



ROYAL AIR FORCE

ornithological society

Newsletter No. 110 - Autumn 2020

WINTER DUCK, 2020



Pictures by Brian Lyon



THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Introduction From the Editor

Welcome to Newsletter No. 110. With the period of lock-down, I was expecting a shortage of articles for this edition, but how wrong can you be?

It is sad to record the passing of two more long serving members of the Society: Darell Hamley, a former Chairman, and Peter Tithecott, whose involvement with RAFOS dates back to the formation of the Singapore Branch in the late 1960s. Darrell can be seen with both a Vickers Wellington and Avro Vulcan aircraft, showing the scope of his flying career. Pete is pictured with two stalwart RAFOS members, also no longer with us: Wilf Corris and Reg Kersley. These two are also mentioned in Brian York's tribute to Val Kersley. Our chairman has included an article on the BTO's Birdtrack application and how it relates to RAFOS, whilst John Le Gassick has reviewed two books relating to ornithology, both of which I am happy to own! Alan Kennedy writes of Birding in the Outer Hebrides, and Scott Drinkel gives us an expurgated account of this year's WINTER DUCK. Dick and Daphne Yates have been to Bhutan, and Dick's article describes their trip in detail. Also included are some pictures from Lieutenant Phil Boak, RN, who recently completed a tour at the RAF College, Cranwell.

Please see the note from the Chairman on the next page, explaining to logic behind the decision to delay the RAFOS AGM until 20th March 2021.

Good Health and Good Birding!

Bill Francis.



AGM 2020 - A Word from the Chairman

Those of you who have been paying attention will have spotted that the traditional AGM calling notice and associated paperwork that normally goes out with this edition of the Newsletter is missing.

The astute among you may well have already put two and two together and come up with four reasons why the Committee has decided to postpone the AGM.

First, there is this nasty little virus going around and although things seem to be improving, we are far from out of the woods yet – so the Mess may not be open for business as usual in November.

Next, even if it is open, there may still be several ‘frequent flyers’ to the AGM in the VP category (that’s Valuable Person) who may not be able to travel to the venue – we might not make a quorum and more importantly, everyone’s health is a primary concern.

Then, even if we did manage to put it all together there is a strong chance we might have to cancel at short notice if things took a turn for the worse as winter approaches. Finally, we felt a move to a spring AGM might be worth trying anyway as the recent AGM survey reported in the last edition, though not conclusive, did show a slight preference for a spring meeting.

Therefore, **the November AGM is postponed to 20 March 2021** with the expectation it will take place at High Wycombe on that date.

In the meantime, the Committee will continue to make sensible decisions about funding expeditions such as WINTER DUCK and ISLAY MIST among other things until we can restore a more normal service.

Stay safe folks and good birding.



WING COMMANDER DARRELL HAMLEY

By Group Captain John Woodard

We are sad to report the death of Wing Commander Darrell Hamley on 6 April 2020 aged 92, after a long illness. He was a bomber pilot and his flying career spanned the transition from piston engine aircraft to the era of jet engines.

Darrell flew the Lancaster, Lincoln and Wellington and progressed through the succession of Canberras and 'V' bombers during the Cold War ending up as a senior skilled Vulcan pilot.

Darrell was a member of RAFOS since the 1970's and was Chairman of the Society from 1977 to the early 1980's. He was a consummate bird watcher, always carrying a monocular and alert to any avian in sight. He would even rise from a dinner party and dash to the nearest window to identify a bird which he had seen out of the corner of his eye. He was a member of the 1976 Masirah expedition where his birding skills were much admired, less so his ability to adapt to living in desert conditions!

Darrell was also a regular attendee at the usual round of RAFOS field meetings: Minsmere, Portland Bill, Chew Valley and more. With his wife Jo, Darrell travelled extensively and regularly reported on their overseas sightings in the RAFOS Newsletter. In the 1980's and 90's a group of previous Chairmen of RAFOS together with their wives and other members spent long weekends at various locations of bird interest around the UK, including a trip to Jersey in the Channel Islands. The idea of these excursions was to see as many birds as possible, but there was a heavy social dimension as well. One wag commented that the group consumed more bottles of wine than birds spotted. It was during these visits that Darrell gained a reputation for consuming gargantuan meals washed down with the appropriate liquor.

The Hamley couple lived in the Hughenden Valley, north of High Wycombe, and he reported on the bird life in that area, wrote a nature article for the Hughenden Valley Church Newsletter for many years and led U3A groups on birding field trips. In later years, both Darrell's and Jo's health declined and severe deafness on his part and macular degeneration on hers curtailed their outdoor activities and attendance at RAFOS AGMs. Jo died in 2019 and Darrell, now with a serious cancer condition, died in a Chesham Nursing Home. He watched birds to the end, reporting to the author on birds and butterflies he had seen from his window in his last week of life.

His knowledge of birds and his forthright views were invaluable and appreciated. Both Jo and Darrell will be sorely missed.





Darrell and Jo



Darrell and a Wellington



Darrell leading the 4 Vulcan scramble at the Farnborough Air Show in 1960

Following the announcement in the last Newsletter of the sad death to Val Kersley, the Secretary has received this tribute to her.

The End of an Era

By Brian York

I was very sorry to read of the death of Val Kersley in the Spring edition of the Newsletter.

I was only a National Service airman and should have been posted to Cyprus during the Suez crisis. If I had done so, I might have met up with RAFOS sooner. However, I was taken off the draft because the station had an important football cup semi-final and I could not be spared!

Back in the late 1980's my eldest son and I attended a Portland weekend for the first time and were immediately taken under the wings of Reg Kersley, Wilf Corris and Ron Bowers. Val also took a liking to Andrew, who was 16 at the time, and decided to feed him up, including three helpings of Spaghetti Bolognese.

The highlight of the weekend was having a Wryneck in the hand. Neither of us have had that experience since.



We attended some RAFOS meetings over the next few years, until Andrew's job took him to Norwich, and we were always looked after very well. Even when I took my wife to Slimbridge she received the same friendly welcome.

Sadly, all our three mentors died, but I kept in touch with Val, usually by Christmas cards, and promising to meet up one day at the AGM. Last year was the first time we did not receive a card and wondered why. The Newsletter explained what had happened.

My interest in birds has not waned and I even persuaded my wife, Pat, that she is a bird-watcher too. This has led to us going on specialised bird-watching holidays abroad. Meanwhile, Andrew is still in Norwich and regularly rings me up to tell me of some rarity he has twitched.

Once again, we will never forget Val and the others' kindness and help in our too-few RAFOS attendances and may I wish you the very best for the future.

Peter Tithecott 19th June 1936 - 28th February 2020

By Dave Bodley

Peter was born in Burry Port but grew up in Swansea. On leaving school he was called up for National Service in the RAF. On demob he went to Gelli Aur College where he met his future wife Glenys, and after completing his course they got married. He then re-joined the RAF to make a career as an aircraft electrician.

Peter was, above everything, a family man. He and Glenys had four children, so it was just as well. Their children grew up in a loving and supportive household and felt both liked and loved. When grandchildren came along Peter and Glenys were delighted and never seemed to tire with having them around. Peter was fun, loyal and kind. Family was important to him.

I first met him in 1966 in 390 MU, RAF Seletar, Singapore when he answered a trawl instigated by John Gregory for people interested in joining the recently formed RAFOS in order to set up a branch of the society in Singapore. The primary aim of the branch was to carry out bird ringing for the Migratory Animals Pathological Survey, an American project set up to cover the whole of the Far East. The return address on the rings was Bangkok, but our inputs went via Gathorne (Lord) Medway who was based at the university in Kuala Lumpur. Thus Peter became a founder member of the group along with Wilf Corris at Tengah, John Gregory at Changi and Reg Kersley and myself at Seletar. We started with local ringing sites both on and off the airfields, then extended to further areas on Singapore before venturing on weekend trips 'up country' into Malaya.

In 1968 Pete joined the RAFOS(SB) expedition – three weeks wild camping, recording, photography and ringing up the east coast of Malaya nearly to the Thai border – six members with two Landrovers and trailers. Halfway through the trip Pete became ill. After an uncomfortable day and night we were nearly at the point of requesting a casevac (which would have been by helicopter), he suddenly realised how wonderful his sweat tasted and self-diagnosed salt deficiency. He drank a large glass of very salty water and within an hour was pronounced cured.

During his RAF career, Pete travelled widely on duty, on RAFOS trips, and privately. He visited Belize, Borneo, Cyprus, Malta, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and the Gambia as well as selflessly volunteering to work for a month at a time on Gibraltar. (As it happened, the Gibraltar trips coincided with the migration season on the Rock). Pete also joined an expedition to climb Mount Kinabalu.

On leaving the RAF Pete and Glenys settled in Haverfordwest. To assuage his lust for travel, he took a job at Marshall's Airfield in Cambridge – a formidable commute. However, the truly faraway places still called, and he started to organise trips for small groups of friends and acquaintances to such venues as China, Chile, Brazil, Namibia, Norway, Vietnam, and India. Anne and I joined him on several occasions, visiting South Africa, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Madagascar. I remember that last trip for many reasons, one of them being that he led the tour on crutches with his leg in plaster following an Achilles tendon failure. One of the hotels we stayed at had a lovely swimming pool and Pete was determined to have a swim. He sealed his leg in a large polythene bag using sticky tape and launched himself into the water. All we could see of him was this enormous floating polythene bubble with no sign of his head at all. Fortunately, his good friend Bernie Priaux immediately dived in and brought his head to the surface, saving the day and Pete's life.

Back in Haverfordwest, Glenys had set up a nursery school business and was also strongly involved in the Girl Guides. Pete was very supportive, frequently involved in the maintenance of the school building and transporting the children. For the Guiding he helped with the Guide camps, moving the equipment and food to the campsite, assisting with tent erection, Latrine pit digging and fire-site construction, wood collection etc. - it takes a lot of wood to cook for forty people. He was also renowned for his aerial ropeways or Death Slides. A pulley on a rope stretched between

two trees would give any Health and Safety inspector a heart attack, but all the children loved them and there were surprisingly few accidents. On these camps his extensive knowledge of wildlife was always a boon.

Peter was a highly active member of the local Wildlife Trust, and here I include a tribute from Graham Rees, who was at that time the Bird Recorder for Pembrokeshire.

'As a committed conservationist ,Peter was deeply involved with the activities of the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales on the Pembrokeshire mainland and its offshore islands. He served on several committees, taking the chair on some. His manual work contributions varied from hide and building maintenance to scrub clearance, planting, digging and even arduous tasks like clearing plastics from Gannet nests. Field surveys occupied much of his free time, making a valuable contribution to charting the distribution and population of Pembrokeshire's breeding birds, including being the observer who first proved that Dartford Warblers bred in the county. He readily got on with the people he became involved with so that they became committed like him. No longer will Peter be seen heaving joists onto roofs, tossing about on small boats or striding along the cliff paths – he will be greatly missed.'

Pete's life changed for ever when Glenys was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She started the slow and inexorable decline and through it all Pete was unflinching in his care for her despite the difficult emotional and physical aspects of her condition. Eventually despite his protestations the Social Services told him he just was not able to cope with her care and she was admitted into a care home. Since then he has tried to ensure that Glenys has been at the centre of his mind with regular daily visits from either himself or their daughter Amanda. It can truly be said that Peter lived life to the full and made an enormous contribution to our knowledge of the natural world and to the lives of those who knew him.



RAFOS (Singapore) expedition to East Malaysia, 1968.

Left to Right : Wilf Corris, Pete Tithecott and Reg Kersley.

