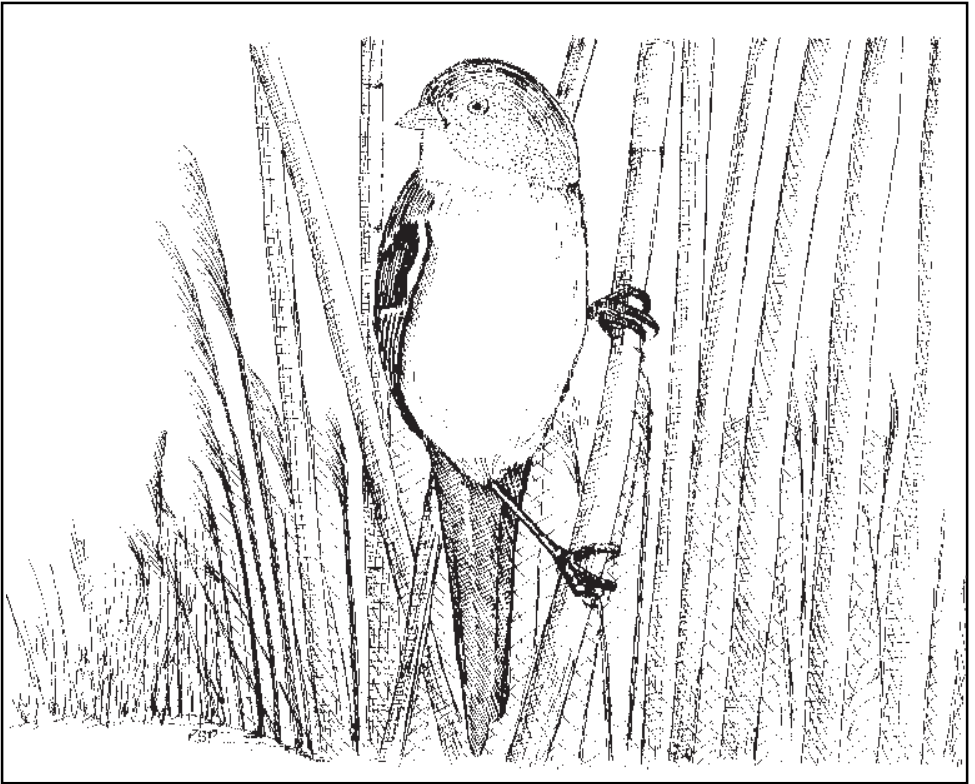




Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

Bird News

Number 18 April 1993



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Articles, Letters and Comments would be welcomed by the Editor

Front cover: Bearded Tit by Ron Plummer

Editorial

I must begin with a special 'thank you' to Alan Roberts for stepping into the breach and writing the Editorial for the January issue of Bird News. Perhaps it would also be appropriate for me to give thanks to the other members of the production team and to all the contributors who have responded so well since our pleas of a year or so ago. There is clearly a direct link between this increase in participation and the several comments we have received, that Issue 17 was the 'best yet'. We are of course very pleased and hope that the momentum can be maintained, as we are in a position to hold some copy towards future issues for the first time. Being privileged to read it some time before publication I can promise you further interesting episodes in Ron Harrison's birdwatching file and more 'in depth' analysis of white winged gulls at Neuman's Flash.

In keeping with good organisational practise the Society recently canvassed members as to their wishes for change. I am hoping that the analysis of your replies and any resultant action will be available from the Publicity Officers for inclusion in the next newsletter. New ideas continue to be put forward. We have now had a few articles on 'best birding days' and in this vein I would recommend Tony Usher's excellent account on page 6 of a morning he spent with a 'rookie' (sorry!) birdwatcher in Tatton Park some 26 years ago. In keeping with this another suggestion has been put forward that we try to recall items of bird news which reached the public's attention in the past. An example given was the furore in 1976 concerning the poisoning of Buzzards on the Tatton Estate which was well covered in several newspapers. So, any interesting reminiscences would be welcome.

David Steventon's article on Projects in this issue well illustrates the scope of surveys available to those who are interested in more specific observation and recording. Ten different surveys are mentioned, some long term, some shorter, some requiring considerable effort and some which can be conducted quite easily, some favouring group working, whilst others are more suitable for individuals. So there should be something for anyone willing to contribute to a better understanding of Cheshire's birds. The considerable success of the Cheshire Breeding Bird Atlas has confounded the doubters and perhaps even surprised the more optimistic; a new Cheshire Avifauna would be an ideal sequel. For this to be successful such surveys need a good response so please participate if you can. An up-to-date Avifauna would of course need editing, but that is another problem!

Mentioned at a later stage in the Newsletter is the moving of Don & Sandra Otter to the Thames & Ciltern area. They will be much missed by the CAWOS team who valued their help and enthusiasm with many tasks over the past few years. May we take this opportunity to voice our gratitude & to wish them every success (and hope they'll still remain members!).

Finally, today I have seen my first Yellow Wagtail of the year as it landed briefly at the edge of a pond near my home. Apart from the early date, and the great pleasure in seeing such colour on a dull spring morning, you may say there is nothing particularly remarkable about the record. Yet it made me reflect upon Paul Wharton's comments in this issue's 'Local Patch' article. It also made me recall a previous local sighting of this species in Spring. I can clearly remember pointing out to my wife a flock of perhaps six or eight Yellow Wagtails foraging for insects which were being disturbed by cows in a meadow at Higher Poynton. That was about 25 years ago, the meadow is now a beautifully manicured golf course fairway and to my knowledge there were no sightings of the species locally at all last year. As Paul might say 'makes you think about the year 2018, don't it! Maybe my single male Yellow Wagtail record will be seen in a very different context then.

RICHARD GABB

Species Spotlight

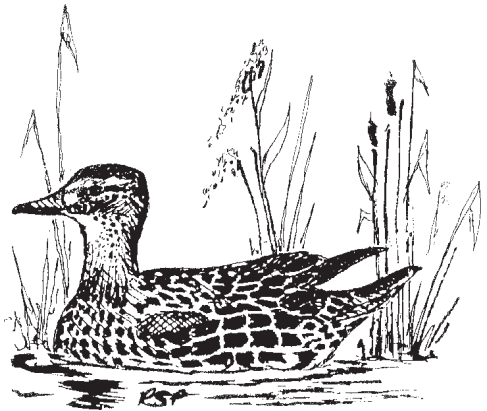
GARGANEY

As March and April arrive, so the anticipation of the first migrants is fulfilled by the sound of a Chiffchaff singing or the sight of a Sand Martin beating across the local mere. It is also the time when that attractive little duck, the Garganey, first shows up, for unlike the rest of our duck species it is a summer rather than a winter visitor.

It is always scarce in Britain, usually between 50 and 100 pairs, so adding to its appeal and it remains equally enigmatic in Cheshire and Wirral. There have been a scattering of nesting records over the past 36 years since the first proved breeding near Warrington in 1957. Due to its secretive nature and preference for grassy secluded marshes when nesting there have been many more accounts of "possibles" than "definite" records.

A few Garganey always arrive in spring and frequently pairs are seen, sometimes staying for several weeks. When the female goes missing for days at time speculation starts, but all too often the male then disappears too. However, frustratingly this is when groups of four or five appear in late summer. Just where were they? Have we missed another occurrence of breeding in the County?

This is typical of the birds pattern in Cheshire and Wirral and over the most of the margins of its range, as we are. It is not a rare bird elsewhere. It breeds right across Europe and Asia, reaching as far as Kamchatka, being most abundant from Central Europe to Central Eastern Asia and Mongolia. Huge numbers, up to hundreds of thousands, winter in Central Africa and it is quite common to see vast flocks on migration at suitable watch points.



Identification can cause headaches, which is typical of this interesting bird. The breeding plumage of the drake is unmistakable and always brings a tinge of excitement when one is picked out from a flock of Teal or emerging from the waterside vegetation. However the duck and eclipse plumage drakes are a totally different matter. To the experienced eye, the build, slightly larger and longer billed appearance of Garganey, is relatively straight forward and the head pattern is quite distinctive. It has a noticeable pale patch at the base of the bill and the pattern of the dark eye stripe with prominent pale stripes above and below usually stand out. The males powder blue forewing is often the best feature when the stretched upperwing is seen, although females and immatures have one very similar to Teals, being brownish grey.

But even then life can be complicated by the need to eliminate the much rarer Blue Winged Teal. Quite a lot of claimed Blue Winged Teal have turned out to be Garganey. It is actually a deeper blue on Blue Winged Teal which also lacks any white on the trailing edge of the wing and Garganey head pattern is usually more prominent with a more triangular, not rounded, spot at the base of the bill. Another giveaway is that adult Garganey have an obvious white belly, whereas Blue Winged Teal is mottled. But beware, young Garganey have a mottled belly too!

Fortunately it is usually the males which arrive. It is so much nicer to find a stunning drake in full plumage. What a splendid surprise it must have been for Ron Harrison in April 1991 to find not only a drake Garganey but also a drake Green-winged Teal together on the new workings at Frodsham.. Alan Roberts.

