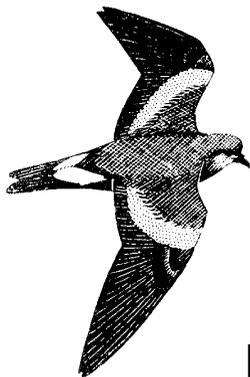


Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

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# BIRD NEWS

Number 66

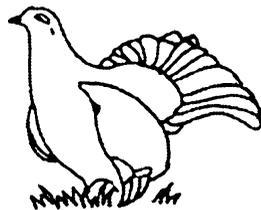
April 2005



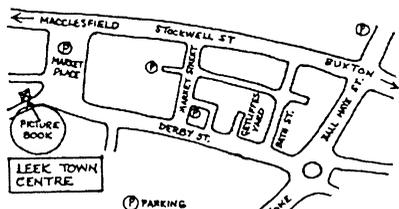
House Martin Survey Results 2004  
The Dee Estuary - Low Tide Birdwatching  
Cetti's Warbler • Woolston Eyes Reserve News

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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: Pallas's Warbler by Ray Scally

Other illustrations: Tony Broome, Tom Lowe, Bill Morton and Ron Plummer

# Guest Editorial

It's April once again, that month which tempts you into thinking that winter is over with warm sunny days, only to disappoint with cold fronts, frost and even snow. The resident birds are well adjusted to the frequent changes in the weather though and are still flocking to the feeders in my garden, whilst migrants from the south pour northward. It has, however, been an exceptionally early spring as far as the last point is concerned. Early dates are not only broken, but shattered. It's now not uncommon to be seeing the first House Martins in March and even Cuckoos arrived during the month. As I've mentioned before, the weather patterns are changing.

Change affects many aspects of our lives and those people involved with CAWOS are not immune. After five years as Chairman (not Chairperson or Chairwoman!), Sheila Blamire has passed the reins over to Brian Dyke. A very big thanks to Sheila who has held the chair very successfully alongside all her other roles. I am sure Brian will be equally up to the task and a warm welcome goes to him from all on Council. I don't think that he's quite mastered the withering glare though, the one frequently employed to keep the rest of us in order.

More change, but on a much sadder note, is the end of 'View from the Farmyard', superbly written each quarter by Pete Hall. As he leaves his present job, he reflects on the demise of farming as he knows it and his unique viewpoint will be sorely missed. His style of writing, describing the daily goings-on at the 200-year-old Toft Hall Farm, makes for a highly enjoyable read and his powers of observation would shame most birders. For me, his articles evoke memories of some of my first nature books. Do you remember the series of Ladybird books, *What to look for... in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter?* They were published in 1959 and illustrated by C.F.Tunnickliffe. I spent (and still do) many hours lost in the magic of a way of life that was disappearing even when I was young, much of it based on farming practices in Cheshire. The similarities between Pete's experiences and the pages in those children's books are too many to quote. I think that I can speak for the majority of Society members when I say that Pete's regular 'offerings' will be genuinely missed. A big thanks to him and a wish for all the success in the future, whatever he decides to do. What about a new series of nature books?

In complete contrast to the last paragraph, I thought I would mention an article printed in *The Economist* on March 17<sup>th</sup>. It outlines why birdwatching is so popular in Britain, due partly to the entrenched animal-loving nature of the great British public and the geographical position of the British Isles. The fact that the RSPB was founded by a group of Manchester ladies worried about the use of feathers in the hat trade, says it all. We're a relatively small, densely populated island with approximately 246 people per square kilometre. France has 110 people per the same area and is a much bigger country. Some bird species are declining, ironically, as the RSPB membership grows.

Lying between the Atlantic and North Sea, British birders are in an enviable position when it comes to seeing species from as far as North America on the one hand and Siberia on the other. Rarities regularly hit the headlines, whereas in other countries they wouldn't even be noticed. We also have 'twitchers', a whole sub-culture of dedicated birders who travel miles to see vagrants. They number a few thousand according to Stephen Moss and many have seen over 450 species in Britain.

But why does this type of birding appeal mainly to white British males? There are apparently few female or ethnic-minority twitchers. Popular explanations include the Protestant work ethic (people feel guilty about lying around doing nothing, and so fill their time with pseudo-useful things), Freudian psychology (a repressed male sexual urge leads to compulsive behaviour) and neuropsychology (type-S brains, more common amongst men, like making lists and cataloguing things; type-E brains, more common amongst women, don't).

From a personal viewpoint, I don't wholly agree or know enough to disagree, with any of the above points. I spent years twitching and enjoyed every minute, just as I now enjoy simply watching the common birds in my garden, and just as Pete enjoys his farmyard birds. What do you think?

**Tony Broome**

**Note: the copy date for the next issue is 25<sup>th</sup> May - 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.

# 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 winter period from December to February.*

## SITE REPORTS

### Dee Estuary and Inner Marsh Farm

A Slavonian Grebe briefly at Inner Marsh Farm on Feb 10th was the first site record and on Dec 10th, 70 Little Egrets roosted – a new county record. Neston Old Quay hosted 25 Little Egrets. Burton Marsh held peaks of 100+ Bewick's and 10 Whooper Swans. Inner Marsh Farm held 154 Pink-footed Geese (Feb 28th) and seven White-fronted Geese (Dec 5th-6th) with one or two on four other dates. 26 Brent Geese were off Heswall on Feb 9th. The long-staying Green-winged Teal remained at Inner Marsh Farm throughout. 19 Scaup off Heswall (Dec 12th) was a very high count for the estuary. A redhead Smew visited Inner Marsh Farm (Dec 6th) while the regular drake was seen on many dates. A Red Kite was near Burton (Jan 12th). The peak count of Hen Harriers at Parkgate was five and this site also hosted 10 Water Rails. Three Avocets flew over Heswall (Feb 22nd) but were not relocated. 13 Woodcocks at Burton was a good count and a wintering Whimbrel visited Neston on Jan 1st. 11 Short-eared Owls off Heswall was the peak count. Water Pipits were seen irregularly at Neston Old Quay with the peak of four on Jan 19th and one was at Parkgate on Dec 26th. The most extraordinary record was of two Cetti's Warblers at Neston Reed Bed from Feb 19th to 28th at least – the first twitchable occurrence of this species for the county. Eight wintering Chiffchaffs were at Heswall SF (Dec 7th) with four at Chester (Dec 21st). 40-50 Twite at Burton (Feb 20th) was a massive count and two Northern Bullfinches were at Heswall (Jan 23rd). At least 35 Reed Buntings roosted at Neston (Feb 6th).

### East Cheshire

A returning Little Grebe was at Adlington Driving Range on Jan 18th with another at Towers Yard Farm Pool, Poynton next day. A Bittern was seen occasionally at Rostherne Mere. Two Mute Swans at Adlington Driving Range (Jan 27th) was the observer's first record there. 70 Greylag Geese at Redesmere was a record site count (Dec 26th). The Egyptian Goose remained at Poynton Pool throughout. Seven Mandarin at Bottoms Resr on Dec 19th was the largest ever count for that area. A record 50 Teal were at Adlington Driving Range on Dec 20th. Poynton Pool hosted a male Shoveler on Dec 24th with two on Jan 16th. Four Scaup at Rostherne (Dec 4th) was a good record. A Long-tailed Duck remained at Catchpenny Pool from mid-Nov to Feb 15th with two birds present on Feb 6th and 15th at least. A Buzzard over a Poynton garden (Jan 1st) was only the fourth garden record and nearby at Poynton Pool, a Kestrel on Feb 22nd was equally rare. This site also had a Water Rail irregularly from Dec 18th to Feb 22nd and a record 30 Moorhens. Unusual wader records included the earliest ever returning Oystercatcher at Adlington Driving Range (Feb 6th), c30 Golden Plovers at Towers Road Fields, Poynton (Feb 23rd – one of very few records this winter), the first local record of Ruff at Adlington Driving Range (Jan 3rd), singles of Jack Snipe at both Lostock Hall Farm and Towers Road Fields (both Poynton), a Woodcock at Lostock Hall Farm (second site record on Jan 8th) and the earliest ever returning Curlew at Adlington Driving Range (Feb 3rd). Green Sandpipers were at Acre Nook SQ, Capesthorpe and Rostherne Mere. A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was at Poynton Pool on four dates in Feb. Adlington Driving Range held c80 Skylarks on Feb 23rd and 60+ Meadow Pipits on Dec 27th. A good candidate for bird of the year was the incredible record of a wintering Pallas's Warbler at Crossley, near Congleton from Jan 30th to Feb 22nd when it was thought to have succumbed during a cold spell. A Raven over Poynton Pool (Jan 25th) was a major rarity. 70+ Greenfinches roosted at Lostock Hall Farm on both Jan 8th and Feb 19th. Single Crossbills visited Macclesfield Forest on Dec 12th and Feb 20th but a Corn Bunting at Moberley on Dec 9th was an even rarer find.

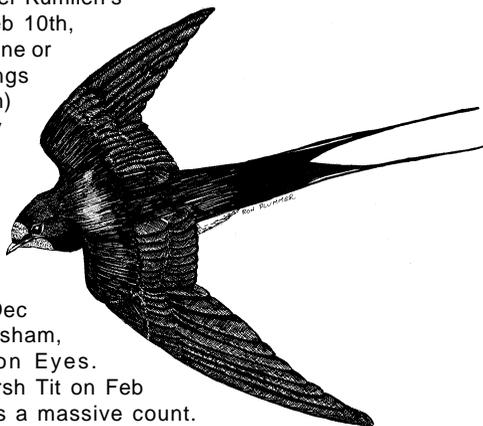


## Hilbre, Red Rocks and West Kirby

28 Red-throated Divers and a Black-throated Diver were off Hilbre (Jan 9th). Brent Geese numbers at Hilbre broke the county record four times with 56 on Dec 21st increasing to 60 on Dec 31st, 63 on Jan 16th and c70 on Jan 23rd. A long-staying drake Long-tailed Duck was at West Kirby ML (Feb 16th-28th at least). 10,000 Dunlin and 15,000 Knot were the peak counts at West Kirby shore. Two Spotted Redshanks at West Kirby on Dec 15th were unseasonal. An adult Glaucous Gull visited Hilbre (Jan 15th-16th) before reappearing at West Kirby (Jan 26th). A Kingfisher at Red Rocks (Feb 10th) was a major rarity there. The only passerines of note were a Chiffchaff at West Kirby, two Twite on Hilbre, c500 Linnets at Thurstaston and a Snow Bunting at West Kirby (Feb 8th-10th).

## Mersey Estuary and Warrington

Two Bitterns wintered at Moore NR. On Jan 23rd, c550 Pink-footed Geese flew over Moore NR. A dark-bellied Brent Goose flew over Richmond Bank on Jan 29th, with Pink-footed Geese. Two Mandarin visited Dibbinsdale LNR and a female visited Rixton Moss. Two Scaup were at Woolston in Jan and a fem Red-breasted Merganser on the Weaver Bend. The peak count of Little Stints on the Weaver Bend was six on Dec 4th. A Woodcock was at Moore NR on Jan 23rd. Mediterranean Gulls were at Arpley Tip/Richmond Bank/Moore NR on seven dates including two adults on Feb 17th. Other records of rare gulls there included up to six Iceland Gulls (including three together on Feb 10th), a probable 3rd-winter Kumlien's Gull (Jan 26th), a 1st-winter Kumlien's Gull (Feb 10th, 22nd), up to three Yellow-legged Gulls daily and one or two Glaucous Gulls. Further rare gull sightings included an imm Iceland Gull over Hale (Feb 6th) and a 1st-winter Glaucous Gull at Rock Ferry (Jan 15th). Three Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were at Moore NR on Feb 26th following others at Lymm and Spital. The most extraordinary records were of a Swallow reported flying over Fiddler's Ferry on Jan 31st and possibly the same bird at Gowy Meadows on Feb 20th. A Black Redstart lingered briefly at Prenton on Dec 16th-17th. Wintering Chiffchaffs were at Frodsham, Richmond Bank, Wigg Island and Woolston Eyes. Stanney Woods LNR had its first record of Marsh Tit on Feb 22nd and 150 Reed Buntings at Woolston was a massive count.



## Nantwich and South Cheshire

Two Red-necked Grebes were reported at Combermere (Jan 16th) – an excellent local record. High counts included 108 Shoveler at Bar Mere, 53 Snipe at Rope and 19 Woodcocks at Moss Wood. Single Mediterranean Gulls were at Hurleston on Dec 12th, Deer Park Mere on Dec 16th and Barony Park on Jan 31st. The Hurleston gull roost produced 20,000 Black-headed Gulls on Dec 11th, 1,200 Common Gulls and 750 Lesser Black-backed Gulls both on Jan 20th. A roost of 97 Pied Wagtails was at Hurleston. The Starling roost at Nantwich during Feb reached 300,000 birds.

## North Wirral Shore

27 Red-throated Divers and 129 Great Crested Grebes were off Hoylake (Feb 16th) and a Slavonian Grebe was there (Feb 13th, 16th). Two Red-crested Pochard were at Birkenhead Park on Dec 3rd with one remaining to Jan 16th. 25 Scaup off Leasowe (Jan 9th) and 47 off Hoylake (Feb 16th) were high counts. Hoylake also hosted two Velvet and 150+ Common Scoters on Feb 16th. Up to seven Purple Sandpipers were seen irregularly at New Brighton and Wallasey. Two Spotted Redshanks were at Hoylake on Dec 16th. A rare find was a Black Guillemot off Hoylake (Feb 10th, 12th). Scarce passerines were restricted to a Chiffchaff at Meols, 12 Twite at Wallasey (Jan 8th with 35 on 10th) and two Snow Buntings at Wallasey (Feb 8th-10th).

## Northwich

A Bittern was seen regularly at Budworth Mere throughout the winter with two on Dec 20th. Budworth Mere hosted a drake Mandarin on Dec 27th-30th and a female Scaup on Feb 4th. Another drake Mandarin visited Shakerley Mere and a redhead Smew was at Newchurch Common (Dec 26th). 15 Woodcocks at Carey Park, Northwich on Feb 6th was an exceptional count. A Green Sandpiper visited Budworth Mere on Feb 20th and 23rd. An adult Mediterranean Gull visited Budworth Mere (Feb 6th-7th) and a report of an adult Caspian Gull came from there on Jan 16th. A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was irregularly at Marbury CP during the winter with another at Allostock on Jan 21st. Carey Park, Northwich hosted two Twite on Feb 14th and a Chiffchaff on Dec 18th.

## Sandbach Flashes and South-East Cheshire

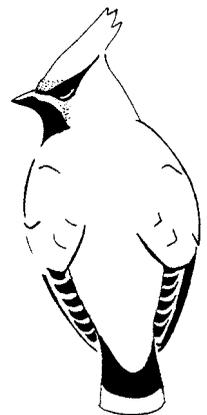
All records relate to Sandbach Flashes unless stated otherwise. Nine Whooper Swans were at Arclid SQ on Jan 30th. A total of 1,430 Pink-footed Geese passed over in one hour on Jan 23rd. The peak duck counts included 55 Shelduck, 37 Pintail, nine Goosanders and 21 Pochard. A male Goshawk on Feb 8th was an excellent flashes record. 10 Buzzards soared together on Feb 15th with 12 at Rode Pool the same day. On Jan 21st, a Rough-legged Buzzard flew over the A530 Middlewich Road at Walley's Green. The peak counts of Ruff, Jack Snipe and Redshank were 16, three and 19 respectively. A Green Sandpiper was at Middlewich Lime Beds on Jan 8th. An adult Mediterranean Gull was present on Jan 17th, Feb 14th and 24th. An adult Ring-billed Gull seen briefly (Feb 21st) and a different bird seen on Feb 25th represent only the third and fourth flashes records. On Dec 29th, a 1st win Glaucous Gull was present but unfortunately it died the next day. Remarkably, on Dec 31st, another 1st win Glaucous was found and it remained until Jan 2nd then reappeared Feb 11th-16th. A Marsh Tit was regularly at Rode Pool during Feb. 36 Tree Sparrows were at the feeding station on Jan 3rd.