Pete Tithecott - Early Days



Cuba, 2007, Pete with friend Bernie Priaux

Madagascar, 2008
Pete and a Lemur



RAFOS Expeditions and BTO BirdTrack

By Martin Routledge

At the AGM there was some discussion about the use of BTO BirdTrack as a recording tool for expeditions and personal use. There seemed to be concern that we could be double counting and at the same time those using the BirdTrack phone app for personal recording felt their own lists would be incomplete if their observations went down against RAFOS instead. What follows is an attempt to de-mystify what is going on, set the ground rules for RAFOS expedition recording and encourage the use of BirdTrack as a very versatile tool.

BirdTrack



The BTO's BirdTrack recording tool is a hugely powerful piece of work. I'm sure many of you already use it but if you don't then look here: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack> The gold standard is the submission of complete lists (with numbers, breeding status and timings) of all birds observed on a visit to a given area specified as one of 'your' sites or 'places' as the app call them. There are other levels of recording available from complete species lists without counts, through Casual Records of interesting finds (either unusual birds or

unusual numbers of common birds) to one-off sightings when a complete list is not appropriate. Species Lists are only set against places you have registered but Casual Records, as the name implies, can be set against your places or any other location but the more accurate the grid reference the better. All records entered under an individual or society log-in can then be searched, analysed and used to produce annual lists or similar. As it says on the website:

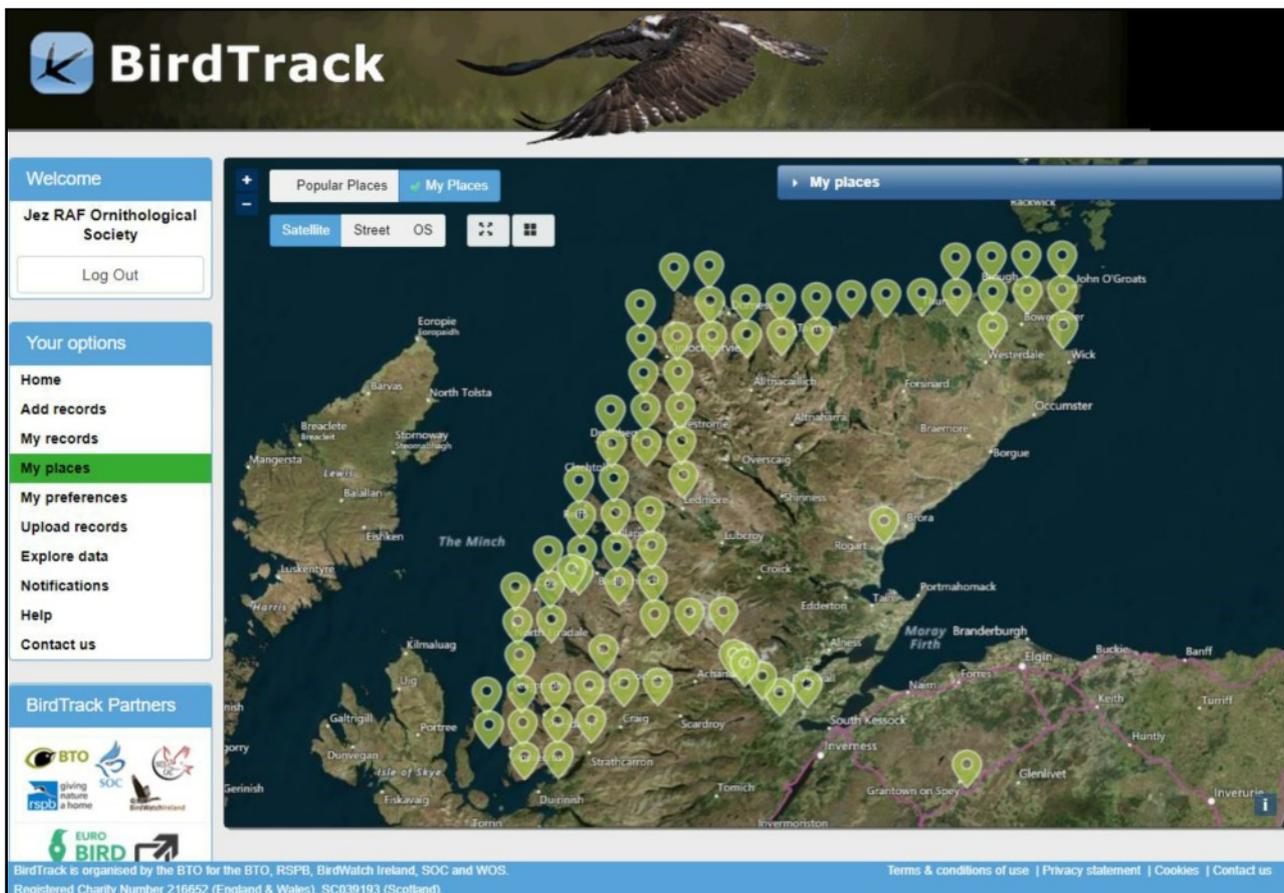
'BirdTrack is an exciting project, through a partnership between the BTO, the RSPB, Birdwatch Ireland, the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and the Welsh Ornithological Society, that looks at migration movements and distributions of birds throughout Britain and Ireland. BirdTrack provides facilities for observers to store and manage their own personal records as well as using these to support species conservation at local, regional, national and international scales.'

If lots of folk are using BirdTrack to enter data, then lots of sightings are going to be recorded more than once by different birders in the same location. A rarity like a Paddyfield Pipit might be obvious if recorded by 50 separate Fat-bellied Twitchers in Porthgwarra but what about the 200 Blackbirds noted (4 per recorder) on the same lists? Do not worry those clever people in the BTO can sort that out through their computer algorithms so it won't matter if you and your best birding friend both enter your sightings against your own usernames. This brings us on to recording on RAFOS expeditions and other outings.

RAFOS and BirdTrack

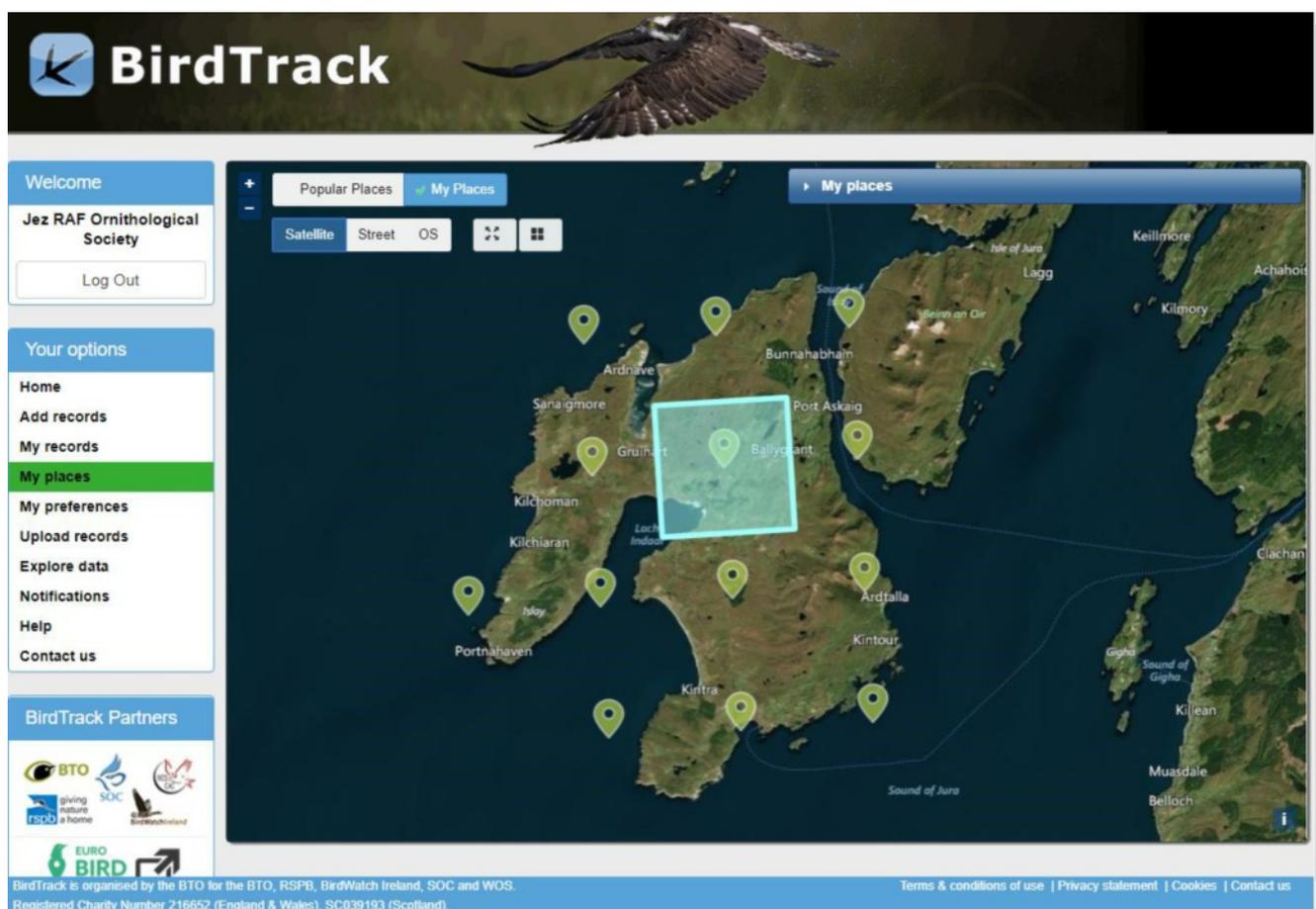
RAFOS expeditions provide useful data to several projects including the BTO-led WeBS, ringing scheme, nest recording scheme and the JNCC Seabird Monitoring Project among others. An expedition without serious data gathering and sharing is little more than a holiday! Consequently, we use BirdTrack as a catch-all, back-up to whatever the main theme of the expedition is. As an example, the WINTER DUCK series is primarily concerned with wetland bird monitoring for WeBS but also records all other birds seen on BirdTrack and sets these against locations (our places) configured as 10Km squares stretching across the expedition area.

RAFOS has a dedicated username and password which can be used by expedition leaders and recorders to set up places, enter observations and then analyse data on BirdTrack. The e-mail default for our username is monitored by Jerry Knights but most expedition leaders and committee members can view the site. We would make it open to all, but there is a risk of too many fingers in the pie, so keeping data entry and settings under some control is ultimately beneficial for all. As a default, for any expedition or birding outing we should set up dedicated places, usually based on 10Km squares for species lists. For WINTER DUCK this looks like:



Where each marker is either a 10 Km Square registered as one of our places or is a Casual Record of note (such as the Red Kites near Dingwall). All our expeditions should be creating

these 10 Km square places to enable recording of our collective effort. Another example, this time from ISLAY MIST:



We have done the same for the Somerset Levels and the SIMMER DIM series with locations on the Orkney Islands and the Shetlands. The BTO have recently evolved the system and places can now be set up as polygons which means expedition leaders can now configure sites in a more user friendly manner – an entire island, or a large bay, might now be designated as a single place even if the 10Km grid system cuts through the middle; that said, existing places should not be modified and the new more flexible system should only be used where it makes sense for future expeditions.

