



BIRD NEWS

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House Martin Survey 1999

Cirl Bunting • Rivacre Valley NR

David Quinn - Wildlife Artist

Moore & Gatewarth Recording Group

Photographic Competition Results



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*Bird News welcomes articles, letters and comments relevant to birdwatching in Cheshire & Wirral.
Please either e-mail or post (on disc) your contributions to the Editor at the addresses shown above.*

*The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the
Society, the Council of the Society, or the Editor.*

Front cover: Lapwing by Tony Broome

Other illustrations by Tony Broome, Jeff Clarke, Tom Lowe and Bill Morton.

Editorial

Imagine, if you will, the following scene. A tranquil body of water lies undisturbed under a warm spring sun; newly arrived Reed and Sedge Warblers, occasionally visible as they flit between the reeds that fringe its banks, noisily announce their arrival and nearly drown out the thin songs of the resident Reed Buntings; stripy-headed grebe chicks peer out from between a parent's wings as they enjoy a free ride on its back; martins and Swallows catching insects low over the water are themselves scattered by a marauding Hobby; a male Ruddy Duck, tail erect and plumage resplendent in the golden sunlight, amorously beats his chest with his impossibly blue bill in the direction of any vaguely interested females. This description could typically be that of any one of dozens of lakes, flashes or disused gravel pits within the county, perhaps even your local patch. However, within this vernal idyll something sinister lurks deep within the reed-bed. An air rifle appears, a shot rings out and the American invader floats away dead, another victim of the DETR's Ruddy Duck control programme.

So much has already been said and written about this complex and controversial issue by better-qualified individuals than I that I don't believe I can particularly add to the debate, especially via this short column. However, I would like to clarify both my own and this newsletter's position on the subject. Personally, for the following reasons, I am not convinced that culling Ruddy Ducks in this country will significantly aid the critically important conservation of the endangered White-headed Duck. Firstly, as the decline of the White-headed Duck has been largely due to habitat loss, it seems logical to me that the highest priorities in its conservation should be the preservation and re-creation of suitable habitat in its native range. Of course, this would have spin-off benefits for other, both avian and non-avian, species. Secondly, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no scientific research that supports the premiss that the expansion of Ruddy Ducks into Europe, and especially Spain, will threaten the genetic purity of the White-headed Duck population, this seemingly being based upon a number of records of lone vagrant male 'ruddies' mating with a closely-related species in the absence of any females of their own ilk. In other words, no one has demonstrated that hybridisation would still occur between similar sized cohabiting populations of the two species or that male Ruddy Ducks are indeed more virile than male 'white-heads'. If this were the case then perhaps the cull could be justified.

However, that's only my personal opinion. But, this publication is the members' newsletter and, as such, seeks to reflect the views of all of the Society's membership. As these are likely to range across the whole spectrum of possible viewpoints from "blast the buggers" to the withholding of records, neither Council nor this newsletter has taken a position of its own, preferring instead to keep you informed and allow you a "free vote". In order to do this, and also because as a recording organisation it is essential for us to know where, when and how the cull is to occur as it could significantly affect other species breeding at the control sites, Council has undertaken to source from the DETR details regarding the cull within Cheshire. After considerable effort on the part of several Council members, limited information was eventually received as reported by Jeff Clarke in *Bird News* 45. This reticence in answering the queries of a genuinely concerned body has naturally led many to the opinion that something underhand is afoot. It also makes a mockery of the current Government's stated policy of openness. Nonetheless, a joint meeting between CAWOS and the DETR has been arranged for 4th May at which, I hope, we will all become a little wiser about what is actually intended to take place.

This lack of communication concerns me most about this whole affair. It has resulted in it being a public relations disaster for all involved, except the WWT who, lest we all forget, created the problem in the first place. In particular, birders are being accused of hypocrisy: on the one hand, we decry the persecution of inland-nesting Cormorants but on the other fail to present a clearly reasoned justification for the apparent massacre of Ruddy Ducks. The public, especially those casually interested in birds, will tar us with the same brush as the marksmen conducting the cull. We are in danger of being seen as a community that protects certain favoured species, e.g. raptors. In the long-term, this could be seriously detrimental to the value of our voice in conservation issues. And that would be a ruddy shame!

Simon Edwards

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 11th June - please be prompt

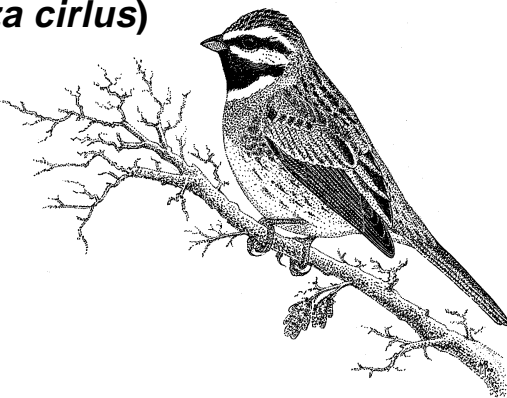
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County Rarities

CIRL BUNTING (*Emberiza cirrus*)

There are only two records in Cheshire & Wirral of this localised and scarce British-breeding bunting, both at Red Rocks, with one on 17th November 1976 and an immature or female on 11th October 1994. Ciril Bunting is an unlikely vagrant away from its stronghold along a narrow coastal belt in south Devon, but recent survey work suggests that conservation activities over the last five years have significantly increased the population. A review of its main separation features is, therefore, perhaps timely. Recently submitted records have had to remain not proven because adequate field notes have been lacking.



Male Ciril Buntings are quite distinct from any of the other Western Palearctic male buntings. The striking combination of yellow underparts with a greenish breast band, a black throat and a streaked breast, and a head of olive-green together with a dark crown and a striking facial pattern of yellow stripes above and below the eyes and a black eye-stripe should be enough to distinguish Ciril from any of the others. The call is also distinctive: a soft "sip" note, almost a whisper and sometimes drawn out and repeated - "siiip siiip" - whilst all the others have harsher, more metallic-sounding calls.

It is with the female and immature birds where a really good grilling is needed, as here Ciril Bunting looks a lot like a female Yellowhammer. The females of the other potentially confusable buntings, like Ortolan, Cretzschmar's, Grey-necked and Cinereous, can be readily eliminated as they all lack the facial pattern combination of supercilium, eye-stripe, moustachial stripe, submoustachial stripe and malar stripe, tending to be more plain-faced and only showing variations in the extent of the pale malar stripe.

So, faced with a strange bunting in a flock of Yellowhammers or, as is more likely in Ciril Bunting's case, one on its own, apart from the call, the key features to look for are plumage tone, the facial pattern and the rump colouration. Female Ciril Buntings do not look as yellow and chestnut in plumage tones as Yellowhammers, but are rather more subdued and more buff and grey-brown. In fact, in a flock of Yellowhammers this will make it catch the eye.

The key for a female Ciril Bunting is the distinctive head pattern. From the top down this is an evenly streaked crown, a buff supercilium, a brown stripe extending back from behind the eye, a brown moustachial stripe which extends to below the ear coverts, a buff-yellow submoustachial stripe, a narrow dark malar stripe, and a buff or yellowish throat. Female Yellowhammers lack this obvious pattern having a yellowish background colouration which gives the face a more washed-out look, whilst juvenile Yellowhammers may have some messy dark markings around the ear coverts. A Yellowhammer never shows the Ciril Bunting's organised facial pattern.

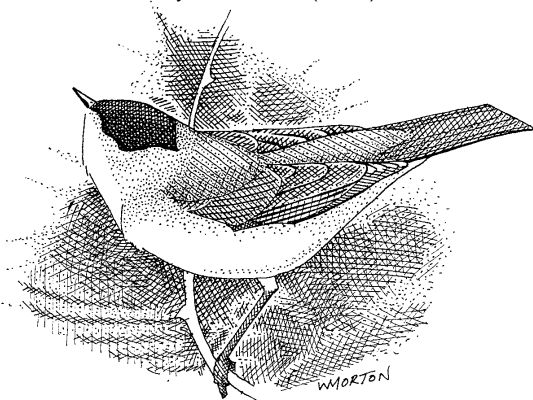
The underparts of a female or immature Ciril Bunting are always dull, even if they have a yellowish wash, and just don't look as yellow as those of a female Yellowhammer, which are also more streaked with dark flecks. Whilst on a first-winter Yellowhammer the breast and belly may look a diffuse buff, even in this plumage there will be yellow around the face and neck. The rump is another key feature: on a Ciril Bunting it's dull grey-brown, never that rich chestnut of a Yellowhammer. For me, the remaining upperparts are pretty similar, but Yellowhammers always look more chestnut with the dark centres to various scapulars and coverts contrasting more.

Apart from the call mentioned above, which is very different from the Yellowhammer's sharp, metallic "tchik", one final point is that Ciril Bunting tends to be a shyer, more secretive bunting, often hiding in short vegetation and is thus not as conspicuous as Yellowhammers.

Hugh Pulsford, 19 Tudor Way, Congleton, Cheshire, CW12 2AS

Recent Reports

The very mild winter with only a handful of frosts has had mixed affects on the birds. **Stonechats** have been over-wintering in good numbers with at least 17 different birds recorded this winter. Frodsham was a regular site with 3+ birds in December, up to six in January and a pair in February. Chelford had a single bird (from Dec 12th into Feb) with two from Feb 5th and three from Feb 26th. Elsewhere, singles were at Burton (Feb 9th), Gatewarth (Jan 13th with pairs on Feb 11th & 19th), Inner Marsh Farm (Dec 26th and a pair on Dec 18th), Leasowe Lighthouse (Feb 9th), St. Helen's Canal (Feb 20th) and a pair at Arpley (Feb 5th). Other species such as **Blackcap** (with only four garden reports) and **Chiffchaffs** (reports from Fiddler's Ferry, Frodsham (three) and Woolston Eyes) seem under-representative. **House Sparrows** were nest building on Dec 31st at Elton and at least three pairs of **Collared Doves** had young in January. Reports of **Green Sandpipers** came from Chelford SQs, Frodsham, Moore NR, Mill Pool (Sandbach), Rostherne and Tatton. A **Common Sandpiper** was reported at Frodsham in Dec and Jan. The very mild weather in late Feb produced a **Sand Martin** at Rostherne Mere (26th) - the earliest ever county record. Some of these records may be unauthenticated and may require review by the Society Records Panel or the BBRC. The records cover the period from early Sep to Nov.



DECEMBER

A **Great Northern Diver** was reported over Frodsham No6 tank early in the month. A **Bittern** was seen regularly at Rostherne Mere with another at Inner Marsh Farm (8th). Up to three **Little Egrets** wintered on the Dee Estuary (two at Parkgate and one at Burton/Inner Marsh Farm). The **Mauritanian Spoonbill** was at Inner Marsh Farm on three dates and up to 88 **Mute Swans** visited Winterley Pool. Up to 50 **Bewick's** and three **Whooper Swans** were at Inner Marsh Farm. 100 **Pink-footed Geese** flew over Crewe (18th) and two days later 28 landed at Elton Hall Flash. 1100 **Canada Geese** at Inner Marsh Farm (3rd) increased to 1550 on 18th - probably the largest ever count in Cheshire. The **Ruddy Shelduck** was at Inner Marsh Farm all month. A drake **Mandarin** visited Sandbach Flashes (27th) where the peak winter count of **Wigeon** was 466. A 1st winter drake **American Wigeon** at Inner Marsh Farm (4th-6th & 11th). A **Green-winged Teal** was reported at Frodsham where up to 65 **Pintail** were seen. Up to 236 **Mallard** were at Doddington Pool with 92 at Rode Pool (20th) when 95% frozen and 140 at Poynton Pool (19th) when 97% frozen. Poynton Pool had its latest ever returning **Pochard** (7th) with 19 at Doddington Pool (and 59 **Tufted Ducks**), 76 at Frodsham No6 tank and 300 at Woolston Eyes. A drake **Smew** was at Inner Marsh Farm (8th-19th) and a **Goosander** was on the River Dane at Swettenham (28th). Eight **Ruddy Ducks** at Astbury SQ was a high count there. **Hen Harriers** were at Frodsham and Woolston Eyes (wing-tagged bird). Five **Buzzards** were at Frodsham with singles at Doddington, Moulton, Quaker's Coppice and Sandbach Flashes. Great Black-backed Gulls at Parkgate (24th) took at least six **Water Rails** during the high tide watch.

A late **Ringed Plover** was at Sandbach Flashes (31st). 1000 **Golden Plovers** were at Frodsham with 11 at Arclid SQ (15th) and seven at Wynbunbury SQ (17th). Large **Lapwing** flocks included 3000 at Frodsham, 350+ at Poynton and 700 at Sandbach Flashes. This last site held two **Knot** (7th) with singles there (10th & 15th). The wintering flock of **Little Stints** at Frodsham reached 12 on 29th with a single at Inner Marsh Farm (12th). Six **Ruff** were at Wynbunbury SQ (17th). Single **Jack Snipe** were at Doddington Pool, Maw Green Tip and Woolston Eyes. Up to 80 **Snipe** were at Sandbach Flashes. A **Great Skua** was an excellent reserve record at Inner Marsh Farm (19th). **Mediterranean Gulls** were at Birkenhead Docks and New Brighton. A **Caspian Gull** was at Arpley Tip (29th). No **Iceland Gulls** and only one **Glaucous Gull** were reported during the month (an

adult over Woolston Eyes on 27th then at Arpley Tip on 29th). A 1st winter **Kittiwake** was seen at Watch Lane Flash (1st). 1000 **Wood Pigeons** were at Blakenhall and a record 23+ **Collared Doves** roosted at Poynton Pool (1st). Five **Short-eared Owls** were at Frodsham with 10 at Parkgate (24th) during the high tide watch. A **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** was at Moulton. A **Meadow Pipit** fed on Spond's Hill, Lyme Park (5th) when two inches of snow covered the ground and up to two foot



drifts were found in places. Up to four **Water Pipits** were at Neston Old Quay and up to 150 **Pied Wagtails** were at Frodsham during the month. 200+ **Fieldfares** were at Moulton (12th) with 300 **Redwings** near Astbury SQ (23rd). Both **Goldcrest** and **Coal Tit** were singing at Poynton Pool (24th) and a **Firecrest** was reported at Marbury CP. A **Willow Tit** at Moulton (26th) was a rare local record and a **Raven** flew over Stowford (19th). 20+ **Tree Sparrows** roosted at Lostock Hall Farm, Poynton (18th). The only **Brambling** reports were one at Watch Lane Flash and two at Moulton. Up to 300 **Greenfinches** were at Frodsham. 60 **Siskins** were at Rode Pool with 120+ at Moulton (29th).

