



**Newsletter 109**  
**Spring 2020**

**ROYAL**  
**AIR FORCE**  
ornithological  
society



*Water Rail at Slimbridge, January 2020. Picture by Ken Earnshaw*

*Taken during the RAFOS visit.*

**AGM**

**SIMMER DIM**

**ISLAY MIST**



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Water Rail WWT Slimbridge, January 2020 by Ken Earnshaw

## THE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT, RAFOS AGM, 2019

I'd like to start by once again thanking Daisy for her presentation – the SIMMER DIM series of expeditions has made a significant contribution to seabird monitoring and is a first class example of where we as a group can add real value to citizen science. All the more impressive given the average age of the participants! And age has caught up with a few members this year and it is sad to record the death of some absolute stalwarts including Val Kersley who, along with her husband Reg were, we believe, founder members of RAFOS and earlier in the year we lost John Orme and Frank Smith; and most recently John Stewart-Smith. Many of you will have memories of some or all of these adventurous birders so take a moment to reflect and smile at the memories.

As most will know, the position of President of the Society remains vacant so it falls to me once again as a life vice-president and a serving member, for another week, to say a few general words about the RAF and what we've been up to this year.

Our engagement in more operational activities has not let up one iota. Despite what the press and that nice Mr Trump might think about operations in Syria and Iraq (dare I say Mesopotamia) the war against Daesh continues as does all the other bits of unpleasantness around that troubled region. We've folk in Cyprus, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Gulf States all playing a part in those activities and we're about to exercise in UAE so our involvement in the Middle East is far from over. We've supported NATO with the deployment of Typhoons to Estonia for Air Policing over the Baltics and are about to do the same from Iceland – the new Cold War is as alive as ever! I was quite surprised by how keen the Regular RAF were to head for Iceland in winter but then I realised none of the current Typhoon Force had ever been there before. Some in this room will remember Northern QRA on Phantoms, the Black Knights of Keflavik and chasing Russians in the Iceland-Faeroes Gap. Indeed, 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 fall of the Berlin Wall. The Chinook force have continued to support the French efforts in Mali, and at home played a fundamental role in propping up the Derbyshire Dam earlier in the year and we've training teams in Nigeria and Jordan. At the same time, we've supported some major exercises around the world from the Flag series in Nevada, through a major Five Powers exercise in the Far East, to the much acclaimed Red Arrows tour of the US. On top of all this our newest beast, the F35 Lightning II, has bloodied itself over Syria and is now deployed on HMS Queen Elizabeth II as part of her initial outing. I'm tempted to say 'cruise' but with some Dark Blue in the room I'll stick with 'deployment'.

I've mentioned before 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 (very successfully) and try to recruit more serving members where we can - indeed we've more Serving members this year than last and I'm pleased to say they're already showing an interest in joining in with expeditions, 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. Many of you will have responded to my Survey Monkey survey about the AGM so now would be a good moment to bring you up to date with the responses.

The survey went to 70 e-mail addresses that the Secretary Bird provided; of these 6 turned out to be no longer in use and bounced straight back. Another couple also missed their targets so in effect there were 62 valid surveys landing on electronic doormats. So far the response rate has been 38 which is actually pretty good. Some analysis:

Most respondents (58%) were either fairly frequent flyers or occasional attendees at the AGM – you are probably all in the room and regardless of the format or location you're the ones who are always going to turn up if you can. Thank you for your support.

The target for change is that group who rarely or never make it. About 39% so we need to understand this group and see what we can do to encourage them more – obviously some of this is down to geography as there is a fairly solid group in Scotland and the far north who might attend if the venue were closer to them.

On the whole a spring or autumn event seems to work for most, travelling up to a couple of hundred miles seems acceptable and there is strong support for the external speaker format. Indeed, of the majority frequent attendees the view was that nothing significant needs to change in the format although as always different folk appreciate different bits more. There was also good support for having a field outing on the Sunday but this is slightly at odds with current experience – perhaps this would go hand in glove with rotating the venue and potentially the season – a spring AGM in a birding hot-spot might be one option.

So nothing definitive as yet – I'll close the whole thing down soon and then do a full report for the next Newsletter. Then your exceptionally good committee will put their thinking caps on.

Which brings me to handing out the bouquets. Your Committee have worked hard this year and deserve your thanks as usual. 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. The FALO will of course cover himself in glory in a moment but frankly they all do a grand job and even let me think I'm in charge from time to time.

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 such as our trip to the Somerset Levels so please feel free to set up other events as your busy lives permit. 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.

### **Prize Giving, 2019**

The prize for Best Written Article was awarded to David Morgan DSC, for his article 'Crash Sites and Caracaras' that was published in Newsletter 108, (Autumn 2019)

The pictures awarded prizes and the winners appear on the following pages.

The prizes were presented by Dick Knight, as our Chairman was unable to attend the AGM due to an injury.

### **AGM Survey**

As promised, the results of the AGM Survey follow on Pages 10 to 12

Prize Winners, 2019 AGM



Prize for Best Artwork - John Le Gassick

Gannets Return

**PRIZE WINNERS, 2019 AGM**



Best UK Photograph, John Wells

Whimbrel, Orkneys

**PRIZE WINNERS, 2019 AGM**



Best Overseas Photograph, Ken Earnshaw

Long-eared Owl

PRIZE WINNERS, 2019 AGM

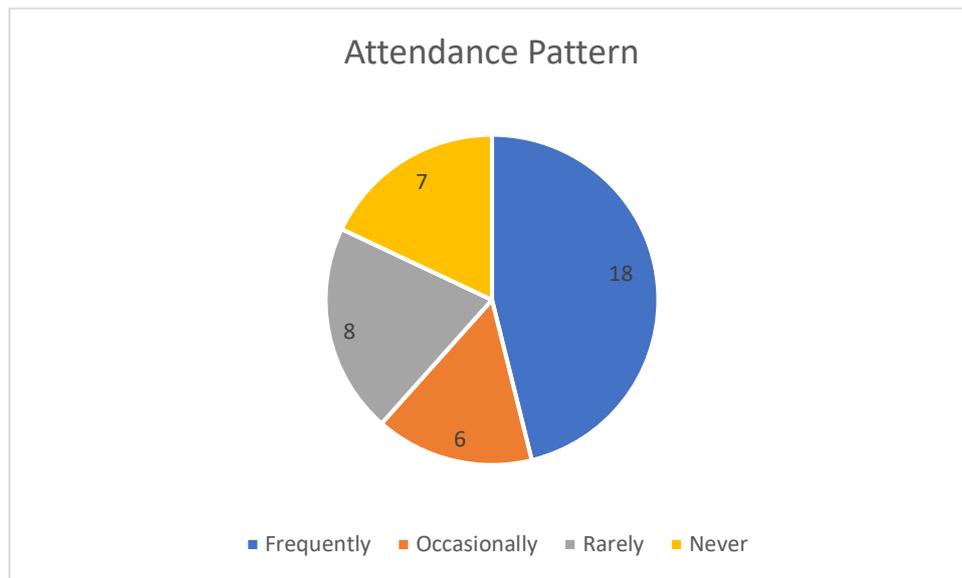


Best Novice Photograph, Sallie Earnshaw

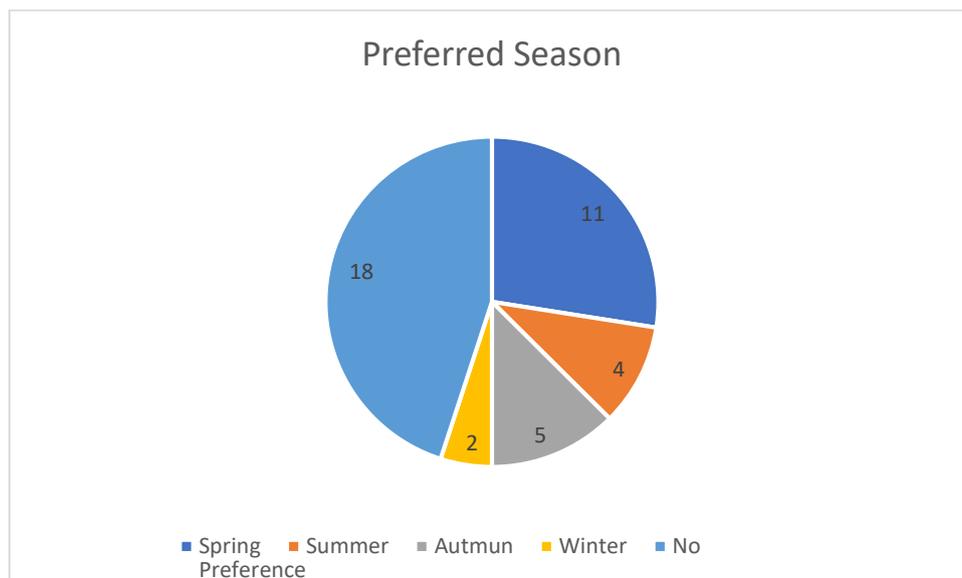
Bee Eater

## The AGM Survey at a glance

There were 62 valid e-mail addresses hit by the survey (courtesy of Survey Monkey) with 40 responses although one was in effect a 'no comment' reply because of the age of the respondent they skipped all questions. Most responses came from frequent attendees.