Expedition recorders should enter complete lists and should also enter the observers' names under 'Optional Visit Information – Comments'; in this way if the local county recorder wants to query something Jerry can direct the question to the likely observer/counter. Lists could be compiled after evening call-overs if folk have been dispersed through the recording day – in this case there does need to be a little care taken. For example, if 2 teams both drive past the same loch and one sees four Whooper Swans and the other a few hours later sees seven what do you record – four, seven or eleven? The safe answer is seven – i.e. the highest count at any one time. Yes, there may well have been eleven separate individuals, but this is far from certain. Recording the maximum seen at any one time is a recognised surveying technique and should be our default.

Personal Listing and Data Management

Many RAFOS birders use BirdTrack on a smart phone app to track their personal lists and observations. Provided these records are also shared across to the expedition counts there is no problem with that as the BTO system will be able to cope with multiple lists from different users. On the other hand, there will come a time when an individual doesn't see all of the same birds that the rest of the team observe – I believe this is referred to as 'dipping' in the jargon of Twitchers. As an example, this year WINTER DUCK Team 1 members had glorious views of a soaring pair of Golden Eagles from the Tesco car park in Ullapool. However, the gallant expedition leader was busy taking care of Team needs (aka shopping for victuals) and dipped out (of note, said Team didn't come and find him and merely gloated after the event – not that I'm bitter or anything). The BirdTrack record for that square for the expedition records the 2 x Golden Eagles but they are not on my list. Therefore, if I am relying on BirdTrack for my annual list I need to make sure I only record the birds I personally observe and not the collective efforts of the expedition.

Those Who Count Know

And those that do not know do not count! So, to make sure your birding counts for something other than a personal list or set of notebooks sitting gathering dust on a shelf somewhere – use BirdTrack to not only record your data but to share it with the body scientific! Oh, and if you are one of those with dusty notebooks on your shelves well BirdTrack is not time limited and you can spend a few happy moments adding your records to the database for all to enjoy.



Skylark on Stronsay during Seabirds Count census 2018 – recorded on BirdTrack as part of RAFOS Expedition SIMMER DIM

A Voyage of Discovery (or not!)

by John Le Gassick

Inspired by the huge success of my recent offerings to the Editor of the Newsletter, Winter Sun 1 to 3 and Zimmer Dim, I have decided to put pen to paper (actually stubby finger to I-pad) and submit yet another light hearted but, hopefully, informative piece. A voyage across the Atlantic with six days at sea, where I felt my sea watching skills would be called upon to identify various pelagic species as we crossed the “Pond”. Unfortunately, the weather was to say the least poor, catching the tails of that double act of storms Ciara and Dennis! Hence as I start this tale seated on the aptly named Poop Deck, damn those prunes, I have nothing to report. To rub salt into the wound I had blown my recently acquired book token on a copy of Howell & Zufelts *Oceanic Birds of the World*, runner up in this year’s British Birds Best Bird Book of 2019. Of course, “Oceanic” should have given me a clue, as it does not include any gulls apart from Kittiwake, Sabine’s and Swallow-tailed. Has Martin been having a word? I should have dug out my 1983 Copy of Harrison *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*, though the photographs in this newly published work are magnificent and well worth the cover price.

The first port of call on day 3 was Corunna, on the north west tip of Spain, where the weather had improved to light drizzle enabling us to walk along by the beach where we observed a male and a female Black Redstart feeding on the weed covered rocks, I would suggest on tiny insects. However, it did seem odd to find the “House Redstart” in this location. It was the European Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros gibraltariensis* with its distinctive white wing bars, there is a photograph. This of course is the land of the Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* and they do look very smart in their Breeding plumage. Hang on I feel a picture coming on!



European Black Redstart, Corunna

The voyage continued and our next port of call was to Bermuda, where we came alongside in the old Royal Navy Dockyard, now a I heritage site. This was cut short as we had to sail early to avoid gale force winds. After we sailed, the port was closed to all vessels! Our shortened run ashore was not overly exciting: House Sparrow and Starling were everywhere, a few gulls and a Mourning Dove and at last a new bird for me - a bright yellow Kiskadee. Freeport on the Island of Grand Bahama was slightly more rewarding, yielding: Ring-billed Gull, American Kestrel, the ubiquitous Ruddy Turnstone, Northern Mockingbird and a tiny Palm Warbler. I was slightly taken aback by a pair of Black Vultures circling over woodland close to the port, but I suppose being so close to the coast of America these should have been no surprise.

Black-faced Grassquit, Bermuda



Ruddy Turnstone, Newport, Grand Bahama



The next port of call was in fact America: New Orleans. The protracted arrival formalities by the US authorities made time for a two-hour Mississippi watch from the promenade deck - like a sea watch but more difficult to spell! Promenade sounds so peaceful and nice, so I am starting a campaign to re-name it "Elderly people rushing up and down in ill-fitting shorts and trainers" deck. From here we logged both Brown and White Pelican, Cormorant of Double Crested and Neo-tropic varieties and Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gull, along with Turkey Vulture.

On the second day, we visited City Park, using the excellent inexpensive trolley (trams as we call them up North) where in the area of the aptly named Big Pond amongst other birds we photographed Pied-billed Grebe, Osprey and a Mute Swan. In conjunction with my Sibley (in my opinion the best Field Guide ever) Black-capped Chickadee, Golden-crowned Kinglet and Palm Warbler were recorded. Two more events of possible interest, before I move on: how lovely is the song of the Northern Mocking Bird singing its heart out in Jackson Park amongst the cacophony of noise; and as we sailed at dusk, a roost of Neo-tropic Cormorants were to be seen on all the available ropes and wires of two USN Auxiliaries, I would estimate about 500.

Pied-billed Grebe, City Park, New Orleans



Northern Mocking Bird, New Orleans



Our next call was into Key West where the Naval Facility, visited by many of my colleagues back in the good old days, although I was never lucky enough, has now been de-activated. Here the highlight was a roost of Skimmers along with a Royal Tern or two, and a visit to the house of the world renowned ornithologist, naturalist, author and artist, John James Audubon, a bit of a

disappointment just like any other famous ornithologist's house but with a veranda! Our next and final call in the USA was to Miami where to avoid yet another "Mall" we had booked an excursion on an airboat, a vehicle like a punt with an aero engine strapped to its rear, to visit the Sawgrass Everglades Park. Not very eco-friendly, but the birds did not seem to mind, Great-tailed Grackles were everywhere (is the term AOS still used nowadays?). I managed to identify an actual wader - a Black-bellied Plover (Grey Plover) along with Purple Gallinule and White Ibis.

The next stop was nearly America, well you needed an ESTA! San Juan, Puerto Rico, which yielded the usual suspects plus good views of the Magnificent Frigatebird. Basseterre, St Kitts was next, unremarkable apart from the number of Cattle Egrets in a daytime roost in some quite low bushes where they seemed quite vulnerable to predation. There were approximately 60 of them. Roseau, Dominica and Bridgetown, Barbados followed, both yielding a smattering of small but colourful unidentifiable birds, which hopefully will be sorted out once ashore and united with the appropriate field guides. Finally, the icing on the cake as it were, what cake I hear you cry! Well imagine an over-cooked teacake without any currants, that sort of cake. Our last port of call was to be Ponta Delgado in the Azores, but as we approached the port was closed to cruise ships as a precaution against Coronavirus, so after dropping off a sick passenger we proceeded along the south coast in cold but sunny conditions with, at last, a calm sea. During this period, we came across a group of shearwaters. I am no Gerry Bilbao, but I identified them as Cory's Shearwater, around a hundred plus. My question is what were they doing in these waters on the 13th of March? Surely, they should still be in their wintering grounds. Other varieties of shearwater are available, answers on a post card please.



Black Skimmers, Key West

Great-tailed Grackle
Sawgrass,
Everglades



Should I Take the Plunge?
Brown Pelican
Key West

Egret Roost, St Kitts
*All pictures by
John Le Gassick*



Uist Birding

By Alan Kennedy

My connection with the Uists began in the late 1970s, when my father was posted to the rocket range on Benbecula. After 20-odd years' service it was his first posting in the UK. He was serving in Berlin at the time and I distinctly remember receiving the 'phone call at school in Scotland. We are moving to where?!? It turned out to be a life changing move, South Uist becoming my family home ever since. Sadly, both my parents have now moved on, but my brother lives at Kildonan and we have a house at Howbeg.

In the early days I was more into fishing, but often used to carry a small pair of binoculars in my pocket. Raptors, divers, and waders were a common sight whilst afloat and still are. Nowadays, since leaving the RAF in 2002 and particularly since acquiring Howbeg in 2005, I spend most of my spare time birding when I am on the island, often in the company of Tom, Richard and Nigel. Our base is located half way down South Uist on the west side overlooking the Howmore river estuary. It is as good a place as any to explore the island chain from Berneray in the north to Eriskay in the south. The main arterial road runs the length of the islands, roughly separating the hill ground to the east from the blacklands and machair to the west. The main birding interest lies to the west on the machair edge.

Most of our visits have taken place in the autumn, only one visit in spring. The autumn wader passage has been the main target. The best time for this is usually the second half of September and the first week in October. Thereafter, the local focus switches more to migrant passerines, although the waders still keep coming but in smaller numbers. However, migrant hunting aside, the Uists are a great all year round birding destination. We usually arrive Saturday and depart the following Sunday (crossing from Uig on Skye to Lochmaddy on North Uist, approximately 1hour, 40 minutes) which allows seven full days birding and a half day on arrival. Weather permitting, this is the bare minimum required to cover the islands, including a half day on Barra if all goes well. I would go as far as to say that a vehicle with some off road ability is essential to explore the machair and get the most out of the trip.

Depending on what is about and what the weather's doing, the day starts with a decision to head north or south for the day (Tom insists on a visit to the Co-op each day; luckily there's an outlet in either direction!) with a packed lunch on board. The *modus operandi* is to access the machair at regular intervals, looking for wader flocks that might contain interesting individuals or present good photo opportunities. For example, we've had good numbers of North American sandpipers in amongst Golden Plover over the years. In between times, there are frequent stops on the coast and at inland water bodies to look for waders, divers, and ducks, whilst all the time scanning for raptors. There has not been a day spent on the islands without seeing at least one Hen Harrier, and more often than not, Merlin, Sea Eagle and Short-eared Owl occur daily too. Golden Eagle is more elusive but we always manage a few sightings.

Birds can turn up anywhere, so as well as following up sightings there is a good chance of finding something fresh. Headlands with machair hinterland are generally best, particularly if it's been wet and there's standing water about. On South Uist, Bornish and Ardivachar points are good places to go. The Range complex at Ardivachar can be particularly good. Unless the Range is active, access is unrestricted because much of the land is crofters' common grazing and served by a good network of tarmac and tracks. En route to Ardivachar, the Hebridean jewellery shop and café do excellent coffee and cake which we manage at least twice during the week. On North Uist Aird, an Runair (access through the RSPB nature reserve at Balranald) and the Baleshare promontory are hot spots.

Trees are few and far between on the Uists, so what stands there are (mostly east of the main road) can be good for passerines during migration. In the south, the woodland at north Loch

Eynort and the small plantation on Loch Druidibeag (now also an RSPB reserve) are well worth a look. In the north, the mature gardens and adjacent conifer plantation at Langass Lodge are productive. The hotel is open to non-residents and does equally good coffee and cake, if a little pricier.

West is generally best, but don't ignore the east coast, particularly in spring if you enjoy a good leg stretch and the divers are back on breeding territory. When the weather turns foul (which invariably it does at some stage) the east can provide sheltered spots to exploit. It has to be pretty bad before we decide not to venture out but it has happened so you need to be prepared for it. A decent bottle of malt usually does the trick!