JANUARY

12 **Little Grebes** were at Moore NR (8th). The **Bittern** remained at Rostherne (to 9th) and another was at Budworth Mere (12th). A colour ringed **Night Heron** was on the River Dee at Queen's Park, Chester (10th) but it hadn't escaped from nearby Chester Zoo. Four **Little Egrets** on the Dee included three together off Neston (3rd, 8th & 9th). The **Mauritanian Spoonbill** was seen regularly in the Inner Marsh Farm/Neston area. Other Spoonbill reports came from over Blacon, Caldby Valley Park and Upton. Away from the Burton area the only winter swan reports were of seven **Bewick's** at Sandbach Flashes (5th -6th) and six **Whoopers** at Frodsham (3rd). Several skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** flew over Frodsham late in the month with 80 over Fiddler's Ferry (2nd) and 271 over Sandbach Flashes (25th). On the deck, singles were at Fiddler's Ferry, Poynton Pool, Sandbach Flashes with two at St. Helens Canal, five at Railway Flash and 100 in the Shotwick/Burton area (30th). 15 **White-fronted Geese** flew over Frodsham (1st) while 221 **Canada Geese** at Poynton Pool (19th) was a new Jan record. Eight pale-bellied **Brent Geese** were at Hilbre (2nd). The **Ruddy Shelduck** remained in the Inner Marsh Farm area all month. Up to 100 **Wigeon** were at Fiddler's Ferry with 55 at Moore NR and 376 at Sandbach Flashes. Pairs of **Gadwall** were at Fiddler's Ferry, Moulton and Sandbach Flashes with 24 at Moore NR (8th). Up to 1280 **Teal** were at Woolston Eyes, 200+ at Astmoor, 152 at Fiddler's Ferry and 245 at Sandbach Flashes. Peak counts of **Mallard** included 104 at Fiddler's Ferry, 350 at Redesmere and 140 at Sandbach Flashes (with up to 25 **Pintail** there). Double figure counts of **Shoveler** included 40 at Astmoor, 30 at Fiddler's Ferry and 20 at Sandbach Flashes. Peak counts of **Pochard** included 30 at Crabmill Flash (16th with 35 **Tufted Ducks**), 23 at Moore (8th), 175 at Rostherne Mere (30th) – a poor winter max and 620 at Woolston Eyes. Tufted Duck numbers reached 110 at Moore/Arpley (1st), 13 at Poynton Pool (18th – the largest count there since Feb 1980), 52 at Rostherne Mere (16th – a poor winter max) and a site record 450 at Woolston Eyes early in the month. Two **Scaup** visited Woolston No3 bed (29th). Two **Goldeneye** at Poynton Pool (19th) during a second day of thick fog were the first there for several years. The drake **Smew** seen irregularly at Inner Marsh Farm all month was joined by a redhead from 10th with the pair together on 21st and 30th. Another redhead arrived at Frodsham late in the month.

A **Hen Harrier** was at Frodsham (17th) and a **Goshawk** was reported at Inner Marsh Farm (2nd). Three **Sparrowhawks** were displaying at Foden's Flash (9th). **Buzzards** were at Fiddler's Ferry, Moulton, Sandbach Flashes, Woolston Eyes with two at Parkgate (23rd) and four at Peckforton (8th). **Merlins** were at Fiddler's Ferry and Woolston. **Peregrines** were at Fiddler's Ferry (two), Parkgate (two), St. Helen's Canal, Sandbach Flashes (two), Vale Royal Locks (two) and Woolston. A covey of 10 **Grey Partridges** was at Arpley (1st). Up to four **Water Rails** were at Sandbach Flashes with singles at Fiddler's Ferry, Frodsham, Knutsford Moor, Moulton and Woolston Eyes (two ringed on 29th). Up to 1000 **Golden Plovers** were at Fiddler's Ferry with 41 at Gatewath (14th) and 110 at Sandbach Flashes (12th). Large **Lapwing** flocks included 5000 at Fiddler's Ferry and Gatewath with 800 at Sandbach Flashes. The wintering flock of **Little Stints** at Frodsham increased to a winter record of 26 on the 11th with a single at Inner Marsh Farm (21st & two on 19th). Sightings of **Jack Snipe** came from Bewsey Tip, Fiddler's Ferry, Frodsham, Maw Green Tip and Sandbach

Flashes (where up to 52 **Snipe** were also present). Up to 10 **Spotted Redshanks** were at Inner Marsh Farm. A dark phase **Pomarine Skua** on Frodsham Score (8th) before flying off towards Eastham was an excellent record. **Mediterranean Gulls** were at Arpley/Moore (8th) followed by two on 20th), Astbury SQ (23rd & 27th), New Brighton, Rostherne (29th) and Seacombe (25th). Arpley Tip showed true quality in rare gulls during the month including a **Caspian Gull** (14th -15th), **Yellow-legged Gull** (8th), two **Iceland Gulls**, a possible 1st winter **Thayer's Gull** (5th, 7th & 8th) and two **Glaucous Gulls**. Another Yellow-legged Gull was at Sandbach Flashes (30th). Iceland Gulls were at Maw Green Tip (irregularly 2nd-22nd), New Brighton (22nd), Seacombe (25th) and Sutton Resr (3rd). First winter Glaucous Gulls were at Chelford SQs (2nd), Fiddler's Ferry (8th), Rostherne (15th) and Sutton Resr (3rd) with an adult at Maw Green Tip (22nd).

Up to three **Long-eared Owls** were at Moore with singles at Frodsham (11th) and Neumann's Flash (1st). Two **Short-eared Owls** were at Fiddler's Ferry with singles at Bewsey Tip and Gatewarth. **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** were at Lawton Hall, Marbury CP and Vale Royal Locks. c100 **Skylarks** were in a potato field at Moulton (10th) while 50 **Meadow Pipits** were at Fiddler's Ferry with 80+ at Gatewarth (3rd). Up to seven **Water Pipits** were at Neston with another seen at Woolston Eyes. Six **Waxwings** arrived at Battersby Lane, Warrington (1st-7th) declining to five (8th-17th). Could these be the same five birds that visited these trees in early 1997? 100+ **Fieldfares** were at Penketh (23rd). 50+ **Long-tailed Tits** were at Moore with 40+ at Sankey Valley Park. A **Willow Tit** was at Tatton (24th). **Magpie** numbers peaked with 57 at Lostock Hall Farm, Poynton, 31 at Poynton Pool (possibly a site record) and 29 at Sankey Valley Park. Small numbers of **Tree Sparrows** (up to 20) were at Hoo Green, Lostock Hall Farm, Mere, Norley, Sandbach Flashes and Woolston Eyes. A **Chaffinch** flock at Hoo Green held a bird showing characters of the North African race *spodiogenys* (from 22nd) with 80 at Fiddler's Ferry and 200 at Moulton (both 1st). Small numbers of **Bramblings** were at Burton, Hoo Green, Moulton and Neston. 140 **Greenfinches** were at Elton and 150 **Goldfinches** at Moulton (17th) was a very high count. 44 **Siskins** visited Foden's Flash (4th) with 50+ at Moore NR (8th). Two **Twite** were at Neston (23rd) and 30 **Redpolls** were at Hoo Green (24th). c15 **Yellowhammers** were at Parkgate (23rd). Four **Corn Buntings** reappeared at Frodsham (17th).

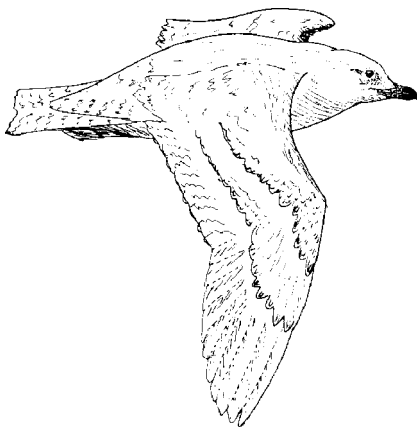
FEBRUARY

Four **Cormorants** at Redesmere (5th) included a blue colour-ringed bird. The **Bittern** was again at Rostherne (from 13th). Up to five **Little Egrets** on the Dee included four at the Decca Pools (24th). On a visit to Neston (22nd), I was lucky enough to see a Little Egret, the **Mauritanian Spoonbill** and a **Grey Heron** all feeding on the same small saline pool allowing the unique experience of the different feeding techniques to be watched in the same view. The Mauritanian Spoonbill was regularly at both



Inner Marsh Farm and Neston. At Burton Marsh (16th), the swan flock consisted of 28 **Mutes**, 53 **Bewick's** and 4 **Whoopers**. Six Whooper Swans were at Pickering's Pasture (13th) - one of only two wintering sites in the county. Up to eight **Pink-footed Geese** were at Redesmere and Sandbach Flashes while 89 were off Burton (16th) and c100 at Neston (9th). 16 **Greylag Geese** visited Inner Marsh Farm (9th) with 15 at Redesmere (5th). A **Lesser Canada Goose** was reported at Inner Marsh Farm (12th) and a feral **Barnacle Goose** was at Burton Point (16th). The **Ruddy Shelduck** remained at Inner Marsh Farm all month with a drake at Chelford SQs (27th). **Wigeon** numbers declined with 40 at Fiddler's Ferry, 52 at Moore and 160 at Sandbach Flashes. The **Green-winged Teal** was at Frodsham (3rd, 4th, 7th & 20th). 470 **Tufted Ducks** at Woolston Eyes was a new site record (where two **Scaup** were present) while 70 were at Redesmere (5th). The pair of **Smew** remained at Inner Marsh Farm (12th-21st) with the drake (to 23rd) and the redhead lingered at Frodsham. 33 **Goosanders** roosted at Chelford SQs (13th).

Buzzard sightings came from (all singles): Astmoor, Barthomley, Crewe Hall, Fiddler's Ferry, Higher Whitley, Saxon Cross Motel, Redesmere, Woolston Eyes and Wynbunbury SQ. Other sightings included three at Doddington (16th), six at Oakhanger (17th), seven at Rostherne (14th), two at Sandbach (20th), a record five at Sandbach Flashes (13th), five at Tatton (20th) and two at Whitegate (12th). Two **Merlins** visited Fiddler's Ferry (26th). Three **Peregrines** were at Fiddler's Ferry with one at Chorlton (22nd). Six **Water Rails** were ringed at Woolston Eyes No1 bed with three at Frodsham and others at Fiddler's Ferry, Redesmere and Poynton Pool – only the third there since 1980. 400+ **Coots** were at Redesmere (5th). **Oystercatchers** returned to Chelford SQs (6th), Sandbach Flashes (19th) and Tatton (20th). **Ringed Plover** flocks included 182 at Hale, 60 at Frodsham and 50+ at Leasowe. Inland, two visited the flash by Acker's Pit, Warrington (9th) and three dropped in at Sandbach Flashes (13th). Frodsham held 2000 **Golden Plovers** (where 150 **Grey Plovers** were seen) with 18 at Astmoor and 13 at Sandbach Flashes. 3000 **Lapwings** were at Fiddler's Ferry and up to 12 **Little Stints** remained at Frodsham with one at Inner Marsh Farm (6th). 3000 **Dunlin** were at Hale (26th) with 2000+ roosting at Leasowe (9th). Up to 17 **Ruff** were wintering at Sandbach Flashes. Three **Jack Snipe** were at Fiddler's Ferry (27th). 30 **Snipe** were at Astmoor (27th) with eight at Manor Park, Runcorn (13th). c500 **Bar-tailed Godwits** were at King's Gap, Hoylake (9th). Up to 73 **Curlews** were at Sandbach Flashes with returning birds at Rostherne Mere (21st) and Tatton (26th) followed by a large movement on 27th, when 11 were at Redesmere and 14 at Rostherne Mere. 150 **Redshanks** were at Hale (26th) with the first returning birds at Chelford (26th), 10 at Sandbach Flashes and 400+ roosting at Leasowe (9th) had a **Greenshank** for company.



Adult **Mediterranean Gulls** were at New Brighton (9th) and Arpley Tip (2nd). **Little Gulls** were at Frodsham (20th) and off New Brighton (9th) with 32 at Hilbre (22nd & 35 on 26th). 3000 **Black-headed Gulls** were at Maw Green Tip (5th) along with 1500 **Lesser Black-backed**, 400 **Herring** and two **Iceland Gulls**. Other Iceland Gulls were at Eastham (19th), New Ferry (16th & 23rd) and Richmond Bank (7th & 25th). A **Glaucous Gull** was reported at Arpley Tip (6th & 9th). Two **Long-eared Owls** were at Woolston Eyes while single **Short-eared Owls** were at Fiddler's Ferry, Gatewath and Norton Marsh. **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** were at Moore and Tatton. Up to 60 **Meadow Pipits** were at Woolston Eyes and seven **Water Pipits** at Neston (25th). 250 **Pied Wagtails** roosted at Leighton Hospital, Crewe with 70 at Woolston Eyes. Seven **Waxwings** were at Stockton Heath Flash, Warrington (8th) but only five were regular (to 13th). A further flock of 10 were at

Sandbach (23rd) briefly. 2500 **Jackdaws** roosted at Wigwam Wood, Poynton (3rd). Up to 50 **Tree Sparrows** fed near Woolston Eyes. The unusual **Chaffinch** at Hoo Green was seen irregularly (to 16th) with up to 100 there and 150 were at Burton (9th). Up to eight **Bramblings** were at Burton, Frodsham, Haslington and Inner Marsh Farm with 30 at Hoo Green. 100 **Greenfinches** roosted at Crewe. 50+ **Siskins** were at Petty Pool (12th) and up to 40 **Twite** lingered at Frodsham. **Crossbills** have apparently bred in Delamere. A **Snow Bunting** at Hilbre (6th) was one of a handful in the county this winter and eight **Yellowhammers** were at Tatton (13th - the first record for c4 years) with 23 roosting near Chorlton (22nd).

If you would like to see your Cheshire & Wirral records featured here please send them to me, by the beginning of June at the latest, to the address below or alternatively phone me. Please remember to send your descriptions, if appropriate, to Tony Broome. If any birders get any useful sightings in early May I would be grateful to have them for a Bird Race team planning a 'Big Day' during that period. The information will be shared with other teams if they wish to contact me.

Phil Oddy, 4 Swan Close, Poynton, Stockport, Cheshire, SK12 1HX. Tel: 01625 877855

Thanks/acknowledgements for Recent Reports go to: - S. & G. Barber, I. Blagden, *Birdwatch* and *Birdwatching* Magazines, P. & C. Brewster, J. Clarke, M. Duckham, A. Hearn, K. Kirk, K. Massey (Fiddler's Ferry Reserve), D. Morris (Tatton & Knutsford Moor LNR), A.R. Parker, B. Perkins (Sandbach Flashes Log), Rostherne Log and anyone else who passed records on.

Personality Profile

DAVID QUINN - WILDLIFE ARTIST

David Quinn is one of this country's leading wildlife illustrators, and has been resident in Cheshire since 1983. His work, particularly on birds, has attracted critical acclaim, and is much respected both for its technical accuracy and its beauty. The level of excellence achieved in his work results from much dedication and hard work at the drawing board on Dave's part, coupled with his extensive work in the field, all fuelled by a genuine love and respect for the birds that he watches.

Born in Salford in 1959, he was schooled locally, attending Salford Grammar School before enrolling at Manchester Polytechnic, where he attained a B.A. First Class Honours in Graphic Design (Illustration) in 1982. This was a logical progression, as Dave remembers being drawing-crazy from the age of eight, helped by a plentiful supply of sheets of paper in their house. By the time he was sixteen, he had decided that drawing wildlife subjects was what he wanted to do, spending time sketching whilst on holidays, and also visiting Belle Vue Zoo to sketch the animals, particularly tigers.