## Species Highlights

Firecrests have been relatively rare in recent years so this winter's high numbers were notable with at least 12 birds present, including singles at Congleton (Feb 4th), Dibbinsdale LNR (max. two on Jan Feb 6th, 26th), Northwich (Feb 17th), Rivacre Valley CP (birds regularly seen with max. three on Jan 27th), Spital (max two on Jan 16th), West Kirby (Feb 8th), Wigg Island (Jan) and Woolston (Jan).

Wintering Stonechats (at least 39 birds) were also much in evidence with birds at Adlington Driving Range (two), Bache House, Bar Mere, Burton (four), Fiddler's Ferry (four), Gowy Meadows CWT (at least six), Hoylake (four), Inner Marsh Farm (two), Leasowe (two), Moore NR, Parkgate, Red Rocks (two), Weaver Bend (five) and West Kirby (four).

This winter saw the largest ever influx of Waxwings to Cheshire and Wirral, involving over 1,000 birds at nearly 40 sites. In early Dec numbers were fairly modest, but just after Christmas they rocketed with the largest day total on Jan 19th when nearly 700 birds were present across the county. The max counts were as follows: Bollington (10), Bromborough (2), Caldy (150 - a Wirral record), Chester (307+), Chester Zoo (22), Congleton (33), Crewe (138), Cuddington (100), Grappenhall (21), Greasby (93), Great Sutton (87), Higher Whitley (1), Hoylake (5), Inner Marsh Farm (16), Knutsford (50), Little Neston (21), Lymm (100+), Macclesfield/Tytherington (260+), Macclesfield Forest (50+), Mere (12+), Middlewich (30), Moore NR (59), Nantwich (c30), Ness (4), Northwich (110+), Ollerton (15+), Poynton (80+), Rivacre CP (4), Runcorn (270), Scholar Green (2), Upton (30), Warrington (450), Weaverham (90), West Kirby (8), Wistaston, nr Crewe (11) and Woolston Eyes (50). The influx continued into early April. An in-depth analysis of the influx over the 2004/05 winter period will appear in the next issue of *Bird News*.



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Thanks/acknowledgements to:- Birdcall, BirdGuides, *Birdwatch*, *Birdwatching*, J. Canovan (Rostherne Mere LNR), Hilbre Bird Observatory, G. Howard (Macclesfield RSPB), C. Hull (Nantwich Naturalists), B. Perkins (Sandbach Flashes), R. Smith ([www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk)) and anyone else who passed records on.

# Sites to Watch

## WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP NEWSLETTER 2004

The Woolston Eyes Conservation Group was formally set up in 1979, making 2004 our twenty-fifth anniversary. From relatively modest beginnings the Reserve has grown in status and is now one of the most important SSSIs in the north of England. Along the way there have been setbacks, none more so than the complete draining of No.3 Bed in 1991. Many considered that the Eyes had been irretrievably damaged and the SSSI status hard to sustain given the major habitat loss. However, those of us who have been involved at Woolston since the early days are well aware of the resilience of this large site.



Within three years much of the water returned, soon followed by the Black-necked Grebes and wildfowl. Woolston has since become even more important than in pre-drainage days. The commitment of many members of WECG - both past and present - has been crucial in the development of the Reserve, and what has been achieved should one day be celebrated in a written history of the Eyes. I am sure that others could learn from our successes – and mistakes, of which there have been a few! What is clear is that without the loyal support of our permit holders we would have achieved so much less.

### Revision of SSSI

Woolston Eyes was designated an SSSI in February 1986. This was for the nationally important wintering numbers of Teal, Shoveler, Pintail and Pochard. Since then important breeding populations of Black-necked Grebes, Gadwall and Pochard have become established. The site has held up to 40% of the UK's breeding Black-necked Grebes whilst the national populations of Pochard and Gadwall are much rarer than many probably realise, at about 400 and 1000 pairs respectively. The twenty or so pairs of each which breed at Woolston most years therefore represent a significant proportion of the national populations of these ducks. English Nature has recognised this by revising the SSSI designation to include these important breeding assemblages whilst at the same time removing Pintail whose wintering numbers have significantly declined since 1986. As there was no objection to the revision this became law at the end of the statutory consultation period in early September 2004.

This clearly strengthens the level of protection at Woolston and WECG is grateful to English Nature (in particular Mandy North of their Wigan office) for all the hard work involved in guiding this revision through. It also emphasises the importance of recording, for without the careful monitoring of breeding populations, as well as the continuing monthly wildfowl (WeBS) counts the essential supporting data would simply not exist.

### Relations between WECG and the Landowner

The good news continues! After many years of only limited contact with the Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCC) it is pleasing to report that in the past year several very productive meetings have taken place, and it is proposed that at least twice yearly meetings will occur in the future to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern. It is clear that MSCC takes seriously its responsibilities under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and is actively engaged with WECG and English Nature in the production and implementation of a Management Plan for the Eyes. We are very encouraged by this and will work closely with the Company and its advisers to maximise the wildlife importance of Woolston whilst recognising their need to continue to use the site for dredging deposition.

### New Hide on No.3 Bed

Earlier this year, Roger Benbow, Alan Patterson and a number of volunteers constructed a new, raised, hide on the south bank of No.3 Bed. From its elevated position it provides excellent views looking north over the reeds and pools. Given its rather stark outline it is easy to see how one

visitor called it the 'gallows' hide, but with plans to add a roof in the near future this is an important addition to the Reserve's viewing facilities.

### **Diverters on Power Lines**

Since the construction of the wetland on the loop of No.4 Bed four years ago, there have been many incidents of birds flying into the power lines which cross this water. We know of many ducks and two Mute Swans having been killed and, very seriously, also two Black-necked Grebes. These are almost certainly the tip of the iceberg. The Group wrote to MANWEB several years ago alerting them to this problem and a site visit with a MANWEB engineer took place. In spite of promises to fit prominent diverters that the birds could see, nothing was done, though MANWEB did pay for tree coppicing below the lines. Earlier this year, however, major servicing and replacement work took place and the contractors fitted up to 600 diverters following discussions with WECG and English Nature. We hope this will greatly reduce bird casualties in the future.

### **Reed Spraying on No.3 Bed**

In last year's Newsletter I mentioned that reed spraying was planned on No.3 Bed in the autumn of 2004. The aim of this is to reverse encroachment of reeds into open water areas while at the same time creating a more broken, sinuous edge to the reeds. This can help to increase the breeding numbers of waterfowl and invertebrate populations. The herbicide used (glyphosate) is only effective when applied in dry weather. Given the high rainfall in recent months it is a miracle that any spraying was possible, but in a brief dry spell in early September two areas were sprayed in No.3 Bed. We will have to wait until next spring to see how effective this has been. Spraying on the islands on the loop of No.4 Bed has been postponed until spring 2005.

### **Surveys at Woolston**

The monthly wildfowl (WeBS) counts and the annual warbler census continue to monitor the populations of a number of bird species, whilst a high level of bird ringing occurs throughout the year. It is our aim to gain as much knowledge as possible of other wildlife at Woolston with surveys of amphibians, fungi and moths having been carried out, while a number of wardens monitor butterflies and plants each year. We know next to nothing, however, of many other taxa. It was pleasing, therefore, to be approached by Carl Clew and Tony Parker of Liverpool Museum who plan to visit the Eyes next year. Carl is an expert on bees and hopes to use the Eyes as a site to train others in bee identification. We are hoping too, to have a survey of spiders, which have never been studied at Woolston.

### **Highlights of 2004**

In February, David Bell, Warrington Council's ecologist flushed a **Bittern** from Paddington Meadows, just to the west of No.4 Bed and watched it fly on to the loop. Sadly, it was not seen again, but this was an excellent record of this rare visitor to the Eyes. In the same month 663 **Pochard** were present (most on No.3 Bed), the highest count for four years. Over 2000 **Teal** were noted at the same time. Two **Firecrests** wintered on No.3 Bed and their tendency to fly into ringers' nets made for some excellent close up views of these fine birds. In early March a **Great Grey Shrike** was a good find on No.1 Bed. It proved somewhat elusive but was seen by a few lucky wardens on several dates up to the end of that month.

A major surprise in the spring was a heavy passage of **Bramblings** with flocks of up to 40 seen. Many were mist netted on No.3 Bed. Two **Mediterranean Gulls** were present in spring (both second summers) with an adult also seen. As always they soon moved on.

The first **Black-necked Grebes** returned on 16<sup>th</sup> March and subsequently at least 24 adults summered. It is believed that 10 pairs bred on No.3 Bed with another pair hatching young on No.2 Bed. In all, a total of 14 young fledged making 2004 the third best year ever and a welcome improvement upon the two previous poor years. Five of the pairs on No.3 Bed double brooded, but sadly all of the young disappeared within a week of hatching as the weather in July became cold and wet. Two of the young were still present on No.3 Bed in mid-November 2004.

The May warbler census found a total of 549 singing males across the Reserve. Highlights included record numbers of **Reed Warblers** (93) and **Chiffchaffs** (58) with the 136 **Whitethroats** the best showing for many years. The 90 **Willow Warblers** was a pleasing improvement after many years of decline. **Sedge Warblers** (113) are now about half the peak population of the late 1990s.

One of the major surprises of the year was the discovery of four breeding pairs of **Kestrels** on the Thelwall Viaduct - two pairs to the south of the canal and two to the north. The motorway contractors initially thought that a pair of Peregrines was breeding but a visit by two members of WECG confirmed two pairs of Kestrels. The contractors later discovered two other Kestrel nests with young. Some of you may have seen the story of the Kestrels on the Viaduct in the *Manchester Evening News*.

**Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Tel: 01925 264251  
E-mail: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com**

**Note:** An Open Day will be held on **Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2005** from 10.00am to 4.00pm (free of charge!). Attractions will include guided walks around No.3 Bed, ringing demonstrations and moth trapping, and there will be displays featuring CAWOS, English Nature and others. For further information contact Dave Hackett (01925 752913) or Les Jones (01925 821757) or look on the WECG website: [www.woolstoneyes.co.uk](http://www.woolstoneyes.co.uk)



## THE DEE ESTUARY - LOW TIDE BIRDWATCHING

"Mud, mud, glorious mud, nothing quite like it for cooling the blood" - so went the old Flanders & Swan hippo song. Of course, mud is a key ingredient of the estuary as far as the birds are concerned, and you will see plenty of it if you go birdwatching at low tide!

Some birders wouldn't consider a visit to the estuary other than at high tide, on the look-out, as they inevitably are, for rarities. But for myself being 'a bad birdwatcher' (as per Simon Barnes's marvellous book) I find being about at low tide very enjoyable and immensely rewarding. Rewarding not in the sense of being able to tick a few birds off my year list, but for the sheer dramatic spectacle of seeing thousands of birds hunting, fleeing, feeding, roosting, calling and flying. Some of you might be surprised at my putting down roosting as a low tide activity, but many birds, particularly the larger ones such as Oystercatchers and Godwits, spend a lot of time roosting both at low and high tide - the living must be good! Below is a description of the best areas for low tide birdwatching and what you might expect to see there.

**But first a Warning:** Apart from a few relatively safe areas as described below, such as the route to Hilbre Island, do not be tempted to venture away from the beach and shore paths. As well as the danger to yourself of getting trapped in thick mud with an incoming tide, you will also be unnecessarily disturbing birds.

Also, I should add that my definition of 'low tide' is fairly flexible, but loosely take it as being from three hours after high tide to three hours before high tide, i.e. the low half of the tidal cycle.

### Leasowe Shore

This includes all the mudflats from Leasowe Lighthouse down to Wallasey shore at the junction of Harrison Drive and Kings Parade. These mudflats are not only one of the best places to see feeding waders in the Dee estuary/north Wirral area but one of the best places in the whole country. Mockbeggar Wharf, as this area is known, is relatively low lying so the sea never goes out very far, but it does get covered early by the rising tide.

Good places to park are either at the car park at the junction of Pasture Road and Leasowe Road (on the A551) or in North Wirral Coastal Park at the end of Green Lane (by the Gunsite). There is an embankment the whole of the length of the shore here giving great views of the birds. It is also safe to go down on to the shore (but beware, the embankment can be slippery) where there is firm sand for about 50 metres out. This is much used by dog walkers but don't be tempted to go out any further as it turns into thick mud.

Typical winter counts (counts based on Low Tide Wetland Bird Survey 2001/02 as well as my own observations and those sent to me personally) here are 2,000 Grey Plover, 250 Sanderling, 15,000 Dunlin, 350 Curlew, 2,500 Redshank, 7,000 Oystercatcher, 20,000 Knot and 6,000 Bar-tailed Godwit; a large roost of gulls is also usually present. Peak numbers, especially of Knot and Dunlin can be considerably higher. About four hours before high tide is the prime time to see these thousands of waders, and as the tide comes in many birds move up towards Leasowe Lighthouse then beyond to Meols and Hoylake.

## Hilbre Island

Very much a place where birders spend the high tide, but, strange though it may seem, I actually prefer low tide. May be I've just been unlucky, but I seem to recall being stuck on Hilbre for five hours over high tide, often freezing cold and wet, with very little in the way of birds to see! That isn't to say that Hilbre can't be a fabulous place at high tide, just that you have to get the weather and time of year just right.

At low tide there is always plenty to see - especially at my favourite times of year, late summer and mid-winter. I always look forward to the return of the Sandwich Terns in early July. They are the first of our terns to finish breeding and one of their favourite spots before heading south is the sandbanks around Hilbre Island. Here several hundred roost each low tide, the juveniles constantly calling out to be fed, and with the returning calls of the adults the noise they make is unbelievable! By early August Common and Little Terns join the throng, and with the comparatively warm weather it is extremely pleasant just to sit on the grass and watch these wonderful birds. This time of year is also excellent for watching numerous sea birds such as Gannets, skuas and Common Scoters, whatever the state of the tide.

Mid-winter is far from warm, but we do have Brent Geese, Purple Sandpipers and loads of other waders around to make up for it! The rocks around the islands are a favourite feeding area for hundreds of Oystercatchers and Turnstones, and Brent Geese feed on the seaweed on the rocks at low tide - invariably moving off to Little Eye or elsewhere as the tide comes in. As you walk over to Hilbre it is worthwhile stopping at the south end of Little Eye and having a quick look through your telescope. The mudflats you see will just be teeming with waders and Shelduck, as described in the section below on Thurstaston and Caldly.

A bonus for coming out to Hilbre at low tide is the Grey Seal haul-out on West Hoyle Bank, here 300 to 500 can be seen throughout the year.

For a description of how to get to Hilbre see 'Planning your trip', and for tide times see 'Tides' on [www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk).