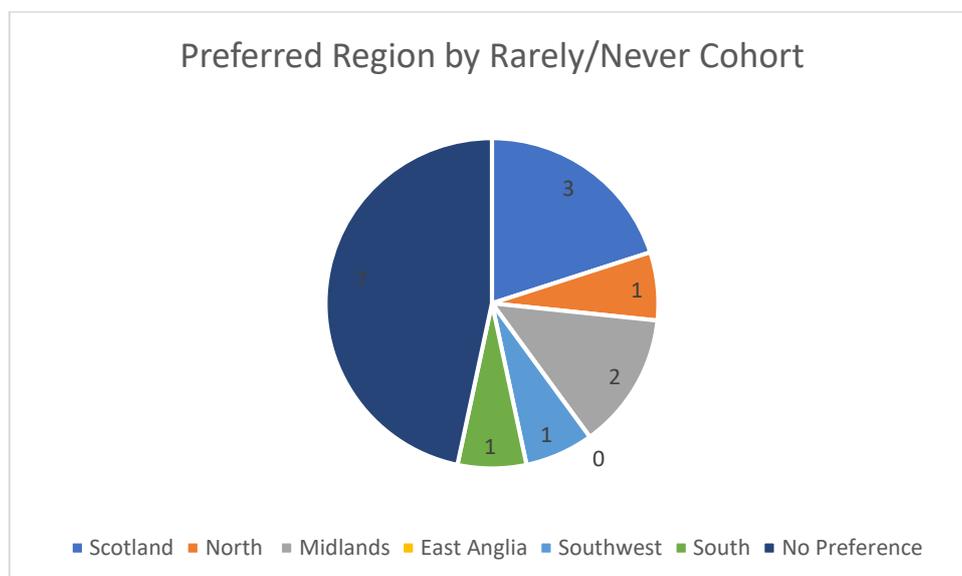
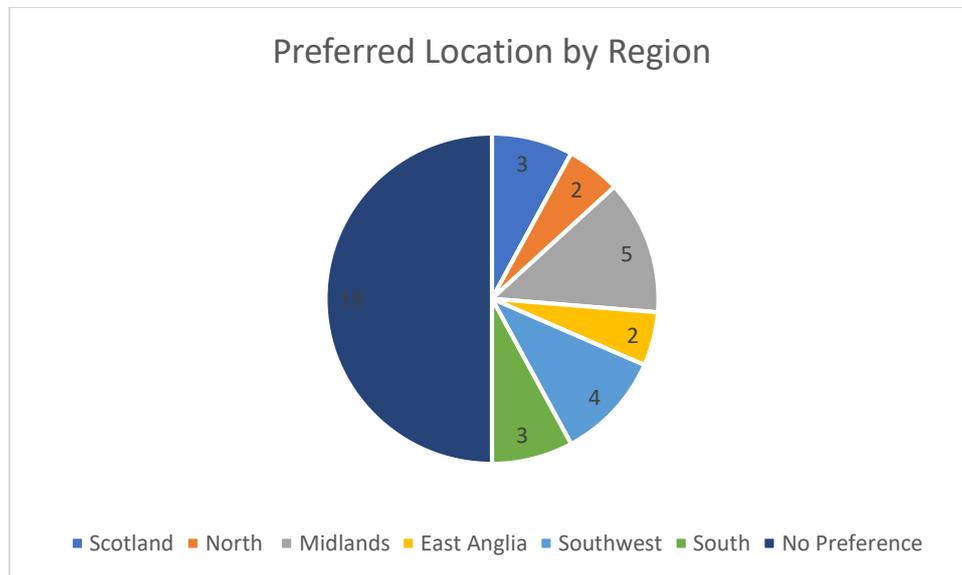


Most had no preference for the timing of the AGM but for those who did express a preference there was a clear desire for a spring meeting.



The conclusion is that a spring meeting might encourage more to attend.

Turning to where the AGM should be held – again most expressed no preference but there was a slight vote in favour of The Midlands among those who stated a preference – furthermore, Scotland & the North was favoured by those who rarely or never attend at present.



Other comments in this space suggested linking to a quality birding location or to moving the location around from time to time. Given the small sample size, especially in the Rarely/Never Cohort, we have to be careful not to read too much into these results, but they do suggest what might help improve attendance. One comment was:

*🇬🇧 Close to centre of UK, Cosford? Bristol area (good rail connections)? or maybe at one of the many museums (aircraft or natural history) or at a reserve that can accommodate us - many have meeting rooms.*

The answers showed an average travelling distance of just over 200 miles was acceptable, but this masked some large variations within and between cohorts. Travelling distance to the venue was broken down thus:

Acceptable Distance to Travel in Miles					
Cohort	Average	0 -100	101-200	201-300	301-400
Frequently	220	2	9	1	5
Occasionally	210	1	4	0	1
Rarely	205	2	3	2	0
Never	210	1	3	1	1

On the whole the concept of a guest speaker was supported (57/100) but the concept of a field outing was less popular (39/100) again this masks a distinct difference between the Frequent/Occasional group who scored a field trip 26/100 and the Rarely/Never cohort who favoured it more at 52/100.

The comments on hotel or venue costs again showed a raft of preferences from those who answered this question. On balance, keeping costs reasonable will be important.

Acceptable Hotel Cost per night in £					
Cohort	Average	0-37	38-75	76-113	114-150
Frequently	70	6	4	3	4
Occasionally	70	1	2	1	1
Rarely	100	0	1	3	1
Never	85	0	0	3	2

Finally, some verbatim remarks from the free text question on what we could do to improve the format. Encouragingly the majority response from our frequent flyers was 'do nothing, it's fine' but here are some other views .....

-  *Make it a social occasion with the AGM as one part.*
-  *Have a celebrity speaker like Bill Oddie.*
-  *Improve the food provided and the venue.*
-  *Hold it in a proper conference room with screen, projector and sound system. Lunch/tea facilities would also be required.*
-  *Formal business is always to be done. Think we've/you've made it light-hearted since 2000.*
-  *Dinner the night before.*
-  *AGM then Speaker.*

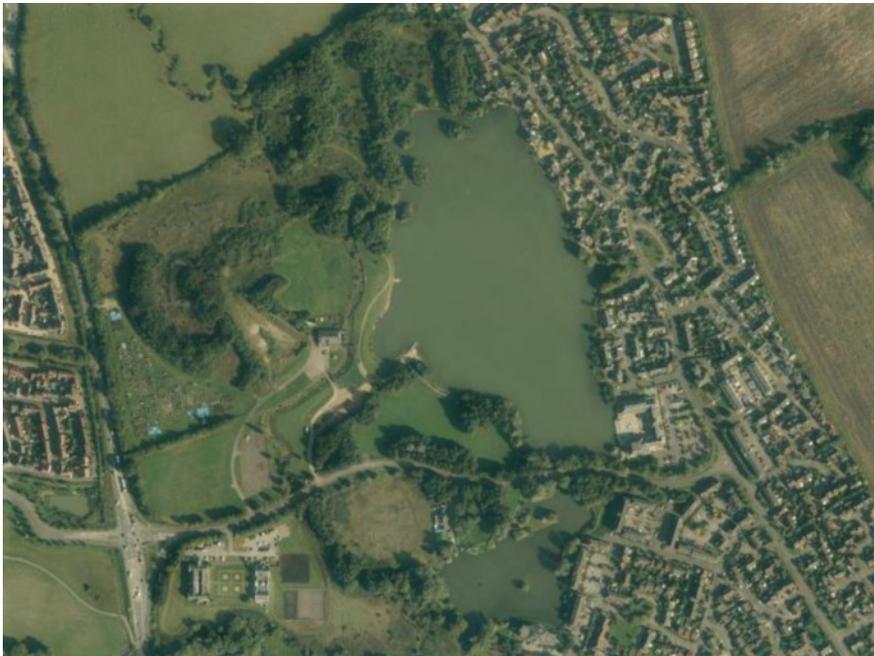
From this it can be concluded that a spring AGM, in an easy to access location, within reasonable costs, with a good speaker and with potential for a decent field trip is likely to be the most favoured outcome. Food for thought at the next Committee meeting.

## Swan Lake

*By Martin Routledge (with apologies to Tchaikovsky)*

One of my earliest birding memories concerns Mute Swans on an estuary in Devon where, as a four-year-old, I was both fascinated and terrified in equal measure. Fascinated by their calmness on the water and terrified because my big brother had told me they could break your leg with a flap of their wings.

