8 further checks between 10 May and 24 Jul with no breeding confirmed, even though throughout this period a nest was built from code N2 (half built) to code N4 - Complete build. Whether they were inexperienced or failed breeders was unknown but an NRC was submitted as build and subsequent 'fail' evidence is still required by the BTO.

2016. First observation and NRC entry dated 16 May with a nest code N2, and the cup was built up at the front but bare at lower middle, the wooden base of box was still showing, It moved to code N3 (3/4 build), but between 4 Jun and 21 Jun further build included nest lining of feathers and light grasses but no eggs were laid.

2017. Only loose grass was seen in this chamber on dates between 9 Apr and 14 Jun. No breeding evidence ensued.

2018. Box under repair. Not re-erected until Jun 18.

Side of House - House Sparrow (Upper box) - Middle Compartment.

2014. Activity commenced on 2 July, with a male seen carrying feathers into the chamber. On inspection 4 Jul, 3 naked, blind chicks were counted. By 15 Jul these young were being fed at the nest hole by both parents arriving but not going inside, just presenting food to eager youngsters. On 17 Jul; at 10:00 the 3 departed - fully fledged, in stages over a 70-minute period.

2015. Nest checks commenced 10 May, and moth infestation found. This was removed and the box cleaned and disinfectant sprayed. A further 4 visual checks between 10 May and 21 Jul, led to a complete and lined nest in-situ but again no eggs laid and a unsuccessful attempt ensued.

2016. 1st very drawn out Single Brood. On 4 Apr the nest was commenced and at N1 (Less approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ built). By 24 Apr the nest was complete with some lining. By 10 May it was fully lined, and on 17 May extra straw and feathers complemented the nest but strangely no eggs. This carried on over the 4 additional visits 26 May, 6 Jun, 10 Jun and 16 Jun but the nest lay unused.

2017. What I listed on my NRC as a second breeding attempt commenced around the 2 July with a male carrying a feather in its beak entering the box after he had successfully enticed a female who was nearby. I did not check with a ladder until 4 Jul, when 3 live youngsters were present. Laying must have been straight after the 16 June visit and by me not taking a ladder to check on 2 Jul, I missed the eggs stages. On 10 July; 3 live chicks had their eyes open and the adult female flew from the open lid as I raised it. On 15 Jul the young were calling from the nest hole, and 17th Jul, 1 successfully fledged and the others were hesitant to leave. By 11:10 they had all

departed. A final nest check on 28th Jul, there were only remnants of droppings present and code NE (nest empty).

2017. A male was seen exploring the box with his head out on 28 Mar, but this may have just been roosting overnight or exploring his options! 6 further checks on 9 Apr, 13, 22, 27 May and 1 and 14 Jun all drew a blank, bar a few dry leaves left in the bottom of the chamber.

2018. Box under repair. Not re-erected until Jun 18.

Side of House - House Sparrow (Upper box) - Right Compartment.

2014. Nil Eggs or Young raised. Nest state: N3 (2nd highest code of build at $\frac{3}{4}$ stage), but no further activities. Visits were undertaken on 7 occasions including one with my trainee, Tom, my daughter's boyfriend [now my son-in-law]. He enjoyed the science of the checks. Checks were between dates of 4^t Apr and 16 Jun.

2015. My first check was on 10 May, when I found insect infestation. So I removed the remnants of old nest material. Spray-disinfected the whole box and left it open for a few minutes. 4 further inspections between 25 May and 21 Jul were undertaken with a complete-looking nest (Code NL) built, but sadly no eggs laid.

2016. My first check on 4 Apr revealed a commencement of nest build at Code 1 (quarter-built) and on 29 Apr it had progressed to N2 (half-built) status but without lining. Most of the nest material was dry grasses. Same degree of build found on 17 May and 26 May, albeit on 6 Jun I recorded it a progressing to code N3 ($\frac{3}{4}$ built), but it had the looks of being unoccupied so whether the male was working alone or lost his partner again is unknown. On 16 Jun there was no further progress. A later check on 4 Jul had no progress nor a second brood.

2017. This compartment had 0 visits by birds and thus no nest build. 5 visual checks were undertaken between 9 Apr and 14 Jul.

2018. Box under repair. Not re-erected until Jun 18.

Side of House - House Sparrow (Lower Box) - Description.

This is a front-facing 3-chambered, front-opening box, where the front lowers giving access to the 3 chambers. Care is needed on this type of box as if sitting birds or chicks are present, they can easily escape and thus fly or fledge prematurely. The box was another purchased box, but the maker's name escapes me.

Side of House - House Sparrow (Lower Box) - Left Compartment.