Recent Reports

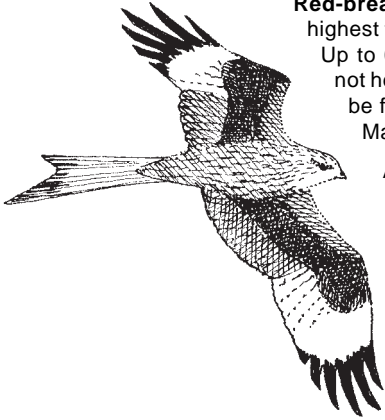
Some of these reports may be unauthenticated and require review by the Society Records Panel or BBRC. Records refer to the period from early December to mid March.

The juvenile **Great Northern Diver** remained at Bosley Reservoir until December 19th when icing over forced it to move. **Little Grebes** began a slow return to breeding sites from early February when trilling was also heard. Cold weather in late December and early January concentrated **Great Crested Grebes** at those waters remaining unfrozen, 47 at Farmwood Pool on December 20th was a record here; 113 were found on the Mersey March count while 51 at Rostherne Mere NNR on March 14th was an exceptionally large gathering for the time of year. A single **Leach's Petrel** was watched flying up river from New Brighton on January 25th. The Rostherne Mere NNR **Cormorant** roost continued to grow and monthly record counts were made in each month December to March, 302 were present on January 30th - the largest ever roost gathering here. Two **Bitterns** reported from Combermere on January 24th was the only record of the species I have heard of. **Grey Herons** had returned to heronries in the Runcorn area and at Trentabank Reservoir by January 30th.

The Cheshire Mute Swan Study Group organised a winter count on January 17th and found 246 birds in the county, gatherings in excess of 20 were at Black Lake Wilmslow (21), River Dee Chester (29), Dee Marshes (50), Nantwich Boating Lake (21) and Winterley Pool (31). The Dee Marshes **Bewick's Swan** flock peaked at 83 reducing to single-figures by early March; up to 17 could be found on the Mersey Marshes with some occasionally wandering to Hale; singles visited Budworth Mere and Rostherne Mere NNR in early January and four were at the latter site on March 11th; a flock of c80-100 over Alderley Edge on February 17th must have been a super sight. The only **Whooper Swans** I have heard of were ten on Tatton Mere on December 27th and one on Hale Shore on January 31st. Skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** were seen over many parts of Cheshire and Wirral and included around 150 which gave grand-stand views to watchers at Parkgate on January 9th, a skein of c600 were tracked as they flew over Runcorn, Helsby, Kelsall and Beeston on January 17th; flocks on the ground included 75 on fields at Rostherne Mere NNR on January 22nd and 58 on Hale Shore in late February while ten were at Inner Marsh Farm from late February to early March where they joined a party of nine **White-fronted Geese** over a similar period. A handful of **Brent Geese** could be found on the mouth of the Dee and singles were reported from Rostherne Mere NNR and Woolston in early February.

A single **Ruddy Shelduck** wintered on the Mersey Marshes. 3595 **Shelduck** were counted on the Mersey in early March when up to 30 were inland at Neumanns Flash with smaller numbers at sites such as Chelford SQ's and Sandbach Flashes. Large numbers of **Wigeon** wintered on the Mersey with 8650 in January, a flock of up to 70 at Budworth Mere was sizeable for the site but smaller than usual numbers were present at other inland waters. Numbers of **Teal** were reported to be lower than usual at a number of inland sites. A **Green-winged Teal** was at Inner Marsh Farm on a number of dates in January. Around 2000 **Pintail** were on the Mersey in January but as usual most had departed by March. A drake **Garganey** was at Woolston from February 20th with presumably the same bird reported from Neumanns Flash on February 25th, the only earlier Cheshire and Wirral Garganey was at Rostherne Mere on 19th February 1956. **Shoveler** numbers increased as spring approached and a nice flock built up at Neumanns Flash.

A **Red-crested Pochard** was at Woolston in early February. The largest numbers of **Pochard** were to be found at Appleton Reservoir, Fiddlers Ferry, Rostherne Mere NNR and Woolston and these sites together held well over 1000 birds. Apart from flocks of 412 at Rostherne Mere NNR in icy weather in early January and around 100 at Woolston **Tufted Duck** numbers were very poor. The only inland **Scaup** I have heard of was a female at Rostherne Mere NNR on January 30th. An **Eider** was off New Brighton in mid January. A drake **Common Scoter** was at Fiddlers Ferry on February 2nd. The return movement of **Goldeneye** was underway by March with numbers varying from day to day at many sites and a site record count of 32 at Farmwood Pool on March 14th. A lovely drake **Smew** was a welcome visitor to Marbury Big Mere, "red-heads" could most regularly be found at Knutsford Moor and Woolston with occasional visits to Bar Mere, Budworth mere, Chelford SQ's, Rostherne Mere NNR and Tatton Mere; at least two "red-heads" were involved in the sightings.



Red-breasted Mergansers could be seen off Parkgate on the highest tides and a drake was on the Weaver Estuary on March 6th. Up to 60 Goosanders roosted at Lamaload Reservoir but I have not heard from Bar Mere, the south Cheshire roost site; one could be found on the Weaver Estuary from January to at least early March with ones and twos visiting several traditional sites.

A **Red Kite** in flight was a splendid first for Woolston on January 17th. **Hen Harriers** have been markedly scarce this winter with singles at Hale and Risley Moss the only records I have heard of. A **Buzzard** frequented Frodsham Marsh from late December into January and may have been the bird seen at Hale Shore on February 21st, otherwise there were very occasional sightings at Chelford, Sandbach Flashes and Tatton. The Dee and Mersey Marshes each held at least three different **Peregrines**, both Fiddlers Ferry and Rostherne Mere NNR regularly attracted two different birds with the latter

possibly being responsible for sightings at Chelford, the Northwich Flashes and Tatton Park, reports came from Sandbach Flashes. At least three **Merlins** frequented the Dee Marshes with two on the Mersey, singles were on Frodsham Marsh and at Woolston in late October and one was seen near Rostherne Mere NNR and in Tatton Park in mid February. Visitors to the high tide spectaculars at Parkgate were guaranteed small numbers of **Water Rails** while at least three were present at Knutsford Moor.

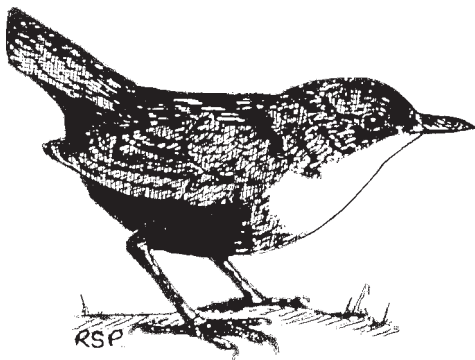
Oystercatchers had returned to at least one inland breeding area by the second week of January, four were in the Marbury Country Park area on February 21st. A **Little Ringed Plover** briefly at Neumanns Flash on March 3rd will be the earliest ever in Cheshire and Wirral if confirmed, one was at Sandbach Flashes from March 13th. **Ringed Plovers** returned to Frodsham Marsh and Fiddlers Ferry breeding sites in late January. The largest **Golden Plover** flock I have heard of was of 2600 on the Mersey Marshes in January, up to 1000 were on Frodsham Marsh in early March but birds were reportedly absent from several once traditional inland sites. The Mersey held over 700 wintering **Grey Plover** and a huge 8400 strong Lapwing flock in January, the latter species was back on breeding territory at Knutsford Moor on February 6th. 13000 **Knot** were at Hilbre in January. An out of season **Little Stint** at Rostherne Mere NNR on January 3rd will be the first for the Reserve if confirmed. 57 **Purple Sandpipers** were at Hilbre in late December. The Mersey held 19400 **Dunlin** in January while frosts brought five to Tatton Mere on January 4th. The usual winter **Ruff** flock formed at Sandbach Flashes with around 30 in January, smaller numbers were at Inner Marsh Farm and singles were noted at Frodsham Marsh, Fiddlers Ferry and Neumanns Flash. Small numbers of **Jack Snipe** were regularly flushed from the Dee Marshes by the highest tides, elsewhere Fiddlers Ferry held up to ten and two were on Hale Shore in late February. Ashtons Flash held a maximum of around 100 **Snipe** and 110 **Black-tailed Godwits** were on the Mersey in January, **Curlew** were back on territory in Tatton Park on February 10th and there were February passage maxima here and at Rostherne Mere NNR of 26 and 47 respectively. Single **Spotted Redshanks** were at Heswall in January and on Frodsham Marsh in March while numbers crept into double figures at Inner Marsh Farm. **Redshanks** began returning to inland breeding sites from early March when 2350 were still on the Mersey. A **Greenshank** was at Heswall in January. A **Green Sandpiper** was at Fiddlers Ferry almost throughout the period while singles were in Tatton Park on odd dates in December and January.

