



# Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

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# Bird News

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Number 17 January 1993



Iceland & Glaucous Gulls • Great Days • Recent Reports  
Notes & Letters • House Martin Survey • Classroom Birdwatching  
Ringers Note book • Local Patch • Diary



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*Articles, Letters and Comments would be welcomed by the Editor*

Front cover: Glossy Ibis by David Quinn

# Editorial

1992 has been a bad year for a lot of people, including the Queen, who has even been moved to announce it publicly. I am sure that many will be glad to see the back of it.

For CAWOS, however, things have not all been gloom and doom. This year has seen notable successes such as the publication of the splendid Breeding Bird Atlas, which has been well received and may even sell out.

Closer liaisons are being developed with other organisations. The BTO surveys are mentioned later in the newsletter and although the main survey of last year, (Nightjars), did not realistically involve Cheshire or Wirral, negative results are also relevant. Do get involved in the Gull counts. The Cheshire Nature Conservation Strategy is published, see the last newsletter. We have had our say in its assembly, now let's get involved in its implementation. Our own House Martin survey looks like being a success, thanks to Don and Sandra Otter for organising it.

The Bird Report gets better every year. In the British Birds magazine national competition our 1990 report was a runner up and we intend to improve on that. Dave Quinn's illustrations in the 1991 report really are superb. I believe that even though text may be clear and interesting, good artwork is like switching the lights on. We are very fortunate to have a steady (and increasing) band of good artists supporting our publications, it is a lot of work for no payment.

Having been involved in "Bird News" since the birth of the society, (17 issues ago), the team has been forced to take drastic measures and make pleas for help and written material. 1992 has seen signs that members have started to come forward more than in the past and this really does have to be one of the most encouraging aspects. An active membership creates a living society, inactivity leads to stagnation. Discussion is all very well but without the progression to action the talk is just that. Not only has the past year seen more unsolicited matter for the newsletter but where posts have been vacated (Membership Secretary and Publicity Officer), volunteers have come forward. Dave Cogger, Graham Jones and Mark Turner are welcomed aboard and if anyone else wants to follow their example, just get in touch with one of the council, anybody is welcome to help in some way.

One way you can assist is to take the time to answer the publicity insert and send it off in the stamped addressed envelope provided. Mark Turner & Graham Jones are attempting to find out the views of members on how the Society can be improved and we will then get on and do it!

The attendance at our indoor meetings is increasing and so far I think, most have been pleased with the venue and the speakers. Knutsford Cinema cannot have had many Eagle Owls flying round over the audience. Michael Leach's "Rocky" successfully upstaged him and Sheila Blamire's introduction lost direction with one flap of the owl's six foot wing span. Geoff and Heather Lightfoot's Waxwings bookshop always attracts attention and we welcome their support.

So much for 1992 but we now have another year ahead and new challenges to face. We need to continue to improve, to make CAWOS a strong influence within the county and head toward the stage where it is an essential Society to belong to for all the birdwatchers in Cheshire and Wirral.

Alan Roberts (Don't worry! Richard will be back in the next issue)

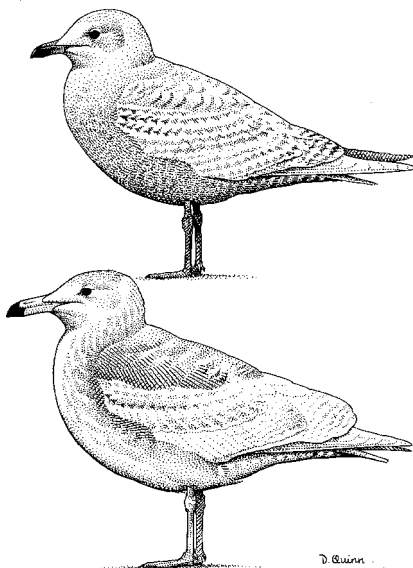
# Species Spotlight

## ICELAND & GLAUCOUS GULLS

Due to the paleness of the plumages of Arctic Gulls ageing can sometimes be impossible, especially with first and second year birds with faded or abraded feathers. However good views and noting of the details of bare part coloration is a more reliable method in ageing.

| AGE                     | ICELAND   | GLAUCOUS  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| 1st<br>Winter<br>Summer | Bill: Mainly black, fleshy base<br>Eye: Dark iris   | Bill: Pink, clear cut black tip<br>Eye: Dark iris       |
| 2nd<br>Winter<br>Summer | Bill: Mainly black, creamy base<br>Eye: Pale iris   | Bill: As 1st Winter but with pale tip<br>Eye: Pale iris |
| 3rd<br>Winter<br>Summer | Bill: Yellow with dark sub-terminal band<br>may have green/grey tinge   | Bill: Yellow with black sub-terminal band               |
| 4th<br>Winter           | Bill: As adult, but with some dark to remains of dark sub-terminal band<br>Eye: Pale iris with red orbital ring | Eye: Pale iris with yellowish orbital ring              |
| Adult                   | Bill: Greenish-yellow with red/orange gonys spot<br>Eye: As 4th Winter  |   |

As with most gulls, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls take up to four years to acquire full adult plumage, having a complete body moult in each summer (April to September) and a head and body moult in the winter (January to May). First winter birds are generally a “digestive biscuit” colour with intricate barring and paler primaries. The head and body feathers are moulted out and are replaced by paler feathers, as the plumage becomes more worn and abraded, the overall appearance is of a paler bird. Second winter plumage is acquired by September, when the bird will have pale buff streaked or mottled head and underparts, some grey feathers may start to appear in the scapulars and mantle, and the primaries are pale buff or white. In second summer plumage the head and body feathers are again replaced by cleaner paler feathers with more extensive grey to the mantle and scapulars. By its third winter most birds have significant amounts of grey to the mantle and scapulars, with some buff feathering remaining in the tail, secondaries and greater coverts. Fourth year birds are often indistinguishable from adults but for some buff feathers in the coverts and by bill pattern (see table above). Adults have white underparts, rump and tail with pale grey mantle, scapulars and coverts.



The pale grey primaries and secondaries are broadly tipped with white. If an Iceland or Glaucous Gull shows streaking to the head and neck then it will be in winter plumage, if these parts are only faintly streaked or white it is in summer plumage. Careful noting of these details over several observations is invaluable for monitoring the number of white-winged gulls - a bird seen in second winter plumage in early February may well be the same bird reported as a second summer in early March at the same site. Scanning through a flock of Gulls roosting or feeding you come across a white-winged gull slightly smaller than the accompanying Herring Gulls. Glaucous or Iceland you ask yourself? At first the smaller size lends itself towards the identification of the bird as an Iceland. But look again. How heavy is the bill? Do the wings project well beyond the tail tip? Does it look dainty or fierce. These are all questions that should be going through your mind, especially if you are going to submit your record to the county rarities committee.

#### PITFALLS

When confronted by a pale winged gull, first check that it is an Iceland or Glaucous. Both species hybridise with other large gulls (at least thirteen hybrid white-winged gulls have been recorded in Cheshire since 1975) but the offspring have contrasting dark tail bands and darker tips to the secondaries, small darker mirrors to the outer primaries and smudging around the eye and ear coverts. Care also needs to be taken with some moulting Herring Gulls, especially *L. a. argentatus* which often show large white mirrors with only small amounts of black to the outer primaries. However all Herring Gulls are darker than adult Glaucous or Iceland Gull. Care also needs to be taken with albino or leucistic gulls, these though are rarer than pure birds.

Iceland and Glaucous Gulls are being reported more and more as the interest in gull identification has increased. Cheshire and Wirral have many sites where white-winged gulls seem to turn up with regularity - just look in any of the annual bird reports - but how do you separate them in the field?

#### MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ICELAND AND GLAUCOUS GULLS:

|                 | ICELAND                  | GLAUCOUS   |
|-----------------|--------------------------|--|
| Size            | 51-60cm                  | 58-69cm  |
| Build           | Medium and sleek         | Heavy and barrel chested                               |
| Bill            | Small and thin 3.9-4.5cm | Heavy and broad 5.6-6.7mm                              |
| Head            | Rounded                  | Angular and flat-topped                                |
| Wing Projection | Well beyond tail tip     | Just beyond tail tip equal to or less than bill length |

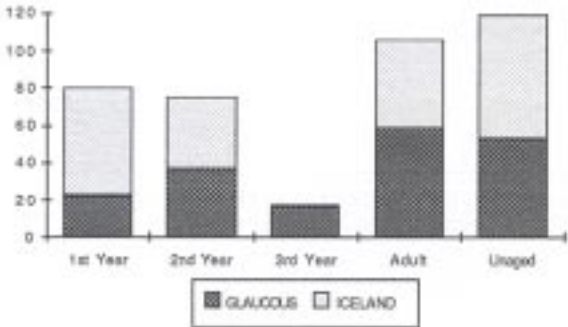
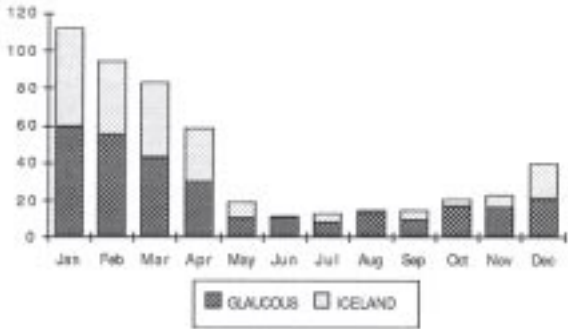
Glaucous Gulls therefore appear heavy and bulkier than even the largest Herring Gulls with a fierce, almost angry, expression, Iceland Gull are more sleek in appearance, almost like a Common Gull. It is always best to compare a white-winged gull with other gulls present, rather than trying to imagine how it compares to a previously seen Glaucous or Iceland Gull.

