



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



Bald Eagle and Osprey (Picture by Ian Grove)

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Contents

RAFOS Committee		Page 2
RAFOS Wins Marsh Award for Local Ornithology	Bill Francis	Page 4
National Birds - Not Miss Wrld	Ian Grove	Page 5
Cape Wrath - Monitoring of Cliff nesting Seabirds	Richard Somers Cocks	Page 10
Magical Dhofar	Jerry Bilbao	Page 23
A Busman's Holiday	Gill Birtles	Page 30
RAFOS Slimbridge Visit 26 Nov 23	Iain MacKenzie	Page 34
The Wetland Bird Ssurvey	John Wells	Page 42
Wines on the Rhine	John Le Gassick	Page 53
The RAFOS Newsletters - Notes for Contributors	Bill Francis	Page 56

RAFOS AGM 2024

A reminder that the RAFOS AGM for 2024 will take place in the Officers' Mess at RAF High Wycombe on 16th March 2024.

Use of the venue is free of charge.

The committee members look forward to seeing you there.

RAFOS WINS THE MARSH AWARD FOR LOCAL ORNITHOLOGY



AVM Martin Routledge, accepting the Marsh Award for Local Ornithology from the CEO of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Juliet Vickery, on behalf of RAFOS in recognition of the work done on WINTER DUCK Expeditions.

National Birds – This isn't about the Miss World Contest.

By Ian Grove

The United Kingdom has always been a quirky place to live. As a population we are known around the world for our ability to queue, Kings and Queens, moral values, and probably most of all a sense of humour that often knows no bounds. The British have always had the sense of a good laugh, ever since King's and Queen's started lopping off lover's, brother's, and sister's heads. Today's millennial generation has taken up the humour challenge with the internet and social influencing through online voting, and I get to witness it every Saturday night.

I am not an avid fan of "Strictly Come Dancing", I get to watch it, as it is the only way to join the wife on the sofa for a glass of wine on a Saturday night. It does, however, provide an example of that British, flamboyant humour, at best through the viewers vote. We know that John Sergeant and Anne Widdicombe were, well, not the most graceful of dancing partners, yet they were saved to perform every week by the "viewer's vote". Why? Who wants to watch some lithe, nimble Italia Conti School of Performing Arts trained actress whirl across the dance floor with grace? The comical, cringeworthy, and watchable Saturday Night entertainment is provided by a lumbering, stomping journalist, and politician, so in the competition they stayed, thanks to the public vote.

There have been numerous online competitions set by companies and governments to name something. To make the ordinary taxpayer or user feel included. The Canadians of British Columbia (ex-British) voted, in a ferry naming competition, the shiny new ship to be called the "SS Should've Been A Bridge". When the British public were asked to come up with names for the UK's newest £150M Antarctic Survey Vessel, the overwhelming UK choice of "Boaty McBoatface" was outright winner; it was not used. This was taking humour to another level after an adopt the bird scheme ended up with an owl called "Hooty McOwlface".

United Kingdom

All of this got me thinking about national birds and how do they end up representing a country. I had just read an old article about online voting and choosing the national bird for Britain. In the 1960's the robin (*erithacus rubecula*) was "unofficially" voted the UK national bird in a Times newspaper survey. A similar online survey in 2015, again saw the robin win the highest percentage of vote (34%), beating the barn owl (*tyto alba*), blackbird (*turdus merula*), wren (*troglodytidae*), and red kite (*milvus milvus*). After winning two rounds of voting the robin has still not "officially" been adopted as the national bird by the United Kingdom.

The robin's glowing, and I did not know before writing this article, unique fingerprint design red breast, has historically adorned Christmas cards, associating it with a joyous time of the year. When the first Christmas cards were sent in the mid-19th century, they were delivered by postmen wearing bright red waistcoats. These postmen were nicknamed "robins" or "redbreasts" and the most popular early Christmas cards depicted robins carrying letters in their beaks, to represent them.

The robin is said to typify the British and has long been a good omen in Celtic folklore, although it only seems to bring good luck when dead!! It is a proud bird, willing to make friends (human) in exchange for food, will fight fiercely (to the death) for its territory, and is renowned for the ability to brave all British weather, including winter snow. The robin is a standalone (island nation), cheeky, friendly bird that is fiercely loyal to its country, and punches above its weight, if that is not representing the best of British

(and UK military) then I do not know what does. There are 87 countries with official national birds, but the United Kingdom is not one.

Other Nations do take their national bird identity more seriously. Serbia has two National birds (griffon vulture (*gyps fulvus*) and eastern imperial eagle (*aquila heliaca*)), Belgium and Mauritius have adopted kestrels (common kestrel (*falco tinnunculus*) and Mauritius kestrel (*falco punctatus*)). King Charles III might own all unmarked mute swans (*cygnus olor*) in the United Kingdom, but Denmark claimed the regal bird as their National bird in 1984 (Denmark originally had the eurasian skylark (*alauda arvensis*) between 1960 and 1984). Aruba proposed the burrowing owl (*athene cunicularia arubensis*) as it's National bird in 2012 but declared the brown-throated parakeet (*eupsittula pertinax arubensis*) as its official representation in 2017.

This would become a very long article, if I were to go through what avian species represents what country, so I thought I would set a limit (for your and my sanity). I decided the easiest way to do that was to choose some world leading countries, setting out on a green agenda pathway, and the G7 came to mind. The United Kingdom is not alone in a G7 country not having an official bird, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France also do not have "official" National birds. So, as a country we should not be in too much of a rush to book ours as the humble, yet feisty Robin.

Canada

A Canadian poll in 2016 received 50,000 online votes and much chagrin from some ornithological circles when the Canada goose (*branta canadensis*) lost out to a small songbird the grey jay (*perisoreus canadensis*). The grey jay has several other colloquial names and was called the "Canada jay" up until 1957. Unlike the Canada goose which migrates to California, the grey jay remains resident in Canada all year, enduring temperatures as low as -30c. The grey jay has cultural significance amongst the indigenous peoples of Canada, as an omen of good fortune and a warning of danger. It is represented by the star Eta Ursae Majoris in the constellation of Ursa Major to the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. The grey jay is important to the Anishinaabe people as a "great wise teacher with an ability to bring gifts." With so much indigenous heritage, it is little wonder that this songbird was selected. It had been hoped that the Canadian government would formally recognize the voting campaign and elevate the grey jay to national bird status as part of Canada's sesquicentennial celebrations in 2017; the Department of Canadian Heritage unfortunately declined.

Germany

Since 800AD the Holy Roman Empire of Germany has featured the eagle as its standard. For the Roman empire that controlled most of central Europe the eagle symbolises courage, strength, and victory. During the reign of King Charlemagne the eagle was a double headed standard as used by the Caesars. After the German Revolution (1848-49), the National Assembly decided the double-headed eagle should remain the emblem of the new Confederation. When the German Empire was proclaimed in 1871, a decision was taken against the double-headed eagle and the associations with the Holy Roman Empire, instead, the Prussian tradition of the one-headed eagle was adopted. The Federal Eagle is the design, and the "unofficial" national bird of Germany is the golden eagle (*aquila chrysaetos*).

Italy

If Germany chose the eagle as its national bird due to the linkages with the Roman Empire, what does it say about the nation of Italy that their national bird of choice is the Italian sparrow (*passer italiae*)? Now I

do not want to get into stereotyping, but..... The national bird is meant to represent the values and beliefs of a country. The Italian sparrow is described as a “small chunky bird”. The sparrow is found abundantly in Italy, well that was an easy selection, no need to exert any unnecessary effort. It has a brown plumage, not something I associate with the great fashion houses of Italy. They are often seen perching in park trees. While their numbers are declining, they are considered of “least concern” by conservationists.

France

France are cocks, or to be more precise the Gallic rooster (*coq gaulois*). The Romans noted that in Latin, rooster (gallus) and Galli for the inhabitants of Gaul/France (gallus) were homonyms. Julius Caesar recognized some of the gods worshipped by the gallic nation and associated them with the nearest Roman god rather than the Gaulish god; Mercury being one such conversion. Mercury is often portrayed with the cockerel and thus the sacred cockerel was adopted with its play on the Latin wording of gallus. The Gallic rooster gained further recognition during the French Revolution (1789) and the Gallic rooster, colloquially “Chantecler” has been a national emblem for France ever since.

America

Whilst dealing with upstart revolutionary countries, I will hop across the pond to the United States of America and the bald eagle (*haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The USA is one of 27 countries that are represented by a bird of prey. I should probably apologise to the Strigiformes (owls) as I only included diurnal Falconiformes in my interpretation of raptor. There will probably be letters of complaint written to the editor of this newsletter for my sacrilege interpretation, the burrowing owls of Aruba would probably dig their heels in to be recognised. The most common Falconiform representing countries is the Andean condor (*vultur gryphus*) the official bird of Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, and Ecuador. While the United Kingdom has the robin, a google search came up with no options for England itself?? The home nation breakaway countries of Wales and Scotland are unofficially represented by the red kite (*milvus milvus*) and golden eagle (*aquila chrysaetos*) respectively.

Anyway, I digress, and it is back to the US of A and the bald eagle. Eagles can be seen as a sign of strength; they were certainly used on standards by Roman Legions. Shortly after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Continental Congress required a new design for the seal of the founding nation. Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin, John Adams (2), and Thomas Jefferson (3) (the numbers in brackets represents their presidential number. Benjamin Franklin remains in history as the face of the \$100 bill) were given the task; their designs did not get Congressional approval. In 1782 Charles Thomson the Secretary of Congress took the task on and made the eagle more prominent and based the design on the American bald eagle a bird found only in the Nearctic (North American) region and not on the most widely distributed large raptor originally used, the golden eagle. This did not necessarily meet with everyone’s approval, and it is stated that Benjamin Franklin called the eagle “a bird of bad moral character that didn’t earn its living honestly”, preferring the turkey (*meleagris gallopavo*). Luckily the bald eagle design stuck and the rest as they say is history.

Japan

The green pheasant (*phasianus versicolor*) named ‘kiji’ in Japanese, was declared the National bird of Japan in 1947. Esteemed in Japanese folklore, pheasants helped the hero Momotarō defeat a band of demons and return with plundered ogre treasure and saving his parents. Pheasants are revered as messengers from heaven. In 620 A.D. red streaks flashed across the Japanese night sky and these were



Osprey (*Ian Grove*)



Mute Swan (*Bill Francis*)



Robin (*Bill Francis*)



Parakeet (*Ian Grove*)

interpreted as red pheasant tails shooting across the heavens as kiji delivered their godly messages to earth; in 2020 scientists determined that it was more likely to be a red aurora from a magnetic storm. Continuing the message theme, green pheasants are particularly sensitive to earthquakes and have foretold of seismic activity well before seismometers were invented. Possibly saving lives and adding to the mythology of being godly messengers sent with their warnings.

Representing United Kingdom Today

Germans used their empirical history in choosing the Eagle and strength, while one of the key American founding fathers stated it was a bird of ill repute and would have preferred a resident bird of a turkey. Canada and Italy chose a bird which has/had the country of origin in its name. Countries use their chosen bird to signify their beliefs and the values they stand for. While it has been just under a decade since the last vote for a National bird of the United Kingdom, much has changed over that period.