Two **Great Skuas** were off Hoylake on February 5th with one next day. **Mediterranean Gulls** were reported from Rostherne Mere NNR, Hoylake and Hurlston Reservoir and at least two different **Ring-billed Gulls** were found at Hoylake. Occasional "**Yellow-legged**" **Gulls** were seen at Neumanns Flash while one at Rostherne Mere NNR on December 19th will be a first for the Reserve if confirmed. "**Argentatus**" **Herring Gulls** were reported in some numbers from Fiddlers Ferry with reports also from Neumanns Flash and Woolston. At least four different **Iceland Gulls** were seen by the keen (read obsessive) gull watchers at Neumanns, Farmwood Pool hosted three different birds in January one of which was seen at nearby Capesthorpe, singles were reported from Fiddlers Ferry, Maw Green Tip/Sandbach Flashes, Rostherne Mere NNR and Woolston on various dates.

Neumanns Flash hosted at least seven different **Glaucous Gulls**, two different birds were reported from both Danes Moss and Maw Green Tips with singles at Farmwood Pool, Fiddlers Ferry and Hilbre. Single **Kittiwakes** were at Rostherne Mere on January 24th and Fiddlers Ferry on January 26th at a time when there was a huge overland movement particularly in south-east England. A **Guillemot** was an unexpected sight on the Mersey at Fiddlers Ferry on December 5th while the January gales brought singles off Heswall and onto the beach at Hoylake.

Wintering **Stock Dove** flocks were on both Dee and Mersey Marshes while display was noted at inland sites from late February. Rostherne Mere NNR and Tatton Park hosted 1350 and 800 **Woodpigeons** respectively around the turn of the year while in excess of 300 **Collared Doves** flocked at Moore from late December. **Cuckoos** reported from Poynton from March 3rd to 5th and Rostherne on March 14th are both earlier than any other Cheshire record and will require substantiating. A **Barn Owl** was seen at Rostherne Mere NNR on two dates in January and was an occasional visitor to the Northwich Flashes. At least six **Short-eared Owls** were seen off Parkgate during the January high tides with four remaining in March, singles were noted occasionally at Frodsham Marsh in December and at Woolston in January and February and one or two occasionally at the Northwich Flashes. A **Kingfisher** was a fairly regular visitor to Knutsford Moor and Tatton Park.

The first **Sand Martin** was over Tatton Mere on March 12th, one or two were here at Rostherne Mere NNR next day while by 14th double-figures were over Tatton and there were reports from several other sites. A **Richard's Pipit** was located on Mow Cop on the Staffordshire border on March 14th remaining until at least 16th, this is the first confirmed Cheshire and Wirral record since 1988 and the first in spring since 1986 when one was on Frodsham Marsh on May 5th. "Hundreds" of **Rock Pipits** were reckoned to be present on the marsh at Parkgate during the January high tides and five were on Hale Shore during frosts at the turn of the year. "Birdline" reported at least 19 **Water Pipits** off Parkgate during the January high tides, up to six were at Neston, two at Ashtons Flash in mid January and one irregularly at Woolston. Around 100 **Pied Wagtails** used the Knutsford Moor winter roost and around 60 were at Fiddlers Ferry in early February. The first report of **White Wagtails** came from Meols where two were found on March 9th. A **Dipper** was seen on



the River Bolin, near Tesco's in the centre of Macclesfield, on March 16th. **Black Redstarts** were reported from Heswall Sewage Farm at the turn of the year and the Red Rocks Nursing Home and other gardens in the area in February. **Stonechats** were scarce as usual but one or two could be found at traditional wintering sites such as Fiddlers Ferry, Frodsham Marsh, Moore and Woolston. The first returning **Wheatears** were at Hilbre on March 13th and Chelford SQ's next day. A **Ring Ouzel** was reported from the eastern hills as early as mid February. Up to 4000 **Fieldfares** were at Daresbury in early January, easily the largest flock reported, otherwise this species and **Redwing** appears to have been widely scattered, but in low numbers.

Wintering **Blackcaps** and **Chiffchaffs** were fairly widespread with reports of the former from Cuddington, Greasby, Hale and Knutsford Moor and Woolston (three+) and the latter from Cholmondeley, Greasby, Hale (three), Fiddlers Ferry, Knutsford Moor, Rostherne Mere NNR and Woolston (two+) likely to be only the tip of the iceberg; the first singing Chiffchaff was reported from Burton Point on March 13th and singles were fairly well scattered over the next two days. **Goldcrests**, almost absent from many areas last winter, appear to have made a substantial, and welcome, recovery. A **Firecrest** was reported from Moore on March 6th. A **Bearded Tit** was at Neston reed bed in late December and early January. **Long-tailed Tits** appear to have survived the winter in good numbers. A **Marsh Tit** at Knutsford Moor on January 3rd was a good local record. Two **Ravens** were over Frodsham Marsh briefly in January while one over Woolston on January 14th was the second ever for the Reserve. Reports suggest that scaring has had no long term effect on the Runcorn Bridge **Starling** roost, for the second year running no significant roost formed in December at Knutsford Moor.

The only **Tree Sparrow** flock I have heard of was of up to 60 in the Forge Pool area. I first heard **Chaffinch** singing at Lower Withington on January 19th, a welcome but somewhat previous, taste of spring to come. Some substantial **Brambling** flocks were located, easily the largest of which was of around 800 at Lyme Park in late December, 200 were at Brown Knowl in March with smaller flocks at Decca Pools and Tatton Park. Flocks of **Siskins** were reported from Knutsford Moor and Rostherne Mere NNR with respective maxima of 70 and 100.

A flock of 40 **Twite** was on the Dee Marshes in December. Two **Crossbills** were in Marbury Country Park on December 12th with one next day and one was reported from Tatton Park on March 3rd. A **Lapland Bunting** was at Moreton in late December while odd **Snow Buntings** were reported from Hilbre in late December and early January and from Meols in early March. Many participants in the **Corn Bunting** survey were unable to find any birds, no such problems at Hale however where up to 60 were present in December.

Steve Barber

Thanks/acknowledgements are due to Birdline Northwest, Birdwatching magazine, Eric Hardy, Ron Harrison, Gary Healey, Andy Hearn, Paul Hill (Witton and Marbury Log), Keith Massey (Fiddlers Ferry), Brian Roberts (Tatton area), the Rostherne Log, Colin Williams and anyone else who passed records on.

[Footnote: Coincidentally, there was 'Petrel' in Finland on 19th of January, blown in by the gales, a Madeiran! - Could we have a description of the New Brighton bird on Tuesday 25th Eds]

16 YEARS AGO - A SPRING MORNING IN TATTON

There have been numerous accounts over the years of birdwatchers achieving the magic "ton", 100 species seen in a day. These have normally been well planned affairs entailing the participants starting before dawn and finally collapsing at the door of a suitable hostelry well into the evening of the same day. The optimum time of the year seems to be late April or early May; the location invariably some favourable spot on the east coast, although I recollect an account of 100 species in a day seen in Cheshire being published in the County Bird Report some years ago. Some may fondly recall the KOS annual pilgrimage to Lindisfarne in 1976, our collective score being 101 in a 24 hour period.

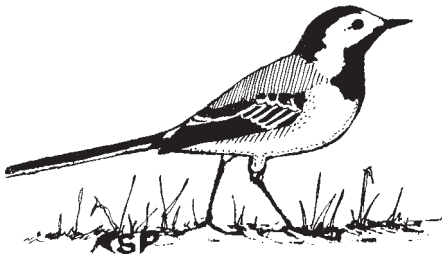
Nevertheless if people are prepared to set their sights just a little lower it is surprising what pleasure can be had nearer home keeping a tally during a stroll through one's favourite local birding area. I well remember an occasion in early April 1977 when a friend and I set off for a Sunday morning's birding in Tatton. He was a relative newcomer to the hobby, looking every inch the part with a pair of well polished hiking boots and a new Greenkat jacket (especially recommended for birdwatchers by Robert Dougall). Clutching binoculars in one hand and with a notebook and a copious supply of pens in the other it would have been a sin to miss such an opportunity: we decided to list every species seen during the day. Here I must point out that ideally this should be done as a matter of course on all occasions, but very few people (me included) manage to do this.

Early April is one of the most eagerly anticipated periods of the year for the majority of birdwatchers. The worst of the winter lies behind us and a combination of warmer weather and the thought of being the first person in the county to record a particular species gives an added edge to every outing. We entered Dog Wood shortly after 8.00am, the morning was chill, with little or no wind and as we made our way down to the mere at its junction with Knutsford Moor, the first page of my companion's notebook rapidly filled: **Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Wood Pigeon, Blackbird, Robin, Song Thrush, Starling, Jackdaw, Rook and Carrion Crow**, all fell victim to his flashing ballpoint within the first few seconds. We were amongst the first in the park that morning, the birds were undisturbed.