## Thurstaston and Caldly

Huge concentrations of Shelduck, Oystercatchers and Redshank make this area a fabulous site. Given the right time of year it is doubtful if you will see more anywhere in the country, and that's not to mention large numbers of Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Knot and Dunlin as well! Heswall gutter (channel) winds its way close to the shore here and acts as a magnet for the birds. The area within half a mile of the beach is very muddy and contains the crustaceans and worms the birds love to feed on. I've stood on Caldly steps in mid-winter and have been awestruck when a Peregrine flies over the mudflats as the thousands of birds all take to the air at once, like a flying carpet of birds.

There are three particularly good vantage points, all with good car parking:

**1. Caldly Steps at the end of Croft Drive in Caldly.** Always thousands of Oystercatchers here and in cold weather thousands of Knot (if Caldly Steps car park is full there is another car park next to the Wirral Way also off Croft Drive).

**2. Parking area next to Dee Sailing Club.** Go to the end of Station Road (Thurstaston), turn right past the caravan park and continue until just before the sailing club where you can park on the cliff top. Here there is a track going down to the beach and a causeway over the sand and mud used by fishing boat and yacht crews. At low tide it is safe to walk out to the end of this causeway and you really get a sense of being out in the middle of the birds - wonderful!

**3. Thurstaston Visitor Centre.** Again go along Station Road but turn left in to the main car park just before the bridge. From here it is a short walk to the top of the cliff giving a great vista over the shore. In late September and October over 8,000 Shelduck will be assembled, and winter brings hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits and thousands of Knot. In cold weather many birds feed close to the beach giving excellent opportunities for photography. Look towards Heswall to the south and there will be good numbers of Teal, Mallard and Lapwing near the marsh, and sometimes Golden Plover and Pintail. Don't try and scramble down the cliff, there are steps down at the end of Station Road.

**And on the Welsh side of the estuary:**

## Connah's Quay and Flint

The Deeside Naturalists' Society reserve at Connah's Quay is members only, but they do have open days from time to time (see their website for details). The main hide to the north gives a good vantage point over the mud where many Teal, Mallard, Knot, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit feed at low tide. Autumn is the best time to see Black-tailed Godwits and over 4,000 can sometimes be observed busy feeding, either off here or Flint. There is good car parking at Flint by the castle. Walk northwards along the shore path and you get to Flint point. From October to February this is a great place to see duck at low tide loafing around on the far side of the channel - thousands of Pintail and Wigeon as well as good numbers of Shelduck, Mallard and Teal. Plenty of waders use this area too.

## Greenfield Dock

This is not where the 'fun' ship is but further south, there are a couple of roads to it south of the Sunday Market, one opposite Greenfield Valley. Here you can park your car and look over the River Dee channel; the 'dock' is just a small harbour filled with small boats and dries out completely at low tide. As the channel here remains quite deep even at low tide the seagoing birds of the estuary tend to concentrate off here. Late summer can bring in hundreds of terns - many from the huge Common Tern colony at nearby Shotton. September and October are good months to see Great Crested Grebes; well over a hundred can congregate here and if you pick a calm day they will be a lot easier to see. It is also a good place for Red-breasted Mergansers, during March and April there are usually 20 - 30. At high tide all these birds tend to disperse across the estuary, so low tide is definitely best.

## Ffynnongroyw

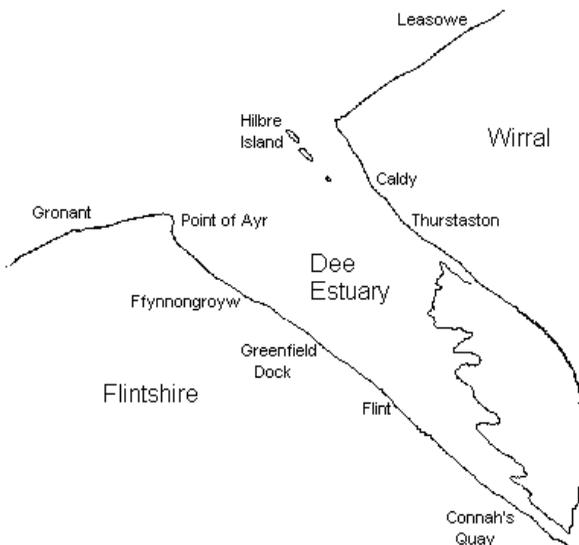
You can park in the village before crossing the busy main road and on to the railway bridge. The view from the top of the bridge reveals an extensive area of mud much used at low tide by Knot, both species of godwits, Dunlin, Shelduck and especially Oystercatchers.

## Point of Ayr and Gronant

Although both these locations are best in the high half of the tide cycle nevertheless there can be large concentrations of gulls, terns and Cormorants on the sandbanks at low tide from late June until September.

**Richard Smith**

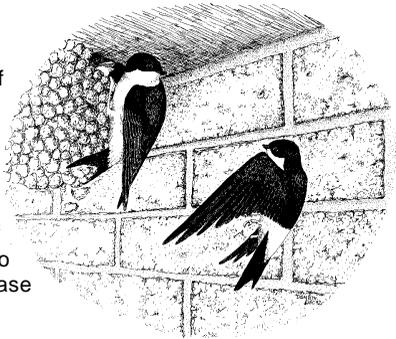
This article was first published on the Dee Estuary Birding website - [www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk)



# Projects and Surveys

## HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY 2004

It is pleasing to report an increase in the number of participants in the survey in 2004, with 24 forms completed for 25 sites (cf. 19 returns in 2003). As usual most of those who submitted data are non-CAWOS members, who have a great interest in their House Martins. The forms returned to me are frequently accompanied by lengthy letters detailing the fortunes of their birds and the threats they face. It would be nice to receive records from CAWOS members as well and increase our knowledge of the county's House Martins.



### Arrival and Departure

Most sites saw the first birds back in mid-April, although an early arrival was at Toft Hall on 5<sup>th</sup> April. As usual, a few observers reported House Martins arriving very late, for example Harry Andrews at Winsford not seeing his first birds until late May and Jackie Ashworth's at Rainow not visiting her breeding colony until 5<sup>th</sup> June.

Departure dates are always less precise, with some observers away on holiday, but most Martins departed from mid to late September, with the latest at Croft, near Warrington, on 1<sup>st</sup> October.

### Major Sites

I was not able to arrange access to Styal Prison this year and so the largest reported colonies were Toft Hall, which showed a pleasing increase with 27 first broods (though just seven second broods), and Holcroft Hall, Culcheth, where Angela Love had 26 occupied nests on this old Tudor mansion. Interestingly, information was submitted by J.D. Atkinson and Alan Straw for a previously unrecorded site, the Horseshoe Inn at Newbold by Astbury, south of Congleton. Up to 17 newly built nests were occupied there, the old nests having been removed for repainting the previous autumn. Country inns, which often have overhanging eaves, are popular House Martin sites, with, for example, good populations in the recent past on the Cock of Budworth and the Cat and Lion at Stretton.

Farm houses, too are often favoured, with P. Matthews discovering two interesting sites high above Macclesfield during Breeding Atlas fieldwork. One at Hordern Farm supported 20 pairs, while another nearby, which was empty, held 10 pairs. John Gregory, however, who lives at Pit Farm, Swettenham, reported just two breeding pairs in 2004, a major fall from the 34 occupied nests in 1998. The significant collapse in his population occurred in 1999 and is reminiscent of a similar crash at Moss Brow Farm, Lower Stretton, a few years ago, when numbers fell from 46 pairs to just a few nests in a year or two. The reasons for these sudden losses are not known. Again, no information has been submitted for the once large populations at the AstraZeneca site at Alderley Edge or that at Hunts Lock, Northwich.

### Breeding Success

The majority of observers reported a reasonably successful breeding season at their sites. For example, most of the 20 pairs at Hordern Farm were thought to have double brooded and Ann Pym at Swettenham had six first broods and five second in the six nests on her house, while both pairs double brooded on Carole Taylor's home in Widnes. Mr and Mrs Johnson at Helsby had good success for the second year running, with up to 100 House Martins above the area later in the summer, although birds breeding on nearby properties had mixed fortunes. Harry Andrews at Winsford also saw success with his two pairs (both double brooded), but only after Harry had repaired one of the nests with 'No Nails' adhesive! Clearly, there is a very good population in Steve Turner's street in Barnton, for in addition to the two pairs which bred on his house he believes that up to another 12 properties nearby had breeding House Martins on them.

A few sites were less successful, with Beryl Colley-Davies at Norley again witnessing battles between House Martins and House Sparrows which “raged for three weeks” after the House Martins returned. At one point the House Martins moved to a neighbouring property but without success. They then returned to her house and built two nests. These produced chicks, but the Sparrows’ “bombardment” continued leading to three chicks being ejected from one nest. As the season progressed two further House Martin nests were built and were probably successful. M.F.Griffiths from Sandbach also reported problems with House Sparrows, and his House Martins left by the end of July. Hilary Sarjeant, who once had a healthy population on her house at Parkgate had no House Martins breeding for the first time in 20 years and it was disappointing to see that only seven of the 27 pairs that produced first broods at Toft Hall subsequently double brooded. Rob Cockbain reported fewer breeding pairs in Hale Village (near Widnes) than in previous years.

Given the extremely wet July and August it was surprising that few comments were made about the weather apart from Jackie Ashworth’s belief that the two nests on her home at Rainow were washed off in a severe downpour on the very wet 25<sup>th</sup> August.

The only report of predation came from Ann Pym, who witnessed a Magpie taking a large young Martin from a nest on her house.

### **Artificial Nests**

The Rev Hugh Linn has five artificial boxes on the Rectory at Eccleston, Chester. Four of these were occupied and three of the pairs double brooded. Similar success occurred on the two boxes Steve Turner has on his house at Barnton, but Sheila Blamire’s boxes at Mere were not used this year, nor were those erected in 2004 by Julian Borrow at Wildboardclough – probably early days yet!

### **Threats to House Martins**

Every year reports are submitted to me of nests being removed by people who are presumably not prepared to tolerate the mess that House Martins can create below an active nest. Attempts are also often made to deter the birds from breeding and several were reported this year, the most common being string or plastic strips hung from the eaves. The more expensive option is wire mesh stapled to the soffits, which has been done on a number of properties in Warrington. Presumably this has been happening for a long time and House Martins have adapted to it by moving elsewhere.

A much more worrying threat is the increasing use of uPVC replacement soffits, which have been discussed in previous reports. There is little doubt that these offer much less adhesion than wood for House Martin nests. Many observers commented on this on their recording forms and expressed concerns for the long-term future of House Martins given the spread of uPVC. Speaking to householders in Antrobus who have fitted these soffits and previously had House Martins breeding, there was evidence that nests built on them frequently fell off before the end of the breeding season. In contrast, others have had a different experience. Phil Brighton at Croft had uPVC soffits fitted to his home in 2001 and House Martins have bred successfully since. Harry Andrews at Winsford had had a similar experience, but only after adaptations were made to the uPVC to make it easier for the birds to gain access to the gable end. Perhaps it depends on the product, with some plastics having greater adhesion than others. One wonders if the manufacturers are aware of this potential long-term problem and would be prepared to address it. Two supporters of this survey are having replacement uPVC soffits fitted before the 2005 breeding season and it will be interesting to see how their birds cope.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, it seems to have been a reasonably successful breeding season for the majority of sites reported. It was pleasing to see an increase in the number of forms returned in 2004 and one hopes this continues. My thanks go to all who submitted data - often extremely detailed - on the fortunes of their local House Martins and I would request that **all Atlas fieldworkers, if they confirm breeding, note the size and location of the colony.** This would add greatly to the CAWOS database of sites and numbers of breeding pairs.

**Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Tel: 01925 264251**

**Contributors:** H.Andrews (Winsford), J.Ashworth (Rainow), J.D.Atkinson (Macclesfield), S.Blamire (Mere), P.Brighton, (Croft), D.Buchanan (Warrington), R.Cockbain (Hale, nr Widnes), B.Colley-Davies (Norley), J.Gilbody (Cuddington), J.Gregory (Swettenham), M.F.Griffiths (Sandbach), P.Hall (Toft), W.Hassall (Great Sutton, Ellesmere Port), D.Hinkes (Rainow), M.Hood (Mobberley), Mr & Mrs Johnson (Helsby), H.Linn (Eccleston, Chester), A.Love (Culcheth), P.Matthews (Macclesfield), A.Pym (Swettenham), H.Sarjeant (Parkgate), A.Straw (Newbold Astbury, Congleton), C.Taylor (Widnes), S.J.Turner (Barnton). Information was also submitted by Mrs M.Caldwell for a site in Greater Manchester.

## HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY

**Please take part in this year's survey -  
encourage your friends and neighbours as well!**

**Contact: Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF**

**Tel: 01925 264251 E-mail: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com**

**Any information is welcome, e.g. numbers, breeding success (or not!), anecdotes, etc.**

## CHESHIRE BARN OWL GROUPS

**At a recent meeting of Cheshire Barn Owl Groups the following reports were made:**

**Broxton** have now erected 200 boxes although about half a dozen may be considered moribund for various reasons. Many new breeding sites were found but some of the traditional sites had been unsuccessful. There were 44 breeding pairs.

**Mid-Cheshire** have now erected 136 boxes and have established a good working relationship with Macclesfield Borough Council. They are also on a consultative panel for the Stockport relief road. Cameras have been installed in selected boxes with great success.

**Wirral** have now erected 126 boxes, some 20 of which may be considered moribund. Training days for members have been organised and run by Steve Binney. There was much anecdotal evidence given leading Wirral to conclude that a raised water table was affecting nesting in parts of the Wirral.

**South Cheshire** are making good progress with a very small but dedicated team and have now erected 37 boxes: 27 in trees, 4 on poles and 6 in barns. 10 confirmed breeding sites were reported, including one barn, two hay bales and two 'natural' nest sites in ash trees. Broxton Group offered the help of equipment and manpower in the coming season.

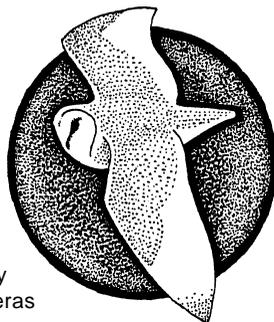
**East Cheshire is now the only bit of Cheshire not covered by an active Barn Owl group!**

**Please get involved.** A dedicated fieldwork team of at least five is needed for the long term to replicate what other groups have achieved within the county. The advantage of Barn Owl groups goes well beyond the specific species, as farmers and landowners are very sympathetic towards this 'flagship' bird. They really want to help. This gives birders and conservationists a very good starting point both to get to know and talk to farmers, and for access where otherwise it may be denied. The work does get people involved with both DEFRA and FWAG.

East Cheshire is defined as everything east of a line from the parishes of Wilmslow in the north, to Bradwall in the south, i.e. everything east of Wilmslow, Chorley, Nether Alderley, Chelford, Lower Withington, Twemlow, Holmes Chapel, Brereton and Bradwall. At the centre stands Macclesfield. South Cheshire starts with Sandbach, Arclid, Smallwood and Newbold Astbury.

**For further information please contact:**

**John Mycock (Mid-Cheshire Group) tel: 01606 75937, e-mail: jdm.mycock@birse.co.uk**



# County Rarities

## CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*)

In a straw poll on a long drive, I remember five of us discussing our most boring birds. Apart from juvenile Common Rosefinch, two of my fellow passengers in the car opted for Cetti's Warbler! Rather harsh, I thought. But then this is a species that promises much when heard and then tends to disappoint, mainly because it often requires considerable time and effort to get half decent views of various parts of the bird, finally to complete a jigsaw of what is basically a dullish brown, dumpy warbler.

