



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**

**ornithological
society**

Newsletter No. 113

Spring 2022

Roseate Spoonbill (Ian Grove)





Pictures by Mike Blair

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From The Editor

Welcome to the Spring 2022 edition of the RAFOS Newsletter. By the end of 2021, I had expected to have an article or two for this edition to hand, but the cupboard was bare. Then as usual some of our more travelled members came up trumps with a collection of beautifully illustrated pieces about sightings ranging from Australia, to the USA, Cyprus, Northern Scotland and the Fens. It seems that despite the best efforts of the Covid 19 virus, there was plenty going on. I was supplied with so many pictures for some articles that I had to omit a few. Apologies to their authors.

We now look forward to a return to some semblance of normality, with a face-to-face Annual General Meeting planned for RAF High Wycombe in March. The Expedition AUTUMN DUCK is described in this Newsletter, and at the time of writing this, WINTER DUCK is under way, despite some horrendous weather in the North of Scotland.

One issue for the AGM is the search for a new FALO, as the present incumbent of this committee post does not wish to continue now that his current tenure is due to expire. Any volunteers?

It is hoped that constraints on travel will continue to ease, and that more of us can spread our wings to visit far away places.

My best wishes for the rest of this year.

Bill Francis

Newsletter Editor

(a.k.a. The Old Bill)



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Picture by Mike Blair





Val Kersley's Resting Place

Late last year, Anne and Dave Bodley, together with Mike Bailey and his wife from the Chew Valley Ringing Group, met up with Kerry Osborne, Val Kersley's goddaughter. Together they scattered Val Kersley's ashes beneath the beautiful oak tree that the ringing group planted twenty years ago as a tribute to Val's husband, Reg, a stalwart member of RAFOS for many years.

Autumn Duck



Team 1 at Red Point (Martin Routledge)



Scanning Gruinard Bay (Martin Routledge)

Now is the Autumn of our Discontent *(or maybe not)*

A first impression report on Expedition AUTUMN DUCK
by Martin Routledge

The plan was in essence simple. WINTER DUCK 2021 had been foiled by the pandemic despite replanning, splitting into 3 separate parts and booking various new lodgings to cope with Scottish rules on self-catering. As Delta surged across the land we admitted defeat, but then a canny ex-copper suggested 'let's reschedule for the Autumn then'. So with towel wrapped around head the Expedition Leader started to look at the options for AUTUMN DUCK 2021.

The main aim of WINTER DUCK is to undertake Wetland Bird Surveys as part of the WeBS project. The core WeBS season runs from October to March inclusive and so an Autumn count would still fall into the core period and provide useful data. Of course, as we'd never been at this time of year there would be nothing to compare our results to but that wasn't going to get in the way of a group of expedition starved RAFOS birders (OK some had made it to SUMMER DUMB in Shetland but that's another story) dusting off their scopes and getting out there. So the first thing to consider was the date – in the end we went for the back end of October into November, as the daylight should be similar hours to WINTER DUCK; the wintering birds should be arriving from Scandinavia and beyond; and the dates suited the majority of potential Duckers.

First problem was that one of our regular haunts near Thurso, used for surveying the eastern sectors of the northern coast, wasn't available at the beginning of the period but was available at the end. Easy we thought – we'll switch the order around and have this team (Team 3) start at Cape Wrath and move east rather than at John O'Groats and move west. Not so fast Duckmeister - the military accommodation at Faraid Head needed to be taken over on a weekday, there was a conflicting booking from the Monday and the Team wanted flexibility to try and get Cape-side. In the end we booked Faraid Head from Thursday to Monday and then the Thurso cottage for the rest of the period. Sadly, this would mean that Team 3 wouldn't be able to join us for the final night at Dundonnell, but needs must. It also meant the entire expedition would see folk on task from Thursday 28 October to Saturday 6 November – a bit longer than a normal DUCK but all still very achievable.

To regular readers of this august publication the normal laydown of a WINTER DUCK expedition will be familiar. Three teams; a week exploring and surveying north and northwest Scotland; plenty of blether and banter; and a fair bit of birding too. That northern team consisted of Tom Dewick and Richard Somers Cocks, with a guest appearance by Al Kennedy over the weekend. Next down the map was Team 2 based out of Scourie for the first part with Jim Bryden, Alan Brimmell, Maggie Sheddan, John Wells and newbie Mark Hollis. Finally languishing in the comfort of Dundonnell Adventurous Training Lodge on Little Loch Broom were Team 1 led by Gerry Bilbao and comprising, Jerry Knights, Brian Lyon, Iain MacKenzie (another Duckin' newbie) and the overall organiser and author of this piece moi. OK so that's the cast list – what did we get up to and how was it different to a WINTER DUCK?

Deployment for the non-Moray crew went along the usual lines of picking up vans from High Wycombe and Wyton and then driving north up east and west coasts to RV at Pine Cottage, Newtonmore on the Friday evening. Team 3 (the Moray Marauders) had deployed early and positioned at Faraid Head on the Thursday undertaking some surveying on their way there. First point of difference (apart from the Team 3 itinerary) was that the weather was mild but wet and the runs north were snag free and unaffected by snow over the Drumochter Pass on the A9 – a good start. Team 3 couldn't get Capeside as hoped but did get lots of surveying in elsewhere. Saturday dawned for the Newtonmore mob, and we quickly continued to Inverness for breakfast at Morrisons before splitting to our start points. Again, mild but wet weather with no hold-



Glaucous Gull
(Brian Lyon)



Great Northern Diver
(Brian Lyon)



Ob Mheallaidh
Loch Torridon
There were seven
Slavonian Grebes at
this site
(Martin Routledge)

ups. The roads were noticeably busier than normal to our usual winter adventure and lots of pubs and hotels in the countryside were still open which again was a change.

The week's bird surveying progressed with damp weather causing some issues but on the whole, we got the job done. One point of interest was that most wetland birds, that we're used to seeing in winter plumage, were still sporting their summer colours – this caused the occasional ID confusion especially for birds in transition. Divers and Grebes seem to have moved to their wintering grounds in summer gear and were now moulting. The over-riding impression on Teams 1 and 2 though was that the birds were in short supply and that the over-wintering hoards had not yet landed on these shores. Even those 'optional' gull numbers seemed low and Herring Gull in particular seemed uncharacteristically shy. We did find a Glaucous Gull in Ullapool though and a Mediterranean Gull at Sheildaig on Loch Torridon. There was also the odd mass gathering – 180 Barnacle Geese by Gruinard Bay, 75 plus Great Black-backed Gulls feeding on a tidal spit at Loch Kanaird and 28 Grey Herons at Corry Point near Ullapool. However, these counts were all dwarfed by the traditional mass sightings by Team 3 who (among others) counted: 853 Wigeon on St John's Loch; 538 Herring Gull at Sinclair's Bay; 381 Barnacle Geese at Balnakiel Farm; 366 Lapwing at Loch Heilen; and 245 Greylags at Brimm's Ness.

That said, all this masked what we still thought was a poor showing – but did the data stack up – had we any real reason for our Autumn of Discontent?

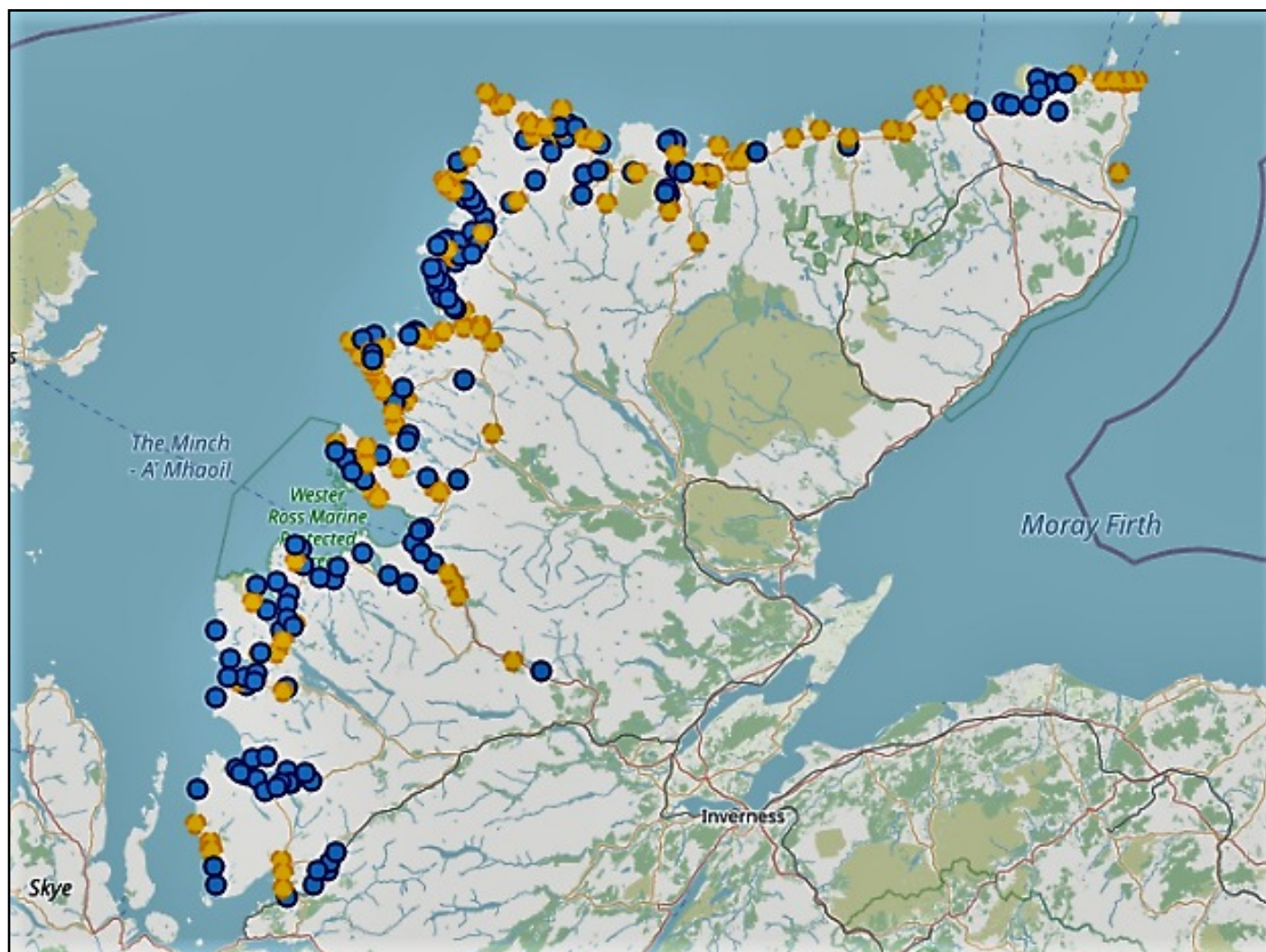
As Churchill is reputed to have said 'Statistics can be cooked. Only trust those you have cooked yourself'. So I've done a bit of cooking using our WeBS and BirdTrack data entry and the results don't always line up with our first impressions. First the health warning: in the analysis that follows I'm comparing AUTUMN DUCK 2021 with WINTER DUCK 2020 and not some longer-term trend; some data is easily slewed because the counts were either low or even a large number of birds turned up only once (Team 3's Golden Plovers for example); I use the terms abundance to talk total numbers observed and distribution to refer to how widely spread a species was – so an abundant bird might not be well distributed. Enough of the small print what about the answers

Well, rather surprisingly (because it didn't feel this way on the ground) quite a few species occurred in similar numbers and with a similar distribution on both expeditions. For example, Shag, Herring Gull, Barnacle Goose, Great Northern Diver, Curlew, Wigeon and Teal were all pretty close. Distribution of Greylag Goose, Oystercatcher, Mallard, Turnstone and Common Gull were pretty comparable, but their numbers (abundance) were significantly down: Greylags by almost 50%, Oystercatchers 30%, Mallard 30%, Turnstone 45% and Common Gull 40%. No wonder we felt things were a bit thin on the water. On the other side of the coin, there were some species where distribution was the same(ish) but abundance was up these were: Lapwing and Redshank up by 50%, Golden Plover up 200% (but note the warning this was one huge flock), Cormorant up 30% and Whooper Swans up 100% (again small numbers of sightings slewed by one big count of 147 birds). The real winners were those up in distribution and abundance and in this league, we saw Grey Heron, Black-throated Diver, Little Grebe and Slavonian Grebe. Sadly, there was one species where distribution and abundance were both significantly down - Goldeneye were down 30% on distribution and 60% on abundance. Among all these records there were also plenty of other small numbers of birds such as Knot, Ruff, Purple Sandpiper, Common Scoter and Bar-tailed Godwit for example but the numbers were small and no conclusions could be drawn from the data.

Overall, we managed to survey 217 WeBS sites from the 232 allocated and at the same time completed 61 BirdTrack species lists at the 10Km square level of accuracy. While wetland birds were our focus, we also recorded some iconic views of Golden and White-tailed Eagle. Buzzards abounded and we saw more Kestrels than usual too. The small stuff seemed rather elusive, but as well as the usual suspects we still managed records of Stonechat, Linnet, Snow Bunting, Reed Bunting, Treecreeper, Brambling, and a Swallow who clearly hadn't got the memo about heading south sooner.

It sure was a whole lot of fun but on the whole most Duckers preferred the winter experience even though the weather is usually much harsher – but we're a tough and adventurous bunch. Suffice to say we're all looking forward to going back in January/February 2022 and by the time you're reading this we'll have returned (Omicron willing) from yet another successful session of Duckin' about in Scotland.

*Martin Routledge
aka der Duckmeister*



Map Showing RAFOS WeBS Coverage

America - A New Frontier for Wildlife on the Space Coast

By Ian Grove

It might seem strange to talk about America as being the “New Frontier” for wildlife. The pioneer years are long gone for America, an established industrial nation of big cities, the dominant world economy, and at the cutting edge of technological advancements. It is though the only way I could think of a title for this article, so please bear with me - I’ll get there in the end.

It was/is/and will be one of the greatest privileges I have had in my Royal Air Force career, to take an opportunity to represent my country and serve as an Exchange Officer working for the United States Air Force, in the Department of Defense Headquarters, at the Pentagon. It is not until you have taken the time to immerse into a culture that you truly start to see what makes them tick, holiday visits just scratch at a country’s fake facade. America is not all Mickey Mouse, New York skyscrapers, pizza and hot dogs, there is a lot more to what is a very richly diverse and extremely large country.

The USA is huge, and outside of the cramped cities, space is not an issue. Even within the cityscapes there are always places set aside for parks and recreational areas. Recreation and family time is one of the many things the Americans excel at, and they have set aside vast swathes of land to accommodate this passion across the entirety of the country. There are 423 National parks in the USA, 10,336 state parks and 567 national Wildlife Refuges providing significant managed resource for wildlife, though seasonal hunting is allowed in some! In numbers there are approximately 193 million acres of land (England and Wales combined are around 38 million acres) set aside for wildlife to be abundant, so no matter what state you visit there is always somewhere to go to see nature or just hike to take in the views.