A pair of **Bullfinches** slipped into thick cover, only conspicuous white rumps betraying their presence; a **Duncock** sang lustily from the hawthorn hedge, while from deep in the wood came the hollow drumming of a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. As we quietly approached the water's edge a startled **Heron** struggled into the air, followed by two **Teal** leaping simultaneously from the surface of the lake. Close to the Phragmites reedbed of Knutsford Moor a **Great Crested Grebe** slipped inconspicuously off its low-lying nest, while from further in the reedbed we heard the discordant call of a **Water Rail** and seemingly in answer from the far side of the mere, the hoarse bark of an early morning fisherman, drawing deeply on yet another Woodbine. We located by song, three **Chiffchaffs** and another summer visitor, a **Blackcap**, poured out its rich, melodious song from the interior of a rhododendron bush.

More Dog Wood “regulars” swelled our list, **Coal Tits** sang from the conifers, a **Marsh Tit** called loudly as we approached its territory in the centre of the wood and the pair of us watched in quiet fascination as a pair of **Long-Tailed Tits** lined their nest with innumerable feathers.

Winter visitors were of course still much in evidence - 12 **Pochard** and 77 **Tufted Duck** were counted, whilst in the centre of the mere two superb male **Goldeneyes** displayed to a group of 17 females. The Goldeneyes were accompanied by a female **Smew**, in those days a Tatton speciality, but alas only irregularly recorded now. The usual gulls were present, **Herring**, **Lesser Black-backed**, **Common** and **Black-headed**, the latter now with the chocolate brown heads of summer plumage. Also looking very handsome in summer attire were two cock **Bramblings**, feeding in the Silver birch as we made our way out of Dog Wood towards the bathing area. Here we found more



evidence of migration, a mixed flock of **Pied Wagtails** and **Meadow Pipits** fed at the water's edge. As we scanned the birds with our binoculars two male **White Wagtails** with jet black bibs and slate grey backs stood out conspicuously. The Oak Wood towards the far end of the mere is always quieter than Dog Wood, but is renowned for **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker**; a fine male duly obliged by drawing our attention as he called thinly from the tree tops. Also in the wood **Goldcrest** and **Treecreeper** provided two new species for the day.

As we rounded the top of the lake and made our way to Melchett Mere a small flock of **Linnets**, perhaps returning from wintering round the coast, flew overhead. Also heading east but with a much longer journey ahead of them, a large, loose flock of **Fieldfares** headed for their summer breeding grounds. A **Kingfisher** perched briefly on an overhanging branch as we sat beside Melchett Mere, where **Canada Geese** squabbled noisily and four **Barnacle Geese**, a **Mute Swan**, 2 **Little Grebes**, a **Cormorant** and a **Jay** were added to our steadily increasing list.

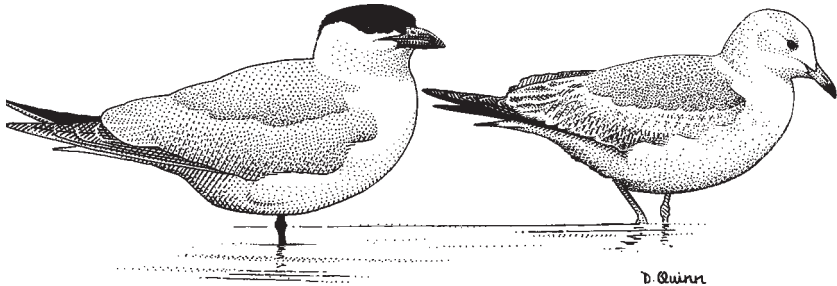
Leaving Melchett we passed the Old Hall where **House Sparrows** were busy nest building and headed for the Mill Pond. **Skylarks** were in full song and in the distance were bubbling **Curlew** and the unmistakable “yaffle” of a **Green Woodpecker**. An immaculate little male **Wheatear** flew along in front of us, while overhead more winter thrushes, this time **Redwings**, headed east. **Coot**, **Pheasant**, **Mallard** and **Moorhen** were all present at the Mill Pond. A **Reed Bunting** sang from a willow overhanging the water and beyond this undisturbed little corner tumbling **Lapwings** were joined by a male **Snipe** producing its characteristic drumming as it plunged earthwards, displaying to some unseen female. As we crossed to the small conifer plantation close to the Mill Pond a fine cock **Stonechat** landed briefly on the deer fence, an unexpected bonus. A **Little Owl** bobbed its head nervously as we approached its traditional roosting tree in the plantation and a chattering **Mistle Thrush** dealt unceremoniously with a marauding **Magpie**.

Those familiar with Tatton will now realise the best of the day was over. It was rapidly approaching eleven o'clock; official opening time, bringing an influx of assorted weekend sailors, windsurfers, model aeroplane enthusiasts and the inevitable joggers, plodding home to a late breakfast of fruit juice, All Bran and "The News of the World". Despite increased disturbance we managed a number of new species on the return journey. Most of the wildfowl had left the main mere seeking sanctuary on Melchett, but **Shoveler** and **Ruddy Duck** were added to the list. As we made our way up towards the golf course a **Sparrowhawk** circled high overhead and we watched a **Kestrel** investigating a possible nest site in one of the old beech trees that stretch along the western edge of the park.

These beeches are used by **Tawny Owls** and nearby we came upon a bird roosting in a large holly bush, staring icily down upon us from the dark canopy. Heading back down to the main mere a single **Goldfinch** flew overhead, followed by six **Redpolls**, whilst twelve newly arrived **Sand Martins** zig-zagged low over the mere. A **Nuthatch** still called from Dog Wood, but by then our attention was centred on a soft, fluent, descending song from Higmere Plantation. It was the year's first **Willow Warbler** and our seventy-fifth species of the morning. We'd been out for only four hours and not strayed much more than two miles from the town centre. Perhaps with a little planning someone will record a hundred species in a day in Tatton Park; there's a gallon of Boddingtons Bitter for the first to do so.

Tony Usher

GULLS AND TERNS OF NEUMANN'S FLASH AND BUDWORTH MERE 1992



To the casual observer, Neumann's Flash during the winter months appears to contain nothing other than large flocks of Gulls. This is certainly true but to any avid Gull watcher this presents quite a challenge. I suspect that 1992 will almost certainly show Neumann's Flash as the hottest spot in the North-West for the larger white winged gulls. It has been stated that Neumann's Flash is one of the top ten sites in Britain for gull watching. The majority of these records occurred over the winter months but there have been sightings during the months of May, June and August. The most predominant species of white winged gull has been the Iceland Gull, rarer in Europe than its larger cousin the Glaucous Gull. Small numbers of Mediterranean and Little Gull appear to visit the flash but usually stay for a brief time only. This year we have had documented records of sixteen different Iceland Gulls and thirteen Glaucous Gulls with a couple of records each of Mediterranean and Little Gull. The occurrence of the latter two species usually coincides with activity of a similar nature elsewhere in the North-West. The adult Little Gull in the spring was almost certainly the same bird that frequented Tatton Mere during the previous two days. The summer months usually herald the arrival of a displaced juvenile or two, this year being no exception. Mediterranean Gulls however are a rarity and usually stay for a matter of hours at best. A second summer bird put in a brief appearance on the 7th March in appalling weather.

It has always been known that both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls frequent the Flash. Reports of sightings have appeared in Cheshire bird reports but in what I considered small numbers. I, like many, have been guilty in the past of not passing on such records to the county recorder and when I compared my sightings to those of the "Official" records I found that there was quite a discrepancy. I therefore decided that this should be rectified and that with the help of a number of regulars to the flash I would attempt to get a clearer picture over the next few years. So far I have been excited by what has been seen. Below is a table of the numbers and months when Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were found. This does not take into account the fact that a particular bird may have stayed from one month to another.

GLAUCOUS GULL

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
	1	3	2	2	1			1		3	

ICELAND GULL

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2	3	1	5	1			1			3	

One interesting fact to emerge is that most of the birds seen have been first year birds. Also Glaucous Gulls appear to stay much longer than the Iceland Gulls who are usually present for a couple of days only. Two of the Glaucous Gulls stayed for almost a month and were affectionately known as "SID and EDDY" (Little and Large). These large Gulls were readily identifiable from each other as each appeared to have its own unique markings. No two birds are exactly the same and if there are a couple of birds present then it is easily possible to see whether a new bird has arrived on the scene.

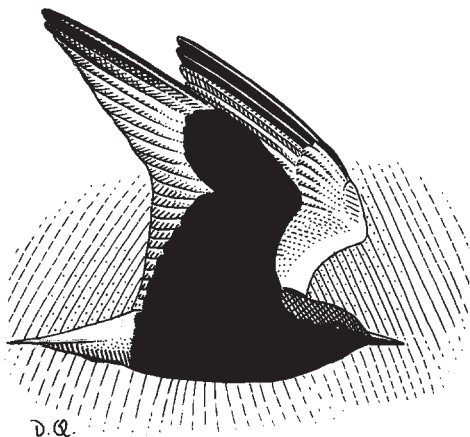
Sometimes it can be quite a difficult task to age these birds. Good close views are required to determine bill colour, paleness of the iris and the amount of barring on the wing coverts. The amount of barring is also highly variable, especially on Iceland Gulls whereas some of the younger Glaucous Gulls appear more "biscuity". One particular Iceland Gull present on the 22nd February was so heavily barred that it was difficult to pick it out amongst the juvenile Herring Gulls. There was no streaking on the white primary tips but the bird had an almost black bill without the usual pink at the base of the skull. By contrast the bird on the 26th appeared almost totally white by comparison with a neat intricate pattern of barring. Both birds were identified as being first winter birds.

