

BIRD NEWS

Number 59

July 2003



~ Special Announcement ~

A New Atlas of Cheshire and Wirral Birds

Writing Descriptions - Broadening the Horizon

Sooty and Balearic Shearwaters • Barnston Dale

Annual Bird Report Competition Results

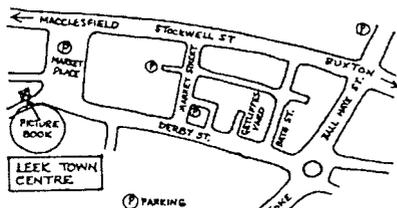
Brent Geese • Greenland Wheatear

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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 address shown above.

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

Front cover: White-throated Sparrow by Tony Broome

Other illustrations by Tony Broome, Phil Jones, Ron Plummer and Ray Scally

Guest Editorial

As I opened the kitchen blinds this morning, there was a little black and white face peering in at me. An adult Great Tit was combing the jasmine that grows alongside and was hanging head down, looking under every leaf. It then dropped down and landed on the perspex of my moth trap, a weekend pursuit of mine occasionally. It was after *my* moths! Too late! A dash outside to interrupt this trespasser was a waste of time. The house walls were bare, the outside of the trap was bare and now all the container plants were being systematically searched.

What did strike me as I stood wondering what moth migrants I'd missed, was that the garden was full of the noise of birds, mostly young being fed by adults, Blue and Great Tits, Blackbirds, Dunnocks, Chaffinches and Greenfinches. The male Bullfinch was cramming its bill full of sunflower kernels, which it seems to be taking back to a nest, and also trying to oust a Goldfinch from the feeder. The sound of all the begging youngsters was suddenly drowned out as the female Blackbird hurled herself at a Jay which was trying to get crushed peanuts off the floor. Her outraged alarm calls scattered her brood of three which retreated under the small yew in the corner and the Collared Doves clattered into the air.

I normally miss all this action as I'm only in the garden early enough to witness it at weekends. But it did support a conversation a few nights earlier at the inaugural meeting of the Cheshire Avifauna/Atlas group. We, as county birders, know a lot about birds, but less about how many we've actually got. The diminishing populations of Song Thrushes, Starlings and Skylarks are well publicised. I have just one pair of House Sparrows nearby this year, the first for at least five years. But are some birds actually doing better? I asked if anyone had noticed the increase in Greenfinches in gardens. They are by far the commonest bird in my garden and I suspect that because I feed all the year round, they have started nesting close by in greater numbers than in the past. So have the Goldfinches, Chaffinches and now the Bullfinches. David Norman agreed that the Greenfinch population does seem to have increased noticeably with many more ringed at Woolston Eyes these days than in the past. Is artificial feeding really responsible?

It would be nice to know and the idea of CAWOS publishing a book on some or all of the bird populations of the county is not a new idea. It has been discussed on numerous occasions at Council meetings over the past few years and although enthusiasm for the scheme was always high, a 'volunteer' with enough time to oversee the project has been unavailable. Now, the resurrection of the plan seems possible with David Norman offering his services to organise and bring it all together. There was much to discuss and Steve White from Lancashire and Merseyside, who has recently published a similar Atlas, was present to give advice. A huge undertaking, of between three and five years, involving many fieldworkers and hours at the computer would be required if CAWOS were to be successful. Further meetings and ideas will ensue no doubt and the support of the county's birders will be sought. [See David Norman's article on page 26]

One bonus from the *Lancashire and Merseyside Atlas* was that, through the fieldwork, the birders who took part thoroughly enjoyed the surveying and some out and out 'twitching' types suddenly became aware that there was a world and a life beyond the pager. It brought a new dimension to the birding activities of some people who had never been introduced to this type of fieldwork, and it didn't mean that dashing off for rarities had to be abandoned at all. Rather, it actually complemented the rarity side of things, kind of filled the gaps..... And I don't think for one moment that given the choice, any twitcher worth their salt, would have chosen to count Greenfinches instead of going for the Black Lark at South Stack, or indeed, our very own White-throated Sparrow at Stapleton. What would the world be coming to?

Tony Broome

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 7th September - *please be prompt*

We cannot guarantee that material received after this date will be published in that issue. If you are aware that your material may be delayed, please let Sheila Blamire know as soon as possible.

County Rarities

SOOTY AND BALEARIC SHEARWATERS

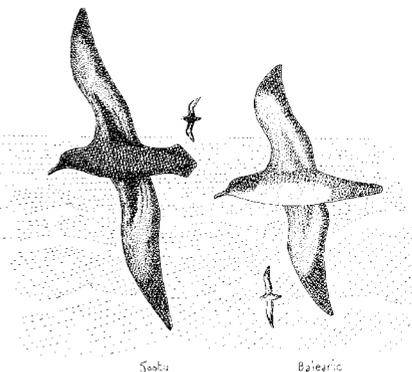
In terms of county rarity value, these two species would seem to be worlds apart. However, the fact that the BOU has only recently granted full species status to Balearic Shearwater has meant that the field identification has been reviewed and birders know what to look for. The early autumn movement north of Balearic Shearwaters brings them into the Irish Sea and with the frequent Atlantic lows that pile into the British Isles giving westerly winds, there is a good chance of seeing them from land. North-westerlies are best however, and the first big September blows that bring Leach's Petrels, also bring Sooty Shearwaters (*Puffinus griseus*). Anywhere from New Brighton to Hoylake and Hilbre could produce numbers of shearwaters.

The best time for Balearic Shearwaters would appear to be the month of August and the first week of September. They may also occur in July, but with minimal seawatching at this time of year, birds probably slip through unnoticed amongst the larger number of Manx Shearwaters. Certainly, the British south and south-west coasts have birds passing throughout July. The first county record in 1974, on Sep 7th, was published in the *Bird Report* as "showing the characteristics of the race *mauretanicus*". Likewise the next two on Sep 1st 1985 and on Aug 24th 1989 were only noted as a race of Manx Shearwater. When 'Balearic Shearwater' was split from Manx Shearwater, there were two forms, lumped under Mediterranean Shearwater. These were the western Balearic Shearwater, (*Puffinus yelkouan mauretanicus*) and the eastern Levantine Shearwater, (*Puffinus yelkouan yelkouan*). The records off Wirral on Jul 31st 1993, on Sep 8th 1997 and on Aug 22nd 1998, were all published as Mediterranean Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*). Then in January 2001, the BOU announced in *Ibis*, that Mediterranean Shearwater was to become two distinct species. Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) and Balearic Shearwater (*Puffinus mauretanicus*). It is the latter that we get and the next accepted one will be published as Balearic Shearwater.

Sooties on the other hand, are recorded throughout August and September and there are even odd records in October and November. Even so, they are not annual. Since the first 'recent' one on the Mersey estuary on Sep 9th 1970, there have been around 25 records, involving a minimum of 40 birds in 17 years. Most records are of single birds, but there were up to five off Hilbre in Nov 1971 and off Leasowe on Sep 19th 1984. It is difficult to be accurate in this respect. For example, in 1971, the five birds off Hilbre were recorded each day between Nov 3rd and 8th. I've assumed that they could have been the same birds loitering, but there could have been as many as 9 birds involved. The best date for seeing them? The week beginning September 13th.

So how do you identify them? Balearics are basically like brown Manxies, but with subtle differences. They are slightly larger, heavier bodied and longer winged. They have thicker heads and necks and shorter tails. Their flight is different, being less stiff-winged than Manx, more fluttery and perhaps faster. Plumage-wise, there seems to be much variation with birds that are pale beneath to birds that are much browner overall. The palest ones resemble their eastern Mediterranean counterpart, Yelkouan Shearwater, of which there hasn't been a proven British record. Most however, are brown above and dusky, brownish-white below with a smudgy cap that tends to merge into a paler throat. The underwings appear dirty white to brownish with a thickish trailing edge. In some lights, the underwings could show a silvery flash, reminiscent of Sooties, the larger species that occurs off our shores. Some are remarkably similar, plumage-wise and could be a pitfall for the inexperienced.

Sooties could be mistaken for Balearics, but once known, they are very different birds. Sooty Shearwaters are much larger, darker and have an almost miniature albatross shape to them. They are



bulkier bodied, with long, narrow wings that are angled back from the carpals, suggesting Arctic Skua at long range. In strong winds, their flight is a series of rising arcs across the horizon. The much slower, stiffer flight of Balearic and the much commoner Manx Shearwater are easy to spot with experience. Essentially all dark except for the silvery centre to the underwings, Sooties are one of my favourites and remind me of my seawatching days off the east coast at Spurn, where it isn't unusual to see hundreds streaming past in a stiff northerly.

Sooty records (all singles except where number given in brackets):

1970 Sep 9th, 1971 Nov 3rd-8th (5-9), 1974 Oct 27th, 1976 Sep 9th (1-2), 1978 Sep 16th, 25th and 26th (1-2), 1980 Aug 30th and Sep 13th, 1983 Sep 21st, 1984 Sep 19th (5), 1985 Aug 5th(2), Aug 26th(2), Aug 31st, Sep 1st, Sep 14th and Sep 15th, 1987 Aug 7th, 1988 Aug 21st (3), 1989 Aug 20th and 22nd, 1990 Sep 6th, 1991 Sep 17th (2), 1992 Aug 30th, 1997 Sep 13th and 2000 Sep 7th. (Note the five year gap 1992 - 1997)

Tony Broome



Sites to Watch

BARNSTON DALE, WIRRAL

The Site: The area represented in this guide covers Barnston Dale and an extended area down as far as Landican Lane on the Prenton border. It is bordered by the A551 Thingwall - Heswall road in the west, by Landican Lane in the north, by the Bidston - Wrexham railway line in the east and by Barnston Road in the south. Prenton Brook runs through the length of the area, which is joined by Stanley Brook at a point on Landican Lane. The area is mainly farmland interspersed with mixed, mature woodland such as Barnston Dale and Stanley Woods.

The area has seen little change over the last 30 years. No new housing has been added to the defined area over this time. The only new building of note is Murrayfield Hospital, the grounds of which stretch down as far as Prenton Brook.

Improvements have been made to Prenton Brook inasmuch as it has been regularly cleared of rubbish and debris. This has resulted in an improved stream flow that has improved the quality of the water. A private clay pigeon shoot has been introduced into Stanley Woods that has not helped the bird population too much. Similarly, cows have been allowed to graze and wander through the northern end of the Dale. This has thinned the understorey and greatly affected the habitat. Sheep have been introduced into farmland near to the site and this has probably encouraged Buzzards into the area.

Access: The area can be accessed in several places. The site is criss-crossed with public footpaths and lanes - a combination of which can be used to provide a long and interesting walk that is certainly underused by the walking fraternity. The Cheshire Conservation Trust has been making noticeable improvements to the Landican Lane path as well as improving access to the Dale itself.

One access point is in the road that leads down to Murrayfield Hospital off the A551. Local dog walkers tend to use this entrance. Another entrance can be found via a public footpath next to the Barnston Dale camp off Barnston Road (SJ287835 - *Landranger Sheet* 108). The site can also be accessed via Landican Lane (no car access). This path commences in Landican village and meanders through farmland down to the Dale. It continues to the end of Levers Causeway in Storeton. This route can be reversed so that the walk can begin in Storeton. Other paths cross the area - one starts at Storeton (SJ303846), goes through fields, over the M53, over the railway line, through the Dale and finishes by the Bassett Hound pub in Thingwall. This often constitutes a popular Sunday morning walk in the spring and summer with a stop for welcome refreshments in the pub!

The Birds: There are a good variety of common woodland birds to be seen, especially in spring. Stanley Woods and the Dale woodlands have a good population of Great Spotted Woodpeckers that have bred regularly throughout the last 30 years. Treecreepers can also be found in both woods, as can Blue Tit, Great Tit, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, Robin, Dunnock, Magpie, Wood Pigeon, Starling, Jay, Carrion Crow, Moorhen, Wren

and Tawny Owl. Stanley Woods has had Buzzards over and in it recently and I suspect they may well breed in the near future.

Barnston Dale has a number of species breeding that are not found in Stanley Woods. Goldcrests have bred in tall gorse bushes. Long-Tailed Tit, Bullfinch, Linnet, Kestrel, Coal Tit, Willow Warbler and Stock Dove breed regularly in the Dale but not in Stanley Woods. Pheasants, and more rarely these days, Grey Partridges can be seen in the farmland between the two woodlands or in the woodland edge. Skylarks and Lapwings were regular breeders until relatively recently. It is a similar story with Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting.

Other Wildlife: I have seen foxes regularly in the area over the last 30 years. There are one or two fields that are particularly good for viewing hares. Any summer evening they can be seen at this location and, with caution, quite close. Grey squirrels have invaded the Dale woodland and are prominent near to the houses by Barnston camp. There are dreys everywhere.

Site Overview: Although the site is little changed over the last 35 years, the bird life has changed significantly especially in the farmland areas. Lapwings and Skylarks were common in spring but are very rare now. Numbers of Yellowhammer, Linnet, Reed Bunting, Song Thrush, Moorhen and Grey Partridges have seriously decreased.

On the plus side, some birds seem to be doing rather better. Magpie, Jay, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Wren, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Mistle Thrush, Wood Pigeon, Carrion Crow, Robin and Chaffinch are common. Dunnock, Blackbird, Kestrel, Stock Dove, Pheasant, Treecreeper, Bullfinch, Long-Tailed Tit and Coal Tit numbers have remained relatively stable. Nuthatches have recently started to breed in Barnston Dale woodlands.

The work on Prenton Brook has been welcomed. The clearer water might encourage Kingfishers and Grey Wagtails to take up residence. The surrounding habitat is similar to other Wirral brooks that have or have had Kingfishers on them in the breeding season. Presumably the task of attracting Lapwings, Skylarks and Grey Partridges back to the area depends on revised farming practices. We can only hope that steps are taken to provide habitat and conditions to enable these species to make a comeback in this particular area.