If you are a numismatist, you will know that there is an ability to collect 50 (at least) different US quarter dollars, each representing a state. In 2010 the US Mint also started releasing the “America the Beautiful” series of state coins. The “America the Beautiful” series depicts one of a state’s national parks on the coin, one from each of the 50 states. As I said earlier there are 423 National parks across the USA, so competition to get depicted onto one of the 50 coins was fierce. Without going down a rabbit hole, you can also collect P or D versions of the coin, but that is a great trivia question for another time. So, getting back to the frontier, and the height of the cold war, the “space race” the new frontier. It is after all as a prime coalition partner that I find myself here in the first place, and recent memoranda between our countries are strengthening that bond. America was not the first for many of the great achievements in space, but when President Kennedy said we will put a man on the moon within a decade, the behemoth that is American access to resources swung fully into action.

So it was that with my “young adults” visiting us for the Christmas period, from their respective Universities in the UK, that we thought we would go on a mid-winter break. UK Lockdowns, lack of travel, socialising, and online lectures have taken a mental toll on them. A visit to us in the USA meant they could escape lockdowns; America certainly has not seen the constraints imposed by other countries, but they have also seen 831K corona virus-related deaths. So early morning (03:30), we jumped in the car and 16 hours and 857 miles later found ourselves on America’s “Space Coast”, for a week of sun in Florida. I have already stated a few figures in this article to quantify scale, and as an engineer, mathematics and numbers play a huge and important role in my daily RAF duties, as do engineering safety, and colonial banter with my American co-workers. When touring a battle site in Virginia a tour guide asked, “has anyone been to a civil war site before?” I responded with “Yes Yorktown”, he said “That is Revolutionary War.” I said, “Depends which side of the Atlantic you are from.” Luckily, he got the joke.



American Alligator



Brown Pelican



Glossy Ibis



Killdeer



Great Egret



Laughing Gull

When American (née German) engineers started building the rockets to explore the new frontier during the space race, they needed a safety buffer of land just in case of a Saturn V RUD (Rapid Unscheduled Disassembly). The Saturn V rocket not only carried man into orbit, but also 2.5 million Kg of fuel and would develop the same effect as a half kiloton nuclear bomb if a RUD occurred. So, in the 1950's NASA bought 140,000 acres of Florida marshland, now known as the "Space Coast". National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) soon realized though that not all that area would be needed as a safety buffer in case of a RUD and handed over much of the land to the Fish and Wildlife Service who have managed it since 1963.

This area is now called Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and the Canaveral National Seashore, and forms just part of the land governed by the John F. Kennedy Space Center. This 140,000-acre wildlife sanctuary does not even make the America the Beautiful coin collection, as it is not a National Park or State Park, just a mere Wildlife Refuge. The state of Florida is represented in the coin series by the Everglades National Park, some 1.5 million acres of wilderness. When you look at these numbers it starts to put the sheer size of America and each state into perspective. **Note:** The crown jewel in the WWT portfolio, Slimbridge, is in the lightweight corner at 2,000 acres compared to these two heavyweights. Scale in America is very hard to comprehend.

Unfortunately, I could not participate in a day of birding for the RAFOS New Year challenge, so I am definitely disqualified from the competition, this was a family holiday and other planned commitments took up time. This is a rough guide to locations and species seen across two half days out with the family while looking for alligators.

December 31 - Day 1 – Morning and Evening

Watching the golden glow of dawn break (07:12) on Cocoa Beach, Sanderlings, Willets, Ruddy Turnstones, Laughing Gulls, and Ring-Billed Gulls scampered along the tidal edge searching for titbits as the small waves washed in and out. Further out to sea Brown Pelicans were already crash diving into the water to catch fish stirred up from the depths by passing pods of dolphin. Rock Pigeons scoured the weed on the high tide line for whatever they could find. **(Species Total: 7)**

Getting into the car (09:50) it would be a 45-minute drive to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in search of alligators in their wild habitat. Mourning Doves were searching through our community bin compound and scratching about on the ground, an American Crow was being raucous on the roof of the house opposite and a Northern Mockingbird was flitting through the palm tree in our small garden. **(Species Total: 10)**

It was a dash up the I-95 towards Titusville, with obligatory Turkey and Black Vultures circling overhead looking for road kill. Into Titusville past Astronaut High School and Sand Point Park. The park sits beside the main busy road and its open grassy area had attracted a pair of Red Shouldered Hawks, which were scanning the ground from telephone wires strung between poles. Further down the wire line a small flock of Starlings had gathered for safety in numbers. The first sighting of Osprey was also at the park, as they wheeled over the small pond in their never-ending search for fish. The A. Max Brewer Bridge over the Indian River led onto Merritt Island, and the concrete barriers had several Osprey looking down at the water from their lofty height advantage. Onto Merritt Island itself and it seemed that every third or fourth telegraph pole had an Osprey sat atop eating its morning catch. **(Species Total: 15)**

The Merritt Island Visitor Center and boardwalk were closed, as it was a Federal Holiday, so we headed straight up to the manatee observation platform, to see if we could spot some of these creatures. It has probably not hit the UK news how these Florida natives are dying in huge numbers this year. Around 1000 deaths have been recorded mainly through starvation. A booming construction industry in Florida combined with fertilizer run off into the rivers and streams have caused pollution and large algae blooms,



Wood Stork



Little Blue Heron



Tricolored Heron



Osprey



Ring-billed Gull



Loggerhead Shrike

resulting in the failure of the sea-grass upon which these animals feed. The event has been so catastrophic that wildlife officials have taken the unprecedented step of intervening with nature and feeding the wild manatees on lettuce. This is a double-edged sword though, as while saving the manatees this year it could cause these harmless, slow-moving creatures to associate contact with humans with food and vulnerable to boat strikes.

It was extraordinarily warm weather (21-27 °C) during our visit to Florida and we were lucky to have a manatee grace us with a visit for around 30 minutes. We left the manatee and drove to a couple of the other trail parking lots. More birds were sitting on the telegraph lines en route. American Kestrel searched the grassy roadside verges and Belted Kingfisher were looking into the roadside ditches. Scrub Jay Trail, lived up to its reputation and I caught a very quick glimpse of a Florida Scrub-Jay as it flew from the ground and into some dense bushes. A small side-track to a muddy boat launch ramp yielded spectacular closeness to a Roseate Spoonbill, that was not fazed by my close proximity as it preened itself on a log jutting out from the water. A Killdeer searched the muddy edge for flies to eat amongst the mud. **(Species Total - 20)**

The highlight and main attraction of the Merritt Island preserve is the Black Point Wildlife Drive (11:45), a 6-mile drive along a one-way gravel path that winds through the pools and canals of the preserve. It is a mythological assumption that American's don't walk anywhere, December and temperatures in the mid-20's who would walk a 6-mile trail through alligator and snake swamp land?? Most wildlife refuges have roadways where the car can be used as a mobile hide to closely watch and record wildlife activities.

To date 359 species of bird have been spotted on the Merritt Island preserve, so this seemed a good place to add to my Florida bird species hunt, while the young adults looked for gators. I won't mention again species seen on the wildlife drive that I have previously noted, but there were plenty of duplicate sightings. We had only entered the drive a short distance when the first alligator was spotted, a small one hiding, and blending very well, into the shrub roots that lined the canal margins. While the young adults concentrated their excitement on alligator spotting, and with the wife driving, I turned my attention to the feathered incumbents of the preserve. The first ponds were shallow and grassy, flocks of White and Glossy Ibises combined numbers and fed close to the road. Solitary Reddish Egret, Great Egret, Tricoloured Heron, and Little and Great Blue Heron stalked and caught fish by themselves. **(Species Total: 27)**

On one tump of grass Blue Winged Teal sat in the sunshine. Further along the road and on a deeper pond Northern Shovelers were floating together in rafts, bottoms sticking out as they fed. **(Species Total: 29)** The road is edged by canals/streams that connect the ponds and Common Gallinule, American Coot and Pied-Billed Grebe, swam these channels. Out in the deeper water of the ponds Double-crested Cormorant and Anhinga were chasing fish, but many were also sunning in the low shrub mangrove trees that lined the bank along with Common Grackles. **(Species Total: 35)**

A stop for some food, water and restrooms and a small walk along the Cruickshank Trail and a Common Yellowthroat was flitting amongst the trees of the parking lot. A Snowy Egret sat atop one of the sluices, its head darting as small fish swam in the frothing water below. Unfortunately, it was the end of the trail and onto other activities for the afternoon. **(Species Total: 37)**

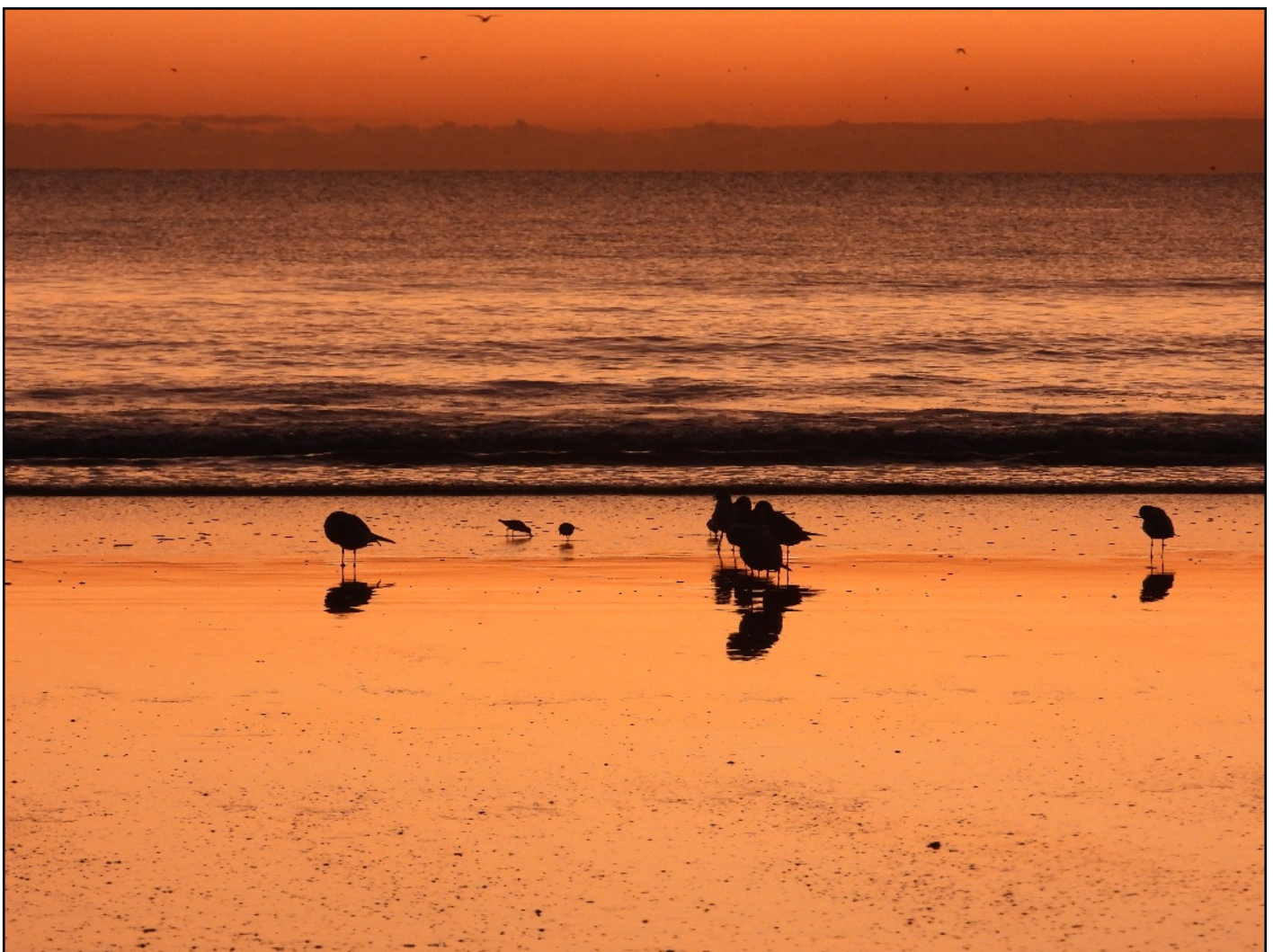
Space is certainly the dominant force on this coast, and two 1st stage booster rockets, I don't think I can add a "Falcon 9" to my list, launched by SpaceX just before Christmas returned to Port Canaveral on their drone ships while we were there. While the family rested after an arduous day, I drove up to Port Canaveral to watch a drone ship and the charter fishing boats dock. A lone White Pelican, swam amongst the Browns waiting for a morsel of fish to be cast aside from the filleting area, while a Wood Stork was more brazen and bold stalking the quay side. A Loggerhead Shrike sat atop fencing on a nearby grassy area. I couldn't believe my luck when three Magnificent Frigatebirds flew overhead and quickly went out of sight. Unfortunately, that was all the time I had for counting bird species that day. **(Species Total: 41)**

Jan 1 - Day 2 – 1.5 Hours on an Airboat

It was time to go alligator watching (again) and an early morning drive down south of Kissimmee to Lake Tohopekaliga for an airboat adventure, anything to distract the kids while I watched for birds. The guide assured us this lake was part of a river system that connected us to the very top of the Everglades. Coasting out along a small canal, before we reached the lake and marsh area, a Bald Eagle sat atop a tree, while two Sandhill Cranes fed along the embankment. **(Species Total: 43)**

Once clear of the canal the throttle was opened, ear defenders fitted to prevent deafness from the screeching V8 engine propelling us along and we scooted out across the reeds, and water lilies, at what seemed breakneck speed. A Purple Gallinule scampered across the pads as the airboat rushed past, on our way to find basking alligators. Slowing to view an alligator Limpkins could be heard calling from the thick dense reeds. Heading towards our last gator spot, they seemed to have names and territories, a Snail Kite had kindly positioned itself atop a bush close to where we were heading. The airboat ride was soon over. **(Species Total: 46)**

I am quite sure that if my birding skills were better, and that I had not been distracted by family activities my list could have been longer, especially for hedgerow birds. December, hot weather and bright blue skies should surely have seen me capturing a lot more wintering or resident Floridian birds. I can thoroughly recommend the Space Coast as the new wildlife frontier for a mid-winter birding break.



Sanderling and Ring-billed Gull

(Ian Grove)

Being 'THE' DIC

by FS Scott Drinkel

Read it as you will, good folks of RAFOS, but I am talking about the new Committee post of Digital Image Coordinator (and how I wish I had thought of a better title ...however!!)

So, what am I doing? My vision as put to the Committee and RAFOS membership at the AGM in November 2019 (which now seems so long ago, thanks to COVID interference) was to try and capture the range of subjects our members have seen and photographed.

Over the years RAFOS folks have travelled more than a couple of miles, visited some incredible birding locations, and been deployed to out of the way places, many taking some images that document the journey and local wildlife. I thought it would be nice to not only capture that journey and all the others, but potentially make these images available for publicity purposes of RAFOS.

Building on this, I thought it would be quite nice to simply capture images of birds wherever we see them, generating an archive of images captured by a variety of folks. I also have a project in mind to hopefully both raise RAFOS awareness but help youngsters start a journey of respect and recognition of local birds to them. For this I need a comprehensive set of images of common local UK birds and again, I would like the images to come from many contributors, making it a society project, rather than just a whim of my own! This idea may or may not have come about by my obsessive need to collect and catalogue, but we are not here to address peculiarities of yours truly – that ship has long since sailed!

The images I receive and the push for more on a monthly basis are currently reasonably limited to the RAFOS Facebook group – it provides access to a number (but not all) of the membership and also a platform to publish the entries received on a monthly basis.