Useful websites:

<https://www.western-isles-wildlife.co.uk/>

<http://www.outerhebridesbirds.org.uk/index.php>

These sites are updated daily and are a good source of information for what is about.

Guides:

Where to Watch Birds in Scotland, Madders & Wellstead, 1997. Dated, but still useful.

Outer Hebrides Bird Report 2014-16. Contains useful site information.



Birds of the Uists:

Curlew (top)

Black-tailed Godwit (above)

Whimbrel (left)



Birds of the Uists:

-Above: Dunlin, & Black-throated Diver,

Below: Iceland Gull and Ruff.





Birds of the Uists:

Above: Short-eared Owl & Black-throated Diver. Below: Purple Sandpiper & Wheatear





Birds of the Uists - American Waders:

Buff-breasted Sandpiper (top)

Pectoral Sandpiper (right)

Semi-palmated Sandpiper (Below)



The 19th Winter Duck (WD 2020)

By the Newly Bearded Tit... Scott Drinkel.

Caveat – Being an article for a Newsletter of an organisation with a majority Military/Ex Military personnel, I wish to remind all of the “5% Truth” rule...as long as a statement or anecdote contains at least 5% truth, it can be admissible as ‘fact’... while there is a ‘possibility’ I am not at 100% truth, I will suggest I am nowhere as low as 5%...enjoy!

Friday 24 Jan 20 - a day that will haunt your author for years to come...

The day started as expected, I had taken the day as leave in order to prepare for the range of weather Northern Scotland has to offer, pack, charge electronics etc. I was sat having my morning coffee in my nightclothes. For a change I actually heard my phone ring (thankfully) - it was the Duckmeister, Martin. Odd I thought (no warning flags yet).

“Morning Martin. What’s up?”

“Morning Scott, I got diverted through Witney, so I *think* I am at the RV...where are you...?”
My eyes widened and my stomach sank “Err aren’t you picking me up tomorrow?”

The question and responses were, of course, pointless. A justifiably disappointed Martin set off for the additional 30 minutes to collect me from my house, leaving me that 30 minutes to get through my ablutions, dress and pack, a feat duly accomplished, but is not a method I feel was conducive to full confidence that I had all I would need!

With significant grovelling and apologies, Martin collected me, and the remainder of Team 1 were notified we were an hour behind time - but the trip was now on! As a side note, you now have a reason why I am indeed the author for this article for the Newsletter!

Of course, it is always good to catch up with Team Members en route, but the trip properly starts its precursors at Newtonmore and the collective pub meal. It is quite amazing what you get to know about people on these occasions, such as our very own Maggie. Obviously, the weather weighed on minds and fantasy filled daydreaming filled the talk in the pub, of hot and sunny days, the likes of which were not to have been seen in Scotland for many a year! Maggie recounted the days of yore when she would take any and all actions required to bronze her skin. It was a lovely day, but there were chores that needed doing, ironing for instance. “But ironing could be done outside in the garden” thought Mags, hastily donning her bikini for impromptu bronzing action. Now that day was particularly hot, and one needs to protect sensitive areas from sunburn: “How can I cover my head, in the absence of a hat?” she wondered. Of course, the answer is as obvious as a lampshade on your head! Yes, imagine the scene, hot day, Mags ironing in a bikini, wearing a lampshade as a hat when the delivery man comes round the back to deliver the parcel - bet his face was priceless.



Maggie partly relives the lampshade incident.

A couple o’ swallies, then bed for an early rise to meet the final team members at Inverness Tesco (where I thought I would buy a spare pair of trousers, the only items missing when I took inventory at Newtonmore - not bad)!

After a hearty breakfast for most (disappointingly no cereals on offer for those who do not partake in a fry-up), Teams embarked their vehicles and headed out to their respective AORs!

The weather forecast insinuated almost unprecedented mildness for a WD, but each time the weather forecast was checked, rainfall and wind strength increased - it would be testing conditions, even for a team that has a pair of assets such as Brian Lyon's eyes - eyes like an outhouse rat, able to spot and call scopes to birds in the most heinous of conditions! To add further misery to the negative weather, the tides were also working against us. High tides were regularly hitting our favourite hot spots, often adversely affecting what was available to be seen.

Being experienced military types, improvisation and adaptability were key. With the forecasts and tide-tables portending the doom as they were, some sectors were reversed in order to the previously established and well-rehearsed routes, to either allow the weather to calm in areas where regular good numbers have been recorded previously, improve the tide time to best viewing times at the survey area, or to simply allow us surveyors the opportunity to have the wind from our backs, protecting some of the optics, slightly improving the chances of seeing anything daft enough to be in the Oggin!

Team 1 was based at Dundonnell through the week, with views of some picturesque mountains and lochs on the way, one of which offered the first good birds of the trip: 6 Whoopers. Apart from that, birds remained broadly out of view. Arriving at Dundonnell, the van was rapidly unpacked with a view to getting out and getting some birding done, but disaster-the water boiler was not 100%. Gerry B was incensed - NO TEA! Heading out via Loch Gruinard (170 Barnacle Geese), to Laide General Store & Post Office. No kettle, so we went as far as Gairloch. Kettle successfully purchased! We were close enough to investigate Loch Kerry, a previous hot spot for Gulls - cannot help but think this may have been a "hot water conspiracy" - a coincidental chain of events orchestrated by persons unknown (Gerry B), but here we were! Weather was acceptable and good numbers were recorded: 150 Black-headed Gulls, 242 Common Gulls, 168 Goldeneye, 6 Great Black-backed Gulls, 19 Herring Gulls and 60 Mallard.

It was around this time that the Winter Duck disease became apparent again, each year becoming more and more prevalent - a proximity virus that affected specific individuals who are often negatively outspoken about gulls. It was identified that the area of effect of this malady (Mallardy!???) was the front seat of the vehicle, with Gerry B being the carrier. The first case of this "Laru-virus" manifested at Badcaul Jetty on the way back to the accommodation. Martin was heard to comment on how "Handsome" a Herring Gull was as it sat on a post 10 feet from us. Hmmm - not normal. Concerned looks were exchanged in the back of the bus as we headed back to Dundonnell and get some tea drank - maybe it was nothing! Unfortunately this wasn't limited to a single day; rather sporadic symptoms as it was at Firemore Farm that Laru-virus struck Martin again, uncontrollably spurting out that a Great Black-back Gull looked "remarkably elegant and smart" as it landed in the cove. Poor Martin - hopefully, he is feeling better by now!

I will not go through events on a day by day, more cherry-pick the highlights, of which there were depressingly few. The weather throughout the week (apart from the Tuesday) was awful and made the surveying very testing. Strong winds limited the effectiveness of long zoom scopes, horizontal rain regularly found its way to hit us and our optics full in the face, and while the ambient temperature was pretty mild for January, the wind took the temperature down significantly. White-tailed Sea Eagles had a couple of days of excellent showing, but none as good as day 1: a pair seen near Red Point, a further 3 near Big Sand and another as we traversed Loch Gairloch. 6 in one day was fantastic. Part of the day 1 route is back at Loch Kerry, which began to return disappointing finds. Gull numbers were very low, many of the Goldeneye were elsewhere and the often-spotted Dipper was nowhere to be spotted. Indeed "looking for Dipper" became a Team 1 staple for those who had imbibed a little too much liquid and needed to generate space for more tea! I was often confused when a team member went looking for Dipper around the back of a bush, nowhere near a river. No wonder we did not find one!



Oystercatcher and Golden Plover (Scott Drinkel)



Red-breasted Merganser (Brian Lyon and Scott Drinkel)



Gerry Bilbao returning from a Dipper search (Scott Drinkel)



Great Northern Diver (Brian Lyon) and Black-throated Diver (Scott Drinkel)



Glaucous Gull (Brian Lyon)



White-tailed Eagle and Golden Plover (Brian Lyon)

When the weather is as dire as this, communications between teams is increased, predominantly for safety reasons, (because we are a caring, sharing lot on WD!), sometimes to hear if there is anything good or different has been spotted and partly just to extract the Michael! Textual conversations are, however, made so much more fun by using predictive messaging with auto correct. In the interests of almost hiding the guilty party, let us call her 'V'. Without further narrowing this down, it was also related to Team 3 (of Tom Dewick, RSC, Keith C & VRON), who were apparently plagued with car troubles. At one point the team were separated while Tom and RSC stayed with a stricken vehicle, with the other pair heading along to Farr bay, surveying as they went.

The nameless texter sent "Surveyed all the way along to Farr Bay, about to head back to the badger". Eyebrows were raised. What a curious expression thought Team 1, before pondering the likely (but not confirmed) "basha" as in accommodation. I have seen 'The Empire Strikes Back' and know where people can sleep if the weather gets bad...I am ruling nothing out!

Further text messages were sent back and forth, it becoming apparent that V and Keith Cowieson (I hope you have worked this cypher out by now!!) had to share the 'Badger' as Tom and Richard did not return that night. Having to rouse a very tired KC from slumber 30 minutes *after* the alarm (wheels is wheels...) obviously weighed heavy on V. This showed in a final text barrage as Team 3 headed to Dundonnell for the 'final meal'. V's car was now the one to play up, with V resorted to "Derek Zoolander" activities – only turning right as the left-hand indicator failed, along with an engine warning light. The problems were significant enough to call Mr RAC. "I have requested a nice hung RAC man to Dundonnell..." wrote V – obviously she has very specific needs terms of in car mechanics. Not sure the intended "Nice young man" is much better, V!

Many phones allow us to personalise the ring tone for texts and incoming calls so we can either identify who is ringing ahead of time or simply recognising that it is likely your own phone that is ringing. During some particular ill-discipline by Team 2 at Ullapool, grabbing some undoubtedly well-deserved coffee and cake, Wellsy informed Mags that her phone was ringing, on hearing the music. Quickly Mags started burrowing through the 17 layers of clothing that the Scottish weather dictated finding her phone was not, nor had it been, ringing. Team Lead Jim Bryden, had of course already deduced that the music was actually the background tunes being played in the café, but decided to watch the scene play out before informing Wellsy of his gaff with the loving term "****wit"! Strangely no one challenged Mags on hearing the music for not recognising that it was NOT her phone.

The weather consistently hounded us and numbers for regular species, although spotted, appears to have kept numbers low. Great Northern Divers, Black-throated Divers, Shag, Geese, Gulls – all species seemed to be affected. Our best day, in terms of weather and no surprise, numbers, was Wednesday. For Team 1, this was around Loch Gruinard and Little Loch Broom. Lighter winds reduced the chop on the water, meaning the smallest of birds were actually visible, good confirmation of the 170 Barnacle Geese still present, good presence of Tysties (Black Guillemot) and Black Throated Divers, gull numbers were higher (Commons in the main!), a pair of nice Common Scoter, Great Northern Divers and Greylags became more prevalent, Oystercatchers and a few Red-breasted Mergansers (normally in numbers everywhere, but this trip were "Nice to sees"!) and a nice sighting of a Grey Plover.

Just to revisit the Laide Post Office, as we did around the survey area on the 3rd day, we got chatting to the proprietor and the Postmaster.

"I've seen your van here before...is that RAF Wyton?" he opined...

"Aaah yes, we are the most prestigious Royal Air Force Ornithological Society, an elite group summoned by a light in the sky in the form of an Eagle being kept in line by a Secretary Bird, to travel to the wilds of Scotland to survey birds" (or something like that) – Jerry K is forever the diplomat!

A wry smile pulled at the corner of the Post Masters mouth...

" You will know my Aunt & Uncle then...."

“?” said we...