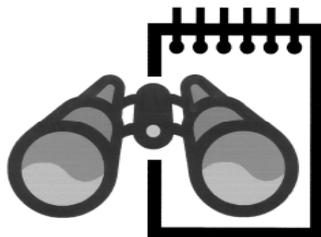
Gordon Hodgson



Records & Recording

WRITING DESCRIPTIONS BROADENING THE HORIZON

My intention was to bore the pants off you with primaries and tertiaries, but what the heck, you can get those out of any modern field guide. No, instead, I thought that I'd recall a few anecdotes to try and convey the overall timescale from when you pick up your first binoculars to when you submit your first BBRC description (and get the bird that you've described, accepted). It is easier without doubt these days. There are up to date books, endless identification articles and the web. The world really is a small place and that includes the world of birds. With enthusiasm and commitment, you can very quickly become competent. As Sibley, the American author, says, "Most birders who find rare birds are looking for rare birds" and..... "an intimate knowledge of the common species is essential".



I've tried to convey the various ways in which you can adequately identify and describe the many species of birds that are to be found in and around your local area and to try and help those of you who are relatively new to birding, to understand that it is always better to walk before you try to run. Describe a Coal Tit in your garden and learn the very distinctive calls of that species, and all of a sudden, you're seeing and hearing them all over the place. As a non-birder, being shown a picture of a Coal Tit in a book would have been like looking at any other bird from anywhere in the world. It's like any other area of interest, it's only when you are a little bit more experienced and knowledgeable that you are able to place whatever confronts you into its relative position in the overall order of things.

It's the same with writing descriptions and with rare birds. The two are inexorably linked if you value the opinion of the British Birds Rarities Committee who sits in judgment of what you 'think' you've seen. If you don't care, then whether you write a description or not is of no importance, but you can lose a valuable reference point. What I mean is that whether a bird is considered rare is a matter of relativity. The recent Black Lark at South Stack in Anglesey was incredibly rare in British Isles terms, and even in European terms, but not that rare where it comes from, in the Russian steppes, east of the Black Sea. It is locally common and if you visited its main breeding areas, you would see lots of them. But, if, like many newcomers to birding, you had found the Black Lark and it was feeding alongside a Hoopoe, I can guarantee that you would pay more attention to the Hoopoe, which would 'look' rarer. They would both probably be new for you and the significance of the Black Lark would be lost on you unless you had an experienced companion to explain why you should be ignoring the common Hoopoe in favour of the lark. It all comes with experience and experience takes time.

I visited Spurn Point Bird Observatory for the first time on a Friday in May 1970. I shivered as I got out of the Morris Marina at dusk, a cool easterly breeze blowing. I can still feel it on my face and smell the North Sea salt in the air. Some of Barry Spence's Doncaster ringers were processing their catch and asked if I wanted to see a Pied Flycatcher. I'd never seen one outside of a field guide and when a stunning male was thrust under my nose, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was beautiful! What a bird! Other species followed over the weekend and, on subsequent visits, I began to see my first rarities.

On another weekend in August, there was a fall of Continental migrants and amongst the hundreds of Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts and Whinchats, I saw seven or eight each of Barred and Icterine Warblers, Wrynecks, Red-backed Shrikes... the list went on. It opened a new world for me and I visited Spurn as often as I could. I ran the three miles to the Point to see my first Golden Oriole, left the breakfast cooking to run up to Kihlsea Church to see a singing Bonelli's Warbler and listened avidly to the discussion over a fly-over Serin that had called heading south as we attempted to flick-catch hirundines at the Narrow Neck. Identify a fly-over Serin? Barry Spence, the warden could, and did. I was impressed!

And there were birds in the hand. To see and hold a bird is so very different from just looking at one at a distance. They take on a whole new look and the ringers could not only identify them, but *age them*. "Oh, that's a juvenile, born in the last three months" would be a typical casual comment. How did they know? It fascinated me and I took up ringing. Over time, I too could age most of the species I handled. Some couldn't be aged because the ringer's bible *Svensson* said so, but I learnt all the feather tracts and how wear affected the look of the bird. Remiges and retrices, emarginations and notches, scapulars and tertials. Eventually, naming them became second nature.

Identifying birds in the field became easier and the smaller and duller they were, the more they interested me. Identifying them became a challenge. I also knew that not only were some of the birds juveniles that we were seeing at Spurn, but that they had been born sometimes hundreds, if not thousands of miles away, and had reached the east coast in only a matter of days or weeks. It amazed and excited me to think that a bundle of feathers I was watching had flown perhaps 3,500 miles, from the other side of the world. The Yellow-browed and Pallas's Warblers had!

There were no pagers in those days of course and whatever was at Spurn when I arrived was what I saw, or, in a lot of cases, I found. I had endless respect for the knowledge and experience possessed by the regular birders of the old school who almost lived at the observatory. Us youngsters were apprentices and were well down the pecking order. We even had to clean up and vacuum the cottage before we left on the Sunday morning. Refuse to do so and the doors to the reserve could be closed to you forever. It frightened us to death.

Barry Spence was very sharp when it came to identifying birds. He'd been an assistant warden on that hallowed haven for rarities, Fair Isle, and had seen many only dreamt of species, such as Pechora Pipit and Lanceolated Warbler. I had drooled over the pictures of them in *Thorburn's Birds* many times. Now hooked on rarities, identification and migration, I made my mind up to visit the island and in September 1975, I flew from Lerwick in an Islander aircraft with some friends from Leeds. As it came to a halt on the dirt runway, there was a small crowd of people, islanders and birders, waiting to catch the plane off.

“Tennessee’s still here”, one person grunted as he threw his luggage into the compartment at the back of the aircraft. There was more than one of us who replied “What’s a Tennesseee!” Never heard of one. What did he say? “American warbler”, somebody interrupted. American? Here? My baptism to real rarities was about to begin.....

The next two weeks were like being in heaven. Rarities all around from all corners of the earth, birds in the hand and endless discussions on identification with some of the best birders of the time. One in particular, Chris Heard, was a natural. Not only did he appear to find and identify more rarities than anyone else, he could say why they were and convey it in a way that I could understand. By a quirk of fate I ended up sharing a run-down croft with him and up to ten other birders. I should have been on the island in August, but the friend I was to originally go with had an accident and I put back my plans. There was no room at the observatory where my friends were, so I had taken a tent, intending to camp. I pitched it next to the croft called ‘The Pund’. On the first night in a gale force wind with horizontal rain, I was woken up in the early hours by a sound of munching and the tent took on an odd shape. Crawling out of the tent into the blackness, my torch revealed a Shetland pony with a mouth full of tent. My camping was over and I moved into the croft. The floor wasn’t too bad, it was dry and only the mouse rummaging through the cornflakes woke me up occasionally.

I saw a lot of rarities. There was a King Eider from Scandinavia, a Citrine Wagtail and Richard’s Pipits from Russia, an Arctic Warbler from the northern coniferous forests, an Upland Sandpiper from America and *not one, but two* Tennessee Warblers from America. These were amongst lots of common migrants and it was dawn till dusk birding. Our temporary residence soon took on the status of a ghetto to the ‘obs’ birders. We were the last to know if anything turned up and we birded by ourselves. A Bobolink turned up on the Outer Skerries. What was a Bobolink and where were the Outer Skerries? The only book describing Nearctic species was a big, thick volume of *The Birds of Canada* in the observatory. They all looked so alike.

One morning I stumbled across the Upland Sandpiper. Now, I knew it was American and I knew the name. I could see the picture in the book. But, could I get the name out!? I shouted to the others, “American wader” and they all came running. Chris Heard immediately said something like “Oh bloody hell, it’s an Upland Sand”. My first real rarity. It was only afterwards that we found out that it had flown over the observatory earlier and that they were all looking for it. Never mind, I’d found it for myself. But, how did I write the description? I was about to learn one of my most valuable lessons. Chris Heard was sitting with me and the others in the croft that evening. It was pitch black outside and the light of our candles glinted on the empty cans of McEwans lager piled up on the window sill. We discussed how to write a proper description. He’d done one for the first Tennessee Warbler which he’d actually identified along with the warden. I couldn’t believe how much he’d written on one bird. Every feather was described, every shade of green compared, every action noted. Three sides of A4 in small writing. How could the British Birds Rarities Committee ever reject such a detailed submission? They didn’t. Could I do the same? With Chris’s help over the next few days I learnt the finer points of writing descriptions and all of a sudden, everything I’d picked up from my visits to Spurn, everything I’d read, all my ringing, suddenly clicked.

So, it’s not easy. It took me years to understand the complexities of writing descriptions and I’m still learning. The secret is to know instinctively when something doesn’t look or feel right and be able to suggest why. You might not always be correct, but then again.....

Tony Broome

MORE STUDY NEEDED!

I’m getting to grips with the tertials,
But reduced outer primaries well!
They’re causing me hours of anguish,
Where are they? It’s quite hard to tell,
And as for the primary base patch,
It’s starting to make me feel ill,
I could sort out the undertail coverts
If only the bird would stand still!

Hazel J Raw

Recent Reports

Some of the records may be unauthenticated and therefore will require review by the Society's Rarities Panel or the BBRC. This report covers the period March to May.

SITE REPORTS

Dee Estuary

A Red-necked Grebe appeared off Red Rocks on Apr 16th. The peak count of Little Egrets was 28 at Burton Marsh on Mar 1st. Two Spoonbills flew over West Kirby (May 30th). 16 White-fronted Geese lingered at Burton in early March. 15 Brent Geese remained off Heswall (Mar 17th). Two pairs of presumed escaped Wood Ducks were at Thurstaston on Mar 30th. An Osprey was at Parkgate Marsh on Apr 11th. Water Rails visited Neston Old Quay on Apr 15th and Thurstaston on Apr 27th. 28 Whimbrel at Heswall shore on May 18th was the peak count. An Arctic Skua flew past Red Rocks (Apr 29th) and eight Little Gulls flew past on Apr 16th. An adult Iceland Gull over West Kirby (Mar 22nd) and 2-3 Turtle Doves at Red Rocks (May 31st) were good local finds. One or two Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers visited Newton Common and Stapledon Wood. A Woodlark was reported at Red Rocks (Mar 23rd-24th). An early Swallow was at West Kirby (Mar 12th). A Red-rumped Swallow was at Heswall (Apr 19th-20th fourth county record). The first House Martins were at Parkgate (Mar 20th) and West Kirby (Mar 15th). 500+ Meadow Pipits were at Thurstaston on Mar 25th. The last Water Pipit was at Neston on Mar 19th. A Redstart moved through Red Rocks (Apr 27th and 29th). Three Whinchats at Burton Marsh (Apr 18th) were early. Wheatears were seen regularly with birds at Burton and West Kirby on Mar 12th and on Mar 14th at Heswall and Red Rocks. Ring Ouzels arrived at Parkgate (Mar 31st and Apr 2nd) and Red Rocks (Apr 29th). The first Grasshopper Warbler was at Red Rocks on Apr 6th while a Wood Warbler was at Stapledon Wood (Apr 27th-28th). Willow Warblers appeared at Thurstaston (Mar 24th) and West Kirby (Mar 31st). Red Rocks hosted a Pied Flycatcher on Apr 22nd. A male Bearded Tit at Neston Reed-bed (May 27th-28th) and a male Red-backed Shrike at West Kirby (May 28th) were excellent records. A ringed Rose-coloured Starling at West Kirby (Mar 19th) may have been an escape. A Hawfinch at West Kirby (Mar 15th) was an exceptional record. A White-throated Sparrow in a Caldly garden (May 22nd-24th) will be a county first, if accepted as wild.



and Red Rocks. Ring Ouzels arrived at Parkgate (Mar 31st and Apr 2nd) and Red Rocks (Apr 29th). The first Grasshopper Warbler was at Red Rocks on Apr 6th while a Wood Warbler was at Stapledon Wood (Apr 27th-28th). Willow Warblers appeared at Thurstaston (Mar 24th) and West Kirby (Mar 31st). Red Rocks hosted a Pied Flycatcher on Apr 22nd. A male Bearded Tit at Neston Reed-bed (May 27th-28th) and a male Red-backed Shrike at West Kirby (May 28th) were excellent records. A ringed Rose-coloured Starling at West Kirby (Mar 19th) may have been an escape. A Hawfinch at West Kirby (Mar 15th) was an exceptional record. A White-throated Sparrow in a Caldly garden (May 22nd-24th) will be a county first, if accepted as wild.

Frodsham and Mersey Estuary

A Black-necked Grebe was on No6 Tank in March and nearby six Whooper Swans remained on the Score in late March. Four Ruddy Shelducks were off the Score on Apr 7th with one again on Apr 18th and two on Hale Marsh on Apr 30th. A Honey Buzzard was reported over the M56 at junction 14 (Apr 26th). Two Common Cranes headed over the M56 near Runcorn on Mar 13th. Two Avocets on the Weaver Bend on Mar 3rd increased to five on Mar 23rd-24th with one still on May 10th. The first Little Ringed Plover arrived at Frodsham (Mar 14th). Little Stints at Frodsham peaked at 10 on Apr 8th while one visited Hale Marsh (Apr 19th and 26th). At Frodsham, a Curlew Sandpiper was seen on May 6th, 14th and 20th. Four Little Gulls were at No6 tank on Apr 17th increasing to 18 next day, followed by 10 on 19th. A 1st winter Caspian Gull visited New Ferry Tip (Apr 3rd) while on Mar 13th, an adult Iceland Gull was there. A Kittiwake dropped onto the Weaver Bend (Mar 21st). A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker visited Rivacre Valley CP (Mar 26th). Early migrants included Yellow Wagtail at Hale on Apr 14th (and Frodsham next day), seven White Wagtails at Hale (Apr 19th), Whinchat at Frodsham on Apr 18th (also seven on Apr 30th and six on May 1st), Wheatear at

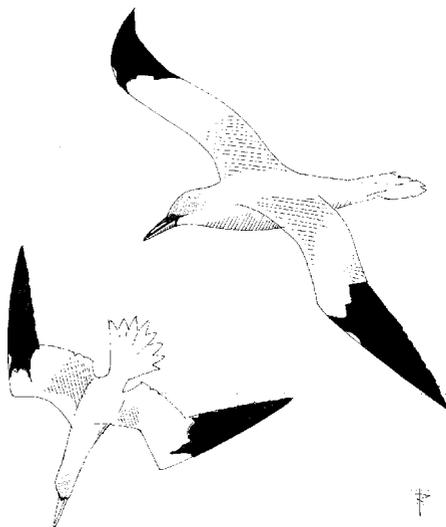
Frodsham on Mar 14th with 12 on Apr 30th and 40 on May 1st, Grasshopper Warbler at Hale Marsh (Apr 19th), Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat both at Frodsham on Apr 17th, Garden Warbler at Runcorn on Apr 21st and Pied Flycatcher at Hale on Apr 19th. A Sykes'-type Wagtail was at Frodsham (Apr 30th May 1st). A Waxwing at Helsby High School (Mar 13th-14th) was followed by 14 at Birkenhead on Apr 6th and 30 there on Apr 14th. Two Ring Ouzels appeared at Hale (Apr 14th) with another at Helsby on Apr 9th. A Hooded Crow was at Marsh Farm (Apr 30th).