If the same poll were taken now, would the millennials and social influencers sway the vote in favour of something more comical? I am not sure there is a U.K. bird species called the lame duck. Would global-warming and climate change see an impact on the bird chosen. The spread of egrets and their now residential status, white-tailed eagles, or even the booming bittern. Do we go all-inclusive and have the rainbow-coloured bee-eaters nesting in Norfolk to show diversity. Would we pick a migratory bird to show the multi-cultural aspect of the United Kingdom. Possibly the ring-neck parakeet as a multi-cultural bird of peace. Maybe select the golden eagle, but we will need to get in quick before Scotland gets a second referendum vote.

The United Kingdom has values, has a culture, has Kings and Queens, and a rich tapestry of history, and I still think we need to pull upon that golden thread, like Germany, France, and Japan. I am not sure that I would vote robin, or barn owl, but there is a wide range of cast to choose from. What would be your bird of choice from British legend, fables, and history from the many bird species that grace this great seafaring and island nation, to represent the values and culture of the U.K? Heaven forbid, may be even a gull could be chosen!!!!



Bald Eagle (*Ian Grove*)

Cape Wrath

Monitoring of Cliff Nesting Seabirds 2023

By Richard Somers Cocks

1. INTRODUCTION

The sea cliffs within the Cape Wrath Special Protection Area (SPA) have significant numbers of breeding seabirds, particularly on cliff ledges in the vicinity of Clo Mor. However, their remoteness and the necessity to count certain sections from the sea result in full counts only being carried out infrequently. The last survey in 2017 was commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage to provide an up-to-date estimate of cliff nesting seabirds at Cape Wrath. Before that there had not been a full survey since 2000, which had been carried out as part of the Seabird 2000 census.

A group of us, many of whom are RAFOS members, conduct annual visits during the summer months to monitor a wide range of conservation issues within the range area of the MoD Cape Wrath Training Centre. Much of this involves the breeding status of the Schedule 1 birds to be found on the peninsula but stretches of the coastline are also regularly monitored. In 2023 several organisations including NatureScot, the BTO Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) and the RSPB contacted us to ask if we could undertake, within means, a survey of the breeding seabirds. One of the reasons was to assess how these colonies had fared because of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) which has caused such significant losses on other colonies.

The greatest concentrations of seabirds are on the Clo Mor cliffs, which can only be fully counted from the sea. The 2017 survey made use of a boat for these sections, but they also walked the cliffs to cover a few areas that weren't visible from the sea. In doing so they identified several vantage point (VP) locations which enabled accurate sample counts to be taken along this stretch. Further west along the cliffs to Cape Wrath and the coast to the south of the Cape nearly all sections can be counted from the land although seabird numbers are much lower. We did not have the use of a boat this year, so the priority was to re-survey from the VPs to enable a like-for-like comparison with the 2017 data, and to cover the other sections of this coastline as best we could from the cliffs.

2. METHODS

Defining count sections. The 16 count sections for the Cape Wrath SPA were originally defined for the Seabird 2000 census. These same sections covering the Clo Mor and Cape Wrath coasts were also used as a basis for the 2017 survey. To make valid comparisons between earlier surveys, the same sections were used for this latest survey. BTO's Seabird Monitoring Programme also uses these defined sections for their sites in the SPA and so this latest survey contributed to this programme.

Approach to seabird counts. As this survey was entirely conducted from land, most of the counts were direct counts from the cliff tops using scope and binoculars. This method worked well for sites where the numbers of birds were relatively low. However, on some sections where there were large numbers of birds, such as the guillemot and razorbill colonies, taking a series of detailed images was also useful. The digital photography was then analysed afterwards as a backup to the counts taken in the field.



Puffin

Survey timing. The timing of the visit for this survey (27 - 31 May 2023) matched the time of year recommended for undertaking colony counts for fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot, razorbill, shag and gull species. For black guillemot and puffin, the ideal survey period would have been a month earlier, so the counts for these species are a less reliable indication of numbers as many were not visible at the time of the survey.

Vantage point plots. The 13 VPs identified in 2017 covered some of the main seabird nesting sites on the Clo Mor cliffs where full counts were only obtainable from the sea. The VPs were reasonably spread out geographically along sections CM08 to CM11. Species counts at these VPs were restricted to the five SPA qualifying species: fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot, razorbill, and puffin. As recognised in 2017 they provided a very useful subsample for future monitoring of key species. All these VPs were viewed from the same points as before except for one. We found that this one necessitated looking over the edge of a very high cliff in rather breezy conditions. Self-preservation got the better of us and we chose another somewhat safer position slightly further away!

Vantage point counts

3. RESULTS & COMPARISONS WITH PREVIOUS COUNTS

The 13 VPs identified in 2017 were successfully surveyed again in 2023 which enables a like-for-like comparison. The results for the 5 SPA qualifying species from these VP counts are given in the table below.

In 2017 the count for VP 7 only included puffin on the upper slopes. However, the site was marked out down to sea level and the lower slopes appeared to have other SPA species which for some reason were not included. These other species were present again this year, so they were included in the count.

	FU (AOS)		KI (AON)		GU (birds)		RA (birds)		PU (birds)	
	2017	2023	2017	2023	2017	2023	2017	2023	2017	2023
VP 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	11	168	8
VP 2	46	19	0	3	0	0	0	5	11	0
VP 3	4	3	93	159	705	960	28	55	5	0
VP 4	14	62	117	201	720	1412	81	148	16	71
VP 5	8	0	33	107	2188	2425	195	83	183	26
VP 6	2	0	60	307	2066	3798	136	224	9	0
VP 7	0	0	0	165	0	1016	0	56	44	12
VP 8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	73	4
VP 9	0	0	38	73	1612	2721	32	66	0	0
VP 10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	75	7
VP 11	7	6	13	27	1111	2263	42	64	0	2
VP 12	1	0	0	170	341	1375	13	158	44	0
VP 13	10	0	0	0	821	715	0	8	0	0
TOTAL	92	91	354	1212	9564	16685	540	878	628	130
Change		-1%		+240%		+75%		+62%		-80%



Garvie Island



West from Clo Mor



Stack Clo k#Kearvaig



Michael Allen & Nigel Deacon at East end of SPA

For the 3 most numerous species (kittiwake, guillemot and razorbill) there were significant increases in the numbers breeding. For kittiwake, even when the count for VP 7 is left out, as there was no count in 2017, there was a threefold increase in numbers seen from the VPs. For guillemot and razorbill, the increases were less dramatic but still substantial when compared to 2017. Fulmar numbers remained virtually unchanged since 2017. Puffin records were quite a bit lower but there was evidence of many fresh burrows on the slopes indicating that the true numbers were much higher than recorded. No conclusions can really be drawn on the puffin numbers as the ideal counting period was earlier in the year.

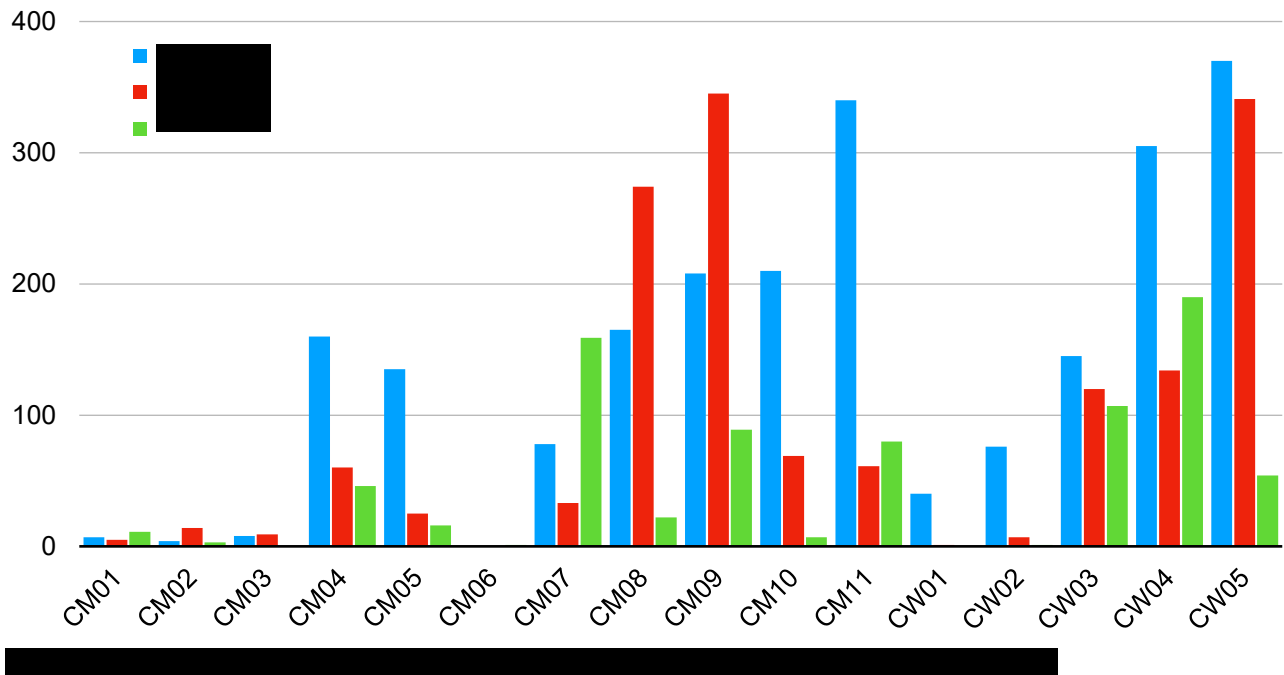
Section counts

The total counts for all the sections within the Clo Mor and Cape Wrath areas are given in the table below. These include the counts for the VPs in the Clo Mor sections as well as other colonies that were seen along this coast. The sections marked with a * indicate those that could only be partially seen from the cliff top vantage points. This is also the area of the SPA with the greatest concentration of breeding seabirds, but some seaward facing colonies were not visible. Nevertheless, a significant count was obtained from colonies that could be seen. As well as including the 5 priority species for the SPA, this count also included other seabirds that were nesting on this coastline: Herring Gull (HG), Great Black-backed Gull (GB), Shag (SA) & Black Guillemot (TY).