2014. 1st Brood. A nest was in build and at Code N1 on first visit on 4 Apr, the box wooden chamber bottom was visible. There was also infestation by moths and larvae. These were manually removed as the nest build was still taking place. I did not use a disinfectant or insect killer as birds were present. By 29 Apr the nest was at build N2, but well advanced, but no lining present. On 10 May the nest was at Code N3, but still not lined. On 17 May, 3 eggs were present. The female was Code AN) (adult on nest), but I had inadvertently disturbed her on opening the box. The female/pair had built domed the cup of the nest and hidden the eggs before flying out. The 3 naked young had hatched by 26 May. The 3 made it to fledging and were being tempted to feed at the front of the box on 10 Jun. Audible youngsters were heard around this date on many occasions but not always recorded, obviously [as the card would be very large and unwieldy]. The youngsters had gone by 16 Jun, when box was both empty and cleared of droppings.

2015. First visit 10 May was used to tidy the box, removing old material and some infestation. No new nest in any state of build so it was unused for the season.

2016. A further unsuccessfully used chamber in 2016, although a nest was built and made stages N3 by the 5 Jun and stage N4 on 21 Jun, but an unsuccessful in laying outcome.

2017. A poorly recorded year on my part, but 1st visit on 9 Apr there was a good-sized nest at Code N3 ($\frac{3}{4}$ built), with ivy used in nest lining. 4 covered (Code CV) eggs were present on my second visit 21 Apr, they were also checked and were warm (Code WA). The female was observed visiting on 30 Apr. A short while after at 07:00 and audible young were heard and later the same day at 09:00. I put them down as very young. By the 13 May my next visit the box and nest were empty, so an assumption was made that the youngsters had fledged, but this was

inconclusive. I don't know what the BTO team thought on that one! The adults were seen visiting twice thereafter on 1 and 7 June but no 2nd brood.

2018. First record was an Adult visiting on 6 Mar. On 19 Apr a pair were observed at the nest. On 23 Apr the adults were seen carrying freshly plucked green leaves to the nest. On 3^r May, 3 live eggs were recorded. Both adults visited and carried feathers to the nest on 5 May. 2 successfully hatched and were naked and blind on 12 May. On 18 May the 2 young had feathers in pin. On 24 May the adults were busy feeding young with yellow gapes, and by 27 May I estimated they had fledged. My final visit to the nest was on 9 June when the nest was confirmed empty.

Eucalyptus tree - rear garden, Stonecrete - Front Hole entrance -Description.

This is a purchased 'Stonecrete' box, probably my favourite type, although expensive, they are 'immortal' and need very little if any maintenance, just cleaning out. I think the build is sawdust and concrete with wood chipping and they are very robust, weather proof and squirrel-proof. The box was one of the first to be erected when we moved here, I feel I purchased it as a secondary 'Stonecrete' type to the one in the front Cherry. Like the others I didn't commence nest records until 2014, but this was the most favoured box and has been used by Great Tits and also visited by House Sparrows but not taken up by them. It is a favourite of the Great Tits, that visit in months after breeding and regularly inspected on sunny days out-of-season. It has been used the once by Blue Tit (2017). House Sparrows have also shown interest but it appears Great Tit like it most. Interestingly I think the Great Tit did push out the sparrows or moved in and defended it on the one occasion.

2014. On 14 Apr a male was heard singing for long periods. My first internal check was on 27 Apr, but nothing in the way of a nest was built. The same goes for 17 May. It wasn't until 2 Jul when I had an adult visiting, that looked like a male trying to entice a female to feed young or some form of late courtship. Similar activity two days later, with an adult taking food to the box. I was a little reluctant to open the front in case I had disturbed a breeding attempt. On 10 Jul there were noisy young present so being new to NRS I felt it was time to open the sliding front panel. 5 youngsters were present with feathers that were still in the sheaths at Code FM; (primary feathers short; less than a third emerged from sheath). On 17 Jul I undertook an early visit at 06:00 but the adults were nearby and wary of me. Good news was the 5 were still healthy. On the 28 Jul, I had missed fledging day and the 5 youngsters had gone. Interestingly all 7 visited again on 29 Jul, the youngsters exploring for food and returned to check-out the box I entered a code of NN which is (fledged young near nest), which I suppose is for those species that stay local to the nest, but fitted the scenario so I added the record for the BTO to record the family re-check of their site.

2015. In 2015 I had a keen pair at the box, and this was possibly the 2014 pair had they survived or perhaps their young. There were two visits by birds on 21 Mar and 27 Apr, but it was an internal inspection on 10 May when a nest was found built at Code N (complete, unlined) that confirmed breeding was attempted. Sadly, nothing else became of this pair; whether one was killed or put off the site for any other reasons but by 25 May there were no further visits and nest was abandoned.