Fiddler's Ferry

An adult Little Egret on May 22nd was seen at Astmoor two days later. Up to six Buzzards were seen in March, a new monthly maximum, which was followed by the first breeding record. 19 Ringed Plovers on May 16th was the peak count. Up to 22 pairs of Lapwings were nesting. An adult Mediterranean Gull on Mar 4th was a good find. A Cuckoo passed through on Apr 28th and the first Swift appeared on Apr 27th with up to 300 in May. The first Sand Martins appeared on Mar 23rd with up to 220 by the end of May. At least six Whinchats passed through from Apr 26th to May 7th the best ever spring passage. The first Wheatear was found on Mar 13th and 10 on Apr 27th was the highest count. The first dates for warblers included Grasshopper on Apr 16th, Sedge on Apr 15th (10 sang in May), Reed on Apr 16th, Whitethroat on Apr 17th (10 sang in May) and a Willow Warbler on Mar 30th.

Hilbre

The peak of Red-throated Divers was 70 on Mar 1st and the last one was seen on Apr 30th. Two Black-throated Divers appeared (Mar 1st) with one remaining to Mar 18th and a summer-plumaged bird arrived on May 7th. A Great Northern Diver was seen on Mar 1st, two on Mar 4th and another on Apr 30th. A summer-plumaged Red-necked Grebe was seen (Apr 12th). A Slavonian Grebe on Mar 4th increased to three on Mar 6th and 9th. The first Fulmars flew past on Mar 28th while the first Manx Shearwaters were 13 on May 18th. 650 Gannets flew past on Apr 30th, possibly a new county record. Single Long-tailed Ducks were recorded on Mar 22nd and Apr 13th. A male Montagu's Harrier flying west on May 9th was an excellent record. A Little Ringed Plover (Apr 18th) and a Woodcock (Mar 18th) were both good site records. A Great Skua on May 3rd followed a report of three unidentified skuas on Apr 3rd. A Mediterranean Gull appeared on Apr 24th. Little Gull passage was excellent with numerous double figure counts including 83 on Mar 28th, 120 on Apr 5th, 115 on Apr 11th, 80 on Apr 10th, 12th and 15th. Two Yellow-legged Gulls were found on Mar 29th. The first Sandwich Terns arrived on Mar 27th and the first Common and Arctic Terns both on Apr 10th. The peak count was 500 Common Terns on Apr 26th. Tree Pipits were particularly evident with up to six on six dates from Apr 12th to May 4th. The peak count was 12 on Apr 13th. 1,000+ Meadow Pipits on Apr 16th was the largest count and 300+ were seen on Mar 18th, 26th, 27th and Apr 14th. The first Yellow Wagtail appeared (Apr 13th) and nine Grey Wagtails on Mar 19th was a notable movement. 12 White Wagtails on Mar 19th and 13 on Mar 24th were the only double figure counts of the spring. A female Black Redstart on May 30th was a good county find. One or two Redstarts were seen on Apr 15th-16th and May 3rd-4th. 17 Wheatears on Apr 13th and 15 on Apr 16th represented the only double figure counts. A Ring Ouzel (Mar 22nd) was a good find. The first dates for warblers included Grasshopper on Apr 13th, Sedge on Apr 18th and Willow on Mar 29th. Willow Warblers peaked at 15 on Apr 13th and 15th, 10 on May 2nd and 20 on May 4th. The largest counts of Goldcrests were 15 on Mar 20th and 12 on Mar 26th. A migrant Spotted Flycatcher appeared (May 26th) while a Tree Sparrow on Mar 19th was more unusual. A Brambling on Mar 20th was followed by three two days later. A Yellowhammer on Apr 5th was an excellent island record.



Inner Marsh Farm

11 Little Egrets on Apr 18th was the peak count and the last Whooper Swan was seen on Apr 23rd. 14 White-fronted Geese were seen on Mar 6th with 16 on Mar 9th. A drake Garganey was present (Apr 14th to May 26th) with two on May 17th. A Scaup appeared on Mar 12th, 21st-22nd and Apr 10th. The long staying female Long-tailed Duck and drake Smew remained until May 4th and Mar 22nd respectively. An adult Spotted Crane on May 30th-31st was a good spring find. On May 4th and 9th-10th, two Avocets were seen. A Temminck's Stint passed through (May 5th and 7th). The Long-billed Dowitcher was seen on 11 dates from Mar 10th to Apr 21st. The peak count of Black-tailed Godwits was 1,000 on May 19th with one or two Bar-tailed Godwits around that date. On Apr 25th, a Wood Sandpiper appeared and a Mediterranean Gull was seen (Mar 2nd and 9th). Five Little Gulls on Mar 29th was a good count. A 1st summer Kittiwake was seen on this last date. A Black Tern was present on Apr 17th. The earliest dates for migrants included Swift (Apr 24th), Sand Martin (Mar 8th), House Martin (Mar 12th), Yellow Wagtail (Apr 14th), Spotted Flycatcher (May 17th) and Pied Flycatcher (Apr 22nd). 14 Wheatears were seen on May 5th.

Macclesfield/Poynton area

A White-fronted Goose visited Redesmere on Mar 8th and 10th. Four Mandarins were at Ridgeway Resr on Mar 22nd, 29th and Apr 7th, with the redhead Smew remaining until Mar 22nd. Up to 23 Teal were in the Poynton area (Mar 10th) a record count. Oystercatchers bred at Adlington again with many sightings in the Poynton area. A late Jack Snipe was at Poynton (Apr 20th). Three Buzzards were at Adlington Driving Range on Mar 19th. A Hobby passed over Danebower on Apr 29th and a Cuckoo was at Langley (Apr 24th). Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers appeared at Prince's Wood, Redesmere, Styal CP and Wilmslow. A House Martin over Poynton (Mar 19th) was the earliest ever local record. An early Wheatear was at Lamaload Resr (Mar 13th). Up to three Ring Ouzels appeared in the Cut-thorn Hill/Danebower area in early April. Wood Warblers sang at Alderley Edge, Tegg's Nose and Trentabank Resr. Up to three Pied Flycatchers returned to both Lyme Park and Tegg's Nose by the end of April. A Brambling came to a bird table in Wilmslow on Apr 15th. 20 Crossbills were at Trentabank Resr on Mar 17th and one over Prince's Wood (Mar 28th) was a welcome local first for the observer. The last Brambling sighting was at Poynton Pool on Apr 22nd.

Nantwich/SW Cheshire area

A Little Egret at Hankelow on Apr 24th was an excellent local record. A possible female American Wigeon was at Bar Mere on Apr 10th. Single Garganey appeared at Quoisley (Mar 19th) and Bar Mere (May 3rd). Ospreys were reported over Farndon (Mar 31st) and Nantwich (May 24th). An adult Mediterranean Gull was at Bar Mere (Apr 1st) and two Common Terns passed through on May 3rd. An Arctic Tern at Hurlston Resr (Apr 28th) was a good local find. Two Red-rumped Swallows were at Hurlston Resr on Apr 24th-25th. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were at Chester, Farndon and Stanney Woods. The first dates for migrants included Cuckoo at Baddiley (Apr 22nd), Swift at Bar Mere (Apr 26th), Sand Martin at Batherton Hall (Mar 11th), Yellow Wagtail at Hurlston Resr (Apr 24th), Redstart at Deer Park Mere (Apr 12th), Whinchat at Reaseheath (Apr 25th), Sedge Warbler at Deer Park Mere (Apr 20th), Reed Warbler at Deer Park Mere (Apr 14th), Lesser Whitethroat at Reaseheath (Apr 22nd), Whitethroat at Shropshire Union Canal (Apr 18th), Garden Warbler at Deer Park Mere (Apr 22nd), Spotted Flycatcher at Moss Wood (May 8th) and Pied Flycatcher at Hankelow and Brown Knowl (both Apr 23rd). A Ring Ouzel appeared in Nantwich on May 5th. The last Redwings were at Deer Park Mere (Apr 20th). A possible Yellow-browed Warbler was reported at Deer Park Mere (Mar 16th) and a male Firecrest arrived at Combermere three days later. Moss Wood hosted 29 Crossbills on Apr 12th and 30 were at both Burwardsley on May 14th and Delamere Forest on Mar 5th. A Hawfinch at Moss Wood (Mar 17th) followed two at Chester in early March.

North Wirral Shore

Single Ospreys flew over Hoylake (Apr 3rd) and Wallasey (Mar 3rd). A Quail at Moreton (May 30th) was the only spring record. 16 Purple Sandpipers were in Wallasey on Mar 6th and two on Mar 20th. 12 Whimbrels at Moreton on Apr 24th was the peak count and a Wood Sandpiper visited Hoylake Langfields (Apr 15th and 20th). A Mediterranean Gull visited Rock Ferry on Mar 6th and New Brighton next day. On Apr 16th, a Roseate Tern flew past Leasowe and next day a Hoopoe flew west at Hoylake. A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker visited Spital. The first House Martin was

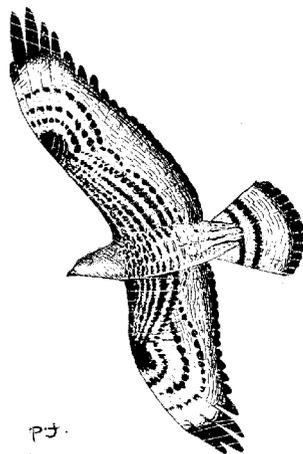
at Hoylake on Mar 15th. A Tree Pipit flew over Leasowe (Apr 15th). The first dates for migrants included Yellow Wagtail at Leasowe (Apr 14th), White Wagtails at Meols (Mar 2nd) and Hoylake (Mar 6th), Redstart at Meols (Apr 14th), Whinchat at North Wirral Coastal Park (Apr 23rd), Wheatears at Hoylake and Leasowe (both Mar 9th), Ring Ouzels at Dove Point (Mar 21st) and Leasowe (Mar 27th), Grasshopper Warblers at North Wirral Coastal Park (Apr 23rd), Lesser Whitethroat at Hoylake (Apr 16th), Whitethroat at Hoylake (Apr 17th) and Spotted Flycatcher at Hoylake (May 16th). Waxwing sightings included 22 at Hoylake (Mar 15th), 27 at Rock Ferry (Mar 19th-30th), six at Upton (Mar 8th-9th) and 20 at Wallasey (Apr 8th). Seven Whinchats were at Moreton (Apr 24th) with 13 Wheatears also seen. Up to three Snow Buntings lingered at Wallasey until Mar 12th.

Northwich area

A Black-necked Grebe visited Budworth Mere on Apr 3rd. On Mar 1st, a Bittern was at Budworth Mere but another at Pickmere on May 1st was very unseasonal. A Little Egret was a good find at Neumann's Flash (May 10th). An Osprey flew over Budworth Mere on Apr 1st and another flew over on Apr 19th. An early Whimbrel was at Neumann's Flash (Mar 9th). Budworth Mere hosted an adult Mediterranean Gull on Mar 21st and 29th with a Little Gull on Apr 15th, 17th and 21st. Three Sandwich Terns flew east at Budworth Mere on Apr 15th and a Common Tern appeared on Apr 21st. The first Swift was at Marbury CP (Apr 24th) and up to four Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were regularly seen. The first dates for migrants (all Neumann's Flash unless stated) were Mar 10th for Sand Martin, Apr 17th for Yellow Wagtail, Reed Warbler and Whitethroat, Apr 24th for Garden Warbler (Marbury CP), Apr 26th for Lesser Whitethroat and May 4th for Spotted Flycatcher (Marbury CP). Two Ring Ouzels were at Hartford (Apr 17th). A Pied Flycatcher lingered at Marbury CP (May 1st to 14th) and 12 Crossbills were present on Mar 26th.

Rostherne Mere and Tatton Park

A Great Northern Diver at Rostherne Mere (May 1st) was the first there since 1990. One Black-necked Grebe was at Rostherne Mere on Apr 2nd, two on Apr 19th and four on May 3rd. At Rostherne Mere, 302 Cormorants in March was the highest March count since 1994. A pair of Grey Herons again nested at Tatton. A Ruddy Shelduck appeared at Tatton Mere on Mar 26th and Apr 6th. Four Mandarin ducks were at Rostherne Mere on May 3rd. A Honey Buzzard was reported at Tatton Park (May 3rd). The first arrival dates for migrants included Cuckoo at Rostherne (Apr 30th), Swift at Rostherne (Apr 26th) and Tatton (Apr 24th), Sand Martin at Melchett Mere (Mar 8th), Grasshopper and Wood Warblers at Rostherne (Apr 18th) with Lesser Whitethroat at Rostherne (Apr 27th). Rostherne hosted a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, while another was at Tatton (no dates given). At Rostherne Mere, an early Wheatear arrived (Mar 23rd).