Between the months of February and May a white winged gull was present on the Flash on almost fifty occasions. Perhaps the highlight was on May 10th when I was asked by Vale Royal to take a group of people on a "Bird Watch" around the Flash and we came across two 3rd Summer and a 1st Summer Glaucous Gull plus a 1st Summer Iceland Gull all present at the same time. I suspect that the beginners did not really appreciate that what they were seeing was probably a once in a lifetime experience.

Perhaps the white winged gulls are those which most visitors like to see but there are other species present throughout the year. During the winter the Scandinavian version of our Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus argentatus*) appeared in small numbers. This really is a large Herring Gull being extremely dark on the mantle, scapulars and wing coverts with an almost washed out looking bill and legs. The amount of black on the primary tips is sometimes almost negligible thus giving the impression of having large mirrors. These birds were present throughout January to March. Of extreme interest was the "Omissus Type" Herring Gull present during the week Jan 4th to 11th. This bird was extremely large and its mantle, scapulars and wing coverts were a very dark grey. Its legs were a dull yellow, the head being large and bulbous and heavily streaked. Very little white showed on the primary tips and it had the look of a Glaucous Gull. This bird was perhaps a yellow-legged version of the Scandinavian Herring gull and in itself quite a find.

The majority of Yellow-legged Gulls appear at Neumann's in July and early August with this year being no exception. Estimates range between five to ten different birds present. Up to seven birds were present in October although some duplication may take place with their appearance altering significantly due to a feather moult into winter plumage. These are quite clearly Yellow-legged Gulls but of which race? We are led to believe that they are of the western mediterranean race "michahellis". Some appear much smaller than others while some are hardly darker than the argenteus race and not all have yellow legs. Much of the literature available today indicates that it is possible to identify these birds without seeing leg colour. From my experience great care should be exercised when identifying these birds if you are at all unfamiliar with this, now separate, species. Some of the so-called diagnostic features can also be found in ordinary Herring Gulls. The dark underwing panel was believed to be conclusive but we have recently discovered these traits in some normal Herring Gulls. Even more care is required when trying to identify juvenile yellow-legged gulls as I suspect the criteria for doing so is not conclusive.

During February we had up to 2500 Herring Gulls present along with over 3000 Black-headed Gulls. Common Gulls were also present throughout the winter months but only reached a maximum of sixty birds. Greater Black-backed Gulls reached up to 100 birds also in February. Another interesting subject is the status of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Numbers built up slowly to reach a peak of 400 in April. They were clearly not dark enough to be of the race "fuscus" although one bird appeared to fit into this category being too dark for the race "graellsii". Are they of the race *intermedius*? During the summer up to 750 birds of the race "graellsii" were present...



An adult winter plumaged Ring-billed Gull on the flash between November 12th and 14th was a long overdue addition to the impressive list of Gulls for this area. Although such gulls have been reported on "BIRDLINE" this is the first documented official sighting for Neumann's.

1992 appears to have been an exceptional year for the Gulls but then the same can also be said for Terns. Although the majority of terns are seen over Budworth Mere, it was Neumann's where the rarer species made an appearance. This year was unprecedented in the number of tern species seen between the two adjacent sites. Seven species have been recorded since the arrival on April 8th of 8 Black Terns and a Common Tern. Black Terns were then present on Budworth most days up to and including

May 18th. Only Common Terns visited the flash throughout this period. May 6th saw 7 Common, 2 Arctic 1 Little and 3 Black Terns all present together at Budworth. May 8th saw a Summer plumaged White-winged Black Tern (PEK) on Neumann's Flash for no more than 10 minutes. The bird appeared after a heavy downpour and was quite clearly attempting to dry itself. Having fed, it flew up high and away. Extensive searching on Budworth, Pickmere and Marston proved fruitless. In this plumage the bird was easily identifiable and was the first Cheshire record since 1986. This bird heralded perhaps the best year for the species for a long time. Up to 22 birds were present on one particular day around the country with the West getting its fair share. If that was quite spectacular then the arrival of a rarer Caspian Tern on May 30th was almost unbelievable. The bird commuted between Neumann's and Budworth for two days before disappearing in the evening of the 31st. This was the third record of this species on the Flash.

Autumn passage started on the 4th September with a Black Tern and 2 Common Terns. Black Terns were then present on the Mere every day from this date up to and including 30th September. On at least one occasion Black Terns seen were also on Neumann's Flash. The peak count of 200+ birds on the Mere during September 11th was surely the highlight. These were a real mixture of adults (several in summer plumage) and juveniles. Some adults were in a stage of moult whilst others had attained full winter plumage. Arctic Terns were also seen around this date along with a lone Sandwich Tern. Black Terns were seen on an unprecedented 26 days. One interesting fact that surfaced during this time was the size difference between adults and juveniles. The latter appeared more compact and shorter winged than the adults. I also found that with some of the fresher juveniles it was possible to identify them individually when at rest. The dark cap on the head of some birds came further down towards the bill reaching the eye in some birds. Also the white fringes on the scapulars varied immensely, some showing wide pale fringe tips which produced different patterns thus giving the bird its individuality before the post juvenile moult. Having proven this fact I was able to conclude with some degree of confidence that one particular bird present on the 11th of September was the same individual that remained until the 20th of the same month. The last two Black Terns were recorded on September 30th.

Obviously 1992 was an astonishing year for both Gulls and Terns. Already 1993 has started in a similar fashion with both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls present on the Flash. What will happen in about two years time when the tip closes, remains to be seen.

Finally I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to my very good friend David Quinn for providing the illustrations and for spending so much time viewing these birds with me and discussing the technicalities of a complex subject.

Paul Kenyon.

Notes & Letters

HUMAN DISTURBANCE OF BLACK-NECKED GREBES ON BUDWORTH MERE

Between March 24th and July 21st 1992, Budworth Mere was host to more than its fair share of refugee Black-necked Grebes, unfortunately displaced from their regular breeding site. Birds were present on and off with a maximum of seven being recorded twice. At first our hopes were high although signs of breeding were only noticed once.

On the 17th May 1992, two Black-necked Grebes were present on the mere and one was busily carrying small twigs and other suitable nesting material into the Coward memorial reed bed. This behaviour continued for approximately twenty minutes when suddenly all hell broke loose. Approximately one half of the mere is used by yachtsmen but this is not normally a problem as a line of buoys shows these people the limit of their area. This line does not allow disturbance within one hundred yards of the reedbed. Disastrously for all concerned, one individual boatsman chose this day to ignore the boundary and sailed straight into the reedbed area, putting the grebes and all other wildfowl present, into a panic. Needless to say, I was infuriated and as I couldn't find any rocks to throw, I immediately (and extremely impolitely) informed the person of what he had done. He eventually got the message and sailed away, totally oblivious of what had occurred. The Park Wardens were immediately informed and this problem has not been encountered again.

Surprisingly the grebes were not frightened off the mere and moved to a more secluded area. Whilst nest building was taking place, the grebes had been separate and it was the disturbance that had actually brought them together. Budworth Mere is not the ideal habitat for Black-necked Grebes and it is most probable that nothing would have come from this behaviour. Still it doesn't stop me from thinking, what if

Dave M Walters

AVIAN THUGGERY

I recently witnessed a couple of incidents of bird behaviour which could only be described as avian thuggery. I was admiring the presence of a superb drake Goosander at the Hide bay of Budworth Mere one morning in mid-January as it lazily preened itself, surrounded by a variety of "lesser" waterbirds, when without warning it suddenly launched itself at an unsuspecting neighbouring Great Crested Grebe. It proceeded to chase the poor bird for some distance before catching it by the neck and half dragging it under the water. At this point the grebe wisely released a fish which it had been carrying, whereupon the pirate goosander despatched its breakfast and returned to loafing and preening - presumably until the next fast food snack passed by.

I was still thinking about this incident as I wandered along the brook running through the adjoining Big Woods, when my attention was arrested by a bundle of Blue Tits fluttering frantically a few metres away. One of the birds separated itself and flew onto a branch, leaving the other two to tumble together down the tree and into a small pool at the base. The one then proceeded to hold the other under the water, occasionally pecking at its head until its rival had ceased to struggle, before disengaging itself and returning to the top of the tree, from where it proceeded to sing out its victory. The other bird was well and truly drowned.

Mugging, theft and sexually-motivated murder, all in the space of half-an-hour. Birdwatching beats "The Bill" hands down!

Chris Stott, 4 Quay Place, Preston Brook, Cheshire, WA7 3LD

P.S. I thoroughly enjoy the "Bird News" booklets - interesting, informative and very useful - keep up the good work!

