

JANUARY 1984

On New Years Day a huge depression centred close to Iceland covered almost the whole of the N. Atlantic, causing a vast westerly airstream to sweep across Britain and W. Europe. This depression deepened quickly to move east towards Scotland, causing severe W.SW gales and bringing blizzard conditions to Scotland and N. England. On the 4th a weak ridge of high pressure built from the SW but this lasted only briefly. Conditions from the 5th to the 10th became changeable, with mainly W.NW winds and cold wintry showers.

The 11th saw the winter gales return with a vengeance, as a deep depression sitting at the N. tip of Scotland whipped in gale force SW winds and torrential rain. (Gusts of up to 90 mph were recorded in Scotland). Another depression followed on Friday the 13th, with much structural damage being reported on the local and national news - at Fiddlers Ferry Power Station a cooling tower collapsed, a trawler missing in the N. Sea, a trawler blown onto rocks off N. Ireland, and a container blown off one of the ferries in the Irish Sea. Through all this the seabirds were taking a severe bashing, as was evidenced by the birds blown onto the Fylde Coast during the weekend of the 13th-17th, and by the corpses found beached later in the month.

High pressure became established late on the 18th and this calmed conditions for a few days, but in doing so some severe overnight frosts and bright cold days resulted. The high slipped away to the SE during the 21st, when bitterly cold SE winds backed to SW as a particularly active depression over N. Ireland caused severe S. SW gales and severe blizzards in Scotland. Snow fell overnight (21st) in the Fylde leaving a covering of about 2 inches, but further east in the county falls were much heavier. Conditions remained cold and wintry to the month end, but without any more heavy falls of snow in the Fylde.

The New Year gales brought many Kittiwakes to the Fylde Coast. At South Shore 240 went south on the 1st, 230 on the 2nd, and 126 on the 3rd. Elsewhere, 66 went south of Cleveleys on the 2nd, whilst on the 3rd at Bispham 710 were counted (the observer did suggest that he might have counted some birds twice when birds were seen to double back after passing his observation point). Amongst the Kittiwakes at South Shore on the 1st was a Leachs Petrel, and on the 2nd a Little Gull - the Kittiwakes at Bispham had six Fulmars and two Little Gulls for company.

The mid-month gales were far more severe than the earlier gales, coming from the SW rather than the NW. Kittiwakes were again fairly plentiful, with 318 off South Shore on the 13th being the highest count. A single Kittiwake at the Mere on the 14th would appear to be the first record there for seventeen years - single dead Kittiwakes were picked up 'inland' at Carleton and Thornton. Little Gull numbers can only be described as spectacular during the gales, with the north Fylde coast providing the highest numbers. Thirty two were at Fleetwood on the 14th, 50 at the Anchorsholme sewage outfall on 15th, and 140 at Fleetwood on the 17th - the largest count at South Shore was that of 9 on the 18th, whilst away from the sea a group of 7 on a school playing field at St. Annes were obviously waiting for the storms to abate. Little Auks are never plentiful off the Fylde, so it is sad to record one taken by a Great Black Backed Gull at Rossall on the 12th - a more fortunate individual was seen in the Wyre Estuary on the 14th and 15th by several observers. (Dead Little Auks were picked up locally but no details were submitted.) Reports of casualties of the gales came from several coastal sites, with Kittiwakes, Black Headed Gulls, Guillemots, Razorbills, Herring Gulls, Common Gulls, and Little Gulls predominating - singles of Leachs Petrel, Gannet, Merganser, Pintail and Puffin were also found. (The Puffin was picked up at Cockersands in late January.)

Two Glaucous Gulls (a 1st winter and a 2nd winter) at South Prom on the 13th appeared to be additional to the Fleetwood bird which was seen regularly between Rossall Point and Fleetwood Pier by several observers. A gull at the Lune Estuary on the 27th-28th presented a few problems of identification to observers before it

was finally agreed to be a 2nd year Iceland Gull. A sub adult Mediterranean Gull off South Prom on the 6th appeared to present no such identification problems.

The widespread heavy snowfalls and blizzards in Scotland didn't suit the Pinkfeet wintering there. Many birds moved south to escape the foul conditions further north, and it appeared that Over Wyre was more to their liking. First indications of the influx came on the 20th when at least 1,500 went south over the Mere in forty minutes - the following day 7,600 were at Pilling. On the 22nd, with a couple of inches of snow lying locally, 11,130 Pinkfeet were in flight at Pilling - amongst the geese at Pilling was a solitary Bar Headed Goose which had been identified amongst Pinkfeet in Scotland. With much shooting over the Pilling mosses on the 22nd it wasn't surprising to receive a record of 1,000 in flight going south over Newton Village that same morning.