Usually one is alerted to a Cetti's Warbler by its loud and explosive song, which is uttered throughout the year. Hard to put into text, but it usually opens with a series of rising high pitched "chip" notes, followed by lower pitched double or treble repeats of a variable phrase, "chee-weechoo" or "tichutt, tichutt". This is followed by softer warbling rattles before starting up again. Cetti's also call when agitated but these are often difficult to pick up on, being very Wren-like at times.

There is a loud and noticeable hard, metallic "phlik" and a hard rattle. Unfortunately, the song and calls are usually generated from within tall, dense vegetation, sometimes from the ground. Considerable patience is often required to see the songster as it hops about, mouse-like through the cover.

Cetti's is a rather compact and medium-sized warbler, with a short neck, rounded head shape, and a short rounded wing. The broad tail can look long because of the short undertail coverts and the fact that it is often held cocked. It also only has ten tail feathers instead of the usual twelve. The bill is thin and shortish, with a dark upper mandible and paler lower. The legs are pinkish brown. Plumage-wise, the overall impression is of a rufous-coloured warbler with dirty grey-white below. The upperparts are dull to bright reddish brown, with perhaps a tinge of rufous on the rump, whilst the dirty whitish underparts can look very grey at times, with the throat being the whitest part. The flanks and belly are usually rustier and the brownish undertail coverts have pale tips. There is also a distinctive greyish-white supercilium, diffuse behind the eye, and a white eye ring, which is set off by dark lores and eye stripe. To the inexperienced birder, a Cetti's might look quite like some of the other reed bed or bushy swamp type warblers, but once seen well, it is obviously different. It is quite unlike the brown *Locustella* species, and the unstreaked *Acrocephalus* species, which it might otherwise be confused with.

As I commented, Cetti's Warbler favours thick vegetation, usually near water and marshy land, and tends to keep close to the ground, although singing males may make themselves more visible by perching in open bushes.

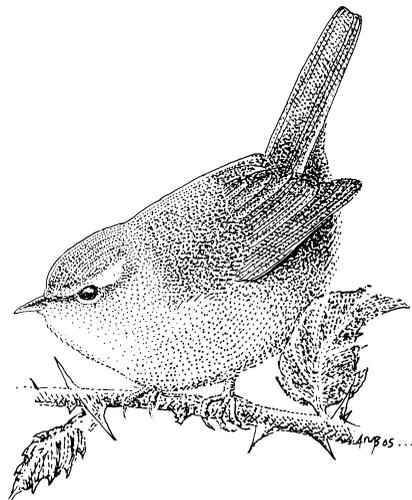
Generally regarded as a resident species in Europe, populations have colonised southern UK in the early 1970s with some subsequent expansion north and westwards, albeit rather intermittently. It appears to be slowly reaching Cheshire and Wirral.

Hugh Pulsford

## COMMENT

Cetti's Warblers are very rare in the county and when they have occurred, they have usually been found in ringers' nets, or on private sites, making it a species which is impossible to get to grips with in Cheshire and Wirral.

Records to date are thus: the first was caught and ringed near Frodsham on Apr 20<sup>th</sup> 1984 but was not seen subsequently. There was another found during CBC work at Rostherne Mere NNR



on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1989. The bird was silent and skulking and although seen briefly on the morning of 9<sup>th</sup>, was not seen again. There was another, a female, trapped and ringed at Woolston Eyes on Sep 26<sup>th</sup> 1998. It was re-trapped in the same area on Oct 18<sup>th</sup> and seen again on Dec 19<sup>th</sup>. These three records were all accepted by the County Rarities Committee.

The best of course, are the two birds in residence at Neston Marsh at the moment. Found in Feb 2005, they are still present at the time of writing and can be seen very close to a public footpath. But they can be incredibly difficult to see and I waited over seven hours before having typically brief, but good views of one of them. They could be heard calling frequently, but to my ears were very similar to the alarm calls of the several Wrens present. It was only when I could see one moving about in the reed mace, a tail here, a wing there, a dark eye peering at me from behind a stem, that the calls became more distinct. They are not easy, especially as they are not singing! This last fact is surprising to anybody who is used to seeing the south coast birds which sing throughout the year. Maybe they are young birds or females. At least one has been caught and ringed, so further details should provide a clue. Juvenile plumage resembles adult plumage, but females average smaller than males and have shorter wings. Steve Round managed to get some brilliant photographs; even if it did take him five hours... have a look on his website.

So that should be it for Cheshire and Wirral. Four records of five birds. But, and it is a puzzled 'but', there have apparently been a number of birds caught and ringed on north Wirral in the past few years, but never submitted. I'm hoping that now the Neston birds have performed for all, details of these birds will be forthcoming, even if the specific site is not disclosed. If you do know, I would appreciate a call or an e-mail so that the records can be included in the next *Bird Report*.

**Tony Broome**

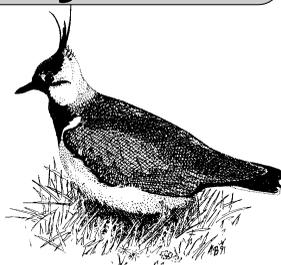
**Stop Press News:**

The ringed bird was apparently ringed in Gloucester! We are awaiting further information.



# View from the Farmyard

At last some proper winter weather has arrived to shake things up a little; all these very early flowers being hailed as indicators of global warming bother me. So it was nice to have some colder conditions to put those nodding blooms back in their place, and to have the screws turned on the over-wintering insect larvae and eggs. Large numbers of both Fieldfare and Redwing have been feeding on the pasturelands, but their accompanying flock of Starlings is sadly much smaller than in past decades. Quite a large proportion of the Countryside Stewardship work which was completed last spring has shown rewards this winter, both birds and rodents benefiting from the grain areas which were left uncut last harvest. One patch close to our cottage has attracted Kestrel and Tawny Owl, which hunt over the area for the rodents, which have spent the winter chewing grain. Also in this patch have been a mixed flock of finches and sparrows. When the weather turned colder at Christmas time, these birds then began feeding in our garden. Chaffinch numbers have been the highest we have ever had in the garden and Greenfinches visit in groups of from 10 to 20; it's impossible to know whether the birds we see at one time are the same or different birds seen at other times throughout the day. Tree Sparrows have been moving with these flocks and spend hours picking over the wild bird mix we have been putting out. On one warm morning a few days ago I heard one of the Tree Sparrows calling repetitively in the garden. When I looked out to see where it was, it was in one of our nest boxes and giving it a good look over. It would be great to have a pair nest within the garden in one of our boxes that have been so popular over the last 20 years with Great and Blue Tits.



On the old stubble fields from last autumn a thick layer of farmyard manure has attracted many birds, keen to extract what they can from this rich seam of opportunity. Meadow Pipits have remained on the fields all winter and a small number of Skylarks have accompanied them

throughout. Fieldfare and Redwing have been there too, the size of their flocks fluctuating from a few dozen to several hundred birds. Pied Wagtail also gathered in their dozens. When the fields were cloaked with a thin layer of snow on Boxing Day I took the opportunity to wander over to see what effect the new conditions had had upon the feeding birds. Almost to a bird the winter thrushes and finches had moved to feed in the adjacent woodland, wagtails were in the ditches and a few Meadow Pipits were in the hedge bottoms, but no sign of the Skylarks. Down across the parkland the blanket of snow covered all the feed for every species, a few Canada Geese stood on one leg by the lake, before taking to their wings and heading for Tatton Park where the deeper water was unfrozen. Beneath the rhododendron-swathed banks small parties of Teal clung to the unfrozen fringes, weaving in and out of the semi-submerged branches and past a few roosting Mallard and on the soil banks was a scattering of Shoveler with heads resting onto their backs. Crossing over the A50 and down the church drive I come to the flooded field where the drains no longer function as they once did; now they only dry out the land for a couple of months in mid-summer. Here amongst the tall tufts of grass were the missing Skylarks; foraging beneath the arching tufts loaded with snow, they could continue to find feed. A few days earlier when I walked by the flood several Snipe took to the wing before dropping in on the other side of the flood, but today they were gone, driven to feed in some other less frozen place, possibly a tall reed bed or by flowing water. Down in the mosses the ditches often hold Snipe during colder weather, so they don't need to move too far under such moderate stress.

As I approached the last few yards of the ditch I was digging, the high banks hid me from being seen from the field. Taking a well deserved lean on my shovel I became aware of muted contact calls from close by. Desperate to know what bird was making these noises and yet reluctant to risk scaring them off, I was forced to stand and wait to see if they would come close enough to identify. As I stood waiting a resident bank vole swam across the ditch and disappeared into the vegetation on the bank. One of the major pluses of hand digging the ditches has been that I have been able to be sympathetic to these and other ditch inhabitants' needs. Then, first one head then another appeared over the bank's rim; slowly and very cautiously they emerged over the top and crept into the end of the ditch. Apparently oblivious to my presence they each made their way down to the water and drank their fill; these four Grey Partridge were the closest I had ever seen them and looked very smart. Sadly, they were the only ones that I have seen in the past 12 months as they have been replaced by Red-legged Partridge released by a neighbouring gamekeeper. Not that I am suggesting that the Red-legged variety had anything to do with the falling numbers of the Greys, but rather that they have filled the niche vacated by the Greys.

In the pages of the *Times* newspaper last Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> March they carried an article about changes to the 'general licences' granted to shoot pest species. The list of species includes; Magpie, Jay, Collared Dove, Canada Geese and both Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls. The main thread of the piece was that shooters are now required to try to scare the birds before taking aim, and must be able to show that they have made suitable efforts to do so before opening fire. Quite how you provide this evidence remains to be seen, and how on earth anyone is going to shoot anything is lost to me; all that is going to happen is that pests are going to be driven to feed on someone else's crops. Also, who on earth is going to police this, when even the ban on hunting foxes with hounds is said to be unenforceable by the police. DEFRA, always on hand with an answer for everything, say "People have to demonstrate that they have looked at alternative, non-lethal methods". Well, that shouldn't be too difficult and will take no time at all, before people can then reach for their 12 bores again and get blasting away. What on earth this piece of legislation was meant to achieve God alone knows. Still some automaton can no doubt feel very pleased with himself, and award himself a tidy performance related bonus! The *Times* finishes off the page with a tasty recipe for 'Andalusian Pigeons' "..... first bag yourself two brace of plump Woodpigeon"; it continues to add all the other ingredients, and sounds very tasty too.

Over the last 10 years or so I have enjoyed writing 'The View from the Farnyard' but as I will no longer be in a farmyard from which to have a view, the time has come to close the yard gate behind me. So it only remains for me to say a sincere "thank you" to those of you who over the years have commented favourably on my offerings, and to those in the other camp I am sure the cessation of me putting finger to keypad will come as some relief. Good Birding!!

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

# Notes & Letters

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

## REMINISCENCES

Many thanks for granting me sponsorship of the Swallow. I have a long relationship with Swallows. I used to be a Poultry Breeder, and I had more than 10 big, 120-foot sheds; the floors had 12 to 18 inches of clean straw for the hens and cocks. I used to let the Swallows fly in through the windows, they used to use poultry droppings to build their nests in the roofs. Each year I used to raise hundreds of Swallows, as well as about 300,000 baby chicks. However, my first preference was the Buzzard and I am very excited about the amazing success of the Buzzard in Cheshire at the moment.

I am 74 and a bachelor pensioner. I have had bad eyesight all my life, but I still managed to see some wonderful things, using an 8x30 monocular. Due to my eyesight my education was a total failure, and I became a nurseryman with 3.5 acres, in the Cranage Woods. Self-employed, I was totally free, and I turned to breeding chickens and Swallows and making nest boxes.

Now every spring, just as the birch trees were expanding their buds to the extent that you could just see through treetops, there would be a mewing call and a beautiful Hen Harrier would lift its wings in slow high flaps and it would be chased by four or five small birds. This happened every springtime. The date did not matter, it was always when the buds were just bursting. Does this strike a bell with other birders?

Unfortunately, I broke my back. I spent a year in pain and had to sell my birds.

I had bad eyesight, but could just about see to drive, though it was always questionable. The doctor was reluctant. But there was a car jack factory that did not want to spend money selling car jacks. They would not give me any travel expenses or a car or any salary at all, but if I sold any car jacks they would give me what added up to 3%. In return I had total freedom, no bosses, no hassle. I could do what I liked, when I liked.

I put a hiking tent in the boot of my Ford Anglia and disappeared in the north of England, summer and winter. I had a sleeping bag, fishing rods and monocular. Now I ask you, have you ever heard of anyone with such freedom before? I turned the 3.5-acre poultry farm into a wonderful nature reserve.

In three years I was selling more car jacks than anyone in Europe. I was in constant pain, but I started driving Austin Maxis which had seats that turned into a big comfortable bed whenever the pain got too great. My back hurt when I walked, so I used to sit down and watch. Now believe me, you see a lot more when you sit than when you walk. I also bivouacked all over the mountains, whenever I liked, summer and winter.

Now when you spend a week or more sleeping among the rocks, in the highest mountains in Britain you actually see an entirely different scene from the ordinary birdwatcher who tramps the Cairngorm plateau in the day. In the day the mountains are bare and windswept with practically no birds about. But you try to sleep at night. It is impossible. The Ptarmigan come out from every rock, they grunt, they wheeze, they turn stones over, they peck at your sleeping bag. They are friendly, you can almost grab their tail feathers, but not quite. I like Ptarmigan.

On the shore of Loch Echacatanin one August there was a big snowdrift. The water for the loch comes out of it from a small cave. A Dipper had its nest in the cave, 4,000 foot high. The ordinary birdwatcher would not believe it.

After a few years I was selling engineering products for five factories and I started to tow a 9-foot caravan all over the north. You can imagine the opportunities I had for watching, and yet I was not really a birdwatcher as I watched and looked for everything else, such as whales, sharks, tunny, snakes, foxes and weasels and traces of Stone Age Man. One of my favourites is weasels, and not least otters.

Twenty-three years ago I lost my parents. I sold up and bought a derelict farm worker's cottage with three acres of rich land. As a matter of fact I bought the cottage by auction, and there were two Swallows' nests in the garage. I valued the nests at £500, and during the auction I put the Swallows' nests on top of my bid; they secured the sale for me!

The basic idea was that everything had to have fruit, berries or nuts or be useful to wildlife. I planted over two hundred fruit trees; there were fifty nuts, twenty cherries, pears, apples, plums, damsons, cotoneasters, cornelian cherry, raspberries, blackberries and also thirty-three environmental trees, a couple of giant redwoods, larches, etc.

I soon found out that it did not pay to sell fruit. However, that did not matter, the birds and animals have the lot. I have anything up to five Nuthatches this summer, they really do hatch nuts. Also lots of grey squirrels, unfortunately. Woodpeckers do well when the cherries are nearly ripe. I have Goldfinches by the flock.

However, when I was 62 I developed ulcers, due to bad sight causing stress when driving. Also arthritis set in. However, after eight years I discovered the cure for arthritis and so far so good. Then my sight deteriorated and two years ago I had to sell my car as I could not even see a bus. I spent a year as a nearly blind man. Actually, being blind is interesting, it is like playing a game of chess.

I suppose you think that was the end of birdwatching - you would be wrong. The song of a Robin told me as much as if I had seen it. I would go to the door and very often I would hear the mew of a Buzzard, very often in fact, the chatter of the Wren, and of course, the irrepressible Nuthatch.