#### WHEN AND WHERE

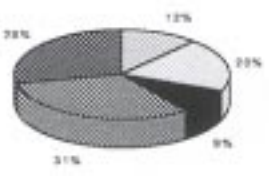
The peak numbers of both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls occur in the first winter period in Cheshire and Wirral with almost half of those birds reported as first winter birds, with occasional birds seen in the summer. The graphs overleaf show the numbers of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls seen in each month as recorded in the 1975 to 1991 Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports and also what proportions of birds are 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, adult and unaged birds. It can be seen that the majority of birds for which details are available were 1st year, 2nd year, adult or unaged. There were very few records of 4th year birds - these have been included as adults for these purposes.

The majority of records have come from just a few well watched sites - either feeding areas or at roosts. These are Witton/Neumann's Flash near Northwich, Fiddlers Ferry and Richmond Tip, Rostherne Mere and Farmwood Pools for Iceland Gull, with the same sites plus a few coastal localities regularly recording Glaucous Gulls. With the best period for White-winged Gulls fast approaching now is the time to start looking out for some "Arctic Visitors".

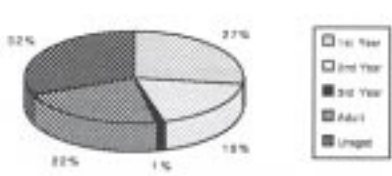
Paul Hill



GLAUCOUS GULLS IN CHESHIRE



ICELAND GULLS IN CHESHIRE



**FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES**

Cramp S. and Simmons K.E.L. (1985) Handbook to the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Volume III. Oxford University Press.

Grant P. J. (1986) Gulls: an Identification Guide. T & AD Poyser.

Harris A., Tucker L. and Vinicombe K. (1989) The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification. Macmillan Press Ltd.

Harrison P. (1983) Seabirds: an Identification Guide. Croom Helm.

Cheshire Ornithological Association and Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society (1975 - 1991) Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports.

**Want to Swan Around in 1993?**

David Cookson has taken over as the co-ordinator for the Cheshire Swan Study Group. He is asking for volunteers to assist in the study during 1993. It does not necessarily mean being a qualified ringer but it would help. He can be contacted on 0270-67526.

# GREAT DAYS IN CHESHIRE AND WIRRAL

Wednesday 19th October 1983

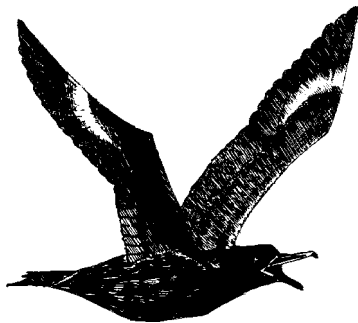
Each evening since the Sunday, Ron Harrison had rung to tell Gill and I of the gale-driven sea birds he had seen from the Promenade at New Brighton. Well intentioned though Ron's calls were, our main feeling was of frustration because I could not get away from work. Ron's news on the Tuesday evening that he had seen an adult Sabine's Gull, a species we had long wanted to see, was the final straw. We checked the shipping forecast and hearing that the north-westerlies would continue made the easy decision to head for the coast next morning.

We packed the car with the usual essentials (not necessarily in order of importance): bins, scopes, warm clothes, food and a plentiful supply of toys and books for our three year old son Paul. We were reassured to find waves crashing over the sea-front at Harrison Drive and pleased to be able to park right by one of New Brighton's best sea-watching shelters which at first we had to ourselves.

We set up in the lee of the shelter and began to get our bearings. It was dry and clear but the wind which drove large waves into the mouth of the Mersey also flung spray from the tops of the waves and at first glance few birds were to be seen. As we "got our eye in" we picked up two petrels trying to move out to sea on the far side of the river, but although we felt they were Leach's the intervening distance and spray made us unsure. Another birder arrived and drew our attention to a Great Skua battling across the river and away behind the Fort. A few Ringed Plovers and Turnstones were forced off the remaining shingle by the quickly rising tide and we turned our attention back to the river mouth. More petrels were picked up, this time passing close enough for us to see a grey band across the upperwing coverts and occasionally even the forked tails, confirming their identity as Leach's. The Petrels battled seawards in groups of three or four and a scan across the river usually revealed at least ten birds at any one time, but it was impossible to judge how many different birds passed by. Our colleague spotted a large bird in mid-river and through our scopes we were able to see that it was a Great Northern Diver and in summer plumage, swimming and diving it headed toward the open sea.

Ron joined us and we searched through the passing Leach's Petrels hoping for a Storm. Eventually we obtained close views of a petrel, smaller and darker on its plain upperparts than Leach's, and

a view of its white underwing stripe confirmed our first Storm Petrel of the day; during the morning several others passed out of the river. Protected by the shelter from the full strength of the wind its power was brought home to us by the sight of an adult Gannet which, driven into the river mouth, tried twice to circle and beat back out against the gale before apparently giving up and flying at speed out of sight up-river. Ron picked up a skua flying toward us at an angle against the wind across the river. It crossed the Fort causeway only some 20 feet away from us before heading out to sea. A small, slender bird, very pale grey on its underside with even barring on underwing and undertail, the upperparts were darker with no white in the primaries and we were all happy that we had seen a juvenile Long-tailed Skua. An adult dark-



phase Arctic Skua a little later gave us the chance to compare size and structure "in our mind's eye". The tide reached its peak and began to turn. A summer plumaged Great Northern Diver, presumably - but not certainly the one seen earlier, flew out to sea. A Common Scoter was out on the water with a Red-breasted Merganser and we saw odd auks flying by and resting occasionally on the sea. The odd Common Terns was seen with larger numbers of Little Gulls and Kittiwakes in a variety of plumages. Bird activity, and the wind, was dying down. Gill went back to the car to fix the happily playing Paul something to eat. Suddenly Ron called out "Sabine's Gull, coming down-river". Gill, full of the mothering instinct, dropped Paul and raced back to her scope in time to join the rest of us in watching the beautiful little Sabine's Gull, a juvenile, as it headed out to sea - our day was complete!

Steve Barber

PS Anyone wishing to contact NSPCC on behalf of Paul should note that his greatest, and lasting, complaint is that he missed the Sabine's Gull.

# Recent Reports

*Some of these records may be unauthenticated and require review by the Society Records Panel or BBRC. Records refer to the period from early September to early December.*

An adult **Great Northern Diver** was seen off Hoylake on September 25th while inland a juvenile gave excellent views at Bosley Reservoir where it remained for several days from November 21st. **Little Grebes** had dispersed from many of their breeding haunts by early September while the build up at the Weaver Bend reached 70 by September 12th. At Rostherne Mere NNR numbers of **Great Crested Grebes** built up slowly to peak at 132 on October 4th, this was easily the largest count ever recorded there and is believed to be the largest number recorded in Cheshire and Wirral away from the coast and estuaries. After reaching this peak the birds dispersed quickly over the next few days; record numbers were present on the Mersey where 277 were counted on October 25th, 112 had been counted on the Dee the previous day. A Great Crested Grebe among thousands of gulls on Neumann's Flash on October 31st was an incongruous sight. Of the scarcer grebes a **Slavonian** was on the sea off Moreton on October 25th while Rostherne Mere NNR hosted two **Black-neckeds** on September 13th and one on October 11th and 14th. Sea-watching conditions remained poor for much of the period but odd **Leach's Petrels** were off traditional sites in the second week of September and the last week of October.

Observations of colour-ringed **Cormorants** at Fiddlers Ferry shed some light on the source of our wintering birds with a bird marked as a nestling on the Solway earlier in 1992 joining the bird marked at Abberton for some time in September and October. The Cormorant roost at Rostherne Mere NNR continues to grow, 221 present on November 30th was easily the largest ever November count there. No colour-ringed birds have been noticed but what is presumed to be the same silver-ringed adult has been present (in the same position in the roost) since September; Budworth Mere held 83 Cormorants on October 31st. The only **Bittern** I have heard of was at Rostherne Mere NNR on October 10th. A **Glossy Ibis** roosted the nights away at Neumanns Flash from September 30th to October 2nd and was watched as it fed in a field by nearby Marston Flash on October 3rd, this will be the first record for Cheshire and Wirral if accepted by BBRC. The record, mentioned by T Hedley Bell in "The Birds of Cheshire", of one on Burton Marshes from September 16th to October 6th 1959 was only accepted by BBRC for Flintshire.