Count Section	FU AOS	HG AON	GB AON	SA AON	KI AON	GU birds	RA birds	PU birds	TY birds
CM01	11	0	1	1	0	0	14	8	20
CM02	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CM03	0	27	15	12	0	0	0	0	1
CM04	46	0	0	5	0	477	95	0	0
CM05	16	1	0	7	98	409	50	0	3
CM06*	1	0	0	0	36	0	0	0	0
CM07*	159	0	0	0	680	1366	241	8	0
CM08*	22	0	0	0	255	1733	149	29	0
CM09*	89	0	0	1	1148	8506	557	121	1
CM10*	7	0	0	1	459	7010	251	25	0
CM11*	80	0	0	0	327	3685	402	13	0
CW01	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CW02	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
CW03	107	1	0	24	12	0	19	0	13
CW04*	190	1	9	8	293	233	42	0	2
CW05	54	0	1	12	0	32	20	0	9
TOTAL	786	30	26	71	3308	23451	1840	204	53

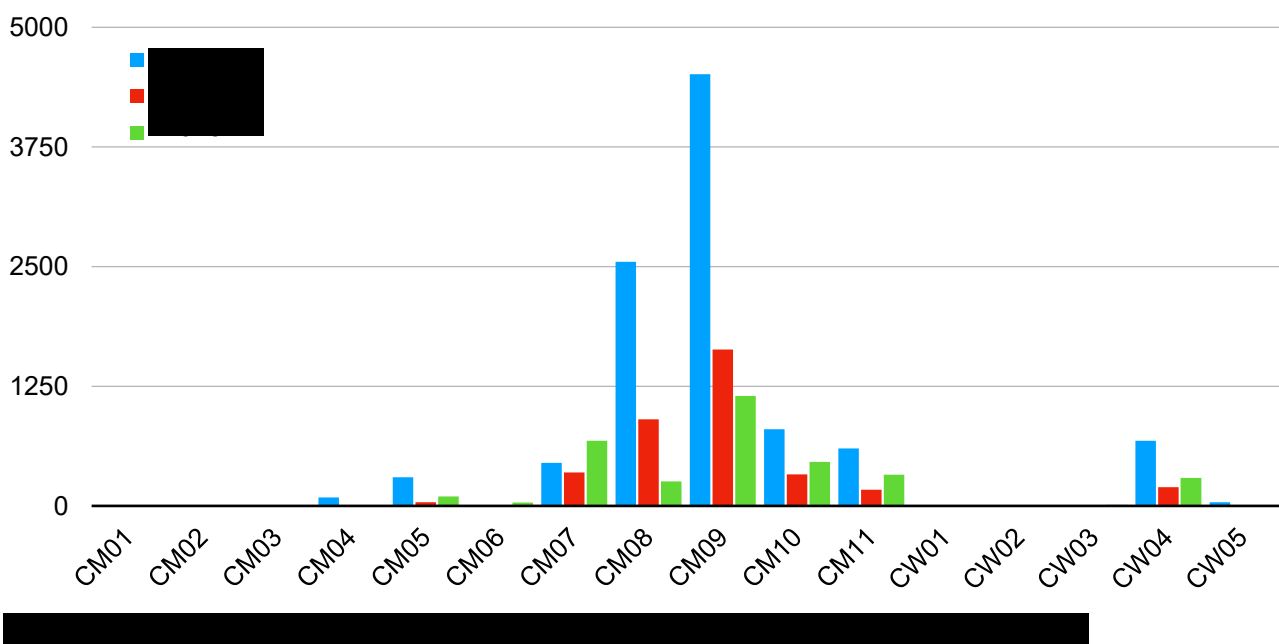
As noted earlier, we didn't have the use of a boat, unlike the surveys in 2000 and 2017, so in some sections where we could only record partial counts no valid comparison could be made.

Nevertheless, significant counts were obtained from all sections and to illustrate the latest distribution, the figures below show the histogram of numbers for four SPA species compared to the previous surveys in 2000 and 2017.



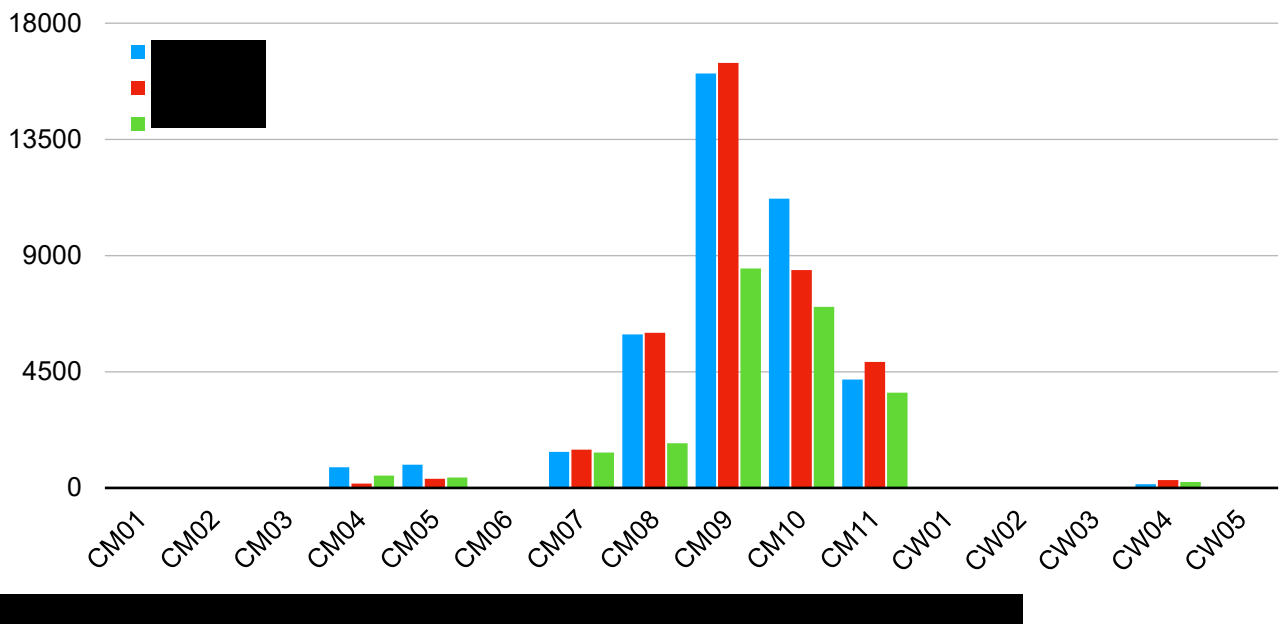
Fulmar. Fulmar site counts showed a mixed picture. On the Clo Mor sections when comparisons were made with the VP counts of 2017 and 2023 there was little change. There were almost certainly a lot more sites on these sections but the upper cliff faces where they breed were largely hidden from view. On the west coast south of Cape Wrath where full counts were possible there was a steep decline in numbers from 341 in 2017 to 54 in 2023. Elsewhere the numbers were relatively comparable.

Kittiwake. The main colonies for kittiwake are in the Clo Mor sections and on the cliffs at Cape Wrath. As noted earlier, the VP counts showed a large increase in numbers. In CM10 and CM11 sections the partial counts this year exceeded the full counts in 2017. It was certainly apparent that the kittiwake colonies appeared to be doing well with nearly all nest sites occupied.

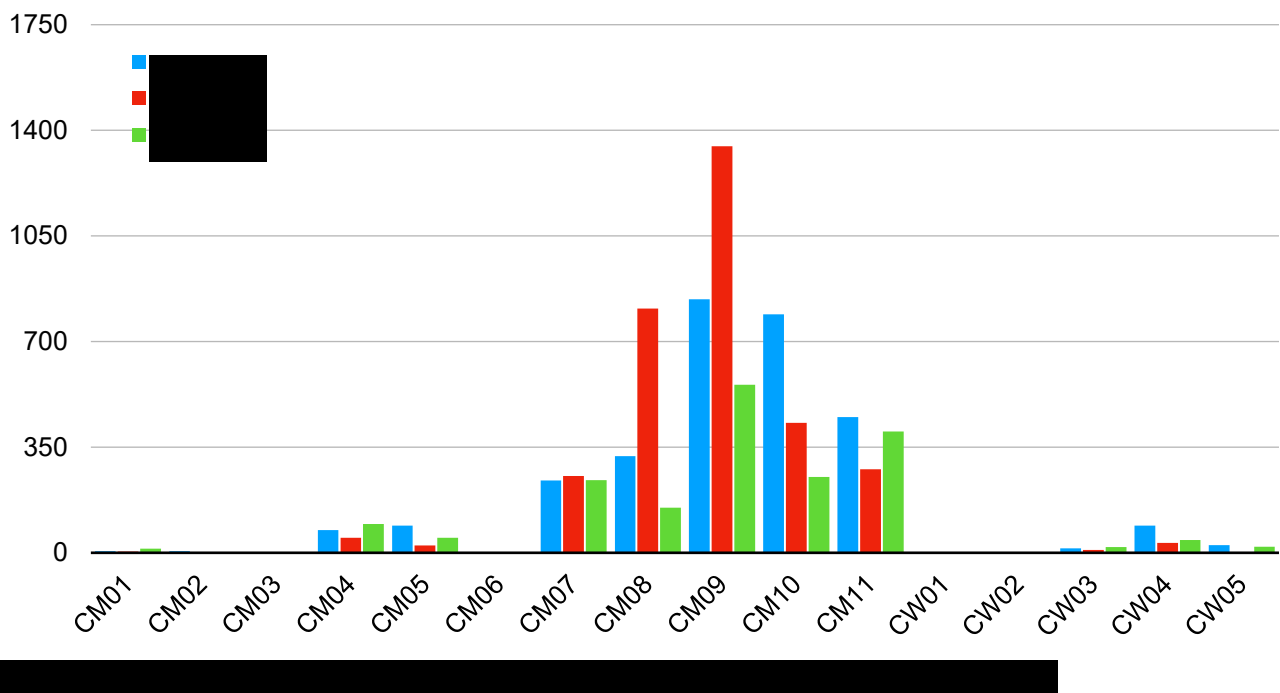


Guillemot. Guillemot numbers seem to be holding up well and the VP counts indicated that in the Clo Mor sections the numbers were showing a substantial increase. With many of these colonies

on the ledges only visible from the sea it is likely that the full count would have been higher than in 2017.



Razorbill. Razorbill is a species that can be difficult to count when a few individuals are mixed in with much larger numbers of guillemot, but overall, their numbers seem to be holding up well. In several of the sections such as CM11 numbers were exceeding the totals recorded in 2017.





Clo Mor



Stac a Chlo



Fulmar



Kittiwake

Puffin. Although this 2023 survey was carried out at least a month after the ideal period for conducting puffin counts, there were far fewer puffins recorded than in 2017 which took place at the same time of year. The reasons for this are unclear, but it was evident that there was plenty of activity at puffin colonies with freshly excavated burrows. No conclusions can be drawn on puffin numbers other than to say that they are still present at several sites in the SPA.

Other species. A total of 53 black guillemot were observed on the sea below the cliffs compared to 18 in 2017. They were widely distributed along the coast but were slightly more concentrated in sections CM01 with 20 and CW03 with 13. Shags tend to nest in caves near the foot of the cliffs and counting them from cliff top positions can be difficult. Nevertheless, a count of 71 shag AON this year compared quite favourably to the total recorded of 83 in 2017 when a full count was possible from the sea. Gull AONs tend to be few in number along this coastline and are mainly confined to the offshore islands. This year there were 30 herring gull and 26 great black-backed gull AONs recorded, which compared to 10 and 13 respectively for the gull AONs in 2017.

4. DISCUSSION

The initial impression was that the seabird breeding colonies in the Cape Wrath SPA were in good condition, and this was borne out from the counts. The guillemot and razorbill numbers at the VPs were both well above the figures obtained in 2017. In the 2017 survey the guillemot count from VPs represented about 25% of the full count that was recorded. In 2023, if the other breeding colonies in the Clo Mor area that we could not see had the same density of birds, then that would equate to a guillemot population around 60,000.

Kittiwake breeding also looked to be very encouraging. In 2017 the VP counts recorded 354 kittiwake AONs which was around 10% of the total count of 3622 AONs for the full count of the SPA. This year that count was 1212 for the same VPs and it is likely that had a full count been possible then the total figure would have been considerably higher than in 2017.

Other species such as black guillemot and puffin are present in much smaller numbers, but this was not the ideal time of year for a count. Nevertheless, both species were present in scattered locations around the coastline of the SPA.

Offshore there were large numbers of seabirds fishing in the waters, particularly off Clo Mor. These included good numbers of northern gannet although no colonies are present in the Cape Wrath SPA. There were 7 sightings of great skua on passage off the coast almost all of which were heading west. This figure was somewhat down on the numbers sighted a few years ago, quite possibly due to HPAI that has affected their breeding colonies elsewhere. Quite a few arctic skua territories and birds were observed inland and at Cape Wrath an adult long-tailed skua was seen heading inland (i.e., south).