Spool forward almost 60 years and I find myself following the adventures of the Swans on a local lake where I undertake a monthly Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) for the BTO. The lake is quite large being 700 metres north to South and about 300 metres wide and is in 2 parts.



*Watermead Lakes North of Aylesbury*

The northern part is bigger, but the southern part is less disturbed by other activities. The lake was formed as part of a landscaping project when a large housing estate was built in the 1980s and what were previously flood plains of the upper River Thames were deepened to provide an amenity for the new residents and provide a haven for wildlife, to offset the building which was on Green Belt land. There is wildlife aplenty but also fishing, some model boating and for a while the lake owner used to run high speed inflatable bananas in the summer holidays. Most of this has settled down now and the lake is truly a hot spot for water birds with breeding Mute Swans, Coots, Moorhens, Great Crested Grebes, Canada Geese and of course Mallards. Vermin (mainly Black-headed and Common) roost through the winter and Terns fish in the summer, sharing the airspace with Red Kites, Swallows, House Martins and Swifts. Cormorants, Grey Herons and Greylag Geese are common and the odd Kingfisher puts in an appearance. The area lies just to the north of Aylesbury and is called Watermead if you want to find it on a map.

Before I go much further, I should warn readers of a gentle disposition that what follows is not all happy and glorious – nature red in tooth and claw as they say – but the ending is happy and unlike Tchaikovsky's classic not everybody dies!

I'd been doing WeBS counts at Watermead for a couple of years and there was always the odd pair or two of Mute Swans, but in 2013 I noted one wearing a colour ring (known as a Darvic), so I started to be able to track just what was going on. The ringing was done as part of the East Anglian Swan Project and over the years I've been reporting my sightings to the project team and been getting a really useful insight into life on Swan Lake. The soap opera unfolded over the next 6 years as follows.

One of the first ringed birds I noticed was in early 2013 - an adult male was given the colour mark 4AOL at Watermead. He was already showing interest in another marked female 4AOY but the relationship came to nought and by the end of the year he'd switched his affections to an unmarked female who was then ringed in March 2014 – at this stage she was at least 3 years old but her origins were unknown. I'm tempted to call her Odette after Tchaikovsky's heroine but let's just call her 4BHC for that was her colour ring.

In the spring a Swan's fancy turns to making cygnets – you've seen the displaying and neck bending I'm sure. Well 4BHC had been the object of the affections of 4AOL for some time – probably since 4AOY left the lake, but without colour marking it was hard to confirm this. The two seemed to be getting on famously but then 4AOL fell ill and taken to St Tiggywinkles, our nearby wildlife hospital (where my daughter works so I get inside information on the comings and goings). On release he didn't hang around and by the end of 2014 our lady 4BHC was the only resident Swan at Watermead although others came and went. January 2015 dawned, and things started to liven up with a new male by the name of 4AOZ showing an interest.

Having reported 4AOZ to the project, it turns out he was a bit of a local wanderer. First ringed in 2013 on the lake at Hartwell House on the Western edge of Aylesbury (about 3 Km away), he'd been partnered with another ringed bird and they'd tried to breed there. Then they moved to the large reservoirs at Tring (10 Km further south-east) for a couple of years. Sadly, while there the female was predated by a fox so as a widower 4AOZ was trying his luck at Watermead among other places.

True love never runs smooth though and 4AOZ appears to have been seen off (and returned alone to Tring and then Hartwell House where I saw him a couple of years later) by an interloping lothario soon to bear the ring 4BRO. Now a couple, our lovers 4BHC and 4BRO proceed to dominate the lake for the next few seasons and while others came and went on the larger part of the lake the southern portion was clearly their territory and defended against all comers. Their first season together was 2015 and they successfully hatched 6 cygnets from a nest on a pile of rubbish and twigs by the housing estate shopping plaza, where people regularly fed the ducks and geese. A safe, if rather public nest site, but prone

to flooding and their early attempts had been delayed that year because of high water levels. Nevertheless all 6 cygnets were successfully reared.



*The traditional nest site used from 2015-2017 wasn't the tidiest!*

The following year again saw 6 cygnets hatch from the same nest site and then in 2017 they produced 8 cygnets – again all successfully taken to adulthood and then disbursed by 4BRO as he dominated his territory.



*The Class of 2017 was 8  
Cygnets*

The 2018 season was odd. Water levels were again high in the early spring and while 4BHC laid her first egg, she was clearly distressed by the rising waters. She was spotted in one of the lakeside gardens looking a bit agitated so a concerned local called St Tiggywinkles and my daughter went to the rescue, bringing 4BHC back to the hospital for observation. The reason for her distress became clear when she laid another egg overnight.



*The 2018 Nest was washed-out after the first egg was laid*

This was popped in an incubator and once the vet had given her a clean bill of health – yours truly had the honour of taking her back to Watermead and releasing her to be greeted by her faithful partner 4BRO. The waters continued to rise and our heroine decided that discretion was the better part of valour and abandoned that nest and tried again on higher ground – but in the open by one of the houses and close to a path used by dog walkers!

*The quickly rebuilt nest on higher ground*





She laid 2 more eggs here though and they both hatched – sadly the incubated one at Tiggys did not.

And so to 2019: another wet start to the year and our heroine was clearly learning. This year she picked a new nest site in the reed beds and she built it on grass and dead reeds; while it wouldn't have risen with the water, she was able to keep adding material to keep things safe. It was perilously close to the edge of the lake though, and by a path that was in constant use. Nevertheless, she laid and sat on 8 eggs while drawing admiring glances from the local crowds. Her mate did an outstanding job of being on guard nearby and all looked set for another fantastic season. Then, in late April, 4BRO was found dead by the nest! The St Tiggywinkles team were called and collected him and left 4BHC on her nest – there was no obvious cause of death and he appeared well nourished so it's all a bit of a mystery. More seriously, without her stalwart mate 4BHC was now vulnerable.



*The 2019 Nest Site was much better*

Over the next few days more Swans started to appear on the lakes. Many were first summer disbursers, but there were a couple of adult pairs as well. In the past they'd been confined to the larger lake while 4BRO defended his territory aggressively. Now they started to show an interest not only in the smaller lake but also in 4BHC who was rapidly becoming the target of their hostility. After a few days the locals contacted Tiggy's again to see if anything could be done, as 4BHC was clearly distressed and being forced off her nest. A rescuer was despatched, who collected our heroine and her eggs and took them back to the hospital. The eggs were incubated and 4BHC given treatment and a chance to recover, then all were reunited in a straw-lined pen. Almost immediately all eight eggs hatched!



*Nest provided at Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital  
The first egg is beginning to hatch!*

*Photograph © and courtesy of Tiggywinkles*



*A successful outcome as 4BHC and her 8 cygnets enjoy the pool at Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital*

*Photograph © and courtesy of Tiggywinkles*

The world class team at St Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital have since reared the cygnets and cared for mum - you can read more of their part in this story on their website ([www.sttiggywinkles.org.uk](http://www.sttiggywinkles.org.uk)) and social media feeds, but the only remaining decision is where to release 4BHC and her brood so that they have a fair chance of reaching adulthood.

Meanwhile, back at Watermead another pair have nested on an adjacent pond and hatched 4 cygnets. In addition, at least 2 pairs are prospecting with a view to moving in next year. Among these other swans are at least 2 from previous broods by 4BHC and 4BRO, who have returned to their natal lake – how do I know? Because they’ve got colour rings on of course

**Grant Report: Expedition SIMMER DIM 2019 – Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS)  
expedition to Mainland Shetland, June 2019**

**Seabirds Count, Year 2 - Keith Cowieson, RAFOS Field Activities Liaison Officer**



**Northmavine survey area from Ronas Hill – Keith Cowieson**

Following on from last year's very successful RAFOS Orkney foray in support of JNCC's Seabirds Count (Cowieson, 2018), Daisy Burnell, the overall JNCC Seabirds Count coordinator, and Martin Schofield the Regional Coordinator for the Shetland Isles, somewhat 'upped-the-ante' for 2019, and gave us the rather more challenging task of surveying vast inland tracts of Mainland Shetland, concentrating on inland breeding skua and gulls. For self-evident reasons, survey organisers often have difficulty in getting coverage of the remote, sparsely-populated peatlands of Northmavine and the Western Mainland, so it was both a privilege and pleasure to be afforded the opportunity to go and tramp the peat bog and peat hag-dominated landscape with the express intention of finding out how many skua and gull breeding territories they contained.

This year we deployed a 13-strong joint RAFOS & Royal Navy Bird Watching Society (RNBWS) team to carry out the survey, and it was with a sense of keen expectation that the enthusiastic RAFOS & RNBWS citizen scientists arrived in Lerwick from Aberdeen in mid-June, courtesy of generous NorthLink Ferries' sponsorship. Our task, to survey as many of the inland grid squares on the northern and Western Mainland peninsulas as practicable. This account is focussed on Northmavine, where I was to spend 12 exhilarating days.