Newly-married to Joan, Dave moved to Moulton in 1983 to start the twin adventures of marriage and earning a living. Easy access to the Weaver valley, with its surrounding farmland, ponds and woods provided him with a ready-made 'patch' on his new doorstep, and it was meeting him whilst out birding at Vale Royal Locks one Cheshire bird race day that led to our becoming friends. That year, 1987, Dave won the *British Birds'* Bird Illustrator of the Year award, and his career gained momentum. Much in demand, his work featured subsequently in many publications dealing with a wide range of issues concerning bird identification, and academic studies relating to species biology, behaviour and ecology. Amongst his most recently published work is his contribution to the Third Edition of the National Geographic *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, and his current project involves one of his own great interests, gulls, working with Rob Hume on the forthcoming Harper Collins *Guide to European Gulls*. Dave will be exhibiting at this year's Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water in August.

A quiet, understated and experienced birdwatcher, Dave has demonstrated to me on our many trips and twitches the value of being cautious when identifying birds. His list of solo triumphs includes the 1987 Neumann's Flash Franklin's Gull and the 1994 first-winter American Herring Gull at the same location (the first accepted record for mainland Britain). Locally on our patch, he grips me off with some regularity, having to his credit Turtle Dove, Hobby, Little Ringed Plover and Common Crane (outrageous!). Less auspicious moments include a memorable misidentification of the 'go-back' call of an invisible Red Grouse when we were actually listening to a sheep, a feat he claims is eclipsed only by his ID, on song, of a Ring Ouzel - actually the wind-borne melody of a distant car alarm! Pressures of work and family responsibilities in recent years have meant less time for birding, but Dave is a fixture on our joint, early May, all-day species count on the patch, and he enjoys another of our annual trips - three days' 'migrant-bashing' on the Yorkshire coast in the autumn. He also relishes the challenge of foreign birding, having visited Poland, France, Spain, Greece, India, Gambia and several locations in North America.

I'm certain that Dave's reputation will continue to grow in the future; true talent will out. We are lucky to have him 'on the strength' of Cheshire birding.

Pete Shaw, 1 Vale Royal Locks, Davenham, Northwich, CW8 2BB



Sites to Watch

RIVACRE VALLEY LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

Rivacre Valley lies on the western border of Ellesmere Port with easy access from the M53 at junction 7, or via the Ellesmere Port Golf Club off the A41 at Childer Thornton adjacent to St. Paul's Church. I spent ten years as a Ranger in the borough, the last six in charge of Rivacre, gradually gaining a good understanding of its birds and other forms of wildlife. Its richness derives from the varied habitats, which include a variety of woodlands from mature Pedunculate Oakwoods to scrubby areas, unimproved grassland, ponds, and the Rivacre Brook itself. Despite the best efforts of planners, who have allowed extensive urban encroachment around the eastern and southern borders of the park, Rivacre's extensive path network makes it possible to escape from the blighted industrialised image of Ellesmere Port as you explore this delightful 400 acre reserve.

The reserve is home to a varied flora including some notable species such as Yellow Rattle and Dyers Greenweed. It supports a superb 21 breeding species of butterfly, including White-letter Hairstreak; 15 species of dragonfly and damselfly, with the Broad-bodied Chaser being an annual breeder in the pond adjacent to the Ranger's Office; 21 species of mammals including several species of bat, with the Noctule being the easiest to identify as it hunts at dusk over the extensive grasslands.

As a bird locality the interest is mainly confined to species associated with woodland and woodland edge. There is however a migratory flyway through the valley which brings many unexpected species within view. Immediately downstream of the reserve the brook empties into the Mersey Estuary at the western edge of Mount Manisty. Though access and viewing are limited here waders and wildfowl, in variety and number, are visible to birders armed with a scope.

Rivacre Valley is not renowned for rarities (ironically as I write this a Pallas's Rosefinch is visiting the feeding station), though a Roller did once grace the valley's slopes, but the lack of coverage from competent birders probably accounts for this in part. My own efforts were minimal (contrary to popular belief Rangers actually get very little time to observe the wildlife they are supposedly charged with managing); despite this I found a number of notable species including several Firecrests, a Wryneck and two Goshawks.

Where Rivacre Valley wins out is in the number of breeding species, particularly those that can prove elusive. The site has all three species of woodpecker with Church Wood being favoured by the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Barn Owls breed on adjacent farmland and come into the valley to hunt for voles in the grasslands. Kingfishers and Grey Wagtails frequent the brook all year and early mornings along the Clayhill Wood stretch usually produces results. Bullfinches are common in the valley but their unobtrusive lifestyle makes them difficult to locate. The most consistent place to see them is a small patch of elders and thorn scrub halfway along the Fairway's Meadow which I used to refer to as the 'Magic Dell', because it had such a thrall over migrant warblers.

Spring and summer would see many warblers breeding in the valley; Grasshopper Warblers tended to favour the rough grassland slopes of Fairways Meadow. Similarly Lesser Whitethroats breed along the tree-planted border of Fairways. As a handy tip search out the mature, isolated ash trees within the overgrown hedges as the male Lesser Whitethroats always seem to base their territories around these marker points. Spring is also an excellent time to search out the finches. Large numbers of Siskins are often present in the valley, notably Church Wood, through to mid-April. Another feature of April would be the small number of Bramblings which would spend the month high in the sycamores of Clayhill Wood feeding on the blossom and any attracted insects. Common Redpolls also seem to favour the valley bottom along the Clayhill Wood stretch.

The best birding in the winter usually coincides with hard weather periods; frozen ground brings a variety of wading birds and wildfowl down to the soft mud at the edge of the brook. Common Snipe and Redshank would be regular with lesser numbers of Jack Snipe and Woodcock. Early mornings often reveal large numbers of Teal feeding along the brook but they would soon depart with the arrival of the regular dog walkers.

My favourite birding at Rivacre revolves around the autumn migration period. During August and September a succession of warblers turn up in the 'Magic Dell' and from late September through October early morning vigils at the watchpoint produce excellent numbers of passage migrants.

Overflies here have included Hawfinch, Water Pipit and the latest ever Swift in Cheshire. This same vantage point also provides excellent canopy views of adjacent woodland from which Sparrowhawks would frequently emerge and Great Spotted Woodpeckers are readily observed flying from wood to wood.

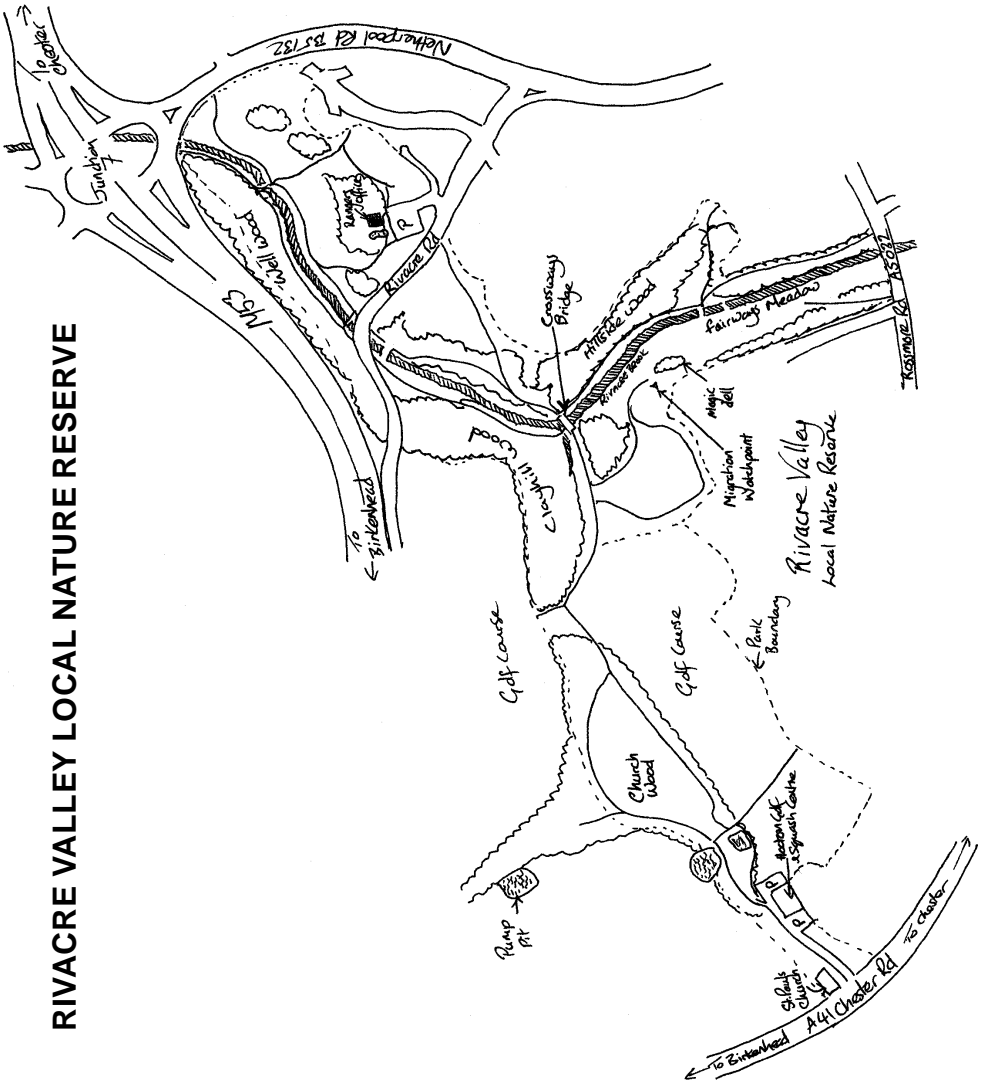
Although Rivacre is overshadowed by more famous birding areas in Cheshire, it would reward closer attention and anybody in north-west Cheshire or south Wirral looking for a local patch would be well advised to put Rivacre on their shortlist of candidates.

TARGET BIRDS

- All Year:** Bullfinch, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail.
- Spring:** Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Brambling, Lesser Whitethroat.
- Autumn:** Migrating finches, buntings, larks, pipits and thrushes.
- Winter:** Woodcock, Common Snipe, Jack Snipe, Firecrest.

Jeff Clarke, 90 Simonside, Hough Green, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 4YN

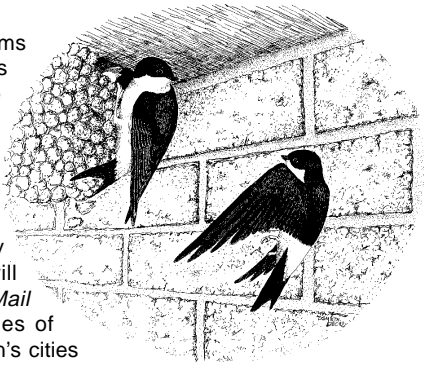
RIVACRE VALLEY LOCAL NATURE RESERVE



Projects and Surveys

HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY 1999

The CAWOS House Martin Survey, now in its 8th year, aims to address specific issues such as local population trends and breeding success, rather than attempt a more comprehensive population census which would cover the whole of the county. Again this report will illustrate more the change in the size of these significant colonies, and breeding success only where known, as many of the sites were visited only once to count the number of occupied nests. I also receive many comments, sometimes expressing concern, which I will report on as well. I was interested to read in the *Daily Mail* last January that "Experts warn that a hundred species of animals and plants that have made their home in Britain's cities need protection to survive". House Martins are included in this list of urban wildlife under threat from development and pollution (Stag Beetle heads the list!). Reports to RSPB in recent years suggest that House Martins may not be returning from African wintering grounds in their usual numbers and their Conservation Science Department is continuing its own House Martin Survey which started in 1998.



Pleasingly, 1999 saw the number of observers rising to 22, from just 11 in 1998 (including some contributors giving general observations). However, although the number of observers is back to pre-1997 levels, 38 colonies with only a total of 310 occupied nests were recorded, compared to 30 colonies with around 780 nests in 1998. Importantly the 1999 results do include the majority of the most significant sites for House Martins in the county, such as Styal Prison (not recorded in 1998), Winwick Hospital, Toft Farm and AstraZeneca's site at Alderley Edge.

Sites of importance

Most members will be aware that **Winwick Hospital**, declared a Grade C Site of Biological Importance by Cheshire County Council because of the importance of the House Martin colony there, has been under threat due to demolition and redevelopment work (although Warrington Council did insist that measures should be taken by the developers to enable House Martins to remain on site if possible). Disappointingly, 1999 again saw a big fall in numbers of occupied nests to just 38, continuing the steady decline of former years from over 120 nests in 1992/93. Particularly frustrating was that all of the 100 artificial nest boxes erected on the Tower stood empty (the House Martins did not even inspect them!). Let's hope that some birds will switch to the new houses being built on the site.

The dramatic increase in occupied nests at the **Women's Prison** at Styal from just 57 in 1995 to nearly 150 occupied nests in 1997 dropped back to 124 in 1999, though still confirming the continuing importance of this site. Again let's hope that the future of House Martins at this site is *secure!*

Toft Farm saw a slightly more successful season with 62 first and 40 second broods, compared to 55 and 31 respectively in 1998. However, unexplainably, the farmhouse was completely deserted. The last known brood fledged on 8th October. This was the second brood to a pair which started building very late. Their nest was also unusual in that it was two storeys higher than any other nest and was built in the direct beam of a floodlight mounted on the building. This lengthened their day considerably!

For the second year running returning numbers of House Martins to **AstraZeneca's Alderley Park** site were both low and late. The first recorded were 20+ on 14th April, but these did not stay. Again only half of the available nests were occupied (31 out of 60+). Explanation for low breeding success could be attributed to permanent scaffolding (for window replacement work) restricting access and disturbing traditional nest sites. This shows the importance of increasing the awareness of breeding birds to encourage, where possible, routine maintenance to be carried out at times of the year when least disturbance will happen. There was some evidence of second broods and a post-breeding flock of nearly 180 was over the farm fields on 20th August. At least seven nests were still occupied in mid-September, with the last on 6th October.

Other significant colonies included Queen Elizabeth Dock, Eastham (12 occupied nests), Stockton Heath Police Station (9 occupied nests) and Field Cottage, Over Tabley (10 occupied nests - their most successful year). However the steady decrease continued at Brackley School, Stockton Heath with just two pairs in 1999 compared to 15 recorded in 1993, there being no obvious changes in the building or site.

Was it a successful breeding season?

Returning House Martins were first seen by A Gorst on 28th April (earlier than usual), but they disappeared until 27th June. Generally he found it difficult to carry out the survey this year as the House Martins seemed to often disappear for short periods. J Lord from Lymm thought that "House Martins seem to be arriving earlier and leaving earlier now". Richard Hargreaves, also from Lymm noted the "end of the colony of six nests at Mill Lane, Heatley, due to re-roofing work carried out at the end of 1998". H Hamer was pleased to note that "House Martins were not put off by cavity wall insulation and window replacement work carried out by sympathetic occupiers in Hawk Green". He did comment that he found it difficult to survey without loitering and peering up at people's bedroom windows! Next year he will try to go out early before people are about!

A & J Terrill (Little Heatley) were delighted to witness fledging for the first time in 1999, with "the young assembling on the washing line with their parents flying around encouraging flight". Other comments included "Their acrobatics are a pleasure to watch", "Spent a weekend watching one brood coming out of the nest and learning to fly - fascinating!" and "I regret that I only have one nest!". On a gloomier note C Wright thought that "Generally people are not keen to have them as they make a lot of mess".