In the seabird colonies within the SPA there was no evidence of any birds affected by symptoms of HPAI. All the species observed looked healthy. The only dead birds found were some very old carcasses on Kearvaig beach: 1 gannet, 2 kittiwake and 1 puffin. No other carcasses were seen on any other parts of the coastline.

Overall, it was a very successful survey of the seabirds that were breeding within the Cape Wrath SPA, albeit involving a fair bit of effort to cover the 23km of coastline, often laden down with camera gear and optics. While it would be interesting to carry out a full survey, this would require

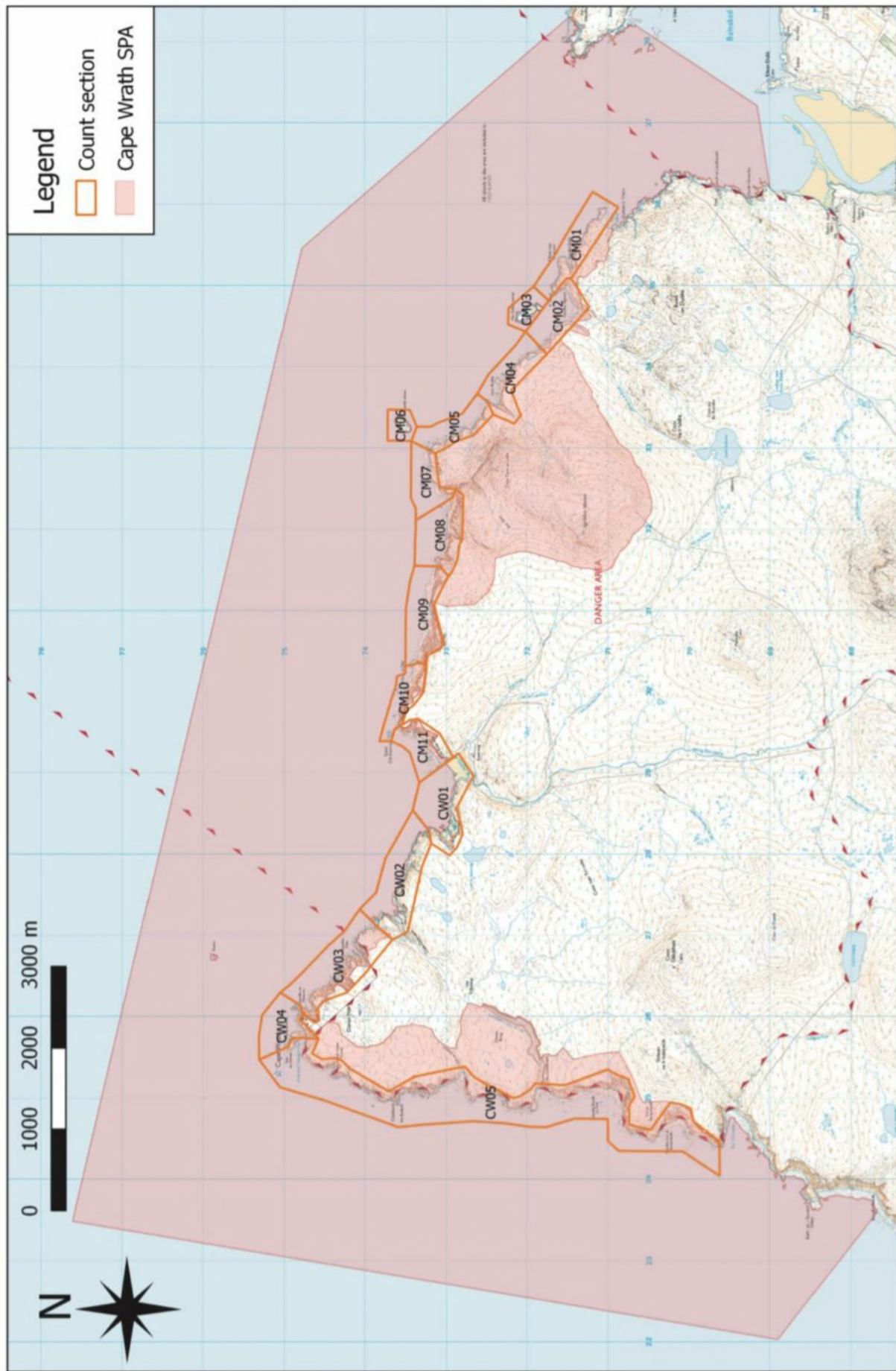
even more time, effort, and resources. Realistically it is probably an undertaking that we would only do in conjunction with a national seabird census. In the meantime, it is relatively straightforward to undertake a regular survey of the vantage points as these can all be covered in a single day. This will enable us to continue monitoring the success of seabird breeding on this important site within the MoD estate.



Guillemots and Kittiwakes



Razorbills



OS base map © Crown copyright and database rights 2017 OS 100017908

MAGICAL DHOFAR

By Gerry Bilbao

INTRODUCTION

Dhofar is the largest of the 11 Governorates in the Sultanate of Oman and lies in Southern Oman. On its western border is the Republic of Yemen and to the north is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The largest city and capital is Salalah, which will probably be the main base for most travellers.



THE KHAREEF

Dhofar is unique in Southern Arabia as it enjoys monsoon rainfall (known locally as the Khareef) for three months of the year, from mid June to mid September. This takes the form of a thick sea mist which comes in off the Indian Ocean, often with visibility down to 10 metres or less! During this period hundreds of Arabs descend on Dhofar, from all quarters of the Arab World, to enjoy the cooler temperature and wild camp.

FAUNA and FLORA

The Khareef has a dramatic affect on the normally arid desert in the mountainous region of Dhofar turning it into one large oasis, with lush vegetation, major rivers developing, and spectacular waterfalls found in various places. With so much good vegetation and water the birding is unsurprisingly superb. Incredibly once the Khareef is over, in a few short weeks the vegetation burns off and returns to arid desert conditions, the major rivers dry up and at best become small streams, and the once spectacular waterfalls dry up until next year's Khareef.



WHEN TO VISIT

To avoid the crowds and the Khareef mist but still see the magical affects the Khareef has annually on the region, a visit in late September is advised.

GETTING THERE

Various Airlines fly into Salalah. However, the national carrier Oman Air is the most convenient. It has daily flights from Heathrow to Muscat, where passengers have an internal transfer to their flight to Salalah.

TRAVEL VISA

For visits of 14 days or less the travel visa is free.

TOUREST SIM CARDS

Several companies sell tourist sim cards. During the flight, passengers are offered a free sim card from Omantel. When you register it, it is valid for 24 hours only and then offers you various packages of 10 days duration. My recommendation is wait until you arrive at Salalah airport. As you enter the arrivals hall there is an Omantel desk where you can purchase a tourist sim card covering the whole of your stay, if it is more than 10 days, for a third cheaper than the one offered online in Muscat!

TRANSPORTATION

All the major car hire companies are conveniently co-located at Salalah Airport.

DRIVING

For the most part the locals are disciplined drivers. However, like anywhere, you must look out for the odd 'Dickhead'! In addition, there are two further hazards to be wary of. Firstly, speed bumps are everywhere and if you drive over one at speed, you won't do it a second time! The second hazard is the large number of camels, cows, goats, and donkeys one encounters on the roads. One should be particularly careful when driving at night.



ROADS

The road network in Dhofar is excellent. Even the most remote locations now have paved roads leading to them.

NAVIGATION

There are no decent detailed road maps. The Waze navigation app and Google earth are invaluable for getting around. All road signs are in both Arabic and English.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation is readily available to book online and to suit all budgets. Careful selection of the hotel's location is important as you want ease of access to go in all directions without having to drive through central Salalah.

One near route 47 is ideal.

17° 1'23.40"N 54° 6'11.97"E

FOOD

There are several excellent hypermarkets located in Salalah and numerous restaurants to choose from.

COST OF LIVING

Oman is not a cheap place to visit - currently 1 Omani Rial is equal to 2.13 Pounds sterling.

BIRDWATCHING

The book Birds of the Middle East by Richard Porter and Simon Aspinall – ISBN 978-D-691-14844-1 is an essential aid.

BIRD WATCHING SITES

WEST OF SALALAH:

- ☐ **Raysut Landfill Site:** 16°59'4.62"N 53°57'19.92"E
Excellent for a good variety of raptors
- ☐ **Raysut Sewage Plant:** 16°59'16.50"N 53°57'14.18"E
Good numbers of storks, herons, egrets and waders, along with raptors overhead.
- ☐ **Mughsail Beach:** Between Lamer Al Mughsail 16°53'15.73"N 53°49'22.43"E and
Marneef Cave 16°52'30.36"N 53°45'58.32"E

Carefully scan through the gulls, terns and waders that loaf about along the length of this beach. Don't forget to scan out to sea for possible Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Jouanin's Petrels and both Masked and Brown Boobies.

- ☐ **Wadi Ashawq Nature Preserve** 16°53'4.14"N 53°46'52.45"E
Normally a good variety of waders are found here, which has included a Lesser Yellowlegs recently, an extremely rare vagrant to Oman. After checking out the NP it can be productive to cross the road to the west and follow the wadi.
- ☐ **Wadi Ashawq:** 16°53'19.86"N 53°46'47.83"E
Good for wheatears and the extremely rare Yellow Bittern has been found here on several occasions.



Yellow Bittern

NORTH OF SALALAH:

- **Ayn (Spring) Sahnawt:** 17° 8'47.11"N 54°10'47.53"E
Is located 10 kilometres north of Salalah, east off the road to Thamrait. Good site for African Scops Owl, Arabian Warbler, Black-crowned Tchagra and Arabian Wheatear.
- **Mudayy Park** 17°28'39.11"N 53°21'9.59"E
The remote village of Mudayy is some 160 kilometres north of Salalah. It is famous for over-wintering Grey Hypocolius, Nile Valley Sunbirds and African Collared Doves. An early arrival here is essential.



Grey Hypocolius

- **Mudayy Waterhole:** 17°28'13.57"N 53°20'11.33"E
This remote site attracts huge numbers of sandgrouse. A 4x4 vehicle is essential.
- **Shisr :** 18°15'9.21"N 53°38'59.72"E
The village surrounds the fabled lost city of Ubar. It is some 170 kilometres north of Salalah, and closer to the Rub al Khali (The Empty Quarter) than Mudayy. Surrounding the village is extensive agriculture which attracts all the harrier species, waders such as Sociable Lapwings, White-tailed Lapwings and a good variety of larks, pipits and wagtails. It is recommended to use a 4x 4 vehicle when driving off the paved road.

EAST OF SALALAH

1. **East Khawr (Creek)** 17° 0'41.59"N 54°10'36.71"E
One of the best sites in Dhofar. Huge numbers of gulls, terns, waders, herons, egrets, and ibis frequent the site. If you're birding east of Salalah for the day it's well worth checking the site out on your way out and upon your return as the bird species particularly waders changes all the time.
2. **AYNS (Springs)**
There are five ayns east of Salalah that are worth checking out. All have similar birds, although the best one by far is Ayn Hamran as it is a much bigger site and the only one which allows you to bird watch off the paved road.

Excellent sites for Verreaux's Eagle, Bruce's Green Pigeon, Grey-headed Kingfisher, Golden-winged Grosbeak and a good variety of other sort after species.