FEEDING STATIONS

During the winter of 1991/2 I made regular visits to Risley Moss N.R., where I spent hours sitting in the woodland hide, practising photography. Most birders get bored with "common" woodland birds after a few minutes, and at Risley Moss they spend most of their time in the tower, scanning the mossland for harriers or Merlins. The woodland hide is brilliant for close viewing and especially for photography. I have counted three Great-Spotted Woodpeckers simultaneously feeding on suet, only a few feet apart. The tension between these normally solitary birds was obvious, and they would screech loudly and often chase each other around the dead tree stumps on which the food is hung. On bitter winter days however, hunger is more important than territorial boundaries, and the birds soon return to feeding.

There is a ceaseless procession of small birds coming to the feeding station throughout the winter, especially during frost. The three commoner species of tit are joined by Long-tailed when the weather is severe, and these delicate insect eaters will feed from the peanut holders if nothing else is available. Willow and Marsh Tits are also quite regular, and given the closeness with which they can be viewed, the subtle differences become apparent.

The most breathtaking action however, is when a Sparrowhawk makes an attack. Often there are up to twenty small birds at the station, and within a split second of an attack, all (except the odd unlucky one) will have dashed into the safety of nearby bushes. The drama is immense, yet one thing seems clear, the larger female hawk attacks at ground level, whilst her smaller partner attacks at the height of the nut feeders or bird table. Here for all to see is the apparent different tastes shown by each sex. The nut holders and bird table have tits, and the odd sparrow, whereas the ground holds Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Song Thrush and Collared Dove. Of course there are exceptions, for a male hawk would not doubt refuse one of the Starlings that often feed from the nut holders, or a woodpecker for that matter! The different tastes of male and female sparrowhawk is quite clear, and readers may notice this at feeding stations, or in their garden.

On the subject of feeding sites, this winter I made a number of visits to Sandbach Flashes, and whilst watching the procession of small birds taking nuts and seeds from the well stocked bird table, I noticed a shortage of Coal Tits. In fact after an hour or so watching the other "garden" birds not one Coal Tit appeared; could this be due to a shortage of nearby woodland? At Risley Moss, Coal Tits seem almost as common as Blues, and certainly more abundant than Greats.

John Williams

SISKINS FEEDING UNDER TREES

Following the high winds at the end of January 1993, I was birding in Tatton when I came across a flock of Siskins. There were probably 70-80 birds involved and contrary to my expectations all were feeding on the floor. They were rather confiding as Siskins often are but being on the ground were remarkably approachable, allowing me to within a few feet. When they did feel I was too close the nearest birds would fly up to a nearby tree but soon fly down again when the threat passed. None were feeding for any time in their normal domain of the tree tops and I concluded that the winds had blown the trees seeds so hard that the birds food had all ended up on the ground.

Alan Roberts

ANY OLD SLIDES

Occasionally I am asked by local non-birdwatching organisations to talk on a subject of my choice. I have decided to talk on Birdwatching in Cheshire and hopefully publicise CAWOS - and even gain a new member! I am in the process of making a set of slides showing different habitats but, not really being a good bird photographer, have very few bird slides. Has any member got any slides they no longer require and would like to donate, or let me copy? Thanks.

David Cogger, Middlewich, 0606 - 832517

FEMALE PINTAILS (ANAS ACUTA)

On 26th February 1993 I found a female Pintail on the canal 200 yards south of the top lock of Audlem flight at Coxbank. Due to work on the locks the pound was partly drained to reveal sandbanks at the edge. I thus saw this bird both swimming and walking. No ringing had occurred. The Pintail was with 14 Mallard and at first sighting was closely following one particular drake Mallard which appeared to be protective to the Pintail. After continuing my walk and returning homeward along the towpath the Pintail was walking on the sandbank. It appeared nervous of female Mallards who seemed to ostracise the Pintail.

About one mile north of Coxbank a local resident has a pinioned pair of Pintail on a pond but both the male and female were still present and the owner assured me neither can fly.

Ian Oxley, 58 Windmill Drive, Audlem, CW3 0BE

101 USES FOR HOUSE MARTIN NESTS

House Martin nests have been used for many purposes other than the intended one! The use of House Martin nests by House Sparrows for both roosting and breeding is well known (Summers-Smith 1963); the Swift and the Wren are reported to have used one on at least one occasion each for breeding (Witherby et al 1938; Armstrong 1955); and in the Soviet Union bats occasionally occupy them (Dementiev & Gladkov 1954). I have seen a Starling investigating an old, broken nest as a potential nesting site; whilst in 1983 a pair of Blue Tits successively reared 7 young in a nest in the West Midlands. Over at least the last two winters, a minimum of six Tree Sparrows have used our House Martin nests for roosting in. In Bird News October 1990, Pete Hall recounted of a pair of Spotted Flycatchers taking bees from a bee hive within an old House Martin nest. But one of the most unusual uses occurred last summer. We have a dilapidated House Martin nest built on an alarm box over our back balcony, in full view of our bedroom window. On the 23rd May 1992 a pair of Spotted Flycatchers were seen to be prospecting this old nest as a potential nesting site. By Sunday 7th June one of the pair was sitting tight on the refurbished nest with its mate in close attendance - all this whilst a rather smokey and noisy barbecue was going on underneath! Unfortunately I was away 'til the following Friday and on my return I found the nest deserted, with no sight or sound of the flycatchers anywhere. No eggs were to be found in their still intact nest, which had been neatly constructed within the old House Martin nest. What happened whilst I was away will remain a mystery. To my knowledge, House Martin nests have only been used by these species - unless you know different!

Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere



WITTON LIMEBEDS AND MARBURY COUNTRY PARK BIRD RACE

Before I start, you may be thinking that December is most definitely not the best month for a bird race. However we are hoping to make this competitive form of day listing a more regular event, if not monthly, then at least seasonally.

2.00am saw myself and my loved one (a non-birder with the strange notion that sleep is good for you) frantically driving up and down the Marbury road listening for Owl species. By 2.30am I was back in bed with a barking Fox and an insomniac Redwing "under the belt" - pathetic, that's what I get for trying to be clever!

The morning revealed a thick frost and with both Neumann's and Budworth Mere almost totally frozen things were not looking good. A brief encounter with Paul Hill gave me Stock Dove as he tried to point it out to his wife, Julia, without my noticing. (You'll have to be more subtle in the future Paul.) A welcome exchange of Kingfisher for Wigeon with John Gregory and I was onto stage two. All in all the morning went pretty much as expected and by 1.00pm we were all partaking of low alcohol lager and comparing notes in the nearby Drum and Monkey.

Results were as follows: John Gregory romped it with 68 Species with Pete Antrobus, Paul Hill and Julia all joint second with 66, I followed with 64, (Kestrel and Shoveller would have helped), and Colin Antrobus finished with 54. Six species should have been evident but were not seen by anybody. These included Ruddy Duck, Greylag Goose and Curlew. Highlights were thin on the ground, namely

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - P. Antrobus; Brambling - J. Gregory; Stonechat (only the second record for the year and a personal patch tick) - D. Walters, Water Rail - C. Antrobus and a skein of 64 Pinkfooted Geese flying south at midday which were seen by all. Bird of the day must go to Paul Hill and Julia with their early morning sighting of a probable first winter Herring Gull of the North American Race, *Larus. a. smithsonianus* on Neumann's, (this is of course subject to acceptance).

To sum up, a combined total of 74 species were seen within the recording area and the beer stocks of the Drum and Monkey were seriously depleted.

Dave M Walters

ORNITHOLOGISCH STATION VOORNE, VOORNE BIRD OBSERVATORY

We hereby inform you of the following colour-ring projects:

In 1990, 1991 and 1992 adults and young Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*), Yellow-legged Gulls (*Larus cachinnans*), Common Gulls (*Larus canus*) and Avocets (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) as well as adult Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) have been colour-ringed in the SW Netherlands.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULLS and **YELLOW-LEGGED GULLS** have been marked with either a single white, green or orange engraved PVC ring or a combination of two rings (one on each tarsus).

COMMON GULLS have been marked with a single green or black engraved PVC ring.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULLS have been marked with a single green engraved PVC ring.

AVOCETS have been marked with a single white or green engraved PVC ring. NB Some white rings may have become stained resulting in them being now rust coloured.

In the future these projects may be repeated with different colours. As individuals of these species are likely to visit your country we ask you to announce this project among your colleagues and/or into your periodical. Details can be sent to the following address:- Norman van Swelm, PO Box 305, 3233 ZG Oostvoorne, Netherlands. Phone: (0) 1815-4816 Oostvoorne, Autumn 1992

THE POYNTON PARROT

Long green arrow shot through English air
From hotter latitudes, you are bizarre
In your forest finery - greener green
Than finch or woodpecker, with bracelet-thin
Pink collar - against a gale-strewn winter day.
Your vouched-for presence was the guarantee
I'd add you to my list (from wild to wild
Through captive generations, freedom sold
And now regained) so certain that the last
Thing I expected, less than if I'd missed,
Was to be at all surprised at what I saw
Scythe across the park of sodden sheep - new
As a happy thought. Yes, you do amaze,
Though no longer rare, among the magpies
And their rattling camaraderie.
Down on the grass you're almost ordinary
Despite red pecking beak, and clambering
Through the lime trees' matted twigs; but, wind-flung
In the sky, become a pliant projectile
With fin-swift wings and streaming blue-green tail,
Lithe aerial athlete, shrieking parakeet -
Outlandish as a Gaugin in grey street.