Planning and map study for the survey work revealed mouth-watering opportunities for exploring rarely-visited parts of the archipelago, much of it lying north of latitude 60° North i.e. on a similar latitude to Bergen in Norway. And an early indication of the nature of the terrain and latitude was afforded when, taking advantage of an early arrival on the islands I visited Ronas Hill, the highest point in the Shetlands at 450 metres. The Arctic-alpine, granite, fellfield habitat and terrain there is similar to that found on the highest Cairngorms at 1200-1300 metres, although the bird assemblage was rather different. Where I would have expected to find ptarmigan, dotterel and snow bunting in

similar habitat in the Cairngorms, the resident Shetland birds were oystercatcher, ringed & golden plover, wheatear, skylark and red-throated diver in the lee of the hill. To the north, I could see the furthest part of our survey area, the rolling unspoilt peatlands of Northmavine, studded with lochs, dubh-lochans and a myriad of pools harbouring who knows how many breeding seabirds and other species.

**Seabirds Count Priorities.** Again, the priority for our Seabirds Count work on Mainland Shetland was to be squarely focussed on skua and inland gull colonies, as some of these species are those giving rise to great conservation concern. The State of the UK's Birds (SUKB) 2017 (JNCC 2018) records that Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) numbers have declined by 64% since Seabird 2000 – the greatest decline of any UK breeding seabird over the period. Conversely, great skua (*Stercorarius skua*) have prospered, increasing by 18% since Seabird 2000 (JNCC 2018). Again, we looked forward to discovering the level of changes, if any, between Seabird 2000 observations and our own.



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

**Observations.** So, what did we observe during our survey and what Lessons were we able to identify for future breeding seabird surveyors? The task on Northmavine was simple, walk as many of the remote, nominated grid squares visited during Seabird 2000 as time, weather and resources permitted, and conduct a snap-shot, single visit survey. Our observations are tabulated below, alongside Seabird 2000 results:

**Changes in inland breeding seabird populations on Northmavine  
(from 149 Grid Squares), 2000 v 2019<sup>1</sup>**

Species	Seabird 2000	Seabirds Count	% Change
Arctic Skua	32 AOT	15 AOT	-53
Great Skua	77 AOT	149 AOT	+94
Great Black-backed Gull	28 AOT	38 AON/AOT	+36
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	2 AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	6 AOT	2 AOT	-67
Common Gull	65 AOT	177 AON/AOT	+172
Black-headed Gull	21 AOT	34 AON/AOT	+62
Arctic Tern	0	527 AON/AOT	N/A

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

<sup>1</sup> Health warning – 2019 figures not yet checked

Inland breeding gulls on Northmavine appear to be doing well. Although relatively thin on the ground on the peatlands, many higher, drier, ridges boasted at least one pair of great black-backed gulls, often several in loose groupings – and they were the only gulls found close to concentrations of breeding great skua, being quite capable of holding their own with such aggressive, predatory neighbours. Meanwhile common gulls have done particularly well, certainly living up to their name in Mainland Shetland, almost tripling in number since Seabird 2000, with many lochs, dubh-lochans and pools hosting small colonies.



**Great black-backed gull chick – Keith Cowieson**

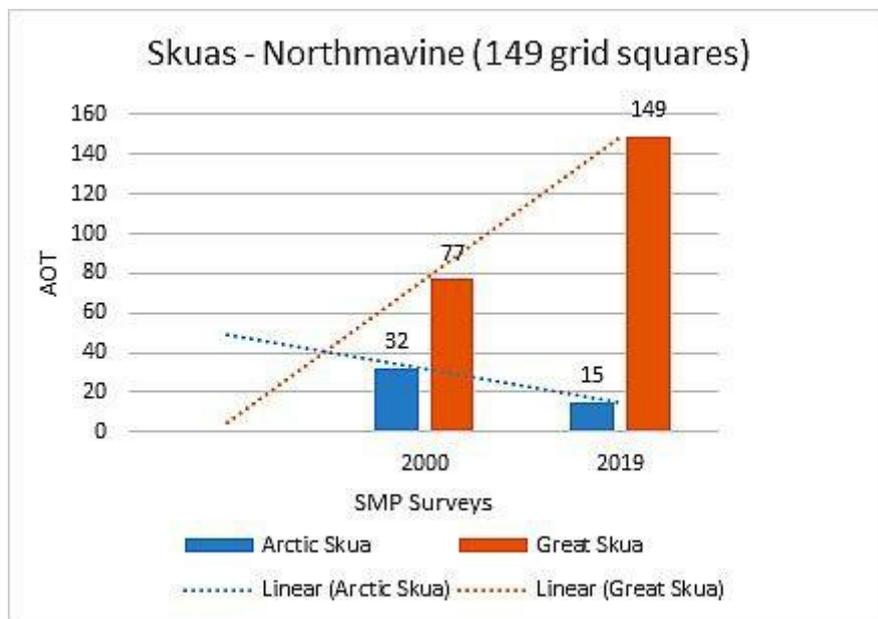
Away from the peatlands, on the moorland fringes, we encountered 2 large and several medium-sized Arctic tern colonies with some isolated groups and pairs on adjacent shorelines.



**Newly hatched Arctic tern chicks, still with egg teeth – Keith Cowieson**

### Skua observations.

On Northmavine, our skua observations from the 149 grid squares surveyed mirrored the recent SUKB trends, if not the modest scale of the national great skua increase. Arctic skua numbers were down 53% over the period from 32 to 15 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT), while great skua numbers had almost doubled, increasing by an impressive 94% from 77 to 149 AOTs.



**Changes in skua populations on Northmavine, 2000 v 2019**

Where great skuas bred in the greatest density, Arctic skuas were absent, and although no 'top down' intra-guild predation by great skua of Arctic skuas, eggs or chicks was observed, the 'top down' pressure of 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 (Perkins *et al*, 2018).

**Lessons Identified.** Two years of breeding seabird surveying, concentrating on priority breeding skuas, inland nesting gulls and terns, have reinforced lessons identified on Orkney last year, namely that in order to most comprehensively and best survey such species, transect walking and flush counting, respectively, are the two most accurate and effective methods - as laid out in the 'Seabird monitoring handbook for Britain and Ireland' (Walsh *et al*, 1995) and 'Bird Census Techniques, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition' (Bibby *et al*, 1992).

Sadly, Arctic skua territories were few and far between on Northmavine, and easily overlooked, as the birds here were relatively undemonstrative, unless surveyors were heading directly towards nest, eggs or chicks. In this respect, I suspect that Arctic skua numbers in such habitat are highly likely to be under-recorded, despite the best efforts of surveyors. For example, on one occasion while following an agitated whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) that clearly had a nest nearby, an isolated incubating pale-phase Arctic skua popped into the field of view of my binoculars, only 40 metres or so distant. Up until that point, there had been no indication of resident Arctic skua in an area that we had passed through only 5 minutes previously. Had it not been for the agitated whimbrel drawing our attention to the skua's nesting area, it would undoubtedly have been overlooked. On 3 or 4 similar occasions, breeding Arctic skua pairs only became obvious when we

were within 30 metres or so and heading directly towards them, despite having scoped or glassed the area at regular intervals on the approach.

By contrast, the behaviour of their larger great skua cousins was much more obvious with off-the-nest birds flying out to inspect approaching surveyors at ranges of 2-300 metres, often revealing previously unnoticed birds and territories. In this respect our findings mirror those of last year - transect walking is the only sure way of surveying the bulk of breeding skua territories in rolling peatland landscapes, and even then a proportion of Arctic skua pairs is inevitably going to be overlooked if a close approach is not made. In Northmavine, the peat hag-dominated landscape essentially rendered any attempt at accurately surveying, skuas from vantage points pointless, due to the significant areas of 'dead ground'<sup>2</sup> hidden by folds and dips in the undulating landscape.



**'Skua transect' surveyors tackle typical Northmavine peat hag terrain – Mike Hayes**

However, these techniques are not without their apparent hazards. Aggressive nest defence by skuas, gulls and terns can be intimidating for experienced and novice breeding seabird surveyors alike. Although it is unusual to be physically struck, it is nevertheless an unnerving experience for many, and some recommend not only wearing stout headgear but also holding a walking pole or suchlike above head-height, as birds invariably attack the highest point of the intruder.

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<sup>2</sup> An area of ground hidden from an observer due to undulations in the land.