Therefore, I look to ask more than the Facebook group – do you have images of birds that you have taken? Would you be willing to provide them to RAFOS for archiving purposes and potentially their selection in future RAFOS projects?

If the answer is Yes, then please send up to 10 high quality digital Images per calendar month to me at Scott.Drinkel@Gmail.com with an email title of 'RAFOS archive for the month of XXX' or similar. Details to be given for each picture are the species common name, where it was photographed, and the name of the photographer. I have been doing this for about 9 months now. Some months have returned fewer images due to my limited capacity while deployed, but this should increase again. Despite this we have well over 600 images in the archive already.

I try to suggest a 'topic' of birds that I would like to capture – this could be for my ease of managing the images, or as a direct request from other Committee members who are driving to achieve a specific aim. Again, this is currently notified through the Facebook group, but how would you like to be informed of the topics or progress of the archive if you do not engage with Facebook? Do you have any ideas on subjects or topics that could generate more interesting images? Drop me a message and let me know – more brains are always better than one (well mine anyway). For information, despite the bias of images on any given month, receiving any 10 images from each contributor per month is better than none, so if you have images to submit, please do so! And if you do not have any images...get a camera and start snapping – you could be the one who gets that 'perfect' image!

Thanks to you all who have contributed, and I hope to see more contributions over the next year.
Scott - DIC

New Hides at the RSPB Ouse Washes Nature Reserve

By John N Wells

Background. A friend on Twitter informed me that she had recently re-visited the centre and the two newly rebuilt hides at the RSPB Ouse Washes Reserve. She had good sightings of 7 Bewick Swans over the far bank at the flooded washes of the Reserve. This new 'birder friend', Rachel Lennard, and I have shared some local good-birding locations/info on access/sightings etc all via Twitter, and we had 'sort-of' made birding acquaintance this way.

Fen Drayton Lakes. Rachel is fairly new to birding but has a good year list and has found many of her hard earned species herself on her local patch, the RSPB Fen Drayton Lakes NR. This patch is perfect for a new birder, as anything can and does pitch-up, as well as having great access. Fen Drayton lakes have been known to local Cambridgeshire birders for a while but has benefitted immeasurably with the new guided bus access, finance via RSPB members and new infrastructure, visitors shelter, maps and marked routes. Although I have been there a few times, we have never really done it justice.

Rachel had said the site had improved access and a new watchpoint with decent seating and some head cover at the watchpoint. This reserve with refurbished footpaths is a bonus for me and my mate Stevie Heather to walk on even-ground, especially for my chum. One day late summer, Stevie and I had a day's birding at Fen Drayton, and jolly good it was too. But Rachel passed on details of another gem, as the RSPB Ouse Washes Reserve has now reopened and now has limited footpaths and access to 2 recently replaced hides: Welches Dam hide (see Key 7) and Rickwood hide (Key 8).

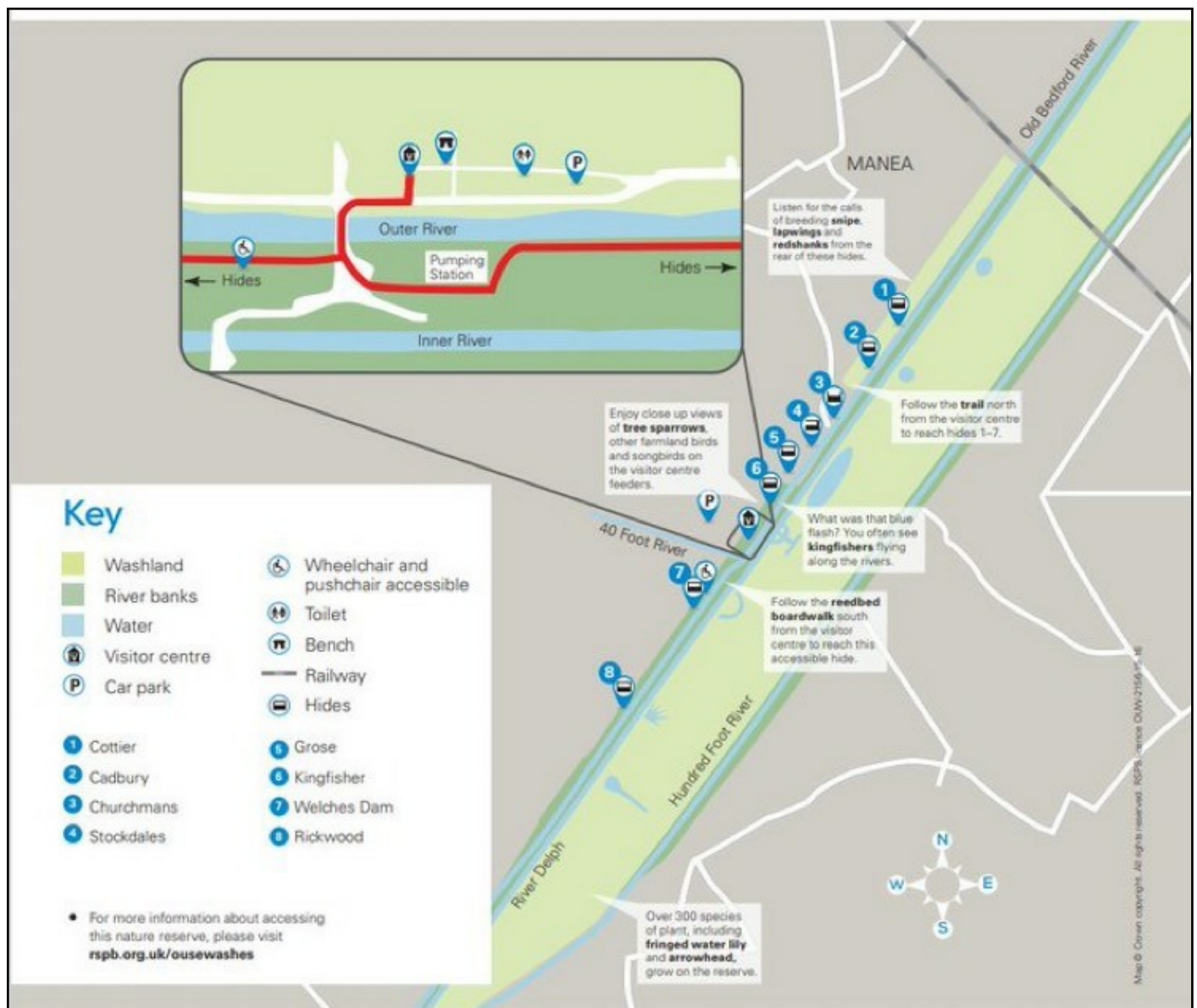
Rachel explained she had been for a walk with her husband to Ouse Washes recently and 2 of the planned 8 new hides had now re-opened for visitors. The reserve had been closed for 2 or more years for major renovations to the structure on the northern banks of the reserve. These cost in the region of £27M, with funding from many sources, including English Heritage. The other 8 SE Hides were either not yet built, or one erected was still closed to allow settlement. Maybe it was worth a trip out to explore over the Christmas period. A lot of the high banks have been re-profiled to contain the floodwater and new banking brings with it more delay for grass to take and the banking to become stable.

This is a favourite local spot for bird watchers as it has good car park, coffee & tea facilities, and an indoor space for a daily diary and a viewing point via the glass classroom. Also, there is a local colony of Tree Sparrows! They breed in good numbers here [or have done for many years], in areas set aside for a feeding and viewing garden aimed at school children, and birding visitors. The feeders are set on poles and nearby there are two large nest box colony towers in the rear garden directly behind a large internal classroom viewing area, which is nice and warm most days. This now has a small boiler for self-help drinks of teas or coffee with an honesty box for donations. So, it was good for getting out of the cold [still under COVID-19 restrictions], when I went in November.

The Ouse Washes have always been a favourite of mine, as the hides are accessible from the car park and each hide is positioned on top of the banking, usually out of a biting wind when we visit at waterfowl peak-time - Winter. This means the birdwatchers' approach is on hard semi rough vehicle access below the sight line of the waterfowl, on a loose stone track which is also being rebuilt under the new major work. It was still very muddy at time of visiting at Christmas 2021, and it is likely to be that for a while as they rebuild all the infrastructure. Pedestrians and reserve vehicles are hidden from view of the assembled waterfowl up and over the banking. The old hides, with their screen systems either side, were rather dated [originally 1950/60s possibly], but always offered shelter, and a warmish place to sit during the time of winter floods on the Washes. Usually, winter is the time I frequent as it is good for waterfowl if the water levels are not too high and cover the wader pools. Usually in January or February the water gets high quickly, as the

washes are designed for flood prevention as water capture areas, thus not so good for waders and passerines.

Development. Back in 2018-19, the RSPB must have taken a massive financial decision to develop the site. Here is a latest overview map of the reserve, with the Centre being within the ‘exploded’ view.



Key: Reserve Layout – Picture 1

Here at Ramsey, we can access both the northern washes at Nene [Near Peterborough], and Ouse Washes south of our region near Manea (pronounced Main-ee), which is 6 mile east of Chatteris and towards Ely. Often from a birding standpoint we are torn between which to visit, which has the best birds - per time of year and which are likely to be quietest, undisturbed by too many walkers or worse, too many Twitchers!

Birdwatchers of the friendly variant are fine and ok, most are accommodating of shared knowledge, and I do pass on details of what's about in the main on the Cambs Bird Club blog, if folk share it both ways. But after years of Cornish Chough 'visits' I've gone off the racer; 'spot-the-bird and move on' birder with little or no conservation thought – *aka Twitcher*. To be honest I have had very little hassle at this 'type' on the reserve and in all seasons in the main. But especially Winter it is essential on cold days to get inside the hides get warm and comfy as its best to stay for a long time as high water can mean distant birds.

So how important is RSPB Ouse Washes? In short **it is very important** holding >33,000 over-wintering Wigeon, the Scandinavian 'wintering' Swans (Bewick and Whoopers), good numbers of Pintail, Shoveler, Mallard, Teal as well as a haven for mud probing waders: Snipe, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew occasionally rarities; like my Temmincks Stint found on 1 Jan 2017 at Grose Hide [see map above], and many winter and summer rarities: breeding Bittern, Tree Sparrow, Hobby, Marsh and Hen Harrier, Peregrine and even some of these are becoming more regular in sightings whereas whilst other species struggle or drop off like once common; Greenfinch, Redpoll, endangered; Marsh Tit, and Lesser-spotted Woodpecker.

To add to the article, I've included a copy of some of the reserve RSPB factual data below:

About – RSPB Ouse Washes

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Site information

The Ouse Washes forms the largest area of washland (grazing pasture, that floods in the winter) in the UK. It is an area which holds SSSI, Ramsar and Natura 2000 status.

Habitat

Ouse Washes consist mainly of wetland and washland.

Conservation

Conservation work is currently focused on habitat restoration and management of this internationally important wetland.

- More than 2,000 grazing cattle will help manage the grass sward, while thinning and coppicing will improve willow and osier beds. Most of the reserve's grasslands have never been ploughed, so we are retaining traditional cattle grazing and hay mowing as the best form of conservation management. We also protect use regular patrols and predator control.
- We are maintaining the wet grassland for birds all year round. In summer, the Ouse Washes attract huge numbers of nationally important wading birds, such as lapwing and black-tailed godwit.
- We are maintaining the ditches and open watercourses for their plant life, and managing the osier beds, mature willows and hawthorn hedgerows for their invertebrate communities.
- A tranquil amenity for local people and visitors, facilities such as information displays, hides and paths are also being refurbished and updated.
- We regularly monitor wintering waterfowl and breeding birds, as well as vegetation structure, water quality, aquatic plants, invertebrates, and other key biodiversity components.
- This nature reserve is part of the Wildlife Guardians Scheme, which is supported by the SITA Environmental Trust through the Landfill Communities Fund (formerly the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme), and Scottish and Southern Energy plc.

13 Dec 21 My Visit to Welche's Dam – RSPB Ouse Washes NR

I usually aim to travel in darkness on most birding days depending on lift share etc, and when birding alone always leave early, but for some strange reason this was an earlier excursion than even I, had dreamt of, awakening at 4 am. Leaving Ramsey around 5 am and getting to the car park at Welche's Dam in darkness 05:45 am was a little extreme. Still, it gave me time for some early morning bird sounds recognition on passerine contact calls; practice and 'noc-mig' (Nocturnal Migration) type listening as some bright and early songbirds flew overhead. The biggest scare was as the remote sensors that came on by the floodlight; motion sensing me in the car park. Which not only lit me, but also lit the whole area for miles around. A good deterrent I reckon as it brightly lit up the toilet block and car park as I walked towards them! Thankfully this place is 'well away' from civilisation with the village of Manea being some 3 miles away and thankfully "*only gets birding visitors*" at this unforeseen hour.

I heard the Redwing in the fields close by, along the line of hazel and alder opposite where I parked the car. Song Thrush started up his morning rendition, whilst I was slowly unpacking my scope, rucksack and fitting my walking boots as the swans that were already well awake, called to each other very noisily. There are immense numbers here [usually order 1K Whoopers and less than used to be, circa 250 Bewick Swans], all were trumpeting loudly. The thousands of Wigeon were whistling, calling to one another in the still dark, flooded washes some 300-500 meters ahead of me, but completely out of sight behind the large, raised embankments and water course draining systems the other side of the nearest 'drain' – the long and straight (drains) drainage system as they are called here. The pumping station is near the car park and likewise this is automated so the mechanical grapple, drains loose reeds and rotting vegetation drawn into the sluices. The car park is almost directly opposite the pumping station which works 24/7 [hours a day, days per-week].

The names of drains and retaining ditches, are more often Dutch than English: with Vermuyden's Drain [part of Ouse Washes] being named after their Dutch engineering master, Sir Cornelius Vermuyden. Vermuyden's task force of 10,000 men build these structures and locks and sluices encompassing the parallel rivers. All dating back to 1636-1649 when plans commenced by Edward Welch [hence Welche's Dam] and the fifth Earl of Bedford's company of adventurers constituted in 1649 to drain the Great levels



Sunrise on the Ouse Washes

of the Fens. That plan oversaw all these impressive water drainage systems in the eastern region of Cambridge and West Norfolk holding the best waterfowl reserves in UK, (the RAFOS Somerset levels team may say otherwise). The land was thus reclaimed for farming when flood water was drained 1650 and 1651 with the cutting of the 'New' Bedford River or Hundred Foot River which was cut parallel to the 'Old' Bedford River.

I take the leisurely walk-in semi-darkness to the first hide accessible to the disabled. A good 18 months ago was the last time Stevie and I had visited. This first hide was then being built, the landscaping on the top of the bank was complete, and they were lifting in the hides new pine walls. All the reserve was closed then, so it was with excitement that I strolled along the heavily used and muddy tracks, though it was very wet after the heavy rain of late. Then as we gained height on the slope, the path and handrail which zig-zagged up the bank, heavy visitor footfall to the one or two open hides has made the clay surface slippery underfoot and I wondered if it was a matter of time before perhaps, they would close it all down again with current restrictions on the pandemic.