Of the four **Mute Swan** cygnets at Rostherne Mere NNR only one has certainly survived to date after all four successfully reached the flying stage. Small numbers of **Bewick's Swans** returned to the Inner Marsh Farm/Burton Marsh area from mid-October but I have heard of no other reports of this species or of **Whooper Swan**. Over-flying skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** have been scarce but up to 30 were on fields near Fiddlers Ferry in late October and on November 24th and 27 visited Rostherne Mere NNR on December 2nd. A September count of 348 **Canada Geese** on Frodsham Marsh was a record count there, three birds among the flock at Poynton Pool had been colour-ringed this summer in North Yorkshire. Five **Brent Geese** flying past Thurstaston on November 13th may have been the birds present off Hilbre in November.

A **Wood Duck** was reported from Dibbinsdale in early November while single male and female **Mandarins** appeared irregularly at Rostherne Mere NNR. Generally speaking numbers of most duck species on meres and pools remained low. On the Mersey in October numbers of **Shelduck** were lower than the same month in 1991, at around 9300 both **Wigeon** and **Teal** were present in larger numbers while **Pintail** held their own. Numbers of **Gadwall** peaked at 147 at Rostherne Mere NNR on November 1st compared with an October 1991 maximum of 200. The well-flooded Neumanns Flash held up to 350 Teal in late November while one or two Pintail were unusual visitors to Tatton in October and November.

Up to five **Garganey** were at Inner Marsh Farm in September and two were there and at Denhall Lane in the first few days of October. Up to 80 **Shoveler** at Budworth Mere in October and November may have been the birds visiting Rostherne Mere NNR irregularly.



Possibly due to the loss of habitat at Woolston, Appleton Reservoir attracted large numbers of **Pochard** last winter, by this November up to 120 had returned; elsewhere Fiddlers Ferry held up to 272 and Rostherne Mere NNR 214 both in November. A drake **Red-crested Pochard** could usually be found on Melchett Mere in Tatton Park. In a minor September influx eight **Common Scoter** were at Budworth Mere and two at Tatton on 19th and five at Farmwood Pool on 22nd. **Velvet Scoter** were noted off Hilbre in November. After a couple of good autumns for records of **Long-tailed Ducks** this species was conspicuous only by its apparent absence this autumn. **Goldeneyes** began to reappear after the first week in October and were in larger than usual numbers at some sites including Rostherne Mere NNR where 23 on November 23rd was very high for the time of year. A “**red-headed**” **Smew** at Knutsford Moor from November 5th was the earliest returning bird in the area since 1975, it visited Rostherne Mere NNR (where it was the earliest ever) on November 8th. 40 **Red-breasted Mergansers** were on the Dee in October. **Goosanders** began to reappear from the first week of November with up to three at Bosley Reservoir, Budworth Mere, Ridgigate Reservoir, Rostherne Mere NNR and Tatton Mere and slightly larger numbers at Lamaload Reservoir.

**Hen Harriers** were apparently scarce with only odd birds on the Dee, one at Rostherne Mere NNR on November 10th was only the fifth ever there. A female **Goshawk** was seen near Eccleston on October 26th. Single **Buzzards** were over Appleton, Tatton Park and the Weaver Bend during the period. **Merlins** were on the Dee and Mersey throughout but I have heard of no “inland” reports. A **Hobby** was at Leasowe on October 9th. **Peregrines** were seen regularly on the Dee throughout while up to three birds attended the Runcorn Bridge Starling roosts in October, Mersey birds were also seen at Frodsham Marsh and Fiddlers Ferry; what were considered to be the same adult male and immature female were seen regularly at Neumanns Flash and Rostherne Mere and there were two reports of single birds from nearby Tatton Park, a bird also visited Sandbach Flashes.

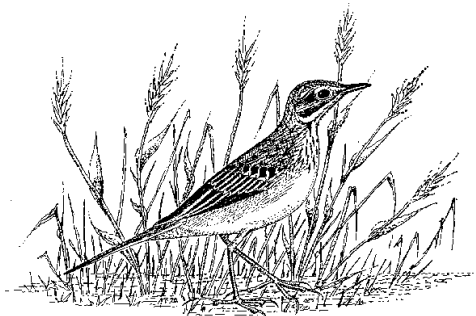
Many **Red-legged Partridges** were reportedly released near Tatton and presumably accounted for 22 near Rostherne Mere NNR and 12 walking along a railway bridge parapet at Ashley in November. A covey of 35 **Grey Partridges** was near Fiddlers Ferry in late October. **Water Rails** returned to Rostherne Mere NNR from September 26th and Tatton from at least October 12th.

61 **Oystercatchers** were on the Mersey on November 28th. If accepted, a **Dotterel** in flight over Red Rocks dunes on September 19th will be the first in the recording area since 1985 when one was over the same area on September 24th. Flocks of **Golden Plover** included up to 450 at Neumanns Flash and 2200 on the Mersey in October and up to 700 in the Fiddlers Ferry area in late November. Large **Lapwing** flocks included 5000 at Neumanns Flash in late September and 3200 on the Mersey in late October. Three **Sanderling** were on Frodsham No. 4 Tank on September 12th. 12 **Little Stints** on Frodsham Marsh Farm on September 12th was the largest count I have heard of, one by Budworth Mere on September 11th and 12th was at an unusual location while one or two at Neumanns Flash and Sandbach Flashes were more expected; birds remained (in single figures) at Frodsham Marsh and Inner Marsh until mid October. **Curlew Sandpipers**, although remaining on the Dee until early October and on Frodsham Marsh until mid October, were even scarcer than the previous species with only low single figures reported. A **Pectoral Sandpiper** was at Inner Marsh Farm from October 3rd to 7th. A **Purple Sandpiper** on No. 4 Tank on September 17th was a “first” for Frodsham Marsh. Only 8000 **Dunlin** were on the Mersey October count compared with 17000 in 1991 and explained the poor Frodsham Marsh high-tide roosts. Maximum **Ruff** counts were 32 at Denhall Lane and 25 on Frodsham Marsh in September and 11 at Neumanns Flash and 25 at Sandbach Flashes in October. **Jack Snipes** returned to traditional sites from early October. Odd **Spotted Redshanks** could be found on the Dee Marshes and Frodsham Marsh throughout. At Frodsham Marsh **Greenshanks** peaked at 11 in September, I have little information from the Dee Marshes but eight were on Burton Marsh on October 4th. There were sightings of one or two **Green Sandpipers** in Tatton Park from mid October while Ridgigate Reservoir was an unusual location for two on November 1st. Two **Wood Sandpipers** were on Frodsham Marsh in September and one at Inner Marsh Farm into October. The **Red-necked Phalarope** remained at Bar Mere until September 10th.

A sub-adult **Mediterranean Gull** was on Frodsham Marsh on various dates from late September to mid October, an adult in winter plumage was at Sandbach Flashes on October 29th. Single **Little Gulls** were at Budworth Mere and Frodsham Marsh on September 11th and 13th respectively. Adult **Ring-billed Gulls** were reported from Wallasey on October 9th and Neumanns Flash late on the

afternoons of November 12th and 14th. Neumanns Flash retained its reputation as a superb site for **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls**, odd Glaucous Gulls were present from late September with four different birds in November when there were also three different Iceland Gulls. Glaucous Gulls also appeared irregularly at Fiddlers Ferry from mid September and a 1st winter bird was seen at Leasowe on various dates from August into September. Both Fiddlers Ferry and Neumanns Flash held **Yellow-legged Gulls** throughout, although numbers and occurrences reduced as winter approached. A **Sandwich Tern** passed through Budworth Mere on September 11th. Odd **Common Terns** were reported from Budworth Mere, Fiddlers Ferry, Frodsham Marsh and Rostherne Mere NNR in mid September, four at Budworth on September 11th was the maximum reported; odd **Arctic Terns** were at Budworth Mere from September 10th to 12th. Cheshire and Wirral shared in a huge, almost country-wide, influx of **Black Terns** on September 11th. Maximum counts were; Budworth Mere 198 (although "Birdwatching" has 315), Bar Mere 71, New Brighton 62, Weaver Bend 48, Marbury Big Mere 45, Tatton Mere 20 and Red Rocks 9, bearing in mind that several traditional "good tern" waters were not covered the influx could well have been even larger than that of May 2nd 1990. Most Black Terns had moved through next day and although several sites held birds over the next few days 12 at the Weaver Bend on September 12th was the largest party reported; October reports came from Denhall and Tatton on 1st and 8th respectively. Seven **Guillemots** were seen from New Brighton on October 24th and a weary **Razorbill** was on the shore at Hoylake on an unspecified date in late November.