From west to east:

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Ayn Razaat: | 17° 7'44.58"N 54°14'8.35"E |
| 2. Ayn Hamran: | 17° 5'50.96"N 54°16'51.63"E |
| 3. Ayn Tobruk: | 17° 6'7.76"N 54°19'34.82"E |
| 4. Ayn Atrum: | 17° 7'4.32"N 54°21'58.88"E |
| 5. Ayn Shawny: | 17° 3'13.60"N 54°36'30.43"E |



Golden-winged Grosbeak

KHAWR (Inlet) TAQAH

17° 2'14.75"N 54°22'29.54"E

A few years ago the Khawr was superb, with a shallow lake before the reed beds and deeper water that attracted a variety of good birds. Unfortunately this had totally dried up. However the town is still worth visiting to check out the beach for gulls, terns and waders:

54°23'14.96"E

17° 2'2.46"N

WADI DARBAT

17° 6'15.94"N 54°27'9.24"E

Is one of the most beautiful wadis of the Dhofar mountains. Unfortunately the government is spoiling the natural environment as it develops the area for tourism! However for the visiting birders it still offers the opportunity to finding eagles, waders, crakes and bitterns. Pin-tailed Snipe, White-breasted Waterhen and Pheasant-tailed Jacana have all breed here.

TAWI ATAYR

17° 6'46.01"N 54°33'37.35"E

Tawi Atayr is one of the deepest natural sinkholes in the world. It measures 100 metre wide and 211 metres deep. It is the place in Oman to see the nondescript but very rare Yemen Serin. The surrounding area can be good for eagles, wheatears, larks and pipits.

MIRBAT

Ras (headland) Mirbat is one of the premier seawatching sites in Oman.

□ From Land: View forward from the small Mosque at: 16°58'25.79"N 54°41'27.38"E

□ Pelargic Trips: Can be arranged through a chap called Hatem. e is on Facebook under: Mirbat Pelargics Birding Oman. Contact details are: Mobile (968) 9908 8815 - Email: say_ary@hotmail.com

CONCLUSION

The downside to visiting Dhofar is the time it takes to get there, the best part of two days door to door and it is very expensive. However, if you want fabulous scenery, superb birding in a safe environment with friendly locals a trip to Dhofar in late September is worth considering.

The Oman Tourist Board has produced a short video promoting Dhofar which you might find of interest.
<https://youtu.be/i5E2QsVnKq0?si=qsNnXkxtecAlOucD>

On the following pages is an article copied from Waterbird News with permission from the author, Gill Birtles of the BTO. She describes her experiences taking part in WINTER DUCK 2023 with RAFOS.

A Busman's Holiday with Winter Duck 2023

By Gill Birtles, WeBS Counter Network Organiser

In January 2023, I had the pleasure of joining the RAF Ornithological Society (RAFOS) on their annual expedition to the remotest parts of northern Scotland to carry out counts at the most under-surveyed WeBS sectors. This expedition is code named 'Winter Duck' and since 1999, RAFOS have completed this expedition on a yearly basis, not missing a single year. On average, 200 WeBS sectors are surveyed in a week, in very challenging habitats such as estuaries, open sea lochs and mountainous lochans.

RAFOS have been supported by the WeBS office each year through providing paper forms and maps and since I joined the WeBS team in 2019, I have always enjoyed this job, doing my small part for the expedition and enjoying the photos and tales afterwards from afar. Even before joining BTO, I vividly remember their presentation given at the WeBS 70th Anniversary Conference in 2017. So when I was invited to join the crew of Winter Duck 2023, I needed no persuasion!

Unsurprisingly, with the majority of the expedition crew being serving and retired military personnel, the organisation of the trip was like a military operation, so I felt very prepared. We were all travelling up from different parts of the UK, so I met up with the 'East Coast Minibus' in Cambridgeshire and we drove the long journey up to Scotland. We met with the rest of the expedition crew for an overnight stay at Newtonmore, where we enjoyed the

comforts of the Newtonmore Diner (macaroni and chips anyone?). There were 10 of us in total and the plan was to split into three teams to cover the week's work. Team 1 would be based at Dundonnell, while Team 2 would work from Horse Sound to Kenmore and Team 3 would start at Duncansby Head and move along the northern coast.

The WeBS sectors that RAFOS cover are in very remote areas that are difficult to access and with few people living locally, it is challenging to find counters who can count them monthly. Therefore, receiving these annual single-visit counts allows us to continue to monitor these important local areas and see how the bird populations change over the years and decades. In the WeBS calendar, January is the most important month of the year as the data collected feeds into the International Waterbird Census, making these counts vital for collecting data for species such as Barnacle Geese and Black-throated Divers.

So we were up early and as I was with Team 1, we headed by minibus to our main base of the MOD Adventure Training Centre in Dundonnell, via Inverness for breakfast at Morrisons and a final supply run. We covered some inland WeBS sectors on the way across and the week got off to a flying start as the first bird we spotted was a Golden Eagle on the side of a ridge – the first of many lifers for me!

The training centre was located at the mouth of Little Loch Broom with views from the bedrooms of Curlew, Oystercatchers and Hooded Crows. You could hear the wind howling around the building but inside was very comfortable and warm and I felt in the lap of luxury compared to some of the hostels that Teams 2 and 3 were due to stay in. Having said that, there were some challenges over the week, such as the fridge breaking and Scottish Water inadvertently switching off the water supply, none of which fazed the regular expeditioners!

For the first full day of surveying we covered Loch Ewe, starting at the western tip at Rubha nan Sasan, where we were accompanied by signs commemorating the history of the Arctic Convoys of World War II and utilised the old look out posts to shelter from the driving wind and rain. It was a long day, stopping all around Loch Ewe, ending at a (closed for the winter) perfume studio on the eastern tip. But our survey work didn't stop there as after our communal meal, the evening was spent double-checking and inputting the data.

In addition to WeBS, BirdTrack is also on the expedition's list of duties, with all bird species seen uploaded against 10 km squares. So there was a lot to keep track of, with all of us taking on the job of either keeping look out, making notes or driving the minibus. Again, military organisation and communication was the key here!

Each day consisted of this routine, getting up, driving to site, surveying and data inputting. We were treated to some



Loch Torridon

stunning views, with my particular favourites being Gruinard Bay and Loch Torridon. Many lifers were ticked off for me including Great Northern Diver and Iceland Gull and as well as the birds, we were nearly constantly in the company of seals, Otters and Harbour Porpoises. The weather was of course challenging – we had lots of driving wind and rain and cold temperatures, but compared to stories of previous years of the expedition being snowed in, stuck in blizzards or sliding off the road and waiting hours for rescue, I felt we got lucky. Needless to say, we treated ourselves to sweet treats when we could, stopping in cafes at Ullapool and Upper Loch Torridon, where we were recognised by locals as the bird folk who appear once a year. I also had to call an emergency stop at a camping shop in Ullapool for waterproof socks as, disastrously, my wellies got a hole in them after just a couple of days!



Great Northern Divers are a particular feature of RAFOS counts on the west coast of Scotland

RAFOS SITES MAP

The RAFOS teams cover over 250 WeBS sites around the north-west coast of Scotland, in some unforgiving terrain and weather, quite an impressive undertaking!



Sources: Esri, USGS, NOAA
Sources: Esri, Garmin, USGS, NPS



On the final night, all three teams converged at Dundonnell for the final supper, where we exchanged tales of our travels and the wildlife seen. It was a great opportunity to laugh, catch up and enjoy a dram or two of whiskey, but also to address any details of how the expedition can improve and how the WeBS team can further support the expedition. Then the next day we made the long journey back south in the East Coast Minibus (of course stopping at the Inverness Morrisons for breakfast!).

I feel very privileged to have joined the 2023 expedition of Winter Duck and came away from the expedition with a profound sense of the hard work and great feat of coordination that goes into the organising of the expedition – in total, 253 sectors were counted in the week! I'm looking forward to doing my part from the office for future expeditions with a new sense of understanding of what is being accomplished for us. My thanks go out to all of RAFOS and the crew of Winter Duck 2023 for taking me under their wing and making me feel welcome among the ranks.

**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society

Your WeBS Core Count
priority dates for the
2023–2024 season...

2023...

15 October

19 November

17 December

2024...

14 January

11 February

10 March

7 April

12 May

9 June

21 July

18 August

22 September

20 October

17 November

15 December

Where tidal conditions at coastal sites are unfavourable on these dates, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates. Ideally, these should be separated by at least three weeks from counts in the preceding and following months. Counts on different count units within complex sites should be coordinated to avoid the possibility of double counting.

Keep up-to-date with count dates and add them to your electronic calendar at:
www.bto.org/webs/coredates

RAFOS SLIMBRIDGE WWT VISIT 26 NOVEMBER 2023

By Iain MacKenzie

INTRODUCTION

For 2023 it was proposed at the AGM to try a November date as weather conditions might be better for travel. On the 26 November Bill, Ken and Sally, Peter and myself met up. On arrival two species are quickly noticed because they are special to Slimbridge, the Hawaiian Goose known as the Nene and Bewick's swans. The painting 'The Nenes on Mauna Loa, Hawaii', is the 1965 oil canvas by Sir Peter. Bought by Mrs Enid Haupt at auction in Florida in memory of her brother who was US Ambassador to London and gifted to the WWT Slimbridge on the understanding it would forever hang in the Visitor Centre for all to see! A pair of Bewick's swans hang from the ceiling.

The weather the day before had been glorious and ideal with clear sky. Saturday dawned misty, with a very fine drizzle at times and this continued all day, although a visibility improvement was noted by mid-day from the Estuary Tower, when the Severn embankment could be seen and where a small number of Barnacle geese were identified.

The group stayed together until dispersing after the Estuary Tower visit. Bill made his way to South Lake Discovery Hide via the Joan Sanderson Memorial Bridge, a lady who inspired many to take up an interest in wildlife, whilst Peter and I stayed together and headed to the main building our meeting point for the 1330 tour of Scott House Museum.

This article will list the species seen but is mainly a view of the areas we visited and the history of them.



SIR PETER MARKHAM SCOTT 14 Sep 1909 – 29 Aug 1989.

The reserve set up by artist and conservationist Sir Peter Scott opened in November 1946 and comprises 800 hectares (2000 acres) of pasture, reed bed, lagoon and salt marsh. Sir Peter had

been inspired by the estimated to be 30,000 geese, ducks and waterfowl that wintered in the area and knew from then, that his home would be forever at Slimbridge.

Sir Peter as an artist had painted a portrait of the Queen as a Princess before her Coronation and the family remained close friends with the Queen and Prince Phillip visiting on numerous occasions and even staying overnight once.

In 1949 Peter Scott was concerned about the plight of the Hawaiian Goose also known as the Nene, endemic to the Hawaiian Islands which was facing extinction.

During 1951 Peter Scott married a second time to his assistant Philippa, whilst on an expedition to Iceland in search of the breeding grounds of Pink-footed geese. I mention this as their children were named after birds a daughter Dafila, an old scientific name for Pintail and a son named Falcon.

Sir Peter was knighted in 1973 for his contribution to the conservation of wild animals.

He was also a keen sportsman and won an Olympic Bronze medal in the 1936 Berlin Olympics in the O'Jolle yachting sailing category.

Sir Peter was the only child of Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott (6 Jun 1868 – 29 Mar 1912) who famously instructed his wife, 'make the boy interested in natural history'. He would have been so proud of Sir Peter's achievements.