I talk to people, and unknown to them, I am gathering information about local birds etc. I also feed the birds and everyone knows how quickly £5 of peanuts goes, plus fat, seeds, etc.

Anyway, just about February I was given a marvellous operation, and guess what the surgeon was talking about while he was cutting up my eye? Yes, he was chatting about the Buzzards that soar above Leighton Hospital very often.

Well, from March I have been able to see, with my one plastic eye, better than anytime in my life. To celebrate I have specially made 100 nest boxes to last about 15 years. I aim to get all of them put up by the end of the year.

Anyway, 23 years ago I hired a Hymac to excavate the brick pond. I made a big island surrounded by a small pond. I planted willows and bushes on it and on one side there is a small bog with willows and alders growing on it. Birds such as ducks and waterhens, etc use it. Also some birds like Buzzards like to bathe in it. Foxes and badgers often ramble under the nut trees that surround it. Near it I planted two Lombardy poplars, a larch tree and a giant Wellingtonia redwood.

Well, in March, as my eye was recovering from the operation a family of Crows took up residence. Then in April a pair of Buzzards started to harass the Crows, and in particular if the Crows landed in the redwood the Buzzards would drive them out.

The Buzzards got very aggressive and would often swoop in low and then rocket up all the way over the crown of the tree. This would completely unnerve the Crows and after close to two hours of harassment the Crows would beat a retreat in a line, five or six of them. This sort of thing went on for a fortnight. I have a theory that it could be a young pair beginning to stake out a breeding territory. I believe some of the larger raptors take more than one year to get established.

Buzzards do not always nest in the tallest trees and I do have a very large ash tree, a fairly large oak tree, an alder and some willows which are larger than the redwood. The Buzzards sometimes perch on the top twig of the larch and poplar trees and often sit on a favourite branch of the ash tree for half an hour or so. What do you think is going on? If they do nest I would be absolutely overjoyed.

My grandfather was Colonel of the Bengal Lancers. Sometime about 1900 a white whale swam up the River Ouse. My grandfather shot it with his big game rifle, had it stuffed and presented it to York Museum. About 1910 my father used to go out with Richard (Cherry) Kearton, the first wildlife photographer. They would clean their hands and carefully take one egg out of a bird's nest without disturbing anything, for the bird's sake and then present the egg to York Museum. The egg collection covered almost all birds possible. But here was the first trace that conservation was beginning to start.

Just after the war, my father was coming to the end of his service with the War Office in the SOE [Special Operations Executive]. He had a train journey and in the carriage was a gentleman who had drunk rather a lot. That man was Ronald Lockley of Skokholm fame.

About 1937 I was in a room with my other grandfather (who was a brass founder and owned a shooting lodge and two armouries of guns), my father and elder brother and they were talking about whether or not to shoot rare birds. The general opinion was that it did not matter as if you did, all that happened was other birds would come in from somewhere else.

Within two days of World War II starting, I was in a small boat in Morecambe Bay; in the stern of the boat was a brownish, somewhat elderly man. He gave me a trident spear and we spent the morning spearing flatfish. That man was Peter Scott's gamekeeper in the days when he was shooting more geese and ducks than most people had hot dinners.

On my ninth birthday I was given a new double-barrelled Browning shotgun and two boxes of cartridges. I was told to go out and get rabbits for dinner. This caused me considerable thought; the problem was I could not see the rabbit. I solved the problem with three white stones. I put them beside a rabbit hole and waited. When the first white stone disappeared I was ready, when the second went I fired, result rabbit for dinner.

All my life I've tackled bad eyesight in a similar way. I was brought up with guns everywhere. I was never very keen about it, I preferred my birds flying about. I have never collected birds' eggs (except for chickens) in my life. I have always been a conservationist. I like them. I get up in the morning and I take pleasure in feeding my little dinosaurs.

Birds are amazing. A few years ago I was in my 16-foot sailing cruiser in which I used to go to the Inner Hebrides. I would spend a week or more watching otters which I love very much. This time I was afloat for a week off the Menai Straits near Caernarvon. I was anchored off Newborough Warren. There was a very high tide, flowing at more than 5 knots. It was a pitch-black night and there was a thick sea fog, the sort that if you put your hand out it disappears. It was really black. The sea was smooth, but flowing fast, there was a lot of phosphorescence in the water, the sea was sparkling.

At about 2 o'clock in the night a terrific commotion broke out, it was as if a dozen people were diving all around the boat. I lit a small torch and lifted the hatch. I instantly had to duck as a large seagull swooped out of the blackness followed by several more. They were Lesser Black-backed Gulls flying on a jet black night in a very dense fog. They were diving into the water and were feeding on shrimps. They knew exactly how and where to fly and catch their food and obviously able to fly home in conditions which I could not understand how they could possibly do it. Now is that birdwatching?

In old books you sometimes see stories about weasels dancing in order to entice birds to come closer. It is true, I have seen it. A few years ago I was cycling along Long Lane, Hampton and I stopped for a rest. A weasel hopped about two feet into the road and started to chase its tail and then rolled over and waved its legs in the air. About five or six sparrows flew down into the road and stood around as though they were a bit puzzled. The nearest sparrow was about fourteen inches from the weasel and, knowing weasels, I knew that was about a lethal distance. Unfortunately, a car came round the corner, but there was no doubt about what was going on. Why were the sparrows so stupid?

A few years ago I was bivouacking for about five days on Moel Siabod, North Wales. I was trying out Chinese egg noodles as iron rations while I fished for trout. I did not like them, so I put a few on top of a rock for the birds. I walked a hundred yards or so and then I did a sweep with my monocular round about across the big valley. Over two miles away were the Snowdon peaks. A very tiny dot separated from the mountain top, it was a Raven. It was flying purposely straight for me. I cottoned on and kept still. The Raven flew straight as a die; above the rock it did a figure of eight, landed on the rock and ate my Chinese egg noodles. There was no doubt about it, from a distance of more than two miles a Raven can see a Chinese egg noodle. I tested it out again several times.

The sight of birds is staggering; I have reason to think Buzzards are even better. Is that birdwatching?

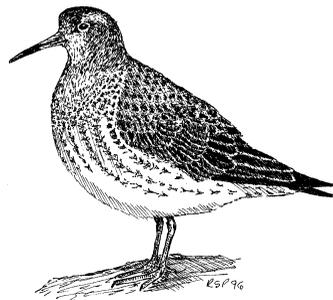
**Roy M Allenby, Ivy Cottage, Hampton, Malpas, Cheshire, SY14 8JL**

## COLOUR-RINGED WADERS FROM HILBRE

Hilbre Bird Observatory and Ringing Station have been colour ringing waders, particularly Turnstone, Purple Sandpiper and Redshank over the last few years. We have had some interesting sightings of these birds within the north-west (north Wales and north-west England). Here is a summary of just a few of the more recent sightings:

### Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*

At least three of the Purple Sandpipers present at Wallasey/New Brighton, where there have been up to 13 birds reported during November 2004, have Hilbre colour rings. These birds were ringed at Hilbre in the winter of 2000/01. It has long been thought that Hilbre birds move between the island and north Wirral during the winter and ringed birds have been seen there in the past, but recent winter sightings of colour-ringed birds have proved this beyond doubt. It will be interesting to monitor the numbers of birds moving between the two sites and the timing of these movements to determine how important the north Wirral site is for feeding and roosting of the Purple Sandpipers.



Interestingly, Hilbre had the first foreign recovery of Purple Sandpiper as long ago as 1964 with a Hilbre-ringed bird caught in Greenland. However, it is believed that Purple Sandpipers wintering on the west coast of Britain actually breed in Canada, as the Greenland and Icelandic populations are mainly resident and recoveries from there are probably of birds passing through to Canada. Up to 13 birds were seen at this site during November including at least three Hilbre-ringed birds.

### Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Several Hilbre-ringed Turnstones from winters 1998/99, 2000/01, 2002/03 and 2003/04 have been recorded at various sites along the north Wirral shore between Meols and New Brighton during this 2004/05 (and previous) winters. Birds have also been recorded down the west Wirral coast from West Kirby Marine Lake to Caldy.

From further afield a Hilbre-ringed Turnstone from winter 2000/01 was seen at Heysham Harbour on 19th September 2004. Similarly, we controlled a bird ringed at Morecambe Bay several years ago at Hilbre this winter (2004/05). We have had a number of recoveries and controls from the Morecambe Bay Wader Study Group over the years. Another bird ringed at Hilbre in October 2003 was controlled at Rhôs-on-Sea in March 2004.

This adds to the picture that has already been developed in the past with many recoveries from Hilbre-ringed birds and controls at Hilbre of birds ringed elsewhere (see *Hilbre Bird Reports* 1957-2003 inclusive). One such bird was ringed at Bidston on the Wirral and controlled at Hilbre 15 years later. Hilbre has had a few recoveries and controls of Turnstones from Iceland during the past 47 years of ringing at Hilbre.

### Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Hilbre colour-ringed birds have recently been sighted at Meols and Caldy on the Wirral. In the past one colour-ringed bird (from the Outer Hebrides), was ringed as an adult female on South Uist in 1985 and returned to Hilbre each winter during 1988-1992 and again between 1997-1999. During its summers it returned to breed successfully on South Uist and raised many young. It was eventually found dead, predated by a Peregrine, in 1999.

Many of the Redshank that winter on our shores are from northern Britain and Europe although the Icelandic race (*robusta*), which are larger than the nominate form, also occurs.

These records are just a small selection of sightings from the colour-ringing scheme that has been carried out at Hilbre over the last few years. We are building up a much more comprehensive picture of the movements of these three species, both within their wintering grounds in the north-west of Britain as well as their migration routes and breeding grounds.

However, we need birders within the north-west (and further afield) to send in their sightings of colour-ringed birds. If you see a colour-ringed bird you can send in details to the British Trust for Ornithology, or you can send details direct to us at the following e-mail address: [hilbrebo@aol.com](mailto:hilbrebo@aol.com)

**Chris Williams, Ringing Secretary, Hilbre Bird Observatory and Ringing Station**

## PALLAS'S WARBLER – AN IDENTIFICATION PROBLEM

Now, I'm not interested in rarities, or vagrants, and never look for them. However, I do recognise an unfamiliar call and will investigate. So, around sunset on Saturday 29 January 2005 whilst walking the Macclesfield Canal near Bosley, I heard a strange call from a tall hedgerow about 20m to my right. Nothing else was vocal, except a distant, singing Song Thrush (and my wife yelling to me to hurry up!). It was an unusual call, very distinct, repeated every few seconds. Coal Tit? No, too quiet. More like a warbler really. Marsh/Willow Tit? No. Hang on, it's coming closer; perhaps I'll get to see it.

Still calling, it moved right to left along the hedge and finally I caught a glimpse, a silhouette, at about 10m. A 'crest surely? Flicking its wings – must be a Firecrest. What do they sound like? Can't remember. Then – another, across on the other side of the canal: two birds, calling simultaneously, perhaps 30m apart. My bird then flew across the canal in the direction of the other. Poor view against the light and the shadow of the railway bridge; again, it looked like a 'crest. Very small. That was it. A few more calls and then nothing. No more views.

Overnight, having checked the books, I had discounted Firecrest and was trying to persuade myself I'd found two wintering Chiffchaffs. But I was unconvinced.

On Sunday 30 January I returned, half hoping I'd find Chiffchaffs. I arrived on site about an hour earlier than the previous day and casually walked the hedgerow, in dull, overcast conditions with a brisk, westerly wind. Quite soon, I saw it, working a high hawthorn hedgerow forming the boundary of the mainline railway embankment. Binoculars up – a Goldcrest! Two minutes later: another one?

This time, no, it's got eye-stripes! Yes, definitely... and wing bars. IT IS a Firecrest. I had reasonable binocular views of the bird as it very actively searched for invertebrates among the branches of hawthorn, ash and oak; and then it flew directly away from me. A pale, yellowy rump, contrasting with the olive-green mantle became immediately obvious. Do Firecrests have those? I couldn't remember (I've not seen the species for perhaps a quarter of a century!).



For about 30 minutes, I tracked the bird above the embankment towards the River Dane, calling Buzzards and a hunting Sparrowhawk almost distracting me from my task. At the beginning of the viaduct across the valley, surrounded by Long-tailed Tits but pointedly ignoring them, it gave me excellent views as close as 3m. Do Firecrests really look like that? Do they lose their obvious crown stripe colour in winter? Surely not? Finally, as the light began to fade around 5pm, it called. "Twee-et" or something like that. Cannot be a Firecrest? Am I getting past it?

Back with the books in the evening, I began to realise it must have been a Pallas's Warbler. Possible, according to the Handbook. So - what to do? 'Phone Steve Barber - he'll know. "Hmm, interesting..." Steve and Gill visited the following afternoon and confirmed my (reluctant) identification. The rest, as they say, is history.

**Richard M. Blindell, 5 Bath Vale, Congleton, Cheshire, CW12 2HF**

## BRIEF ENCOUNTER

February 8th started misty and damp, but by mid-morning the sun was breaking through, giving warmth and brightness. Along a Knutsford lane Song Thrushes and Chaffinches were singing as if heralding spring. A fox investigated the rushy edge of a pool, closely monitored by Magpies, then loped away across the field. An unusual encounter then took place. A male Great Spotted Woodpecker arrived in a tree already occupied by a Little Owl. Immediately the woodpecker went on the offensive, shuffling up the branch towards the owl, sharp beak held straight out, menacingly. An audience of Goldfinches, Greenfinches and Blue Tits flew in to watch the action. The Little Owl swung round to face the woodpecker, but didn't budge. Its unblinking yellow eyes seemed to unnerve the woodpecker, which shuffled back down the branch, then flew to another branch and started tapping. Suddenly the Great Spot flew towards the Little Owl, brushing the owl's head feathers with its beak as it flew on to land in another tree. Still the owl didn't budge, but almost immediately after this incident an aggressive Carrion Crow landed on the branch beside it and instantly the Little Owl flew off into deeper cover. The bantamweight champion had to give way to the heavyweight bully. Ain't it a shame....



**Bob Groom, 17 Queensway, Knutsford, Cheshire, WA16 0NJ**

## STONECHATS IN SNOW

In my article on Stonechats in the east Cheshire hills, in *Bird News* No. 57, January 2003, I said that ".....snow is the only element they will not put up with and they leave and do not return." This statement was based upon my own observations and that of others. However, the cold snap at the end of February 2005 gave me reason to modify my view.

There was a considerable drop in temperature after 20<sup>th</sup> February, caused by northerly and then easterly winds and these blew in snow, which was fairly light and short-lasting on the plain, but heavier and longer-lying in the hills. On 26<sup>th</sup> the hills were still snow-covered, with some drifts up to 3ft deep, whilst it had all melted away lower down.

On that day I found two pairs of Stonechats just to the south-east of Pearls Farm at the base of Midgley Hill. Because of the snow a feeding trough containing hay had been erected for the sheep and these had trampled away the snow and churned up the ground around the trough and some paths leading to it. There were also a few small patches, which the wind had cleared of snow. The chats were feeding in the muddy ground and the clear patches. They picked up tiny items, presumably insects and one male found two small worms. They were still feeding there when I returned two hours later.