Peter Walton

SCAUP AND CORN BUNTING IN 1992 AND 1993 - A plea for records

Scaup: The flocks which winter on the Dee Estuary and along the coast of North Wales are very mobile and can easily be missed, or not be present, during official Wildfowl and Wader counts. These circumstances make "casual" counts particularly important and the Wildfowl and Wader Count Team on the Dee, led by Colin Wells, would be very pleased to hear from anyone with details of any such counts (and dates) from the Dee for 1992 and 1993 so far. Any such records can be sent to me for onward transmission and I would also ask observers to make a note of the size of any flocks seen during the rest of 1993.

Corn Bunting: Many readers will be aware that during the 1992/93 winter there has been a BTO survey of Corn Buntings and that a survey will be made of the same species in the some areas in the 1993 breeding season. These surveys are not intended to cover the whole of Cheshire and Wirral. I would therefore ask participants in the survey who have 1992 winter records away from the areas surveyed and non-participants who have any 1992 records not already submitted to let me have these records urgently. Would observers also follow the same guidelines when, in due course, the time comes to submit 1993 records for the Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report.

Steve Barber, 14 Thornfield Grove, Cheadle Hulme, Stockport SK8 6AZ.
(On behalf of the Editorial and Records sub-committee.)

Wood Pigeon

Three afternoons we've hidden from the sun
Under the stunted ash tree's wind-trimmed shapes,
Near harvest-heavy fields behind the house.
We're now so frequent here that we've been joined
By a single pigeon, clattering in
To the Sidelong canopy and plumping
A blue and purple bulk across the bough,
Cushion-comfortable, to share our shade -
Gazing down, safe from heat and hawk and gun.

Peter Walton

CAWOS MEETINGS - THE NEXT SEASON, SO FAR...

The first three lectures of next years programme, which will be held in Knutsford Civic Centre, are as follows:-

4th October "Birds of Moorlands and Uplands" by John Wyatt

John Wyatt is a lecturer, natural history photographer, tour leader and regular contributor to 'Birdwatching' and 'Birds Illustrated' magazines. His talk will look at some of the birds found in these haunting and evocative areas.

1st November "Abernethy - Forest of the Future" by Richard Thaxton

The RSPB's Abernethy Forest Reserve of mountain, moorland & native pine forest is situated on the northern flanks of the Cairngorm Mountains. Richard Thaxton, RSPB Warden, Loch Garten, will look at the birds and habitat of this unique area; the specific problems and management of the reserve; and the hopes for the future.

6th December "The Great Migration" by Paul Doherty

Paul Doherty is a top bird photographer and regular contributor to 'Birdwatching' and 'Birds Illustrated' magazines. This lecture looks at the spectacular annual migration of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of birds of prey between Russia and Africa.

Ringer's Notebook

Several species of large birds are marked with colour rings with letters or numbers visible from a distance. Any sightings are valuable, even if the inscription cannot be read in full. A Cormorant ringed as a chick in its tree-nest at Abberton Reservoir in Essex on 7th June last year was seen at Fiddlers Ferry Power Station, near Widnes, on 20th August and many subsequent dates. The ringers there marked 130 chicks and this is the farthest north-west out of the 35 birds reported from 15 different English counties. Two ringed Cormorants have been seen in the Rostherne Mere roost, one of which occupied the same position in the same tree from September to December 1992. Unfortunately neither is colour-ringed.

An adult male Pintail ringed at New Ferry in December 1991 was shot on the Ribble Estuary on 24 October 1992: for several years the counts on the Ribble have been increasing while those on the Mersey have fallen, and this bird provides direct evidence of a switch between the estuaries. Two Teal ringed on the Mersey were shot in Finland on the same day, 20 August 1992, one of them inside the Arctic Circle at 68 degrees 05' N. A breeding Oystercatcher trapped on the Isle of May, Fife on 21 May 1992 had been ringed as a first-year bird at West Kirby on 13 December 1966, and was thus 26 years old. Two Dunlin ringed in early 1989 at Bromborough Pool were trapped in August 1992 at Ottenby Bird Observatory at the south-east of Sweden.

The programme of catching gulls feeding at landfill sites is continuing to produce interesting long-distance movements. Black-headed Gulls ringed at Rixton turned up in the 1992 breeding season in the Netherlands, Estonia and Finland, and the 550 caught there in February and March included two birds already wearing Dutch rings and one each from Denmark and Finland. The February catch also included an "intermedius" Lesser Black-backed Gull from southern Scandinavia, the first of this species to be caught that was not of the British-breeding "graelsii" race.

Two Greenfinches from the flocks visiting Woolston have moved in opposite directions, one south to Acton Bridge and the other north to Forton, Lancashire. As thoughts turn to the returning summer migrants, we have recently heard that the female Pied Flycatcher lifted off eggs in Delamere nest-box on 24 May 1992 had been ringed on 19 June 1991 at Lake Vyrnwy, Powys (74 km away), as an adult female then. Nestlings often return to a different area to breed, but such switches between sites are unusual for birds of breeding age.

Dr David Norman, Rowswood Cottage, Ridding Lane, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 6PF.

PROJECTS

Readers may be wondering what has happened to Projects since it is now more than three years ago that a Projects sub-committee report appeared in the Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report. Rest assured that work has been going on behind the scenes. This will be clear from the launch of the first CAWOS survey last year on House Martins. The purpose of this article is to summarise the many activities that are going on.

Little Grebes: Our second CAWOS survey, starting this year and organised by Don and Sandra Otter. Details have already been published in Bird News. (See below for update)

Swans: The informal Cheshire Swan Study Group keeps tabs on the breeding pairs as well as ringing adults and immatures. There was a county wide survey over the weekend 16th/17th January that produced 293 adults and immatures. There is a proposal to count the moulting flocks in July. David Cookson is the group co-ordinator.

Hérons: The BTO Heronry Census is the longest running survey of its type in the world. Within Cheshire & Wirral it is organised by Brian Martin, who ensures that the nest counts by BTO members and helpers are reported to the County Recorder for inclusion in the Bird Report.

Birds of Estuaries: Monthly wildfowl and wader counts are carried out on the Dee Estuary (organised by Colin Wells) and Mersey Estuary (organised by Graham Thomason). Extra counters are always welcome, whether occasionally to cover for holidays etc or as a longer term commitment to cover one site once a month.

Wintering Gulls: This was another BTO survey to which CAWOS members contributed. It involved the counting of all roosting gulls on one weekend in January. Most inland sites were done with results such as 15000 birds at Doddington and 11000 birds at Hurlleston. However, bad weather prevented a good count on the Dee and the Mersey was not completely covered.

House Martins: Our first CAWOS survey, organised by Don and Sandra Otter, details of which have already appeared in Bird News. (see below for update)

Owls: Roy Leigh has started a nest box study of Little Owls. There has also been a breeding survey of Long-eared Owls using nest baskets.

Peak Moorland: Research into particular areas that are commissioned by, for example, the Peak Park Planning Board, is usually handled by Richard Blindell and local RSPB members. It is open to CAWOS members to help. One species that lends itself to a survey by just one or two individuals is Ring Ousel. Rather than having a lot of birders pay just one visit to tick off Ring Ousel for their year list, we need one or two to make frequent visits to establish locations, breeding numbers, first and last dates etc.

Common Birds Census: This is another BTO survey to which CAWOS members contribute. There are not many CBC or Waterways Birds Survey plots in Cheshire and Wirral but some of them are long established eg Bidston Hill from the early 1970s. The BTO (contact John Marchant) welcomes new plots and there are new developments for a simpler technique that needs piloting.

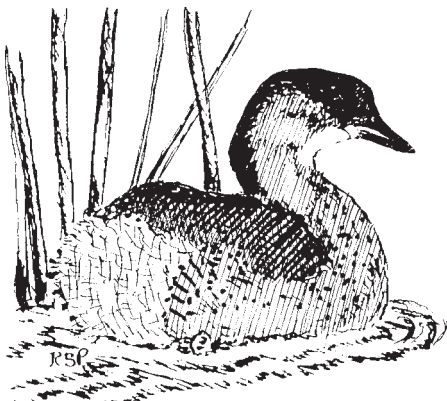
Corn Bunting: This is another BTO survey with specific tetrads being targeted for detailed study. Other casual records are still most welcome. It is being managed within Cheshire & Wirral by the BTO Regional Reps, Roy Leigh, Colin Lythgoe, Clive Richards and Steve Woolfall.