Regarding interactions with other species, there were several reports making reference to House Sparrows. V McArdle noted that "House Sparrows used one nest during the winter, but they 'vacated' it on the House Martins' return", while D Colley-Davies said that "although House Sparrows destroy the end nest each year, the House Martins always rebuild it". H Hamer found that "House Sparrows seemed to have taken over some of the Martins' space under the eaves". Richard Hargreaves reported that "Blue Tits had taken over an artificial nest". He was fortunate to witness "a Hobby passing through his garden in July, 'hopefully' attracted by the House Martins; it took unidentified prey nearby. The same bird, presumably, had been seen overhead on 25th June, but had ignored all bird prey".

Number and size of broods

S Midcalf was unsure whether one of their two nests was used purely for roosting, as all the birds were flying as from 4th August, but using both nests. Y Cairns thought their House Martins probably had two broods each, though they could not confirm this except that their cat was very interested in the nests on two occasions! Tony Broome speculated whether his House Martins had in fact had a third brood, as the first fledged on 8th July, with the second eight weeks later on 5th September (he was away at the time). Richard Greaves points out that he has 'proof' of third broods for 1998 and says for 1999 that "the first birds returned to nests 5th May and by 2nd June they had hatched. Fledging takes about three weeks: 23rd June. If laying occurs soon afterwards (and can occur before), then by the end of July second broods are out of the nests (at the latest). In 1998 nests were not empty until 22nd September, giving plenty of time for a third brood (in fact seven weeks - and only five are needed)." He says it is not uncommon to have nests occupied through September, though this year, 1999, after two broods for some pairs, most had gone by the end of July. Richard recognises that BWP states "three broods are rarely reported", but he can see no other explanation for about five months of continuous activity to produce two broods, taking five weeks for each!

This mystery and, to some extent controversy, surrounding the number of broods and the number of House Martins seen using nests later in the season, appears to be gripping the imagination of others in the birding world. I am sure John Gooders will not mind me quoting from his article in *Birdwatching* October 1999:

"House Martins nest in colonies several hundred strong in various parts of Britain, including a tenement of more than 500 nests in Oxfordshire. In southern Europe nests are plastered one against the other to form enormous colonies that are sometimes even larger. And in Europe as a whole there must be several million pairs. Yet, at the end of summer, they disappear into oblivion. Swallows and Sand Martins, as we all know, roost together in reed-beds. House Martins simply vanish. But where? Observant watchers have counted up to 14 birds entering or leaving a single nest in late summer and it's a reasonable bet that travelling House Martins bed-and-breakfast along the way, but what happens when they find themselves with no nests to stay in?"

John has travelled thousands of miles through their winter ranges in Africa and India and hardly seen more than a handful, and speculates “could they, like the ‘cloud-scraping’ Cisticola, fly so high that no one ever sees them?” He goes on to recount tales of “birds arriving at nesting colonies in the middle of the night in a state of near hypothermia, so that cuddling up with ten or more other martins would be nothing less than life-saving”. Some people have seen martins roosting in trees and in reed-beds in winter, but the small numbers involved and the infrequency of such reports indicate that this is not normal, everyday behaviour. And so the mystery deepens. John finishes with “Perhaps, after all, they do spend their nights aloft cat-napping like Swifts? But what do they do during the day? One could speculate forever, but one thing is clear. The millions of House Martins that pass through Europe every autumn to winter in Africa cannot all bed-and-breakfast with their chums. No! There can only be one explanation - that Gilbert White, the 18th century Rector of Selborne, was right after all - they must spend their winters hibernating at the bottom of ponds.” Now that is a mind-boggling suggestion!

What will the new millennium hold?

I am pleased to announce that Phil Oddy has volunteered to take over organising the CAWOS House Martin Survey. I am sure he will continue to place importance on the monitoring of Cheshire’s significant colonies, whilst encouraging more people to take an interest in the fortunes of their local birds. Please feel free to photocopy the House Martin form enclosed with this edition of *Bird News* (or ring Phil for extra copies) to pass on to your friends and neighbours within the county and so increase the interest in and take-up of the survey. Remember that *any* information is useful, even if just one visit is made to count the number of occupied nests (July probably the best month). We would be grateful if you would check that your local library is displaying the CAWOS House Martin poster and also look out for any notices in your area papers (ideally let Phil know as well). If you would like any further information or are able to offer advice or help, please contact Phil Oddy, 4 Swan Close, Poynton, Stockport, Cheshire, SK12 1HX Tel: 01625 877855.

A tip from America

Regular readers will be aware that from time to time I extol the virtues of putting up artificial nest boxes to attract House Martins (yes - I know that all 100 artificial nests erected at the Winwick Hospital site were ignored in 1999!). Well, I received a rather unusual Christmas present from America last year - a gourd birdhouse. The information leaflet that came with it states that “the early Indians discovered that if they cut holes in these large gourds, cleaned them out and hung them in trees or on poles around their gardens, birds would use them as a nesting site. They quickly found that, as they put more of them up, if they could get a certain kind of bird to use them, the insect population declined.

The Purple Martins discovered the gourds, they left their holes in trees and assumed the gourds as living quarters. Because the constant commotion around the gardens kept other birds away from the gourds, the martins soon learned that being around man was beneficial to them. Man supplied them with nesting sites, kept other birds away from the gourds and they had places to rear their young. Thus, the beginning of a long and happy relationship between man and the Purple Martin.” So, will Purple Martins find their way to our garden this year and make use of this rather fine gourd birdhouse? What an addition that would be to the British list!!

And finally.....

Thank you to all contributors for your help and support. Please give Phil the same support in the future and happy House Martin hunting in 2000 and beyond.

Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, Cheshire. Tel: 01565 830168

Contributors: B Ankers (Eastham Dock), Sheila Blamire (Mere), Tony Broome (Wilmslow), Y Cairns (Winsford), D Colley-Davies (Norley), P Goodwin (Paddington), A Gorst (Sankey), Pete Hall (Toft Farm), H Hamer (Marple), M Hancock (Tabley), Richard Hargreaves (Lymm), John Hillmer (Handforth, Mobberley), J Lord (Lymm), Brian Martin (Winwick Hospital), V McArdle (Holmes Chapel), S Midcalf (Siddington), Hugh Pulsford (Alderley Park), B Ranson (Congleton), J & P Roberts (Blakelow), J Rylands (Walton Hall), A & J Terrill (Little Heatley), R Thompson (Rudheath) and from outside Cheshire & Wirral’s recording area I Dalley (Dunham Massey) and C Wright (Hale).

HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY 2000

You will find *your* survey form in this issue of *Bird News*.
Please give copies to friends and neighbours and encourage them to join in.

MERSEY ESTUARY WETLAND BIRD SURVEY 2000

Would you like to have a local patch that's in the top ten best birding spots in Britain and has no public access? If so, give your birding a new lease of life. Here's a unique opportunity to visit on a regular basis the ninth most important estuary in Britain and get stunning views of tens of thousands of waders, ducks and attendant raptors.

The Mersey Estuary is an internationally important estuary protected under European law and, despite its polluted image, each winter attracts on average over 100,000 ducks and waders. The best parts are the extensive salt marshes and mudflats on the southern shore. Unfortunately, the presence of the Manchester Ship Canal makes public access to this area impossible. However, once a month a group of birdwatchers are allowed through Shell's oil refinery at Stanlow, taken across the canal by ferry and allowed to watch this usually unseen spectacle.

The Black-tailed Godwit flock has increased from a handful in the early 1990s to over 2000. The 5000 Redshanks present make it the third most important place in Britain for this wader, whilst only Morecambe Bay has more than the 48,000 Dunlins that it hosts in an average winter. But it's not only good in winter: a recent article in the 1998 *Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report* highlights that the estuary is also a major Shelduck moult site, with 15,000 recorded in August. And it is not all ducks and waders: there are also usually two or three Peregrines, a couple of Merlins, Sparrowhawks and an occasional wintering Hen Harrier, as well as Twites, Lapland Buntings, Ravens, Yellow Wagtails and the odd rarity. Both the Terek and Broad-billed Sandpipers found at Frodsham in 1999 disappeared at low tide to feed on the Mersey Estuary.

How do we know all of this? Well, the once a month trip is part of the nationally coordinated Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) where the birds on every wetland in Britain are counted. All of the counters are volunteers, and we on the Mersey Estuary are in need of new blood. You do not need to have any experience of counting birds as you will soon learn to pick that up; you just need a reasonable knowledge of British birds and some waterproofs! So if you can spare any of the following Sundays in 2000, please contact me at the address below. We meet at Stanlow.

Count Dates and Times

Date	Time	Tide
7 th May	11.00 am	9.6m
4 th June	10.00 am	9.8m
2 nd July	9.00 am	9.6m
20 th August	12.00 noon	8.7m
17 th September	11.00 am	9.2m
15 th October	10.00 am	9.5m
12 th November	8.30 am	9.6m
10 th December	7.30 am	9.2m

Dermot Smith, 71 Richmond Avenue, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2NX
Tel. 01925 602397 E-mail dermot@richmondav.fsnet.co.uk

HONEY BUZZARD & RED KITE SURVEYS

In 1999, the Cheshire and Wirral Raptor Study Group carried out a Common Buzzard breeding survey (see January's *Bird News*). This year the Group has been asked to take part in the national surveys of breeding Honey Buzzards and Red Kites, and we would like to ask for help from CAWOS members.

There have been increasing records in recent years of Red Kites in Cheshire, and they can be expected to start breeding in the near future following the successful reintroduction schemes and the increasing numbers in Wales: they could turn up almost anywhere. Honey Buzzards are slightly different in that there are only occasional records in the county of passage birds. Breeding could probably only be expected in a limited number of sites because of the birds' requirement for about 40% woodland within their territory.

The Raptor Group would like to ask CAWOS members to phone in ALL sightings of Red Kite and Honey Buzzard (in Cheshire!) to the Group's co-ordinator, Colin Wells, as soon as possible after the sighting. Members can be assured that all records will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality. Colin's telephone number is **0151 336 7681**.

NEW BTO REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR MERSEYSIDE



British Trust for Ornithology

CAWOS members should note that the British Trust for Ornithology has appointed Dr Robert (Bob) Harris as the new Regional Representative for the Merseyside area. This follows an extended period without permanent BTO representation in this region, which also includes the north-eastern section of Wirral and some parts of Halton District such as Hale, Hough Green and Ditton. Bob has described his initial role as fulfilling a number of functions which fall into several categories: co-ordinating BTO survey work at the local level; membership liaison and recruitment; and promoting, where possible, all birding activities within Merseyside in collaboration with all other interested groups and organisations.

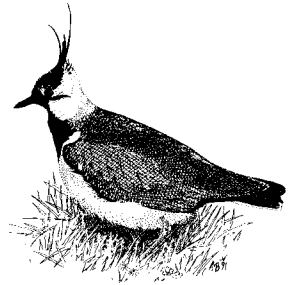
As such, Bob's principal objectives are to ensure that survey data is both comprehensively and accurately collected (and promptly returned!) and to produce a regional BTO members' newsletter publishing that data together with other articles of interest. Additionally, he is keen to follow up the work of the Lancashire Bird Club and the Lancashire Naturalists' Trust in continuing data collection within the region with particular emphasis on target species and the Regional Biodiversity Action Plans that are currently being drawn up. Consequently, he is keen to hear from any current or potential BTO members within his geographical area who would be interested in either participating in survey work or contributing to the newsletter. In particular, he is looking for any volunteers to take part in the Breeding Bird Survey and any other surveys, which are planned for the future.

Anyone wishing to contact Bob should do so at the following address: 2 Dulas Road, Wavertree, Liverpool, L15 6UA. Alternatively, telephone on 0151 722 6231 (after 6 pm) or e-mail at harris@liv.ac.uk or drbobharris_uk@yahoo.com.

Simon J Edwards, 24 Badby Wood, Kirkby, Liverpool, L33 7YQ

The View from the Farmyard

The first two months of 2000 have produced some of the wettest lunchtimes I can remember. My usual lunching spots have seldom been visited, but this doesn't mean to say that I haven't been birdwatching. The modern steel-framed buildings and the old brick barn both offer the opportunity for birdwatching whilst sitting on nice warm straw. The small bales are marvellous for building windbreaks and comfortable seats. A pair of Magpies is a frequent visitor to the calf pens; if only one is in view the other isn't far away. Both birds emit a range of contact calls, some just for contact and others to warn of approaching danger. When March had just begun the female's mind was turning to thoughts of raising a family. Her calls had a softer edge to them and she would sit for periods emitting a repetitive 'kak' note, each note accompanied by a double flick of the wings. March 2nd was a very wet lunchtime and I sat in the calf shed; two other regular companions of mine, the Robin and Wren flit in and out of the shed. Their bodies are just small enough to fit between the vertical slats known as "Yorkshire boarding" that form the windbreak on the ends of modern farm buildings. In the calf pens the young stock lie in a close group in the deep straw bedding, chewing their cud in a most mechanical manner. The look on their faces shows that the light is on, but there is definitely nobody at home, that is until someone rattles a feed bucket or moves a gate.



The female Magpie made her usual graceful entrance, and perched on the gate to make sure all was safe before venturing further into the shed. A vigorous shake removed the beads of water from her feathers, and a gentle stroke of the beak straightened a wayward feather in the tail. Both birds are very smart and make me feel a little guilty that I haven't dressed for dinner too. Over the last week the male bird has developed a rather strange habit. When he is making his loudest "look at me" noise he used to sit on the very apex of the roof, but now he has discovered acoustics. So

when he lands he skips along the gutter until he reaches the downspout, into which he thrusts his head. When he makes his call now it is perhaps a little muffled and has a duller plasticity hollow edge to it, but he is quite chuffed with himself and lifts his head to look around every now and then. She, I'm afraid is obviously easily impressed and draws closer to get the full effect, and maybe akin to some humans likes to be seen on the arm or rather the wing of a star.

Our embryonic high-rise Rook colony looked as though it had come to an early end only three years after its conception. Violent winter winds stripped their old constructions from the treetops and scattered them onto the road, where the passing traffic ground them to pulp. Though the Rooks remained in the area, they shunned the old rookery trees, spending much of their time on the large beech trees or the chestnuts of Sandfield Wood. But as February turned to March tiny platforms of crossed twigs slowly developed into the dense masses needed to carry the adults and their new families. This I am told is the first rookery in Toft for more than 50 years. In an area with, one would think, the desirable characteristics of mature trees and mixed farmland it would be difficult to blame their long absence on anything other than human persecution. The choice of these trees against the A50 may help to prevent them being 'shot through', a practice, which should in my opinion be outlawed, as the gunman on the ground has little or no knowledge of what is on top of the nest. Crows' nests are a favourite platform for Buzzards to use as nests, and as we have learned from the last *Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report* the Hobby is now nesting in the county. I learn from Anthony Chapman's book *The Hobby* that 90% of Hobbies use old Crow nests to raise their young, so it is only a matter of time before one of these very rare raptors to this part of Britain is lost to this cowardly practice.

Amongst my wide-ranging interests is local history and whilst looking into the local field names I came across *The Place-names of Cheshire* by J Dodgson. The book amounts to his lifetime's work and runs to 6 volumes and 9 books in all. Dodgson identified many field names containing bird names, but also villages and farms. Names like Ullard Hall Farm that lies in Toft, Ullard being the country name for a young owl; Crows' Nest Farm probably relates more to the elevated position of the farm. The villages are more interesting, Bickley consisting of two elements, ley being a wood and Bick the Old English name for the Green Woodpecker. Still more thought-inspiring is Tranmere that Dodgson identifies as Crane Marsh/Lake. Was this once a traditional nesting place of the Crane?