**Turtle Doves** appear to have been scarce this year, one passed through Rostherne Mere NNR (an old breeding site) on September 9th and one was at Red Rocks on September 27th. A **Barn Owl** hunted over Ashtons Flash from October into November. Although five **Short-eared Owls** were at Wigg Island in late October reports have been scarce with ones and twos irregularly on the Dee Marshes, Fiddlers Ferry and Woolston. The last **Swifts** I have heard of were over Rostherne Mere



NRN on September 15th. **Sand Martins** still present at Rostherne Mere NNR and the Chelford SQ's on September 13th had disappeared by the next weekend while cool wet weather brought around 1000 **House Martins** to Rostherne Mere NNR on September 15th, the last **Swallows** and **House Martins** had moved through our area by the end of the third week of October. A **Richard's Pipit** flew over Red Rocks on October 17th and two Pipits were reported from Woolston on November 28th. Up to 60 **Pied Wagtails** used the Knutsford Moor roost in mid October. Small numbers of **Redstarts** and **Whinchats** passed through Red Rocks on September 19th, a

Whinchat was on Frodsham Marsh until October 3rd. One or two **Stonechats** appeared at Fiddlers Ferry, Frodsham Marsh, Lamaload, Moore, Red Rocks and Tatton from early October. A **Wheatear** passed through Tatton Park on September 6th while at Fiddlers Ferry passage continued until October 10th. A **Ring Ouzel** was at Woolston on October 10th. **Fieldfare** do not appear to have been particularly plentiful on the plain but a spectacular flock estimated at 3000 fed on the hillsides around Lamaload Reservoir on October 30th. **Redwing**, first noted in late September at Delamere and Hale, arrived more generally from early October and have been seen in greater numbers than the previous species.

The largest parties of **Mistle Thrushes** I have heard of were 43 at Fiddlers Ferry on September 26th and 30 at Tatton on October 3rd. A juvenile **Marsh Warbler** was ringed at Hilbre on September 6th. The last **Reed Warbler** at Rostherne Mere NNR was noted on October 4th. An **Icterine Warbler** reported from the bank of Frodsham No. 5 Tank on October 1st will be only the fifth for Cheshire and Wirral if accepted, the last was at Handley Covert on April 27th 1984. A **Melodious Warbler** was reported from Red Rocks on September 27th, this will be the sixth Cheshire and Wirral record if accepted, all the other records have been from Hilbre or Red Rocks. A **Blackcap** passage was evident through several sites in early November while later in the month birds were at Moreton and Woolston. A **Chiffchaff** was on Knutsford Moor in early November, others were at Moreton and Woolston later in the month (see Blackcap). The latest **Willow Warbler** I have heard of was at Frodsham Marsh on October 4th. Two **Firecrests** were reported from Meols in October and one was



November. A **Pied Flycatcher** passed through Red Rocks on September 19th. A **Marsh Tit** at Marbury Country Park in November was the observers first there for some years. A **Red-backed Shrike** at Inner Marsh Farm on October 2nd and 3rd was the first in Cheshire and Wirral since one at Knutsford on June 7th 1988.

**Starling** roosts formed at Acre Nook - max 10,000 and Rostherne Mere NNR - max 8,000 but these were dwarfed by huge numbers roosting, despite human and raptor?? disturbance, on Runcorn Bridge. **Bramblings** arrived in better numbers than in some recent years and flocks included up to 100 at Poynton Pool and 125 at Tatton Park in November. A **Siskin** flock at Knutsford Moor numbered around 80 birds on November 28th. Two **Lapland Buntings** remained at Neumanns Flash for several days in early October and there were further reports from Hilbre in early November. **Snow Buntings** in single figures were reported from Hale Shore, Heswall and Hilbre from early November. The Knutsford Moor **Corn Bunting** roost held 32 birds on October 18th.

Steve Barber

Thanks/acknowledgements are due to Birdline Northwest, Birdwatching Magazine, Eric Hardy, Ron Harrison, Gary Healey, Andy Hearn, Paul Hill (Witton & Marbury Log), Keith Massey, Julia Mottishaw, Brian Roberts, the Rostherne Log, Colin Williams and anyone else who passed records

OR.

# Notes & Letters

## THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

They returned last night. I saw one of them on the roof just before dusk at about 7.15pm. We moved into Woore just before Xmas, and we were both surprised at how many wild birds visited our back garden. We first saw them in late January or early February at about 9pm. While walking to the pub we noticed on a neighbours roof, the silhouettes of what looked like large pigeons. The confusion was that they sounded like game birds, they couldn't be!! We saw them a couple of times over the next two or three weeks, but couldn't decide what they were.

Early in March I had a fair idea. Late one afternoon I was messing about in the back garden when over twenty Red-legged Partridges landed on the garage roof. One overshot and arrived within fifteen feet of me. Since then we have seen them many times flying onto the roof tops in the evening and leaving early in the morning.

In the spring they roosted in pairs on various houses on our small estate. They tolerate our presence quite well, staying safely on the tiles, but we can sometimes get within a few yards of them. Just before they left to mate, and move out to the fields, they would turn up even earlier in broad daylight, and "chuckle" at each other for up to an hour. I have managed to take two or three close photos of them.

A neighbour told me they turn up each year about this time and have done since he has lived here. We assume they were originally hand reared and therefore have learned to tolerate human presence. They obviously like the warmth of the chimneys and the safety of the tiles. Perhaps the tile colour is similar to their original desert-like mediterranean scenery, or so one person has suggested. Either way, we feel flattered that wild birds use our house as their winter home.

Colin and Fiona Hamilton, 5 Farmfields Rise, Woore, Crewe, Cheshire, CW3 9SZ

## ANTAGONISTIC BEHAVIOUR OF FEEDING SNIPE

I would like to relate an account of a recent witnessing of antagonistic behaviour amongst feeding snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). On Sunday 22nd November 1992 I was watching a group of 7 snipe feeding along the edge of lagoon 3, on land belonging to Shotton Paper Company, Deeside. The feeding area was no more than ten metres square and I had a good, clear view of all seven birds at all times. The distance between myself and the snipe was roughly 50 metres and I was using a pair of 7x50 binoculars. The observation period was from 12 noon until 1pm. The behaviour to which this relates is of antagonism between individuals towards intruders upon their feeding area, and only if a bird was feeding. The display would begin with the feeding bird turning its back towards the intruder, it would then cock its tail and slightly fan the feathers to show the pattern of a black letter "T" across the underside tips and down the centre to the undertail coverts (this dark, vertical line is only visible when this posture is adopted and is hidden when the feathers are once again flattened). Now, with head down and tail up the aggressor walks backwards towards the intruder. This always had the desired effect of forcing the intruder to back away. As stated this behaviour would only take place if a bird was feeding, when a previously aggressive bird was preening or just sitting it could be approached without retribution. The phenomenon was not common to just one bird and it was observed that intruder would turn aggressor when it found a

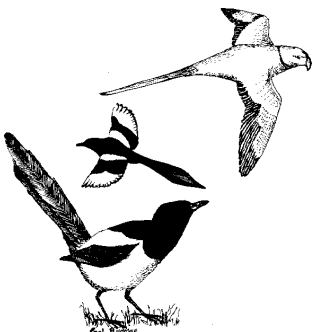


feeding patch of its own.

As recently as 1990 this antagonistic behaviour has been observed in fieldfares and is documented in the Clwyd Bird Report 1990 (Cedric Lynch). Page 425 of the September 1987 issue of *British Birds* gives an account of the freezing posture adopted by snipe when they are in danger or disturbed. Also J. Lewis Bonhote in his 1907 publication *Birds of Britain* describes how a snipe will back up to a tussock of grass with its head down and tail up causing the two dorsal stripes to resemble the grass. There is also reference in *Birds of the Western Palaearctic*, Volume III, regarding a similar behaviour in snipe but this account is of the bird facing the intruder, lowering its head, raising its tail to show black spots, or "eyes" on the upper side of the feathers, then with beak parallel to the ground the aggressor will walk towards the intruder. But there is no mention of the "rear first" posture that I witnessed.

### Ron Plummer **RING-NECKED "MAGPIE"**

In October 1990 after a severe gale, a new species for Poynton Park noisily announced its presence with a series of raucous screams. It was a male Ring-necked Parakeet, origins uncertain, but as large as life with its bright green plumage, pointed wings and long tail incongruous amongst the autumn foliage. Very infrequent sightings followed, until news from a nearby householder told of an apple-eating parrot in one of her trees. With a supply of food, it survived the relatively mild winter with ease, only to be seen less the following summer, virtually absent for months at a time.