2016. No visual checks until I saw an adult visiting, with audible young present at 1 or 2 days old on 14 Apr, so by 16 Apr I raised the ladder and 4 young were counted. Each was blind (Code BL) and TO was also recorded (Egg tooth present). So my initial assumption was correct. It goes to show there are lessons to learn with science study even though you know a bit but there's room for improvement. On 21 they were feeding regularly. The young were noisy at the nest. On 22 May I counted 3 young with no sign of 4th chick so adults may have removed the dead chick. Audible young were present and feathers were at Code RF (Ready to fledge). On 26 May the youngsters' heads were at the nest box hole almost ready to fledge. On the 29 May I recorded a code of YC (Young capable) of leaving nest on the previous visit. The youngsters were near the box in a birdbath. Also a code NN (Fledged young near the nest) was recorded. The young were this still nearby (Code LB). A final check of the nest on 30 Jul confirmed the empty nest in the box.

2017. This was the year that Blue Tits occupied the nest box with a complete and lined box found on 9 Apr, sadly an unknown outcome as the nest remained empty on two further visits; 21 Apr and 13 May.

2018. Two days of exploration by a pair of Great Tits on 5 and 6 May, but sadly no breeding attempts this year.

Eucalyptus tree - wooden open fronted.

2016. An article in an earlier the autumn Newsletter Number 102 described how a pair of Spotted Flycatcher were observed in my lower garden. They nested in the fork of the Eucalyptus tree and sadly failed or were pushed out by bad weather. I was so disappointed and felt a heavy heart seeing the 5 eggs abandoned and left to perish. So much so that after the nesting attempt, I purchased a small open fronted box and have affixed it to the tree adjacent to where the pair nested, in the hope of the birds return. As you know flycatchers can sometimes return and are quite site-faithful. To date none have returned in the 2 years hence.

Shed entrance - Blue Tit holed box. Located in the apex of the shed above the door. To date no takers, but ivy has grown up to the box and the adjacent Leylandi gives plenty of cover, so I'm hopeful birds will take to it. There's not a great deal of disturbance at the shed. Only me getting the mower out now and again, that and the feeders topping up. Erected in July 2017.

House Martin - Artificial Cup. Erected 2016 on the wall of the rear of the house above our bedroom window. No takers as yet.

Rose Trellis - Blue Tit - holed box. Erected 2014.

Only used by Blue Tits in the one year, this box is a small purchased pine box with additional metal plate fitted to the front to protect it from woodpeckers and or prevent larger birds' ingress. Erected 2014. Successfully used by a pair of blue tits in **2015**. On 2 May 15 a pair were seen swapping over at the nest site. The female was sitting tightly on eggs on 4 May at 13:00. 6 eggs counted on the 10 May. 4 live young were counted on 25 May, with both parents nearby, but sadly they perished as on 7 June as no survivors were left. The nest abandoned. On this day I did consider giving up nest recording as disturbance could well have been contributory.

2016 Not used.

2017. My first sighting was a adult removing a faecal sac or white feather on 16 Apr. On 21 Apr the nest was completed. By 13 May the adults were feeding busily over past 2 days. 6 young were counted the same day at 07:00. 4 of the brood fledged successfully, but 2 perished and removed from the nest on 25 May. The adults were last seen feeding young on 23 May.

NATURAL NEST SITES - NEST RECORDS

Eucalyptus [Natural nest site -Wren]

This nest was found built between and against the side of the Eucalyptus tree, in peeled back bark about 5 foot off the ground. Inside the nest were the 4 well advanced young. I had unwittingly disturbed them, three young were seen exploding from the nest as I emptied the waste compost bin onto the compost heap. It was a terrific nest location, squeezed in tightly behind peeling tree bark, very ingenious but also very risky as the bark sheds rapidly. I only counted the 3 young as they were exploding from the nest, but there may well have been more young birds. So had no real dates and science to add onto the NRS, but I submitted it anyway. Here's the entries;

2014. 4 Young raised, counted 4 Jul. 2 Seen fledging burst nest on 07 Jul, 2 possibly earlier (missed), same day. Recorded entries; 2 Jul - 8 Jul.

Trellis - Natural nest site; Wren.

Along the side of the house and conservatory is a large creeper trellis for Honeysuckle and climbing Passion flower. A male wren built a nest of moss, dry leaves on the top of one of the bearers, it was well hidden under the creeper but on the underside when viewed-upwards. The

female never laid eggs in the nest. It has been used since as a natural roost I feel though by the same wren as he frequently hunts and sings from the trellis bearers right next to the conservatory window.