Top of the popularity league is the Crow with 42 place names related to this bird. It was without doubt as well known in mediaeval times as it is now, and some of its most infamous haunts bear its name to this day. Next comes the Woodcock with 40, mostly Cock-shutt or variants of this. Cheshire being well-wooded and blessed with many marshes and bogs, enabled our ancestors to be familiar with both sight and taste of this bird. Third with at least 31 place names are the raptors; the value of the hawk in older times was considerable. *The Domesday Book* records very many hawks' eyries. So valuable were such eyries that their presence was often recorded on parchment, whereas the female relatives of the landowner were often omitted from his list of valuables, so that the nest is remembered but the relatives' names are lost to time. Hawks also feature highly in crests and coats of arms, a status symbol akin to a knighthood today. A cluster of other birds follow on from here; Magpie and Mistle Thrush, two mystical birds. Magpie, teller of fortunes and the 'Storm Cock' who chooses the highest treetop from which to sing into the teeth of the fiercest storm. Plover (aka Peewit, Lapwing, and Green Plover), Moorhen and Partridge were vital additions to the largely vegetable diet of the peasant and landed alike. Plovers' eggs were still part of the country diet within living memory.

The kite however must be treated with caution. I know country people to this day who call all raptors kites. You must be able to imagine my excitement 20 years ago when one such person told me of a kite's nest only 200yds from my door, and you will be able to imagine how deflating it was to discover it to be a Kestrel. The lark, once the constant companion of the farm workers, who toiled all day in the fields, is present in 10 place names, and the Cuckoo, also easily identified, at a further seven sites. In all 42 species (356 sites) are contained in the name record. When I stand on Hawksgeard (Hawks Gap) or Sparrow Greave (green) in Toft, I know that my mediaeval counterpart noted the same birds as I and was familiar enough with them to be able to name them and their haunts.

Pete Hall, The School House, Toft Road, Knutsford, Cheshire

Notes & Letters

Bird News is always keen to hear from CAWOS members. Please send us any notes of unusual avian behaviour or amusing anecdotes that you think your fellow birders will be interested in. Also, we are always interested in your views on any of our articles or on the newsletter itself. Ed.

BAD TWITCH DAY

Every now and then the intoxicating allure of a dream bird seeps into my psyche and drags me off on a bender, but these days the guilt at not paying enough attention to my first love tends to get the better of me. I have to face the truth that developing strong bonds and sharing special moments means more than a one-off encounter, exciting and exotic as it may be. Twitching is something I used to do in a past life, not in the 'Hoddle' sense, but certainly before I developed into a well-rounded individual. Sadly this doesn't mean I now rest easy with my place in the world, with a fuller understanding of the intricate web of life; more accurately it was a time before I gained a significant amount of weight. No, the truth is that over the past few years I have largely forsaken the green grass on the other side of the fence and fidelity has me in its grip. The local patch has gained my affections.

I've given this state of affairs some thought; is it that I have sampled enough cookies from the jar that I now know what I really like? Or is it that, like most folks, I've settled for a safe, secure, stress free, future. No doubt the truth lies somewhere in between, but one thing's for sure, a whole series of salutary experiences made me reassess where my birding priorities really lie.

Like most avid birders/twitchers I've frequently dipped out on my intended targets but normally I have taken these occurrences with good grace. Just part of the game. Some you win some you lose. When I really feel dejected is when I actually see the bird but it might as well be a grnat squashed on my windscreen for all the key features you can make out. Llanfairfechan has always had that air of dejection about it, at least when I visit. The day I saw my first Surf Scoter there merely confirmed my opinion. It was a bitterly cold winter's day with a force seven gale lashing over the seafront. Dozens of Common Scoters were, according to some of the locals, milling just offshore. Evidently the Welsh operate on a different measuring system from the rest of the world as all I could see were occasional black dots being flung skywards on the crest of the breakers half a mile out. With hypothermia fast setting in I eventually nailed my quarry. Yes, there it was, a drake Surf Scoter. Or more accurately a distant black smudge with two strategically placed white spots. Over the period of the next hour I saw the bird perhaps thirty times. Total viewing time lasted well in excess of seventeen and a half seconds and so, satiated I left vowing never to return to that godforsaken place, well not till next time anyway.

Sometime later I joined a team on a twitch to Norfolk in pursuit of Parrot Crossbill and Serin. On arrival after the overnight drive I rubbed my eyes and accidentally knocked out one of my contact lenses. After scrabbling around in the foot-well I finally located my irreparably damaged lens and then discovered I'd forgotten to bring my glasses. The team had a good day catching up with all its intended targets but my memory of the trip is one of distorted images, the only decent views being through my telescope. Things got so bad I eventually took my remaining lens out and spent the remainder of the day in a complete haze. At least now I could use both barrels of my binoculars. Trouble is it's extremely difficult walking around with binoculars permanently strapped to your eyes.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing for me about twitches was spending more time in the car than birding. I eventually fell out with the pursuit when on another trip to Norfolk I spent less than an hour actually birding and about ten times as long roaring around this enchanting corner of England. We more or less cleaned up on half a dozen rarities but had no time to find our own birds. It was a bit like having all the ingredients for a great meal but due to a heavy cold you couldn't taste a thing. So from that point on I all but gave up twitching. It has to be something with real charisma to get me off my local patch. These days I live in hope of turning up the first Glaucous-winged Gull for Britain and if it's going to be anywhere it could well be at Arpley Tip or on the Richmond Bank. Now when I ring Birdline it's always the North-West region, just in case somebody's found something on the local patch. "Welcome to Birdline North-West. Today's highlights include.....and just outside our region a Hawk Owl in Durness". Yikes, I'm on my way.

Jeff Clarke, 90 Simonside, Hough Green, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 4YN

YULE LOG 2000

At 7am on 2nd January 2000, I felt rather silly. Hugh Pulsford and I were standing, shivering, in the car park of the Little Chef at Monk's Heath. We had co-opted John Rayner and John Tromans for this year's "Yule Log". Our arrival had been timed for 7am in the mistaken belief that we would catch the dawn. So we spent the first hour of this year's Yule Log drinking coffee; fortunately Little Chefs open before dawn.

Our first target site was Radnor Mere, sadly on private land, but accessible to us as employees of AstraZeneca. This winter has seen the arrival of at least 14 Mandarin Ducks, and shortly after dawn these exotic, but countable duck started our day list. Also present were five corvids, Goosander and several commoner duck species. Next stop was Farmwood Pools where we failed to see Ruddy Duck, but bagged Goldeneye. We moved swiftly to Sandbach Flashes and it was immediately clear that several of our 'target' species were available and, thanks to Hugh stocking up the feeding station, Tree Sparrow joined our steadily growing list, along with Ruff and Common Snipe.

Our first long drive took us past Frodsham to the Wirral and Inner Marsh Farm (IMF). This driving time was not wasted as we had a chance to get warm and have a snack. If only the RSPB could sort out the access difficulties, IMF would probably become one of the Society's top reserves. Sadly, it may never happen. We scored well, with Raven giving us the 'full set' of corvids but there was no sign of the previous day's drake Smew. The marsh, viewed from Denhall Lane, had Bewick's Swans and the expected commoner goose species. We also found two Little Egrets here, initially mistaking one (at a great distance!) for the Mauritanian Spoonbill.

Next stop Neston Old Quay where, rumour had it, we could see Water Pipit. I have seen this attractive species at this site in the past but sadly not today. However, we received a boost from a huge, mixed, finch flock, which contained Linnets and Brambling. That high tide Mecca, Parkgate Old Baths car park, was our next port of call. Sadly, this time Parkgate failed to live up to its reputation. Now, strange as it may seem, we still had not seen Grey Partridge. This is a bird that is declining nationally and one that we hoped to 'twitch' for today's list. However, we could not find one and no one we spoke to could either.

Stapleton Woods is another little gem along this coast. It is a relatively small site that holds good numbers of all the common woodland birds. It is reputed to hold Lesser Spotted Woodpecker but not on this occasion. Here we added Nuthatch, Greater Spotted and Green Woodpecker.

Red Rocks was to be our next stop. Unfortunately, the tide was out with a capital O. We endured a two mile walk across the sand to get close to the tide line and view the waders and were rewarded with Eider Duck, Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Dunlin, Grey Plover and Turnstone, which we duly added to the list. The return walk netted fly-past Sanderling and Knot. Parkgate at dusk, and yet again one of my favourite sites did not deliver. Belatedly, we found that one of our targets here, Hen Harrier, has not been frequenting this once traditional site, this winter. Hugh and I spotted Merlin but could not give good enough directions to our team-mates for it to count.

We made a few mistakes during the day; missing the tide was the main one. We should, perhaps, have been on the coast rather than drinking coffee at 7:45. However, we saw Mandarin, Goosander and Ruff "inland", away from the Wirral, so perhaps not. The weather did not help. The sunny afternoon brought out masses of walkers onto the sands at Red Rocks and along the footpaths at Parkgate.

What of the birds we missed? Well, Song Thrush, Grey Partridge and Marsh Tit head the list. But Water Rail, Water Pipit, Ringed Plover and Rock Pipit should all have been available. Smew and Ruddy Shelduck were a short flight away in Clwyd. We finished with a grand total of 86 species but added two points for a CAWOS non-member, totalling a grand 88. Still it was a superb day out and a fabulous way to blow the champagne-induced cobwebs away. It has also provided the four of us with a decent start to our year lists.

I sat and typed this note during the first week in January but we didn't hear any real news of the event after Mike Holmes hopped off to the land of Aus. It seems from James Walsh's note published in the January 2000 *Bird News* that we managed to win the event again.

Not that the result matters. The day's good birding was enough of a reward.

Mike Crawley, 17 Leeside, Heaton Mersey, Stockport, SK4 2DN

Well done, Mike. Unfortunately though, it appears that the honour of being this year's top 'Yule Logger' goes to Dave Riley of Woolston Eyes with 101 points: a remarkable feat. Ed.

GARDEN BIRDS' BEHAVIOUR NOTES

Phil Barnett submitted to us the following notes from his extensive observations of the birds in his garden. Phil is the web master of the award-winning *Birds of a Cheshire Garden* web site. Check it out at www.abcissa.force9.co.uk/birds/. For more information see page 19 of *Bird News* 43. Ed.

UNUSUAL INSTANCES OF AERIAL FEEDING

An emergence of flying ants on 20th July 1997 was accompanied by the usual congregation of Black-headed Gulls, Swifts and hirundines. While scanning through the gulls I was surprised to also see an adult Hobby feeding on the ants. Bearing in mind that a Hobby would usually cause great alarm amongst Swifts and martins, it was interesting that it was ignored. Later, three Jackdaws, one Common Gull, two Lesser Black-backed Gulls and two Herring Gulls joined in. I understand that this behaviour is fairly uncommon in the latter two species.

Two further interesting observations were as follows:

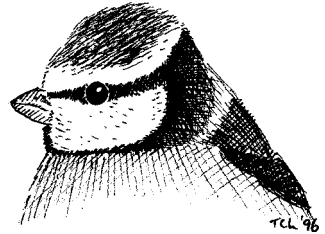
On several occasions in August 1995 I watched a Dunnock catching pyralid moths on the wing. These were disturbed by the bird, which would then catch them about 50cm from the ground, then take them to feed its nestlings.

On 13th August 1997 I saw a Magpie fly from a nearby aerial to the roof of my house. The Magpie made a slight deviation from its flight path to take a large flying insect (probably a fly). This may have been an intentional sortie after the insect or it may just have happened upon it en route.

Certainly Magpies are extremely opportunistic in their feeding behaviour. I recall recently observing a Magpie taking either spiders or hibernating insects from around one of the window frames of my house. It did this by tentatively clinging to the brickwork, repeatedly accidentally tapping the window glass as it did so. I was briefly reminded of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds!* Ed.

BLUE TIT BUILDING TWO NESTS

During March and April 1995 I watched a Blue Tit simultaneously constructing two separate nests in nest boxes: a completed, lined nest and a second, unlined nest about 10m away from the other. On several occasions I saw the female collect moss, fly into one box, collect more moss and then fly into the other box (thus ruling out two females being involved). Judging by its display flights, I got the impression that the male preferred one box while the female preferred the other - the one which was lined and in which eggs were laid. Birds sometimes build more than one nest when confused by the close proximity or similarity of sites. However, this is unlikely to be the case here, one box being on a tree facing east, the other being on a fence facing west.



BULLFINCH EATING LARGE NUMBER OF PYRACANTHA SEEDS

On 12th February a male Bullfinch fed on *Pyracantha* berries which I had attached to a tree near to my house. During the day it spent around five hours in six 'sessions' on the tree. Whilst on the tree it took around seven berries a minute. The Bullfinch was in fact eating the seeds and discarding the flesh of the berries. As each berry contains four seeds, assuming no wastage, the amazing total of around 6000 seeds must have been consumed during the day!

NUTHATCHES CATCHING NUT FRAGMENTS IN MID-AIR

Several species which use my garden nut feeders frequently display great agility and very fast reactions. For example, Blue Tits can often be seen rapidly flying down from the feeder to catch a fragment of peanut that they have dislodged. However, the speed of reaction required to perform this feat is nothing compared to that which I have seen performed by Nuthatches. While energetically hammering at the peanuts, Nuthatches often send pieces in all directions. Without altering their foothold, Nuthatches are able to shoot the body very rapidly downwards and catch the fragment before it has dropped out of reach. They are invariably successful. These lightning-fast reactions have possibly evolved as a consequence of the Nuthatch's mode of feeding: if fragments of food were not caught in mid-air they would probably be lost for good.

Phil Barnett, 11 Oaklea Avenue, Wilmslow, SK9 1QL

I'm a great believer in the value of routinely observing the commoner birds so often overlooked by many birders. Phil's observations clearly demonstrate the pleasure that can be found in watching these species and getting to know their characters. Ed.

BIRDING IN THE TWILIGHT YEARS

Bird News recently received this lovely letter from one of our older members. It demonstrates that despite the ageing process and failing eyesight, birdwatching can still be a pleasurable experience that can be enjoyed throughout a lifetime. I was particularly taken with the way in which Mrs Bartlett uses a bird's jizz as the key to its identification. Ed.

Here is a description of the birdwatching that is still possible for me.

I can't focus on objects very well any more, so I think of my eyes as fixed focus instruments, except that on dark winter days the pupils don't close to help the focus but enlarge to let in more light thereby making the focus worse. My opticians have designed my glasses so that I can read very well and also see quite well up to about 6 to 8 feet away.

So, when I look out of my kitchen window all the little birds look more or less the same to me. The paler ones will be Goldfinches and Chaffinches and will be on the ground, though they are not the only ones there. However, I can see that male Chaffinches in their adult plumage have a bright white wing bar and that Robins hop in an identifiable way and Dunnocks fly back into the undergrowth in a recognisable manner. Greenfinches are larger than the other finches and I'm hoping that when the Siskins arrive I will be able to identify them, as they will be feeding upside down on the hanging nuts. There are no sparrows in the garden except in August when the young birds come in with the adults. The large black birds in the distant Lombardy poplar will be Carrion Crows; as they fly over the house they are unlike any other birds, as there are no Rooks around here to confuse me. Most Blackbirds are black and halfway in size between crows and the small birds. With binoculars I can see everything and could spend longer with them than I do, though I have to be lucky to be using them when there is something unusual to see. I recently saw a Long-tailed Tit, though not again since. I've not yet seen any Nuthatches this winter.