In spring 1992, the by now familiar shrieks became an everyday occurrence and a peculiar association between the parakeet and a pair of Magpies developed. Everywhere the Magpies went, the parakeet went also, feeding on the ground for lengthy periods, and even associating in noisy Magpie "gatherings".

Complete toleration on the part of the Magpies was surprising considering their sometimes aggressive behaviour towards other similar sized birds. The parakeet also accompanied the Magpies in their breeding routine although actual involvement was not observed. To date, the threesome still exists.

Tony Broome, Dec '92.

## **WATER PIPIT**

I read with interest your recent species spotlight (Oct 92 - Water and Rock Pipits) and whilst overall an excellent help in sorting out these difficult species, I feel the following is worth mentioning. During the mid Eighties, Water Pipits were regular in winter in the Mersey Valley with flocks of up to 17 birds being present. During this period I became very familiar with these birds.

The statement in the article that Water Pipits have a "long and obvious" whitish supercilium is quite misleading. It was noticeable when studying these flocks of Water pipits that the supercilium was very variable with most birds showing very little sign of any supercilium. In fact the only time that the supercilium was obvious was in late March/early April when the birds were coming into summer plumage. I would therefore suggest that the lack of a well defined supercilium should not automatically rule out Water Pipit.

Pete Berry, 11 Baslow Drive, Heald Green, Cheadle, SK8 3HW.

## **BIRDS ON PEANUTS**

Mr Antrobus's note (No. 14) of Robins feeding on peanuts reminds me that I have noticed this during the last two winters, very occasionally. There has also been a Treecreeper on a peanut bag, albeit briefly, in my mother's garden.

Mike Jones

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## **HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY**

We are now in a position to report a few preliminary findings from this survey. At the time of writing (early November), we have information back from over 30 colonies. Nearly all of these are from across the north of the county from Runcorn and Delamere in the West, to Poynton and Macclesfield in the east, the only exception being a site in Chester. Obviously this reflects the distribution of human population. However, surely there ARE birdwatchers in southern Cheshire and Wirral? Having said this we are waiting for one or two reports from these areas.

We have received data on a total of 435 nests. The colonies varied greatly in size, the smallest being of one nest and the largest 123 nests. However, most were of less than 15 nests.

Nests were found on a variety of buildings e.g. detached, semi-detached and terraced houses, pubs, farm buildings, a railway station, schools, a college, office blocks and a psychiatric hospital. Interestingly, most of the colonies were on relatively old buildings, with many on buildings over 100 years old. The oldest building mentioned was built in 1813. In contrast, one colony was on a house only two years old.

Data received concerning nest site selection indicated fairly catholic tastes on the part of the Martins. Although most nests recorded were built onto brick, this probably reflects availability rather than choice as other nests were built on pebbledash, wood, slate and render. Nests were at a variety of heights from the ground the lowest being at 3.5 metres and the highest at 36 metres, again probably reflecting availability. Although most nests were under overhangs, a couple were in recesses. One colony consisted of 12 nests all built on the top of drainpipes. No significant correlation was found between nest sites and compass direction.

Participants were asked about habitats near to the colonies, and to notice, if possible, which habitats were used by the Martins for feeding. 50% of colonies had woodland nearby; 56% had open water; 75% had other buildings and 100% had grassland or fields. Birds were seen feeding over all of these habitats but especially open fields and grassland. Hence, it would appear that a variety of habitats is beneficial but open country is particularly important.

Where the age of colonies was known, it varied greatly from one which was only one year old to one which was at least sixty years old on Brooke House Farm, Newton by Daresbury. No nests were found on Dutton Viaduct which was said by Boyd in "A Country Parish" to have held over 100 nests in 1943.

Arrival dates at colonies varied from 20th April to 2nd May, whilst nest building began between 27th April and 14th May. Most observers last saw their House Martins in the 1st week of October.

With regard to success rates, the general feeling was of a successful year with many nests having second broods. One nest had three broods. However, many observers felt that their colonies were getting smaller, an exception being a large colony at Alderley Park which has been increasing over the past few years.

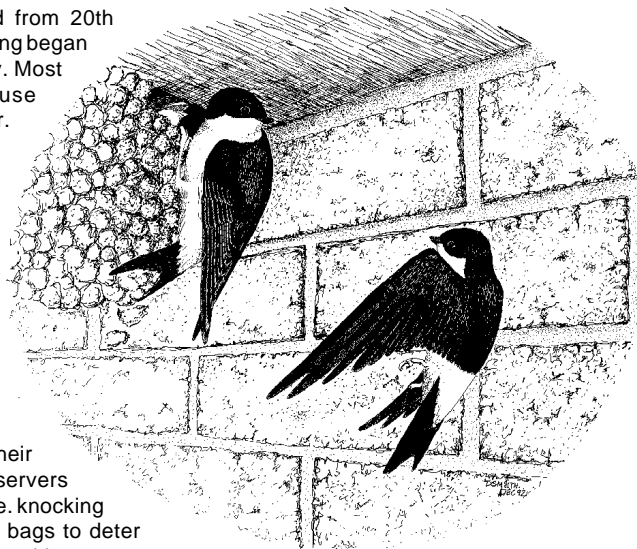
Many householders are proud of their nesting Martins but one or two observers noted hostility towards the birds i.e. knocking down nests or putting up plastic bags to deter the Martins. At one site a nest with young was accidentally knocked down by painters, but when put into an artificial nest the chicks were fed as usual by the parents.

Although quite a lot of data has been received, with more (hopefully) still to come in, it has to be said that the response could have been better with less than 10% of members responding. This survey is something of a test case as we hope to organise various surveys in future years which will rely on membership participation. For 1993 we aim to repeat, refine and extend the House Martin study and also carry out a census of breeding Little Grebes. We have had promise of help with the House Martins from schools, WATCH groups, RSPB groups etc. but still need new participants for the 1993 season, particularly from south Cheshire and Wirral. Also, we hope that all this years participants will take part again. We may then be able to start to build up a picture of the bird's fortunes within the county. The evidence so far suggests that they might be on the decrease.

More details of the 1993 House Martin Survey will appear in April's Cheshire Bird News. If you wish to take part in the Little Grebe Census, please return the slip enclosed in this issue. Again, participants from the Wirral and the southern half of the county would be especially welcome, but, wherever you live, your help would be greatly appreciated.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members who took part in this survey and hope they enjoyed the fieldwork enough to take part next season.

Don and Sandra Otter, Brian Martin, Dr David Norman, Steve Barber



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## MERSEY

Stepping from the shelter of a clipped hawthorn hedge alongside the footpath, into the scouring wind, blue Welsh hills come into view topped by slate grey racing clouds. Then the noise borne by the gale, rushing, lapping, the real Mersey sound. Knotted yellow winter grasses nod with each gust that throws the sand against the white walls of the lighthouse.

The opposite bank is lined with serried ranks of tanks, towers, pipes and pumps. Green lights, white lights glare across, bright beads, sickly perspiration in the soft grey. Factories clustering the river and the canal banks. Each corpse white tank brimming, every one capable of casting the shadow of death across the entire valley and destroying the river. Beyond, the green hills of Cheshire swell gently away, mantled with trees and fields.

Up stream the twin spans of the bridges. One square, black, Victorian that carries the railway the other a green, criss-cross arching span burdened by rushing traffic. Beyond that the sentinel of the power station, half visible blurred by low cloud.

Crossing the distant objects, the flicker of wings, the swirl of life battling the buffeting winds. Silhouettes rocking over the wave peaks, streams of skimming shapes ride close to water, up stream and down, hopeful beaks probe at the tides edge. From the low red sandstone cliffs topped with marginal plants, survivors from pesticides and field clearance and fugitives from the tidal spray, a flock of larks twist up to foot level, bouncing to gain height, turning into the wind. Using precious energy, each flight is balanced against the scale of the threat, they drop quickly into the clumps of marsh grass along the shore. Teal unnoticed, resting at high tide raise their heads to the new arrivals, metallic green glints on the faces of the handsome drakes, no danger, heads down. A few walk to the water's edge, their neat shapes slip easily into the water, the yellow triangle on the bird's rumps looking like small boat sails as the birds point into the waves. Over the swimming teal, ghost grey gulls swoop and wheel, black headed no longer. Strong red beaks dip into the water above a stream of debris. Hundreds of them, wintering birds swelling the resident numbers, growing fat on the waste of man. Among them, stronger wings. The definite flight of herring gulls squabbling over choice pickings. And the lone great black-backed gull, crisp black on white, its' yellow eye waiting for food clues among its' smaller cousins. On the mud spit below, the flight of gulls, another hunter, the lithe mist grey heron, resting not hunting, patient.