**Surveyor under 'Bonxie' attack, chick in the centre foreground, characteristic 'Bonxie' fertilised mound in centre middle-ground – Keith Cowieson**

One further technique that has served me well over the years is that of facing the attacker, and looking them directly in the eye during attack runs/mobbing behaviour. In my experience, the birds will always veer away or pull up short of the observer. Conversely, turning one's back on the birds can lead to being hit, occasionally – and I have had the odd 'bump' to prove it. Therefore, it was fascinating to read the recent findings of researchers at the University of Exeter, suggesting that urban gull feeding behaviour may be influenced by human behavioural cues, such as gaze direction. Seventy five percent of urban gulls' were deterred from approaching food sources, and those that did took significantly longer to do so, when experimenters' gaze was directed towards them, compared with when directed away (Goumas *et al*, 2019). This certainly bears out my personal experience when translated to attacking & mobbing seabirds. My recommendation to fellow breeding seabird surveyors is to face attacking seabirds directly, if possible, and look them straight in the eye as you make your way gingerly through ternery, gullery and skua colonies. This should not only deter too close an approach, but also allow you to marvel, safely, at the birds' innate grace, manoeuvrability and natural defensive behaviour at impressively close quarters! The trick is just to hold your nerve.....



**Looking a 'Bonxie' in the eye – Keith Cowieson**

And as reported last year, another good giveaway for locating great skua (and great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*)) territories and nest sites are the vivid patches of well-manured, green plots in otherwise uniform brown peat and heathland-dominated landscapes. These invariably indicate historical breeding sites and lookout posts, well-fertilised by guano and the decomposing corpses of prey over the years.



**'Bonxie' chick, with signature 'look-out' mound, right middle-ground – Keith Cowieson**

**Seabird Nest Incorporation of Debris.** In 2018, Dr Nina O’Hanlon of the University of the Highlands and Islands requested that surveyors note any seabird nest incorporation of plastic during their work, in order that the proportion of nests affected could be ascertained. This innovative and worthy, topical initiative has grown like Topsy, and proved so successful, that it has now spawned a website of its own, not only cataloguing plastic incorporation in seabird nests, but also the presence of other debris in all bird species’ nests, worldwide (Birds & Debris, 2019). On Mainland Shetland, we found that many shorelines on both survey areas contained varying amounts of plastic and other litter, and 4 nests with plastic and other debris incorporated were found on Northmavine - two Arctic tern nests in wrack & flotsam-littered shingle beaches, containing thread-like plastic, plastic rope and metal wire; one oystercatcher’s nest immediately adjacent to old plastic sacking; and a ringed plover’s nest immediately adjacent to a length of plastic rope. One of the tern’s nests was part of a small colony of 12 pairs, the other an isolated pair, both on shingle bars just above the Mean High Water Mark.



**Arctic tern incubating on nest incorporating threadlike plastic rope – Keith Cowieson**



**Arctic tern nests incorporating threadlike plastic, plastic rope and metal wire – Keith Cowieson**

**Non-target bird species.** Shetland's appeal was not limited to seabirds either, there were good numbers of wetland birds and waterfowl such as eider, goosander, grey-lag goose, moorhen, mute swan, pintail, red-breasted merganser, abundant red-throated diver, wigeon, several pairs of breeding whooper swan, a pair of common crane, and an intriguing pair of barnacle geese nesting in an apparent wild state in a typical 'tundra' goose-type nesting location – in wild uninhabited terrain in a remote peatland location. Meanwhile, resident breeding raptors were scarce and only kestrel, peregrine & sparrowhawk were encountered. Breeding waders however abounded, including curlew, dunlin, golden plover, lapwing, oystercatcher, redshank, ringed plover, snipe & whimbrel and a red-necked phalarope and couple of over-summering turnstone in suitable breeding habitat. Passerines and doves included blackbird, collared dove, dunnock, hooded crow, house sparrow, skylark, meadow & rock pipit, raven, rock dove, skylark, starling, swallow, twite, woodpigeon and wren, as well as several pairs of red grouse. All in all an impressive and diverse assemblage of birds with numbers of waders being especially abundant, perhaps reflecting the absence of natural mammalian predators on the island.



**Incubating barnacle goose, in an apparent wild state – Mike Hayes**

In sum, 243 SMP Grid Square and other sites were surveyed by RAFOS and RNBWS personnel on Shetland. The sites ranged in character from 300ft vertical cliffs, through tundra-like heather moorland and peat hags & bog, to stretches of sandy and shingle beaches. Personnel covered between 7-15 miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 18 species lists for BTO's BirdTrack at the 10 Km square level. A total of 961 BirdTrack records were created in the survey areas with 72 species recorded. Meanwhile, 3 x British Birds Rarities Committee, Rarity Submissions were raised, several nest record cards covering a variety of species are in the process of being generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme, 4 x Nest Incorporation of Debris Forms were posted on the Birds & Debris website and 3 x Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database.

Finally, the RAFOS Chairman and Committee would like to express their sincere gratitude to both The Seabird Group and to NorthLink Ferries for their generous grant and sponsorship towards the costs of our 2019 expedition.

Looking forward, immensely, to the final, 2020, Seabirds Count season.....

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## ... BUT WE HAVEN'T RINGED THEM YET !

*By Dick & Jan Knight*

In the daily TV weather forecasts, we usually have a look at the prospects for Islay, especially in the run-up to the regular RAFOS visit to the island. Did anyone else notice that they seemed to have had 3 years' worth of rainfall in the 9 months to October last year? Was this a clue to the weather we could expect, or would it be fine because they'd used up their allocation of rain?

The ferry crossing on 26 October 2019 was windy, with gusts to 25 mph in blustery showers but the MS Finlaggan made it feel fairly smooth, apart from the odd thump when the bow caught a wave at a bad angle. Taking an early afternoon sailing rather than the evening one of 6 years ago meant that the 10 of us got to the cottages at Kilchoman in daylight; a distinct advantage as those who have experienced the last 5 miles of single-track road will know. The bird list got off to a good start with, among other species, 3 species of geese, Whooper Swans and a flock of about 20 Scaup on the way. The last mentioned were near the shore at Blackrock at the top of Loch Indaal, and Treecreeper, Raven and Twite at the cottages.

The first full day started for us with a White-tailed Eagle doing its barn door impression over the cottages followed (not literally) by 2 Buzzards and a Merlin. Our daily routine usually involved heading out round Loch Gorm by the northerly road, occasionally by the southern road. Going by the north route on Day 1, Bill Francis spotted the male Hen Harrier hunting over the tussocky grass at Saligo. Among the jobs the RSPB had asked us to do was to note the position of any groups of geese and to look out for neck rings among them. A bit further round the loch we found groups of Barnacle, Greylag and Greenland White-fronted Geese in some grazed fields. While counting the numbers we saw 2 White-fronts had neck collars but despite our best efforts we only got 2 of the 3 letters on one of the rings. Rain, wind gusting to 30 mph and the ringed birds hiding behind others prevented us from getting more detail. Later on, stopping at Blackrock we got a proper count of the Scaup flock at 22, rather than the drive-by estimate of the previous afternoon, as they had moved to the other side of the rocky island to an area where the road allowed safe stopping. They were seen one side of the island or the other every day.

On the Monday, we took the southern road around Loch Gorm which got us 31 Whooper Swans, 43 Tufted Ducks and a Goldeneye, among other species. On to the back road from Bowmore to Port Ellen, we found a boggy field about 2 miles from and in line with the main runway at the airport that had over 1000 Barnacle geese and 136 Greenland White-fronts feeding. Later in the day Ken and Sally Earnshaw and Pete Evans counted about 3000 Barnies and 1000 White-fronts there, and the numbers were high every time any of us went past. This gave us more data for the report we sent to the airport authority for the Wildlife Management Annex of their Airport Manual. We continued to Claggain Bay and Kildalton and built up the bird list. We stopped on the way back at a small bay for a quick look and found 2 White-tailed Eagles, 2 Buzzards, 25 Teal and a Kingfisher among other species, so we had to celebrate with a tea at the Ardmore distillery. We then stopped at the airport to get more observations for them. A notable one was the Buzzard sitting on an aerial tower watching the controllers in the ATC tower 100 feet away watching it. Stinky Corner, near Bridgend, provided plenty of geese and waders on the sand, and, on the far bank, a man with a tripod and camera balanced precariously on a slope. We heard later that John Aitchison was on the island to film geese.

Tuesday took us round the north of Loch Gorm, on to Port Charlotte and Portnahaven, then back via The Rhinns and up to Loch Gruinart. The heavily pot-holed single-track road up the east side got us plenty of species and the RSPB hide got us our daily White-tailed Eagle, or 2 to be precise. Eight new species for the trip, 52 species for the day.