I read a lot about birds in such publications as *Bird News* and *Birdwatch*. It's interesting to read about what other people see, though I usually don't read about foreign species or the pages of *British Birds* devoted to something obtuse; but it's fun to think that there are people who can enjoy such things!

I don't really moan to myself that I can't join in. I could never go on a birding holiday, for when we had family holidays together the others were not interested in birds. I've now got a six-year-old grandchild who likes birds and so I don't feel quite so much the odd one out any more.

Eppie Bartlett, 36 Laurel Drive, Willaston, Neston, CH64 1TW

MIGRANTS, MIGRANTS, EVERYWHERE !!!

Living so far inland, it's very rare for me to be able to enjoy the real spectacle of numerous migrants along every hedgerow. Occasionally I get a few migrants arriving on the same day, usually just a few Swallows, House Martins, Willow Warblers or Chiffchaffs and an overhead passage of Meadow Pipits during the spring or autumn. September has long been my favourite month of the year mainly because of the variety and number of birds that can be experienced. Birds also tend to remain a lot longer than in spring. On September 25th, I noted a good passage of 112 Meadow Pipits over Poynton Pool along with single figures of Swallows, House Martins and Pied Wagtails. On September 26th, for the first time in 11 years of watching my local patch in Poynton, I was treated to such a memorable spectacle. The early part of the morning was dull and cloudy with a light/moderate SW wind but by mid-morning the weather had deteriorated to light drizzle.

Poynton Pool is the only large area of water locally and it lies north-south alongside the A523. The Pool itself is rather narrow, and is disturbed by fishermen, but it also consists of small areas of mixed (but mainly deciduous) woodland and a good area of open parkland. It is usually my first port of call and can under the right conditions be good for wildfowl as well as passerines. On arrival at Poynton Pool there was an obvious overhead passage of Meadow Pipits with 67+ birds over in an hour (a good total) mainly heading SW. Curiously other migrants such as eight Swallows and three Pied Wagtails were heading SW, along with four House Martins and two Skylarks (always a good migration marker species here). Scarcer migrants included three Goldcrests and 11 Jays, both notable overnight influxes of those species.

By late morning, I moved to an area near to Poynton Pool and locally known as Hazelbadge Fields. This is an area of woodland, open grazed fields and derelict scrub. The area has numerous ponds, which often flood into the adjacent fields during periods of heavy rain. In worsening weather the passage of Meadow Pipits was even more noticeable with at least 146 birds counted in an hour

(20 flew SE, 71 flew S and 55+ were grounded on the fields). This indicated birds were funnelling out of Ladybrook Valley at the first opportunity rather than continuing SW towards the Pool. Other presumed migrants included a Chiffchaff, a Linnet, two Siskins, at least two Goldcrests, a male Blackcap, 12 Swallows and five House Martins. Best of all were two Teal on the flooded fields, where this species is quite rare.

In the afternoon the weather had improved to give the odd sunny spell and so I decided to visit the remainder of my patch, namely Lostock Hall Farm. This area centred on a derelict farm, consists of mixed hedgerows and unimproved grassland and lies adjacent to Woodford airfield. It is the favoured area for migrants on my patch. I spent nearly two hours wandering my usual circuit to be delighted by a flock of c40 Redpolls, six scattered Goldcrests and 10+ Meadow Pipits flew south. Working the main migrant hedgerow, I approached an area known to me as "Redstart corner" because all my previous local records of this species have come from this area. There were at least three Chiffchaffs and two late Willow Warblers along the hedge and I thought it was too late for a Redstart. A few moments later I heard the contact call of a Redstart, which was quickly followed by a flash of red as the bird flicked along the edge of the hedge. It was a dull female but was easily my latest local record. I continued around the farm and paused to watch a mixed flock of Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits. As I watched the flock I noticed another bird following it. The bird was elusive and I had to wait several minutes before getting good views of my latest local Spotted Flycatcher.

Of the 49 species recorded during September 26th, the 16 migrant species totalled 333+ birds including 223+ Meadow Pipits (67% of all migrants), 40 Redpolls, 20 Swallows, 11+ Goldcrests and 11 Jays. The sheer number and variety of species involved was truly remarkable for the local area. By next day, September 27th, only a few Meadow Pipits, Swallows and House Martins were seen in the same area. It will probably be some time before I have a similar fall on my local patch; however visiting Yorkshire during a fall frequently fails to disappoint and is far more spectacular.

Phil Oddy, 4 Swan Close, Poynton, Stockport, Cheshire, SK12 1HX

A BIRDWATCHING GUIDE TO THE DEE ESTUARY

The Internet is increasingly becoming a feature of everyday life and seems to be mentioned almost daily on the national television and radio news. It even made news in the January 2000 issue of *Bird News*, which had an article all about Dave Walters' excellent new CAWOS web site. You may be interested to know that CAWOS actually had an Internet presence for more than a year before that, as part of the *Birdwatching Guide to the Dee Estuary* web site. This web site has made a point of featuring all the local bird-related societies and clubs around the estuary - so far a total of 16. The CAWOS page is still there, but now with a link to the new web site.

As well as featuring all these societies, the *Birdwatching Guide to the Dee Estuary* also includes site guides, a monthly newsletter and a latest sightings page, updated daily. The number of visitors to the web site continues to increase - a year ago it was just above 10 a day, now it's 40! This translates as nearly 15,000 in a year. Of course many of these will be repeat visits from local birders.

The Internet is a world-wide phenomenon, and this is reflected in the number of different countries people access the site from - so far a total of 46, including such far-flung places as Brunei, the Cayman Islands, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Kenya, Slovenia, and, rather worryingly, the US Military! I also get e-mails from all round the world. In the past couple of months alone I've had someone from Oregon, USA asking about Hilbre Island as he wanted to visit it whilst on vacation, and an Australian family thanked me for the help the web site gave them whilst spending a holiday on the Wirral. One of the most interesting e-mails was from an English teacher in Sweden who wanted to bring a group of Swedish school children over for a field trip to look at the birds. At least that's what I thought he said; there I was looking forward to meeting some glamorous 16-year-old Swedish schoolgirls when a load of middle-aged teachers turned up! Anyway, Jeff Clarke and I had an excellent day out with them.

If you want to look at the *Birdwatching Guide to the Dee Estuary* web site, the Internet address is www.deeestuary.freeserve.co.uk. Don't forget to e-mail (richard@deeestuary.freeserve.co.uk) or phone (0151 625 2320) with your latest Dee Estuary sightings to me for inclusion on the web site.

Richard Smith, March Wall, Kings Drive North, Wirral, CH48 1LL

Don't forget to check out the CAWOS web site at www.cawos.org as well. Ed.

EXCERPTS FROM THE KNUTSFORD ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY WEB SITE CHESHIRE MARLPITS

Marlpits are one of the features of the Cheshire countryside. They were dug out, usually in the corner of a field, to supply boulder clay or calcareous marl that was spread onto the field as a fertiliser. Marling, as it was known, ceased in the last century as supplies of lime became available, but the pits remained and became important nesting sites for birds, especially Reed Buntings and Moorhens. Every pit used to hold a pair of Moorhens or 'woggies' as they were known locally. Larger pits attracted Sedge Warblers and Snipe although both have declined in numbers over the years, especially the Snipe, which we seem to have lost locally as a breeding species. Some pits have dried out naturally, but unfortunately many were filled in by landowners anxious to gain a few more square yards of productive land.

But of late quite a few have been reopened and in some cases new ones dug as it was realised that they could be stocked with fish and rented out to angling clubs. We stood alongside a good example in Mobberley recently. Carp could be heard making their strange sucking sound as they took food from the underside of the lily pads. A Moorhen's nest containing about 10 eggs could be seen from the water's edge, whilst at least two pairs of Reed Buntings had set up shop. Nearby good numbers of Skylark and Yellowhammer were in evidence, as well as an encouraging number of Lapwings incubating eggs laid amongst emerging spring-sown barley - the winter barley seems less attractive, probably due to its greater height.

In the 1970s the phragmites reed-bed on Knutsford Moor attracted large numbers of roosting hirundines; 2-3000 birds at dusk was not uncommon. Since then, though numbers have declined considerably, it's not difficult to discover where they've gone to: take a trip to the surrounding countryside and as the light falls at the end of the day they will be found roosting in the fields of maize now grown extensively in Cheshire and used for cattle feed. Another relatively new crop to the county is oilseed rape. This made its appearance around 12 years ago and it seems to be becoming a useful nesting habitat for some species that are losing their traditional sites. The Tatton log contains details of a singing Sedge Warbler in the large field of rape alongside the Outdoor Centre and whilst I was looking for this bird I counted no less than seven singing Reed Buntings in the same field! This will make an ideal replacement for the pits that we're losing so rapidly and it really is bird-friendly. Pete Hall tells me the crop is sprayed only once with herbicide at the start of spring and is then left until cropping in August so the buntings will be able to rear two broods comfortably. It would be interesting to know how many birds one of these fields will support and what they are feeding on.

RUDDY DUCK CONTROVERSY

Tatton Park was left to the National Trust by Maurice, the last of the Egerton family on his death some forty years ago and it is administered on its behalf by Cheshire County Council. The National Trust has left the decision up to the Park Rangers as to whether or not to allow the MAAF access to cull any Ruddy Ducks that may or may not be present in Tatton. Thankfully the staff has come down on the side of the Ruddy and it will be safe in the Park, although the same is not true throughout the UK so its future remains uncertain. For those that are not aware of this cull it's being carried out across the UK in an attempt to wipe out this import from America which, having escaped from various wildfowl collections, has established itself all over Great Britain in recent times. It's a delightful little creature but has been getting a bad press in certain quarters because it has spread as far south as Spain where it is hybridising with their White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* and threatening its existence as a separate species. I believe the Scottish Wildcat is under threat because, in a similar way, it is hybridising with the introduced domestic cat, so if it's OK to protect the purity of the White-headed Duck by a cull - what about the purity of our Wildcat? - pass me the shotgun!

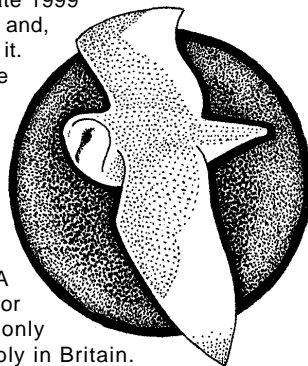
Tony Usher, 113 Town Lane, Mobberley, Cheshire, WA18 7EU. Tel: 01565 873508
www.usher.u-net.com/home.htm

As a fervent dog-lover, I'm also a fervent cat-hater on the grounds that they are temperamental, untrustworthy and sharp at five ends (as opposed to dogs, which are only sharp at one!). They also kill birds - usually the small, defenceless and declining garden and farmland varieties. I understand that in Australia, conservation group members proudly pose for photographs next to mounds of shot moggies that can no longer endanger that country's fragile ecosystem. Perhaps it's time for birders in this country to adopt a similar attitude and campaign for the mandatory neutering of all non-pedigree cats in order to reduce their numbers to sensible levels? After all, there are far more cats in the UK than there are homes for them. Ed.

TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED - BARN OWL AT CHESTER ZOO

A wild Barn Owl appeared within the grounds of Chester Zoo in late 1999 and was seen regularly by a number of staff. The owl was content and, as it seemed possible that it would stay, an owl box was erected for it.

The owl took a keen interest in the box and was seen to investigate it a number of times over the New Year period. The outlook was hopeful, with the prospect that the bird would set up a territory and ultimately attract a mate, and thus create a new breeding site in Cheshire for this increasingly scarce species. The story, however, had a sad and somewhat unexpected conclusion. In January, the owl was presumably attracted down to dead chicks inside one of the animal pens, when the occupants, Maned Wolves from central South America, struck and killed the off-guard owl. A single wing was all that was found as evidence of the bizarre end for this particular Cheshire Barn Owl. I would guess that it is the only one ever predated by Maned Wolves in this county and probably in Britain.



Paul Brewster, 23 Verdin Close, Moulton, Northwich, CW9 8RL

Book Review

A CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF THE NORTHWEST REGION

Produced by Steve Williams from Hilbre Bird Observatory and Ted Abraham of Birdline North West fame, this slimline publication is intended to supersede the *Northwest Region Birders' Checklist* published in 1991. The A5 booklet is essentially a 14 page systematic list of species with seven columns for ticking life, year, county and local patch lists for example. It claims to include all 466 species recorded in the northwest up to February 2000, the region essentially being defined as the 'counties' of Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire, Clwyd and Gwynedd together with the Isle of Man. Space has been left at the end of the list for the addition of new species. Seven colour photographs of rarities by Steve Young adorn the front and back covers, including a nice shot of the 1997-98 Vicar's Cross Dark-eyed Junco.

As a self-confessed anorak (sorry, I mean list keeper!), I was particularly interested in this booklet as a timely record of the birds that have occurred throughout our region up to the end of the last century. I was especially pleased to note the inclusion of exotic species, such as Falcated Duck, Purple Gallinule and Siberian Meadow Bunting, which are generally considered to be escapees from captivity but nonetheless contribute to the region's diverse avifauna and are often ignored and certainly under-recorded. However, I was interested to note that Bald Eagle appeared to be considered as a genuine vagrant in contradiction of the BOURC which maintains it in category D in its most recent British List. Also, some birders may raise an eyebrow at the presence of birds, e.g. Ovenbird, which have only been recorded in the region as tide-line corpses.

The checklist uses an unusual mix of traditional and new English names, hence the use of Dunnock (as opposed to Hedge Accentor) on the one hand and Black-billed Magpie on the other. After all, with global warming Azure-winged Magpie might just turn up in the northwest some time in the distant future! Also, the lack of Latin species' names makes it unclear where an identifiable race is being referred to as such and not as a separate species, for instance in the case of Dark-bellied and Pale-bellied Brent Geese.

All in all this is a useful reference for today's field birders, especially when needing to know if they are being confronted with a new species or race for the northwest. Also, I'm sure that many birders, myself included, will use it as a record of their own birdwatching experience that can easily be carried into the field wherever they happen to be.

Copies of *A Checklist of the Birds of the Northwest Region* can be obtained from Steve Williams for £1.50 postage free at the following address: 2 Westbourne Road, Wirral, CH48 4DG. Cheques should be made payable to S R Williams.

Simon Edwards, 24 Badby Wood, Liverpool, L33 8YQ

Ringers' Notebook

Welcome to the newly resurrected Ringers' Notebook. Many of you may remember with fondness David Norman's articles: now after an absence of several months, Chris Benson, a member of both the South Manchester and Merseyside Ringing Groups, has agreed to take up the gauntlet afresh. We hope you find it to be interesting. Ed.

'Ringers' Notebook' will aim to keep you informed of what of interest is going on where and why by the region's various ringing groups and ringers. At any one time there are several different studies going on of either individual species or family groups within the region. One of the most important of these is the study of gulls, a family of birds which spend a lot of their lives close to man. A trip to any rubbish tip at any time usually produces many hundreds, if not thousands, of these far-travelling birds and is the best place to catch them in large numbers. Why is this important? Because they spend so much time on rubbish tips trying to feed on anything that looks remotely edible. It then follows that their potential to spread disease to both man and beast is fairly large, and hence we try to follow their movements around this and other countries.