As the tide falls waves break over the silver banks revealed in the ebbing stream. More birds wisp in, waders, the mud reflecting their shapes like a dusty mirror. Wing on wing, wave on wave they come. The steady curlew, slow deep proper brass brown and russet feeding on the sea worms. Busy dunlin and sanderling patter and whirr at the very edge of receding water garnering the feast before they move on to the high north to breed. More travellers share the bank, grey plover, long wanderer huddling face to the wind, twenty five birds spaced in an ellipse. Oystercatchers herald of spring here, piebald dots among the other birds. Flotillas of duck haul out and tail shake, mallards, sleek handsome pintail and shelduck, one hundred, two hundred line across the water. Broken outlines of green and white hide them among the moving waves until they begin to feed on the exposed tidal flats.

A flight of starlings arrow towards the finger of beech trees that reach down to the shore, branches fretting and swaying against the confining sky. They dip to the shelter of the low growth at the base of the trees near the strand line and begin to forage among the flotsam. Old clothes, drinks cans, paper, straw from the farms, blobs of solid oil yet surprisingly little considering the scale of the recent pollution. On the pebbles a pied wagtail walking towards a corded angelica stem papyrus like, strange here, a dead gull, not oiled and sea sponges mixed with fallen bracket fungi from the wood. A hopeful redshank moves forward rooting stones and straw for sandhoppers.

A movement sharp and swift over the cliff crest then there she is, powerful pride of princes, wings angling, floating. The feathers flicking in the low pressure above the wing. Cast bronze dull in the sky, dark eye all seeing. The redshank takes off calling the alarm, the peregrine swoops down, shallow gliding then, impact. Small feathers blow quickly away, the yelping redshank struggles in its' captor's talons and finally wriggles free, earthbound. The falcon swoops again, mobbed, surprise gone, she gains height and tilts back covering half a mile in seconds, working towards the flocks on the tide banks. The sickle winged form shows pale for a moment against the rolling rainclouds, then vanishes into the cloud haze that spatters handfuls of silver drops onto the steaming towers and pipes. The rain already tainted by dissolved gases washes down the squat, square tanks and silos that cluster close to the river.

The river flows on darkly and swiftly to the sea, waterfowl riding its' currents, waders flocking to its' valley, songbirds resting on its' shores. Yet, it's waters are dulled and abused by effluents and metals, warmed by oil and sewage, but still somehow bountiful enough to support the rich diversity of life. No salmon, no seals, no otters. Disregarded and spoiled by man, but still a wild place of beauty. Surely a precious thing all the more to be valued for its' tenacity, this least loved of our rivers. Mersey - maybe with effort and care the silver migrants of the deep ocean may crown the river once again. Setting the deal on our appreciation of what nature itself will forgive, and has given us to cherish.

# BIRDWATCHING IN THE CLASSROOM

In my last five years of teaching, I had the opportunity to teach Birdwatching to pupils of secondary school age. Readers might be interested in how I tackled this, and in some more general observations.

The school decided to have an activity period at the end of Wednesday afternoon, between 2.55 and 4.00. Pupils chose from a wide variety of activities offered by staff. They would choose three for the year and do a different one each term. To make allocation easier they were asked to state about eight activities which they would be prepared to do. I, as the member of staff in charge, made the final allocation and offered Birdwatching as my contribution.

What range of pupils did I get? A very wide one, both in ability and interest. A group could include pupils who eventually went to university and those who found reading and writing very difficult. There were pupils with keen interest and knowledge and some who were interested but were absolute beginners. A very few, who put the subject down to make up their allocation, had little or no interest, at any rate to start with. As initially I was in charge of the whole scheme I had some control over numbers, and tried to keep the group to 12, which would fit into the school minibus. Later, group sizes had to increase and I had to take a group out in two halves, leaving those behind under the eye of another teacher, with work to do.

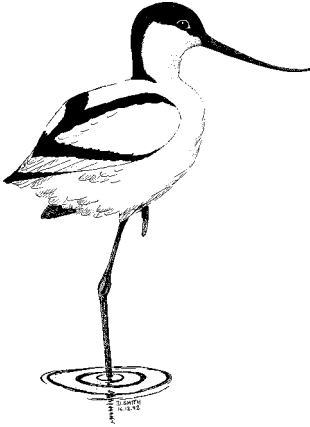
I soon found that if anyone had ever done this before, they had never published their methods. Quickly I abandoned elaborate plans and concentrated on basics such as identification, trying to get pupils to recognise common birds and to see the differences both between families and within them. I tried to link field work and classwork, though this was difficult as obviously I could never guarantee what we should see, or, in fact we should see anything. I bought some cheap new and second-hand binoculars. The time of day was not ideal birdwatching time, but I tried to get pupils out as much as possible. Hedgerow and woodland soon proved to be difficult habitats to work with lively adolescents and we quickly graduated to open spaces and water. Luckily within 10 minutes drive there was a large flash, a river, two sandpits and a canal so there was always the chance that something might appear sufficiently far away to be watched but not disturbed!

Working with these young people was a constant reminder to me that we birdwatchers take a great deal for granted. Some had great difficulty in using the binoculars or in finding and seeing birds at all - this may have been the first time in their lives that they were asked to really look at, or for, something. Many were keen but had a lack of self-discipline so that a sighting was hailed in a voice which scattered the birds for half a mile around! Some found difficulty in describing what they were looking at, or where it was - I sometimes disappointed them by failing to identify "that small brown bird over there".

Being accustomed, like all birdwatchers, to use sound and well as sight as a means of identification, I found it difficult to convince many pupils, as I have some adults, that birds could be identified by sound alone in many cases. Getting them to listen was very difficult even if we could see the bird, and almost impossible if we couldn't. A few could not see that work in class, which often consisted of identification exercises I constructed, had any connection with what they saw in the field. Many had problems with the high reading levels of most bird books or articles, which are written for an articulate and literate audience; while I am not against this I wonder if those birdwatchers who write for the general public are aware of the need to keep text simple and sentences short. How many of those who read the word "crepuscular" when applied to the nightjar have to look it up - would not "twilight" be better?

What did the pupils gain from this? Over the 5 years probably about 120 pupils, overwhelmingly boys, chose this course. Most will have had their awareness raised if nothing else, learning to use their eyes and being conscious that there are different types of bird with differing habitat requirements. Many had some knowledge of, and belief in, conservation, often a legacy from primary education. The next generation is hopefully going to be far more conservation conscious, having been brought up with the idea from early childhood. No mention was made of egg collecting though illegal shooting is still quite common among more "macho" teenagers.





On an individual level, most got something out of birdwatching - even the lad who said that he liked birdwatching except when we have to go out and use binoculars! A few gained a great deal and came out with me in much smaller groups at weekends to places such as Seaforth and Delamere Forest. I took several weekend trips to Anglesey, the Solway, Norfolk, Spurn Head and Skomer and over the five years we saw between us a total of 166 species. To raise money for the school's new minibus a group, under my direction, did a sponsored birdwatch in Cheshire and Lancashire and saw 91 different species between 5.00am and 8.00pm one brilliant May day. Perhaps my most satisfying experiences were the raw beginner who rushed up to me in school one day to say that he had successfully identified a female blackbird, and the expression on a more experienced 15 year-old's face on seeing his first ever avocets at Holme in Norfolk.

David Cogger

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# Ringer's Notebook

One of the most exciting records of a ringed bird reported recently has been the Bewick's Swan seen at Meols in the north Wirral on 15th October. The bird was wearing a blue neck-collar with the inscription 300P, and had been caught by a Dutch ringer as an adult (but non-breeding) female, on the Korovinskaia Gulf, near Arkhangelsk, Russia on 15th August 1992. She left Meols and moved to Martin Mere the next day, staying there for about two weeks. Wildfowl workers marked a total of 310 Bewick's Swans with neck-collars in arctic Russia in summer 1992: the collars are harmless to the birds and are easier to read from a distance than the traditional plastic leg-rings, as are applied to many Mute Swans in Britain. Please look carefully at any swans you see, and especially try to note any young birds accompanying the adults, as the researchers are trying to assess cygnet survival during the autumn migration.

The national bird of the Faroe Islands is the Oystercatcher, and one found dead there on 24 July 1992 had been ringed at Bidston, Wirral on 20 February 1988. A Knot ringed at Bromborough Pool, Wirral on 26 March 1989 was shot at Calvados, northern France, on 10 August 1992, quite an early date of return from its Canadian breeding area. Two Black-headed Gulls ringed at Rixton, Warrington on 16 February 1991 have been found dead on the continent in early August, one in Friesland, 530km east, and the other at Kuopio, Finland, 2057km away. By contrast, two Herring Gulls from Rixton in February 1992 have been found farther north in Britain, one in Strathclyde in July, and the other on the River Lune in Lancaster, an August victim of botulism.