Sandbach area

Four Ruddy Shelducks flew over the Flashes (Apr 5th) before reappearing two days later at Frodsham. A Hobby was at the Flashes on Apr 27th. A Common Crane was seen in flight near Alsager on Mar 11th. The first Little Ringed Plover arrived at Sandbach Flashes (Mar 19th) with up to eight by the end of March. Two Mediterranean Gulls visited Sandbach Flashes on Mar 16th with further singles on Mar 26th and Apr 22nd. One also visited nearby Arclid SQ on Mar 11th. A Glaucous Gull visited Elton Hall Flash on Mar 10th and an adult Ring-billed Gull was seen (Mar 24th). A Kittiwake visited Sandbach Flashes on Apr 2nd. The first dates for summer visitors (Sandbach Flashes unless stated) included Cuckoo at Chorlton (Apr 21st) and Smallwood (Apr 22nd), Swift on Apr 25th, Yellow Wagtail on Apr 16th, Whinchat on Apr 20th, Wheatear on Mar 17th (six were also at Maw Green Tip on Apr 26th), Ring Ouzel at Mow Cop on Mar 26th, Sedge Warbler on Apr 15th, Reed Warbler on Apr 18th, Lesser Whitethroat on Apr 20th, Whitethroat on Apr 16th, Garden Warbler on Apr 28th, Willow Warbler at Quaker's Coppice on Mar 27th (the earliest ever SECOS record) and Pied Flycatcher at Middlewich on Apr 13th. A Hoopoe was at Smallwood (Apr 17th-18th). Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were at Brereton CP, Crewe Business Park, Crewe Green and Sandbach Flashes. Seven Fieldfares flew over Sandbach Flashes on Apr 22nd and a female Red-backed Shrike there (May 31st) was a first for the Flashes.

Warrington area

A Black-necked Grebe at Woolston Eyes on Mar 16th was the first returning bird. The peak count was 12 in April, well down on last year's figures. Two also visited Houghton Green Flash on May 2nd. A drake Mandarin visited Moore NR (Apr 5th) and a Garganey was at Woolston Eyes (Apr 19th). A drake Ferruginous Duck at Moore NR (May 15th) was a site first. Risley Moss hosted a Honey Buzzard on May 25th, Osprey on Apr 19th and up to three Hobbies from Apr 24th. A Red Kite flew over Culcheth (Mar 27th). Two Common Cranes flew west over Risley Moss on Apr 13th. Two Mediterranean Gulls were at Woolston Eyes in April and a 1st summer visited Moore NR on May 5th. A 1st winter Glaucous Gull was at Arpley Tip (Mar 12th, 14th, Apr 5th). One or two Turtle Doves were at Risley Moss (May 2nd and 26th) and Rixton Clay Pits (May 3rd and 17th). A Cuckoo appeared at Risley Moss on Apr 19th and a Nightjar was reported there (May 20th). A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker visited Moore NR. The first dates for summer visitors included Swifts at Risley Moss (Apr 21st) and Woolston (Apr 24th), Sand Martin at Moore NR (Mar 10th), Swallow at Risley Moss (Mar 24th), House Martin at Moore NR (Mar 14th), Yellow Wagtails at Gatewath (Apr 15th) and Woolston (Apr 12th), Ring Ouzel at Moore NR (Apr 20th), Grasshopper Warblers at Sankey Canal (Apr 16th) and Woolston Eyes (Apr 12th), Reed Warbler and Whitethroat at Gatewath (Apr 15th), Lesser Whitethroat at Moore NR (Apr 22nd) and Willow Warbler at Moore NR (Mar 27th). A pair of Crossbills were at Risley Moss on Mar 23rd and a Yellowhammer was ringed at Woolston Eyes on Mar 20th.

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Thanks/acknowledgements to:- *Birdwatch* and *Birdwatching* Magazines, J. Canovan (Rostherne Mere NNR), C. Hull (Nantwich Naturalists), M. Jones, K. Massey (Fiddler's Ferry), D. Morris (Tatton Park), J. Patterson, B. Perkins (Sandbach Flashes Log), R. Smith (www.deeestuary.co.uk), P. Walton, D. Wild and all observers who passed records on.

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Species Spotlight

BRENT GEESE IN THE MOUTH OF THE DEE

Flocks of Brent Geese feeding on the tideline sitting in rafts just offshore, or flying into roost are one of the many great birdwatching sights, and sounds, of a British winter. These tiny, dark geese, scarcely bigger than a Mallard, are a common sight for anyone who goes to the east or south coast between October and March, but almost need to be 'twitched' in the west, as the only regular sites are around Hilbre, the Inland Sea, Anglesey and Freckleton, Lancs. The winter of 2000/2001 saw a dramatic rise in the numbers of Brent Geese recorded from the mouth of the Dee. Normally numbers hover around 5-10 birds, but that winter's flock peaked, and remained at 39, a 520% rise on the average figures. The next two winters followed the same pattern with a peak of 37 in 2001/2002 and 33 in 2002/2003. In anyone's book this is phenomenal, but what was the cause of it? No scientific analysis has been produced from these figures but we can speculate on the possible reason why.

The majority of birds in Britain are Dark-bellied Brents, which are found wintering mainly between the Humber estuary and the Gower peninsula in South Wales (but not in most of the West Country and the Severn estuary). The only regular haunt of Pale-bellied birds in England is Lindisfarne, in the North-East, which holds between 50% and 100% of the Spitzbergen/Franz Josef Land population. Traditionally, the only birds to winter on the coasts of the Irish Sea were pale-bellied eastern Canadian/Greenland breeders and were concentrated in a few sites on the east coast of Ireland, mainly Strangford Lough and North Bull, Dublin, and it is from this population that our birds have probably come.

An all Ireland census of the Canadian Light-bellied Brent Goose was carried out in October 2001 and January 2002 (*WeBS News* no.17). The October count was 22,787, the highest yet recorded. The January count is always lower as the birds disperse around the coast; in this case 20,381 were counted. The Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey estimated that 3,000 geese are thinly spread along rocky coastlines from mid-winter to spring. This fits exactly both the habitat on Hilbre and the time of year the Brent Geese are in the estuary. The record number of this population might

also explain why numbers in the Dee are much higher than usual with birds probably needing to range more widely in search of food.

There have always been records of small numbers of birds in the area around the mouth of the Dee, but nothing on the scale of the past three winters. In the Hilbre book (ed. Craggs, J.D. 1982) a total of around 300 birds are recorded as occurring in the 20 years between 1957 and 1977, the vast majority being dark-bellied, with about 10% pale-bellied amongst them. There has been a total reversal in taxonomic flock composition since then, with pale-bellied birds now dominating and 1-5 dark-bellied occurring spasmodically throughout the winter. (The same change in flock composition appears to have occurred at Lindisfarne in the early years of the 20th century but information about this seems to be mainly anecdotal or apocryphal.)

Brent Geese breed in a continuous band around the Arctic in three separate populations, Dark-bellied Brent, *Branta b. bernicla* mainly on the Tamyр Peninsula, West-Central Siberia, Black Brent, *B. b. nigricans* from the Tamyр to the Perry River region of Canada and Pale-bellied Brent, *B. b. hrota* through to Spitzbergen and Franz Josef Land. Like all High Arctic species of bird they move south for the winter, and it is possible in most winters to see all three taxa in Britain. At present all three are regarded as Brent Goose, *B. bernicla*, in Britain, but the Dutch, and some British birdwatchers, regard them as being three separate species. The BOU is looking into the problem, but reports of limited hybridisation and a paucity of distributional fieldwork on the breeding grounds in Siberia is hampering a final decision.

Brent Geese were, at one time, thought to feed exclusively on the rhizomes of a species of eel-grass, *Zostera marina* and when these were exhausted they moved onto the more delicate green marine algae such as *Ulva spp.* and *Enteromorpha spp.*, with limited grazing occurring on salt marshes. In the 1930s 'wasting disease' decimated the population of *Z. marina* which was blamed for the subsequent collapse in goose numbers. Later evidence suggests that Brent Geese feed on another species of eel-grass *Z. noltii*, which was not affected, and that hunting pressure, both on their breeding and wintering grounds, was the primary factor in the decline. Since the low point in the 1940s and 1950s numbers have dramatically increased. This is partly through protection of their breeding and wintering areas, and partly through the birds' change in foraging behaviour, feeding more on salt marsh and learning to exploit winter cereal crops.

The number of birds wintering in Britain and Ireland has risen from 16,500 in 1955/57 to 203,000 in 1983, the year of the *Winter Atlas* (ed. Lack, P. 1986), the last time the entire Eire population was surveyed in conjunction with the UK. At present numbers are declining, with a maximum of 102,923 recorded in the winter of 1998/1999. Dark-bellied Brents appear to be the worst affected, probably due to a succession of poor breeding seasons that may be linked to the results of over-exploitative oil exploration and extraction in western Siberia. Both populations of Pale-bellied Brent seem to be holding steady or even increasing. Surprisingly, the Siberian population of Black Brent has become annual in single figures in Britain during the last decade or two, and flocks of up to 10 birds are now regularly recorded each winter from either Denmark or Holland even though this population is considered to be decreasing.

Chris Butterworth and Richard Smith

Note: This article in its original form was published in the *Dee Estuary Voluntary Wardens' Report* 2001 and on the Dee Estuary web site www.deeestuary.co.uk. It has been brought up to date by Richard Smith with kind permission of the original author, Chris Butterworth.

Further reading:

Hilbre -The Cheshire Island, J.D. Craggs (ed.), L.U.P., Liverpool, 1982

Atlas of Wintering Birds, P. Lack (ed.), Poyser, Calton, 1986

Wildfowl, S. Madge, H. Burn, Christopher Helm, Bromley, 1988

Wetland + Estuary Bird Survey Reports, 1982-83 to date

Report on Rare Birds in Britain and Ireland, British Birds, 1971 to date

European News, British Birds, 1977 to date

Estuary birds - before the counting began, C. R. Tubbs, in *British Wildlife* 7 : 4: 226 235

Changing perceptions of the Dark-bellied Brent Goose, J. Vickery, W.J. Sutherland, in *British Wildlife* 7: 6 : 341 347

GREENLAND WHEATEAR

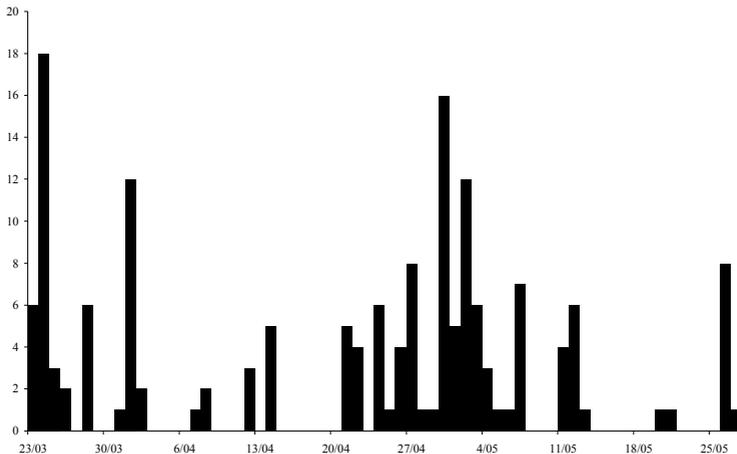
March in the Dee estuary heralds the commencement of the spring and there is perhaps no other bird which epitomises the start of the arrival of migrant birds from Africa to the Dee more so than the Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). The Wheatear is one of the most familiar long distance migrants to birders in the UK as it is one of the earliest to pass through in spring. Wheatears are amazingly widespread with some even breeding in Alaska, north-east Canada and Greenland. All of these birds along with European and Asian populations winter in Africa.

The first birds arrive in the Dee usually in the second week of March and these birds are often seen at Hilbre, Red Rocks or Burton Marsh. These early birds are almost always males, which are racing back to the breeding areas to find the best territory. The first ones back are of the nominate race and are probably birds heading north to breed in northern England and Scotland. After mid-April, however, distinctly larger individuals are observed on Hilbre and measuring of captured birds has confirmed that they are of the Greenland race (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*).

To catch Wheatears we use small portable traps called 'Potter' traps. The birds are often very inquisitive and investigate the trap for food - setting off a spring balance, which closes a door behind them. They are then extracted from the trap by experienced ringers licensed by the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology), and they are taken back to the Bird Observatory to be identified, measured, weighed and ringed before release for their onward journey north.

Since we first started using Potter traps we have caught an increasing number of birds each year with 45 birds being ringed in the year 2000 alone. Of these 45 birds an incredible 31 were identified as being of the Greenland race; these birds migrate up the west coast of Britain and then across the north Atlantic to Greenland. Ringing recoveries from Britain and Europe confirm that Greenland Wheatears migrate south-east in the autumn to western Europe and furthermore they suggest that after making landfall they then head south-west into west Africa where they winter.

The best places to look for Wheatears (including the Greenland form) at Hilbre are on the west side of the main island or on Middle Eye during March to May and again during August to October. The histogram below shows the spring passage of Wheatears which occurred at Hilbre in 2001 (reproduced from the *Hilbre Bird Report 2001*); there are two distinct peaks in March / early April (nominate race) and late April / early May (Greenland race).



We at Hilbre Bird Observatory and Ringing Station, always look forward to the first Wheatear of the spring and we are now looking forward to our first recovery of a Hilbre ringed Greenland Wheatear. From 2003 Hilbre Bird Observatory will be colour ringing the Wheatears that we catch in the hope that they are sighted elsewhere. This is part of a national scheme co-ordinated by the BTO. If you see a colour-ringed Wheatear (Northern or Greenland) please send details either direct to Hilbre Bird Observatory or to the BTO.