SAVING THE NENE – HAWAIIAN GOOSE

The Hawaiian Goose evolved from the Canada Goose which probably arrived on Hawaii shortly after it was formed 500,000 years ago. In Hawaiian culture, they are seen as a symbolic joining force between the mountains, (their feeding grounds and the coast their breeding grounds) because of their seasonal migration.

Originally numbers were estimated at 25,000 but due to predation by mongoose and cats the numbers had reduced to 20-30 by 1949. With extinction looming Sir Peter arranged a captive breeding programme brought a pair to Slimbridge which turned out to be two females, with the introduction of a gander so began one of the greatest conservation success stories. It became his passion for the rest of his life breeding the Nene, in 1965, 35 Nene were born and raised at Slimbridge and reintroduced to the wild in Hawaii.

The Hawaiian Goose remains one of the world's rarest geese.



SLIMBRIDGE 2020 PROJECT

In 2016 the Slimbridge 2020 Project was set up with 6 exhibition proposals to be completed with funds from the National Lottery Heritage Fund £4.5 m and the Wetland and Wildfowl Trust totalling £6m. This funding was used in part for projects including the Estuary Tower, the Scott House Museum Duck Decoy renovation and the Living Wetland Theatre and Waterscapes walk-through Aviary which replaced the 50-year-old Tropical House. The aviary is much better equipped to house vulnerable species and is fully accessible to people with limited mobility.

HOLDEN TOWER

The Holden Tower was originally constructed and completed in October 1966 due to a generous gift from Mr Duncan Holden in New Zealand in memory of his father, Peter Wood Holden who died in February 1965 aged 92. His son wanted an observation tower built looking over The Dumbles, with splendid views over the Severn Estuary, connected to Rushy Pen by a screened corridor so as not to disturb wintering geese and wildfowl. Sir Peter called Slimbridge the 'avian Serengeti' thanks to the vast number of wild birds that use the wetlands to feed and roost. By 2019 the Holden Tower had outlived its usefulness after 53 years with the increasing number of visitors wanting to view, so the Slimbridge 2020 Project funding was used to construct the new Estuary Tower providing visitors with a much more comfortable, better experience. The Holden Tower's Last High Tide viewing had taken place on 23 March and the tower closed on 31 March. Demolition was ideally timed for April when wintering geese had departed, and breeding species had not fully arrived.



The Holden Tower (Bill Francis)



ESTUARY TOWER REPLACES THE HOLDEN TOWER

Constructed during April 2019 the much improved 10-metre-high Estuary Tower provides magnificent views of the Severn Estuary. Opened by naturalist Mike Dilger, the tower has 2 floors accessible by lift. Excellent photography opportunities can be had from the open-air viewing terrace. New shallow ponds at the foot of the tower provide links to the existing water courses.



*Ken and Sally
Earnshaw on the
Estuary Tower*

BEWICK'S SWANS 2023 ARRIVAL

The Bewick's swan is the smallest of the UK swan visitors during winter to Eastern England Welney WWT and the Severn Estuary.

The Bewick's swan was named in 1830 by William Yarrell after engraver Thomas Bewick who specialised in illustrations of birds and animals.

The most successful day since 1966 was 27 January 2022 when 128 Bewick's swans including 33 Juveniles were recorded. Counts are not made every day but on 22 Nov 2023, 43 were present and on 27 Nov 33 including 7 juveniles.

Keep up to date by viewing the Bewick's swans blog.

<https://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/slimbridge/news/a-bewicks-blog-winter-2324/>



SCOTT HOUSE GUIDED TOUR 1330-1430

At 1325 Paul our guide arrived and introduced himself to the 6 present and we waited for a few minutes for two more on his list to appear. Maximum due to the size of Scott House is 8 with 3 tours a day. The 6 of us set off and first of all Paul spoke from outside Sir Peter's original house, a fine-looking cottage, one can see from the walkway to the entrance to the WWT main building. Due to its even smaller size it is not open to the public. The actual Scott House Museum is not visible from the walkway, but good views can be had from the Yuen Peng McNeice Observatory opened by the Queen on 12 February 1988, a lovely warm enclosed room looking over Rushy Lake and with excellent viewing of the Bewick's swans being fed at 1600 daily a very popular event.



The Scott House Museum built in 1953 is a typical 1950's build consisting of 4 rooms the first being the kitchen, where Paul explained little had been changed since the house was built. It certainly was a grand look back to items we remembered as children, the blue kitchen units, the aga, the drop-down clothes drying pulley system.

The second room is the dining room, fairly small, but where the Queen and Prince Phillip had dined in the past along with other important figures including Sir David Attenborough. On the walls are various certificates awarded to Sir Peter and a painting of interest which Paul asked us to identify what it was. No one was able to, even looking closely at a copy on the dining table. Photography is not allowed in Scott House, and I've not been able to find it online. Paul explained it was a duck decoy. It became derelict in the 1990's but the renovated duck decoy is now open and demonstrations are given at weekends during the Winter.

The third room the smallest, was used as an office and also had projection equipment and tabletop slide viewer with a selection of slides viewable. Throughout the rooms one can discover Sir Peter's achievements as a conservationist, painter. and sportsman.

The visit culminates in the studio, recognisable from the early BBC natural history television series *Look*, broadcast from 1955 to 1969. BBC Bristol remains the mainstay of BBC natural history productions. This large room consists of the library, an easel with Sir Peter's last painting as it was at the time of his death in 1989. It is an imagining of the London Wetland Centre, which opened 11 years after his death. Various books with copied extracts and a copy of the visitor's book at the page signed by the royal family. Sketches of the panda logo Sir Peter designed for the WWF and the swan logo designed for the WWT are displayed here.

The studio allows you unprecedented views of Rushy Lake, which was also the focal point for Bewick's swan research. Although the lake shore is close to the house, the house has never flooded due to good water level management.

The Scott House Museum was opened by the HRH the Prince of Wales on 4th Mar 2022.

The upper floor known as Bewick Lodge provides rental accommodation and consists of 3 en-suite bedrooms, with visitors access to the private viewing tower at the house.

VICTORIAN DUCK DECOY RENOVATION

I mention this as it was talked about in the Scott Museum House tour. It was originally built in 1843 to supply food to the Berkeley Estate. When Sir Peter arrived, he could see a use for the duck decoy and used it for 30 years for conservation purposes, to give birds a health check and attach Darvic leg rings for future observation. It was originally a small lake with 4 narrowing channels fanning into tunnels, known as pipes which led to nets where the ducks were trapped. After Sir Peter's death in 1989 the duck decoy fell into a derelict state. However, as mentioned, it has been renovated using money from the Slimbridge 2020 Project. It is now a smaller version of the original with one tunnel for demonstration purposes and is a popular attraction every Saturday from Nov-Feb at 2pm where visitors can view a historical practice of catching wild ducks in the duck decoy, where a man can be seen using a specially trained fox-like dog. Paul told us this method was successful as ducks always like to be ahead and with the dog behind them chasing them into the narrowing tunnel pipe meant they were soon successfully caught

Finally of note was on the 75th anniversary 16 September 2019, special Heritage Open Days were held to celebrate Sir Peter's 110th birthday and gave visitors a view of how Slimbridge was progressing with the funding generously given. 75 years ago, WWT was just an idea in the mind of founder Sir Peter Scott. The 75th anniversary also marked the completion of the Slimbridge 2020 projects, including the Living Wetland Theatre and Waterscapes Aviary - the largest exhibit, dedicated to engaging visitors in wetland conservation.

We had a good day and the species seen are listed below.

Slimbridge 26 Nov 23 Species List

Mute Swan

Bewick's Swan

Greylag Goose

Canada Goose

Barnacle Goose

Shelduck

Wigeon

Eurasian Teal

Mallard

Pintail

Shoveler

Pochard

Tufted Duck

Cormorant

Great Egret

Moorhen

Coot

Golden Plover

Dunlin

Snipe

Black tailed Godwit

Redshank

Black-headed Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Herring Gull

Feral Pigeon

Woodpigeon

Robin

Blackbird

Blue Tit

Jackdaw

Rook

Carrion Crow

House Sparrow

Reed Bunting



The Wetland Bird Survey

*My local site: **River Lane Gravel Pit (32209)**
[includes elements of Brampton Park Golf Club]
Brampton, Near Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire
By John N Wells*

Introduction.

I have assisted the WeBS Programme for many years with RAFOS, but to take on an additional site locally, was another big undertaking that in hindsight was probably not a great move; as I'm way too busy in the summer months with cricket and groundsman efforts for my Club; Houghton & Wyton C.C. I was also asked to support WeBS at Grafham Water, but I managed to body swerve that-one!

During winter though, with weekends needing filling, I offered to assist the WeBS Team somewhere that needed on a one-person-one site basis, rather than the huge efforts at Grafham Water. After a meeting with them for a RAFOS Winter Duck liaison and planning day with Martin and Keith from our Committee. The meeting was held in the WeBS Team Office at BTO Thetford, I think Martin and Keith covered it in an earlier Newsletter piece. Gill Birtles' predecessor: Heidi Mellan, was still in post around that time (Feb 2019). Heidi had originally allocated a WeBS site to the east of my hometown; Ramsey, at Block Fen Gravel Pits, an extraction site about 12 mile east from home near Chatteris. Following 5 or 6 difficult visits to that site and with very little access and what access I had, was very much restricted [due to it being a working extraction site for gravel works] and as such, the movements of huge lorries full of sand and gravel in mind-blowing quantities made for birding in nervous times. I think most on the extraction itself and associated transports belonged to Mick George (MG) Ltd. MG Ltd being the prime sponsor of Peterborough Town and a local dignitary and character in the Houghton area, where he owns a very large farm, llama breeding farm, carp ponds, agricultural and orchards etc, basically his home estate, I digress.

The Block Fen site with its working lorries, men and machines got the better of me and I had to say to the BTO it was not viable as a WeBS Site, due to Health and Safety restrictions, with personal safety as well as a considerable risk to binos' and scope! Notwithstanding some impressive barriers set in place to keep 'joe-public' out, walkers and fishermen alike were at best 'pushed-out'.... saying it nicely. Even at weekends and quiet periods they had workers there, some of which were not always friendly to the layman or rather me; 'a man and his optics'. Something in hindsight they (the BTO), probably already knew; from the past recorders no doubt, but after a few years lying dormant on the database the BTO wanted it checking from a trusted RAFOS surveyor. I reckon Heidi just wanted a second opinion from me. Interestingly, Block Fen GP is still allocated to me, so maybe the BTO hope it becomes a viable site in the future once extraction quietens down.

So, during our RAFOS / WeBS Team chat; Heidi reallocated me to a smaller and bonus wise; more local, but certainly (well probably) a less productive bird-wise was my assumption. So, this article is based on the site named as River Lane Gravel Pit; or colloquially Brampton Pits, incl; some 70% of areas included large elements of Brampton Park Golf Club, a private

members Club which was ok - not brilliant bird wise (was my gut feeling), but ok as a starter; so “let’s go see what’s there”? Was the “order-of-the-day.



Photo 1 – Main Lake of the site – [taken in Autumn 2023 after Carp fishery workings]

Brampton Pits site.