Leylandii - Natural nest site; Robin. Located one day as I emptied the compost bin onto the heap. A nest with three youngsters noisily being fed by adults. The nest location was in the hedge at the bottom corner of the garden, directly behind the new opening I cut for the metal fence line. 2 young successfully fledged 1 perished outside the nest.

Leylandii - Natural nest site - Dunnock. This nest was located as I cut the lower Leylandii garden hedge. In amongst the dry sticks where the hedge had died back.

2016. On 17 Apr I disturbed a sitting female as I brushed past the hedge with my empty kitchen waste green waste bin. The Leylandii is adjacent to the vegetable compost bin and in the 3-foot gap I have for cutting the hedge. I found a tight nest with 4 live bright blue eggs. On 29 Apr the young were hatched, blind and naked. On 6 May the adult was sitting tight, so I left her undisturbed. I visited again on 7 May and only 2 youngsters remained. By the 12 May the nest was empty code NE and the nest was remaining in pristine state, so I left it until the end of breeding season when it was sent to a university for a science project on nest insulation.

That concludes all my NRS entries. It's a very worthwhile and rewarding data-gathering project, and like most surveys, they are always asking for further volunteers to assist BTO-NRS. I feel that you can and do expand your bird knowledge by participating. Furthermore, you get a regular twice-yearly newsletter that's aligned to ringers and nest recorder data logging. This is definitely a survey for good nest-finders.



Sparrow terraces (left)

Sparrows in cherry (below left)

Rose trellis (Right)

Front cherry -2 boxes (below right)



Extract from 'Sanctuary' Magazine

Dr Jim Reynolds and the Army Ornithological Society (AOS) win a Sanctuary Award 2018

The annual Sanctuary Awards, now in its 28th year, showcases remarkable conservation and environmental initiatives across Ministry of Defence (MoD)-owned land, known as the defence estate.

The Sanctuary Awards 2018 were held at the Ministry of Defence in central London on Tuesday 20th November 2018. The awards recognise groups or individuals and their commitment to sustainability, energy saving, wildlife, archaeology, environmental protection and improvement



From left to right: Andrew Bray (AOS), Dr Jim Reynolds (University of Birmingham & AOS), Dr John Hughes (AOS), Colin Wearn (Royal Air Force Ornithological Society), Roger Dickey (Chair of AOS) and the Rt Hon Tobias Elwood MP (Minister for Defence People & Veterans) at the Sanctuary Awards 2018.

The AOS was 1st Runner Up in the Environmental Project Award in recognition of the AOS Ascension Seabird Conservation Project which started when members visiting the island *en route* to the Falklands reported massive seabird declines in many species. The AOS mounted its first field expedition in 1990 with soldier-naturalists beginning what became a long-term monitoring programme. Its enduring goal was the collection of data to investigate significant pressures on the seabird populations of the island.

The enthusiasm of 55 volunteers from all services, who contributed to 23 expeditions between 1990 and 2018 is remarkable. Heat, poor facilities and rough terrain make conditions on Ascension arduous and limited time requires teams to start work immediately on landing. The AOS Ascension project has received some funding from sources such as the Darwin Initiative and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). However, it has been largely self-funded and conducted in all cases by volunteers who have often given up their leave and made personal financial contributions.

Jim has worked closely on Ascension since 2008 and for a large part of this he has been their scientific advisor facilitating delivery of various research project outputs. Many of the AOS Ascension team members bring their professional qualifications to the project such as ringing, blood sampling and fitting harnesses. Between 2002 and 2018 the AOS assisted staff at the newly formed Ascension Island Conservation Office with hundreds of hours of monitoring and training in the handling of seabirds.

Lectures to the public and professional conservation bodies on this demanding field conservation work, the provision of training to locally employed staff, enabling school children to see the birds at close quarters, and the publication of research findings in major peer-reviewed scientific journals have helped to bring the plight of Ascension's seabirds to the attention of the public. These research findings will make a significant contribution to ongoing discussions and the designation of an enormous Marine Protected Area (MPA) in this area of the South Atlantic by the UK Government in 2019.

Acknowledgements of the MoD support to conservation work on Ascension are included in all of the published papers from the work. These have considerably enhanced the MoD's reputation in the eyes of the scientific and conservation communities.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Tobias Ellwood said:

"I was honoured to present the Sanctuary Awards this year and it's been a pleasure to meet the unsung heroes working hard to preserve and protect a defence estate that covers almost 2% of UK land.

I am immensely proud that the hard work of these men and women has been celebrated. All of the projects were excellent and showcased the variety of work that goes into defence to ensure we preserve the environment across our estate, wildlife can thrive and our heritage endure."