“Dave and Anne Bodley!” - what an incredibly small world! Naturally, we nearly started behaving ourselves in public after knowing that!

As part of the Loch Broom survey area, Ullapool is in play. While there are some who would take advantage of the coffee shops for a hot beverage that didn't come from a flask, the choice of one of 16 hot chocolates and/or various cakes, there are none on Team 1 who will admit to this. What we WILL admit to is the recurrence of Laru-virus that continued to dog the otherwise sound countenance of the Duckmeister and Team 1 driver. It was here that Martin was seen to dance as an excited child after identifying the Glaucous Gull that circled above us at rooftop height, commenting on the 'striking stripes' on the head and neck. Always nice to see a 'White-Wing' but what dark days are these that a Gull is the 'Bird of the day'? Damn you, Laru-virus!!

It is imperative to keep warm on these trips, especially when staying at a bunkhouse near Kishorn. After the formalities of call-over, Team 2 prepare for the ever enticing "Curry-Ping" (Curry heated in a microwave). Knowing the owners would be using the oven soon, Team 2 started warming their Naans, while waiting for the main course, before hastily scoffing it down. Disapproving cries of "Anyone left a cow pat under the grill" emanated from the smoke-filled kitchen. Nonchalance, turned to panic, turned to guilt as John Wells realised that he had not actually eaten his naan - indeed he had not recovered his naan from the grill earlier! Every cloud and all that though. Charred naan burns with the heat of the sun for 17 hours when thrown into the Log burner, so it was a warm and cosy night!

This was the voyage of experience that was Winter Duck 19, with many of the members having completed almost all of them, Jim Bryden having been on them all. Much was learned about many of us, by far too many of the others. We know that the work we do on Winter Duck is important and is appreciated by organisations such as the BTO, who hailed the team as 'Surveying heroes' for braving the conditions RAFOS did this year. Despite the conditions, a wonderful 108 species were seen, including a few singletons: Great Spotted Woodpecker, Grey Plover, Merlin, Moorhen, Reed Bunting, Short-Eared Owl, Tawny Owl, Treecreeper and Woodcock, - some as nice surprises some just adding to the general disappointing low numbers seen through the week. Still, there is always next year, when the weather is destined to be absolutely perfect for bird survey work to celebrate Jim Bryden being on his twentieth Winter Duck!

The Cast:

Team 1 comprised Gerry Bilbao, Scott Drinkel, Jerry Knights, Brian Lyon, and Martin Routledge. This Team was based at Dundonnell and during Phase 1 of the expedition surveyed from Red Point to Loch Kanaird; during Phase 2 they surveyed Loch Torridon.

Team 2 comprised Jim Bryden, Maggie Sheddan and John Wells. During Phase 1 they were based at Scourie and surveyed the area from Horse Sound (South of Badenscallie) to Balchrick (north of Kinlochbervie). During Phase 2 they relocated to Kishorn and surveyed the Loch Carron and Applecross areas before recovering to Dundonnell.

Team 3 comprised Keith Cowieson, Tom Dewick, Richard Somers Cocks and Vron Young; they surveyed from Duncasby Head at John O'Groats to Cape Wrath and were based initially at Watten, near Halkirk and then at the Cape Wrath range facility at Faraid Head. Two members of this Team (TD and RSC) also conducted a pre-expedition survey of Sinclair's Bay near Wick.

“Two for One” Two Books, One Reviewer

by John Le Gassick

Taking advantage of the fact that the Covid 19 pandemic may have created a shortfall of material for inclusion in the next RAFOS Newsletter, Mike Blair, where are you? It seemed like a golden opportunity to sneak in a review of two books, totally different, but with the common denominator that they are both about birds! When self-isolation commenced I picked up a book that I received at Christmas but never seemed to have the time or the inclination to start reading it is “The Wonderful Mr Willughby- The First True Ornithologist”, and there was me thinking that it was Jerry Bilbao!

This a beautifully produced book from Bloomsbury Publishing, written by Tim Birkhead and printed on good quality paper with the text set in Adobe Garamond which was first used in books published in Paris around 1532. Although the book appears to be a “weighty tome” there are only 272 pages of narrative divided into ten chapters. This is followed by 80 pages consisting of acknowledgements, four indices, notes etc. It is a work of true scholarship. I thought the tiny three bird logos used to divide the paragraphs nicely enhanced the text. The book also has plenty of illustrations ranging from colour photos to historic etchings.

Well after all the waffle, let us cut it the chase!

Francis Willughby’s ancestry can be traced back to the early 13th century when a Wool Merchant the aptly named Ralph Bugge purchased land near the tiny village of Willoughby in the Nottinghamshire Wolds. The family became de Willoughby and then simply Willoughby or in Francis’s case Willughby. The Family accrued land and wealth and by the late 1500’s had estates in in over twenty English Counties. Francis was born on November 22nd, 1635 at the Family seat of Middleton Hall in Warwickshire. His childhood was spent amidst the ravages of the English Civil War and his Family were one of the very few Royalist families to survive unscathed. At the age of sixteen, in September 1652 with England under Parliamentary rule, Francis entered Trinity College Cambridge as a Fellow-commoner. Francis was the “tutee” of James Du Pont and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1656, he was top of his year ranked above every other student in the University. He remained at Trinity for a further three years to obtain a Master of Arts. During his time at Trinity John Ray became his best friend and over the next decade they became one of the great partnerships in biology. They travelled extensively in England visiting Yorkshire, the Lake District and to the Calf of Man and many more places of interest to study of birds, and especially in Francis’s, case insects and fish as he published classification tables for both. On the Calf of Man, they came across a plump downy Manx Shearwater which was classified as a Puffin. This accounts for the Manx Shearwater puzzling Latin name *Puffinus puffinus*.

They also travelled quite extensively in Europe, interestingly France had changed from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar in 1582, which meant a change of ten days in the date when crossing the Channel, not a lot of people know that! Great Britain adopted the Gregorian Calendar in 1752. They sometimes travelled with different companions, contacts were crucial and scattered across Europe there were numerous Trinity College men who formed a loosely connected “brotherhood” into which Willughby knew he and his companions would be warmly received. It is difficult to imagine the enormity of the task that they had set themselves in the 17th Century to classify the Avifauna into a definitive reference book. Today, even with our host of devices: binoculars, telescopes, digital cameras, apps on our phones and magnificent Field Guides it is still so difficult to differentiate between similar species. Their identification was from birds sold in markets, and the corpses of birds that had been shot and then dissected. “They did pretty well, identifying and describing around 90% of roughly 200 birds regularly encountered in England and Wales (in the parts where they travelled)”.

Francis Willughby’s innovative work and industry inspired three major natural history volumes:

The Ornithology of Francis Willughby 1676 in Latin (English translation 1678)

History of Fishes 1686 in Latin

History of Insects 1710 in Latin

These formed the foundation of a new type of natural history, with the study of birds being the most significant. Francis was also a member of the Royal Society - the Royal Society of London Association which was formed at Gresham College on 28th of November 1660, following a lecture by Christopher Wren, under the Chairmanship of John Wilkins. Francis Willughby was admitted in December 1661 and elected a Fellow in May 1663 when he was 27 years of age.

Ray and Willughby also visited Bardsey Island, a place that holds happy memories for many RA-FOS members, ".....they undertook the somewhat perilous two mile journey from Aberdaron off the tip of the Llyn peninsula through swirling tidal rips to the beautiful island of Bardsey." Ah yes - I remember them well!"

Throughout his adult life Francis had a weak constitution and from 1662 suffered bouts of serious illness he eventually died in 1672 of pleurisy at the age of just thirty-six and was buried in Middleton Church. John Ray promised that all of his work would be published, and to his credit all three books were eventually published even though in his later life he was in immense pain from ulcerated legs. The Ornithology, a three-part blockbuster, a compendium of Ornithological knowledge was first published in Latin in 1676 and an English translation followed in 1678. The History of Fishes followed in 1686 with The History of Insects following in 1710, five years after John Ray's death in 1705, both only in Latin. Francis Willughby accomplished so much in the world of Natural History in such a short lifetime.

The story of how this lovely book came to be written is worth a mention. Apparently, an adulatory biography written in 1952 by Canon Charles Raven of John Ray was published, he was unaware of Willughby's extensive family archive in the Middleton Collection-in the Nottingham University Library. Tim Birkhead assumed that the biography was correct and that Ray not Willughby was the brains behind their published works. Birkhead visited the Willughby family home while he was writing a book "The Wisdom of Birds" to photograph a portrait of Francis for inclusion in his book. Lord and Lady Middleton kindly invited him to lunch. During the meal Tim commented on Ray's brilliance, as he says partly because it was true and also he knew so little about Francis Willughby. Lady Middleton gave him a rebuke of such ferocity that it took his breath away, making it clear that it was Willughby not Ray was the genius. After that visit to the Middleton home he sought and obtained funding from the Leverhulme Trust, the rest as they say is history, Natural history of course.

To round off this less than fascinating review, if anyone is still with us, we need a Quiz, we have all become "stir" or is it "quiz" crazy over the past three months.

QUIZ: these are all common birds' names from the "Ornithology" simply supply their modern name.

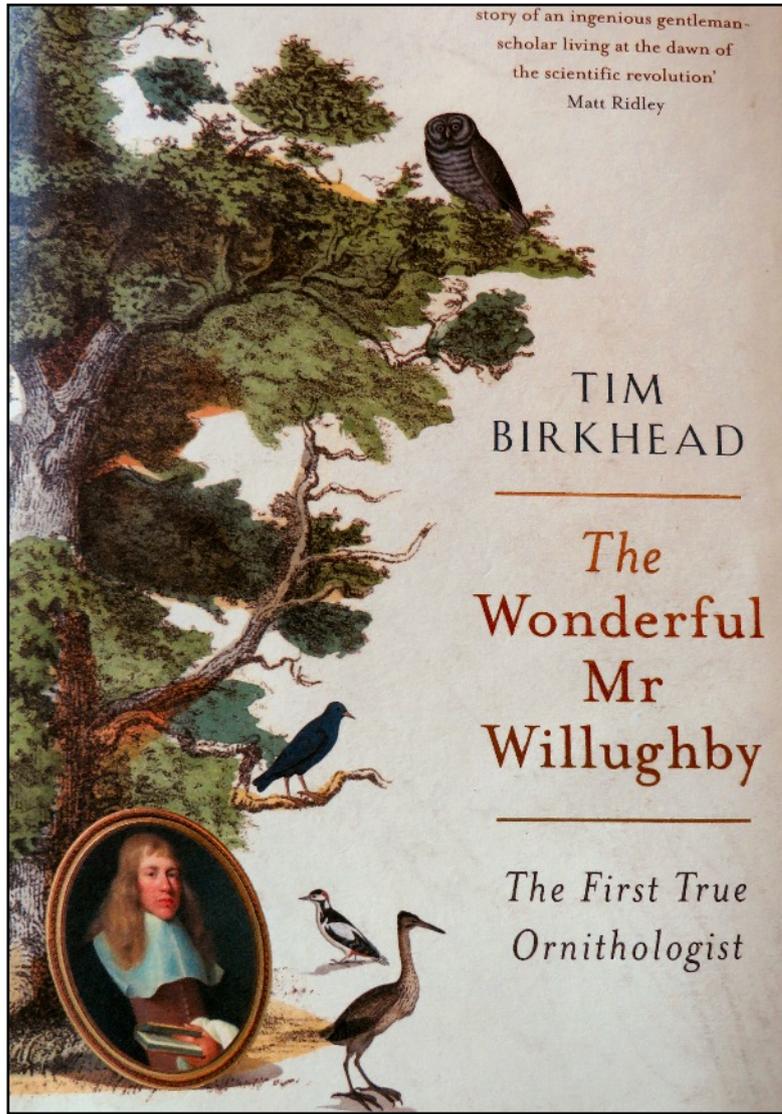
1. Ars foot. 2. Bald Buzzard. 3. Fern-owl. 4. Gid. 5. Ox-eye. 6. Puttock. 7. Witwall. 8. Woodspite. 9. Pyrarg. 10 Greenland Dove.