The gales also affected local numbers of some wildfowl species. One hundred and four Pintail went south off South Prom on 1st, 1100 Teal were sheltering on the R. Wyre behind ICI on the 8th, 70 Shoveler on the Mere on 15th, and 47 Red Breasted Mergansers on 14th-15th must be the highest single count on record for the Fylde. Numbers of the more regular wildfowl species remained largely unchanged from December, but up to 5 Eiders were still off Rossall, the female Long Tailed Duck remained at the ICI pool, and the three Ruddy Duck were still frequenting the Mere (the drake disappeared on the 20th leaving only the two ducks). - 9 Scaup were in the Wyre Estuary on 14th, and 30 Wigeon on the sea off Central Prom on the 23rd. Forty Mute Swans were on Fleetwood Marine Lake for most of the month, and 4 at Wesham Marsh on 14th-15th (No records of 'wild' swans were received).

A Slavonian Grebe at the Mere on 7th and 8th, and probably again on the 15th, may have been the bird seen on Fairhaven Lake in December.

The grim weather in Scotland not only affected the increase in Pinkfeet, but was also the most likely reason for the local increase in Snow Buntings from 10 at Rossall at the start of the month to at least 73 at the end of the month. The December flock of 10 remained stable up to the period of heavy snowfalls, but 13 more at the Mere on the 25th heralded the start of the influx. On the 27th, 2 were by Amounderness Way at Thornton, 37 at Rossall School, 28 in Anchorsholme Park, and 2 in the St. Annes dunes. By the 28th, 73 were between Anchorsholme and Rossall Point.

The snowfalls also appeared to affect other passerine species, but not quite so dramatically as the Snow Buntings. At Fleetwood Marine Lake a roost of Greenfinches on the island held at least 450 birds on the 29th (is this a new roost or an old one, or just a result of the weather?) - 9 Mistle Thrushes on Lytham Green and 14 at Anchorsholme park on 27th were unusually high local counts for this species, and a flock of 14 Redpolls at Greenhalgh on the 29th was an unexpected record of an under recorded species. Fieldfares, Redwings, and Starlings were involved in the hard weather movements down the coast late in the month, and Redwings in search of food were forced into gardens at Poulton on the 26th. A Yellowhammer at the L.S.A.N.R. on the 25th was surprisingly the first record of the species at this site. A Marsh Tit was found at Fleetwood Power Station on the 29th, where earlier in the month (6th) a male Black Redstart provided the only record of this species so far this winter.

At Lytham Marsh on the 29th several observers reported sightings of a Peregrine 2 Merlins, a Kestrel, and the wintering female Hen Harrier, whilst on the same day at the Mere the Short Eared Owls had increased to 5. Single Sparrowhawks were seen at Poulton (14th), Preesall (28th), Inskip and Fleetwood Power Station (29th) - the Poulton bird putting in a brief appearance over a feeding station in Phil Slades garden on Garstang Road. The only Little Owl seen was a single at Cogie Hill on the 21st.

Wader records during the first week of the New Year included 346 Redshanks and 129 Turnstones sitting out the gales on a field off Rossall Lane, a Purple Sandpiper at Rossall Point, and 62 Ringed Plover with 109 Dunlin at Anchorsholme Lane. Mid-month records of waders were few, so a Ruff at Pars Farm (Fleetwood) added some interest to a quiet period, but it took the monthly wader count at Pilling on 22nd to add volume to the records. The count produced the following, 3,220 Oystercatchers, 359 Golden Plover, 45 Grey Plover, 2,460 Dunlin, 4,000 Knot, 43 Redshank, 846 Bar Tailed Godwits, and 250 Curlew (details of the St. Annes count were not submitted). The only large flock of waders reported from South Shore was a flock of 1,000 Bar Tailed Godwits on the 14th. A Spotted Redshank amongst Redshanks in a field off Cockers Dyke Lane (Preesall) on the 28th was the first indication that a bird may be wintering in the area (following last winters Pilling bird) - 2 Ruffs in the same field were probably wintering birds. The most significant wader records of the month involved Woodcocks, when towards the month end it became obvious that there had been an influx of the species to local sites. On the 25th, 4 were at L.S.A.N.R., 10 the next day at the Mere, one at Fluke Hall, 5 at Hardhorn, and one at the Mere on the 28th, and yet another single at Inskip on the 29th - it makes one wonder how many others passed unobserved at other likely sites.