In between, I found another male half-way up the western side of Tagsclough Hill. It was on the snow and, after flying along in front of me and landing two or three times on the snow, it flew over a wall, landed in some rushes, which had kept much of the snow from the ground, and immediately picked up a 3in long worm. 250 yards further up the hill were four sheep troughs, again with churned-up ground around them. Apart from the five feeding troughs already mentioned, there were two more above the 'Eagle and Child' and four at Heild End, so there were at least 11 troughs well within the range of the five chats.

It would seem, therefore, that by making use of small areas cleared of snow by wind and/or animals Stonechats can survive at least short periods of snow in the hills. The fact that these birds were probably returning to breeding territories, rather than being true wintering birds (I could not find any Stonechats in the area earlier in the winter), does not invalidate this view. Of course, if the snow was so deep or so frozen that animals could not break through it the position would be much more difficult.

Incidentally, the Stonechats near Pearls Farm appeared to ignore, and were ignored by, both a Robin and two Mistle Thrushes when, at times, they fed within 2ft of one another.

**J.V. Oxenham, Birchwood, 178 Holmes Chapel Road, Somerford, Congleton, CW12 4QB**

## NOTES ON THE SIZE OF BIRDS

Ever seen a bigger passerine<sup>1</sup> than a Mistle Thrush? (Here's the catch, don't count the Corvids<sup>2</sup>!) Bird around Europe and that's the biggest you'll see. Go to Africa or North America and, apart from a couple of long-tailed species, the story's the same<sup>3</sup>. Go to Asia - find me a non-Corvid passerine above about 33cm (13 inches). You can't. <sup>4</sup>

It has always struck me that passerine birds around the 12-inch mark are few and far between. Was I imagining this, or is this a reality? The crows take up the size baton and carry on to Raven size. But for the really big birds you need a non-passerine. But when I was in Australia this size phenomenon did not appear to exist. I saw many birds - of various families - as big as or bigger than this cut-off point. And this prompted me to do some research.

### Here's the much-condensed realisation:

In Europe, North America, East Africa (and probably all of Africa<sup>5</sup>) and Asia the non-corvid passerines run out of steam at around the 12-inch mark.

In Australia (and New Guinea - which is part of the same biogeographical area) many species from several families reach 50cm.

In Central America (and South America) there are a small number of exceptions to this 'rule'. There, the Oropendulas and Grackles (both Icteridae) reach 20 inches and three species of Umbrellabird are 16 inches or so.

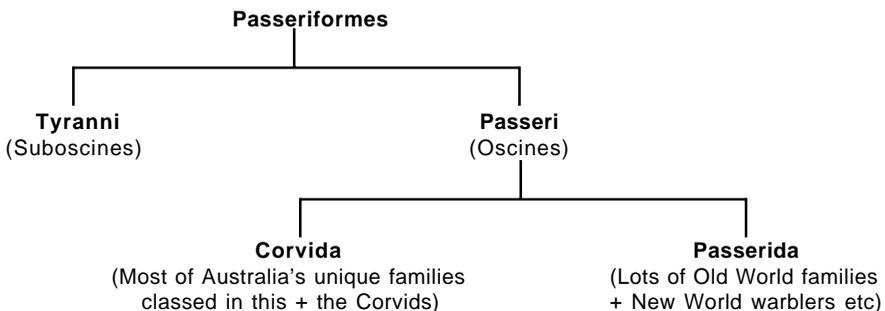
Why should this be so?

Let's go back about 140 million years. Birds were beginning to evolve and the land mass of Gondwanaland was breaking up. Australia/New Guinea split away, so did South America. North America, Eurasia and Africa were still one. Now, Australia/New Guinea remained isolated for another 100 million years or more. Recently, DNA analysis has shown that many Australian/New Guinean bird species are the result of adaptive radiation, not invasion from elsewhere. And, the ancestors of the crows originated there too.

To a lesser extent other passerines radiated in South America in isolation for some time before that continent collided with North America.

So, for most of the globe, passerines evolved as generally small species. In Australia, due to prolonged isolation, they filled the available niches - and some increased their size.

A look at the modern classification of passerines, based on DNA analysis, makes things clearer:



These three branches (Tyranni, Corvida, Passerida) broadly represent the three main land masses, with their evolving birds, after the break up 140 million years back. Since then the water has been muddled somewhat by the spread of species from one continent to another as the continents drifted closer together.

But this largely explains why, when in Australia, you will see unusually-sized passerines.

This, of course, begs the question: "Is there some physical anatomical problem for passerines which keeps them small - which the Australian species cracked a long time ago?" I've no idea!

So, next time you see a big bird, you are looking at a crow - or you're in Australia!

**Richard Hargreaves**

- Notes**
- 1 Passerine: 'song birds' - birds with larynx muscles enabling them to sing. Three forward toes, one facing back.
  - 2 Corvid: Crows, Jays, Magpies and allies.
  - 3 Apart from two Grackle species the Thrashers are the biggest in the USA.
  - 4 In Asia a few Laughingthrushes are the biggest.
  - 5 I only checked East Africa and The Gambia.
  - 6 E.g. The Currawongs, Friarbirds, etc

**Refs:** Several field guides and Internet articles (particularly Dr. C G Sibley's work)

## THORNY PROBLEM

I have a Droll Yankee, 6-port seed feeder which I fill or top up with best sunflower hearts approximately three times a week. I am now on the fourth 13kg sack this winter. Imagine the cost. (We ought to be able to claim tax relief as we are helping the government with their claimed 'green' credentials.) About ten feet from the base of the feeder pole, I have a prostrate form of conifer under which a neighbour's cat has chosen to lurk and hide before pouncing on ground-feeding Chaffinches etc. Elsewhere I have some exceedingly prickly berberis shrubs. I decided to prune the berberis and, with gloved hands, managed to get the prunings under the conifer, as a deterrent to the cat. Twice this week, the berberis has been dragged out. The cat's effort and pain of extracting the prickly branches, average two feet long, is mind boggling. I have now had to place a brick as an anchor for the berberis but am still prepared to be surprised by what the cat can achieve. Incidentally, it is a black cat but has not brought me that much luck. (The chances are that the anchored berberis will take root and grow there in the wrong place.)

Berberis is also lashed to the feeder pole to thwart squirrels but this does not work as squirrels are impervious to all deterrents. Can anyone advise me otherwise?

The feeder perches are used by Blue, Great, Coal and Long-tailed Tits, Nuthatch, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, House Sparrow, occasional Tree Sparrow, Siskin, Robin, Starling and even a Blackbird. This week a pair of Bullfinches has been eyeing the sunflower hearts and I will not be surprised to see them pluck up courage to land on a perch. This is all very heart warming but I do worry about the expenditure involved and this has set me wondering about the profit margins achieved by the many bird food suppliers. Does the same industry exist in Europe?

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

## FLEAS - PLEASE HELP!

The Biological Records Centre at Monks Wood, Abbots Ripton is planning to publish an enlarged second edition of *The Atlas of the Distribution of British Fleas*, originally published in 1974. For this to be as up to date as possible could members please send any specimens which they have for identification and recording. Providing they are accompanied by data (where, when, on what, who found them) any quantity from singles to hundreds will be welcomed. Indeed, some of the commoner fleas are badly under-recorded as people never send them in or record them. According to rECOrd, Cheshire is very under-recorded for its flea populations so all fleas sent in are probably going to be new for the site in which they are found and possibly even new for the county.

Fleas from cats, dogs, from bird nesting boxes, voles, rabbits, badgers, bats, etc. will all be very gratefully received. Identifications will be provided and the specimens incorporated into the collection of the national recording scheme organizer, unless their return is required, in which case return postage would be appreciated. Please send all specimens to:

**R.S. George, 54 Richmond Park Avenue, Bournemouth, BH8 9DR. Tel: 01202 515238**

A Buzzard was fed up with waiting,  
 So he thought he'd try out some speed-dating,  
 Then in two minutes flat  
 He'd attracted a chat  
 And a Coot, which was really frustrating.

**Hazel J Raw**



## BIRDING THE CAWOS PATCH 2005

I had decided to do a Cheshire and Wirral 'year list' midway through 2004 when I had read James Walsh's report about his 1995 experience. That year he wasn't year listing on his own in the county and it was, in fact, Tony Broome, the County Recorder, who set the record that has stood to this day – a total of **205** species. So I did some homework and went over old *Bird Reports* making notes of areas and dates of where and when the more tricky species could be found during the year. Otherwise I just hope that the patch will get its fair share of rarities throughout the year.

**January** started really quite well and on 1<sup>st</sup> I caught up with a first winter Glaucous Gull at Elton Hall Flash, Sandbach. I actually saw 65 species on this first day of the year and the 'Glauc' was not the only goody I saw that day. Other birds included Waxwings at Hoole Bridge in Chester, drake Smew at Inner Marsh Farm and Marsh Tit at Moore Nature Reserve. I finished 1<sup>st</sup> January off with a Barn Owl which came into view at dusk at Elton Hall Flash.

Whilst on the subject of owls, January was a lucky month for me as I had seen five species by 10<sup>th</sup>. Tawny Owl was seen roosting early morning in an ivy covered tree on 2<sup>nd</sup> at one of the Sandbach flashes, Little Owl was seen flying along Ashton Road in Delamere Forest, Short-eared Owls were easy to see on Burton Marsh on 3<sup>rd</sup> and three Long-eared Owls were found at a roosting site in the Frodsham area on 10<sup>th</sup>.

3<sup>rd</sup> January was another good birding day with two Barnacle Geese, Hen Harrier and Peregrine at Frodsham Marsh. Whooper and Bewick's Swans showed well on Burton Marsh along with another Peregrine. The day finished very well at Marbury Country Park with great views of Kingfisher, Water Rail and, best of all, a Bittern in the Coward Memorial Reed Bed.

On 4<sup>th</sup> I caught up with a long staying Long-tailed Duck on Catchpenny Pool during an extended lunchtime break from work. WM

Saturday, 8<sup>th</sup> produced the first 'big' tide of the year along with a force 8-9 westerly wind. At 8.30am I was at Kings Gap, Hoylake and the high tide had pushed all the waders almost up to the road. A great selection of waders were on view, including Bar-tailed Godwits, Grey Plovers, Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling, Oystercatchers and Ringed Plovers. Further along the coast at the Wallasey Lifeguard Station five Purple Sandpipers with Turnstones were sitting on rocks facing into the strong wind. From here I headed to IMF and got the hoped for Green-winged Teal along with Spotted Redshank, Little Egret and Pink-footed Goose.

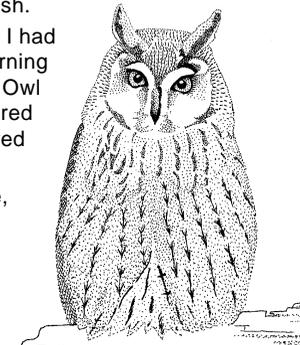
Living in the Delamere area it doesn't take much effort to get out early and find some good birds locally. On the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> I added Lesser Redpoll, Siskin and Bullfinch to my list. I had just returned home and made a cup of tea when the pager told me that there was a Firecrest at Rivacre Country Park. I set off almost immediately and was rewarded with cracking views of a male preening in a 'bare' bush – fantastic bird.

On 14<sup>th</sup> I was taken to a wood in the Burton area where, I was told, I would get guaranteed Woodcock flying out of their roost site. 'Bang on time' at 5.10pm a single bird flew out of the wood and across the open field opposite. By the time 5.15pm had arrived I had seen 11 birds in small groups do exactly the same thing.

On 16<sup>th</sup> I went back to Moore NR, a great reserve by the way and well worth a visit, and found all three woodpeckers close to the Lapwing Lane hide. Later that day I went to Frodsham after Tony Broome had told me that there was a drake Scaup on No.6 tank. After about 5 minutes I found the bird amongst the 'Tufties'.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> I spent the day on the south Wirral shore and caught up with 20 Brent Geese flying towards Hilbre, three Water Pipits showing very well with Grey Wagtails at Neston Old Quay and finally a Merlin from the Old Baths car park at Parkgate.

29<sup>th</sup> January proved special. I went early to Richmond Bank in the hope of seeing one of the Iceland Gulls that had been reported during the week. After three hours and with a little help from the 'Comberbach Casuals' I eventually saw a cracking adult roosting with thousands of other gulls. My January total had finished on 125 species.



**February** started off with a bird that I could never have predicted. A Pallas's Warbler, the fourth for Cheshire, just north-east of Congleton at Crossley. What a stunner and it performed really well for five minutes preening and feeding.

The first weekend of February had me in the Cheshire hills searching for local specialties. In a small river adjacent to the Brookside Restaurant close to Wildboarclough I found two Dippers feeding actively. I did flush them but carefully tracked one down further along this river enjoying prolonged views. Unfortunately, there was no sign of any Crossbills in the area so I proceeded to Cut-thorn Hill where I had a number of Red Grouse feeding close to the road. I headed back to 'Frodders' where I saw Little Stint, Dunlin, 200+ Golden Plover and over 1000 Lapwings on No.6 tank.

The next day had me walking the 'old pale' in the Delamere Forest area. Two male Yellowhammers fed actively along the roadside with Chaffinches.

Another pager message had me driving to Wallasey Lifeguard Station again on 9<sup>th</sup>. Again with a little bit of help from my friends, namely Bob and Janet Jones, I got onto a Snow Bunting. These birds have been very scarce on the Wirral this year.

My biggest disappointment so far this year was missing the Slavonian Grebe that was at IMF for about 15 minutes on 10<sup>th</sup>. I caught up with it feeding in the concrete reservoirs adjacent to Shotwick Lake but, unfortunately for me, these are in Wales!!

On 12<sup>th</sup>, another very windy day, I caught up with a drake Mandarin Duck at Raby Mere and four Rock Pipits showed very well at high tide on the Heswall shore.

I was again at Hoylake on 19<sup>th</sup> watching the sea from the beach. In the very windy weather I had three Red-throated Divers, two Common Scoters and a Guillemot. Later that day I was watching a very vocal Egyptian Goose on Poynton Pool.

The last day of February finished the month off very well with another Cheshire tick for me, namely Cetti's Warbler. This was another bird I was not expecting to get on my county list this year. The grand running total for the year so far was 138 species.

As I write this account it is 22<sup>nd</sup> March and so far this month I have added Brambling, seen in Tatton Park, Red-breasted Merganser with another Long-tailed Duck on West Kirby Marine Lake, Kittiwake off Hilbre (what a walk!!) and Wheatear and Avocet at Frodsham. The spring migration time is with us once again and I am looking forward to a very busy 'birding' period.

If anyone has any Cheshire Hawfinch or Crossbill sites please let me know on the mobile number below. Many thanks.

**Frank Duff Tel: 07710 998592**

## **WHO OWNS THAT LAND?**

Did you know that anyone can, for a few pounds, find out exactly who owns a piece of ground? I am wondering whether this might be a useful tool when it comes to "that bit of land that looks good for birds". Wouldn't it be really good if a corner of a field somewhere could be forever dedicated to wildlife in the battle for space on this precious island? I know that much is being done through official channels and we have some farmers helping through DEFRA, BAPs, CSS, LEAF, etc, but..... sometimes nothing beats a conversation with the farmer or the interested party direct. Many folk are sympathetic and just to point out the value of small pieces in the nation's ecological jigsaw/tapestry could well add to overall protection.