Graham Dalton, Chief Executive of DIO commented:

"The MoD and DIO are committed to implementing Defence sustainability principles across the whole MoD estate and promoting the Government's vision of long-term climate resilience. Therefore, it's great to see so many innovative projects taking place that demonstrate the positive impact we can have across the Defence estate, both in the UK and Overseas. Thank you to all the teams and individuals for their enthusiasm and commitment in helping MoD towards achieving its sustainability agenda."

The ceremony also marked the launch of the 47th edition of Sanctuary magazine, the MoD's longstanding annual sustainability magazine, which demonstrates how the MoD is protecting and maintaining the defence estate throughout the UK and overseas. [The Sanctuary magazine is available online on GOV.UK.](#)

This year's award winners and runners up represented areas of the defence estate from the UK and overseas.

Cape May, New Jersey, USA

Ken Earnshaw, with additional notes from Dick and Jan Knight.

Cape May. Wow! What a place.

It has been a well-known destination for generations of Americans mainly for beach holidays. It is an island at the southern tip of New Jersey, separated from the mainland by a narrow canal. The city of Cape May is a lovely place with an upmarket air and lots of fine, variously coloured, Victorian timbered houses. The main commercial activities would appear to be tourism, fishing and support to some expensive looking boats so giving rise to a quiet, laid back environment which was most impressive.

To the west of the city is the main birding area comprising of; the New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Bird Observatory, the Hawk-watch platform, woodlands and fresh water marshes. The sea-shore has extensive wide beaches and the entrance to Delaware Bay is about 20 miles across. This stretch of sea forms a barrier to some migrant raptors in the Autumn, but it does provide sea-watching opportunities; The Rips, an area of tidal rips a mile or so off-shore attracts large concentrations of gulls, terns, a few jaegers (skuas) and some rarities. A large shark was seen by KE through a telescope as it moved into Chesapeake Bay about half-a-mile offshore. Great Whites, for instance, have been recorded in the bay!

The Observatory is a good, friendly place to visit with a range of information, books and gear available and, in addition, the woodland grounds are attractive to migrant warblers, vireos and flycatchers and others such as woodpeckers.

However, it is the Hawk-watch platform which is the magnet for most birders. This large, wooden, tiered structure close to the lighthouse at Cape May Point can support a large number of birders and overlooks a sizeable 'pond'. The pond attracts a good range of ducks, egrets and passerines and the attendant raptors. A key feature here is the professional and volunteer staff of the New Jersey Audubon Society who man the platform from, I understand, dawn to dusk, to record bird and butterfly passage and also to welcome visitors, explain aspects of migration and to generally make everyone's visit an enjoyable occasion. They were very enthusiastic and knowledgeable so we were pleased to be able to point out a life tick (an American Coot) for one of them. Bird ringing (banding) is carried out and from time to time a raptor or two is shown to visitors; the handling of these is well controlled and birds are released at the slightest hint of distress.

The Cape May peninsular extends north for some 20-30 miles or so. The East coast side has extensive salt marshes bordering the Atlantic. Further north up the coast are vast extensive fresh and salt marshes around Atlantic City. The West coast, bordering the Delaware Bay, is particularly well known in Autumn for the dawn flight of passerines at Higbee Beach and in Spring for the Horseshoe Crab egg-laying and the resulting frenzy of migrating shorebirds feeding on the eggs. The whole of south New Jersey has extensive woodlands with the large Belleplain Forest being a good site for numerous warblers, etc, in the Spring. In short, the whole area is well endowed with wildlife reserves which are a joy to visit.

Cape May is renowned for being a prime migration site in both Spring and Autumn, one of the best in North America. In the Autumn birds from Canada tend to migrate eastwards then turn south and join with US birds similarly migrating. There is, we understand, a predominantly north-westerly airflow in North-East America at this time such that large numbers of birds come down into the eastern US and due to the shape of New Jersey, with the Atlantic on one side and the Delaware River and Bay on the other, are funnelled into the Cape May area. Weather patterns have a clear effect upon migration at Cape May; a southerly wind seems to largely stop migration but if the wind is from the West or particularly North-West then migration is in full swing. These effects were



Cape May Invertebrates:

*Tagged Monarch butterfly
(above)*

Common Buckeye (right)

*Yellow Orbweave Spider
(below)*



very noticeable to us. Some of the larger raptors and the vultures were seen to approach Cape May Point from the North or North-East, find that there is a large stretch of water in front and turn around and go north up the Delaware Bay coast and presumably around the top of the bay to resume their southerly passage.