Crossing the vehicle (semi-finished track) to the tarmac up the slope, into a brilliant brand-spanking new hide, the likes of which would fit 15 birders easily in normal times, with space for maybe 4 scopes at a push in the central standing area, with high retractable windows, all with brand new rotary driven pulley drawn window screens. All windows were clean and had an 'air gap' to aid ventilation and prevent misting. The cord system on the upper glass and T handles would keep them open and locked. The easy-to-use circular winding table turrets for the larger lower retractable glass was novel but I found the large circular drum did get in the way of using the table surface for elbows when locking your arms and when making your tea from your flask! But they are The 'Porsche' of bird hides circa 2021/22.



First on the species list after the Winter Swans and Widgeon are the obvious Mallard, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose and Shoveler just in front of the hide. Less common and interesting was a group of Little Grebe and 5 in one small area suggests to me they were a family party. Perhaps last summer's young remaining with their parents as guardians That or they stay together as an extra measure of protection during early winter or rising waters.

Shortly after 6:30-7:00 the Whoopers out on the adjacent fen fields started their melodic; call to those remaining on the wetland to join them and as hunger or habit dictated, they alighted the flood washes and joined their mates out in the open black-fen soil to feed on beet tops, leek tops or other crop leftovers.

Somewhat spoiling the serenity, was the blaring sounds of workers in a farming team. The music, blaring loud, was in an Eastern European language [undecipherable for me any way], from a pair of boogey-box speakers not 300 metres away from where the farm workers were working in a brightly lit area of field,

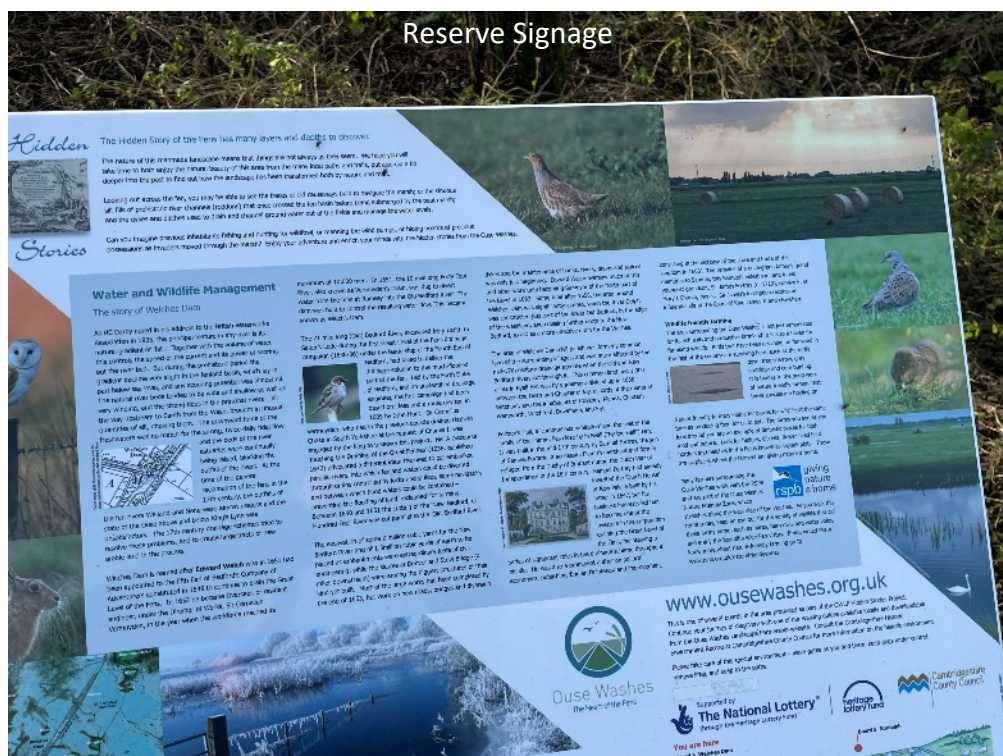
complete with toilet facility, caravan cover and canvas sided transportation vehicles plus a rest area cum rain shelter. These guys had already beaten me to their start point, and they were busy getting the vegetables out of the ground ready for Christmas shoppers. Over their heads mixed groups of Greylag Geese and Canada Geese honked loudly as they made their first excursions out to further afield grazing or wetland sites. Similar behaviour but separate in many ways to their cousins the Swans whom with they do not travel in tandem with.

Just after 08:00 a nice pairing flew down the washes towards Mepal - a splendid pair of Cranes. I assume they were a pair of adults, but there has been between 30-40 this past year between Peterborough and the Norfolk colony, around Lakenheath. Cranes are a speciality of this region, breeding in well protected sites. They were flying very strongly at 100-200' and never looked like stopping.

A pair of Marsh Harries were quartering the raised edges of the fields, leaving the only grass, vegetation and high grass filled fence line above water. It must be hard searching for voles in flooded conditions, and I guess they look elsewhere as well as the marshes for their catch. This soon became apparent; a prey species was Teal, as a solitary drake cut-off from the huge flock was twisting, spinning, and sinking, submerging itself under water to evade the 2 spearing pairs of legs from the 2 Marsh Harriers. I for one did not give the Teal much chance! I thought he would get exhausted and give up or be too weak to continue the fight. But he did battle on and plunge dive away from them both. Only resurfacing when he had to gasp for air. This fight went on for a good 8-10 minutes then lo' and behold his chances got worse as a juvenile Peregrine saw the kaffuffle and went to explore the chances of an easy meal? I don't think the Harriers were for giving up on their quarry just yet, and they saw the Peregrine off. Whereupon shortly after a couple of further plunge dives, the Teal arose out of the water and took flight away from the Harriers and made a break for it flying swiftly to join the myriad of other Ducks to live another day.

A flock of waders caught my eye as they sped tightly grouped down the washes. Possibly Redshank Ruff and or Greenshank? Most certainly a good-sized waders with some small ones tucked in the flock. I trained Stevie's scope on a muddy gateway and there they were, all together probing for invertebrates, molluscs, or worms. A count of Dunlin (12), Redshank (6), Ruff (13). They were all at a very long-scoping distance, but with sufficient views to make out the winter plumages on the waders: an interesting 20 mins watching them. All in their winter finery and they seemed pretty content to have found a suitable feeding site. It was around this point that the warden, Paul Harrington, came into the hide with his friend, a small

terrier to snap about the hide as was his way. The warden was very knowledgeable and keen to see what I had put in my book. He also brought me a slice of luck as a male Peregrine was found by yours-truly on a higher strip of land not far from where some deer were resting. He explained the regular counts they do there on the washes with their regular morning walks summary totals, but all monthly counts were more serious and contributed not only to their administration but also aligned to WeBS monthly counts.



On the walk back to the car the wardens tipped me off that there was a small party of Brambling in with the finches in the osiers near the pumping station and 3 females, were located alongside 12 Chaffinch in the tall trees standing in the flooded margins on the banking. There were no further highlights but my list for the day totalled 45 species mostly the usual fare apart from the above.

AVIAN FLU Check

On the way back out of the reserve there was a dead Whooper Swan lying in the fringes of an old, ploughed field and on the edge of the new raised banking further SE from the road some 500-700 m from the road. I just had to investigate for the obvious reasons. did it have a neck collar or possibly leg rings? Could it have hit wires (in which case I could look for injury)? Many swans in this region fall this fate. As it transpired, I found none of the above but as a precaution against Avian 'Bird-flu' I had my gloves and face mask on. Lifting the corpse by the two legs and webbed feet, I slowly turned it over to find no signs of obvious trauma, so I suspected Bird-Flu was a probable cause of death. However, it was an adult so could have been an unwell or aged bird. On reaching home after I had tweeted an Army friend and local fellow birder @jammyjim, who advised that I should report its whereabouts to DEFRA. After a quick web search, I called them and passed on the details over the phone. The lady on the other end said they were unlikely to investigate as it was not a group of sick swans, or as you get with chickens and poultry flocks, large numbers of unwell birds. They would most certainly investigate contamination of a large or semi-large flock, and this may well be just the one bird. Either way I felt the wardens should also know so I called them and passed on the information. Interestingly on 1st January 2022 on my RAFOS Bird-count day, the Whooper's corpse was still there. So perhaps, one left for the Buzzards or Kites in the area.

Well, that is about it on my update for you on a good birding site with excellent new spacious hides, if you are in the region of Cambridgeshire. It is drivable but be prepared for uneven and narrow fen roads with the possibility of bottoming out your sump guard or worse! Drive SLOWLY. Also, a description of how my winters day's birding went. Considering that it was very cold and I was up and about very early; it was a very pleasant day and great to see the reserve again. It also served as a prompt and a base to start the Bird-count to get a wide variety of species numbers in early. I headed home about 3 p.m. But it was terrific to get access for the first time in nearly 2 years and to get some decent birding done with no distracters on The Ouse Washes. Just as I like it.



Akrotiri Birding

By FS Scott Drinkel

Another summer trip courtesy of the RAF, where I spent a couple of months in Cyprus - and very nice it was too! While my post made it difficult to leave work and the operations tempo being such that kept me and my guys gainfully employed for many hours a day, I could get a few hours away maybe twice a month. Not knowing the area very well (after 30 years served, this is my first deployment to Cyprus where I didn't simply transit through), and not having any opportunity to travel out with likeminded individuals, I generally satisfied myself with visits to Akrotiri Marsh, with each visit yielding something extra, made it all the better to go back to it! Moreover, I was particularly struck by how 'lucky' I was, by the number of sightings that occurred on a single occasion in my time.

The sun was very intense, especially in the early part of my tour, and I would head out straight after breakfast (around 06:30 hours) to get out before many folks were on the road and before the sun got particularly high, which likely affected the specific sightings I saw (and indeed didn't see but have been aware of their presence by other sighting reports)! For the purposes of this report, I will refer to species in **bold** font, with birds I have not previously seen (my lifers) in the wild will be enhanced as ***italic bold***.



Akrotiri Marsh offers a couple of opportunities, and I will try to refer to this map. A small car park (1) allows access to a Tower hide (2) overlooking the rather tall and unkempt reeds. Heading around the Marsh via the road (about 1 km) offers access to a small, exposed marsh area (which was my favourite place to loiter (3)) and further, a second ground level hide (4), but this offered little as the reeds were too high and too close to the hide to be able to see anything. Further on still is a small gravel pit area (5). Nearby was an apiary (6) and an overview of woodland (7) where more local birders have reported some other sightings (1 chap reported and photographed an incredible list of birds in one afternoon: 31 species

that I had not yet seen (contact was made and directions to his 'spot' obtained with thanks, but the time of day I was available to attend did not yield the results that he had!)

The birding was a wonderful experience for me though. Initially I contacted Colin Richardson, on the suggestion of Mike Blair. He was very helpful in offering areas I could visit within my restrictions (the reason for my trip to Cyprus meant I was confined to the Sovereign Base Area (SBA)) and he passed a link to his book, which I duly purchased. Very useful it is too!

Despite all the useful guides, my fragile birding knowledge has been exposed more than once, being unable to positively identify a female **House Sparrow** and **Common Kestrel**. There are reasons why: behaviours being different, colouration and lighting making a difference, being hot and bothered, fatigue and of course the obvious one – I am not a good 'in the field' birder, relying on my images too much. Nevertheless - shamed! 12

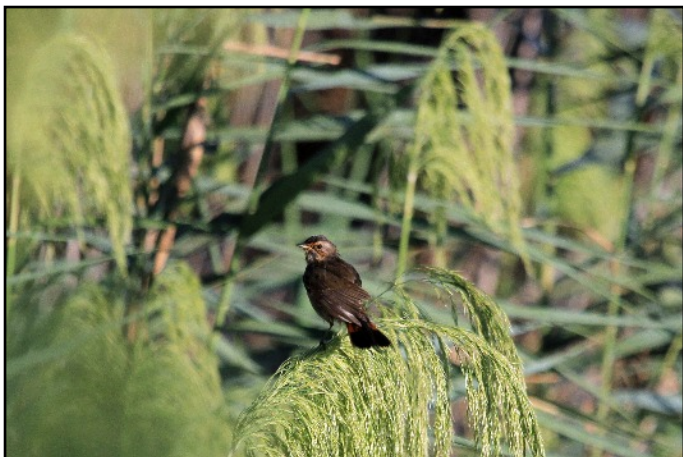
Here is a table of all my photographed sightings, lifers are highlighted by italics.

<i>European Bee-eater</i>	Garganey	Moorhen	Temminck's Stint
Blackcap	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>European Nightjar</i>	Stonechat
<i>Bluethroat</i>	Goldfinch	<i>Golden Oriole</i>	Barn Swallow
<i>Honey Buzzard</i>	Little Grebe	<i>Chukar Partridge</i>	Teal
<i>Steppe Buzzard</i>	Greenfinch		Common Tern
<i>Zitting Cisticola</i>	<i>Yellow-legged Gull</i>	Ringed Plover	Sandwich Tern
Coot	Marsh Harrier	Water Rail	Great Tit
<i>Spotted Crake</i>	<i>Pallid Harrier</i>	<i>European Roller</i>	<i>Black-headed Wagtail</i>
Hooded Crow	Black-crowned Night Heron	Common Sandpiper	Yellow Wagtail
Collared Dove	Grey Heron	<i>Wood Sandpiper</i>	Willow Warbler
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Squacco Heron</i>	Shag	Cetti's Warbler
Cattle Egret	<i>Hoopoe</i>	<i>Lesser Grey Shrike</i>	Reed Warbler
<i>Great Egret</i>	<i>Glossy Ibis</i>	<i>Red-backed Shrike</i>	<i>Sardinian Warbler</i>
Little Egret	Kestrel	Common Snipe	Northern Wheatear-
<i>Eleanora's Falcon</i>	Kingfisher	House Sparrow	Whinchat
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Spur-winged Lapwing</i>	<i>Spanish Sparrow</i>	Woodpigeon
<i>Greater Flamingo</i>	<i>Crested Lark</i>	European Spoonbill	
Spotted Flycatcher	Mallard	<i>Black-winged Stilt</i>	
<i>Black Francolin</i>	House Martin	Little Stint	

Areas that I particularly enjoyed visiting were:

Tower Hide (2) – this was a nice place, in the shade, that offered quite a nice quite high above the reeds. Here many birds would simply 'come to you' – I have had good views of **Marsh Harrier**, **Little Grebe**, **Mallard**, **Kingfisher**, **Zitting Cisticola**. It was from here I got my only view of a **Bluethroat**, and true to form, didn't actually get to see the bird's front and its namesake coloration! The height of the vantage point also allowed me my only view of the **Black Francolin** – the characteristic call in the absence of all other persons in the marsh allowed me to slowly scan the fields and ultimately track the elusive birds down.

To get to the hide from the car park (1), I walked about 300 yards along the track. This offered its own little joys. One time (and only one time) I was startled as I walked by a large marsh-side tree, a huge cacophony as a flock of large birds lifted and circled. Up with the camera and start clicking before I even identified about 25 **Black Crowned Night Herons** that were roosting. Other notable events or sightings for me would be a **Turtle Dove** in a tree about 50 metres away but not photographed. The time that I felt I needed to duck as a **Marsh Harrier** flew at head height around the corner of the track before banking sharply away. I even had to wait for a couple of seconds for it to be far enough away to get a full frame photo! One of my favourite encounters was with a **European Nightjar**, at about 10.00 in the morning. It was quite happy to pose for a little bit, before merging with the reed beds.