Steve Williams, Hilbre Bird Observatory

Ringers' Notebook

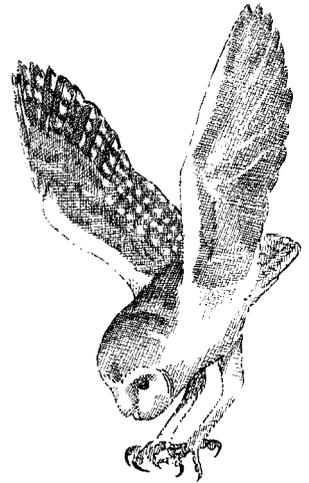
Some of the frequent bird movements tend to get taken for granted so they are not often reported in detail here. This certainly applies to Mute Swans, which have the highest reporting rate of all birds, being large, often found close to people, and with many of them wearing prominent colour rings. The work of the Cheshire Swan Study Group has shown that there are regular interchanges between the flock at Cavendish Dock, Barrow-in-Furness, and Cheshire and Wirral birds, such as the one ringed at Barrow on 21 October 1999 and found freshly dead at Brimstage, Wirral, just about three years later, a movement of 86km. Many of our birds also move to the North Wales coast to moult in July and August. A much more unusual movement was undertaken by the bird wearing the green colour ring CA14, which was seen at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust headquarters at Slimbridge, Gloucestershire on 27 April 2003, a movement of 151 km from its ringing site at Winterley Pool, Sandbach. This swan was ringed as a male in its third calendar year on 20 January 2001 and was last seen at Winterley Pool on 13 June 2001, and we do not know where it was in the intervening time.

Most of the chicks in the Cheshire and Wirral population of Barn Owls, now increasing, are ringed each year and are giving valuable pointers to the threats facing them, their movements and recruitment to the breeding population. Drowning is a common problem for them, and a chick ringed in July 2002 was found in January 2003 4km from its natal site in a canal at Ellesmere Port. Another from near Tarvin was found at Burtonwood in February, 28 km north, with an unreported cause of death.

The Merseyside Ringing Group has recently received details of six long-distance movements of warblers in 2002, all of them recaptured by other ringers. *Acrocephalus* warblers ringed in reed-beds at Frodsham Marsh feature strongly. A juvenile Sedge Warbler ringed on 25 August was retrapped at Titchfield Haven, Hampshire, 295km away, just three days later. Another, ringed on 27 August, was in a French ringer's net on 12 September in the Loire-Atlantique department, 677km south. A juvenile Reed Warbler made an earlier departure, being ringed at Frodsham on 28 July and retrapped at Abbotsbury Swannery, Dorset on 13 August. A juvenile Whitethroat, ringed at Woolston on 27 July, was recaptured a month later at Beachy Head, Sussex, 350 km south-east. An adult male Willow Warbler caught at Woolston on 15 June had been ringed on spring passage on 4 April at St. Alban's Head, Purbeck, Dorset. Finally, another adult male Willow Warbler, ringed at Meols on 3 May, took a more south-easterly autumn route than most to be caught by a Belgian ringer on 25 August in Oost-Vlaanderen, a movement of 549km. This is only the seventh BTO-ringed Willow Warbler to be recovered in Belgium.

Members of the public always ask ringers how long birds live: this is not an easy question to answer because, for passerine species at least, most birds die during their first year. They are inexperienced, more likely to lose in competition with other birds, fall prey to predators, fail to find food, and so on. In many species, as few as one-in-ten chicks hatched will survive to parenthood. A Meols Blue Tit defied all the odds. Ringed as a juvenile on 30 August 1992, it was found freshly dead, killed by a Sparrowhawk, on 29 March 2002, just two months short of the longevity record for a British-ringed Blue Tit of 9 years, 9 months, 3 days.

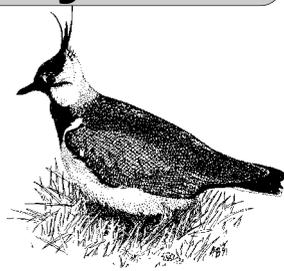
A pair of Redstarts in Delamere, breeding in an old woodpecker hole in a dying birch tree, provided a fascinating record because the female was already wearing a ring, one of a brood that I ringed in a nest box in Delamere last year. The movement from the place of ringing is about 750 metres, but of course she had really travelled up to 10,000 km in between, to west Africa and back.



Professor David Norman

View from the Farmyard

Watching birds can become an obsession taking up the bulk of your waking hours, though the obsessive period usually leads to a burn-out followed by the resumption of some kind of normality (whatever that may be). Even birds can become obsessive; the private life of the Dunnock is complicated, with multiple mates and sordid goings-on. So for a Dunnock to find the time to become obsessive is rather amazing. The short length of Leylandii hedge in my garden has regularly been home to a pair of Dunnocks for the best part of 15 years, 2003 being no exception. The garden population of Dunnocks is hard to be precise about, with at least two and possibly three nests but quite who is whose partner is rather a mystery. The nest construction was started in late March or early April and continued until the second week of May; the massive volume of nest material moved over that period is quite remarkable. The exact goings-on in the hedge are unknown to me but they involved three birds. The finished nest is not remarkable in any way, but the pile of surplus material is. Below the hedge a pile of about the size of a small compost heap has accumulated; when compressed I would say it would amount to about 1 cubic foot in all. The effort expended in collecting all this was huge and resulted in a nest no different from the norm. Quite what stimulated such activity I can only guess at; possibly with three birds present two were removing each other's work resulting in an epic struggle for control of the nest.



2004 will we hope herald the start of a new era in our farming activities; by then the application for Countryside Stewardship should be completed and we can set about putting right some of the more destructive aspects of agricultural practice that marred the last 50 years of the 20th century. This will be a challenge for us as it goes against the grain of what we have strived for all our working lives. Our goals of increased efficiency and expanding yields must to some degree be reversed and a whole new set of criteria put in place. Hopefully, this will be mirrored to some degree by the consumers of our produce, who will need to pay more for a product whose production has caused less impact upon the environment and possibly incurred a heavier labour cost than had become the case last century. The response of wildlife will be unpredictable but hopefully positive, and the improvement in field margin management may with time, seed the flowering in profusion of the many species of plants, which hold on to a very precarious foothold along field banks and ditches.

Magpies stir the emotions of almost all who see them, but it is different emotions for different people. Few would deny that the Magpie is a magnificent bird, when you watch one glide across a field or between trees in a wood; there are few species to compare for grace and visual impact. The clowning about when in family or pre-breeding groups shows a sense of fun. Then the diligent affection shown by parents to chicks, and the impressive intelligence of them to puzzle and experiment to obtain whatever takes their interest. But the most powerful human emotions are displayed when the Magpie shows its dark side, their ruthless determination to obtain eggs or chicks from nests, often two birds working together, one drawing the parents from the nest whilst the other darts and probes to obtain their prey, leaving only a blood spattered nest and the alarmed protests of the parent birds. When this drama takes place only yards from your armchair and involves songbirds you have listened to serenading their mate each dawn for weeks, and watched building the nest in the garden you have nurtured for them, the response of many is as if they or their own family had in some way been violated. Some may remember Genghis my adversary in the farmyard which I wrote about some issues ago. He had learned to take Swallow nests and specialised in it to the point of obsession, sometimes seen standing on the backs of the cows waiting to be milked, to pluck the eggs and chicks from nests only feet above him. Well, Genghis taught his chicks well and this year several Magpies have been devastating the nests about the farmyard. This was a state of affairs I could no longer tolerate. After weeks of turning it over in my head I finally borrowed a Larson trap; my hatred for the trap was almost as great as my hatred of Genghis' family. In 5 days I had caught all six Magpies and the affair was over with.

I am not proud of what I have done and indeed feel that I have let myself down, but I could stand by and watch no longer what had become too distressing and damaging to the Swallows and me. The Swallows have rebuilt their nests with an interesting development - two out of the eight nests have sides that reach up to the ceiling above them looking much like House Martin nests. Was this an attempt to foil the Magpies? The Genghis family and the trap are gone, other Magpies have moved into the vacant territory, but thankfully show no signs of the methodical and fanatical techniques of their predecessors. To those who will say that I should have left nature alone I say, that farming and the humankind have so interfered as to have irreversibly unbalanced the natural environment and what I did I feel was to remove a rogue group which endangered the success of a species already under pressure. Of course it may be that in the long term nature will deselect humankind. In late May the BBC televised a garden watch hosted by Bill Oddie; I was most interested to watch as a Magpie tugged on the tail of a fox. My interest stemmed from observations made in my own garden, involving a Magpie pulling the tail of first a Pheasant and then a rabbit. The first to receive this treatment was a semi-tame hen Pheasant and the second an equally tame and rather large rabbit. Both were eating food put out for them, when the Magpie began tugging on their tails, apparently trying to stop the feeding. Each was only slightly annoyed and simply turned to face the Magpie before resuming feeding, at which point the Magpie hopped round to the rear and once again began tugging at their tails. The rabbit's ordeal lasted for about three minutes and the Pheasant's about 10 minutes.

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

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Projects and Surveys

THE FORTHCOMING BTO WINTER GULL ROOST SURVEY

For all gull enthusiasts, or just simply birders who enjoy counting gulls, the BTO are looking for volunteers for the forthcoming Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS). The survey is due to commence in the 2003/4 winter and is planned to run for three consecutive winters. The BTO has organised surveys of winter gull roosts each decade since 1953, with the last survey taking place during January 1993. The last survey produced a total of 2,594,491 gulls within Great Britain, with a further 19,030 gulls also counted in Northern Ireland, 3,853 in the Isle of Man and 8,477 in the Channel Islands. During the 1993 survey, the most important inland site was Chew Valley Lake and the most important coastal site was the Severn estuary.

The five main species of gull have increased in number between the first survey in 1953 and the last in 1993, with the greatest increase apparent for Lesser Black-backed Gull. The increases in winter gull populations have resulted in more roost sites being occupied and more gulls using individual roosts.

All the previous surveys have concentrated on inland sites, with a few coastal sites also being covered during the 1983 and 1993 surveys. We are hoping that WinGS will improve on previous surveys by producing the first total winter gull population estimate for the UK. All key inland and coastal sites will be targeted, along with any new roost sites identified since the last survey, e.g. as identified in local bird reports. The number of gulls roosting inland, but away from key inland sites in the remainder of the UK will be estimated from the randomised stratified sample of 600 tetrads (2km x 2km). A pilot survey undertaken earlier this year on the Northumbrian and East Anglian coastlines confirmed that substantial numbers roost offshore, away from known key sites. Ideally, we would make counts around the entire coastline, but this would require huge numbers of volunteers and is not feasible. Thus, we are intending to sample 1,200 short (1-2km) stretches of coastline around the British Isles over the next three winters.

All the previous surveys lasted a single winter; WinGS will run over three winters, with all areas surveyed on the first year. However, it is currently planned to only survey the coastal stretches during the second and third year of the survey. The complexities of the survey are still being finalised but should be available shortly. The sites will require a **single visit** in January, ideally as

close to **January 17th - 18th** as possible, although counts made between mid-December and mid-February are acceptable. A reconnaissance visit may be necessary if the counter is unfamiliar with the area.

Sites to be surveyed include key sites, followed up by additional sites where known gull roosts take place (these have been generally identified from CAWOS *Bird Reports*). Details of any sites omitted from the list would be appreciated. Sites marked with an asterisk (*) were previously surveyed in the 1993 survey and we hope that the same people will take them up for 2003 onwards.

NE Cheshire Sites

Thelwall Eyes SJ650883
Woolston Eyes SJ655885
Rostherne Mere SJ744842 *
Tatton Mere SJ755800
Chelford Farmwood Pool SJ810730 *

South Cheshire Sites

Bar Mere *
Combermere *
Hurleston Reservoir *
Elton Hall Flash *
Astbury Mere

Wirral Sites

Dee Estuary - Oakenholt Marsh SJ266720 *
Dee Estuary - Connah's Quay Marsh SJ282712
Dee Estuary - West Kirby SJ200860
Dee Estuary - Hilbre SJ180870
Dee Estuary - Neston SJ270760

Mid-Cheshire Sites

Frodsham Score SJ515795
Witton Flashes SJ655755
Witton Flashes Broken Cross SJ686735

Other sites that we would like to include are:

Doddington	Farmwood Pool	Fiddler's Ferry
Moore	Redesmere	Richmond Bank

Would any volunteers for these or any other sites, please contact me as soon as possible. For very little effort a day's birding could be combined with a valuable survey, so anyone who can offer to help would be greatly appreciated. All results from the survey will be fed back to members via CAWOS publications.

Paul Miller, BTO Regional Representative Mid-Cheshire. Tel: 01928 787535
E-mail: huntershill@worldonline.co.uk

PEAK DISTRICT LAPWING AND WADER SURVEY 2002

The RSPB published their report of the above survey in April 2003. The main aim was to estimate Lapwing numbers and distribution as part of the Biodiversity Action Plan for the Peak District, so that suitable conservation action might be implemented.

Three CAWOS members took part finding a total of 41 pairs of Lapwings in the Cheshire part of the survey area; mostly in bye-land* and moorland fringe sites from Danebridge to Lyme Park. The total number of Lapwings for the entire park was 1213 pairs considered a fair estimate of the population as a whole. Cheshire contributed just 3% therefore.

The survey methodology was not suitable for estimating total populations for Curlews or Snipe, but 264 pairs and 138 pairs respectively were nonetheless recorded. 59 pairs of Curlews and 14 pairs of Snipe in Cheshire are however better estimates of our total local populations, since most of our birds do fall within the survey sites selected, and we looked hard for them. Only three pairs of Redshanks were recorded for the entire Peak District a species very much on the edge of extinction locally.

The RSPB report contains very little text and is little more than a collection of maps, showing where the waders were found, and a short summary. It is available from Richard Blindell (01260 275084), David Cogger (01606 832517) or Anna Sugrue at the RSPB in Huddersfield (anna.sugrue@rspb.org.uk).

Richard Blindell

*Bye-land, also know as 'in field', refers to grazing pasture adjacent to or near farm buildings. Whereas 'out field' would refer to heather/bilberry moor used for summer grazing.