The idea of a visit to Cape May came up over a glass or two of a good red wine in Lesvos a couple of years ago between Jan and Dick Knight and Sally and Ken Earnshaw and was firmed up in early 2018. We travelled on the 17th Sep 2018 by Aer Lingus from Gatwick to Dublin, completed US immigration formalities in Dublin, then onwards to Philadelphia where we arrived as domestic passengers. Our accommodation for the stay was at the Madison Avenue Beach Club in Cape May; a motel which was clean, quiet, had good friendly staff and met all our needs. It was nowhere near the beach but that suited us. Other guests were generally very friendly, engaging and helpful, a factor that we met with wherever we went; we struck up some good friendships particularly with the American birders. One such was passionate about cricket so a lively discussion entailed.

For our evening meals we mostly prepared our own and dined on the balcony outside our rooms although we had an excellent curry in a restaurant which was attached to a petrol station. We weren't sure about their advertising – the sign on the petrol pump said "Eat here, get gas." We also had a very good take-away from the Lobster House restaurant comprising of; lobster, large prawns, scallops and fries and it went down well with a very acceptable glass of local wine. While sitting on the balcony we could note a good range of birds including House Finch, Chimney Swift, Glossy Ibis, Forster's Tern, Osprey, Red-tailed Hawks, Bald Eagle and, on the adjacent water tower, Peregrines.

Our birding was mostly undertaken in the Cape May Point area at the observatory, the platform and at the 'Meadows' (a fresh-water marshy area). On our second day in Cape May we caught the side of Hurricane Florence as it moved north inland from the coast, which caused a very large number of birds to be swirling around. It also dumped on the beach at Cape May Point a Brown Booby which was in a distressed condition and was taken into care at the observatory.

On subsequent days there were spectacular movements of American Kestrels, Merlins, Sharp-shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks (some of these flying very low over the platform) with smaller numbers of Peregrines, Northern Harriers and Ospreys. On other days it was the turn of Northern Flickers or Blue Jays or literally thousands of Tree Swallows. And then the Broad-winged Hawks started to arrive, usually flying at a considerable height and accompanied by more Sharpies and Coops along with Ospreys, Black Vultures, Turkey Vultures and Bald Eagles. All-in-all a wonderful spectacle. Keeping a wary eye on all these raptors were a sprinkling of passerines in the scrub in front of the platform; Mockingbirds, Northern Cardinals, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Common Grackles and singles of Indigo Bunting, Prairie Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and a Gray Catbird, all mostly keeping their heads down.

Several days spent on the platform certainly helped with separating Sharpies from Coops and with positively identifying the Broad-winged Hawks. Subtle distinguishing features of various birds in flight were regularly called out by the experts and staff on the platform which was greatly appreciated.

While all this bird activity was going on there was a continual migration of Monarch butterflies through the area heading south-west towards Mexico. Smaller numbers of Common Buckeyes, Painted Ladies, Black Swallowtails, etc, were also present. A tagged Monarch butterfly with the tag on the underwing was photographed such that the tag could be read, (tagging being done at Cape May Point). A couple of species of dragonfly were seen including a spectacular Twelve Spot Skimmer.

Opposite: 12-spot Skimmer, Blackpoll Warbler, Northern Parula Warbler, Eastern Phoebe, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Downy Woodpecker, Broad-winged Hawk and juvenile Bald Eagle, Red-



A limited amount of birding was done away from Cape May island particularly at the Avalon sea-watch site up the East coast. We were a bit early for the main sea-watch period, (October-November being best), but there were large flocks of Black and Surf Scoters passing close inshore and some Caspian and Royal Terns fishing close in while a group of Dolphins passed by giving fair views. Parties of shorebirds, on the beach and on a stone jetty, were none too bothered with our presence.

We also had a few hours at the Forsythe Reserve to the north of Atlantic City. This is primarily a fresh-water marsh fringed by salt-marsh; with an eight-mile one-way drive around it with plenty of stopping opportunities. At a shorebird high-tide roost we were able to approach on foot, along with a gathering of other birders, to within about 20 ft and set about searching through the Semi-Palmated Sandpipers for Western and White-rumped Sandpipers and any other goodies. A few Semi-palmated Plovers were also mixed in with them for good measure. Further around the loop an adult Bald Eagle was seen chomping on a Cormorant and a Black Skimmer put on a brief display of its skimming ability.

A ferry ride across Delaware Bay was considered but we settled instead for a three-hour boat trip from Cape May Harbour around the creeks and salt-marshes just up the eastern side of the peninsular. Good views were had of flocks of American Oystercatchers, Grey (Black-bellied) Plovers, Greater Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitchers and a Willet. Several young Ospreys were still hanging around their nests, the parents having departed on migration. It was good to also see Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons together. A very good three hours visiting parts we would not have got to on foot and with a very knowledgeable guide. This eighteen-day visit to New Jersey was most enjoyable and productive, we clocked up around 120 species and we intend to return in the Spring of 2020 hopefully for the warbler migration and the Horseshoe Crab spectacle. We would probably repeat the travel arrangements and would stay at the motel again.