The Brampton Pits site is down a quiet Bridleway, River Lane to the River Great Ouse. The lane also serves the GC groundsman’s’ maintenance yard and what is a tree nursery that was previously but now closed, flower nurseries; though I feel their larger trees are still grown at the site. So yes it, (my WeBS site) is safe access and open to the public if ever you are over this region and want to take an easy drive and park up and bird from a public right of way to the River Great Ouse. Parking is in natural lay-bys on River Lane. I always park at the Golf Club members’ car park and prior to any visit clear it through my new-found-friend and semi-keen birder Mr Nick Meehan; the Head Groundsman at the Club. The Rive Lane entry is (nearly) opposite the old RAF Brampton site - entrance gate just after the roundabout where the old RAF Brampton MGR was, as you come from Huntingdon, which many of you will know from past AGMs and our Society 40th Anniversary Dinner. The ex-Mod/RAF Brampton site is now hundreds of homes you understand. Some MQs remain to service RAF Wyton. JARIC has ‘gone’ as have the sports fields where I did occasionally score a few and bowl a few – in my time!

This WeBS boundaries are on what was an old previously worked gravel extraction site many moons ago, but also adjacent to a very large high standard Golf Club that hosts

County standard maybe even Regional 'Championship Golf' on a course set between the numerous water features from gravel extraction [West boundary] and a large River alongside [eastern boundary] The River Great Ouse; still a place for leisure regularly used by small craft and holiday cruiser boats, canoes and team skulls rowing boats, as well as a riverside walk. The river is not formally part of the WeBS Site, as it is just placed outside the boundary but acting as a marker for it-the Pits complex itself. The river does add interest though as the birds using the river, or move, travel/fly over and in some cases, waterbirds breed nearby across to the Golf Course and to the pits on the Western reaches of the site, which is the large 'village' of Brampton. The 18-hole course has many water features and thus is attractive for birds. I've recorded many, and many I have missed as a 'one-off visit per month; 'monthly counts' only give a pen picture of birds using the site. Some other records (herein my piece) have been seen outside of the standard methodology; set dates 1 per month and thus 12 visits per year, plus any supplementary counts by other birders who can add these via the electronic systems now on mobile phone or in situ for WeBS.

A short distance further east of the Golf Course entrance is another man-made monstrosity; Buckden Landfill site. I have that aspect to cope with at the start of the first walk (transect); mostly the tip has blown litter in various forms of detritus but that is largely away from larger water complex of the main pits. The grassed area of the driving range does attract large numbers of gulls that roost overnight. Feeding by-day or scavenging on the landfill during the day. Throughout most visits there's always a few gull species in transit to the landfill site sometimes in in HUGE numbers but not always during my WeBS count days. It is also tricky to gauge how many gulls are there as the workings are behind a huge ridge of a clay 'mountain', capping the previous or since finished workings. Gulls do use the river and the pits as markers heading towards their favourite haunt throughout the days when workings are taking place. Winter tends to be the seasons for the gulls loafing on both the adjacent GC practice driving range and holes and fairways for holes 1, 3, 4, 17, 18.

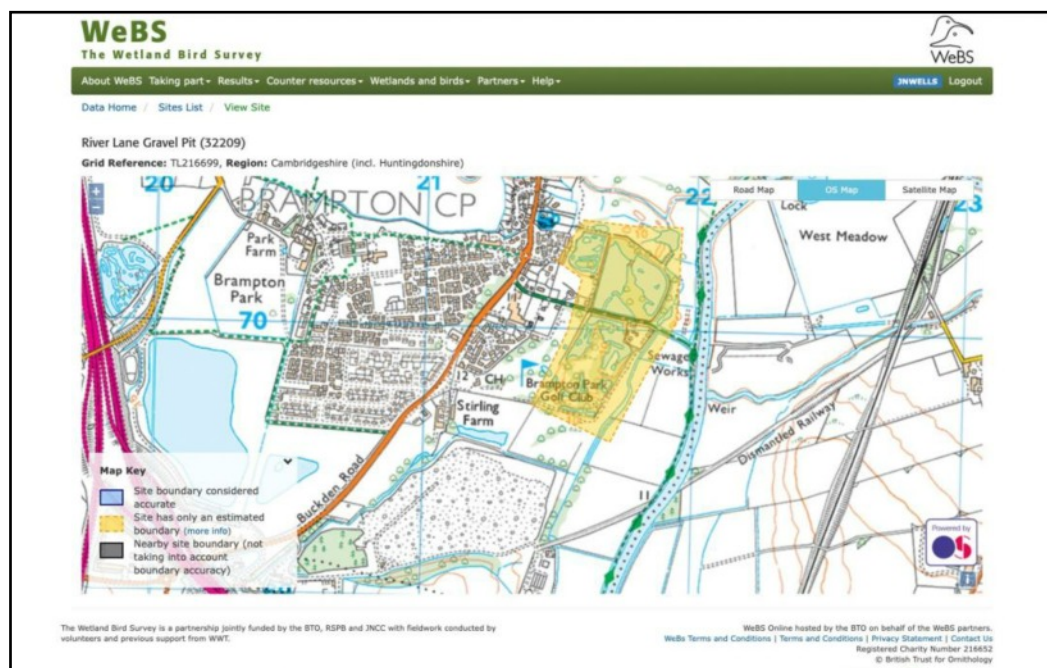


Photo 2 -WeBS Map of the Pits Course water features/hazards and Pits Layout.

Carp Fishery.

I must also add at this juncture that I was to be be-devilled again by “man and his machinery”. Approximately 2 years ago the Brampton Pit site was purchased, and the pits and surrounding vegetation including ponds their banks, trees, islands, and brackish surrounding areas including the 2 large wetland areas were fenced off and since thereafter fully PRIVATE. Not being local, I was completely unaware that the site had been purchased by quite an aggressive entrepreneur to develop the ponds as a Carp Fishery. Apparently, some local businessman who was a keen Carp angler who was a quite renowned; competition fisherman had bought the pits, from whom I don’t know, maybe the Council, maybe partly some of the land purchased with the access rights from River Lane and adjacent housing that backs onto the pits. Probably elements of both. Local access and access around some fairways and greens was now severely restricted, so he must have consulted via the Golf Club organising committee, the local nursery, and those private houses on River Lane. This purchase has had a profound environmental and conservation impact on the pits and their use by birds particularly wildfowl including many Little Egrets and Grey Herons in particular.

Site Description.

The main pit has two large islands and a few smaller island/banks covered mainly with trees, shrubs and some thick scrub before development, less so now as areas have been opened out making clearings for fishermen and equipment such as tents, stools and paraphernalia associated with leisure and competition fishing. These trees were ‘The Heronry’ and breeding site for good numbers of heron species including both Little Egret and Great-White Egret (visited) alongside its smaller cousin bred here. Most days you would see Egrets and Herons feeding and loafing, sleeping at the site. We were quite hopeful (that’s the local birders and me), that possibly G.W Egret would breed as well, as the Little Egret found all the site to their liking and with the nearby grass fields and water meadows of the River Great Ouse it was eminently suitable for both these species and Grey Heron to live alongside one another. I had 11 nesting Grey Heron in May 2019 with regular 8’s and 5’s before that using the islands woods and trees nearby. I will expand later the revision to the initial Carp fisherman’s work via a few photos as you then get the striking earthworks undertaken during the workings. See Photos’ 1 to 4 below. Recovery stage has now commenced; since summer and the example shown below in Autumn 2023 shows there is hope the site can recover for waterbirds; possibly Egrets/Herons again as well as other nesting waterbirds that are here all the time. The views below show the JCB’s working in Feb 2013 is now shown with a comparison photo of the same Main Pit area in the Photo 4 taken November this year (2023).

My Predecessor – Site Access

I investigated the previous surveyors’ records and found [the name is now shown as “Anonymous”] on e-WeBS possibly due to Data Protection Law. But when you open the Data entry on each visit it allows me (possibly you/others), to see it was J PARSLow.

So, from there I looked at the data Mr/Mrs? J Parslow visits that (he/she) made. They were very considerable, over many years. That all recorded sightings i.e., entries are made on dates after that first visit by J Parslow thus, make some of the staffs involved and interesting facts are reproduced as follows:

- ☐ First date site visited [Anonymous/no surveyor name]: [16 Jan 1982](#) on this visit and the x1 entry by same anonymous individual thereafter. After that it was/is all the work of J Parslow
- ☐ First date site visited/survey by J [Parslow: was 09 Jun 1994](#)
- ☐ Last date site visited by J Parslow: [18 Jun 2015](#) [some 21 years of effort] – good efforts that eh?
- ☐ Total number of WeBS Site/visits: [by all counters: 198](#)
- ☐ J N Wells - My first WeBS entry was in [WeBS year 2018-2019](#)
- ☐ J N Wells - My first actual site/visit [17 Feb 2019](#)
- ☐ My current monthly / last visit: [20 Nov 2023](#)

J Parslow was a prestigious WeBS monthly counter/surveyor and was very dedicated to this site. Perhaps by being very local, living nearby he/she walked it easily, each month? Knowing what they knew with the developer buying the water sites they decided to discontinue their WeBS involvement, or maybe they just became older and wished to stop the work or possibly; even moved away, I don't know.

Perhaps BTO should consider asking outgoing vol's to do a 'one-off' handover of each site if credentials and personal situation allows and fits? That way new surveyors could get a feel and facts involved at each site. One for our BTO and RAFOS friend; Gill Birtles and the Team to consider that.

Layout and Route

On my first 4 or 5 visits it was still ok to walk the tracks go through gates and spot birds under considerable tree and shrub cover and see what was around the main pit and adjoining smaller pits. The access was both from the lane by car or foot and on-foot via the golf course and paths around the main pit (possibly even before the fences went up) I don't know.

On my very first visit, I felt it was best etiquette to go inside the Club House to introduce myself as players are always using the course early am onwards. Thereafter, I would use the Club Shop to book in and out of the site, until some 2- or 3-months later visits, I got to know Nick much better and to this day, I use texts via my mobile phone, as it was becoming easier around that time 2018/19 to use mobiles and folk would allow you to hold their private numbers. Unto this day we still text one another as I feel its best to let him know I'm on the course if competition is in-play, also as a considerable amount of the site has paying members using it, whereas I am seen as a guest with care walking the periphery mostly.



Photo 3 – Driving range & water feature.

[Note the blue nylon ropes strung between banks, over the water to distract Herons feeding – probably]!

The course has numerous water sites or ponds, streams and a bunded reservoir beside the driving range. Many of the streams lead through the course, to the river itself. The Club Captain also gave me a course card with each hole layout which was very useful as this also had the 'blue water hazards' depicting in the thick outreaches that may hold birds.

The habitat is very suitable to waterbirds both on course and running alongside the River Great Ouse. It had stacks of potential for the odd rarity as well as the usual fayre of mallards, greylags and mute swans and the trusty gull or three to identify. That is if they (the gulls) settled rather than the usual fly-over to the landfill site. One of my best gull counts on the site was during a very cold, frosty, and misty foggy period - 15 Nov 22 when there were 332 Black-headed Gulls on the course. Most were hunkered down on the driving range with some 30+ later in the morning adding to the totals.

2018-2023 Visits.