Looking ahead, there is a lot more that we can do, particularly if we are to fill in gaps in our knowledge in advance of preparation and publication of an up to date County Avifauna. A good candidate for a breeding survey next year is Swifts. Brian Martin found a method for surveying them in Warrington and Knutsford last year that he will be developing this year before rolling it out for members to use next summer.

Project/survey work can be very time consuming (wader counts) or very quick (House Martins), can be done in large teams (wadery again) or individually (such as one's own nest box study). But it is always very rewarding and worthwhile.

David Steventon

LITTLE GREBE & HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY UPDATE



Unfortunately Don & Sandra Otter are leaving the Cheshire area due to Don taking up a new post in the Thames & Chiltern area for the National Trust. So the next postal contact & any future correspondence should be sent to:-

Little Grebe:- BOB ANDERSON
102 CREWE ROAD
NANTWICH
CHESHIRE
CW5 6JD

House Martin:- SHEILA BLAMIRE
WOODRUFF COTTAGE
CLAMHUNGER LANE
MERE, KNUTSFORD
CHESHIRE, WA16 6QQ

The Local Patch

HOW DO YOU MANAGE ?

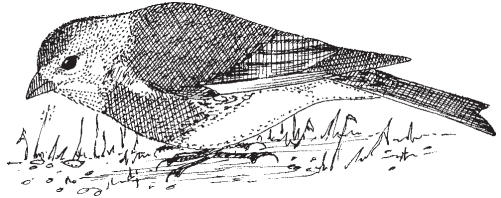
For the past year, I have been writing articles of a more or less observational nature (usually more observation than writing in my case!). These have been laced with my own brand of sardonic wit, and Noel Coward is undoubtedly restless in his repose. Although my sense of the absurd will occasionally raise its head during this piece, I feel compelled to discuss the drastic changes that are happening in my local environment. (Little of it for the benefit of flora and fauna.)

Some of this may be due to observer effect, as subscribed to by all the best ornithological studies, which states that the more you look for something, the more you will see of it. Having spent large amounts of time searching around my local patch, change of any description will be noticed, more so than by someone travelling along a regular route each day.

And the nature of this change?

It seems to come in three distinct forms:-

1. "Designer" housing
2. Industrial units
3. New roadways



Where is this change being perpetrated?

In every case, the answer is on unsuspecting farmland and woods, leaving little or no gaps between existing developments, reducing the green belt to a green thread squashed between suburban conifers and prefab warehouses. Birds, already hard hit by modern farming methods, are finally squeezed out from any remaining marginal areas by in-filling for one of our three types of development. Whilst dealing with the issues at a local level, the ramifications of these issues stretch throughout the county and the nation as a whole.

In years gone by, towns in Cheshire, even in areas such as Widnes, were industrial islands in a sea of green. This sea then contained many more hedgerows and areas of woodland or wetland. Even though the pollution produced by these areas ranged out into the surrounding countryside, and in many cases was more obvious and less controlled than at present, there was still an unspoilt reserve of land. From this reserve, flora and fauna could re-populate denuded areas.

Policies in farming and agriculture during the 60s and 70s, further continuing through the 80s, tended towards the removal of woods and hedges in order to obtain produce from every available acre of land. This has led to the massive EEC food mountains, which produce short term profits, and consequent irreplaceable losses in the countryside so creating the situation where traditional farmland species contract into areas of marginal land surrounding towns, or even derelict areas in town centres. Towns, the environment bad guys, have become the unwitting hosts to the species they originally displaced. A present day example of this is partridge distribution around Widnes. This species, once widespread, only occur in any numbers away from the intensively farmed monocultures. On areas of farmland in which they still occur, the birds only use fields as resting places where they form the famous "eyes outward" covey.

The birds, even on arable farmland, tend to feed on any nearby areas of grassland or disturbed ground which provide a much higher density of plants and insects. Partridge have disappeared from their spring-sown barley fields and have moved to these areas: Fiddlers Ferry (power station) Richmond Bank (waste tip) Wigg Island (former ICC phosgene plant) Bold Heath (sand quarry) and Widnes Marsh (former chemical site). The only farmland sites with a remnant population are usually livestock associated or are managed for shooting.

Other examples of this type of enforced movement to town edges or urban sites are numerous, Linnet, Skylark, Song Thrush and Yellowhammer to name just a few. Although rural pockets of all species still exist, these are tending to become the exception to the rule on my local patch.

In fact, the pattern of distribution of the Skylark is almost identical to that of the Partridge. Song Thrushes, on a recent singing male count somewhat relieved my fears for a total wipe out. The birds are concentrated in suburbia overlooking parks or playing fields, with only the occasional “singer” in farmland areas away from intensive crop production, and then only in the presence of good cover.

So, from this information it would appear that the beleaguered farmland species are surviving along with displaced arable weeds and other once familiar plants and animals in un-formed areas around industrial sites and on town edges. These sites now provide the “gene pool” material for any future population spread, making them more valuable than one would at first think. As further proof of this theory, I would offer up some of the best monitored birding sites in Cheshire, Frodsham Marsh, Woolston Eyes and Neumann’s Flash, the former two sites are dumping grounds for the Manchester Ship Canal and the latter is formed by ICI mining activities. This site’s value is further increased by the presence of a nearby large tip. All of these sites hold a number and diversity of species that it would be difficult to equal in surrounding countryside or farmland.

Despite this these sites (and their like) seem to be at a greater risk from “inevitable” development from the trio of threats mentioned earlier. At first, any development of this nature would seem to be totally without benefit for birdlife or anything else that doesn’t eat tarmac or live out its life on roof tiles. But hand in hand with this goes amenity planting, and some unfarmed and occasionally undisturbed green spaces (motorway function islands spring immediately to mind). This can offer benefits of increased tree planting and diversification of plant life as opposed to surrounding fields. This attracts gold finches, kestrels, woodpigeons and tit flocks. These birds occur mainly along the more mature areas of roadside planting and green spaces provided for leisure purposes. Although such sites provide a temporary haven for flora and fauna, they are no lasting substitute for the environment types that have been displaced. Any population of birds that would flow into these areas, has to come from places that are currently undeveloped, and such places are very quickly becoming fewer. So any re-populating that will occupy these new niches is under threat because of the present pace of development on marginal sites. Even the small areas set aside for amenity planting are not given over to wildlife reserves. They are pruned and cleared in a fashion that to my mind is quite savage, leaving little or no cover for any would be resident species. The planted areas are used as architectural softeners and are treated as little else, degrading the value of this precious resource.

The only thought that has provided some light at the end of the tunnel is sympathetic management. Not just at important or recognised sites - but of more unlikely areas too. I believe that these marginal sites now provide a viable source of plants and animals that may repopulate available areas. Birds will be quickest to benefit, being mobile and able to exploit food sources or breeding areas as they become ready. Without recognition of this fact very soon, we may find that areas which are set aside for wildlife may no longer be regained and we will have lost many of our indigenous bird species that some people take for granted.

Solutions to this problem may come in a number of ways. Local authorities could be persuaded to set aside areas in order to preserve some of the places we have left that hold declining species. Management of these sites could be directed away from people to wildlife orientation. (Lancashire County Council’s road verge scheme is a small but important example.) Another major factor in saving our birds could come from farm management becoming more aware of the needs of wildlife. There is some evidence that spring sowing and “set aside” fallow policy is currently filtering into practice, maybe helping finches and partridges. These birds have declined due, in large part, to autumn sowing. The growing of timber in areas not required for arable production is another practice that could benefit bird life in the longer term.

We need to preserve these marginal areas now in order to prevent some bird species from becoming lost, even at local level. I have no wish to see the loss of locally familiar plants and animals due to current short sightedness. As birders at a local or national level, we must begin to perceive birds as part of the whole environmental picture. If we don’t do this, we could be witness to the decline or loss of most of them during the “green” 90s. After all, if we don’t care and take some action soon, how will they manage?

Paul Whorton

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CONSERVATION NEWS

Discussions with the County Council and ICI over the future of Neumann's and Ashton's Flashes are still continuing. Both of the flashes are now in the ownership of the County Council, who are passing the land over to 3C Waste. We have heard that the land is unsuitable for waste disposal purposes on economic grounds, but we have yet to have this confirmed by 3C Waste; we await their comments.

On a more positive note though, the Northwich Community Forest is progressing and Planning Approval has now been granted for work to Marbury No 1 Tank. This work will include the re-grading of the Tank to create wader scrapes over which, we hope, it will be possible to control the waste level. The money for the work has been made available through Derelict Land Grants. Unfortunately, this does not provide any funds for a hide although we have permission to erect one.

RSPB - YOC

Jean Crouch has recently been appointed County Youth Officer for the RSPB. She is anxious to set up YOC branches. Anyone interested in helping with this should contact Jean:- 4, Blenheim Close, Poynton, SK12 1DN - telephone 0625 873147.

PLEASE NOTE: LATEST COPY DATES FOR "BIRD NEWS"

I have long intended to give the latest dates for receiving contributions for future issues of Bird News.

July Issue - By 7th June 1993
October Issue - By 6th September 1993

Thanks for the improved response. Keep up the good work. Ed.