The Wonderful Mr Willughby by Tim Birkhead

Bloomsbury Publishing ISBN: HB:978-1-4088-7848-4. £25.00

Answers to the Quiz:

1. Great Crested Grebe. 2. Osprey. 3. European Nightjar. 4. Jack Snipe. 5. Great Tit. 6. Common Buzzard. 7. Eurasian Golden Oriole. 8. Green Woodpecker. 9. White-tailed Eagle. 10. Black Guillemot (will accept Tystie).



Bird Photographer of the Year(Collection 4)

This book is a completely different “Kettle of Birds” to my earlier review, it is what it says on the tin. Published in 2019 on glossy paper it is a record of all the best of the submissions submitted to the Bird Photographer of the Year competition in the eight categories: Best Portrait, Birds in the Environment, Attention to Detail, Bird Behaviour, Birds in Flight, Garden and Urban Birds, Creative Imagery and Inspirational Encounters. There are also three Special Awards: Best Portfolio, Nature Photographers Ltd People’s Choice Awards and Young Bird Photographer of the Year (under 17 years of age)

This is another beautifully crafted book, though this time it is the birds not the words that tell the tale. It is a large format book 29 x 23 cm or as us oldies prefer 11.5 x 9 inches. A proper coffee table book, a book to dip into over a small, or not so small, glass of Bruichladdich in the evening. Other Islay brands of single malt are available. This is so much more than just a book of bird photographs it is more a work of art! The prize winner of the year for 2019 Bird Photographer of the Year was Caron Steele from the UK for her photograph entitled “Dancing on Ice” of a Dalmatian Pelican on Lake Kerkini, Greece. This picture adorns the book’s Dust Cover.

Browsing through the book among some of my favourites are a photo taken from a drone of thousands of dots which are Black-legged Kittiwake feeding in front of a glacier in one of the southernmost fjords of Svalbard. The picture of the birds feeding in the rich meltwater flooding out from the glacier was taken from a drone. A very interesting category is for the best portfolio which is deemed to be a collection of six or more photographs, the winner of this award was Thomas Hinsche from Germany. He submitted lovely shots of Common Eider, Eurasian Wryneck, Black-crowned Night-heron, Common Hoopoe, Common Goldeneye, Eurasian Buzzard and Great Cormorant ably supported by a dwarf Catfish. There are 237 pages of photographs in the book and some pages have multiple pictures, so enough to wet any ornithologist’s appetite. There is of course accompanying text giving details of the Photographer, the subject, the location, and the equipment used with a few words on how the shot was acquired.

On my journey through the book I came upon beautiful photo taken by Brian Small on Changi Beach where just off shore Black-naped Tern breed it was called “Kissing Terns”, I must confess that this beautiful species was new to me but not RAF Changi which was the home of 205 Squadron when I visited in the mid-1960s. My first thought after combing through the book was to offer this advice to any would be bird photographers out there “Buy a Canon EOS and arrange an exchange posting to Oz!” This was before I noticed a photograph by Rebecca Nason of a Meadow Pipit in a field of pink tulips which just goes to show that birds do not have to be exotic to make a lovely photograph. There is another photograph of a Mallard duckling at Pensthorpe taken by Rachel Piper which also fits the bill. I think that I may take my photograph of a House Sparrow to this year’s AGM if there is one.

I hope that these few words have awakened interest in members whether they are photographers or not, at no stretch of the imagination would I describe myself as a bird photographer but there are some lovely inspirations for a watercolour or two.

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR COLLECTION 4 Edited by
Rob Read and Paul Sterry published by William Collins £25.00
ISBN 978-0-00-833619-6

OFF TO BHUTAN – 13 NOV to 3 DEC 19 by Dick Yates

I had wanted to do some birding in the Himalaya region for a long time but couldn't quite decide where to go: Nepal, Northern India around Sikkim and Darjeeling or further east in Arunachal Pradesh? Then at a Squadron reunion a couple of years ago I met a colleague who I hadn't seen since the early 70's; he isn't a birder but he said you must go to Bhutan; it's fabulous! I didn't think you could go there I responded, but he said it was quite OK now but tourism is controlled and it can be a bit pricey. So I researched it and found that several birding companies offer guided birding trips to Bhutan. I selected a local company called "Off to Bhutan" based in Thimpu and run by a chap called Norbu. This proved to be a good choice and we had a great 3 weeks, mainly birding but with a bit of added culture.

We decided to go via Bangkok; it was the easiest route compared with going via India or Nepal, and as I had never been to Thailand before we decided to include a 2 day cultural bit while we there. Our local travel agent arranged the flight to Bangkok with BA and that part of the trip and Norbu arranged our Bangkok/ Paro/Bangkok flights and all the in country transport, accommodation and birding. He did it excellently, we had a dedicated bird guide, Sherab, and driver Tshewang, all the hotels were of a pretty good standard, some excellent, and our transport was a Toyota Land Cruiser and very comfortable with just the 2 of us in the back.

13 Nov. The flight into Paro is entertaining in its own right. Rated one of the top 10 most dangerous airports in the world to land at, the approach is through steep sided mountains on either side until you come round the last one and roll out onto finals to land. Also, it must have one of the most ornate baggage carousels anywhere in the world!



Sherab and Tshewang met us on arrival in Paro and whisked us off for the 1½ hour drive into Thimpu. At a stop on the way we saw our first local bird Plumbeous Water Redstart.



Me, Norbu, Sherab, Tshewang



Plumbeous Water Redstart

The group photo was at the end of the trip when we met up with Norbu in Thimpu.

14 Nov. Next morning was a cultural introduction to Bhutan. We visited the local market, the Bhutan Textiles Museum and a local college where young people who had not made the grade for University out of year 12 are trained in traditional craft skills. It was all very interesting. But our overall impression was of the quiet, peaceful and polite manner that everyone went about their business. Compared to the mad cacophony of noise and the seething crowds of people you come across in India this was a peaceful haven. After lunch we visited the Takin Preserve; the Takin is a strange looking antelope and is the national animal of Bhutan. Here we also picked up Yellow-billed Blue Magpie, White-throated Laughing Thrush and Green-backed Tit. On our return to the city we were taken down to the Thimpu River that runs through the town. This riverside area is getting very developed and is not really very attractive. Much building work is going on and most of the indented Indian labour lives in a sort of shanty town close to the work site. However, we did get our first sight of Ibisbill along with River Lapwing, Grey-backed Shrike, Brown Dipper, Ruddy Shelduck, Plumbeous, White-capped and Hodgson's Redstarts and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

15 Nov. Today we set off before first light to get to the Dochula Pass for sun up to see the sun rise over the Himalayas. BEAUTIFUL. No photo can really do it justice



Mind you, it was pretty chilly at 3,150m at first light! Having taken it all in it was breakfast time at the very nice restaurant at the top of the pass. We continued on our way towards Punakha stopping to bird at various spots that Sherab knew and if we saw anything interesting. Good birds this morning Blue-fronted Redstart and Crimson-browed Rosefinch.



We arrived in Punakha in time for lunch at the Zhingkhram Resort, our hotel, and we spent the afternoon searching up and down the Mo Chhu (Chhu is river) for the critically endangered White-bellied Heron. We searched all afternoon but to no avail. However, we did collect a good bird list of 35 species for the day including White-throated and Striated Laughingthrush; Green Shrike-Babbler; Rufous-vented, Stripe-throated, Black-chinned and Whiskered Yuhina; Yellow-breasted Greenfinch and Hodgson's Treecreeper. We also saw 3 mammals – Yellow-throated Marten, Assamese Macaque and Five-striped Palm Squirrel.

16 Nov. After an early breakfast we continued our search for the White-bellied Heron, this time along the banks of the Pho Chu. The Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu can best be illustrated in this next photograph. The Punakha Dzong stands at the confluence of these two rivers and after they have joined they become the Puna Tshang Chhu. A Dzong is literally a fort and all Dzong will contain a temple, however, not all temples are Dzong. I hope that is clear! This picture shows the Punakha Dzong where the 2 rivers join, the northerly one is the Pho Chhu and the southerly one the Mo Chhu and heading off to the right is the Puna Tshang Chhu. It is a spectacularly beautiful spot.



We searched down river first along the far bank of the Puna Tshang Chhu and then returned in the afternoon to search up stream on the Pho Chhu. Finally, at 1600 we found the heron. It is estimated that the world population of this bird is between 100 and 400 with possibly as few as 300 mature individuals, of these approximately 60-70 are resident on Bhutan rivers; and here it is digiscoped by our guide from quite a long way off.



Once again a good tally for the day of 44 species that included Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Black and Mountain Bulbul, Verditer Flycatcher, Ashy-throated and Hume's Warbler, Small Niltava, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Lesser Yellownappe and Rusty-fronted Barwing.



Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler



Black Bulbul

17 Nov. This morning we left Punakha en-route for Tsirang. We were now moving into the more remote parts of the country which had only been open to tourists for a short time. The roads started to get a bit more interesting, very narrow and twisty with lots of hairpin bends and surfaces which varied between reasonable tarmac and plain dirt. It was the steep cliffs on one side and the vertical drops on the other that were a bit unnerving but things were going to get a lot worse as the days went by. In many places the roads and bridges had been washed away in this summer's monsoon which was particularly bad. It could take years to effect all the repairs. In this picture the road used to run along the front of the buildings.



We were birding all the way of course and everywhere the scenery was spectacular. The first part of the journey, just out of Punakha was beside the river and we spotted 2 River Otters which were great to see. By the river we also got Crested and Common Kingfishers, Great and Little Cormorant, Common Sandpiper and White Wagtail. Once into the wooded areas we picked up Grey-backed and Long-tailed Shrike, Short-billed Minivet, Ashy, Red-vented and Black-crested Bulbul and Bronzed Drongo among others. At Changchey we passed a centre that is being set up to start a captive breeding programme for White-bellied Heron, it should have started but hopefully it will get going soon. <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=66671>. To know more, follow the link.

18 Nov. After a very pleasant night in the Damphu Resort in Tsirang we continued south towards the Indian border to the town of Gelephu. This area has very few western visitors and usually is only visited by birders on fairly long tours; the normal birding trip is 10-14

days and most don't get this far south; consequently accommodation is a bit more basic but perfectly adequate. Everywhere and everything in Bhutan is on the side of a hill, very often steep. Consequently, most birding is done from the road or just a short walk off the road. This was great for Daph and me with our hips and knees, but it also means that nearly every building has loads of steps that have to be climbed to get from one area to another. It became a standing joke between us and our hosts "Not more steps!" the cry went up.

Morning birding today started along the road passing through moist subtropical forest where we saw Black-throated Tit, Yellow-bellied Fantail, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Spotted Forktail, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo and Long-tailed Broadbill and our only sighting during the trip of Greater Yellownappe. I didn't take many photos today but I did manage a reasonable shot of the Golden Langur endemic to a very localised area of Assam, India and Bhutan and one of the most endangered primate species in the world.