Hirundines continue to produce interesting records. A Swallow roosting at Woolston on 8 September 1987 has just been reported from 5317km away in Nigeria, where it was "killed for food" during winter 1987-88. Three of "my" Delamere Sand Martins showed the typical long-distance movements within Britain: a juvenile ringed on 7 July 1991 was caught exactly a year later as a female in a colony at Kilsyth, Strathclyde, 320km north, while another bird first ringed in Lincolnshire on 28 June 1991 and caught in Delamere nine days later was also trapped as a breeding female in a Warwickshire colony on 28 June 1992, coincidentally also a year after its ringing date. One of this year's juveniles moved 237km east to visit another colony at Hempton in Norfolk before undertaking its southward migration.

Ringers have twice caught a Marsh Tit in Arrowe Park, one of the few authenticated records of this species from the Wirral.

Dr David Norman, Rowswood Cottage, Ridding Lane, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 6PF (Tel. 0928 711064)

# The Local Patch

## GENUS LARUS, COUNT US, IDENTIFY US

Imagine the scene, two birdwatchers gazing intently at the surface of the sea. One says to the other “what’s that white object on the sea?” After the usual 20 minute discussion as to bearing, distance below the horizon, and relation to any visible markers, the second birdwatcher replies “I don’t know, I can’t tell if its a gull or a buoy at this distance”. The first birder rejoins “I asked if you could identify it, not sex it”. This must be one of the few genuine ornithological gags, needless to say when it happened I laughed like a drain, and still do every time I tell it. But this seemingly innocuous statement raises the question of the dreaded gulls! Some birdwatchers I have spoken to over the years regard gulls as somewhat of a pain to familiarise yourself with, the seemingly endless changes of plumage, the question of feather wear and the subtleties of the light could result in the following scenario. “There’s a flock of gulls, now lets look at the ducks”. It also could be argued that lengthy gull observation is like buying a colour T.V. and watching it in black and white.

Balanced against this, there is a more positive side to gull watching (flogging or grilling to the initiated). During the winter, gulls increase in number and are usually an obviously observable group of birds. Even in periods of adverse weather, when most species take cover or have moved on to friendlier climes, gulls seem to revel in testing themselves against a headwind of heroic proportions that would blow the feathers off most species. The sight of a flight of gulls caught in a sun gleam against storm tossed winter clouds is surely one of the delights of a cold day’s birding. Added to this, there is a great diversity of form within the group, from the dainty Little Gull, to the grace and elegance of the Common Gull, to the sheer brute power of the Greater black-backed. Surely enough variety within one group to perhaps tempt the palate of the most confirmed warbler fan.

In the Mersey Valley there is a very large gull roost, attracted in a large part by local tips such as Gateworth, and the extensive sandbanks in the river offering safe roosting sites. Some idea of the number of gulls frequenting this one tip may be gauged, as recently when visiting fiddlers ferry, the gulls feeding on the tip were put up by an approaching rainstorm.

The subsequent flock, when checked on a map extended to 3 sq km up to an approximate height of 100m, with the birds spaced so as to appear “like snowflakes” within this area. I am still trying to work out a figure of discreet airspace needed by each bird to arrive at an estimated number until then the result will be recorded as “a double shedfull with a patio extension”. This was in addition to the birds that remained on the ground. From this tip and other feeding grounds around the area, the birds draw towards the roosting sites, either following the line of the river or, strangely, down the line of major North/South roads. All five common species of gull are well represented in these long snooze-bound lines of birds. And this daily winter-month spectacle takes place half an hour before dusk. The gulls are generally underflown by starlings, all heading for the cornucopia of bird life at Runcorn bridge.

Once at the roost site, the birds interact with one another spacing out, bathing and squabbling, providing grist to the mull of the behavioural specialist, and amusement for the more general observer. Gulls are inveterate thieves, and it’s fun to watch the grim aerial dogfights over some morsel which gets dropped in the fancy flying, only to be gobbled up by some grateful beak below. Not the polite keep-your-distance displayed by wader flocks, this is the brash, uncouth world of the gull roost.

Occasionally in the melee of the commoner sorts there is a more exotic bird, maybe one of the subspecies of the Herring, Lesser Black-backed or Common Gulls moving westward from hard weather on the continent. These birds are discernable from the flock with a little practice, and faced with an obvious Lesser Black-backed with a jet black not dark grey mantle, the seasoned gull-griller will mumble “fuscus” (being on first name terms with the bird by omitting the larus fuscus species name and getting straight down to the subspecies!). Or more obviously coming across a thunderously huge white gull with an ice pick for a beak our birder may break into a mild smile for a Glaucous Gull. Similarly presented with a borstal-faced Common Gull with a big chest and pale mantle, he or she may congratulate him/herself on discovering a vacationing American, the Ring Billed Gull. (Surely more obvious by its crimplene slacks and baseball hat?)

The key to the occurrence of these rarer gulls (as with most displaced birds) is the weather. Cold snaps on the continent may produce an influx of big "Argentatus" herring gulls overspilling from the East coast. North or North Easterly winds will bring in the more Arctic species of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. Similarly a South Westerly gale will blow in the pelagic species such as Kittiwake or even the elusive Sabine's Gull, which has been recorded even further up river than Widnes, after a prolonged gale from this quarter, although it is more usually confined to the river mouth. A massive Atlantic depression may bring in the Ring Bills, but there is now a resident population on this side of the pond.

Some vital tools in this quest may be P.J. Grant's definitive work "Gulls" or the "Macmillan Guide Book to Bird Identification" (plug, plug, cheques in the post I hope!). Or if you would like to part with less of your hard earned, January's issue of Birdwatching magazine is featuring gulls.

Finally I mention the B.T.O. Gull roost survey in January. If you feel the motivation to give the gulls some serious stick, why not do it on the 23rd of January and send in your results? (Details available from local or national B.T.O. sources). This would have the double benefit of increasing personal gull spotting and counting ability and adding more eyes and minds to this national project.

So this winter, watch the weather and grill the gulls. It becomes addictive after a while, and powers of observation honed on the whetstone of confusing immature plumages, soon become sharp enough to discover the hidden gems of the gull flock.

Paul Whorton

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## **CONTINUING LIAISON BETWEEN THE SOCIETY AND THE BRITISH TRUST FOR ORNITHOLOGY**

Following the request for survey workers in the April Issue, I thought it would be timely, as a new year begins, to thank all those who came forward and provided information and time in 1992. The BTO relies on local birdwatchers to spend some of their spare time by making important (but not necessarily onerous) contributions to National projects. If only takes one or two extra helpers to spread the enjoyable work more evenly. On behalf of all the Cheshire BTO representatives, I would like to thank all those who assisted.

### **1993 UPDATE**

**Corn Bunting Survey:-** The pilot work on a small sample of tetrads was completed last summer and the winter recording work is in hand. In the forthcoming spring/summer there will be a breeding/habitat survey and more helpers may be needed - no details yet.

**Nightjar Survey:-** Efforts were made to visit all possibly suitable sites so that calling birds could be recorded last summer. Little or no information was gathered in the County. It seems that trips to the bird's national strongholds would be a much quicker method of finding them!

**Pilot Census Project:-** We are yet to learn what is to be asked of the Region for the coming season but for those contributors/field workers using the two trial methods of census - a big thank you. We hope that much will have been learnt nationally on how to proceed in future years for population monitoring.

**Winter Gull Roost Census:-** As mentioned in April, the BTO aims to complete a synchronised Gull Count. This will be the fifth, the last count being in 1983. The dates set are between 21st and 31st January 1993, preferably the 22nd/23rd weekend. Vast numbers were recorded last time and I would like some help a) because of the number of inland sites and more especially b) because the River Mersey forms such a large area. It is necessary to co-ordinate the field work and I would be very pleased to hear from those who live near to or who are familiar with roosts on the Mersey Estuary. The record cards are available now. The counts themselves can be made of birds flying into roost or those resting on the water.

Any CAWOS/BTO members who are interested in any of the above items are invited to contact me as soon as possible. I will put you in touch with the night person, if not myself. Obviously, efforts to conclude the Gull Count are the main current concern.