16 Nov 2018



Cooper's Hawk (left)



Sharp-shinned Hawk (right)



Cape May Hawkwatch Platform



Exit Zero Curry House and Filling Station

You have been warned!



Lesser Yellowlegs (left) and Greater Yellowlegs (right)



Forster's Tern and Semi-palmated Plover



Semi-palmated Sandpiper and possible Western Sandpiper



*Dining-in Night
And
Motel Sunset*



Zimmer dim

by John Le Gassick

If you are wondering, Zimmer is the preferred form of transport on these cruises and dim probably relates to the author!

This is a tale of an excursion by sea to Greenland designed to inspire those who have passed the first flush of youth and feel that they can no longer brave the hardship of surveying north of Kinlochbervie and have reluctantly hung up their water proof leggings.

The first day of this journey a transit from Southampton to Stornaway along the Irish Sea in bright sunny weather with a calm sea. For me the highlight of this day were the hundreds of Manx Shearwater feeding on the surface or flying over it close to the water, affording excellent views of birds only normally seen from the shore at distance, recognisable only by their distinctive flight. I hoped some of them were gathering food to take to a burrow on Bardsey Island. Gannets were present throughout along with pods of Common Dolphin, probably feeding on the same shoals of fish. Kittiwake were also seen in good numbers along with Razorbill and Common Guillemot in small groups on the surface. During my watch I was very amused and surprised when a large log passed down the side of the ship with a Sandwich Tern standing one at each end, what an ergonomic way to travel! A very helpful talk was given on what was likely to be seen in the ensuing weeks by the Naturalist Nigel Marven covering both birds and cetaceans.

On board there were also two young observers from the charity ORCA who were there counting the whales and dolphins, apparently this is carried out annually on this cruise. They also gave a presentation on the identification (much needed) of these mammals. Their total at "endex" was 826 animals which included seven species of whale.

The day we had planned to spend in Stornaway was cancelled as weather conditions, as wind strength and sea state were out of limits for the ship to shore tender service. I had to content myself with sea-watching from the ship with my telescope, managing to "winkle out" a small group of eight Common Scoter along with the normal gull species and Common Tern. A most interesting sighting and possibly worthy of a note to BB was of a Great Skua harassing an angler. My observation was of at least 40 minutes, I first saw the bird sitting on the sea quite close to the fisherman and every ten minutes or so flying up to the top of the cliff where the man was standing and circling just above his head. He was obviously annoyed and often waved his fishing rod to deter the bird. Although some fish were caught and immediately secured in a bag the skua never attempted to take any. This continued at regular intervals throughout the period that I watched.

Reykjavik was our next port of call and the morning weather was cold overcast with a hint of drizzle, but the afternoon was warm and sunny with a temperature of 18C. We shelled out 6,000 ISK (£46.00) each for a boat tour which took us to the three islands of Akurey, Engey and Lundey, located a five-minute ride from the port. It was well worth the money and it was nice to see that the birds were only observed from the boat! The Puffins were in burrows underneath boulders on the steep bank and were busily flying to and fro with beaks full of silver fish of which are obviously very abundant! Predators were there en masse, Great Black-backed Gull, Arctic Skua of both phases and Great Skua in unbelievable numbers. I counted a group of thirty Great Skua on an outcrop of boulders, taking their ease after a morning of piracy. The only Tystie (Black Guillemot) recorded was in the Old Harbour, where we had reasonable views of a juvenile. There is a large pond right in the middle of the town in a large green area and amongst the incumbents were a pair of juvenile Scaup and two Whooper Swan. Although sea birds abounded there was a marked lack of land birds, here for example a solitary adult Starling sporting a BTO ring and in a different part of town, two juveniles were the total.

One of the highlights of this Cruise was the passage through Prins Christian Sund in bright sunshine, this waterway is only navigable for three months of the year and very often the weather is unsuitable for sailing through this narrow scenic channel. Unfortunately, the bird life did not live up to the views of glaciers and mountains, yielding only Glaucous Gull in small numbers. On exiting however, a small flock of Little Auk whirred away from the ship amid small icebergs. Fulmars were constant companions of the ship from Stornaway, birds I never tire of watching.