Looked at it the other way there may be an urgent real or perceived threat and maybe a bit of knowledge (of neighbours etc) might help. Any ideas.....? I am still learning the ins and outs myself but I'll gladly deal with this for any member of the Society or if you want to have a go yourself, try Land Registry on:- [http://www.landregisteronline.gov.uk/faq\\_section3.htm#q3\\_6](http://www.landregisteronline.gov.uk/faq_section3.htm#q3_6)

**Clive Richards, 88 Manchester Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 2JY. Tel: 01625 524527**  
**E-mail: [cliverichards@cawos.org](mailto:cliverichards@cawos.org)**

## **ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP: GREAT NEWS FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE**

This spring saw the introduction of two new farming schemes which could transform much of Britain's countryside. For the first time ALL farmers and land managers can be paid for looking after wildlife, landscapes and natural resources for everyone to enjoy. The new schemes are also designed to address a wider range of issues than previous schemes. New areas include: protection of water and soil, careful use of pesticides, preservation of rare traditional breeds and flood management. The two new opportunities for farmers are the Single Payment Scheme, which will keep land in good environmental condition, and Environmental Stewardship, which rewards farmers for wildlife and habitat management.

Under the Single Payment Scheme, participating farmers are paid under the Common Agricultural Policy for adhering to an extensive set of rules, such as only cutting hedges at certain times of the year; widening hedges and field margins to a minimum width; preventing soil erosion; and keeping public Rights of Way open. Farmers will be free to farm exactly how they wish, and it is thought that very few will decline this opportunity.

Environmental Stewardship replaces the Countryside Stewardship, Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Organic Farming schemes. Together, the Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes currently cover more than 11% of English farmland. Environmental Stewardship's primary objectives are to conserve wildlife, maintain and enhance landscape quality and character, protect the historic environment and natural resources and promote public access and understanding of the countryside. It also has secondary objectives of contributing to genetic conservation and flood management.

The new Environmental Stewardship scheme has three elements:

1. Entry Level Stewardship - will pay farmers for basic environmental management. It is hoped that at least 70% of farmers will participate, thereby helping to tackle countrywide problems such as loss of landscape character, biodiversity and pollution of rivers.
2. Organic Entry Level Stewardship - will pay for activity similar to that under the Entry Level Scheme but give farmers higher payments in recognition of the added environmental benefits of organic farming.
3. Higher Level Stewardship - will reward farmers and land managers who undertake more ambitious environmental management in key target areas, particularly Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It will also encourage new permissive access to join up other Rights of Way and open access land so that more people can see for themselves the benefits which the new scheme will bring. Applications will be competitive and funding will be targeted to the most environmentally important and sensitive areas.

The Rural Development Service, English Nature and the Countryside Agency have worked together closely on the development of the new scheme, which will be delivered by the Rural Development Service, working with English Nature, the Countryside Agency, and other organisations and agencies. Significantly, the scheme asks farmers to deliver agreed results rather than prescribing rigid management. It is a major step forward towards developing a single and improved integrated agency.

## **'LADY' WOODPECKERS**

At the beginning of April I watched an interesting display of controlled aggression between two female Great Spotted Woodpeckers on Knutsford Moor. The encounter went on for at least 20 minutes and probably longer than that, as noisy passers-by prompted them to move farther away from the path. There was no male in the vicinity, although one could be heard drumming not too far away in Dog Wood, Tatton Park. The female contestants indulged in frequent sky pointing, also head and, at times, whole body shaking. They made frequent brief lunges towards each other (but never made actual bodily contact) as they moved about the branches of several trees, but each move seemed to end in stalemate. Presumably the dispute was territorial, possibly an older bird trying to move on its female offspring?

**Bob Groom, 17 Queensway, Knutsford, Cheshire, WA16 0NJ**

# Cheshire and Wirral Atlas

## SPONSORSHIP OF INDIVIDUAL SPECIES - UPDATE

**Q.** What do Cormorant, Smew, Tree Pipit and Coal Tit all have in common?

Before you think too deeply about this one, the answer is simple:

**A: None of them have as yet been sponsored for the Atlas** (but if you know of another answer, please let us know!)

Thanks to the following, who have sponsored the following species (as of 11 March):

Jill Thornley	Grasshopper Warbler	Nigel Stones	Waxwing
Peter Walton	Dunnock	Hazel Raw	Black-headed Gull
John Patterson	Tawny Owl	Roy Bircumshaw	Peregrine
Marie Turner	Blue Tit	Henry Finch	Song Thrush
Steve Atkins	Wood Warbler	Frank Gleeson	Yellowhammer
David Cookson	Gannet	Heather James	Fieldfare
Jean Bulmer	Corn Bunting	David Kennerley	Black-throated Diver
Paul Morris	Marsh Tit	Anne Morris	Ruddy Duck
Derek Pike	Red-throated Diver	Andy Harmer	Feral Pigeon, Wren
Pat Thompson	Whitethroat	Paul Bebbington	Willow Warbler
Denise Bebbington	Coal Tit	Red Kite	Philip French
Mrs Edna Draper	Blackbird	Cheshire Swan Study Group	Mute Swan
Geoff Blamire	Eider	Mary Prince/Susan Bastin	House Martin
Syngenta CTL	Slavonian Grebe, Shag, Shoveler, Scaup, Smew, Snipe, Stock Dove, Sand Martin, Sedge Warbler, Snow Bunting		

Over 100 species have already been sponsored but there are still about 80 left. They include most geese, most sea ducks and sawbills, all gulls (except Black-headed) all pigeons (except Feral) and all pipits. Surprisingly, birds such as Wheatear, often our first spring arrival, and Cuckoo have not yet been sponsored. Sponsorship is £25 per species. If you are interested either phone me on 01606 832517 or e-mail memsec@cawos.org to find out what is still available. Or send a list of about 6 or 7 possibilities, with your cheque made payable to CAWOS, to David Cogger at 113 Nantwich Road, Middlewich, CW10 9HD.

## LEARNING BIRD SONGS AND CALLS CD – UPDATE

I still have a few copies of the CD issued by the BTO 'Learning bird songs and calls for bird surveys in lowland Britain', available from me for £3.00 including postage. Suggest you phone 01606 832517 or e-mail memsec@cawos.org to check availability before sending your cheque.

## TETRAD ALLOCATION - UPDATE

As I write this in the second week in March it is clear that at least 400 of the 670 tetrads to be covered in the Breeding and Wintering Atlas project will have been covered in the 2004 breeding season. We have promises, too, of nearly 150 more to be covered in the present breeding season or in 2006. This leaves us with about 100 which still need to be covered.

It is still not too late to take on a tetrad for the 2005 season, or for 2006. If you have not yet volunteered, or if you have done one tetrad well already and would like a challenge, please think seriously about taking on another one. If it is some distance from your home we would not expect you to take the same time to cover it as you have done your local patch. We do not want to have the situation where we have to rush round madly in 2006 to complete coverage, or worse still, delay to 2007.

A full list of 'unclaimed' tetrads was published with the January *Bird News*, and quite a few of these have been taken up.

The main gaps at present are: in the area to the north and west of Congleton; north of Nantwich to Tarporley and across to the outskirts of Chester (along the A51); north-east and south-west of Warrington. In addition there are odd corners in south Wirral, south Cheshire and elsewhere.

If you are interested please contact David Cogger (contact details as above).



# Membership News

**Welcome to the following new members:** Chris Price, Adrian Morgan, Bill Bellamy, John Bannon, Peter Royle, T Padden, Margaret Ford, Phil Woollen, Roy and Iona Bowden, N Pumphrey, Alec and Christinev Johnston, Steve Nichols, Alastair Jenkins, Simon Wood and Sheila Shaw, D and S Tunstall, David Kennerley, Robert Dreaves, Philip French, David Haigh.

## **Meeting of Council held 13 January:**

- a letter would be sent to DEFRA asking for a list of sites where licences had been issued and the number of Cormorants actually shot.
- The 'Survey of Surveys' (an investigation into all those bodies actually recording birdlife in Cheshire and Wirral) had been completed and the Records Sub-Committee would approach organisations whose records we did not receive.
- Several Borough Councils had agreed to pass on to us planning applications concerning wildlife.
- A new membership leaflet and welcome pack would be produced.
- The producers of the *Bird Report* were congratulated on its high standard.
- We were continuing to investigate the availability of our archives under the new Freedom of Information Act.
- Nearly 400 tetrads were known to have been covered for the Atlas in the 2004 breeding season and over 80 species had been sponsored.
- The Rostherne Observatory had made a profit for the first time for several years.
- It was agreed that there was no need to put up the annual subscription this year.

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 4<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2005**

### **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2004**

Membership for 2004 reached 371, the highest total since the Society was founded back in October 1988. Council ran with one non-executive member short for part of the year. Mark Feltham in his role as Bird Report Editor, and Charles Hull as BTO Representative, were co-opted to Council in April 2004. Derek Kelly was also co-opted for his expertise on Conservation; however, it was with regret that towards the end of 2004 Derek resigned from this position, so ending a long and valuable association with CAWOS Council. It is to be hoped that we can still call on him from time to time.

### **Projects and Surveys**

The Cheshire and Wirral Atlas, the biggest project ever undertaken by the Society, dominated the Society's year, both in interest generated and workload! By the end of 2004 submissions for the first breeding season of the survey were received for 428 tetrads out of the county total of 670 (although not all of these have been covered in detail). Approximately 10,000 hours of recording were generated by over 300 observers, many of whom were both new to systematic bird recording, and non-CAWOS members. Hopefully, more CAWOS members will get involved – this will be essential to achieve full coverage of the county over the three-year survey period. As I write this in mid-February the first winter survey of the Atlas is drawing to a close.

Volunteers are still needed to help with other aspects of the project as well, like publicity and fundraising, data-inputting and so on. Special thanks go to David Norman for coordinating the project, David Cogger for handling the administration side, Geoff Blamire for setting up the import programmes for the CAWOS database and Andy Harmer for designing the Atlas website.

A very successful Recording Forum and Atlas Training Day was held on 28th February 2004, attended by 57 delegates. Besides looking specifically at the Breeding and Wintering Bird Atlas, short talks in the morning included 'Recording and the Importance of Records' and 'Identification Hints'. Workshops were then held in the afternoon when delegates could choose to attend two out of three topics: 'Submission of paper and electronic records', 'Identification', and 'Fieldwork'. Feedback afterwards was very positive, and everybody involved agreed the day was very worthwhile.

Brian Martin continued co-ordinating the House Martin Survey, which entered its 13th consecutive year. The Society welcomes applications for financial support to assist projects or surveys within the county. CAWOS grants made last year included a grant towards the Nantwich Natural History Society's feeding station at Hurleston, to enable it to operate all year round.

## Records

There are now approximately 170,000 records held within the CAWOS database, not including any Atlas submissions. 2004 records are currently being received and imported. An increasing number of contributors are now submitting their records electronically and this is a welcome trend, both in terms of reduced workload generated and also by reducing the potential for errors with manual inputting. It is, however, a big learning curve for some and their effort to submit in the 'correct' format is appreciated. Help and advice is always available.

A great deal of discussion was generated towards the end of 2004 by the new version of the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR 2004), due to come into operation on 1st January 2005. ACRE, the Association of County Recorders and Editors, is seeking clarification on a number of issues on our behalf. This has meant that the exchange of records with rECOrd, our Local Record Centre, has been put on hold until the wider implications for biological recording societies and schemes, and other voluntary biodiversity organisations, resulting from these revised regulations are known and understood.

We were pleased that Howard Fearn took over the role of Rarities Secretary at the beginning of 2004; chasing up and collating county rarity descriptions is not an easy task.

## Conservation

The eight Local Area Representatives, each covering a Borough Council within the CAWOS recording area, continued to keep the membership informed of conservation issues within their areas via *Bird News*.

The Society contacted all County and Borough Councils to ensure that CAWOS is included on any mailing list on matters concerning wildlife conservation.

The role of Conservation Co-ordinator has still not been filled after Jeff Clarke resigned three years ago.

Input from the Society was provided where habitat was threatened by development or other activities, or to support various conservation projects. Examples of these include:

- SEMMMS, the South-East Manchester Multi-Modal Study (including Manchester Airport Eastern Link Road (MAELR), A6(M) Stockport North-South Bypass, and Poynton Bypass).
- The Farmland Bird Targeting Project.
- Six sites connected with the 'Cheshire Revive' Scheme (Cheshire County Council).
- An ecological assessment of an area of land next to Junction 21 of the M6, at Woolston.

## Publications

Congratulations go to the Bird Report Team, who continue to improve the standard and content of *Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report*. In March 2004 the Society learnt that the 2002 *Bird Report* had come 'joint 3rd overall' in the 'Best Annual Bird Report Competition' run by the BTO, with 50 out of a possible 53 points - three points more than the previous year's report. 50 local bird reports published during 2002 had been considered for the award. We eagerly await the results from last year's competition to find out how the 2003 *Bird Report*, published well before the agreed end of 2004 deadline, has fared.

At the end of 2004 Mark Feltham resigned his role as Bird Report Editor owing to pressure of work. Our thanks go to him for all his hard work over the last two years, and for the many new ideas he has brought to improve the *Bird Report*.

David Cogger and Richard Gabb continued to take responsibility for the distribution of the *Bird Report*, seeking new outlets and involving affiliated societies.

To reduce stocks held of back copies of *Bird Reports*, these are still available to members and other organisations for the cost of post & package, and a small donation where appropriate.

*Bird News* continues to receive high acclaim from both within and outside the Society. However, the newsletter has been without an official editor for three years now, though thanks must go to

all the people who have stepped in to write a wide variety of Guest Editorials. Thanks also go to Hazel Raw for proofreading and Geoff Lightfoot for stapling *Bird News*.

A new printer was purchased at the end of 2004, specifically to keep the printing of *Bird News* 'in-house'.

The task of cataloguing the wealth of information contained within *Bird News* is virtually complete, although it will obviously be an ongoing job to keep it up to date. Our thanks go to David Simmons for undertaking this job.

A 20% increase in the cost of the 'Pre-paid in Cash' postage, used to send out *Bird News* and the *Bird Report*, will cost the Society approximately £100 more a year.

Changes, corrections and additions to sites held within the *Cheshire and Wirral Gazetteer* have continued apace. Because of this it has proved impractical to print addenda showing these new sites. A new printed version of the *Gazetteer* will eventually be published. In the meantime an up-to-date electronic version is available on request, which will also be put on the CAWOS website shortly.

The website has not been updated as often as it should have been due to time constraints. However, it is still considered an important window to reach other birdwatchers, and the 'Discussion Forum' continues to provide a platform for the exchange of information and ideas.

## **Activities**

A varied programme of indoor meetings was held in 2004:

- In January Keith Offord explained how the behaviour of birds is driven by a number of factors, none more so, arguably, than light.
- Whilst in February André Farrar, the RSPB Public Relations Manager, described how wetlands, and other important habitats and their birds, are under pressure from man's activities.
- After the 2004 AGM, Tony Smith, Senior Crown Prosecutor, and Steve Hogarth, Police Wildlife Officer, brought us 'Operation Easter' a real-life 'whodunnit' about a recent wildlife case.
- Mike McKavett in October looked at bird migration along the 'Great Eastern Flyway' of North America.
- November took us to Venezuela and the great flood plains of Los Llanos, brought alive by David & Sigrun Tollerton.
- At the December meeting, held at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, Paul Hobson looked at the attractions of Florida as a great birding destination. Thanks to Paul for stepping in at short notice.

I would like to thank all those people who helped with the interval drinks and also Birdnet for supporting the majority of our meetings.

The Society aims to support and help where possible with the organisation and publicity of a number of outdoor events, including various workshops and guided walks.