C.M. RICHARDS, "Fairhaven", 13 The Green, Handforth, Wilmslow, SK9 3AG (tel: 0625 524527)

# Diary

## JANUARY

- 7 CADOS "The Corner of an Island" by Hugh Linn
- 8 MCOS "The Great Migration" by Paul Doherty
- 10 KOS LEIGHTON MOSS meet at Sessions House at 9:00am
- 10 HPRSPB TATTON PARK meet 9:00am at Hazel Grove
- 11 CAWOS "Penguin Promenade" by Brian Dyke
- 11 SRSPB "Focus on Bats" by Mike Freeman
- 11 HPRSPB "With our British Birds in Senegal" by Dr David Norman
- 13 HO "Wildlife Photographer Abroad" by Michael Leach
- 13 WG MID-CESHIRE & WIRRAL meet Guild HQ at 8.00am
- 17 SECOS SHROPSHIRE MERES ring 0270-872435 for details
- 20 CRSPB "The Corner of an Island" by Hugh Linn
- 22 KOS "Birds of Wigan" by Charles Owen
- 23 CADOS MARTIN MERE meet Overleigh Cemetery at 9.00am
- 29 LOG "Penguin Promenade" by Brian Dyke
- 29 WG "Birds of Fire and Ice" by Gordon Yates
- 30 HO FRODSHAM & WIRRAL, meet Cecil Road car park at 8.30am
- 31 SRSPB NORTH WALES COAST by coach ring for details

## FEBRUARY

- 1 CAWOS "Birds and Animals of Northern India" by Mike McKavett
- 1 HPRSPB "Breeding Waders and Recreational Disturbance" by Dr Derek Yalden
- 4 CADOS "Arizona" by Bob Maton
- 6-7 KOS SOLWAY WEEKEND, ring for details
- 7 HPRSPB WIRRAL meet 8:00am at Hazel Grove
- 7 CRSPB CONWAY & NORTH WALES, ring 0244-324628 for details
- 8 SRSPB "Birds and Animals of the Kenyan Bush" by Mike McKavett
- 8 RSPB "RSPB Film Show" Free Trade Hall, Manchester
- 10 HO "Wildlife of Florida" by Stan Craig
- 12-14 HO SOLWAY WEEKEND, ring 061-980-8362 for details
- 14 CADOS NORTH WALES COAST, meet Overleigh Cemetery at 9.00am
- 17 CRSPB "Birds of Israel" by Paul Doherty
- 19-21 WG SOLWAY WEEKEND, ring for details
- 22 HPRSPB MEMBERS NIGHT
- 20 SECOS LLANGOLLEN, ring 0270-872435 for details
- 26 KOS "Birds of Trinidad" by Valerie McFarland
- 26 LOG "AGM & Members Evening"
- 26 WG "Golden Plovers and Recreation" by Dr Derek Yalden
- 26-28 HPRSPB TREGARON WEEKEND
- 27-28 CADOS DORSET WEEKEND, ring for details
- 27 HO LLANDULAS & RHOS, meet Cecil Road car park at 8.00am

## MARCH

- 1 CAWOS "AGM & Members Slides"
- 4 CADOS "AGM & Bird Brain Quiz"
- 7 CRSPB WIRRAL WADERS & WILDFOWL, ring 0244-341371 for details
- 7 SECOS TREGARON, ring 0270-872435 for details
- 7 WG TREGARON, meet at Guild HQ at 7.30am
- 14 CADOS TREGARON, meet Overleigh Cemetery at 8.00am
- 14 HO TREGARON by coach, ring 061-980-8362 for details
- 15 SRSPB "The Dee Estuary" by Val McFarland

## MARCH

- 17 CRSPB "AGM + The Embro Valley" by John Armitage
- 17 HPRSPB "Wildlife from the Signalbox" by Austin Brackenbury
- 21 LOG FAIRBURN INGS meet at Lymm Cross at 8.00am
- 21 HPRSPB SOUTHPORT meet 8:00am at Hazel Grove
- 26 KOS "Autumn on Fair Isle" by Alan Roberts
- 26 LOG "The Canadian Rockies" by Val McFarland
- 26 WG "Fair Isle" by Mike Wilkes

## APRIL

- 4 KOS LLANDUDNO meet at Sessions House at 8:00am
- 4 CRSPB OVERTON, ring 0244-682018 for details
- 5 HPRSPB "Next stop -- Antarctica" by Peter Rathbone
- 11 HPRSPB DELAMERE FOREST & WEAVER BEND meet 8:00am at Hazel Grove
- 14 HO "Wild Sweden" by Derek Scott
- 19 SRSPB AGM
- 21 CRSPB "Members Evening"
- 23 KOS AGM & Members Slides
- 24 CADOS NORTH WALES COAST, meet Overleigh Cemetery at 9.00am
- 25 HO FAIRBURN INGS/RISHWORTH MOOR meet Cecil Road car park at 8.00am
- 25 SECOS HALES HALL/PECKFORTON, ring 0270-872435 for details
- 25 SRSPB HODBARRROW/WINDERMERE by coach, ring 061-980-3986 for details
- 26 CADOS BURTON/GWYSANEY, meet Overleigh Cemetery at 6.00pm
- 30 LOG "Wild Orchids" by Dave Thompson
- 30 WG AGM & RSPB Films

## SOCIETIES

- ADNHS Altrincham & District Natural History Society, mtgs Hale Methodist Church Hall 7.30pm, Sec. Vincent Pedley 061-748-4717.
- CADOS Chester & District Ornithological Society, mtgs Caldley Valley Community Centre 7.30pm, Prog. Sec. Marion Barlow 09282-3871.
- CAWOS Cheshire & Wirral Ornithological Society, mtgs Knutsford Civic Centre 7.45pm, contact Sheila Blamire 0565-830168.
- CCTNG Cheshire Conservation Trust (North Group), mtgs Altrincham Library 7.45pm, Pub. Off. Ann Mason 061-860-5104.
- CRSPB Chester RSPB Members Group, mtgs St. Marys Centre Chester 7.30pm Prog. Sec. Brenda Legard 0244-682018.
- CWT Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Wilmslow Parish Hall, 0625 582460
- HO Hale Ornithologists, mtgs St. Peters Assembly Hall 7.45pm, Prog. Sec. Barbara Vercambre 061-980-8362.
- HPRSPB High Peak RSPB Members Group contact John Durell 061 427 3018
- KOS Knutsford Ornithological Society, mtgs Knutsford Civic Centre 7.45pm, contact Peter Perkins 0565-632784.
- LOG Lymm Ornithological Group, mtgs Lymm Village Hall 8.00pm, Prog. Sec. Peter Tonge 0606-891274
- MCOS Mid-Cheshire Ornithological Society, mtgs Hartford Village Hall 7.45pm, contact Paul Kenyon, 196 Chester Rd, Hartford.
- MRSBPB Macclesfield RSPB Members Group, mtgs Senior Citizens Hall 7.45pm, Prog. Sec. Julia Thornburn 0625-582433.
- NCRSPB North Cheshire RSPB Members Group, mtgs Runcorn Library, Shopping City, Sec. Lynn Fewster 0928-575876
- SECOS South-east Cheshire Ornithological Society, mtgs Sandbach Library 7.30pm, Prog. Sec. John Clowes 0270-872435.
- SRSPB Stockport RSPB Members Group, mtgs contact Mike Armstrong 061-980-3986.
- WBC Wirral Bird Club, mtgs Kingsmead Hall Hoylake 8.00pm, Prog. Sec. Hilda Truesdale 051-632-2705.
- WG Wilmslow Guild, mtgs Wilmslow Guild HQ 7.45pm, Prog. Sec. Miss C. Roberts 061-432-5842.
- WRSPB Wirral RSPB Group, mtgs Williamson Art Gallery Birkenhead 7.30pm Prog. Sec. D. Jowitt 051-625-5534.

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# Index Etc

|            |                     |            |                   |
|------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Page 1     | Editorial           | Page 12-13 | Mersey            |
| Page 2-4   | Species Spotlight   | Page 14-15 | Classroom Birding |
| Page 5     | Great Days in C & W | Page 15    | Ringers Notebook  |
| Page 6-9   | Recent Reports      | Page 16-17 | Local Patch       |
| Page 9-11  | Notes & Letters     | Page 17    | BTO Update        |
| Page 11-12 | House Martin Survey | Page 18-19 | Diary             |

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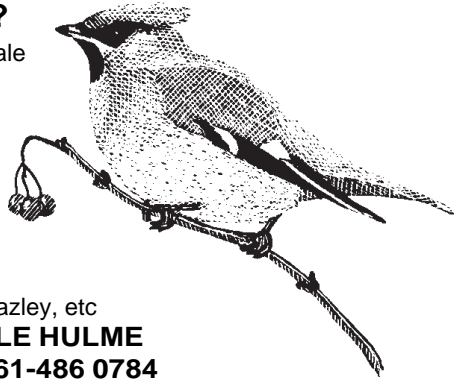
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## CORN BUNTINGS

Many thanks to all those people who've dug up their records and sent them to me. I'll pass them on.

## COLOUR MARKED BIRDS

The RSPB have brought to our attention the fact that several uncommon species of breeding birds have been marked in one way or another so that their winter wanderings can be followed and are trying to collate information on these and others. If you see any of the species below, please send details to Sean Reed, RSPB, North West Office:

- Bittern - any wintering sites
- Hen Harrier - any WING-TAGGED individuals. Note colours and which wing.
- Merlin - any INLAND wintering sites, roosts especially.
- Golden Plover - any autumn/winter/spring roosting sites and numbers recorded.
- Bearded Tit - look for COLOUR RINGED individuals, noting colour and which leg.

You will receive details from the RSPB telling you where the birds are from. Remember that Bittern and Bearded Tit records should be accompanied by a rarities form when you submit them to CAWOS at the end of the year.

Tony Broome

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● Thanks to all our artists, and may we wish all our readers a happy new year! ●  
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