Our first port in Greenland was Qaqortoq, a small town making it's living from fishing, so had a nice collection of white winged gulls allowing the difference between Iceland and Glaucous to be observed and photographed with even a Great Black-backed Gull thrown in for size comparison. Come on you Larophiles! Ravens were numerous here, in noisy family groups. Thinking my excitement was over for the day I was delighted to come across what was possibly two families of Snow Bunting busily feeding in some boulders, during this happy interlude a female Northern Wheatear happened by accompanied by a single fledgling. I assumed they were of the Greenland sub-species *O. oenanthe leuchora*!

Nuuk, also known as Godthab, the capital was our second and last stop in Greenland and was disappointing. The fine weather deserted us here, starting very cold +4C and overcast with heavy continuous rain from late morning. Our short trip ashore yielded two more juvenile Northern Wheatear and on our early morning arrival alongside half a dozen Ruddy Turnstone leaving their roost under the pier. A group of gulls on a distant green slope appeared to be made up of both white-winged gulls, Greater and Lesser Black-backed and to my surprise Herring Gull. Unfortunately, weather conditions prevented any scoping of the birds. The highlight of the day was Clouty Dumpling at lunchtime nice enough, but nae as nice as Margaret's, on Islay! The voyage south from Greenland was in a 40Kt wind from the North West with accompanying sea state 6. Mind you we did get some FLAK (Fulmar, Little Auk, Kittiwake)!

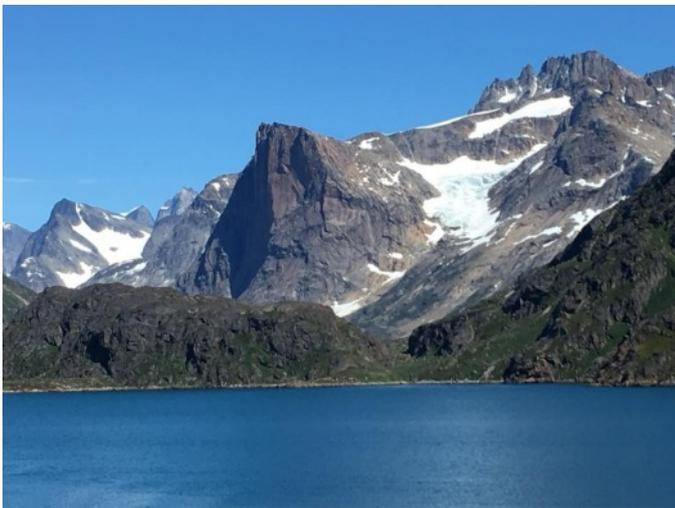
The next two ports of call were in Iceland: Isafjordur and Akureyri. The weather gods were kind at these picturesque locations, both situated at the end of fjords. At the first we were pleasantly surprised, whilst surveying the waters from a conveniently placed bench, by a group of seven Purple Sandpiper alighting on nearby rocks. Akureyri has a very nice Botanical Garden, apparently the most northerly in the World, and here we added to our sparse list of land birds with Blackbird, Redwing and a flock of Redpoll feeding in the pine trees.

Torshavn the capital of the Faroe Islands was the next stop and despite rain, heavy at times, the list was extended with the first House Sparrow, Carrion and Hooded Crow, Oystercatcher and Common Gull of the trip. Great Skua was on station attacking parties of Arctic Tern vigorously. Eider were present in good numbers at all of the Icelandic ports and Torshavn, the males going into eclipse plumage gave much excitement and plenty of disappointment! Although many of the passengers had a "whale" of a time and although they are marginally larger than our feathered friends I did not have many identifiable sightings.

Postscript: Transiting the Denmark Straits we passed over the position of the wreck of HMS Hood which was sunk during World War II with the loss of 1414 souls with only three survivors. Apparently, a direct hit on an ammunition store by a shell fired by the Bismarck meant this battle cruiser sank immediately. A minute of silence was observed, the last post sounded, and poppy petals strewn over the spot by the ex-RN members of the ship's crew. Very moving.



Common Redshank. Akuyeri



Prinz Christian Sund



Iceberg

Snow Bunting juvenile, Qaqortoq (below)





Zimmer Dim

*Northern Fulmar, Isadofor
(top)*

*Purple Sandpiper, Isadofor
(centre)*

Black Guillemot (right)

Further to the picture on the front cover of this Newsletter, the male Tawny Frogmouth shown was trying to defend its young from a large lizard (Goanna?). As you can see below, he was unsuccessful. *Picture by Dick Yates*



Ox-pecker. *Picture by Martin Routledge*



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 in Word documents – they are difficult to import with my software! PDF files can be imported as supplied.
- 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 No. 108 is 21st July 2019 and any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 109.

Please address contributions to:

Bill Francis
100 Moselle Drive
Churchdown
GLOUCESTER
GL3 2TA

Email wgfrancis@btinternet.com