Many of the wintering Black-headed Gulls in our region originate from the Baltic region, with several recent recoveries showing this. A bird caught at Risley landfill tip in February 1997 was shot at an airfield on the island of Sjaelland in Denmark in July last year. Another bird from Risley, ringed a year later in February 1998, also moved to Sjaelland, this time having its ring read in the field by a Danish ringer at the end of March 1999. Finally, a bird found dead in the Karelja district of Russia, near to the border with south-east Finland, in July 1999 had originally been trapped and ringed at Risley in November 1996. Most Lesser Black-backed Gulls from Britain move south during the winter, and so it was with GF51230, found in the southern Portuguese province of Estremadura in September 1997 having been ringed as a three-year-old in June 1996, again at Risley. Perhaps 'found' is misleading, as the recovery sheet states "finding condition unknown - ring only found"!

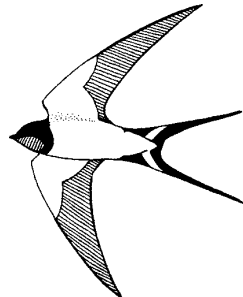
With migration time once again upon us and thoughts of summer avian visitors on our minds, a recent recovery of a familiar bird reminded us of their 'other' home. A Swallow, ringed in the roost at Frodsham Marsh on 18th August 1997, was retrapped in the Bloemfontein Free State in South Africa on 11th March 1999, nearly 10,000 kilometres south. To fly such a distance is remarkable enough, but to also have to cross and endure seas, deserts and mountains - not to forget various hunting "sportsmen" - makes this feat even more incredible. It's worth thinking about when you see your first Swallow this year. Sadly, a Willow Warbler ringed at Woolston in August 1998 did not make it as far south though, meeting its end, having been trapped by the legs in a net to 'protect' crops, just three kilometres away at Lymm in July 1999.

And finally, I've saved the best until last. Most wintering British and West European Turnstones come from their breeding areas in Greenland and the far north of Canada. It is this species which gave the Merseyside Ringing Group its first ever transatlantic recovery with a bird recovered on, or close to, its breeding ground on Baffin Island. Originally ringed as an adult in November 1990 at New Brighton, it moved 3770 kilometres to the north-west before its discovery in June 1999. This was just the tenth ever BTO-ringed bird of this species to be recorded from Canada, out of a total of nearly 30,000.

Chris Benson, 39 Redesmere Park, Urmston, Manchester, M41 9ER

A Swallow flew back to the shed
Where he had been born, hatched and bred.
He said "It's OK,
I just can't go astray
With this compass and map in my head".

Hazel J Raw



Society Spotlight

If you would like to see your group or society under the spotlight, send in all relevant information, including how you started, specific aims and any other interesting snippets! Ed.

MOORE AND GATEWARTH BIOLOGICAL RECORDING GROUP

Just over a year ago several birders who regularly watch the Moore and Gatewath areas, located around the River Mersey between Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn, joined forces to form a biological recording group. There were various reasons for this. Firstly as a bunch of disparate individuals, all ploughing our own furrow, we felt that we would benefit from the shared knowledge and socialisation combining efforts would bring. Also we wanted to place greater emphasis on making use of our wildlife recording. As a result we have started on the process of collating our information. In addition we have carried out a number of co-ordinated counts as well as a number of team habitat management days. We have liaised closely with the various Rangers who manage some of the sites within the recording area; indeed it was Estelle Linney (the Warden for Moore Nature Reserve) who acted as a catalyst for the formation of the group, and as a result we have organised several events throughout the year to bring the area to the attention of a wider audience (see *Birdwatchers' Diary 2000*). Most of the group members are also members of CAWOS and as a result the Society has benefited from a raised profile and an improvement in the collection of records from this top class birding area.

The recording group is not just about birds; indeed the group has put great efforts into recording other aspects of the area's natural history. This has already paid dividends with the discovery of a colony of Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies at Moore NR as well as six species of bat at the same locality. To find out more about the wildlife of the area you can obtain a copy of the annual report through Tony Parker on 01925 658 624. If you are a regular visitor to the area and would like to become involved with the recording group please contact Jeff Clarke on 0151 423 4275 or Estelle Linney at Moore Nature Reserve on 01925 444689. Over the spring period the group will be hosting a number of bird-related events including a Bird Song Workshop on Saturday 13th May. A few days later the group will be carrying out a co-ordinated warbler survey to coincide with the one carried out at Woolston. Hopefully this will be established as an annual survey so that long-term comparative data can be assessed both for the recording area and Woolston.

Perhaps the most enjoyable and pleasing aspect resulting from the group's formation has been the pooling of information so that all the members of the group get the most out of their birding. To add a little spice to our efforts we have an annual challenge with the prize going to the person recording the most bird species. 1999's challenge was won by Steve Minton, with 135 species to his credit, who vied all year with Mike Mullholland for the title. No doubt Mike will be out for revenge this year after finishing on an agonisingly close 134.

Even if you can't or don't want to join the recording group why not come along to some of the organised events this year. If nothing else you will be able to appreciate just how varied the area is and how rich it is in wildlife, particularly birds. Perhaps it will inspire you to form your own recording group on your own local patch.

Jeff Clarke, 90 Simonside, Hough Green, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 4YN

HELP WANTED

We need volunteers to help 'man' the CAWOS stand at CWT's exhibition "Cheshire's Wildlife on Show" between 10-4pm on Sunday 9th July at Marbury Country Park. Please contact David Cogger on 01606 832517

Membership News

Welcome to the following new members: P Heaton, Mike Dye, CD Sharp, A Straw, Dr RJ Harris, Alan Edwards, Peter Mathews and G Hodgson.

With the introduction of the new subscription rates, the number of members paying by Standing Order has almost doubled and is now about 20% of the membership. Several members asked why they had to pay by this method and not by Direct Debit, which automatically increases the payment and would be much more convenient for them - and us. When we increased the subscription for 1997 we did ask the bank about Direct Debit but were told that we were not a large enough society to use this facility. Sorry!

I received a request for help from Goostrey Women's Institute to make nestboxes as part of their Millennium celebrations. Some of these were to go up in private gardens and others would be put up in woodland in the village. My wife and I went along on 12th February to give some help, and subsequently I talked to the W.I. about the siting of nestboxes. As a result 59 boxes were made and erected and CAWOS received a very generous donation of £44 from the Goostrey Women's Institute.

Council held two meetings on 20th January & 3rd February respectively. Among the issues raised were:

- congratulations to the West Midlands Bird Club on their 70th anniversary.
- concern expressed about the lack of information about control trials on the North American Ruddy Duck and attempts were being made to find out more.
- a grant of £300 was approved towards the publication of a book on *The Birds of Sandbach Flashes*.
- a grant of £150 was approved towards the Buzzard Tagging project.

As part of 'The Way Forward':

- the Editorial and Records Committee would meet to look at the whole process of record-keeping.
- a survey of some of the Society's members was in progress.
- a Forum for all organisations involved in keeping records of birds in Cheshire and Wirral would be held on 22nd June. Details would be sent out about six weeks beforehand.
- the Avifauna project would be put on hold for the time being.

David Cogger, 113 Nantwich Road, Middlewich, Cheshire, CW10 9HD. Tel: 01606 832517
E-mail memsec@cawos.org

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 3rd MARCH 2000

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

As many of you will be aware from the reports in recent issues of *Bird News*, after 10 years in existence, Council decided to take a fundamental look at the way in which the Society operates. In a project called 'The Way Forward', we invited selected members from both within and outside the Society to tackle particular areas where it was felt that changes might be made. With sub-groups set up to cover conservation, publications, recording, liaison and activities, a large number of ideas were generated, and from these we selected those which were considered to be of greatest importance. The results of these efforts are already there to see: we now have a CAWOS web site, which opens up a number of possibilities for better communication with members and non-members; a Forum has been initiated to improve the liaison between organisations working for birds within the county; and a review has taken place of the methods for recording and organising the work associated with the production of the annual *Bird Report*. There have been other changes, and there will be many more in the year ahead.

Notwithstanding the work involved in 'The Way Forward', the usual activities have continued to take place. Our programme of lectures included speakers telling us of their experiences with "Harriers" and with "Camels & Crab Plovers", ranging from Atlantic islands to the Middle East. The increasing number of workshops covered gulls, skuas and terns, and waders, as well as songs and calls and Migration Watches. These were supplemented by the regular High Tide Birdwatches. There are already plans for more workshops this year, and the attendance at these events shows their popularity. All these events provided good publicity for the Society, but we were fortunate to add to this by re-staging the exhibition, created last year for Chester's Grosvenor Museum, at

Wirral Country Park. Many more members of the public were able to get a better understanding of the importance of Cheshire's and Wirral's habitats for birds and to appreciate the wealth of species that can be seen within the county.

Our involvement in conservation issues remained high. There was disappointment at the progress and conduct of the East Cheshire Grey Partridge Species Action Plan, but many of our members were involved in surveys such as the House Martin Survey, Winter Farmland Bird Survey, the Breeding Bird Survey and the Cheshire Buzzard Survey. Input from the Society was also provided in a number of cases where habitat was threatened by development or other activities.

Our publications continued to please their readers, with the four copies per year of *Bird News* covering a wide variety of topics and the production of the 1998 *Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report*, albeit a little later than we would have wished. A great deal of hard work goes on to ensure the high standards we attain.

Council has also this year approved significant grants to other organisations. A contribution was made to the BTO's Nightingale Appeal. A donation was also given to the Dee Estuary Voluntary Wardens, who do such valuable work in patrolling the beach at West Kirby to minimise the disturbance to roosting waders during high tides. The Society also took over the administration of the A W Boyd Memorial Observatory at Rostherne Mere, and we hope that this will also offer our members the opportunity to more easily obtain permits to view this reserve.

Thanks are due to the many people who give their time to the Society to make all these things happen. Their efforts are greatly appreciated, but with greater involvement from the many who are not currently involved we could do so much more!

Brian Dyke, CAWOS Chairman

SECRETARY'S REPORT

I would like to start by thanking all those members who have helped the Society in any way during the year. This help can be given in a variety of ways from washing-up after coffee breaks at indoor meetings to compiling sections of the *Bird Report*. Everything is appreciated. Again I can report a small increase in membership this year, from 347 to 353. It is pleasing to note that the majority of members who have joined in recent years renew their membership, which indicates satisfaction with the Society's work.

However welcome the increase in numbers is, and it is welcome, it is not on this that I wish to focus. I am very concerned about the small number of members who are actively involved in the running of CAWOS. Organisations such as ours expect that a large number of members, almost certainly the majority, will play little or no part in the running of the society for a variety of reasons, but it is estimated that a society cannot fulfil its functions adequately unless about 10% of members play an active part.

We are running well below this. In addition several of those currently involved in CAWOS have been doing so for several years, in some cases since the Society's formation, and would like a change. I am disturbed that there has been so far no response to appeals and advertisements in *Bird News*, and up to the commencement of this meeting I have received no nominations in response to a flier in which we appealed for members to come forward for election as Ordinary members of Council. The Chairman has spoken of 'The Way Forward' and some of the initiatives which we hope to put in place but at present there are simply not enough people to do the tasks required. If the Society is to develop, more members must be involved. If they are not, the new proposals and, more seriously, the very existence of CAWOS are threatened.

David Cogger, CAWOS Secretary

Members' Noticeboard

Do you have any helpful tips; requests for information; small items for sale (ornithological of course!) etc etc? Well, this is the place for you! Write in with your thoughts or requests.

On-line members might be interested to know that Focalpoint are now providing a free once-daily e-mail bird alert service. This includes both rare and less common species and is nationwide in its scope, arranging records by county. For further details check out www.fpoint.co.uk.

ANNUAL CAWOS PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION

There were eight entrants this year (one up on last year due to Sheila Blamire being back behind a camera again) and 79 slides and prints were entered in total. This was more than double last year's total, creating a fiercely fought competition, particularly in the Foreign Category, which had 51 entries (43 slides and eight prints). For the second year running we were pleased that Colin Smith FRPS of Chorley agreed to judge both the Foreign and British sections. His comments on the winning entries are listed below.

So, who were the winners?

CATEGORY 1 - FOREIGN

1st SHY ALBATROSS AND WESTLAND PETRELS, NEW ZEALAND BY SHEILA BLAMIRE

Action is the key here and the image is interestingly different, with a fantastic atmosphere caused by the lighting in the water and the mist in the background. There is plenty of detail in the light parts and even the out-of-focus flying bird adds to the composition.



2nd Black-backed Gull, New Zealand by Sheila Blamire

The pastel shades make the gull stand out. This was not an easy photo to take and again it has superb atmosphere, particularly the soft focus hills in the background.

3rd Clark's Nutcracker, Lake Louise, Canada by Nigel Stones

Super detail, with nice soft lighting in a completely natural setting. Being supercritical, the catch-light is missing.

Commended White Stork and Black-winged Stilt, Lesbos by Sheila Blamire

This shows excellent technique and good positioning. You can't expect pictures like this to be sharp and choice of winners becomes very personal when the quality is so high. A very near miss.

Commended Red-billed Gull, New Zealand by Sheila Blamire

A good image size and position with lovely detail. The exposure is spot-on and the background not distracting.

Commended Barred Owllet, Florida by Jeff Clarke

A lovely overall composition with strong lines in the branches - all in the right place. The leaves are good.

Commended Osprey, Florida by Jeff Clarke

A classic shot with a lovely graphic effect. Very good exposure and detail. The only slight blemish in this pleasing image is the turned-away head, with the eye not showing.

Commended Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse by Brian Dyke

This bird is sharp and beautifully shown and the light is excellent. The composition is not quite right - as with so many of the entries - just a matter of luck.

Commended Marabou Stork by Brian Dyke

Basically an excellent image, with both the bird and background perfectly shown. The bird is however just too far to the right in the frame.

Commended Asian Openbill Stork by Vernon Lundy

This perfectly-positioned bird has very good lighting and detail. Once it gets to choosing winners the criticisms will seem carping and nit-picking. Which they are! The top left-hand bit of this picture distracts a little, but it is still a cracking picture.

Commended Clark's Nutcrackers, Canada by Nigel Stones

These two entries are the last of the commended series. They are all excellent and the final choice was entirely personal.

CATEGORY 2 – GREAT BRITAIN

There were only five entries in this category - this highlights the lack of photography within our own shoreline - do most of our photographers forget to take their cameras with them on more local excursions?

1st DUNLIN, CROSBY BY JEFF CLARKE

Excellent lighting and definition. Foaming water very nicely sets off the bird. A really good atmosphere.

2nd Arctic Skua by Jeff Clarke

Sharp, well-positioned and good detail. Would have been better with the top masked.



CATEGORY 3 – HUMOROUS

The 23 humorous slides were judged by a vote system at the Annual General Meeting.



1st “WE’LL HAVE TO GO UP TO A SIZE 44D NEXT YEAR, TO GET US ALL IN!” BY NIGEL STONES

House Martins in two adjacent cup-shaped nests musing on next year's requirements!

2nd “Eeh, that was a good curry last night.” by Nigel Stones

An embarrassed-looking Rock Nuthatch standing on a yellow lichen-covered rock.

3rd “That’s it, about there’s where I dropped my lens.” by Richard Gabb

Common Loon in California with his head in the water as if searching for something.