FEBRUARY 1984

A wet and windy start to the month brought a few Little Gulls to coastal sites, but the number involved could in no way compare with the huge numbers of last month. The 'largest' counts were of 3 at Rossall on the 5th and 3 at Fleetwood on the 8th - singles appeared off South Prom, the Wyre Estuary, and Cleveleys. Inland, singles were at Preesall and on Palatine School playing fields (South Shore).

An adult Glaucous Gull seen moving slowly north over Starr Hills dunes on the 2nd was yet another 'first' for the L.S.A.N.R.

Results of sea watches from Rossall Point late in the month indicated light passage of Razorbills and Guillemots, but of more interest to most observers was the number of divers encountered. Red Throated Divers were the most plentiful with a maximum of 11 on the 19th, these reducing gradually to 3 by the 28th. During this same period, a few records of Black Throated Diver probably referred to a single individual, similarly a single Great Northern Diver provided several sightings from the 19th to the month end. A Slavonian Grebe on Fleetwood Marine Lake on the 5th was possibly the bird seen at Marton Mere during January.

Pheasants have never figured prominently in observers notes, probably because of the difficulty in ascertaining their origins as releases for shooting or from truly wild stocks - nevertheless the 6 at Winmarleigh Moss on the 4th are worth mentioning as a "first" record from observers submitted to the newsletter. Thirteen Partridge at Thurnham, also on the 4th, were well worth recording, as were the 9 Red Legged Partridge on Pilling Moss on the 19th.

The monthly wader count at Pilling and Cockersands on the 19th produced 2,550 Oystercatchers, 21 Ringed Plover, 418 Grey Plover, 4,430 Knot, 3,650 Dunlin 17 Snipe, 540 Bar Tailed Godwit, 366 Curlew, 108 Redshank, 99 Turnstone, one Sanderling, and one Greenshank. Throughout the rest of the month, "one-off" counts of note included, 83 Snipe at W.G.P. on the 17th, and 200 at Pars Farm on 24th - 246 Redshank at Thurnham on 4th, 276 at Preesall Sands on 11th, and 100 on the bed of the drained Fleetwood Marine Lake on 24th - the largest flock of Golden Plover was that of 1,000 birds near Preesall on the 4th, and 4,000 Lapwings on Newton Marsh on the 12th was the highest count of that species. Overwintering waders of note were single Spotted Redshank at Pilling on the 18th, a Greenshank in the Cockersands area from the 19th to the month end, and two Green Sandpipers at Street Gravel Pits, Scorton, throughout the month.

Single Merlin records came from nine widespread sites (coastal and inland), but all Peregrine records except one came from the Fleetwood Power Station area, and probably referred to the two regular birds. The only Peregrine sighting away from the Power Station, was of a bird seen to take a Turnstone at Rossall Point on the 28th - this may well have been one of the Power Station birds. Sparrowhawk sightings involved single birds at Cogie Hill, Little Singleton, The Mere, Hardhorn and Winmarleigh Moss, but an absence of notes from Lytham regarding the female Hen Harrier may mean that "the bird has flown".

The few Short-eared Owls seen this winter remained at their regular haunts during February, but a bird seen over the sea off Rossall Point on the 19th may have been an "early" migrant. The Fylde's resident Tawny Owls became noticeably vociferous during the month as birds re-established breeding territories.

Nine species of geese were found Over Wyre during the month. As one might expect Pinkfeet were most plentiful, and it was amongst the Pinkfeet flocks that some less common visitors were located. Up to 4 'Russian' Whitefronts and up to 5 'Greenland' Whitefronts were present for most of the month (one of the latter was also found at Wesham Marsh), 2 "light bellied" Brents and 2 "dark bellied" Brents came at mid month, and 3 Barnacles appeared on the 23rd. In addition to these the Bar Headed Goose which appeared in January was still to be found near Eagland Hill. During the month, Wesham Marsh not only proved attractive to the Whitefront, but also to a reasonable variety of duck, including 45 Shelduck, 50 Pintail, 60 Teal, 4 Gadwell, 8 Wigeon, and 2 Shoveler. At the I.C.I. pool the female Long tailed Duck has become something of a permanent fixture, and the female Scaup at the same water looks like becoming the same; at Rossall, observers could expect at least 8 Eiders with the high tides, and up to 45 Mergansers were still frequenting the Fleetwood Docks. The absence of Ruddy Duck records from the Mere was disappointing (have they gone?), but an interesting record was of a female on the sea off Rossall Point on the 19th. A noticeable influx of Pochard came to The Fylde at the start of the month, producing maxima of 160 at the Mere, and 50 at the I.C.I. pool - both very good counts for the respective waders. Numbers of Tufted Duck at the Mere showed very little change from January's fifty or so.