Going back through the on-line data extrapolated; my first visit was in Feb 2019. Here are a few stats on dates/visits/species. Not all species are reflected in the Counts, but I'll focus on WeBS specific - Species with interesting stats are reflected in Table 1

Table 1. Site Species

Total Number of visits since 2018: Monthly counts (with nil supplementary) = 21

WeBS Species- Max and Average counts at River Lane Pit; since taking-over the site

Species	Date of Max count seen at my site	Total-Max Count seen at my site	No of Monthly visits seen [out of 21] – Monthly Visits
Canada Goose (CG)	22 Apr 2019	10	11
Greylag Goose (GJ)	20 Nov 2023,	(Estimated) ¹ (135) ²	13
Mute Swan (MS)	18 Dec 2020,	16 NB: (includes Juveniles in WeBS counting methodology)	18
Egyptian Goose (EG)	22 Feb 2013, and Mar 2023	Max 1 (Same bird – most likely)	2
Shoveler (SV)	21 Jan 2022,	8	8
Gadwall (GA)	20 Nov 2023,	10	17
Mallard (MA)	15 Oct 2020	57	20
Teal (T.)	14 Oct 2019	23	8
Tufted Duck (TD)	16 Dec 2019	8	7
Little Grebe (LG)	21 Sep 2019	2 (usually only 1) seen	3
Grey Heron (GH)	20 May 2019	11	15
Great White Egret (HW)	24 Mar 2019 ³	1	2 [last seen May 19]
Little Egret (LE)	24 Mar 2019	7	5 [last seen Feb 23]
Cormorant (CA)	22 Apr 2019	9	9
Water Rail (WA)	14 Oct 2019	2	1 [heard r/h 4 the fairway]
Moorhen (MH)	10 Feb 2020	19	22 Group of 12 seen
Coot (CO)	21 Jan 2022 & 21 Mar 2022	12	14
Black-headed Gull (BH)	15 Nov 2020	352	19
Common Gull (CM)	21 Mar 2022	7	5
Great black-backed Gull (GB)	9 Mar 2020	13	8
Herring Gull (HG)	7 Feb 2019	13	11

¹ Estimated Counts are (bracketed) e.g. (135), that used in WeBS methodology

² Viewed on far bank of River Great Ouse, from inside my site. These birds grazing in fields adjacent to the site

³ First ever record for Site

Habitat

The main habitat around the GC is very wooded and inside each fairway there are many smaller wet areas as well as Badger setts and large diggings by these mammals. These have created natural boggy patches in winter and the ground does not dry easily. Often the 'winter greens' are just postage stamp of dry circle grassed areas as Summer is the peak time for competition there I assume. Many of the holes are sponsored by the Members, and one such divot soil/seed container was named by Sqn Ldr Ian Robinson my Boss at 901 EAG Al Udeid, Qatar whom I knew very well whilst deployed but also understand he's doing rather well in Civvy street with his airworthiness competencies and considerable knowledge of industry. I digress. Ian: played a lot of Golf and is very accomplished I understand. So, it is nice to sit and have a brew from the flask and a sarnie or KitKat from the daysack sat at Ian's' sponsored tee, my rest spot. Usually by the time I've walked my circular route and taken in the ducks on the water hazards it's time for a brew.

The Badger is the course symbol on letter heads and score cards and you will soon understand why when visiting the course! Badgers must love the place. It's so secluded, thick with cover has lots of raised earthworks where badger sets are in place on course and alongside boundary's Badger working are in full site with holes and setts in numerous places as you walk the course. The course also has plenty of water to bring in the wildfowl to the water hazards; Gadwall and Shoveler love the brackish backwaters for pairing up and probably breeding here. I have not seen a nest as these species can be rather solitary but on some occasions during my visits, they show up well usually together in pairs to keep one's interests during the routes walk around.



Photo 4 – Rear of Main Pit from access track



Photo 5 - Site Excavations for Fishing and Carp breeding with 2 JCB Diggers, in action



Photo 6 – Main Pit - RH of view from River Lane

Other Features

The Riverbanks have held one or two niceties, but my stars of the show are Kingfishers, as they are not easy to see here. I think they breed on the main pit as there are one or two potential banking sites, some still showing a hole or two. Could be rats of course, but for sure the 'peep-peep-peeppp' of the Kingfisher is a welcome sound on a chilly winter day there. Another spot which always needs checking is rather smelly but can be productive. The sewerage workings right at the middle point of River Lane-Golf Club cart crossing and alongside a lovely clear stream. So, they must be extracting the sewage well!! The Mallards love this stream and paired up or in small groups they add interest and make one's brain work; on the new methodology of WeBS Counting, by sexing and totalling up any groups found. Gadwall like the larger lake on the course just to the North of this crossing point. Gateways and galvanised gates restrict any access to the large lake just here too and there is even a sign in bold lettering stating "WARNING - QUICKSAND KEEP OUT". After seeing a HUGE JCB digger get marooned and nearly sunk here I don't doubt it either. But true, they don't want strangers in their Carp lake- - far too much money to be had hooking them for sport.

So that's the end of my resume of the site and its birds. A potted or less-so, history of the site. What other passerine goodies have I had? I hear you ask. Well, as well as the Kingfisher, summer brings in some lovely Grey Wagtails on the stream and lakes and Reed Buntings, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs are a plenty in the many waterside areas with huge trees such as the massive willows and alders along the river. Red Kites occasionally glide beneath the treetops. Likewise, Buzzards adorn the adjacent farmland and mew at great height above the course. But pride of place must go to the Osprey that arrived on 15 Oct 2019. A juvenile, identified as such by me, which must have been located by a local birder, but notified to myself by Nick at the Golf Club. The water levels were still high around then and he stayed local in the area for about 10 days or so, with many other good fishing haunts on the river and water meadows of Godmanchester, The Hemmingfords and St Ives there was good reason for a juvenile Osprey to stick about, especially with a free carp or two for its delectation over lunch and tea!



Photo 7 – Osprey (Juv) on Main Lake – Oct 2019.

Green Woodpecker, the 'yaffle', use the adjacent paddocks near the sewage farm, to feed on the ground and could well breed here in the treeline of Oaks, Beech, Ash, and Willows. Likewise, Jays and Magpies can be seen and heard along the periphery of the course. There is a fair chance Blackcaps breed here with possibly Whitethroats and Lesser Whitethroats too, There are other spring passage migrants added to the species lists during the walk around. With lots of living Alders, plus lots of dead, fallen or chopped trees, some with a few holes! So, a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker is not beyond the realms of fantasy – but considered unlikely in this area anyway. I have counted non-WeBS on many occasions over the past visits, many of the full typed lists going to Nick for his records. I tend not to do this nowadays, as it can be very time consuming as the site holds many species. So, the aim is stick to WeBS to get it done sooner. Plus, by passing copies across, Nick can now see the data all online [with pre-requisite permissions].

Goldcrests have been seen but not Firecrest yet but are possible. Also, migrant wise there are plenty of potential particularly the thick wooded areas around Hole 5, the short par three, where I had my close encounter with a splendid but very juvenile, Otter. The Otter was happily bathing away and fishing in the water hazard there and was oblivious to me standing motionless not 6 feet away on the path. Once it clocked me-it was off! Scurrying back across the golf-trolley path, just to my right. Back to the river or stream that it had come from. Glorious.

On that high point, I will close my article from 'Brock the Badgers' many play dens in Brampton. A glorious spot, that is good for birds once man and machines have now hopefully finished. It is a brisk enjoyable walk and gives pleasure adding the data to WeBS effort nationally. One just must ignore the occasional golfers or "members" rough comment: "Who's he", or "What's he doing on OUR Course?" and be very-wary! nay down-right sharp as a pin; to dodge missiles – aka golf balls!

Wines on the Rhine

By John Le Gassick

In August 2023, my wife and I made our first SAGA trip, sailing from Amsterdam along the Rhine before branching off into the Moselle valley, and 14 days later ending up in Luxembourg at Wasserbillig, then catching the Eurostar back to St Pancras station, London. The plan was to enjoy some bird watching from the deck of 'The *Spirit of the Rhine*', as having a problem with a collapsing right knee walking any distance was not comfortable, even using the much-needed walking stick! Fine plan. I hear you cry, but unfortunately it was marred by the shortage of interesting bird life. Yes, there were Grey Heron spaced symmetrically along the riverbank, each holding a territory with a 5-yard spacing. Greylag and Canada Geese were prolific, but Egyptian Geese were everywhere. I suppose it depends where you live, but where I live in East Anglia, they were rare until the last couple of years, but along the Rhine they were the most numerous goose species by a long way. I suppose it is marginally nearer to the Great Pyramid of Giza!

Enough of the preamble, if anyone has read as far as this, they must be surely thinking 'The poor old bloke has finally lost it'. However, my observation gets even more odd, as it concerns the Common Starling *Sterna vulgaris*. I was fortunate enough to be a member of a RAFOS Field Trip to carry out an ornithological survey of Neusiedlersee and the surrounding area. But it must have been an expedition, as we were in receipt of CILOR (for the young members, both of you, the acronym stood for Cash in Lieu of Rations). The team was made up of two contingents: one from the United Kingdom and one from Germany. The dates were 16th September to 2nd October 1985, and there were 18 participants including 3 from the ABWS. We were operating with the Biological Station at Illmitz, and although we had qualified ringers with us, they said that the water levels were too high to sanction ringing. Nevertheless, we recorded 151 species. The full report is recorded in RAFOS Journal No. 18. Anyway, during our stay there, the area around Illmitz, some 50 miles Southeast of Vienna, is a major Austrian wine producing area. The vineyards were covered in ripe grapes, ready to be picked and made into vintage wines. Starlings gathered in their thousands to take the ripe fruit, and despite the farmers covering the crop with sturdy netting, the birds used several strategies to gain access to their prize. One of the cleverest was for the flock to alight in nearby shrubbery or woodland, and gain entry at places where the netting left a small gap. Light aircraft were also employed to fly close to the incoming flocks to disperse them before they acquired their target, but with only limited success.

Once we left the Rhine, that had plenty of vineyards, the banks of the Moselle were vineyard after vineyard stretching up the slopes on either side. I presumed that the ripe grapes would be a magnet for Starlings, but not a single bird was seen! On board, we had embarked a well-known oenophile, who for the sake of anonymity I will call Oz. He was very interested in the birds, so finding myself standing beside him, asked him why there was not even a single Starling on the vines. He said that the grapes had not quite reached the point of perfect ripeness for picking. Birds knew when this was and would arrive at exactly this time. He then told me that in some wine-growing areas of New Zealand, farmers wait until the

arrival of the Silvereye (Tauhou is the Maori name for the linguists among you) to feast on the ripened grapes to start to harvest the perfectly ripe crop! Just another baffling example of a bird's unexplained skill. How do they know to arrive at exactly the right time, year after year? Answers on a postcard please!



Spirit of the Rhine (John Le Gassick)



Grey Heron (John Le Gassick)



Common Starling (John Le Gassick)



Silvereye (Internet Picture)

The RAFOS Newsletter

PLEASE READ -NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

This is your Newsletter, and its content is only as good as you make it. I am most grateful to the contributors to Newsletter No.117 for making it such an interesting read.

Short contributions are always welcome, but it is up to you.

Illustrations (artwork or photographic) are also always welcome, and need not be accompanied by text (apart from species, location, and artist's or photographer's details).

Please send written work as soon as you can.

.pdf files can be imported very easily, but please use the font Calibri and give the author's name just below the title of the article. See this Newsletter for example of the preferred layout..

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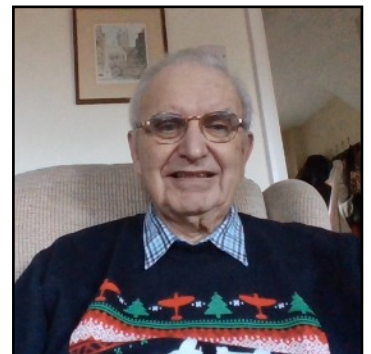
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