Conservation News

WIRRAL AREA

- a) Kite Surfers: A report is being written on behalf of the Dee Estuary Voluntary Wardens for English Nature, the Countryside Commission for Wales and Wirral Ranger Service. This will highlight the effect of disturbance by kite surfers on both Oystercatcher numbers on Little Eye and other waders on West Kirby shore during the winter of 2002/2003.
- b) Wind farm: Construction of the North Hoyle wind farm off Prestatyn is well under way. This is the first significant maritime wind farm to be built in the United Kingdom. The effect on the birds migrating in and out of the estuary, and across its mouth, remains to be seen - it certainly won't be beneficial! The wind farm has already caused complaints from Wirral due to the noise of the construction.
- c) House building: There has been some debate recently on the Wirral due to more and more gardens being taken over as plots to build new houses. Watchers of the recent *Wildlife in Gardens* BBC programmes will know just how good gardens can be for wildlife, but a significant percentage of large gardens are now being built on in Wirral. There seems little the local planning department can do to stop this; their hands are tied by government and local planning regulations. We are urged to write to both our local councillors and MPs to try and protect this very important habitat.

Richard Smith, Wirral Area Representative

MACCLESFIELD AREA

The Mission Statement for the Macclesfield Borough Community Plan has been printed and has been put out for public consultation. It contains a section on the environment that contains a reference to increasing biodiversity. The need for a biodiversity audit and a strategy and associated action plan was stressed. The creation of new habitats and increased protection for existing habitats was also stressed. An increase in the number of Local Nature Reserves was also targeted.

A discussion on this section of the plan took place with other attendees who included Cameron Crook and Trevor Bithell of Macclesfield BC and representatives of Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Groundwork and several other organisations with an interest in Nature Conservation in the Macclesfield area. I stressed that the aims of the plan were laudable, but such plans needed financial support to become effective. A Nature Reserve without a long-term management plan could become a waste of valuable resources as well as creating apathy with conservation activists.

Copies of the Community Plan are available at Information Centres in the Borough or via Val Burlison at the Town Hall on 01625 53490, or the Council web site.

Derek Kelly, Macclesfield Area Representative

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Vale Royal	Paul Hill, 1 Clive Cottage, London Road, Allostock, Knutsford, WA16 9LT. Tel: 01606 722938. E-mail: pmh@biota.co.uk
Warrington	Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Tel: 01925 264251. E-mail: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com
Wirral	Richard Smith, March Wall, King's Drive North, Caldy, Wirral, CH48 1LL. Tel: 0151 625 2320. E-mail: richard@deestuuary.co.uk

MARGARET BECKETT VISITS LEVERHULME FARM

In March 2003 Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs visited a LEAF demonstration farm in the North-West. The farm is one of 44 LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) demonstration farms showing how, in practice, farmers can balance economically viable and environmentally responsible farming. The LEAF farm, at Leverhulme on the Wirral, signed a 10-year Countryside Stewardship agreement with DEFRA in October 1999, under which it receives payments for providing habitats for endangered bird species such as Barn Owl and Grey Partridge.

This flexibility of the scheme has allowed DEFRA and the Leverhulme Estate to modify the management so that it delivers a range of environmental benefits as well as meeting the requirements of the Estate. The scheme comprises:

1411m of 6m arable margins, 379m of 2m arable margins and 291m of 6m grass margins. These are managed to provide hunting habitat for Barn Owls, nesting habitat for farmland birds such as Grey Partridge and over wintering habitat for invertebrates. They also buffer watercourses and hedgerows from farming operations and provide linking habitats across the holding.

Two access routes, both of which are bridleways. One is a short route to enable riders to keep off a busy road and the other is a long circular route, which provides a pleasant ride.

Restoration of a small orchard and educational access to this orchard.

Comprehensive whole farm hedgerow restoration plan.

There has also been a special project to install nest boxes for Barn Owls; these will provide a nesting place for the owls and complement the margin management. Wirral & Ellesmere Port Barn Owl Trust has provided most of the nest boxes.

As part of the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food, DEFRA has recognised the importance of working and collaborating with groups who have been encouraging sustainable farming and re-connecting with markets.

The Secretary of State said: "I am very pleased to see this leading example of good practice. It is providing a vital inspiration for farmers who are looking for a profitable and environmentally-friendly future. I commend the foresight of LEAF and its members in promoting a realistic and sustainable future for farming. With DEFRA's network, LEAF will play a crucial role in delivering the vision contained in the Government's farming and food strategy. Farmers have always had to embrace change to survive and I am sure they will again rise to the new challenges. For its part, the Government is providing £500m over the next three years to assist these changes."

Caroline Drummond, Chief Executive of LEAF said: "We are very pleased that Mrs Beckett is taking time to hear more about the specifics of responsible farming in practice. LEAF farmers are enthusiastic ambassadors for many in the industry who are linking the environment and farming and who want a sustained future. I am pleased that DEFRA is keen to collaborate and co-operate with others in the industry to take farming forward and we are grateful for their support and recognition of how LEAF demonstration farmers and members have truly demonstrated a long-term commitment to quality food production, alongside a healthy, vibrant environment."

For further information about LEAF farms, go to www.leafuk.org.

This article was first published in the Wirral & Ellesmere Port Barn Owl Trust newsletter May 2003

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.

Good home wanted for Birdwatching magazines: An almost complete library of *Birdwatching*, dating back to 1986, has been donated to the Society. The majority of the magazines are filed in binders for easy storage and reference. If you know of anyone (maybe a local school or another society?) who could make use of these please contact: **Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, WA16 6QG. Tel: 01565 830168. E-mail: sheila@cawos.org**

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.

A WHITE-THROATED SPARROW IN THE GARDEN

A 'funny looking' Dunnock was my first thought as I saw a bird hop along the patio outside the window. Well, I wasn't really paying attention the light was very bad and I was busy on the computer updating the Dee Estuary web site (www.deeestuary.co.uk). Even so it was so obviously different that I immediately went to my Collins field guide, but the only 'funny looking' Dunnock with black and white on the head was a Radde's Accentor - not very likely.

The next day I was up at dawn - no, not to look for the mystery bird but because I was due at the Little Tern colony at Gronant for six hours voluntary wardening. The weather was appalling with heavy continuous rain. At 10am I'd had enough and decided to come home early. It's an hour's drive from Gronant and when I got home I have to confess I had completely forgotten about the 'funny' Dunnock. I went in, got changed and at exactly 11.30am opened the front door, and there it was, sitting on the porch! On seeing me it flew into the bushes on the far side of the front lawn where I managed a good close look with the 'scope. It was immediately obvious that I was looking at something very different from the normal garden bird. The main body still looked not unlike a Dunnock but the head was very striking with distinctive and bright black and white stripes, and yellow patches above the eyes. I had no idea what it was so another look at the Collins guide was called for - not an accentor, perhaps a finch? Almost at the end of the book and there it was - a White-throated Sparrow listed under North American Passerines. It was a 3 star rarity - wow! But come on, you don't get 3 star rarities in your front garden - you go to the Scilly Isles for those, or perhaps even the local hot spots - Hilbre Island or Frodsham Marsh - certainly not one sitting on the porch!

One of the advantages of running a local birdwatching web site is that you get to meet some very knowledgeable birders. So straight on the phone to Chris - "err, I think I might have a White-throated Sparrow in the garden, what do you think?" Luckily, Chris was familiar with the species so after a series of searching questions regarding its behaviour and plumage - necessitating frequent return trips to the 'scope - we both agreed that, yes, it was a White-throated Sparrow, remarkable though it seemed. Unfortunately, Chris couldn't come over so next I phoned Steve who was in work 30 miles away, another very knowledgeable birder and keen twitcher. Almost before I finished the sentence - "I'm pretty certain I've got a White-throated Sparrow in the garden and Chris agrees" - he was in the car doing 90mph down the motorway!

What followed were three hectic and surreal days. Within an hour the icons of Wirral birdwatching were sheltering in my porch getting great views. Phone call after phone call was made and of course I immediately put it on my web site from where the news radiated to all the rare bird news services. The weather the next day was much better and the birders were here from 7am until dark. The bird was both showing and singing well, some great photographs were taken and everyone was thrilled to see this rare and striking bird. Three hundred birdwatchers turned up over the three days and £250 was collected for the RSPB and Hilbre Bird Observatory. Thanks to everyone for their donations and for helping to make it a memorable three days, but most of all thank you to the White-throated Sparrow who chose my garden to rest and feed for a few days.

Some facts and figures:

The bird was present from late evening of May 21st to about 7pm on May 23rd; there was also a possible sighting early on 24th. This was the 7th British mainland record for a White-throated Sparrow, and the 23rd record for the whole country. It was the first ever American passerine for Wirral. So what exactly was it doing in my garden? Pure chance of course, and people who know my level of bird identification skills, or rather lack of them, will realise it was just as well it was so obviously different or I would never have picked up on it!

Looking at the 22 previous records make interesting reading - many are for the Shetland Islands. This to my mind suggests strongly that these birds crossed the Atlantic under their own steam, albeit with a strong following wind. On the other hand there are quite a few records of birds arriving on ships, including four on a Cunard ship in 1958 (these don't count as they were put into an aviary). So maybe it arrived on board a grain ship docking at Seaforth. These American sparrows, unlike the warblers, are hardy birds and may well survive over here for several months, if not years. So it is quite possible that this is the same bird that was seen in Yorkshire last year. There is another theory - that I bought the bird from Chester Zoo and released it into my garden just to increase the hit rate on the web site. A completely ridiculous idea of course, almost as ridiculous as finding a 3 star mega rarity on the front porch!

Richard Smith

Footnote

The fact that the bird was singing would indicate a male of course, but what about age? White-throated Sparrows are thought to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to age. In fact, all the other records for Britain have been left unaged.

Jane Turner and Steve Williams, both experienced ringers, remarked on the contrast in colour between the outer and inner greater coverts. In Palearctic species, this plumage feature is often a good indicator that the bird is in its first year. The tail feathers were quite pointed. Another good indicator for a young bird... but not if it's a Nearctic sparrow species. These features are shared by both adults and immatures.

By chance, an American bird banding team in Philadelphia, led by ringer Bob Mulvihill, had been visited by David Norman recently and their Powdermill Nature Reserve web site shows detailed photographs of most, if not all, east coast passerines. There were several pictures of White-throated Sparrows and so I contacted Bob to ask his opinion. I e-mailed him some of the photographs of the Caldý bird and he commented that there were one or two features that led him to believe that our bird was a second year bird, which is a first summer bird to us.

His reasons were that the tertials showed a whitish outer margin and a less dark rufous edging whereas adults would show a rufous edging. Also, the primary coverts looked dull brown enough to be a sign of immaturity and the tail feathers looked worn rather than fresh. This information has been sent to BBRC along with the description submitted by Richard Smith and they will have to assess the accuracy of this information.

Thanks have to go to Richard Smith for his decision to put news of the bird out so that a lot of people could enjoy it. For it to turn up in a garden wasn't really as surprising as it might seem. The only other Nearctic passerine accepted for the county, the Dark-eyed Junco, was also in a garden, in Chester and was similarly enjoyed by many people. They are both garden feeder birds in the USA, as are many other species and the proximity of Liverpool docks must mean that there will be more records in the future. Seaforth Nature Reserve has had several other American birds including Song and White-crowned Sparrows and Blackpoll Warbler.

Accepted near-passerines include a Black-billed Cuckoo and an American Nighthawk. There are other old records for Wirral that either weren't submitted or were not accepted, including a possible tanager and an Eastern Wood Pewee!

Tony Broome

DÉJÀ VU

By chance, I recently came across a letter to *British Birds* that contained the following lament: "For years ornithologists have been hot in pursuit of rarities ... Such antics might be thought harmless, although members of the cult would surely be better occupied with stamp collecting, were it not for the large number of ornithologists thus seduced from more useful work. It is very hard today to persuade members of local bird organisations to join in even the most simple enquiry, largely because of this cult."

Since the pursuit of rarities rather than participation in local surveys is thought to be a modern phenomenon, I should add that the letter was published over 37 years ago, in December 1965!

Professor David Norman, Rowswood Cottage, Ridding Lane, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 6PF. Tel: 01928 711064 E-mail: david.norman@physics.org

IS THIS THE EARLIEST EVER EARLY BIRD?

When the nest boxes at Quaker's Coppice, Crewe have been cleaned out we have found a variety of things in them over the years. However, whilst doing them this year, on 27th February, Bryan had a real shock when checking a large hole box with no lid on to find himself staring eyeball to eyeball with a fledgling Tawny Owl!

After double checking to make sure that it was not a 'feathery' squirrel (the usual occupants) we moved on quickly since Tawny Owl adults can be very aggressive when defending their young. Returning two days later on 1st March to replace the lid, the box was found to be empty. But after a thorough search of the wood the young bird was finally found sitting high up on a branch of a tree 70 yards from the nest box, with an adult perched nearby watching it!

A search of the nest uncovered the part eaten remains, mainly just legs, of two more young Tawny Owls, one less than a week old and the other between one and two weeks old.

Reading through the *Birds of the Western Palearctic* later confirmed the following:-

- The usual clutch size is 2-5 eggs, with a mean of 2.7.
- The incubation period is 28-30 days.
- Young emerge from the nest at 25-30 days and climb up the tree using claws, bill and flapping wings.
- The young begin to fly at 32-37 days, i.e. around 7 days after leaving the nest.
- The young are dependent on the adults for 2 to 3 months after fledging.
- Fratricide sometimes occurs when food is in short supply.

If we assume that the owlet had just left the nest on 28th February, and using the above data, then the egg was laid between 1st and 6th January! But since the owlet could probably fly, since it was found 70 yards from the nest box, it could even have been up to a week earlier and become a late December egg!!

And we thought that was the end of a remarkable breeding record until 3rd March. A further search then found two more fledged young, obviously larger and so older than the first one, which was also re-found on this day, together with an adult.

So in summary it is probable that five eggs were laid between Christmas 2002 and the end of the year; all five hatched and three young survived to at least leave the nest box. On 11th March the three young were still roosting in the open in the wood with an adult roosting in a nearby holly tree.

This information was included in David Glue's usual article on early nesting birds in *BTO News* 246, when he offered the additional information that in autumn 2002, a huge crop of beech mast and other woodland fruits fuelled locally high populations of rodent prey, enabling Tawny Owls to take advantage via early egg laying.

Bryan Perkins and Colin Lythgoe

FOOD FOR THOUGHT....