A male Blackcap found a Layton garden much to his liking, staying from January 24th to February 5th - from the 3rd to the 5th he must have found it even more to his liking when he was joined by a female of the same species. Later in the month (25th) a female Blackcap was in a garden in Laverton Road, St. Annes. The Layton garden was also visited by both female and male Bramblings during the month. (Is this the same garden of Red Breasted Flycatcher fame - if so, what is the secret?)

The spectacular flocks of Snow Buntings of January appeared to have departed The Fylde by mid-February, leaving about 24 at Rossall at mid-month - these were replaced by some quite large flocks of Twite, Linnet, and Reed Buntings which frequented the areas about Fleetwood Marsh. The first indications of the "all-change" came on the 2nd when a flock of 200 Twite was found on Fleetwood Marsh, and a mixed flock of some 60 Twite and 50 Linnets was near the Fishmeal Factory. On the 4th, Fleetwood Marsh still held the 200 Twite, but in addition were 80 Linnets, 30 Reed Buntings, and 200 Bramblings (the latter may have moved from Lytham Marsh). From the 5th these numbers quickly fell, but by the 24th the Reed Buntings had increased again to 95. The Fleetwood Marine Lake Greenfinch roost still held up to 350 birds throughout the month. Over Wyre passerine flocks included 100 Tree Sparrows at Preesall Moss Edge, 45 Corn Buntings at Cogie Hill, 30 at Eagland Hill, and 106 at Pilling Moss, also 27 Yellowhammers on Winmarleigh Moss and 350 Skylarks at Cogie Hill.

Other Passerines of interest included Stonechats at six sites; 6 Long tailed Tits on Winmarleigh Moss and 3 Marsh Tits at Winmarleigh Hall Woods (9th); a Coal Tit at Fluke Hall (17th) and another at Greenhalgh (26th); a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at Mowbreck Hall, and a female in Clifton Hall Woods.

A blue Budgerigar at L.S.A.N.R. on 26th could have been a wind blown vagrant!

GENERAL NOTICES

1. Patrick Davies will be continuing his study of "spring" warbler migration through the Fylde during 1984 - he would appreciate details of all records, but stresses that maximum counts from sites will be of most importance. Patrick hopes to establish a pattern to "spring" warbler migration and how the weather and other factors may affect this.

COMMENT

One of the easiest ways of broadening the horizons of our newsletter would be to take an idea from BB and include bird behaviour notes. We all observe unusual bird behaviour at times, although few of us I expect consider sending details to BB, and even if we did there is no guarantee they would be published. Most are filed away for future reference and may or may not be used. This would not happen with our own newsletter which would seem to be ideal for this purpose.

Notes by virtue of definition are short and sweet and should take little more time to prepare than ones monthly records.

As I see it, if we did start doing this, then when BB requested information about a particular behaviour we could respond immediately from our own resources provided of course an index is maintained of the various notes - 'who knows how long we will be in existence'. Secondly it would add variety and greater purpose and thirdly it would demonstrate an initiative to move away from just recording birds (important as that is) and thereby enhance the reputation of the Fylde Bird Club.

Shall we give it a try members?.