We had volunteered our services to the RSPB, so we started Wednesday at Kinnabus, the HQ for the Oa reserve. We had 3 tasks: 3 members of the party were asked to count and age all the geese around Kinnabus; 3 were asked to count Chough on the Oa reserve and to look for leg rings, and 2 were asked to count Twite at Kinnabus and Upper Killeyan and to look for leg rings, ours being the last task. How do you spot a leg ring on a Twite, let alone read the characters on it? As we were about to give up at Upper Killeyan, having seen no Twite, a flock of about 100 flew in and immediately disappeared in the vegetation. Back at the farm at Kinnabus we eventually got the count on a barbed wire fence up to 55, plus 2 flighty groups on the other side of the field making a total of about 135 – well down on previous years of 600 odd. After a call at the airport for another check on their birds, we tried a new (for us) site, the Bowmore landfill and recycling site, aka the Dump. In the fields and shores around the site there were large numbers of geese and waders and our daily White-tailed Eagle. Apparently up to 4 eagles are regularly seen there, as the feeding opportunities are good.

To Blackrock on Thursday to check on the Scaup, then to Bunnahabhain (yes, another distillery) on the east coast, with Golden Eagle and 3 Buzzards on the 3 miles of single-track road to it. Years ago, after you left the main road you drove past a large barrel marked “To Bunnahabhain”. On the return side it read “To other places”. Sadly, the humorous side has had the writing removed. On a recommendation we stopped at the new distillery at Arnahoe, just down from Bunnahabhain. They haven’t been distilling for the required 5 years to market their wares, but the coffee and gift shop are very good. Unfortunately, whilst Bill checked the facilities, he missed the Peregrine and 2 Ravens that glided past the picture window. Refreshed, on to Port Askaig. No Black Guillemots, but we did see at least 2 Dolphins beside the quay that we were standing on. Loch Finlaggan was almost deserted, so we called at the woollen mill on the River Sorn, north of Bridgend. Statistically, the odds of seeing Dipper and Grey Wagtail there are good, but we dipped out this time. Still, the bird feeders at the woollen mill entrance can almost guarantee tit family and Siskins and we got a Treecreeper by the car park. Loch Gruinart got us our daily White-tailed Eagle and a beautiful flock of 500 Golden Plover as well as plenty of geese and waders.

On the northerly route round Loch Gorm on Friday we found 2 fields at Saligo with groups of Barnacle, Greylag and White-fronted Geese. We were diligently counting in the wind and rain when we found a White-front with a neck collar in a group that immediately took flight, leaving all the others feeding happily! Further round, we found 10 Whooper Swans and a male Hen Harrier. Ardnave was quiet, apart from 9 Redwing and 8 Pied Wagtails – no Chough or Snow Buntings. At Loch Gruinart, the Golden Plover flock had risen to 1000 and the daily White-tailed Eagle was present. In the hide were RSPB wardens David Wood and James How, each hosting a couple of visitors. The conversation turned to our tasks and we complained about the problems of trying to spot leg rings on Twite. David explained the background to the visitors and then added “But we haven’t ringed them yet!”. He didn’t explain that Twite had been ringed at Kinnabus in the previous 2 years, but not yet in 2019 – but why spoil a good line with the facts?

We had to be at Port Ellen at 0900 on Saturday for the ferry. We had barely gone a mile when a Little Egret appeared from the direction of Loch Gorm, flying over the car towards the Kilchoman distillery – and it was too early for us to have been sampling. To the best of our knowledge that is a new species for Islay Mist. The Scaup flock were in place at Blackrock and the daily White-tailed Eagle was in the harbour at Port Ellen.

The final total of species seen over the week was 112, and a pure coincidence that the sweepstake was won by the recorder! Details have been sent to the Islay Natural History Trust. As well as the surveying tasks on the Oa for the RSPB we sent them details of all our geese sightings with positions, and a report to the airport authority for the Wildlife Management Annex of their Airport Manual, with a list of all our sightings within 5 miles of the airfield, including details of the geese feeding area on the runway approach that they may not have been aware of. And the answer to the question in the first paragraph is no, it didn’t rain **every** day.

**List of Birds recorded on Islay by RAFOS between  
30<sup>th</sup> October & 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

- 1 Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*
- 2 Whooper Swan *Cygnus Cygnus* Flock of 45 on 3/11
- 3 Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*
- 4 Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*
- 5 Greylag Goose *Anser anser* 300 on 5/11
- 6 Greater Canada Goose *Branta Canadensis* one by Kintra
- 7 Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*
- 8 Brent Goose *Branta bernicla* max count 20 on 3/11
- 9 Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
- 10 Eurasian Wigeon *Anas Penelope*
- 11 Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*
- 12 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
- 13 Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*
- 14 Northern Shoveler *Anas clyptea*
- 15 Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* 4 Loch Ballygrant 4/11
- 16 Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* 300 Loch Indaal 31/10
- 17 Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*
- 18 Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Bowmore Harbour
- 19 Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*
- 20 Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* one record of 8 on 3/11
- 21 Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*
- 22 Red-throated Diver *Gavia Stellata* recorded daily
- 23 Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica* single record on two dates
- 24 Great Northern Diver *Gavia Immer* a raft of 26 from the ferry
- 25 Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* recorded daily
- 26 Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* 3 Lochindaal
- 27 Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus* 5 Lochindaal 31/10
- 28 Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*
- 29 Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
- 30 European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*
- 31 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
- 32 Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* 1 or 2 recorded daily
- 33 Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*
- 34 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*
- 35 Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* 1 record 31/10
- 36 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* recorded daily
- 37 Merlin *Falco columbarius* seen chasing Snow Bunting
- 38 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
- 39 Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*
- 40 Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* 30+ near Bridge End
- 41 European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*
- 42 Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
- 43 Red Knot *Calidris canutus* 30 on 5/11
- 44 Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritime* max 3 at Bruichladdich
- 45 Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
- 46 Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
- 47 Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* 1 at Loch Gruinart RSPB
- 48 Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* flock 36 on 5/11
- 49 Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*
- 50 Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus*
- 51 Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* max count flock 28
- 52 Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* 1 Ardnave 31/10

53	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ribidundus</i>
54	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
55	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i> 1 on 1/11
56	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
57	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
58	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i> only 1 record 1/11
59	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
60	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
61	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>
62	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i> single bird on 30/11
63	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
64	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i> very few records
65	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> flock of 15
66	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
67	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i> 1 Kildalton 2/11
68	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i> 1 Kildalton 2/11
69	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
70	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
71	White/Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
72	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i> 4 at Bunnahabhainn 4 <sup>th</sup>
73	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i> on Rivers Sorn & Killenan
74	Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
75	Hedge Accentor	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
76	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
77	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
78	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
79	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
80	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>
81	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
82	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
83	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
84	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
85	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
86	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
87	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>
88	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
89	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
90	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
91	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
92	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
93	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
94	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
95	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
96	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
97	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
98	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
100	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i> 30+ Islay Woollen Mill
101	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
102	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>
103	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i> 2 in NR35M
104	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
105	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> 1 Ardnave 1/11
106	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i> recorded on 2 days
107	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>

Nomenclature as per British Ornithologists Union: The British List dated 4<sup>th</sup> April 2006. English names are as in BOU *Checklist of Birds of Britain and Ireland* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition 1992)

### ***List of Other Fauna Seen***

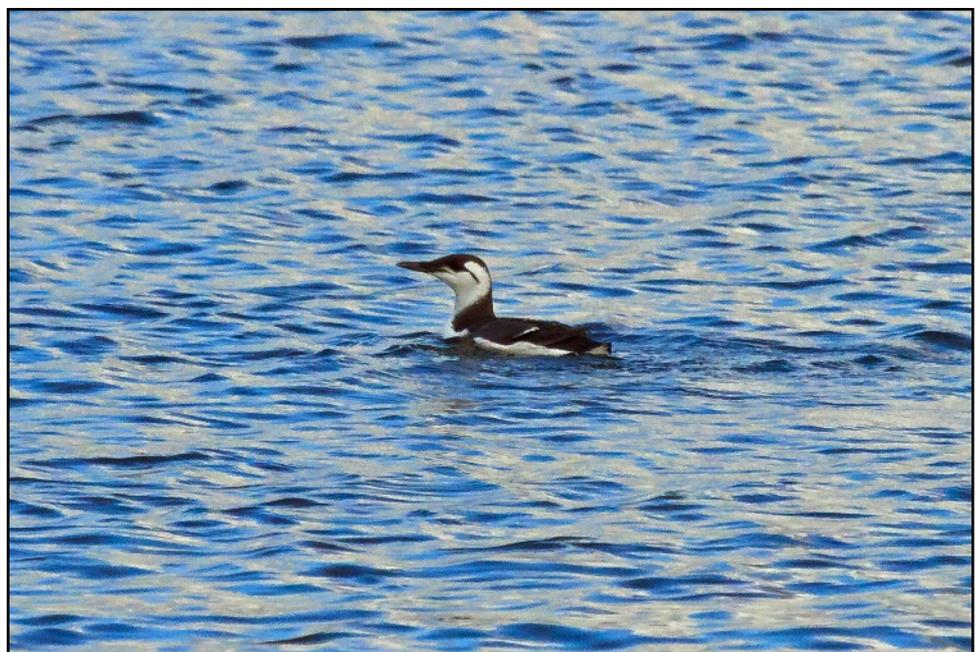
Otter  
Rabbit (including some black)  
Brown Hare  
Atlantic Grey Seal  
Common Seal (Port Ellen)  
Toad  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Bottle-nosed Dolphin



*Left: Redwing, Mull of Oa*

*Below: Guillemot,  
Bruichladdich*

*Pictures by Scott Drinkel*





*Above: Red-billed Chough, Machir Bay, Islay*

*Below: Dipper, Islay Woollen Mill (Pictures by Scott Drinkel)*





**Flt Off Jean Oakes WRAF**  
First British woman to exceed Mach 1 (Mach 1.7)  
6<sup>th</sup> September 1962  
Lightning T4 XM971 RAF Middleton St George

John Stewart-Smith with the  
first supersonic WRAF  
(above).