Bluethroat



Honey Buzzard



Common Kestrel



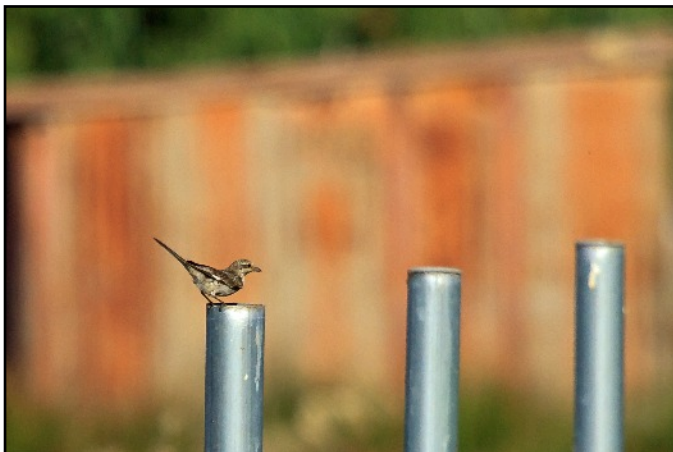
Zitting Cisticola



European Bee-eater



Crested Lark



Red-Backed Shrike



Lesser Grey Shrike

Close to the car park on the main road, the Marsh came very close to the fence line (3). This was probably my favourite spot to stand and loiter and gave me some of my most fondly remembered encounters. This pool was home to about 10 cows regularly, slowly meandering through the soft moist ground, obviously to the benefit of many species. **White Wagtail, Black-Headed Yellow Wagtail** (M.f.feldegg), **Squacco Heron, Cattle Egret, Little Egret, Hoopoe** (not my first sighting, as previously viewed on a different OOA, but first opportunity for photograph, duly taken 12 – I so love Hoopoes!), **Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Spur Winged Lapwings, Glossy Ibis, Grey Heron**. While here and taking a photo of one of the ‘littlies’ a bird with unusual flight caught my attention, and luckily I managed to get my camera to bear and got off 2 shots. It flummoxed me for a while (and I wasn’t embarrassed asking for ID assistance with this one) but it turned out to be a female **Golden Oriole** that I was chuffed to have seen!

To get to the low-level hide (4), you walk a path between 2 fields, at 90 degrees from the roadway. These fields offered a couple of nice birds as opposed to the hide itself: **Common Sandpiper, Grey Wagtail, Barn Swallows** and **Feral Pigeons** in abundance, but it was here I managed to see my first ever Shrike, a **Lesser Grey Shrike** to be specific, soon to be joined at the opposite end of the field by **Red Backed Shrike**.

Continuing up the roadway towards the Gravel Pit area (between (4) & (5), the fields on the left offered a couple of other opportunities, A nice **Common Kestrel** (I could identify this one – it was later at a different location that I struggled <sigh>!), a lovely charm of **Goldfinch** and a **Whinchat** (again, while ‘seen’ on Islay before, I did not get a photo...I have now!)

Finally reaching the small pool (5) at the end of the marsh, I was rewarded with clear views of a single juvenile **Greater Flamingo** and a lovely photo opportunity. My finicky nature did cause me some minor frustration, in that I struggled to get a photo of just the Flamingo...the area being shared with up to 4 lovely **European Spoonbill** which presented well and deserved dedicated photos itself!

Early September, I was joyous at seeing a pair of distant **European Bee Eaters** such lovely birds (and heart-breaking to hear how much these birds (and others) are hunted on the island...thankfully the SBA is a safe haven for many species). Over the next couple of weeks their numbers had increased, and they roosted near the beehives at (6), providing some wonderful views, their gorgeous colours filling the skeletal trees, and comms lines running along the road.

Outside of the Marsh, I did spend a little time wandering the coastline on the Base itself, with the South Coast cliffs being home to several **Eleonora’s Falcons**. It was very therapeutic to simply sit watching their display as they rose before stooping down towards the gloriously clear water around the peninsular. I used to do about a 5km ‘round trip’ that took in these cliffs, which gave views of more common birds to the areas, but nevertheless they were often ‘new’ to me. **Crested Lark** would often sit atop the trees and sing their heart out. It was here that my shameful **Kestrel** (of which I include a photo) – I have just seen it take a lizard for lunch (looking at the size of the Lizard, it looks like a **Starry Agama**!) This bird looked quite large, larger than I have attributed to Kestrels before, at the end of a long workday and at the end of my 5km round trip. I was hot and thirsty! The bird landed on the aerials of the BFBS studio, I guess to secure its catch. As it lifted and flew almost overhead, I got this photo and never have I seen the barring and chest markings so clear, and I truly think the clarity was such that I did not consider Kestrel, I assumed it was something unfamiliar to me...lesson learned (although I think we only ‘identify’ lessons now....)!

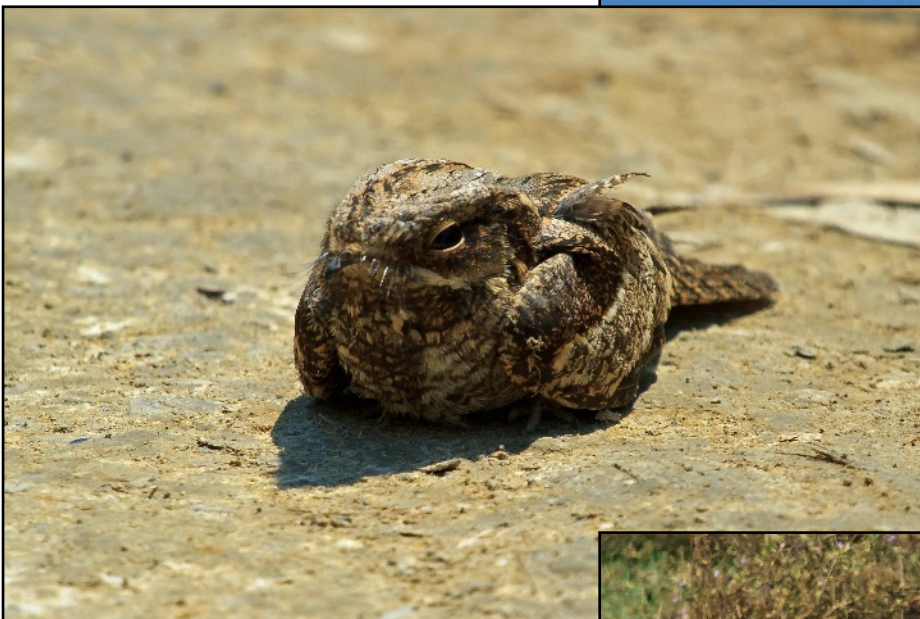
Around here I also saw a couple of **Northern Wheatear**, of course they would be “Northern” as I am quite familiar with those, and there are a few other more local species, yet to be found by yours truly. I was very impressed at the sight of the **Sardinian Warbler** here as well, a single chance occurrence as the bird flew in, rested for a few seconds and was off within a minute, but at least a couple of snaps were taken.



Greater Flamingo



Golden Oriole



European Nightjar



Spur-winged Lapwing

In the scrub land, I have seen a couple of **Chukar Partridge**. They are quick to disappear when I have my camera, but I had an experience at work where one was quite happy to stand 30 feet from me, almost mocking knowing I had no way of grabbing a photo that my list making needs urge me to have!! The most common photo I have of these birds is of their posterior as they flush away from me! Just as frustrating was a group of 5 **Honey Buzzards** wheeling above my place of work early on one morning (only one morning). Thankfully this frustration didn't last, as I was able to grab images of one wheeling above me on camp while out with my camera.

The final place I spent any time was a hide at the end of Lady's mile very near to the port of Limassol. **Cetti's Warblers, Spotted Flycatcher, Kingfisher, and Grey Herons** were particularly common. I shared the hide one morning with another Brit, generally talking of experiences and areas to visit before he left. Within 2 minutes of his movement a delightful **Spotted Crake** emerged from the reeds and performed admirably to let me grab some images.

As stated, I did not spend as much time birding in Cyprus as I wanted but must also confess that I knew I was not going there for a holiday and am pretty impressed with the down time I was able to grab, which I firmly believe was maximised at a relatively limited but nonetheless rewarding set of locations.

Cannot wait for the next time, which should be a different season...



Spotted Crake



Common Kingfisher



Eurasian Spoonbill

Chukar Partridge



Eleonora's Falcon



“It’s The Final Countdown”

Keith Cowieson, RAFOS Field Activities Liaison Officer

Expedition SIMMER DIM 2021 – Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) expedition to north Mainland Shetland, June 2021



Bonxie¹ nest & eggs (Sullom Voe Oil & Gas Terminal in background) – Keith Cowieson

As a follow up to RAFOS’ successful 2019 Shetland outing in support of JNCC’s Seabirds Count (Cowieson, 2019), Daisy Burnell, the overall JNCC Seabirds Count coordinator, and Will Miles, the Regional Coordinator for the Shetland Isles and Seabird Group’s Seabird Census member, requested we reprise our efforts in 2021, with the aim of visiting as many of the unsurveyed grid squares in the parishes of Delting, Lunnasting, Nesting, & Northmavine in north Mainland Shetland as possible. We had made an excellent start in this vast, remote, sparsely-populated area of peatlands in 2019,

¹ The local Northern Isles name for great skua.

surveying some 149 grid squares, and this last push would help fill in many of the holes in coverage. The daunting challenge this year was not only the physical effort of tramping over the peat bog and peat hag-dominated landscapes, but also the precautions required to ensure the expedition complied in all respects with the prevailing Covid-19 guidance. In this latter respect Scottish Governmental guidance for carrying out fieldwork under the ‘voluntary or charitable activities’ exemptions, and recommended JNCC & BTO procedures for volunteers, proved invaluable.

This year we deployed a 12-strong joint RAFOS, Royal Navy Bird Watching Society (RNBWS) and Army Ornithological Society (AOS) team to carry out the survey, arriving in Lerwick from Aberdeen in mid-June, suitably jabbed, masked, booted and spurred. Our task in this last season of the Seabirds Count, to mop up uncovered inland grid squares, again concentrating on inland breeding skua and gulls. Half of the team members were already familiar with survey methodology, predominant topography and habitat from 2018 & 19, so we were able to hit the ground running and conduct on-the-job training/mentoring for our new volunteer surveyors where required.

Seabirds Count Priorities. The priority for our Seabirds Count work on Mainland Shetland remained squarely focussed on skua and inland gull colonies, as some of these species are those giving rise to great conservation concern. The Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) Report 1986-2019 (JNCC 2021) records that Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) numbers have declined by 70% since Seabird 2000 to around 785 breeding pairs (Woodward *et al*, 2020) – the greatest decline of any UK breeding seabird over the period. Conversely, great skua (*Stercorarius skua*) had prospered, increasing by 18% since Seabird 2000 (JNCC 2018). Again, we looked forward to discovering the level of changes between Seabird 2000 observations and our own.

Observations. So, what did we observe during our survey and what Lessons were we able to identify for future breeding seabird surveyors? The task was simple, walk as many of the remote, nominated grid squares visited during Seabird 2000 as time, weather and resources permitted, and conduct a snap-shot, single visit survey. Our aggregated 2019 & 21 observations are tabulated below, alongside Seabird 2000 results:

**Changes in inland breeding seabird populations on north Mainland Shetland
(from 347 Grid Squares surveyed), 2000 v 2019 & 2021²**

Species	Seabird 2000	Seabirds Count (2019 & 2021)	% Change
Arctic Skua	47 AOT	28 AOT	-40
Great Skua	116 AOT	196 AOT	+69
Great Black-backed Gull	61 AOT	93 AON/AOT	+52
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	2 AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	6 AOT	50 AOT	+733
Common Gull	95 AOT	295 AON/AOT	+211
Black-headed Gull	21 AOT	34 AON/AOT	+62
Arctic Tern	0	632 AON/AOT	N/A

Source: Seabird Monitoring Programme On-line Database <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>

² Health warning – 2019 & 2021 figures not yet checked by JNCC

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



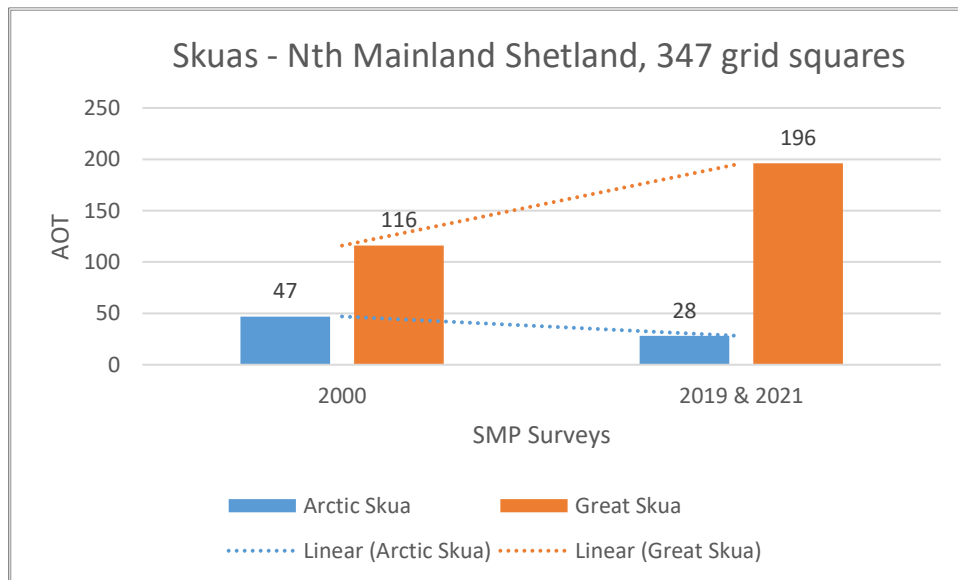
Great black-backed gull chicks – Keith Cowieson



Common gull incubating on sea-defence wire basket, Sullom Voe – Martin Alabaster

Skua observations.

Our skua observations from the 347 grid squares surveyed again mirrored the recent SMP trends, if not the modest scale of the national great skua increase. Arctic skua numbers were down 60% over the period from 47 to 28 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT), while great skua numbers had increased by an impressive 69% from 116 to 196 AOTs.



Changes in skua populations on north Mainland Shetland, 2000 v 2019 & 21

Where great skuas bred in the greatest density, Arctic skuas were absent, and although no ‘top down’ intra-guild predation by great skua of Arctic skuas, eggs or chicks was observed, the ‘top down’ pressure of the burgeoning population of competing/predatory great skua does conform to the broad thrust of the ‘combined bottom-up / top-down pressures’ effect judged to have led to catastrophic Arctic skua declines in Scotland (Perkins *et al*, 2018). Additionally, the timing of our survey in 2021 was such that most skuas pairs had either just hatched or were on the cusp of hatching, so we did not witness any of the distressing high level of bonxie chick and adult mortality, possibly from an unidentified strain of bird flu, reported later in the season from Fair Isle, Foula, Unst and elsewhere in Shetland (Pennington, 2021).



Bonxie nest, egg and chick with egg tooth – Keith Cowieson

This year, many of our designated grid squares were on ridges paralleling the numerous voes³ that cut into the heavily indented northern coastline. On the peatlands atop these ridges, pairs of great skua were spaced every 500-900m, and not below in the boggy flats and valleys that held the occasional pair of Arctic skua. On one particular western morainic flat in more glaciated terrain, a small colony of 5 pairs of bonxies were found within a 300m² area, with a nesting pair of Arctic skua within 250m, located typically in a boggy area by a run-off burn. This was the densest concentration of breeding skua encountered.