As we descended to lower levels it got hotter and more humid until we arrived in Gelephu in time for lunch where it was completely overcast, the temperature was about 25C and humidity 85%. In addition, there was a rather unpleasant smog drifting up from across the Indian border. Afternoon birding took us to the local settling pools; here we found most of the Egrets and Indian Pond Heron, White-throated Kingfisher, Red and Yellow-wattled Lapwing, White-breasted Waterhen, Green and Curlew Sandpiper, Indian Pied and Chestnut-tailed Starling and Black Drongo. The light was so poor that I didn't bother with taking photos.

19 Nov. After a night in the Kuengacholing Hotel we were told breakfast would be at 0630. We duly arrived to find the place still shut up tight. Sherab managed to find someone and we eventually got food just after 0700. The morning was a bit cooler but still very overcast, misty and humid as we birded the local area. First up we found Green Imperial Pigeon, Black-hooded Oriole and Red-breasted and Rose-ringed Parakeet. Then came Oriental Pied-Hornbill, Chestnut-headed and Blue-bearded Bee-eater, Sultan Tit and Streaked Spiderhunter among others.

The afternoon session brought a distant Wreathed Hornbill, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Pale Blue-Flycatcher, Black-crested Bulbul, Lineated Barbet and Asian Fairy Bluebird. On returning to the hotel we found that the laundry we had put in before breakfast was not dry as the sun didn't shine! Next, as it was Tuesday we couldn't get a beer to settle the dust. Apparently, alcohol is not served in Bhutan on a Tuesday. However, Sherab explained that this was a very rural area and not used to tourists; when

we got back into the places that see tourists more often we shouldn't have a problem. This proved to be the case – thankfully!



Sultan Tit



Digiscoped Asian Fairy Bluebird

20 Nov. We left Gelephu at 0715 going north again heading for our next night stop Tingtibe, some 5 hours drive away. Today we were on the worst roads we had experienced so far. In many places the road and bridges had been washed away and work was underway to repair them leaving some pretty hairy detours to get round.

As we travelled around, on most roads we saw gangs of 'hedgers and ditchers' clearing vegetation and Sherab said that it was a round year job to keep the roads clear. Most of the gangs seem to be made up of women with the odd man, usually standing around looking like a supervisor, smoking and talking into his mobile phone! These are mainly fairly poor people and tend to live in rough houses built just off the road. However, they all seemed well fed and again Sherab told us that they all got a wage that allowed them to live, if not well, certainly not at starvation level. The king decrees that all people must be given enough in wages to live on. One day we were walking past 2 ladies hacking away at the undergrowth and Daph said Hello to them. One of them looked up and replied in very good English "Good morning Madam". Quite a surprise. We mentioned this to Sherab who told us that English is taught as a compulsory second language in all schools starting in primary school.



Hedgers and ditchers in action....



.....their accommodation.

But back to birds. What did we see today? Minivets figured large on the menu, Long-tailed, Grey-chinned and Scarlet being the main ones. Other birds of note were Silver-eared Mesia, Red-headed Trogon, Green-billed Malkoha, Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler,

Rusty-fronted Barwing, White-breasted Parrotbill, Blue-winged and Red-tailed Minla (these are often called Siva these days), Spotted Forktail, Great Barbet and Asian Barred Owllet. Main Mammal today was the Malayan Giant Squirrel.



Scarlet and Grey-chinned Minivet.



Long-tailed Minivet.



Asian Barred Owllet

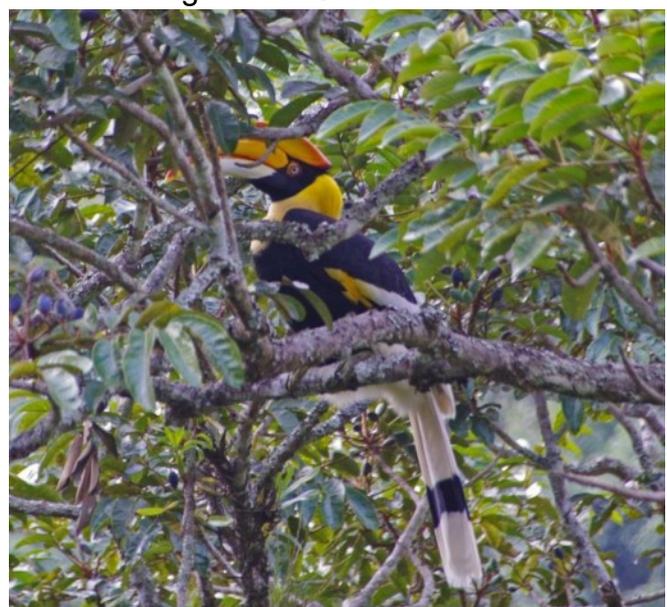


Malayan Giant Squirrel

21 Nov. Spent the day birding around the Tingtibe area getting a good list of 48 species. Among the new ones for the trip were White-throated Bulbul, Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, Blue-throated Barbet, Mountain Hawk Eagle, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Nepal Fulvetta, Yellow-bellied Warbler, White-browed Piculet, Slaty-backed Forktail, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike and White-bellied Epornis and the magnificent Great Hornbill.



Digiscoped - Mountain Hawk Eagle.



Great Hornbill hiding in the branches



This is the T Wang Hotel in Tingtibe. There are two things to note. First, the picture of the King to the left of the entrance. Every building we went into in Bhutan, including private houses, had pictures of the King and Royal Family who are held in great respect and with great affection by the whole population. Second, even in these more remote areas all our rooms had en-suite facilities, but these were wet rooms and the shower head was always in close proximity to the loo and the basin. This was fine provided you remembered to remove the towels and loo rolls before you turned on the shower!

22 Nov. We left Tingtibe today and headed South for Pangbang and the Manas National Park. It was a beautiful sunny day and the scenery was fantastic as we wound down through the river valleys towards the lowlands. Not too many new birds today but we did see a pair of Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon and a small feeding flock of Pin-tailed Green Pigeon as well as Mountain Hawk Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Collared Falconet and Blue-bearded Bee-eater. We stopped for a picnic lunch at the Twin Falls in Manas NP and this provided the wildlife spectacle of the day – butterflies.



Digiscoped shots of Collared Falconet



and Blue-bearded Bee-eater



A very shy Hoary-bellied Squirrel

As we sat beside the Twin Falls having lunch I noticed that lots of butterflies were crowding around the small puddles nearby. As this was a very popular spot I assumed that animals and people stopped here often and that the puddles probably contained many minerals on which the butterflies were feeding. I took quite a few pictures and that evening Tshewang brought out a book of the Butterflies of Bhutan and we were able to identify most of them. Here is a small selection for your enjoyment.



Cruiser



Commodore



Talbot's Chestnut Tiger



Broadstick Sailer



Common Map Wing



Variegated Sailer



Twin Falls.



Hotel Manas.

After our break at the Twin Falls we completed the journey to the Hotel Manas, arriving about 1500 and we decided that we would take the rest of the day for a bit of R & R.

23 Nov. After a fairly relaxed breakfast at 0700, a morning of local area birding was the order of the day. As is normal with birding trips new birds were getting harder to find as

we had seen quite a few of the more common ones. However, we did catch up with Pin-striped Tit-Babbler, Greenish Warbler, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Maroon Oriole, Common lora and a possible Small Minivet amongst a list of 36. After lunch we had a bit of culture, visiting a local craft centre. Here we saw a young lady weaving on a back-strap loom and the boys tried on some hats. We also bought some woven bamboo dishes.



24 Nov. This morning we left Pangbang and headed east for Nganglam for our last day in the lowlands. We got a few new birds on the way, Steppe Eagle, White-hooded Babbler, Sapphire Flycatcher, which I missed, Rufous-faced, Black-faced and Whistler's Warbler, Rufous-necked Laughingthrush, Blue-eared Barbet and Black-throated Thrush. We also caught a brief glimpse of a Barking deer as it ran across the road in front of us. But the best sight of the day was a flight of 9 Wreathed Hornbill closely followed by 2 great Hornbills, unfortunately they all disappeared without stopping and no photos were possible. I also saw my first ever Wallcreeper having spent many fruitless hours looking for one in European surroundings. Our morning coffee stop was at a local café where 2 young lads were playing the local version of darts; it's a sort of cross between darts and archery without bows. As an aside, archery is the national sport in Bhutan and our guide's wife, Dema, is a national champion and represented Bhutan in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The young fellow seems pretty pleased with himself having hit the target!



The other mammal we got today was the Capped Langur.



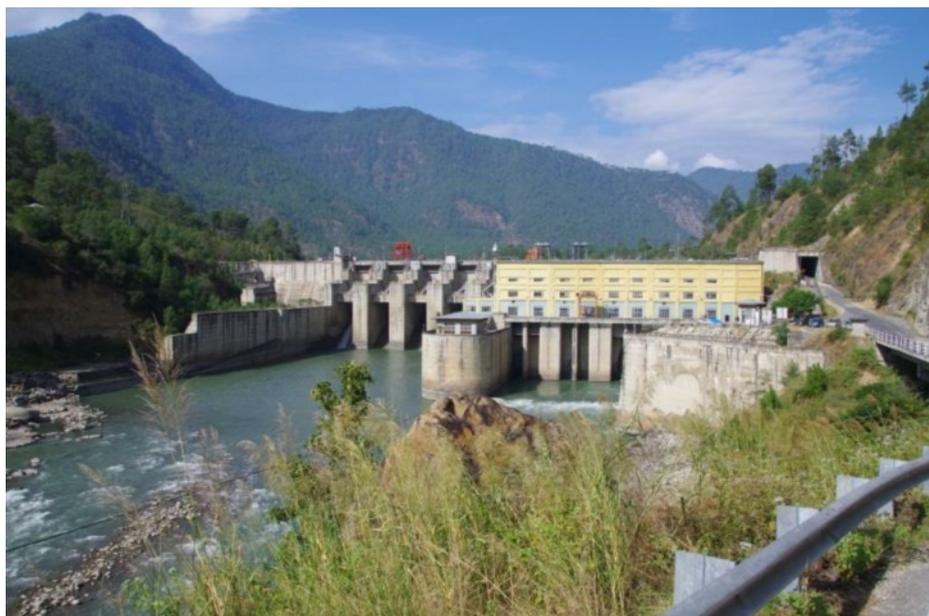
Wallcreeper



Capped Langur

We got to the hotel for lunch and in the afternoon we drove out past a huge cement works which was home to lots of lorries in various states of upkeep or dilapidation and the whole area was covered in cement dust. Not a very attractive place but a large employer and a significant source of income for Bhutan as most of the output is exported to India.

25 Nov. The hotel refused to function before 0700 so we had a leisurely breakfast and departed for Yongkala and Trogon Villa at about 0800. The first part of the journey took us out past the cement works and then we started to climb higher. This was to be the most terrifying bit of all our travels. The road, such as it had ever been had been washed away and now was just a single track carved into the side of the mountain with a sheer rock face on one side and a sheer drop on the other, mostly without safety barriers anywhere. Usually, there was not enough room for 2 vehicles to pass; fortunately the only ones we did meet had seen us coming and had pulled into whatever small passing place they could find. These other vehicles were mostly lorries but with the odd bus full of people! This stretch could not have been more than 15-20Km but it took about 2½ hours to make transit. We finally joined a more normal road at a place called Gyelpozhing (pronounced Gelposheen) and this is the site of the biggest hydroelectric dam in Bhutan; again most of the output goes to India, power being the country's biggest export earner.



The dam at Gyelpozhing.

Shortly after leaving Gyelpozhing we ran across a blockage in the road. This guy had dragged the power lines down with the digger on the back of his truck.