There's a rather neat trick you can do with a metal coat-hanger. What you do is attach two equal lengths of cotton (about 18 inches long) to the two 'corners' (i.e. the ones *without* the hook) and then wrap the free end of one of the pieces of cotton around the end of one forefinger a few times and wrap the free end of the other piece of cotton around the other forefinger in the same way. You should now have the hanger suspended, hook down, from your fingertips - a bit like a puppet. Slowly tilt your forefingers upwards so that the cotton goes over the end of each forefinger (this is the tricky bit!) and hold it there, taut across your fingertips, with each thumb. Next, stick one forefinger in each ear (with the cotton still over the tips) and let go with your thumbs once your fingers are firmly in place. Now bend over at about a 45° angle from the waist so that the coat-hanger is suspended (still hook down) from the cotton over the ends of the fingers, which are now in your ears. Allow the coat-hanger to hang freely. Finally, gently swing it from side to side and let it knock against a radiator or something similar. The result is brilliant. It sounds as if Big Ben is 'going off' right inside your head!!!

Now I know this has nothing to do with birds or birding but it got me thinking about equally bizarre things that do and the same question kept popping up - how on earth do people come up with these things? Take for example eating larks' tongues. Apparently the Romans were quite keen, so much so in fact, that one historian suggested it may have been what caused the downfall of the

Roman Empire (downfall of the Roman lark more likely!). But why on earth would anybody think to even try a lark's tongue in the first place? It's not exactly an efficient means of getting your daily calories, as a quick calculation will show. Even if a lark's tongue is better, nutritionally, than any other body tissue (which I doubt), a whole lark only weighs about 40gm so its tongue can't weigh more than about 0.2gm at the most. This means, by my reckoning that you'd need to eat about 3,000 tongues to even come close to the calories in your average steak. "That's a lorra, lorra larks!!!" (as Cilla would say). And what about *bird's nest soup? Why would anybody think to eat the hardened saliva of a Cave Swiftlet?! Did someone just wake up one morning and think, "I know! If I risk life and limb and climb to the roof of that 50ft pitch-black cave, chase off the swiftlets, grab their nest, get rid of all the feathers and parasites and soak it for two hours, it might actually taste pretty good." It beggars belief doesn't it? So why try it? Well, I think I may have the answer - ancient ornithological traditions!

At one time or another, most of us have probably kept mementoes to remind us of particularly memorable birding finds/experiences. It might be a feather shed by a moulting raptor as it soars overhead, it might be a ring from a dead migrant we found, or, these days, likely as not, it might be a 'digiscoped' image from a Nikon 'Coolpix 995' or similar device. Now I'm pretty sure the BTO weren't ringing larks in Pompei in 350AD and I know for sure that when trade in swiftlets began during the T'ang Dynasty in China, 1,200 years ago, Nikon were still just *painting* birds (cranes mostly) on bits of porcelain. All the ancient birder could do, therefore, by way of capturing a magic birding moment was to collect the odd feather. Well, that's not quite true. He *could* collect the entire bird (like the Victorians did...a lot!) or, he could go one step further... and eat it!

This is not as crazy as it might sound because there is still somewhat of a tradition (in certain biological circles at least) to eat the oddest things. One of my old Profs told me about one such occasion on an overseas field trip. Undergraduates weren't allowed in to the traditional going home party until they'd sampled the delights of a 'Lepidopteran smorgasbord' prepared by entomologists at the field station. The idea was to use the students as guinea pigs to test some hypothesis regarding the mimicry of distasteful butterflies by tasteful ones (and I'm not talking dress sense here...). A similar experiment had been done on young Florida Scrub Jays, I think, and these learned to avoid both types of butterflies (as did the students, funnily enough!) thus demonstrating the adaptive value of mimicry as an anti-predator strategy. All very scientific! This is not always the case however...

Take, for example, the similar 'tradition' of consuming one's study species found in some ornithological circles. It's not something I've tried personally, mind you, as I think Cormorant and Goosander would taste pretty awful, but over the years, various colleagues of mine have claimed to have eaten Redshank, heron, Kestrel and a veritable host of other 'road kills' during their respective studies on these and other species! Given that these warped souls not only study birds for a living but are, by the nature of things, birders too it's not *that* big a leap for one or two of their ancient predecessors to be tempted into trying the odd rarity should one stray into his or her path...is it? I'm sure if you read *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) there's a passage somewhere that reads "Honey I'm home! Hit a Calandra Lark with the cart on the way back from the Lyceum so I've stuck it in the pot with the olives...it's a bit squashed but the tongue should still be OK. Oh, and by the way, Parcilius showed me this great trick with a coat-hanger! Learned it from an Indonesian chap soaking something 'orrible in a pot down the market - apparently!!"

Mark Feltham, 39 Brookfield Ave, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 5RE

*Two species comprise most current trade in birds' nests for soup; the Edible-nest, or, White-nest Swiftlet *Aerodramus fuciphagus* and the Black-nest Swiftlet *Aerodramus maximus*, both from Asia. The name *fuciphagus* means 'seaweed eating' as it used to be believed that this was what swiftlets made their nests from. In fact the half-cup nest is constructed entirely from saliva regurgitated as long, thin gelatinous strands from glands under the males' tongues. The saliva then dries and bonds like quick-drying cement to the inside of a cave wall. Over-harvesting of nests has become such a problem in some areas, however, that an alternative practice of 'farming' swiftlets has been developed whereby 'bird's nest' swiftlets from caves are cross-fostered with house nesting, Mossy-nest Swiftlets *Aerodramus salanganus*. 'Bird's nest' swiftlets that fledge from these nests come back and start colonies on houses instead of in caves, thus relieving the pressure on threatened cave colonies.

A NEAR MISS

On 15th April, at 22.40, as I and two colleagues were driving home from our weekly camera club meeting at Whitchurch, on a stretch of A525 between Burleydam and Lightwood Green, Audlem, we all three saw in the light of my headlamps, a large owl standing right on the middle of the double white lines in the centre of the road. My passengers chorused "That's an owl". As I was driving and my precise attention was on the nearside edge of the road as opposed to the middle, I was not quick enough to decide on whether or not it could in fact have been a Long-eared Owl. My lightning impression was that it seemed big enough, but I was past before I had time to think of the more probable possibility that it was a Tawny Owl.

We must have missed the owl by inches; we could not stop because another car was not far behind and I was unable to see more in the rear-view mirror. However, I returned to the spot next morning and there was no trace of the owl having been a casualty of the following or later cars.

The suppositions must surely be that either the owl was recovering from being slightly stunned by a previous vehicle or that it had seen Catseyes' reflections and landed to carry off the 'cat' or whatever it thought might have been a suitable item of prey. I do not think that the Catseyes' reflections were from my headlamps because the owl was facing us; but then I do not recall a vehicle going the other way.

I would have thought that a mature owl would be aware of traffic headlamps at night and, having such enhanced powers of sight and movement in the dark, would be more wary than other birds. I would be interested to know the statistics of owl fatalities on roads compared with those of other birds.

Ian Oxley

EXCERPTS FROM CAWOS DISCUSSION FORUM (www.cawos.org)

The Discussion Forum on CAWOS's web site is where people can discuss the Society, local bird sightings, places to see birds, general queries and announcements and other such matters. Here are some topics from the last three months:

BREEDING SUCCESS

Just sharing the experience of our nest box programme at Alderley Park this year. Numbers compared to previous years were about the same, 42 pairs Blue Tits, 37 pairs Great Tits and 5 pairs Nuthatches (over a 400 acre area). However, the Nuthatches and Great Tits stole the march on the Blue Tits, nesting a week/10 days or so earlier, and thus had already hatched young, which were about a week old, when the cold and very wet 10 day spell arrived from mid-May. Average fledgling success was very low for the Blue Tits, down to 3.5 young per 10 boxes (usually around 7 or 8,) whilst the Great Tits were only marginally down at 5.8 per 10 boxes examined.

Did anyone else experience a similar pattern?

Hugh Pulsford

INSOMNIAC BIRDS

Over the years I've heard and seen many birds active during the wee hours that usually aren't noted for this behaviour. Over the last fortnight though two occurrences have surprised me. Firstly, at 03.00 on a very dark night a Wheatear was seen busily feeding along the road to Marsh Farm at Frodsham, although it did let itself down a bit by colliding with a fence post after becoming aware of the Ford Escort bearing down on it. I was bat detecting by the way - never bat detect by a reeling Grasshopper Warbler, you can't hear anything else.

Secondly, a Cuckoo was calling for around 10 minutes whilst I photographed a Womble in my garden around 02.00 (suppose it could have been a hedgehog). Anyone else ever noticed these species nocturnally activating - must admit I haven't other than at dawn/pre-dawn?

Dave Walters

In early May this year I was coming back from a pub (post lock in - so it was after midnight) and I was surprised to hear a Willow Warbler calling repeatedly. Glad you made it clear you were bat detecting by the way!

Jane Turner

RENAMING OF *OUR* BIRDS

I admit to considering whether or not to renew my membership. It's not due to the lack of enjoyment I have gained from the membership information. Indeed I have considered a more active contribution to the group. There is currently in birdwatching groups a growing pressure to adopt 'new names' for birds. Personally, I am utterly against this. Why should a minority of dull statisticians hijack what is a simple enjoyment for myself and hundreds of thousands of others by unilaterally re-naming birds? Names that have existed for hundreds of years. Personally, I have never ever experienced a situation when mentioning a Kestrel, Nuthatch, Redstart or Nightingale where confusion has occurred. Let's face it, anyone who makes a stab at discussing their sighting of something other than that on the standard British Birds list would use the full name so as to demonstrate what a clever person they are. I may be impressed to a certain degree. Unlike when they then try and further impress me of their knowledge of 'correct' nomenclature by inserting some pathetic (epithet?) in front of the name. Rufous Nightingale. I ask you. Hedge Accentor! Who cares.

If CAWOS wishes to become the domain of a select band of enthusiasts it is obviously the prerogative of that group. If it wishes to exclude members (potential members) by talking about things they have no interest in, the same. Will I be excluded next year?

R.J.Carter, 78 Grant Avenue, Wavertree, Liverpool

IN REPLY.....

I sympathise with you over the new bird names, having used the familiar ones for over 50 years, though I can see their advantages if one is discussing birds internationally. However, can I reassure you that CAWOS has made its position quite clear on page 14 of the 2001 *Bird Report* and will continue to use the old names for quite some time yet as this is what many of our members want; the computerised database will accept whichever name individual members prefer to use.

I can also, I hope, reassure you that CAWOS is not the domain of a select band of enthusiasts. We have realised through surveys carried out among our membership that we are in fact a very 'broad church' covering members who can hold their own among the best national ornithologists as well as beginners or those with little experience. This is as it should be. We welcome all with a genuine interest in birds and birdwatching and try to cover a wide range of interests and abilities. If you are interested in becoming more involved you might be interested in the CAWOS structure on pages 32-33 of *Bird News* 58; we should be delighted to hear from you if any of the jobs there attract you.

David Cogger, Membership Secretary

BTO CONFERENCE IN WALES

There will be a BTO Regional Conference in Machynlleth on Saturday 18th October 2003 and all birdwatchers are welcome to come along. There is an interesting line-up of speakers including Derek Moore (Conservation Challenges in Wales), Steve Sutcliffe (Seabird Ringing in Pembrokeshire) and Dick Loxton (Bird Observatories). BTO staff will be speaking on Pied Flycatchers, Swallows, and the Nest Record Scheme and will be available to answer any questions on BTO work. It will be a great chance to meet other birdwatchers and to hear about local and national projects.

The one-day conference costs £15, which includes lunch and refreshments. For a programme and booking form please contact **Dawn Balmer: E-mail: dawn.balmer@bto.org or write to The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.**

NANTWICH NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Please note that the Nantwich Natural History Society web site has moved to www.nantnats.fsnet.co.uk. It has been updated to include a section showing Bob Brown's photos of the two recent Red-rumped Swallows at Hurlleston Reservoir. Full details of field trips, indoor meetings and other events are also available.

WILMSLOW GUILD ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Please note that the Wilmslow Guild Ornithological Society have decided to change their name to the Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group. Contact details remain the same.

Membership News

Welcome to the following new members: L Holmes, E Yarwood, J Ashworth. Our membership total, which reached a record high of 370 in 2002, is likely to be below this in 2003 as about 40 members have not renewed. Some explained that it was because they were moving to another part of the country, but if anyone knows if the increase in subscriptions, or any other cause, was the reason for someone not rejoining we would be glad to know.

A meeting of Council was held on April 10th. The following points emerged:

- Derek Kelly (Conservation) and Mark Feltham (Editor, *Bird Report*) were co-opted onto Council until March 2004.
- Reports were given on the progress made towards completing the 'Survey of Surveys', planning for the autumn Recording Forum and collecting records for the database for the 2002 *Bird Report*, though tardiness in handing over information was becoming a problem.
- The Society's archives (mainly consisting of the raw material for past *Bird Reports*) have now been transferred to the County Record Office, Chester. A list of contents will be published once they have been catalogued by the Record Office. As a safeguard permission to inspect them will need to be given by the County Recorder.
- The proposal for work on a *Breeding Bird Atlas/Avifauna of Cheshire* was discussed and accepted with enthusiasm. See report below.

Recording Forum: We have decided to postpone the proposed Recording Forum, due to be held in September, until spring 2004. This will enable us to incorporate training, where needed, on survey techniques to be used for the new County Atlas.

David Cogger

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~ SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT ~

**WE WILL NEED EVERYONE'S HELP - LARGE OR SMALL -
PLEASE GET INVOLVED**

.....

A NEW ATLAS OF CHESHIRE & WIRRAL BIRDS

CAWOS Council has agreed that we should embark on an atlas project to map the breeding and wintering distribution and abundance of birds in Cheshire and Wirral. This will be the biggest task undertaken by the Society and we hope that as many members as possible will take part.

Why are we doing this?