Arctic skua nest, egg and chick with egg tooth – Keith Cowieson

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

Sadly, Arctic skua territories were few and far between and, as witnessed in 2019, easily overlooked, as the birds are relatively undemonstrative, unless surveyors were heading directly towards nest, eggs or chicks. This reinforces our impression that Arctic skua numbers in such habitat are highly likely to be under-recorded. Breeding Arctic skua pairs often only became obvious when surveyors were bearing down on them, often within 30 metres or so, despite having scoped or glassed the area at regular intervals on the approach.

In stark contrast, the behaviour of their larger great skua cousins was much more obvious with off-the-nest birds flying out to inspect approaching surveyors at ranges of 2-300 metres, often revealing previously unnoticed birds and territories. In this respect our findings mirror those of previous years - transect walking is the only sure way of surveying the bulk of breeding skua territories in rolling peatland landscapes, and even then a proportion of Arctic skua pairs is inevitably going to be overlooked. In north Mainland Shetland, the peat hag-dominated landscape essentially rendered

³ Voe is the local name for an inlet in the Shetland Isles.

any attempt at accurately surveying skuas from vantage points redundant, due to the significant areas of 'dead ground'⁴ hidden by folds and dips in the undulating landscape.



Typical north Mainland Shetland peat hag and moorland terrain (with Sullom Voe Terminal and Ronas Hill in background) – Keith Cowieson

Top tips for surveyors. Aggressive nest defence by skuas, gulls and terns is intimidating for experienced and novice breeding seabird surveyors alike. Although unusual to be physically struck, it is nevertheless an unnerving experience for many, and some recommend not only wearing stout headgear but also holding a walking pole or suchlike above head-height, as birds invariably attack the highest point of the intruder. Over the years I have found that facing attacking birds, and looking them directly in the eye will invariably cause them to veer away or pull up short of the observer. Conversely, turning one's back on the birds can lead to being hit, occasionally – and I have had the odd 'bump' to prove it.

Another observation is that the ferocity of the mobbing attack, and the closeness of the pass, can often be another cue to proximity of nest or chicks. The closer and more frequent the attacks from bonxie, the 'hotter' the surveyor is. With Arctic skua, the risk of being hit is much less but a good giveaway to proximity to nest or chicks is the extent to which the 'skootie alan'⁵ flutter closer and closer around one's head, or perform a 'dying duck' distraction display around one's feet. Again, the closer and more frequent, the 'hotter' the surveyor is. My recommendations to fellow breeding seabird surveyors then is to face attacking seabirds directly, if possible, and look them straight in the eye as you make your way gingerly through ternery, gullery and skua colonies. The more demonstrative they become, the closer to nest and/or chicks you are. That said, clearly one should not linger in the vicinity when the birds are distressed, only remaining long enough to record the nest or ring the young, particularly if the weather is cold, windy or wet.

⁴ An area of ground hidden from an observer due to undulations in the land.

⁵ The local Northern Isles name for Arctic skua.



The author attracting close Bonxie attention, indicative of nearby nest, eggs or young – Martin Alabaster



Dark phase Arctic Skua distraction display – Keith Cowieson

Finally, vivid patches of well-manured, green plots in otherwise uniform brown peat and heathland-dominated landscapes are another good giveaway for locating great skua (and great black-backed

gull) territories and nest sites. These invariably indicate historical breeding sites and lookout posts, well-fertilised by guano and the decomposing corpses of prey over the years.

Seabird Nest Incorporation of Debris. In 2018, Dr Nina O’Hanlon of the University of the Highlands and Islands requested that surveyors note any seabird nest incorporation of plastic during their work, in order that the proportion of nests affected could be ascertained. This innovative and worthy, topical initiative grew like Topsy, and proved so successful, spawning a website of its own, not only cataloguing plastic incorporation in seabird nests, but also the presence of other debris in all bird species’ nests, worldwide (Birds & Debris, 2021). Moreover, researchers have found that such opportunistic data collection of nest incorporation of debris by seabirds is a cost-effective way of detecting changes in the prevalence of debris in the marine environment across a large geographic range (O’Hanlon *et al*, 2021). On Mainland Shetland, we found that many shorelines on both survey areas contained varying amounts of plastic and other litter - noticeably worse by fish & shellfish farms - and several Arctic tern nests were discovered this year in wrack & flotsam-littered shingle beaches, containing thread-like plastic, plastic rope, metal wire and other debris. The terns’ nests were part of a small colony of 12 pairs, sadly surrounded by, and interspersed with, the detritus of fish farm and other activity.



Arctic tern colony’s plastic-littered, shingle-beach habitat – Keith Cowieson



Arctic tern nests amongst the plastic rope, thread and other plastic – Brian Lyon

Non-target bird species and other wildlife. Shetland's appeal is not limited to seabirds either, there were good numbers of wetland birds and waterfowl in the survey area, such as eider, red-breasted merganser, tufted duck, teal, breeding wild grey-lag goose, wigeon, locally common red-throated diver and a pair of breeding whooper swan. Resident breeding raptors were scarce, although we were fortunate to come across 2 pairs of breeding merlin. Breeding waders however abounded, including curlew, dunlin, golden plover, lapwing, oystercatcher, redshank, ringed plover, snipe and numerous whimbrel. Passerines and doves included blackbird, collared dove, dunnoek, hooded crow, house sparrow, skylark, meadow & rock pipit, raven, rock dove, skylark, starling, swallow, twite, woodpigeon and wren, as well as several pairs of red grouse. Notwithstanding the recent reported declines in some populations of widespread breeding birds in Shetland (Hughes *et al*, 2021), for those accustomed to depauperate mainland UK populations, Shetland offers an impressive and diverse assemblage of birds with numbers of waders being especially abundant, perhaps reflecting the reduced suite of native mammalian predators on the islands. Added wildlife bonuses included an otter frequenting the bottom of the garden by our accommodation and a surprisingly good sprinkling of mountain hare in our survey areas.



Mountain hare leveret– Keith Cowieson



Otter with prey in the garden – Keith Cowieson

Conclusion. In sum, 198 SMP Grid Squares were surveyed by RAFOS, RNBWS & AOS personnel in 2021 making a total of 347 SMP grid squares covered in 2 seasons work on north Mainland Shetland. The sites ranged in character from 300ft vertical cliffs, through tundra-like heather moorland and peat hags & bog, to stretches of sandy and shingle beaches. In 2021, personnel covered between 5-11 miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 32 species lists for BTO's BirdTrack from 13 separate 10 Km squares. A total of 591 BirdTrack records were created in the survey areas with 73 species recorded. Meanwhile, 15 x whimbrel priority squares were also surveyed and 17 x whimbrel breeding records and other opportunistic whimbrel sightings were passed to the National Whimbrel Survey 2021 coordinator.



Whimbrel 'trilling' – Keith Cowieson

Additionally, several nest record cards covering a variety of species were also generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme; 5 x Nest Incorporation of Debris records were posted on the Birds & Debris website (4 x Arctic tern, 1 x raven); 8 x Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database; and several moth records forwarded to the Shetland Natural Heritage Project Officer.

Finally, the RAFOS Chairman and Committee would like to express their sincere gratitude to both The Seabird Group and RNBWS for their generous grants towards the costs of our 2021 and previous expeditions. All participants have found the experience of tremendous value and benefit and learnt significant new skills in the process. We are now all looking forward, rather wistfully and longingly, to the 5th National Periodic Census of Breeding Seabirds in the UK and Ireland - in 2030 or so? - and to reading the results of Seabirds Count findings in Daisy *et al*'s forthcoming tome.....



SIMMER DIM 21 team – Martin Alabaster

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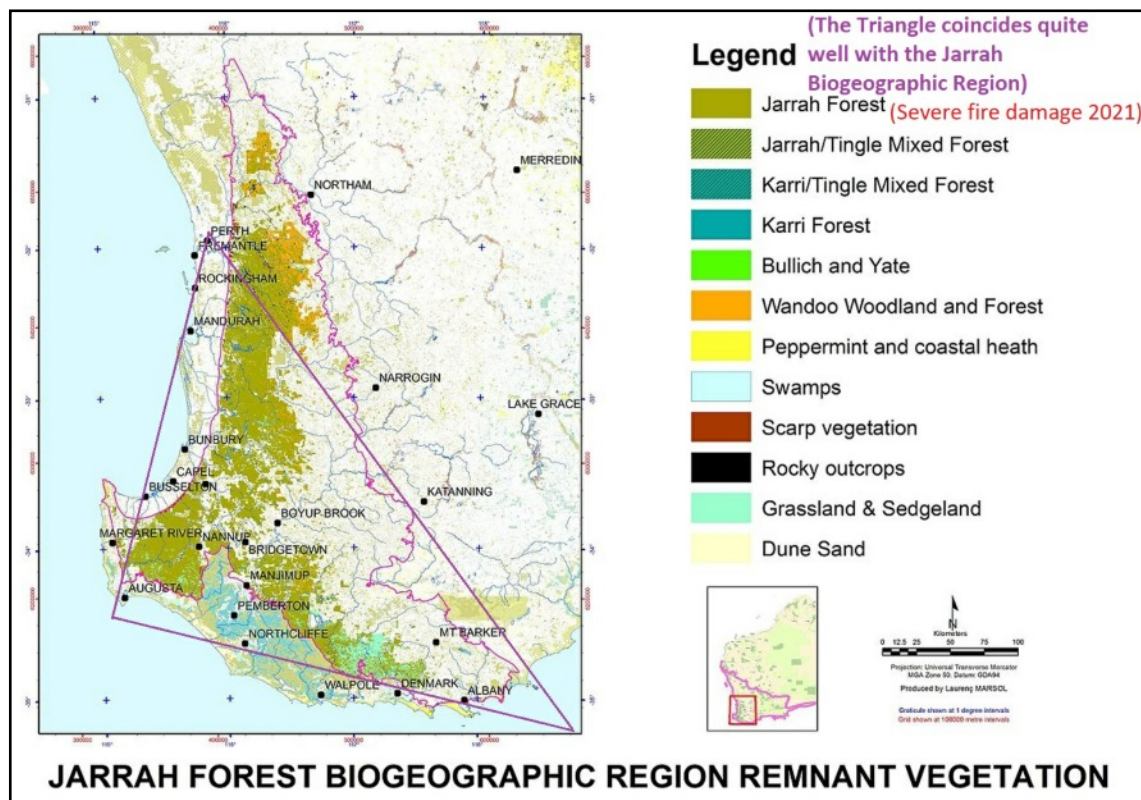
The Starting Triangle - an Introduction to Birding in Australia

By Mike Blair

If you haven't undertaken a birding adventure, if you haven't visited Australia before, or if you haven't visited the south-west of Australia, you just might find this tale interesting, useful, or even inspiring. It concerns a narrow approximate triangle in Western Australia with Perth at its apex and with Cape Leeuwin and Cheynes Beach at its base. Post-pandemic, it might just be the place to lift your spirits! Perhaps the best overall time to visit is August to September, the Australian Spring, although the best sea watching period at Cape Leeuwin is June & July, tailing off a bit by September; mornings on windy (and often cold) days tend to provide good numbers.

Travelling to Australia brings time-shifting disorientation, and so to ease your adjustment to jet lag, it's best to fly by the quickest route and to decompress in accommodation that's close to good and varied birding. Routes to Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, or Adelaide are much longer than the route to Perth, by 4 to 6 hours even if your aircraft stops to refuel en route. The direct Qantas Heathrow to Perth route inaugurated in 2019 increases that advantage, the outbound leg taking only 16+ hours and the return leg 17+ hours. There is a good basic hotel that not only has terrific birding close to it and Perth Botanic Gardens 30 minutes' walk above it (it does involve the Kokoda steps!), but almost outside is the first bus stop you can you free of charge to visit the city! This is Sullivan's Hotel (B&B included: excellent evening meal available as extra), well-known to and frequented by birders and bird tours: reception is open 24 hours a day.

You'll want to rent a vehicle if you're to explore the Triangle. The Thrifty rental company does have an agency in Perth city, on Murray Street. Although they also have an agency at the airport, you might not want to have to cross the whole city on intimidating freeways immediately after you've landed. What we did was to take a taxi from the airport to the hotel and spend a few days just walking, birding locally. There are also several chauffeur-driven businesses that you can book on-line for little more than a taxi, so that you don't spend time in queues. We used these days also to purchase The Australian Bird Guide (\$49.99 Aus), an inexpensive TomTom Australian Satnav (About \$80 Aus: rental vehicles often have satnavs, but these can be quirky, of limited coverage and not simple to use) and a cheap Australian mobile phone that the shop loaded with the Telstra tourist month-long card, from which all Australian and international calls could be made free, at a cost of about \$50 Aus. We later took the bus into town and walked to Murray Street and got our car. Warning! Bone up on Western Australia's traffic & parking laws beforehand...





Uncredited:
Wikipedia
Creative
Commons





Now, let's concentrate on the birding trip! We're off to Albany, a relatively straightforward drive of about 4½ hours from Perth to the south coast, where there is ample cabin or hotel accommodation. Frenchman Bay is where the Anzac troopships assembled in World War 1 before setting off for the Western Front and Gallipoli. Today, it is the haunt of whales - there are many tourist boats that specialise in ethical whale-watching. However, there is a stunning small reserve close to the coast, Lake Stebbings, the car park for which lies on Golf Links Road. A circular path should provide you with a wide selection of birds, some quite rare.