The annual Migration Watch attracted many birders and the High Tide Birdwatches, organised by the RSPB and the Cheshire Countryside Management Service, provided the usual excitement.

CAWOS was represented at the 'National Bird Club Forum' held in Sutton Coldfield in February 2004, and attended by 47 bird clubs. It quickly became apparent that Cheshire and Wirral was unique within the country, in that there were such a large number of active RSPB Groups and local societies, meeting many of the needs of the county's birdwatchers. A report to Council from those representatives who attended this inaugural forum formed a major topic for discussion during the year. This has resulted in specific actions being put into place.

## **Rostherne**

The Society has successfully negotiated a further five-year renewable term with English Nature to manage the Observatory. The voluntary wardens and subcommittee members carried out external painting in 2004 and the place is in good shape. Permit numbers remain stable and with the bank account again showing a small profit, annual permit fees are yet again held at £7. The issue of day-permits has actually increased. Regarding access: it is necessary to retain some level of security and to limit the knowledge of the whereabouts of the key; however, each new permit holder will be sent a map with the key location marked.

## **Finally.....**

It is with regret that I am stepping down as Chairman of CAWOS, having completed five years in this position. I would like to give sincere thanks to all the people involved with the running of

CAWOS, who have given me such support over the last 5 years, but especially to the Society's Secretary, David Cogger, who does so much and who works so tirelessly, to enable the smooth running of the Society. It has been a pleasure working with him.

It must be said that the question of workload within the Society is still a serious concern for Council and will continue to be debated in 2005. Realistically though, we either cut down on the number of projects or even the standard of publications produced by the Society, or we bring on board new volunteers. With the onset of the Atlas project, many new and enthusiastic people have become involved with CAWOS, which brings renewed optimism that the Society will continue to flourish in 2005 and beyond, without having to make any cutbacks.

I believe I am passing on the role of Chairman to my successor, in what is a very exciting time in the evolution of the Society.

**Sheila Blamire, Chairman**

## **SECRETARY'S REPORT**

Once again the Breeding and Wintering Atlas project dominated the Society's work in 2004 and will continue to do so in the forthcoming twelve months.

Many fieldworkers will be revisiting their tetrads to try to find birds they did not find in their first year, and in particular for evidence of successful breeding, which proved more difficult to discover than many imagined! Some are also taking on new tetrads as well and a trickle of new recruits has swollen the number of fieldworkers to over 300, well over half now being CAWOS members. Ways of measuring abundance are being investigated and will be put into operation during the forthcoming breeding season. When all the 2004 breeding season returns have been submitted and analysed, and promises of coverage for 2005 included, only about 100 tetrads out of the 670 will not have been covered by the beginning of the final breeding season in 2006.

Sponsorship of individual species, which has continued steadily and is now over the 100 mark, will similarly be close to completion. A Steering Committee to guide the Atlas project to completion is in the process of being established. The first Atlas bulletin was produced in February of this year. Several fieldworkers have expressed the need for more training in fieldcraft and a number of Atlas Coordinators have volunteered to lead field walks at the beginning of the next breeding season; it is hoped there will be a good response. Thanks are due to all those who have put in such a lot of time and effort to get the project off to such a good start.

A feature of the Atlas fieldwork has been its popularity with those taking part; many people have spoken of the added interest to their birdwatching which the project has inspired, and this extract from a letter from a member sums it up:

"I seem to see something different or learn something new each time I go out on my tetrads. It has certainly added a new level to my birdwatching experience. I wish I had taken part in a similar project years ago as it would have made me much more knowledgeable."

What is particularly interesting is that this fieldworker is surveying semi-urban tetrads which could not remotely be described as 'hot spots'.

This enthusiasm has been reflected in the membership figures; 36 new members joined in 2004 – eight more than in 2003 – and of those 16 have become Atlas fieldworkers. A mailing about CAWOS to all fieldworkers who were not CAWOS members has already brought in 11 members. I share, too, the Chairman's optimism that the renewed interest in the Society will encourage more of the new members to play a more active part in running CAWOS; although some signs are encouraging it is still true, as I said last year, that this work is in the hands of dangerously few people.

We are pleased to welcome Richard Smith as Editor of the Systematic List for the *Bird Report*, whilst Sheila Blamire will take on the role of Technical Editor. We still, however, need someone to take on Publicity and are lacking once again an official Editor for *Bird News* and a Conservation Coordinator.

The Atlas project has enabled us to continue to work closely with our affiliated societies and RSPB groups, many of whom have been very active in recruiting volunteers and also in selling copies of the *Bird Report*.

The indoor programme for 2005 will include speakers such as Tim Loseby, Tim Mellings, Andy Hirst, Keith Offord, and Paul Hackett; the full programme will go out, as usual, with the July *Bird*

News. It is unfortunate that we have had no option but to drop the annual meeting held at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, as the response to this from members in west Cheshire and Wirral has been very disappointing; at the last meeting held there in December 2004 members from north and east Cheshire far outnumbered those from near Chester.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have helped me in the work of the Society and in particular our retiring Chairman. Sheila has worked very hard and has been brilliant in encouraging and advising not only me but many others in CAWOS, and although she is stepping down as Chairman it is good that we will still have the benefit of her knowledge in the years ahead.

**David Cogger, Secretary**

## **TREASURER'S REPORT**

The draft 'Income and Expenditure' and the draft 'Balance Sheet' were presented to the meeting, but it was stressed that the figures were 'subject to audit'.

The year has seen a small profit of £369 and a total income of £9,225 on ordinary business. However, in addition we have income from sponsorship of the Atlas, less direct costs to the project, netting a further £1,500 or more. This will be put to the Atlas project.

We have issued grants totalling £600 and received donations of over £700 in the year.

The virtues of Gift Aid are once more apparent with a superb addition to funds of £864, this time up by nearly £100 from the previous year's.

Once again, despite the high cost of insurance, the management of the Observatory at Rostherne has had a neutral effect on these accounts, with permit money in, cancelling permit money paid out.

The draft accounts will be audited in the near future.

**Clive Richards, Treasurer**



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# Diary

## MAY

- 4 NCRSPB Aber Valley - contact Paul Grimmett 01925 268770
- 7 ADNHS Leighton Moss - contact George Allan 0161 973 8088
- 8 WGBG Ynys-hir, by coach - contact Derek Bradbury 01625 525950
- 8 CRSPB Botanical Gardens, Morfa Nefyn by coach, organiser to be confirmed
- 8 HPRSPB Coombes Valley, by car, meet at Marple at 8:00am or Chapel at 8:30am
- 10 MRSPB AGM followed by MEMBERS' SLIDES
- 10 ADNHS 'HEDGEROWS' by Chris Hudson
- 11 HO 'A BIRD AND ITS BUSH' by David Elcome
- 11 NCRSPB Pennington Flash - contact Paul Grimmett 01925 268770
- 12-15 KOS St. Bees Head, Cumbria Weekend – ring for details
- 13-15 MRSPB Suffolk Weekend, contact Ray Evans for details on 01625 432635
- 15 SECOS Aber Valley, by mini-bus - contact Derek Owen
- 15 HO Potteric Carr by coach departing at 8:00am - ring for details
- 16 HPRSPB 'THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS' by Frank and Pat Seals
- 17 MCOS Loggerheads Country Park/Cilcain - contact Harold Fielding on 01606 882529
- 19-22 MCOS Kent Weekend - contact Ray Evans on 01829 752494
- 21 NCRSPB Ynys-hir - contact John Drake 01928 561133
- 22 SRSPB Lake Yyrnwy by coach - ring for details
- 22 HPRSPB Anglesey, by car, meet at the Memorial Car Park, Marple at 8:00am
- 23 SRSPB Tegg's Nose, meet in Holehouse Lane car park, Langley, off A523 at 7:15pm
- 27 KOS Goyt Valley evening field trip, meet at the Sessions House, Knutsford at 6:30pm

## JUNE

- 1 NCRSPB Great Orme - contact Paul Grimmett 01925 268770
- 2 MRSPB Errwood Reservoir, meet in 'The Street' car park at 6:30pm
- 7 MRSPB Prestbury and Mottram Hall, meet in main car park in Prestbury at 6:30pm
- 8 NCRSPB Moore Nature Reserve - contact Tony Parker 01925 726986
- 8 HO 'TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT CYPRUS' by Michael Deane
- 11 KOS Roddlesworth Woods, Tockholes, East Lancs, meet 8:30am at Sessions House
- 12 HPRSPB Branston Marshes, by car, meet at the Memorial Car Park, Marple at 8:00am
- 12 MCOS Montgomeryshire - contact Paul Kenyon on 01606 77960
- 14 MCOS South Stack, Anglesey - contact Harold Fielding on 01606 882529
- 15 MRSPB Upper Goyt Valley, meet in Derbyshire Bridge car park at 6:30pm
- 16-20 NCRSPB Speyside long weekend - contact Dave Hughes 01925 726242
- 24 KOS Wildboardclough evening field trip, meet at Sessions House, Knutsford at 6:30pm
- tbcr CRSPB The Lakes Weekend, contact Tracy and John Langley 01244 678781

## JULY

- 7 NCRSPB BBQ and walk at Queen Charlotte's Wood - contact John Drake 01928 561133
- 9 ADNHS Wildflower Centre, Sefton - contact Claire Joures 0161 928 4513
- 9 HPRSPB Farley Moor/Ogston Reservoir, meet at the Memorial Car Park, Marple at 6:00pm
- 10 KOS Leighton Moss/Woodwell, meet 8:30am at the Sessions House, Knutsford
- 13 HO MEMBERS' EVENING (tickets to be obtained in advance)
- 13 NCRSPB Hatton's Hey - contact Les Goulding 01925 265578
- 16 SRSPB Middlewood Way Open Day
- 19 ADNHS ANNUAL BARBECUE - contact Anne Mason 0161 980 8645
- 22 KOS Anderton/Neumann's Flash evening field trip, meet at Sessions House at 6:30pm

## AUGUST

- 7 **Birdwatch, Banks Road car park, Lower Heswall, 10:30am (HW 13:36, 8.8m)**
- 21 NCRSPB Hilbre - contact Tony Parker 01925 726986

## SEPTEMBER

- 4 KOS Hilbre, meet 8:00am at the Sessions House, Knutsford, or 9:00am at West Kirby
- 5 HPRSPB AGM AND MEMBERS' SLIDES
- 11 HPRSPB Pennington Flash/Horrocks' Flash, meet at Memorial Car Park, Marple at 8:00am
- 12 SRSPB AGM and 'NOT THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR YOU DON'T' by Brian Hallworth
- 13 MRSPB 'AUTUMN TO SPRING' by Mike Wilkes
- 14 HO AGM and 'BEYOND THE GARDEN HEDGE' by Margaret McCormick
- 16 NCRSPB 'UP THE INSIDE PASSAGE' by Jeff Clarke
- 17 **Wader Watch, King's Gap, Hoylake, 10:00am - 12:00noon, tel: 0151 678 5488**
- 17 NCRSPB Tittesworth Reservoir, Leek - contact Paul Grimmert 01925 268770
- 19 **Birdwatch, Riverbank Rd car park, Lower Heswall, 11.45am (HW 12:56, 10.0m)**
- 19 HPRSPB 'NESTING BIRDS' by John Lintin Smith

**For further information on Outdoor Events within the county see the  
2005 Birdwatcher's Diary at: [www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk)**

## AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

- ADNHS Altrincham & Dist. Natural History Soc, mtgs Hale Methodist Church Hall 7.30pm, contact Sec. Anne Mason 0161 980 8645
- CADOS Chester & Dist. Ornithological Soc, mtgs Caldby Valley Community Centre 7.30pm, contact 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, contact Prog. Sec. Rob Adams 01829 270654
- HO Hale Ornithologists, mtgs St Peter's Assembly Rooms 7.45pm, contact 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 8.00pm, contact Roy Bircumshaw 01565 634193
- LOG Lymm Ornithological Group, mtgs Lymm Village Hall 8.00pm, contact Prog. Sec. Hilary Unsworth 01925 860155
- MCOS Mid-Cheshire Ornithological Soc, mtgs Hartford Village Hall 7.45pm, contact Paul Kenyon 01606 77960
- MRSPB Macclesfield RSPB Members' Group, mtgs Senior Citizens' Hall 7.45pm, contact Ray Evans 01625 432635
- NCRSPB North Cheshire RSPB Members' Group, mtgs St Matthew's CoE Primary Sch, Stretton 7.45pm, contact Olive Giles 01928 733405
- NNHS Nantwich Natural History Soc, mtgs The Gables at 7.30pm, contact Sec. Mike Holmes 01270 611577, mike@uimprove.com
- SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithological Soc, mtgs St Peter's Church Hall, Elworth 7.30pm, contact Sec. Colin Lythgoe 01270 582642
- SRSPB Stockport RSPB Members' Group, mtgs Stockport College of Technology, Lect Theatre B, 7.30pm, contact Peter Hugo 0161 485 4024
- WGBG Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group, mtgs Wilmslow Guild HQ 7.45pm, contact Indoor Prog. Sec. Judith Rees 0161 980 5034

Will **affiliated societies**, who wish to advertise meetings of relevance to CAWOS, please send their programme to:- **Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, Cheshire, WA16 6QG** or, *preferably please*, by e-mail: [sheilablamire@kawos.org](mailto:sheilablamire@kawos.org)

## WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP

**OPEN DAY: Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2005, 10am to 4pm**

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For further information contact Dave Hackett (01925 752913) or Les Jones (01925 821757) or look on the WECG website: [www.woolstoneeyes.co.uk](http://www.woolstoneeyes.co.uk)



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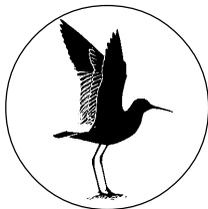
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#### **EARLY SPRING EXCURSION:**

This is in April. At that time, the intensive mating of woodpeckers takes place, therefore it is possible to visit the best sites for watching both woodpeckers and migrant birds at the seashore and inland waters.

#### **EXCURSION IN MAY-JUNE:**

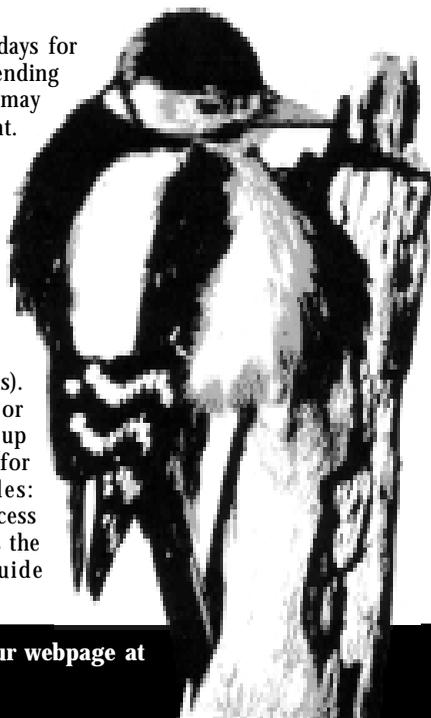
It is possible to plan an excursion of up to 10 days for visiting the best meadows, forests and waters. Depending on your wishes and capabilities, the excursion may include hiking tours and spending nights in a tent.

#### **LATE SUMMER/AUTUMN EXCURSION:**

There is the opportunity of observing waders at the seashore. In September/October it is possible to visit the best regions of fish ponds in Latvia, which become especially interesting in terms of birdwatching at that time.

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