*With apologies for the quality  
of the picture*

John receiving a prize for  
photography at a RAFOS  
AGM. (Right)



## John Stewart-Smith 1932 – 2019

*By Alec Smith*

John Stewart-Smith passed away on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

Born on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1932 in Eire of Irish parents, he was number 3 in a family of 6. A dedicated ornithologist all his life, anyone who met John would probably get the idea that he was a very positive person knowing a great deal about birds. He was a person not to suffer fools gladly, in fact he did not suffer them at all! His birding knowledge was considerable, and he could give comprehensive guidance to either a beginner or an expert.

John's flying as an ATC Cadet with 781 (Newquay) Sqn in 1946, gathering over 800 hours on maritime Lancasters and Liberators flying from RAF ST Eval, before joining the RAF (as did his brothers) as an Air Radar Apprentice, 58<sup>th</sup> entry, at RAF Cranwell. This was no strange thing with an RFC/RAF father, who advised him to join at a tradesman and then think of aircrew training; advice given to all 4 brothers who joined the RAF.

Following a three-year apprenticeship, he was posted in 1950 to RAF Upwood working on Lincoln bombers, spending more time in the air than in the Air Radar workshop. He was soon selected for pilot training and in 1952 he crossed the pond to RCAF Currie Field, Alberta, flying Harvards. He returned to the UK in 1953, converting to Meteor Mk 4, 7 & 8 with No 1 (F) Squadron at RAF Tangmere.

By 1955 he had been to the RAF Central Flying School, leaving as a QFI on Chipmunks and Vampires at RAF Swinderby. This was followed by a posting to the Empire Test Pilots School at RAF Farnborough. After this, a tour on Javelins with 41 Squadron at RAF Wattisham that included a safety officer course, a NATO air defence course and a course studying supersonics at Bristol University.

In March 1961 he was posted to 56 (F) Squadron on the introduction of the Lightning at RAF Wattisham, and thence to 226 Lightning OCU at RAF Middleton St George. Then Lightning production flying at 60 MU RAF Leconfield. Desk jobs at HQ Fighter Command and later at HQ Strike Command brought his RAF career to an end in 1969.

After leaving the RAF, John did a tour of duty with the Royal Saudi Arabian Air Force, instructing on BAC 167 Strikemasters, before moving in 1970 to the Air Wing of the Abu Dhabi Defence Force, operating Hunters and Britten-Norman Islanders. He was decorated for flying a Hunter back to base after being hit by his own SURA rocket, saying that he reckoned it would have been much braver to eject over the desert!

After kicking the sand from his flip-flops, John returned to the UK in 1978 to join the Fleet Requirements and Air Direction Unit (**FRADU**) at RNAS Yeovilton, once again flying Hunters. FRADU provided training for the Royal Navy by conducting simulated attacks on Royal Navy ships during Airborne Early Warning (AEW) exercises, training air controllers and Helicopter Fighter Affiliation training.

After 4 years with the Royal Navy and more than 100 sorties during Operation Corporate, a low-level ejection whilst 'attacking' HMS LONDON off Start Point on 17 March 1981 resulted in a severe spinal injury terminating his military flying career.

However, it is difficult for a pilot to kick his bone-dome into the locker for the last time. He took up gliding at Perranporth, gaining his Golden Height at Aboyne before gaining his Silver 'C'. He was cajoled into joining RAFOS by his brother, Alex, and spent many happy and productive expeditions to the Gower, Gibraltar, and Islay and weekend jaunts to the Wash and Portland. He also had trips to Ramsey Island, where Alex was doing a 4-month Shearwater project for the RSPB. During his time with RAFOS, John served on the committee, editing the Newsletter.

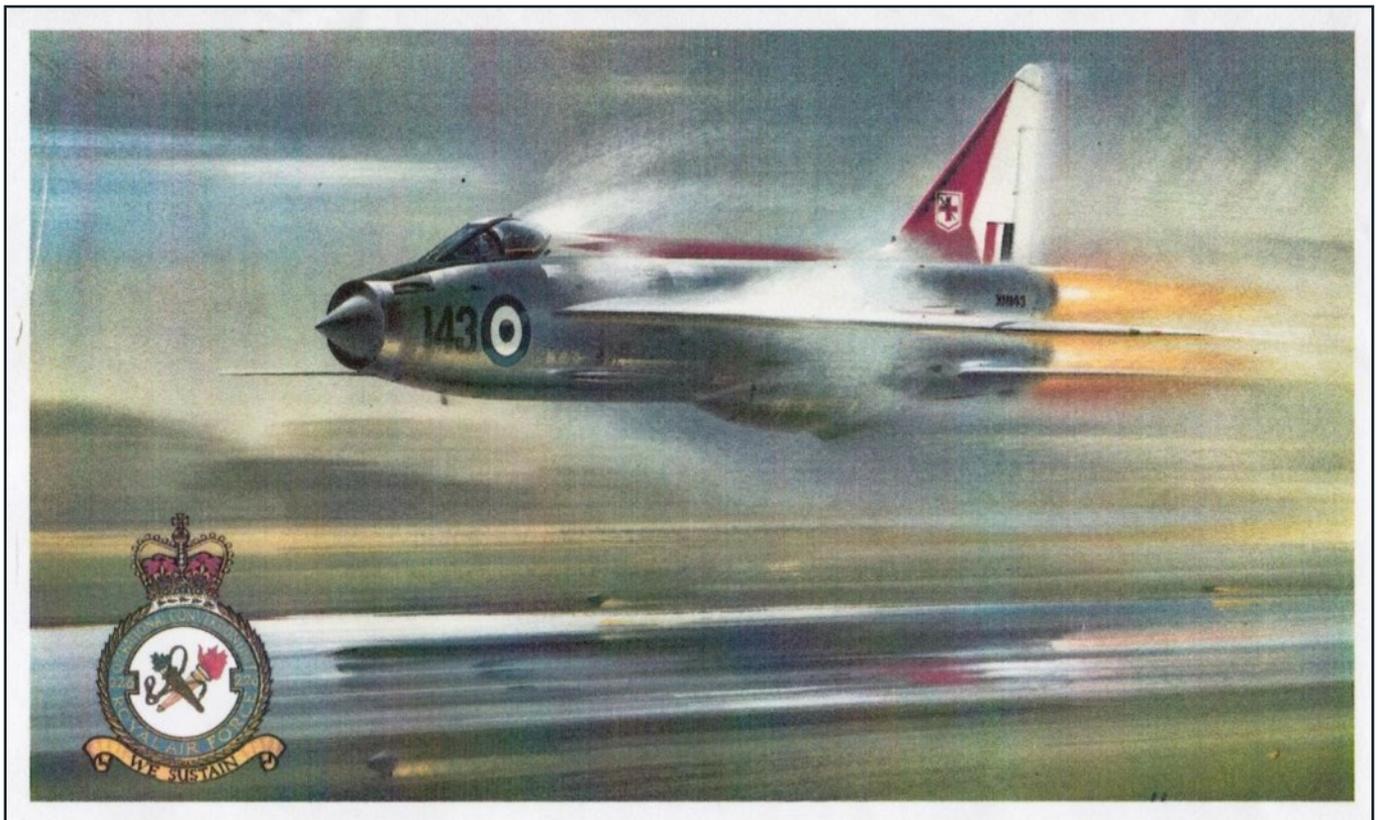
His expertise will also be missed in the world of aviation. In 1995 he became editor of the General Aviation Safety Council (**GASCo**) Flight Safety Bulletin and in 1998 was nominated by Airbus Industries as Aviation Journalist of the Year.

Rest in Peace, John



John with a Harvard (above)

6th June 1963, John giving a low-level aerobatic display at RAF Middleton St George for the USAF Academy (below)



## Val Kersley July 1921 – October 2019

*by Dave and Anne Bodley*

Val was born in St Austell, Cornwall to parents Charles and Gertrude Bunt. The eldest of six siblings, she was raised in the family home with her sisters Pamela, Jennifer and Judith and her brothers Tony and Roger. Val attended elementary school locally then successfully gained a scholarship to the all-girls grammar school.