Red-capped Parrot *Purpureicephalus spurius*



Red-eared Firetail *Stagonopleura oculata*



Australasian
Swamphen
*Porphyrio
melanotus ssp
bellus*

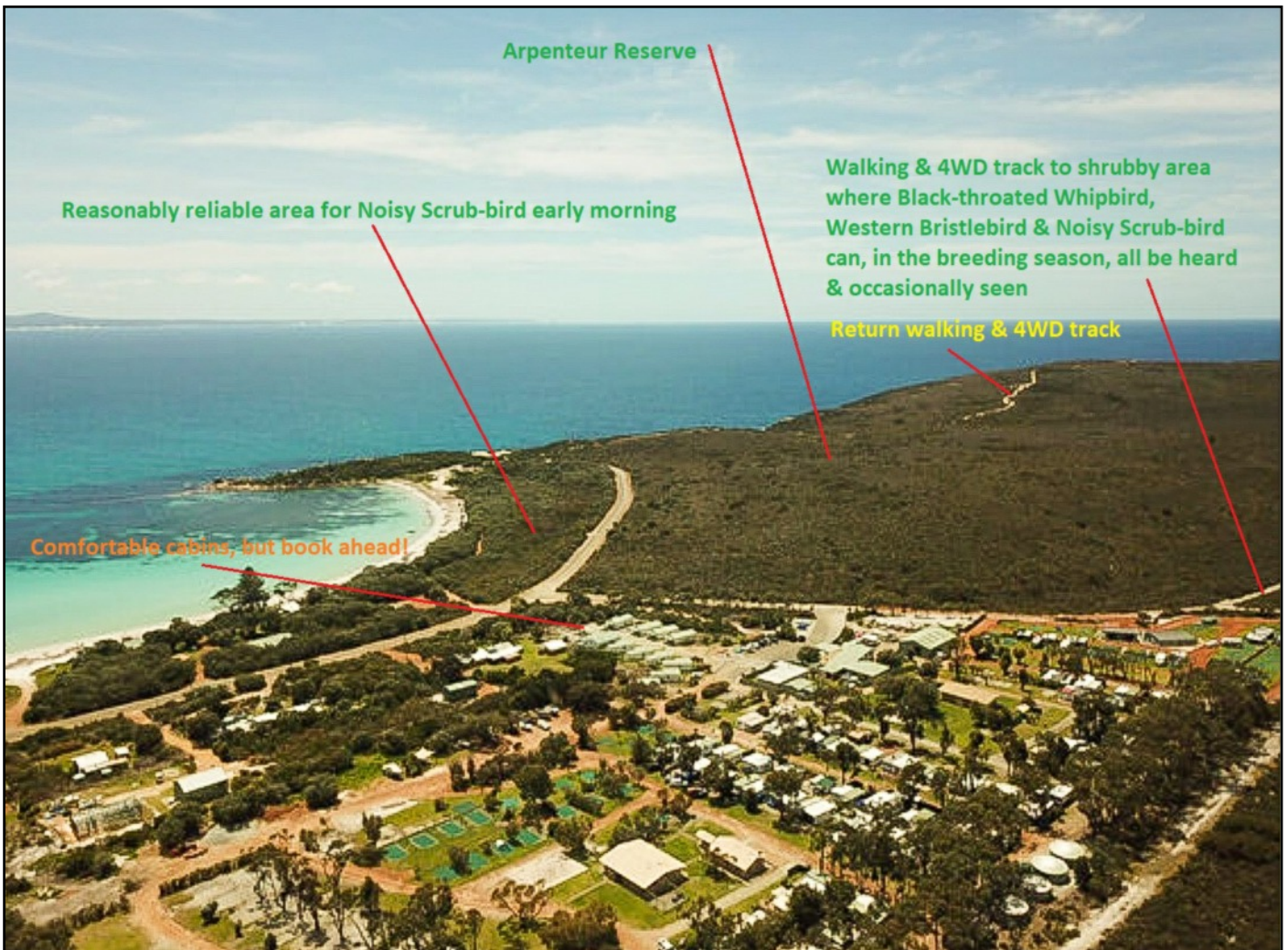


Musk Duck *Biziura lobata*, male.
© JJ Harrison Wikipedia Creative Commons



Musk Duck *Biziura lobata*, female

From Albany, it's some 65km east to Cheynes Beach via Route 1, the South Coast Highway for 48km turning south to Cheynes Beach. The Cheynes Beach Caravan Park also has a small number of cabins, and it would be prudent to book ahead. It adjoins the Arpenteur Reserve where some of the splendid walking tracks are shared by adventurous 4WD drivers who often get stranded. This tiny area of less than 4km² is where you can, if you're lucky encounter three of Australia's rarest birds, all of which are reluctant to some degree to fly, which means that you are likely to see them as scurrying LBJs. In September, they often call for lengthy periods, each one being quite distinctive and so it's essential to have a good Australian Bird app on your UK mobile (if you've bought an inexpensive Aussie phone, it may not have the capacity to download the app). There is a small valley along the 4WD track whose eastern slope is a blaze of Banksias in flower at this time of year: this is where you'll hear the birds calling. The whole area is part of the Waychinicup National Park. In addition, the Caravan Park, the hamlet gardens and the shore-side scrub are alive with bird species.



The Big Three at Cheynes
Beach: in 2nd place is
Western Bristlebird
Dasyornis longirostris



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Galah *Eolophus roseicapilla* ssp. *roseicapilla*

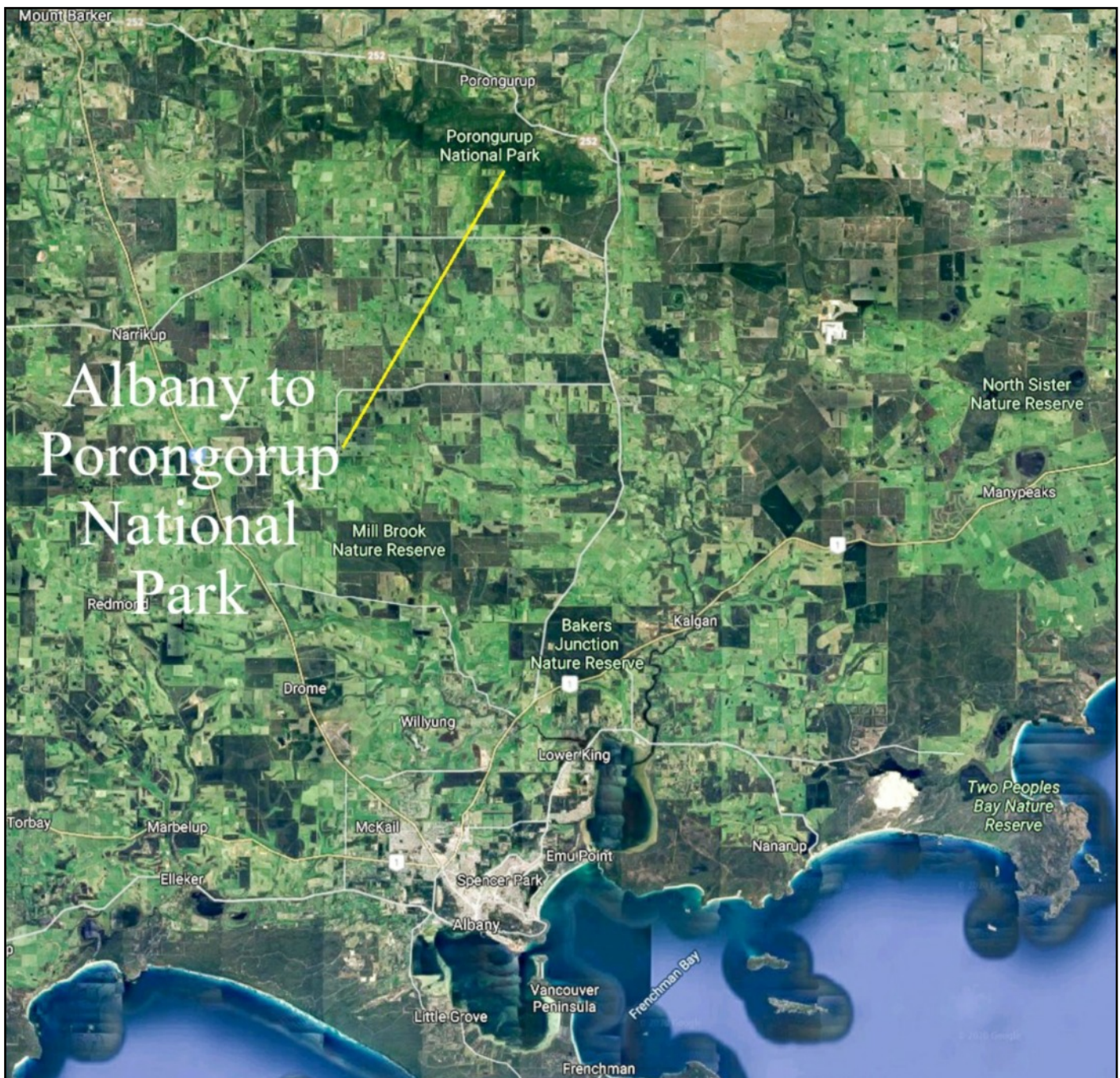


Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

Sooty Oystercatcher *Haematopus fuliginosus*



The extensive Jarrah forests at which the early European settlers marvelled were soon diminished by agriculture, and with time the remnants became more and more fragmented by the settlers' descendants. If you take 1000 hectares comprised of these fragments, it will have fewer bird species in much lower densities than 1000 hectares of contiguous forest. That inexorable law meant that by 2001 on our first visit, a number of iconic bird species had become difficult to find. For example, the western populations of the mound-building Malleefowl have been declining steadily: the range-restricted and Jarrah-tied Baudin's Black Cockatoo (Long-billed Black Cockatoo) and the relatively commoner Carnaby's Black Cockatoo (Short-billed Black Cockatoo) of Western Australia have both been designated as Endangered. The former has become difficult to find, but the extent of forest fires since 2015 has devastated their forest habitat to the extent that they both could become extinct in the wild within decades. The species are difficult to distinguish unless seen well, but the Carnaby's is far more confiding. In forest, they can be distinguished by their contact calls, Carnaby's being more disyllabic, Baudin's trisyllabic, whose second and third notes are closer together, the third also being lower in volume. As of September 2019, the hill forest in Porongorup National Park some 40km north of Albany was the most likely place to find them and other forest specialist birds.





To complete the Triangle, we drive to Cape Leeuwin via Denmark, Walpole, Manjimup and Nannup, staying in a motel at Augusta only 8km away. The route meanders through numerous Forest Parks, Nature Reserves, State Parks and National Parks, all of which have been damaged by recent forest fires exacerbated by near-continuous drought since 2018. The small visitor centre and museum at Cape Leeuwin opens around 9am, despite the time on the signage, which normally is too late in the day to find Rock Parrot which breeds on offshore islands and islets, but often feeds on the mainland. However, at the north end of the visitors' car park, there is a network of paths to the west over rocky scrubland where a few pools of fresh water exist, and if you're lucky you may find that species not long after dawn. We had seen it in 2011 at the opposite end of its distribution in South Australia, but in 2019 we drew a blank. Cape Leeuwin is where the Great Southern Ocean meets the Indian Ocean; in calm weather, you can see a line to the southwest horizon in the ocean separating the colder waters from the warmer by the different shades of blue.





All this is based on post-pandemic life returning to something like normal, but if I have piqued your interest sufficiently for you to make tentative plans... There are plenty of helpful Aussies out there – there's a lot of good advice on such sites as Bird Forum (which is free to join). From the maps I included, you'll note the abundance of protected areas. Even if you spent two days at each such area within or bordering the Triangle, it would take you at least 3 months! Even stopping to bird for a few minutes in areas of likely habitat is often rewarding. Most Australian towns have ample open areas with lots of bushes and trees and so it's a worthwhile policy to check in to your accommodation around 4pm so that you can do some local birding.

Note that the cut-off age for vehicle rental for most Aussie firms is 75, but Thrifty state 78; there may be room for negotiating a higher insurance premium. You'll need a visa, but don't book flights before you've got it. The Australian visa system online is pretty straightforward, but don't try hiding any medical condition: if you need treatment in Australia for any pre-existing undeclared medical condition, they'll take you for every penny you've got. If you have declared a medical condition, they'll generally do their best to help as much as possible.

That said, the bird life pretty much anywhere in Australia is spectacular, but if the country and its avian inhabitants are new to you, starting with the Triangle is a pretty good way of easing yourself into it!



And so it's goodnight from me... Do go, you'll not regret it!

My Temporary Local Patch - Huntley Meadows Park

By Ian Grove

If Lamar Valley in Yellowstone is the “Serengeti of America”, then Huntley Meadows, the largest park operated by Fairfax County Park Authority, Virginia, must be the “Okavango Delta of America”, and thankfully I can call it my local patch. OK that might be a slight exaggeration, no water buffalo, but Huntley Meadows is truly an oasis of divergent wildlife in the metropolitan D.C. area and my temporary local patch for this overseas tour.

I have been asked by my American coworkers and neighbours “Do the British not study the history of America because they (*you*) lost the Revolutionary War?” I usually respond with, “My Nan’s house is older and has more history than America!” This may seem curt and impolite, but I usually go on to explain that in 1773 it was King George III on the throne and that there is 1000 years of British kings and queens before that, and some 250+ years since. We can only graze upon such a rich diversity and tapestry of British history in the six periods of lessons a week I received about history at school. I had more than enough to learn about European/World Wars, Henry VIII (his six wives), and other Kings and Queens to be taught about the colonial uprising. It is at this stage I am usually pronounced an expert in Royalty and asked for my view on the Netflix series of the Crown, and have I met the Queen!!!

History of Huntley Meadows

So, with this in mind and not digressing too far off writing about the actual wildlife at my local preserve, I thought I should start with a bit about my patches slice in American history. Americans are very proud of their short span of history, and everything seems to have a relation or context to the Revolutionary War. George Mason (1725-1792) was a Virginian plantation owner and proud American patriot and his work in writing the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Constitution of Virginia were instrumental and influential in shaping Thomas Jefferson’s writing of the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. He is though referred to as the “Forgotten Founding Father” as he refused to endorse and sign the US Constitution as it gave too much power to Central Government. This lack of endorsement resulted in his falling out with Virginian neighbour and lifelong friend George Washington the first president. Mason was more interested in the freedom of the people than the controlling power of a government, so many similarities with today’s American political and social landscape.

The land my local wildlife area now sits in formed part of Mason’s vast Virginian plantation. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s the land passed through several other owners, before ending up in the hands of the Naval Research Laboratory’s (NRL) Hybla Valley Research Station, where highly classified radio communication research was conducted in the 1940’s. In 1957 when Sputnik was launched its orbital track was determined, just 5 hours after its launch, by aeries of a Naval tracking station, based at what is now a large pond’s location.

By the early 1970’s the land was becoming an unofficial walking area for Fairfax County locals. In 1971 the US Department of Navy and Fairfax County Park authority officially designated 400 acres as the “Hybla Valley Trails”. In 1971 President Nixon initiated the Legacy of Parks program, offloading surplus government land for recreation. After the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s subsequent resignation President Gerald Ford signed the Legacy of Parks documentation in 1975, handing over what is now Huntley Meadows Park.

Since then, several dedicated individuals have worked tirelessly to protect the park and trails and create a 1500-acre area that attracts over 200 species of bird, semi-aquatic rodent, and other woodland animals. Not all this area is open to the public, and yes seasonal hunting does take place on the land by bow and

arrow to control the population of White-Tailed Deer. Due to changing habitat, silting, hurricanes and the work of beaver, not all locally rare marsh birds remain as breeding in the park, but the wildlife is still vibrant and reliable for viewing.

Huntley Meadows Park

The wildlife refuge main parking and the Norma Hoffman Visitor Center, named after a tireless campaigner who saved the marsh area from becoming a 4 lane highway, is located just 7 miles and a 20-minute drive from where I live in the Alexandria suburb outside Washington D.C. This entrance allows access to boardwalks and woodland paths for unprecedented viewing of wetland wildlife. A second entrance to the park area offers woodland walks, trails, and views over the lakes and ponds, but access to the boardwalks is not available from there. When visiting my patch, I usually park in the main visitor center car park, and take a meandering gravel woodland trail, through the trees to reach the ponds.

Woodpecker species abound on the woodland trail with Red Bellied, Pileated, Red Headed, Hairy and Downy regularly seen. Downy are by far the most dominant species spotted in the woodland; although my birding skills are limited, and they could be a mix of Hairy and Downy. Yellow Bellied Sapsuckers, and Northern Flickers also add to the list of woodpecker allies.

Blue Birds, Hermit Thrushes and the American Robin of the thrush family can be seen turning over the leaf pilings or catching insects. The mimics of Gray Catbird and Northern Mockingbird can be both heard and seen. Wrens, Winter and Carolina, flit amongst the slow growing low shrub bushes in their search for a tasty tit-bit.

Rusty Blackbirds wade through the flooded areas that edge the pond margins and leaf litter on a winter's day, while flocks of Common Grackle and Red Winged Blackbird are common sights. In 2019 a local photographer won the Audubon Grand Prize for photography with a picture taken at Huntley of one of the abundant Red Winged Blackbirds. She successfully captured a "smoke ring" of the bird's breath whilst it sang early one frosty morning. Many have since tried to recreate that shot with varying degrees of accomplishment.

Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures are often seen circling overhead, or deep in the tree thicket feasting upon a fallen carcass. There is quite a lot of road kill in these parts abutting the woodland and park edge, or they may be picking over the remnants left from a fox kill. Deep in the forest White-Tailed Deer lurk and despite their size are hard to spot until that distinctive flash of tail catches the eye. Small flocks of Wild Turkey search amongst the grass and at dusk can be watched as they fly up onto a branch to roost for the night out of harm's way.

Barred Owl are often perched on low branches in the woodland, and a breeding pair are reliable photographic subjects in the spring months. Red Shouldered, Red Tailed and Cooper's Hawks are equally as likely to be found and are always on the lookout for a meal. They sit patiently in the branches scanning the ground or flushing birds along with Merlin and the American Kestrel. Some photographers have been extremely lucky to catch shots as they pick apart a snake or amphibian for a snack. I was lucky and managed to see a conflict between a Northern Flicker and Merlin as they fought a high speed aerial battle of super agility between the branches. No hope of capturing a photograph though as they whistled through the branches with life itself at stake.

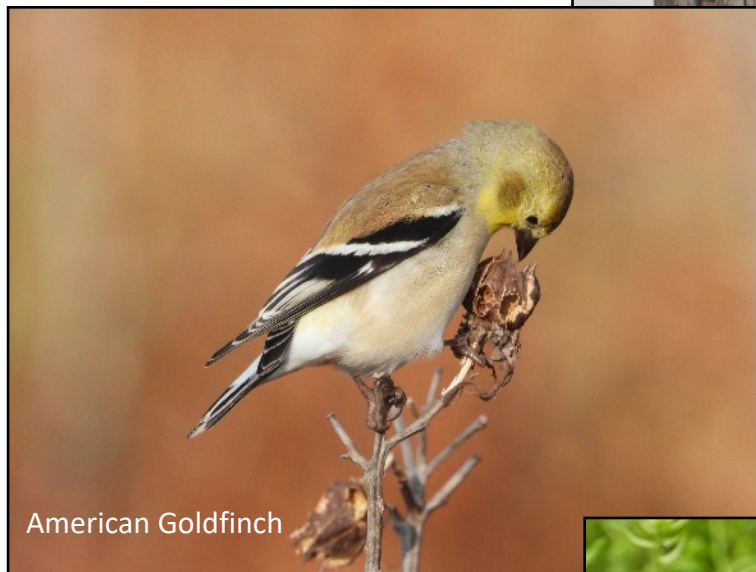
The "unofficial" Huntley Facebook page is great for tracking what birds are having their portraits taken. There are numerous local photographers, who vie for the "best spots" and shots. They are generally very helpful in pointing out and discussing what has been seen and where to help the British "foreigner", then asking "Have you met the Queen?"



Carolina Chickadee



American Crow



American Goldfinch



American Goldfinch

While various species of birds of prey hunt among the woodland trees and around the pond margins, it is the Bald Eagle and Osprey who skillfully catch fish on the water. These magnificent birds are real crowd pleasers.

The Pond Margins

After a few hundred yards you exit the woods onto a sturdy boardwalk that was constructed between 2013 and 2014 at a cost of \$3M, replacing the old wooden boardwalk which had collapsed. The boardwalk trails loop around, and you can return via a series of more woodland trails from the bottom pond, or loop back on the boardwalk itself.

The animals that can be viewed at Huntley change with the season, but the park has become renown for the ability to view up close semi aquatic water rodents such as Beaver, and Muskrat. A resident family of River Otters wowed the crowds in 2021, catching and eating fish within touching distance of overjoyed nature lovers and photographers from across the state. They even grabbed newspaper and TV headlines with their playful antics, accessibility, and viewing dependability.

The bushes and trees that line the ponds edge are home to many different species and family of bird. The American Crow is a raucous visitor, and pest to the smaller residents. Yellow-Billed Cuckoo with beaks packed full of insects are one of the larger species that finds food around the margins. The dainty Carolina Chickadee, can be seen acrobatically hanging from seed heads, competing for spoils with the American Goldfinch. The Tufted Titmouse is elusive, and it moves constantly, defying my attempts for a good photograph. While Brown Creepers and White Breasted Nuthatches cling to the trees, searching for insects amongst rough bark crevices.

Blue-Gray Gnat-catchers help alleviate stings from the swarms of summer mosquito, yes, a good dosing in insect repellent is needed before any summer visit. Washington is notoriously built on land reclaimed from a scorching hot and humid swamp. Then there are the flycatchers, Eastern Phoebe, and the Eastern Kingbird. Red-eyed Vireo is another species that takes delight in harvesting upon the ever-abundant insect population.

A seasonal visitor is the Cedar Waxwing, with colors that defy imagination and a tail that looks like it was accidentally dipped into a yellow paint pot; there must be a natural and evolutionary explanation for this. Other colourful species include the bright red Northern Cardinal, the orange, brown and black coloured Eastern Towhee and the plainer Dark Eyed Junco. The White Throated Sparrow always looks angry on its perch, the yellow streaks of feathers above the eye making its brow look permanently furrowed, and in a scowl.

Warblers are other seasonal visitors that feast on the insect hordes. Common Yellowthroat, Prothonotary, and Yellow-rumped warblers have lots to dine on. Their flashes of yellow bring summer sunshine to the bright green leaves and vegetation. Catching insects on the wing over the water are Barn Swallows and Tree Swallows. The former builds its nests on the stanchions and cross beams underneath the boardwalk, with a ready access to a constant supply of food for hungry chicks. The smallest summer visitor catching flies on the wing is the Ruby Throated Hummingbird, that weighs less than a quarter dollar. Its pulsing iridescent green wings are too much for my camera skills to freeze in shot.

Moving on to the pond edge and the muddy margins. It must be noted at this point that water levels in the park can vary considerably over a year, despite the best engineering efforts of the resident beaver population. Snow melt and winter storms can flood, whilst summer heat waves leave just the deepest streams and channels wet, and the mud dried out in hexagonal tiles. Wading birds start to take advantage as the water levels swing. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted, Solitary and Semipalmated Sandpiper along with Killdeer scour the mud. During winter, as the leaves recede and the grass turns russet, Wilson's



Tufted Titmouse



Eastern Towhee



Cedar Waxwing

Snipe become the photographers target, its constant bobbing requiring high shutter speeds to prevent photographic blur, difficult to achieve as it lurks and blends with the shadowy margins.

Unusual visitors for this habitat have been welcome arrivals for the last two winters, with Clapper, Virginia and Sora Rail elusively stalking through the marsh edge grasses. They fleetingly come out into the open in the crisscrossing streams before scampering back into the dense undergrowth. Woodcock have also been recorded in the lower pond.

There is a year-round change of herons and egrets silently stalking their prey and the fish filled lakes. Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Little Blue, Great Blue and Green Herons all frequent and diet on the fish. Some of the fish species are invasive and a massive problem exists with Northern Snakehead, and active management is taking place to remove these unwanted guests.

Photographers will rush to the park when social media feeds highlight any special species arriving. During the summer, 2021, photographers were keen to capture a Roseate Spoonbill which spent several days feeding in the shallow ponds. Unfortunately, the park has lost its breeding bittern population, due to human population expansion and changing water conditions.

On the Water

(Apparently gulls are a taboo subject for some, so I am not going to mention them)

The reed beds are a breeding ground for Canada Geese, and nesting boxes and tubes have been erected for the very colorful Wood Duck to breed in. Northern Shoveler, Mallard, Blue-Winged Teal, Northern Pintail, and Hooded Mergansers are regularly sighted on the ponds. A lone Snow Goose was obviously blown off course and spent a few days feeding in and amongst the Canada Geese in December 2021. The small Pied Billed Grebe is another that can be seen diving for food.

The park is a wetland marsh area and other species that make up the multi-layered food chain include a wide variety of turtles. Snappers are the biggest and by far most voracious, many Great Blue Herons have fallen to these beasts. Often you can see the battle damage as the herons and egrets perch on logs, missing, torn or deformed limbs are a sure sign of an encounter. Eastern Painted Turtles and Red Eared Sliders can be seen, often in great numbers piled upon logs and each other basking in the sunshine. Spotted Turtles are much smaller and seem to stay in the shallower water and shady margins. During egg laying season turtles are often seen venturing far from the water in the woodland vegetation finding somewhere safe to bury the next brood of eggs. Woodland Box Turtles are uncommon but also found in the woodland realm.

Although resident a wide variety of frogs, including the much sought but hard to find Green Tree Frog and Copes Grey Tree Frog can be found during the summer season only. The winter sees them vanish like magic as they hide the harsh and bitter cold. There are four non-venomous species of snake found in the park: Eastern Rat, Northern Water, Ribbon, and Rough Green. Whilst they are harmless to humans, they can take a toll on the nesting bird population. They are, however, an essential part of the food chain, and can reduce the number of ticks present in the long grass. Watching a rat snake climb a tree and emerge gorged from a Bluebird nest is just part of a cycle of life and survival. Salamanders are found amongst the rotting woodpiles from the carnage that beaver leave behind.

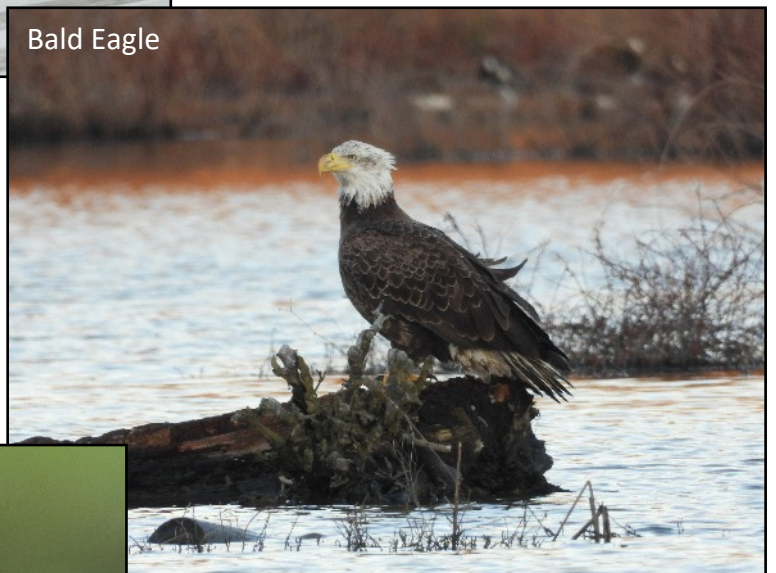
Raccoons are drawn to the trees in Autumn, seeking out and eating the ripening Persimmon fruit on a row of trees between two sets of the pond. Their balancing acts and tree climbing antics drawing the photographers as dusk settles. Piles of discarded clam shells can often be seen where they have been holding a feast.



Wood Duck



Hooded Merganser



Bald Eagle



White-breasted Nuthatch

Visiting

The best times to visit the park is between spring and autumn, in either the early morning or late evening, though wildlife can be spotted throughout the day. The cool dew filled mornings and early light are great for capturing frog photographs. As dusk falls, the Beaver will venture out to chew on the fresh green leaves along the water's edge, offering unprecedented close-up views. Weekends are extremely busy, and the ability to spot wildlife in the park is inversely proportional to the number of visitors. The more visitors and noise the less likely to view wildlife, so I avidly avoid the weekend crush.

The success of the parks team and volunteers in restoring this area, close proximity wildlife viewing, photography opportunities and widespread distribution of images on social media channels has really seen the park visitor numbers take off. During the pandemic especially, people searched for open spaces of interest to socially distance and "telework". Not all are nature lovers and despite dogs being banned from the boardwalk they are often taken there disturbing the nesting geese. Casual visitors seem to forget it is a preserve for nature and chatter loudly on mobiles, play music, or have a general disrespect for fellow guests and wildlife. Maybe the casual visitors have misunderstood George Mason's "Bill of Rights"!!

The diverse wildlife that can be found at Huntley Meadows will be one of the many things I will miss as I depart from this area, losing access to what has become my temporary local patch, full of wildlife across the entirety of the food chain.



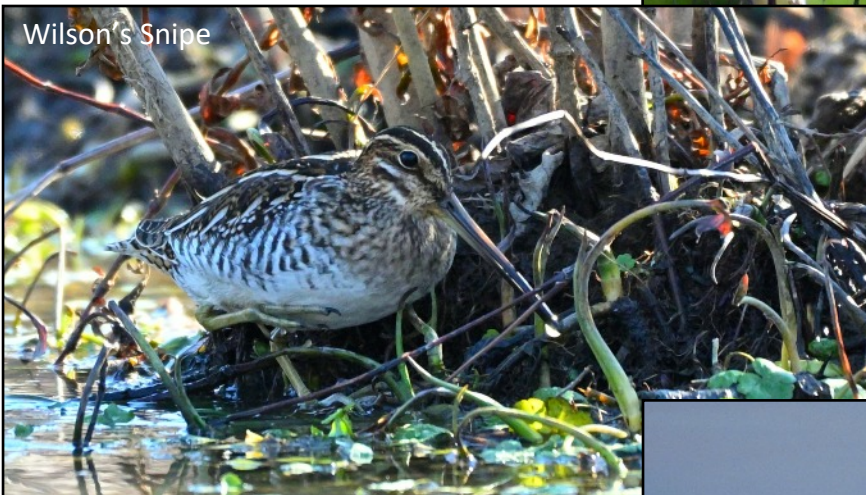
Cooper's Hawk



Red-tailed Hawk



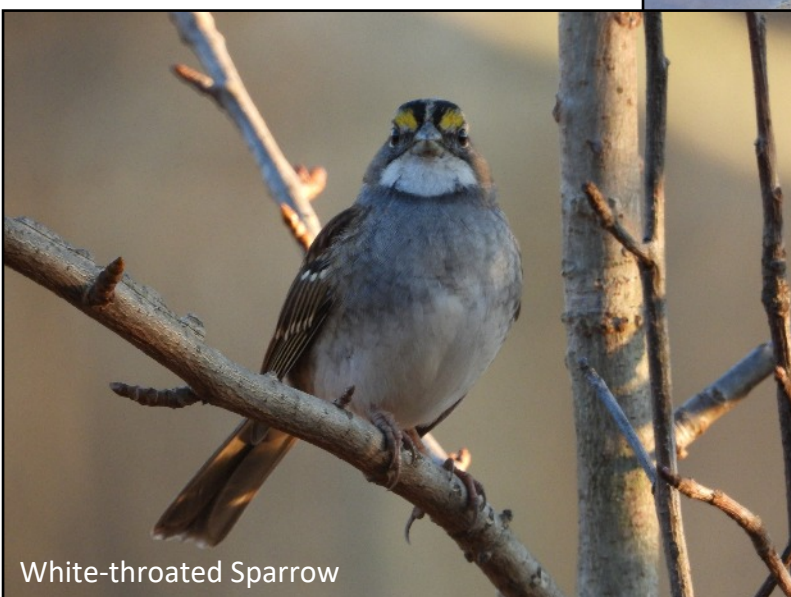
Northern Flicker



Wilson's Snipe



Killdeer



White-throated Sparrow

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. Please include the author's name after the article's title and use the font Calibri.

Please avoid footnotes and tables – they are difficult to import with my software!

Articles can be submitted either as attachments to emails, or 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. 114 is 31st July 2022, and any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 115.

Please address contributions to:

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