Thank you to all the entrants and congratulations to the winners. Confirmation of next year's competition, including category details and the closing date for entries, will appear in a future issue of *Bird News*. If you have any suggestions or comments, I would be extremely grateful to receive them – I look forward to hearing from you.

John Headon, 6 Holland Road, Bramhall, Stockport, SK7 2PQ. Tel: 0161 439 8557

GULL IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP REVIEW

Regular and astute readers of *Bird News* will no doubt have realised that the previous Editor, Jeff Clarke, is something of a gull fanatic and that I, to put it mildly, am not. From the earliest days of my birding life I considered gulls to be difficult birds to identify: sure, I could do the adults of the common species, though I struggled with the scarcities like Mediterranean and Yellow-legged. Immature birds were a complete mystery and, frankly, I couldn't see what all the fuss was about when a Glaucous or a *smithsonianus* Herring Gull decided to make an appearance at some god-forsaken tip. So it was with some scepticism that I skidded to a halt at 8:30am on 11th March at Moore Nature Reserve with a morning of standing in the middle of a landfill site ahead of me. Jeff promised me that, by the end of the workshop, I would be filled with a new appreciation for these garrulous scavengers: I wasn't so sure, but was at least open to being convinced.

We started by trudging over the hill from Moore to the Mersey's riverside opposite Richmond Bank, skittling a flock of Meadow Pipits en route whilst Skylarks danced high in the overcast sky above us. The mudbank was full of gulls, mostly Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed with the occasional Common and Herring. Jeff explained that the Herring Gull passage was largely complete, with Lessers now taking over. The diffuse morning light allowed us to scan through the flock for that subtly different shade of mantle grey that might signify an *argentatus* or *intermedius* race bird. No luck, but a partially albino Lesser Black-backed briefly raised our hopes of a white-winged gull.

After an hour or so genning up on the finer ID points (Tertial Crescent - sounds like it should be in some new edge-of-town housing estate!) of relatively stationary birds, we moved on to the swirling mass at Arpley Tip. Now I was impressed, not by the gulls' looks, but by their aerial mastery as thousands swooped down to glean food from freshly dumped rubbish, narrowly escaping the wheels of the behemoth machinery. A first-winter Glaucous Gull on the lagoon provided the sought-after white-winged species, though, unfortunately, the tip remained devoid of Iceland Gulls all morning. A second-year Yellow-legged Gull caused much debate amongst the experts (or was it a hybrid Herring x Lesser Black-backed?). I was particularly curious about the gulls' lack of fear of humans in luminous yellow jackets in contradiction of conventional birding wisdom which says NBG (nothing but green): apparently they associate them with food!

All in all, I can say that the morning did go some way to renewing my interest in gulls. Perhaps more importantly, it made me realise just how little I know about the plumages and behaviour of this complicated family and has inspired me to do a bit of reading on the subject. I'll never lose my first love of wildfowl, but I do feel a little more confident at identifying these birds, though I'm still a long way off from safely calling a non-native race of Herring Gull let alone a first-winter Caspian Gull. More visits to Arpley are needed.

Simon J Edwards, 24 Badby Wood, Kirkby, Liverpool, L33 7YQ

TEMPORARY ACCESS RESTRICTION AT ARPLEY

All gull watchers within the county know how superb the Arpley Tip/Richmond Bank complex is for producing rare and scarce *larids*. Indeed Birdline North West describe it as the white-wing gull capital of the region. It is for this reason that CAWOS holds its annual gull workshops at this location (see page 28 for this year's Gull Identification Workshop Review). Within days of the recent workshop new access restrictions have come into force at the Arpley Tip complex. In effect all access to the site is denied for the next three months. The reason for the restriction is the large-scale earthworks taking place for new pipe work, which will take venting gases from the tip to the new energy generation plant and leachate to the nearby Gatewath Sewage Farm. These earthworks bisect areas of land (including recently reclaimed phases of the tip) normally crossed by birders to gain access to the south side of the Richmond Bank and to the viewing area for the active tip. The work is expected to last for up to three months.

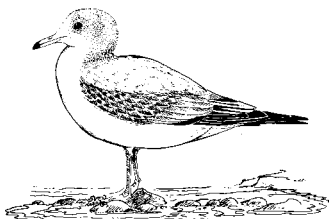
In the meantime all birders are requested to conform to the instruction not to venture onto the site. Once the earthworks are completed the local Biological Recording Group will re-negotiate access so that visiting birders will have the best possible viewing facilities for gulls, including on the active area of the tip. Any birders breaking the access restriction in the interim period run the risk of jeopardising any future access agreements.

The good news is that during this period most of the gulls can still be viewed from the north side of the river; access via Penketh walking east along the Sankey Canal from the Fiddler's Ferry Tavern. Most of the gulls utilising the tip spend some part of the day loafing on the Richmond Bank during low tide periods. The white-winged gulls in particular seem to show a preference for the bank. With this in mind please support the efforts of the local recording group whose close liaising with the tip operators should bring long-term benefits for all birders visiting the Moore and Gatewath Recording Area.

Jeff Clarke, 90 Simonside, Hough Green, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 4YN

A *Larus* flew over the tip
As the rubbish dropped out of the skip.
He thought "That looks swell
But I can't stand the smell,
I'd much rather follow a ship".

Hazel J Raw



CAWOS MEMBERSHIP SURVEY - PROGRESS REPORT

In the last issue of *Bird News* I promised that I would provide a report on the Membership Survey in this issue. This proved to be far too optimistic: by the press deadline, I hadn't even finished entering data, let alone analysing it. All I can do is to make some initial comments and assure members that I will have a full report available for the next issue.

Firstly, the response has been excellent; I still have a handful of laggards to chase up, but the vast majority of the forms have been returned, most of them with commendable speed. Thank you all for the response - and thanks too to those kind enough to add a note of appreciation for what CAWOS does.

On the strength of the impressions I have gained from inputting the data from about half of the returned forms, I can already make some informed guesses about the end results. Unless there is a remarkable late swing, there seems to be a fairly high level of satisfaction with the Society's service to its members. The *Bird Report* and *Bird News* are initially scoring well ahead of both indoor meetings and outdoor events in the satisfaction stakes - not surprisingly, since a majority of members, from the sample I've seen so far, don't attend either of these. This poses an interesting question to Council: how do you keep in touch with the members if most of them don't attend meetings? The answer, presumably, is via 'Membership News' in *Bird News*, except that I'm pretty sure, when all the results are complete, that this will prove to be the least popular bit of the newsletter (it's trailing well to the rear at present). So, maybe nobody is actually reading this anyway!

Bob Anderson, 102 Crewe Road, Nantwich, CW5 6JD



APRIL

- 28 KOS AGM & MEMBERS' SLIDES OF LESBOS
- 28 WGOS AGM followed by 'BIRDWATCHING IN THE GAMBIA' by Mike McKavett
- 28 NCRSPB 'IT'S A FUNNY WAY TO MAKE A LIVING' by Michael Leach
- 28 LOG 'A NEPALESE EXPERIENCE' by Patrick Milligan
- 29 **Dawn Chorus at Moore NR, meet Lapwing Lane junction at 4:45am, 01925 444689**
- 29 CADOS World's End, contact Nick French 01978 856522
- 30 SECOS Woolston Eyes, ring for details

MAY

- 2 MCOS Mere Sands Wood, Rufford, contact Bob or Sheila Greenwood 01928 788475
- 4-8 KOS Suffolk weekend, ring Roy Bircumshaw for details on 01565 634193
- 6-13 HPRSPB Scotland Birdsearch holiday, contact Alan Monks 0161 427 5105
- 8 HPRSPB 'A CORNER OF THE ISLAND OF ANGLESEY' BY Rev. Hugh Linn, at Marple
- 10 SECOS Local Evening Walk, ring for details
- 10 NCRSPB Woolston Eyes, meet at Weir Lane, Woolston at 7pm
- 10 HO 'AUTUMN INTO SPRING' by Mike Wilkes
- 12-21 LOG Slovakia, contact Peter Tonge 01606 891274
- 13 **CAWOS Bird Song Workshop, meet Lapwing Lane junction at 6:30am, 01925 444689**
- 14 CADOS Derbyshire, contact Peter Hale 01244 341074
- 15 SRSPB Redesmere, meet at Redesmere car park off A34 at 7:15pm
- 20-21 CADOS Kent weekend, contact Nick French 01978 856522
- 21 SECOS Lake Vyrnwy, ring for details
- 21 NCRSPB Bolton Abbey, meet Sainsbury's Car Park at 8:30am
- 21 HO Hodbarrow RSPB Reserve by coach, contact Babs Vercambre 0161 980 8362
- 21 SRSPB Coed Garth Gell, near Barmouth, by coach, contact Jayne Skelhorn 0161 282 8758
- 21 WGOS Anglesey by coach, departing at 7:30am – ring for details
- 22 SRSPB Teggs Nose, meet Bottoms Reservoir car park, Langley, Macclesfield at 7:15pm

- 23 MCOS Conwy RSPB, contact Bob or Sheila Greenwood 01928 788475
- 25 CADOS Tetrad evening, contact Dave Goff 01244 345043
- 26 KOS Goyt Valley/Derbyshire Bridge, ring Roy Bircumshaw for details on 01565 634193
- 26 LOG To be announced
- 28 HPRSPB Coombs Valley/Churnet Wood RSPB, meet Marple at 8:00am or Chapel at 8:15am
- tbcc MCOS Kent Weekend, contact Mike Hems 01606 888525

JUNE

- 7 NCRSPB Marbury, meet at Marbury Car Park at 7pm
- 10 KOS Anglesey, ring Roy Bircumshaw for details on 01565 634193
- 10 CADOS Lake District, contact Ron Shewring 0151 339 0696
- 11 MCOS Bempton Cliffs RSPB Reserve, contact Ray Evans 01829 752494
- 11 HPRSPB Old Moor Wetland Centre, meet at Marple at 8:30am or Chapel at 8:45am
- 11 LOG Coombs Valley, contact Peter Hale 01244 341074
- 12 SRSPB Bosley Reservoir, meet at Bosley Reservoir car park off A54 at 7:15pm
- 14 SECOS Local Evening Walk, ring for details
- 14 HO 'THIS BLESSED PLOT' by Andy Harmer
- 15 CADOS Tetrad/Nercwys, contact Dave Goff 01244 345043
- 18 SECOS Walney Island, ring for details
- 20 MCOS Leighton Moss, contact Bob or Sheila Greenwood 01928 788475
- 24 NCRSPB Anglesey, meet Frodsham Station Car Park at 8:30am
- 25 SRSPB Leighton Moss RSPB Reserve by coach, contact Jayne Skelhorn 0161 282 8758

JULY

- 9 KOS Conwy/Point of Air, ring Roy Bircumshaw for details on 01565 634193
- 9 CADOS Anglesey, contact Nick French 01978 856522
- 12 SECOS Local Evening Walk, ring for details
- 12 NCRSPB Pennington Flash, meet at Pennington Flash Car Park at 7pm
- 12 HO MEMBERS' EVENING (Tickets to be obtained in advance)
- 16 'Swallows go to Roost', meet Visitors' Centre, Moore NR at 8:00pm, 01925 444689**
- 16 HPRSPB Clumber Park, meet at Marple at 8:30am or Chapel at 8:45am
- 16 SRSPB Middlewood Way Open Day - guided walks, nestbox building etc

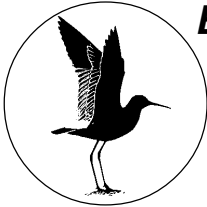
AUGUST

- 13 KOS Seaforth/Frodsham, ring Roy Bircumshaw for details on 01565 634193
- 17 CADOS Zoo trip (date to be confirmed) contact Roger Wilkinson 01244 381343
- 19 CADOS Scillonian Pelagic, contact Don Pawlett 01244 677477
- 21 CADOS Scillonian Pelagic, contact Don Pawlett 01244 677477
- 20 NCRSPB Point of Air, meet Frodsham Station Car Park at 9:00am
- 25 LOG 'RUDYARD'S BACKYARD' by Leddon Unsworth Enterprises
- 30 High Tide Birdwatch, Parkgate - 11:00am (HT 12:48, 9.9m)**
- 31 High Tide Birdwatch, Parkgate - 12noon (HT 13:32, 9.9m)**

Will affiliated societies, who wish to advertise meetings of relevance to CAWOS, please send their programme to:- **Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, WA16 6QG Tel: 01565 830168**

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

- ADNHS Altrincham & Dist. Natural History Society, mtgs Hale Methodist Church Hall 7.30pm, Sec. Vincent Pedley 0161 748 4717
- CADOS Chester & Dist. Ornithological Soc, mtgs Caldy Valley Community Centre 7.30pm, Prog. Sec. Nick French 01928 856522
- CAWOS Cheshire & Wirral Ornithological Society, mtgs Knutsford Civic Centre 7.45pm, contact Sheila Blamire 01565 830168
- CRSPB Chester RSPB Group, mtgs St Mary's Centre, Chester 7:30pm. Prog. Sec. Rob Adams 01829 270654
- HO Hale Ornithologists, mtgs St Peter's Assembly Rooms, 7.45pm, Prog. Sec. Barbara Vercambre 0161 980 8362
- HPRSPB High Peak RSPB Members' Group contact John Durell 0161 427 3018, Ken Hodgson 0161 427 6828
- KOS Knutsford Ornithological Society, mtgs St John's Church Centre 7.45pm, contact Roy Bircumshaw 01565 634193
- LOG Lymm Ornithological Group, mtgs Lymm Village Hall 8.00pm, Prog. Sec. Colin Antrobus 01925 635337
- MCOS Mid-Cheshire Ornithological Society, mtgs Hartford Village Hall 8:00pm, contact Paul Kenyon 01606 77960
- MRSPB Macclesfield RSPB Members' Group, mtgs Senior Citizens' Hall 7.45pm, contact Peter Kirk 01625 829119
- NCRSPB North Cheshire RSPB Members' Group, mtgs Appleton Parish Hall, Appleton, Mem. Sec. Pam Gibson 01925 817874
- NNHS Nantwich Natural History Society, mtgs The Gables at 7:30pm, Sec. Mike Holmes 01270 216890
- SECOS South-east Cheshire Ornithological Society, mtgs St Peter's Church Hall, Elworth, Sandbach 7.30pm, Sec. Colin Lythgoe 01270 582642
- SRSPB Stockport RSPB Members' Group, mtgs Stockport College, Theatre A 7:30pm, contact Peter Hugo 0161 485 4024
- WGOS Wilmslow Guild Ornithological Society, mtgs Wilmslow Guild HQ 7.45pm, Prog. Sec. Stephanie Harrison 0161 428 5462



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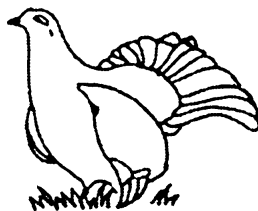


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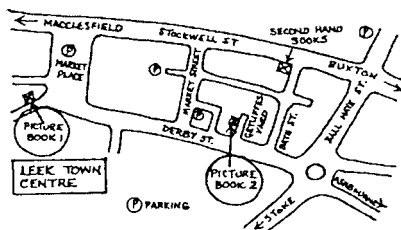


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Imminent dates for your diary:
13th May Bird Song Workshop - see Diary page 30 for further details

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