Her first job on completing her secondary education was for the largest employer in the area at the time, ECLP & Co., working in the office as a typist. When World War Two commenced, Val joined the Women's Royal Army Corps, where she was allocated to the Medical Section, working in administration. Val's hard work and diligence was noted; she was seconded to the headquarters of the American Base and was one of the first into Germany after D-Day. She was then sent to the American Medical Services HQ in Frankfurt where she remained until the end of the war. Val then returned to St Austell and civilian life.

It was while out at a dance one Saturday evening with her sister Pam and brother Roger that Val met a handsome man named Reggie Kersley, known as Reg. Their relationship blossomed and they later married.

We first met Val and her husband Reg in Singapore in the late 60's, when Reg and David were serving at RAF Seletar. They shared an interest in birds and were founder members of the Singapore branch of the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS). With other interested members they set up ringing sessions in Singapore and Malaysia. Val accompanied them and was always ready with pen and paper to complete the forms in a neat and accurate manner. She must have filled in hundreds in the three years that they were there.



1969 Singapore Dave Bodley - Betty Binning - Val Kersley - Reg Kersley



1985 Gambia Anne Bodley - Val Kersley - Reg Kersley - Dave Bodley



2005 Malaysia (with ABWS) Anne Bodley - Val Kersley



Val at Chew, 2011

They returned to the UK in 1969 and were stationed at Colerne for a short time before they returned to Malaysia, where Reg was on secondment to the Malaysian Air Force. Much time was spent birding on the Golf course. On return to the UK they settled in Chippenham and Reg immediately started birding and ringing weekends at Portland Bird Observatory for RAFOS, with Val preparing and cooking the meals. These became very popular and she would cope with up to 20 people, baking quiches, pies and cakes at home to bring with her. For those who wanted more birding and the chance to watch bird ringing, Spring and Autumn days were organised at the Chew Valley Ringing Hut where Reg was a member. Once more Val was in the kitchen organising and serving soup and salad lunches and sumptuous cakes for tea. Some years later when she was on her own, her efforts were so appreciated that the Chew Valley Ringers asked Val if she would do a Christmas Lunch for them in the hut. This she agreed to do and continued to do for a few years.

Reg had itchy feet and planned 3 birding trips to the Gambia, one to Kenya with members from RAFOS and Wiltshire Ornithologists and 2 weeks ringing in Cyprus with his trainee ringer who was stationed out there. All of these we greatly enjoyed with Val once more dealing with the recording. After Reg's death in 1995 Val continued her interest in RAFOS activities and that was when we became more heavily involved with the organisation and catering of these events. Val was already 75, but she wanted to remain involved and active and she was - right up until she was 95, when support for the field meetings declined and they came to an end after 40 years. However, she wished to keep in touch, so she accompanied us to all AGM's up to November 2018. Although living alone, Val spent time with her sister Pam who lived in Bath, so when more opportunities arose to travel, the two of them joined in. A Sunbird privately organised tour to Tanzania was the first: 17 days travel in 2 minibuses and they took all the minor upsets in their stride. They came on the Tithcott Tour to South Africa, 3 weeks in a minibus taking in several National Parks, up the Sani Pass in a Land Rover to Lesotho, a night in Swaziland where Val made banana sandwiches for us for breakfast, there being no food available in the lodge, several nights in the Kruger National Park and back to Johannesburg via the Blyde River Gorge.

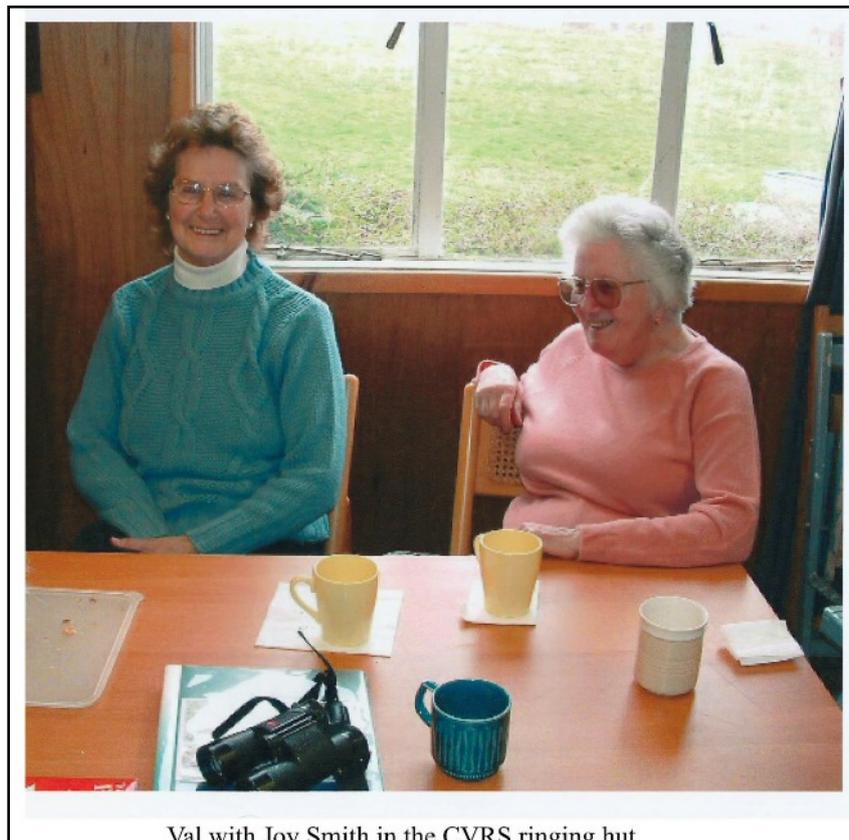
In 2005 the Army Ornithological Society was organising an expedition to Malaysia and invited RAFOS members to join them. Val and Pam were keen to go, Val to see how the country had changed in the last 45 years, so undeterred by thoughts of the hazards of tropical jungle travel they signed up to go. They remained unfazed when the boat became stranded on the river and all the men had to get out and push us into deeper water.

Val was an intrepid traveller, a consummate caterer and a superb cook. None of us will forget the magnificent cake she made for the 40th anniversary of RAFOS.

An indomitable lady who we will long remember.



Val cutting the cake that she made for the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of RAFOS. She is with ACM Sir Joe French (RAFOS Chairman)



Val with Joy Smith in the CVRS ringing hut

## From the Editor

It has been my sad duty in this Newsletter to record the deaths of two more members of our society, both of whom I have known for many years. John Stewart-Smith is the subject of an article by his brother, Alec, and I will always remember this larger-than-life character with a fund of fascinating stories. Val and her husband Reg Kersley were long-serving active members, and Val is the subject of a write-up by Dave Bodley. Her sterling efforts in the kitchens at Portland and Chew Valley are legendary. I inherited the organisation of the annual Slimbridge visit from Reg, when he died suddenly in 1995.

Last autumn, I took part in Islay Mist 2019, travelling as a passenger with Pete Evans to and from my home near Gloucester. The drive north in foul weather was not exactly enjoyable, and I was glad that Pete was driving rather than me. Once arrived on Islay, Pete teamed up with Ken and Sally Earnshaw, whilst Team Knight took over as my carers for the week. You can find their report elsewhere in the Newsletter, along with some pictures by Scott Drinkel. Martin and Rosy Godfrey were also with us, after a gap of several years from participating in RAFOS events.

Six of us broke our journey South with a two-night stay at the Nith Hotel, a favourite hostelry near Dumfries and the WWT Centre at Caerlaverock, where we enjoyed a day's birding. The food at the hotel was as good as usual and we were made very welcome. The rest of the journey south was uneventful, but affected by the long-term road-works on the M6, that seemed to go on forever.

Like our Chairman, I was unable to get to the AGM due to injury, so the organisation on the day fell to Team Knight, with Richard reading the Chairman's address and presenting the prizes.

In this Newsletter are the results of the Chairman's survey of members' wishes concerning venue alternatives for future AGMs, and I am looking forward to an interesting discussion at our next Committee meeting.

Fifteen people took part in the aforementioned trip to the WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020, that began as usual with an assembly for a coffee and a chat in the café - warmer than the car park! The party then broke up into small groups, who covered all of the hides on the reserve between them. Just under 60 species were seen on the reserve, including such uncommon birds for Slimbridge as Goosander and Egyptian Geese. Water Rail were showing well from the Willow Hide, as can be seen from Ken Earnshaw's pictures. It was interesting to see the new hide that has replaced the Holden Tower, overlooking the Dumbles and the River Severn, complete with a lift.

Best wishes for the rest of 2020, Hoping to see you at the AGM on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2020

**The Closing Date for items for Newsletter No. 110 is 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

*Bill Francis*

Me at Chew Valley Lake

(A few years ago!)





Including just a couple of my own pictures that I like. What is the point of being Editor otherwise?