The Breeding Bird Atlas of Cheshire & Wirral was published over 10 years ago (1992) based on fieldwork now 20 years old (1978-84). Nationally, those 20 years have seen perhaps the biggest changes ever in bird populations and distribution. A glance at some of the maps from our Atlas hints at some of the changes that have taken place locally. Mute Swan was at a low point, with fewer than 20 pairs. Shelducks and Oystercatchers were just starting to breed inland. Amongst the raptors, there were just two tetrads (2x2km squares) with confirmed breeding of Buzzard, and none of Peregrine or Hobby. Grey Partridges were confirmed to breed in one quarter of the county's 670 tetrads, with breeding season presence in two-thirds of them. Observers recorded Snipe in the breeding season in one-quarter of the county's tetrads. Lapwings and Skylarks nested in over half, and Yellow Wagtails were found in well over half, and proven to breed in over a quarter. Tree Pipits were found in over 80 tetrads, with Turtle Doves encountered in 144, while there were only four tetrads with proven breeding of Pied Flycatcher. Marsh Tits occurred in almost a quarter of the county, and Willow Tits in over 40%. Tree Sparrows were found in over three-quarters of tetrads and Linnets and Yellowhammers in over 85%, while there were 260 tetrads with Corn Buntings recorded, and breeding in over 200 of them. These are amongst the

most striking results, unbelievable to today's birders, and it is vital for conservation to determine the present status of these, and many other species. But there are surely more subtle changes to be discovered. Do Starlings and House Sparrows still breed in 98% of the county?

Now, we have decided that not only are we going to do a new breeding bird atlas, but shall do winter distribution as well. A lot of birds migrate here for the winter, taking advantage of our relatively mild weather and good food resources. But for many species we know little at the detailed county level of where they are and how many there are. This atlas will be a major advance on the first county breeding atlas because it will measure abundance as well as distribution. The methods for doing this are still being discussed, with advice from the BTO and other counties, but will probably involve experienced surveyors visiting a sample of the county's tetrads.

How can you help?

Good participation from CAWOS members is essential to make a success of the Atlas and achieve full coverage of Cheshire and Wirral. Many people have said that surveying for the first atlas was one of their most enjoyable and worthwhile experiences in birding. Anyone can join in! This is a chance not only to get to know the birds of an area much better, and probably to come up with some surprises, but also to contribute to a major project that will see your work published and put to good use for conservation.

Fieldwork will start next April (2004) and will cover three breeding seasons (April to the end of June each year) and three winter periods (mid-November to the end of February), finishing in February 2007. We plan that the publication, as a quality hardback book, will be during 2008. The basis for recording will be the birds in each tetrad: this is a 2x2km square, defined by the gridlines on the Ordnance Survey maps. The previous atlas engaged the interest of birders and achieved complete coverage of all 670 tetrads in Cheshire and Wirral; we aim to do likewise. Each tetrad will probably need two visits in the breeding season and two in winter, sometime during the three years of the project.

Perhaps you can now start to think which tetrads you would like to deal with. In the autumn we shall be compiling lists and approaching members who have offered help. Maybe some of the local bird clubs would like to arrange coverage of their own areas? We shall probably arrange coordinators for areas of the county to give local knowledge and act as contacts between organisers and observers. All offers will be welcome.

Help will be needed not only with the fieldwork. Volunteers will be appreciated to help with other aspects of the project like publicity and fundraising, production of webpages, data-inputting and so on.

Recording at other times of year

The atlas will provide the essential up to date knowledge of the distribution and population of the county's birds during the 'core' times of year breeding and winter periods when most are relatively fixed. We also hope to encourage more records from the spring and autumn periods, although these will not be mapped in the atlas as many birds are just moving through the area. These records will, however, be put to good use in the annual *Bird Reports* and will provide the final pieces of the jigsaw needed to complete a county avifauna. This will be a book describing the current status of birds in the county, placed in the context of historical records and the national and international picture. The first such avifauna of Cheshire & Wirral was by T.A. Coward in 1900 and the only county-wide publication since then was by Hedley Bell as long ago as 1962. Thus, an up to date avifauna is long overdue, and has been discussed many times in the last decade. This atlas will provide an essential input into a new avifauna.

What next?

I am coordinating the project and a small group is working behind the scenes on the details. We are taking advice from other societies, including those in Cumbria and Lancashire and North Merseyside who have recently completed their own atlases. The detailed methodology will be announced later this year. Meanwhile, please think about how you can help, and prepare to get involved in CAWOS's biggest ever project!

Professor David Norman, Rowswood Cottage, Ridding Lane, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 6PF. Tel: 01928 711064 E-mail: david.norman@physics.org

BEST ANNUAL BIRD REPORT AWARDS STOP PRESS NEWS

The *Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society Bird Report 2001* came joint third in the 2002 competition with 47 points (out of a possible 53).

This competition, established in 1991 and formerly run by *British Birds*, was taken on by the BTO two years ago. The objectives of the competition remain much the same as before: to provide public acknowledgement of the high quality of local, county and regional bird reports, and to encourage and promote high standards of content of annual publications in Britain and Ireland. The BTO stressed that "The general standard of annual bird reports in Britain has improved significantly since this competition began. Content, such as local census results and specialist articles, together with improved reporting methods in the systematic lists, has obvious benefits for the interested reader and conservationists."

55 local bird reports, published during 2002 (mostly for reports covering 2001) were considered for this year's award. The competition, assessed independently by four judges, each marking a different set of criteria, provided a clear winner (*Devon Bird Report 2001* with maximum 53 points) and several close contenders for second place (*Suffolk Birds 2000* came second with 48 points), followed by six reports coming in at joint third with 47 points. Of these six, three achieved at least four points more than the previous year's report (including CAWOS - we improved our score by an impressive seven points!).

Congratulations to all those involved in its production.



AUGUST

- 13 **In Search of Terns on Hilbre - £1 charge. To book contact: 0151 648 4371/3884**
- 29 LOG 'WATER, WILDERNESS & WATERLOO' by Fred Ledden
- 30 CADOS Flamborough - ring for details
- 31 KOS Hilbre, meet Dog Lodge lay-by, Knutsford at 8:00am or West Kirby at 9:00am

SEPTEMBER

- 1 HPRSPB AGM and MEMBERS' SLIDES
- 8 SRSPB AGM followed by 'WILDLIFE AROUND BRITAIN'S COASTS' by David Tolliday
- 9 MRSPB 'BIRDS OF BROAD ACRES, YORKSHIRE' by Trevor Gunton
- 10 HO AGM followed by 'STRAIGHT FROM THE OLD WIFE'S MOUTH' by Brian Hallworth
- 11 **In Search of Skuas on Hilbre - £1 charge. To book: 0151 648 4371/3884**
- 13 NCRSPB Blacktoft Sands & Old Moor, Barnsley - ring for details
- 14 KOS Fairburn Ings, meet at 8:30am (ring for details of meeting place)
- 14 CADOS Teesside - ring for details
- 19 NCRSPB 'JUST A SECOND' by Andy Harmer
- 20 ADNHS Tatton Park for Forester's Walk - contact 0161 980 5000
- 20 **Hawk Watch at Wigg Island, Halton - 7:00am - 4:00pm**
- 21 **Hawk Watch at Wigg Island, Halton - 7:00am - 4:00pm**
- 21 **Migration Watch at Hale Lighthouse - 7:00am**
- 21 HPRSPB Moore Nature Reserve, meet at Marple at 9:00am - ring for details
- 21 MCOS Point Lynas contact Ray Evans 01829 752494
- 22 HPRSPB 'BIRDS OF NEW ZEALAND' by Brian Dyke
- 23 ADNHS 'WILDLIFE AROUND BRITAIN'S COASTS' by David Tolliday
- 26 KOS 'THE NATURAL HERITAGE OF THE PENNINES' by Gordon Yates
- 26 LOG 'THE GREAT EASTERN FLYWAY' by Mike McKavett
- 26 WGBG 'AN INDIAN EXPERIENCE' by David & Sigrun Tollerton
- 27 LOG Trip to Sweden to Oct 5th - ring for details

- 27 Migration Watch, Red Rocks, meet Stanley Rd, off King's Gap, Hoylake at 7:00am
 27 High Tide Birdwatch, Old Baths car park, Parkgate - 11:15am (HW 12:54, 9.9m)
 28 High Tide Birdwatch, Old Baths car park, Parkgate - 12:00noon (HW 13:33, 9.9m)

OCTOBER

- 2 CADOS 'SOUTH AMERICAN WAY' by Brayton Holt
 2-5 KOS Holy Island Weekend - ring for details
 3 CAWOS 'A LANE IN A POLISH MARSH' by Mike Lane
 4 Migration Watch at Denhall Lane, Burton - 7:00am start
 4 CADOS East Coast - ring for details
 7 MRSPB 'A GARDEN FOR BIRDS' by Keith Offord
 11 Birdwatch, Banks Road car park, Lower Heswall - 10:15am (HW 12:47, 9.3m)
 12 All Day (9 hrs) on Hilbre - £3 charge incl. hot meal. To book: 0151 648 4371/3884
 12 Migration Watch at Wigg Island & Oxmoor LNR - 7:00am - 10:00am
 12 NCRSPB Gigrin Farm - ring for details
 12 HPRSPB Old Moor Wetlands, meet at Marple at 8:30am - ring for details
 12 WGBG The Wirral by coach departing at 8:00am - ring for details
 13 SRSPB 'SCILLY THROUGH THE SEASONS' by Tim Melling
 14 ADNHS 'GALAPAGOS' by Dorothy Hudson
 16-19 MCOS North Yorkshire Coast Weekend contact Les Goulding 01925 265578
 17 NCRSPB AGM followed by 'CONSERVATION UPDATE' by Laurence Rose, RSPB NW Region
 17-19 HPRSPB Norfolk Weekend - ring for details
 19 SRSPB Filey Brigg/Flamborough Head by coach departing at 7:30am - ring for details
 20 HPRSPB 'SOUTHERN SPAIN' by Alan Gladwin
 24 KOS 'THE BIRDS OF YORKSHIRE' by Steve Knell
 24 WGBG 'TAYMYR THE ENDLESS DAY' by Brayton Holt
 25 High Tide Birdwatch, Old Baths car park, Parkgate - 10:00am (HW 11:46, 9.8m)
 26 High Tide Birdwatch, Old Baths car park, Parkgate - 10:45am (HW 12:28, 10.0m)
 26 Migration Watch at Dawpool NR. Meet at Dee Sailing Club car park at 7:30am
 27 High Tide Birdwatch, Old Baths car park, Parkgate - 10:30am (HW 12:09, 10.0m)
 28 ADNHS 'FLOWERS OF NORTH WALES' by Roy Beacham
 31 LOG 'WILDLIFE & SCENERY OF PEMBROKESHIRE COAST' by David Cummings

NOVEMBER

- 4 ADNHS BONFIRE SUPPER & FIREWORKS
 6 CADOS 'BIRDS HERE AND THERE' by Don Coan
 7 CAWOS 'THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY: SEABIRDING AROUND THE WORLD'
 by Tony Marr
 9 KOS Point of Ayr, meet Sessions House, Knutsford at 9:00am
 9 LOG Conwy/Aber Ogwen by coach - ring for details
 9 Birdwatch, Banks Road car park, Lower Heswall - 8:45am (HW 11:17, 9.2m)
 9 CADOS Leighton Moss - ring for details
 11 MRSPB 'BIRD ISLANDS, NORWAY TO CAPE VERDE' by Nick Williams
 11 ADNHS 'SALFORD QUAYS BEFORE AND AFTER' by Audrey Locksley
 13-16 NCRSPB Caerlaverock Weekend - ring for details
 14 MCOS 'BOSQUE DEL APACHE (NEW MEXICO)' by Tony Hamblin
 16 HPRSPB Martin Mere (NW BIRD FAIR) & Marshside meet at Marple at 8:30am
 16 WGBG Slimbridge by coach departing at 8:00am - ring for details

For further information on all Outdoor Events contact Jeff Clarke 01928 583905 (work) or 0151 423 4275 (home) or e-mail: conservation@cawos.org OR see the complete 2003 BIRDWATCHER'S DIARY at: www.deeestuary.freeserve.co.uk/highbird.htm

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 or, preferably please, by e-mail: info@cawos.org

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

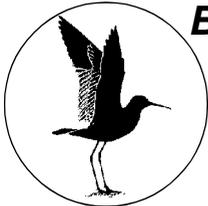
- ADNHS Altrincham & Dist. Natural History Soc, mtgs Hale Methodist Church Hall 7.30pm, Sec. Anne Mason 0161 980 8645
CADOS Chester & Dist. Ornithological Soc, mtgs Caldly Valley Community Centre 7.30pm, Prog. Sec. Nick French 01978 856522
CAWOS Cheshire & Wirral Ornithological Soc, mtgs Knutsford Civic 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 Peter Griffiths 0161 427 5325 or Pat O'Mara 0161 449 8299 (Outings Sec.)
KOS Knutsford Ornithological Soc, mtgs Jubilee Hall, Stanley Road 7.45pm, contact Roy Bircumshaw 01565 634193
LOG Lymm Ornithological Group, mtgs Lymm Village Hall 8.00pm, Prog. Sec. Hilary Unsworth 01925 860155
MCOS Mid-Cheshire Ornithological Soc, 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 St Matthew's Primary Sch, Stretton 7.45pm, Sec. Carol Davidson 01925 635967
NNHS Nantwich Natural History Soc, mtgs The Gables at 7:30pm, Sec. Mike Holmes 01270 611577, mike@uimprove.com
SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithological Soc, mtgs St Peter's Church Hall, Elworth 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
WGBG Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group, mtgs Wilmslow Guild HQ 7.45pm, Indoor Prog. Sec. Judith Rees 0161 980 5034

~ URGENTLY WANTED ~

TYPESETTER FOR THE CAWOS BIRD REPORT

We urgently require a typesetter for the 2002 Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report - due for publication later this year. If you have any contacts or leads please contact Richard Gabb asap!

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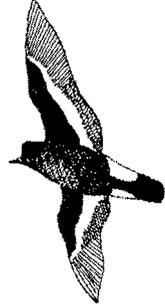
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