After about 10 minutes 2 ladies pulled up behind us and Sherab had a chat with them. The upshot was that they were on their way to work at Trogon Villa and knew a cross-country way around the blockage, so we followed them and met them again when they served us dinner that evening. We continued on our way to Lingmithang where we had lunch and Daphne congratulated Tshewang on his driving over the awful bit of road, asking him how many times he had been that way before. "I have never been that way" he replied, "It was very dangerous!" We got to Trogon Villa at about 1430; it is a top spot and was built by a local entrepreneur with birders in mind. At 1530 I went out for bit of birding, Daph decided to put her feet up. The Limithang Road is recognised as one of the best birding spots in Bhutan allowing access to a wide variety of habitats spanning a large altitudinal range; we were to spend the next 2 days birding this area. However, in the late afternoon we got Beautiful Nuthatch, one of the 2 main target birds. There were 4 of them working a tree lower down the valley and unfortunately the light was quite poor and they were quite a way off. I did not have Daph's phone to try for a digiscope so I gleaned this picture from the internet. A truly lovely little bird! We also had Red-headed Trogon again.



26 & 27 Nov. We birded the Limithang Road trying in vain for the other major target bird, Ward's Trogon – to no avail. We heard it calling both days but it refused to leave the forest. Other new birds included in the list of 60+ for the 2½ days were Grey-throated Babbler, Himalayan Cutia, Rufous-chinned, Grey-sided, Bhutan, Scaly and Black-faced Laughingthrush, Goldcrest, Eurasian Wren, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, Grey Bushchat and Common Rosefinch. However, one of the great birds that we had seen before but only at a distance was Rufous-necked Hornbill, female on the left male on the right. These were quite a way off too and Daphne's digiscoping got these results.



Bhutan Laughingthrush

Across the road from the Villa were 2 small houses/workshops where ladies were working on back-strap looms. It was fascinating to watch them work, the young lady on the left is setting up her loom for a new piece and the older lady on the right is getting stuck into the task. We bought some beautiful hand woven scarves from each of them as presents.



28 Nov. At 0710, with some sadness, we left the lovely Trogon Villa and this beautiful area and headed for Bumthang some 5 hours plus driving away over the Thrumshing La Pass at 3,800m. They are building a new temple at the pass and on a bright, clear but chilly day we had wonderful views of the eastern Himalayas.



We stopped for birding all the way and picked up quite a few high altitude birds including Red Crossbill, Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch, White-winged Grosbeak, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Spotted Laughingthrush, Coal Tit, Rufous-vented Tit, Grey Crested Tit, Red-billed Chough, Eurasian Magpie, Solitary Snipe and Blood Pheasant.



Grey-crested Tit



Rufous-breasted Accentor



Red Crossbill



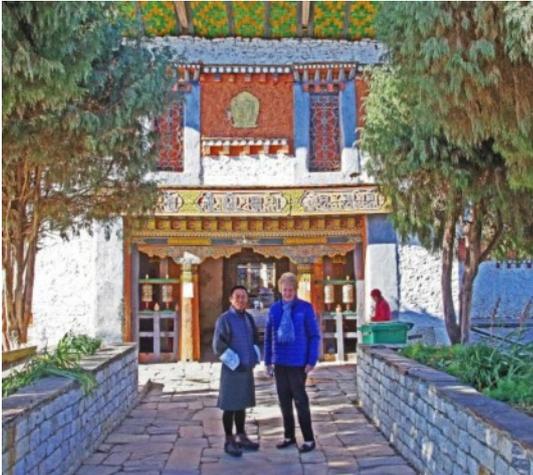
Blood Pheasant



Solitary Snipe

We arrived at the Hotel Uglenyng in Bumthang about 1630 and decided that we had done enough for the day. Over dinner we asked Sherab about the local language(s) and he explained that Bhutan has 19 different dialects and it is quite usual, especially among the older people, for those speaking one dialect not to understand the others. Hence the government established Dzongkha as the national language in 1971 and this is taught in all schools along with English and is the official language of government and business. But it is still quite common for people to use their local dialect especially among those who left school prior to 1970.

29 Nov. The morning was spent on cultural visits. We went to 2 monasteries, the first Jambay Lhakhang was constructed in AD 746 and is the oldest monastery in Bhutan. Buddhist texts say that it is one of the 108 temples built by Tibetan King Songsten Gampo in 659 CE in a single day, to pin down to earth for ever an ogress who was laid across the Himalayas and preventing the spread of Buddhism. The second, Kurje Lhakhang, is one of the country's most sacred sites as it is where the Guru Rinpoche meditated and left the imprint of his body in the rock. It is also the final resting place of the first 3 kings of Bhutan.



Outside Jambay Lhakhang.



Kurje Lhakhang.

We then took a drive around the local area taking in a project where hazel trees are being cultivated and then sent out to small local growers to plant up and use as a cash crop to supplement their incomes. Next we went to see the new provincial airport being built to link the town to Paro and other parts of the country. It could even become an international airport taking inbound flight from other countries in the region. Finally we went down to the Chamkhar Chhu which runs through the town to look for Ibisbill. We found a beauty which behaved very nicely for us and Daphne got some great digiscoped shots like this one.



After lunch I went up to Tharealing Lhakhang, a monastery where Himalayan Monal should appear every evening as the monks throw out any left over rice. It was a 2 hour drive and the last 80 minutes were a climb up a very rough road which at one point had been blocked by a landslide and we had to wait about 15 minutes for the digger that was clearing it to make a path and get out of the way.



It was said that the birds came at around dusk to feed, so arriving at just after 1520 we were in more than enough time! We looked around and kept a good look out but by about 1600 it was getting pretty chilly; fortunately the monastery had a small visitors room and a young monk brought me a very welcome cup of tea. Sure enough, as the sun was going down the first birds arrived, about 6 females. I should mention at this point that there were quite a few dogs around and Sherab was a bit concerned that they would keep the birds away. However, they started to arrive and we watched about 5 or 6 females for about ten minutes and then Tshewang spotted a solitary male across the valley making its way down a path towards the monastery, looking fairly apprehensive I have to add. I managed to get just one long range photo before some dogs saw it and headed up towards the bird which instantly disappeared – very disappointing, but I had seen it.



Male and female Himalayan Monal

30 Nov. Today we moved on from Bumthang and headed for Phobjikha (pronounced Pobjekha) where our target bird would be Black-necked Crane. This was a very pleasant drive over mostly quite good roads as we were getting back into the more usual tourist areas. We stopped for morning coffee in Trongsa at a very nice resort hotel that “Off to Bhutan” uses on their shorter tours. Lunch was taken at a restaurant that looked across a wide valley floor where we could see several groups of figures carrying large bundles on their backs. Sherab explained that it was locals collecting pine needles from the wooded hill sides to be winter bedding for their livestock. We had just finished eating when the call

Snow Pigeon went up. We shot outside and I just managed to get off a few distant shots before they disappeared over the ridge.



Collecting pine needles.



Snow Pigeon just before they disappeared.

We continued our journey and before long we came across a group of Golden Langur and a troop of Assamese Macaque. This was the last sighting we got of both these species. I also had the opportunity to get a reasonable shot of Blue Whistling Thrush, a bird we had seen almost every day but that had proved very camera shy.



Assamese Macaque.



Blue Whistling Thrush

We crossed our second 3,500m pass before dropping down into the Phobjikha Valley. Like most of the valleys in Bhutan this one has some stunning views and before long we were picking up groups of cranes dotted across the valley floor, along with plenty of yak.



Later that afternoon we went out to try and get a bit closer to the birds but it was very difficult. We were not allowed to walk across the valley floor and even if we had been, Sherab said the birds would just have moved further off. We did get good views through the scope and some quite nice digiscoped shots. Another new bird for the day was Oriental Skylark and a decent view of Dark-breasted Rosefinch, not seen since day 1.



1 Dec. With a last look at the stunning Phobjikha Valley we set out for Paro via Dochula Pass and Thimpu where we met up with Norbu. We did stop for birds a few times on the way but gathered nothing new and arrived in Paro about 1630 where we were to stay in the Gangtey Palace Hotel supposedly one of the best hotels in Bhutan. Indeed it was very nice and served cold beer which was a blessing.



2 Dec. Today we went north out of Paro and climbed over the Chelila Pass, the highest road pass in Bhutan at 3,988m. The target birds were pheasants, Monal that I had seen

and Kalij. No Monal but Daphne saw 2 Kalij Pheasants that just happened to be on her side of the car. By the time we stopped and I got out they had disappeared. That made it two all on the pheasant count! As we went up we were in and out of the cloud but once over the top of the pass on the road to Haa the sun came out and after about 4km we stopped and the boys set up breakfast: hot coffee, sandwiches, hard-boiled egg and roast potato at just under 4,000m, -2°C and surrounded by yaks – not your everyday morning fare! Tshewang had moved the yaks on for this picture, but ever curious they wandered back to see us.



New birds for the day were the Kalij Pheasant, White-collared Blackbird, White-throated Redstart, White-browed Rosefinch and Plain Mountain Finch.

A small aside and apropos nothing, I just loved these exhortations to Bhutanese drivers to be safe on the roads. They appear all over the country on the better roads close to the towns.



And this is my favourite because there is often only one lane:



On the way down from the pass we stopped to look over Paro airport. Not many airfields have a control tower that looks like this.



We returned to Paro for a late lunch and in the afternoon we went out to a small wetland area on the road out of town to try to find Black-tailed Crake. We heard him calling in 3 places but he just wouldn't show himself.

That concluded our 3 week trip to Bhutan and next morning Sherab and Tshewang took us to the airport for our flight to Bangkok and then home. Our memories of the trip will be of the lovely friendly people, the beautiful scenery, the fantastic birds - and awful roads! But for me the overriding impression was of the quiet serenity of the country as a whole. This probably stems from their deep rooted and devout faith in the Buddhist religion and the fact that the well-being of the country is judged by a measurement of gross domestic happiness rather than wealth and possessions.

Trip Statistics - 275 species seen.

6 heard only.

11 mammals seen. Our guide and driver saw a Leopard as it disappeared into the undergrowth beside the road ahead of the car.

I can provide a full bird and mammal list if anyone is interested. You can also visit the 'Off to Bhutan' website at www.bhutanbirding.com.

A total of 1,786Km travelled, and that is quite a lot of travelling in a country that is only 300km east to west and 150km north to south.



Some Pictures taken by Lieutenant Phil Boak, RN, during his tour at the RAF College, Cranwell:

Wild flowers, Swallow, Whitethroat, Beckingham Training Area sunset, Linnet, Brown Hare, Skylark, and College Hall





More of Phil Boak's pictures of the Cranwell area:

Corncrake, Cranwell Church, Temple Bruer, Yellowhammer, Yellow Wagtail, Brauncewell Horse Gin, Ermine Street, and Beckingham Training Area at sunset



The RAFOS Newsletter

PLEASE READ THIS

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 in word processed documents, please send them separately from the text.
- .pdf files can be imported as they are received, including related pictures, tables, etc. Please include the author's name after the article's title.
- Please avoid footnotes and tables in Word documents– they are difficult to import with my software!
- Articles can be sent as attachments to emails, on a CD, DVD, memory stick or card. Sticks and cards will be returned!
- Digital images should be in .jpg format.

The closing date for inclusion in Newsletter No. 111 is 21st January 2021.

Any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 112.

Please address contributions to:

Bill Francis
100 Moselle Drive
Churchdown
GLOUCESTER
GL3 2TA

Email wgfrancis@btinternet.com