Barry Dyson

'COUNTING BIRDS'

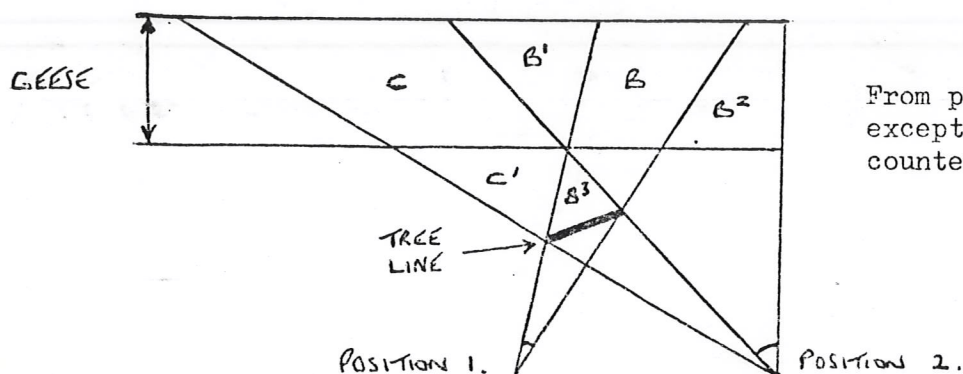
Some time ago Peter Guy demonstrated how difficult it is to count 'wild beans' in flight. This set me thinking about why counting birds in general should be so difficult, which I consider below for your interest and comment.

I think we would all agree that on the night eye estimation proved to be rather crude and inaccurate when faced with more than over 250 birds. Bearing in mind that in the field we would have had longer to count them than Peter gave us, we would on the other hand have been faced with the not inconsiderable problems of density and mobility. Peter's flocks were two dimensional only. Nevertheless I would consider that large flying birds such as geese present a marginally easier task to count than grounded birds, that is until you reach the 5000+ scale when guesstimates must surely be the order of the day.

Counting the number of any species of birds in a large grounded flock is often difficult. An accurate direct count depends on many things; the distance of the flock from the observer, the size of the species, whether or not they are roosting, the intensity of the light, the average distance between the members of the flock, the speed of movement (if the flock is moving) or the speed and extent of wandering of individuals (if the flock is stationary), the plumage colour. The difficulties increase with the size of the flock, not least because it is very easy to confuse counted with uncounted particularly among uniformly spaced birds of like appearance. For these reasons it is often impossible to make a direct count of a very large flock, and I personally have, on a number of occasions, 'given up' with wader flocks.

It is often possible to count a portion of a flock and by comparing it visually, both for area and density, with the rest of the flock to estimate the total. Such estimates may be rather inaccurate particularly if the flock is on the ground (and you lack elevation) where its density and area are hard to judge but are probably more reliable when the flock is in steady flight and all the birds are equally visible.

To count any grounded flock accurately requires a birds eye view which just isn't possible most of the time. Counting geese in the Fylde can be infuriating because they are often to be found feeding on uneven ground. Creek ridden salt marshes and 'hilly' farm land are favourite feeding grounds which make for tortuous counting. Hillocks such as those to be found at Rawcliffe Moss, Stalmine and Cogie Hill, where Pinkfeet appear from and just as quickly disappear from view are enough to make anybody blaspheme. Then there are hedgerows to contend with. Intact hedgerows are fine because they prevent you from counting at all, but fragmented hedgerows or even a remnant group of stunted hawthorns present difficulties for the counter. How often are you left to guess how many geese are concealed by such physical features because there is no alternative viewing position. Even where you can move to another position there is the further problem of re-alignment and one wonders whether an educated guess of the unseen geese is no less accurate than taking up a fresh position. Below is a diagram illustrating the problem in its simplest form. The permutations are endless and infinitely more problematical than this example.



From position 1 all the geese except for those in B can be counted.

By moving to position 2 all the geese will have been seen unless some of those in Sector B have moved into Sectors C, C1 or B3 which there is little you can do about or would even know about. But additionally how do you exclude geese in B1 and B2 so they are not included twice in your count, and if the flock is mobile which is the usual situation, some geese will have moved from Sector B into Sectors B1 and B2 during the time spent repositioning your observation point. There are so many considerations but I should now like to move on to perhaps the worst problem of all - disturbance.

Picture the scene, there you are counting a large flock of Pinkfeet when part way through they take on an alert stance, your heart stops beating, you look around for signs and then all of a sudden it happens, complete silence for a split second followed by a cacophony of sound and then mass take off. Sure its a wonderful sight and perhaps you even feel ambivalent towards the culprit, for if there is one thing guaranteed to stir me inside its a large flock of geese flying for their lives.

From a distance they look like a large cloud rising from the ground. They begin to circle gaining height all the time while instinctively planning their escape route. Before long the cloud begins to disintegrate as families group together while still climbing and moving further away. Then before you realise it is happening, the sky is transformed into a network of chevrons and by now they are safe from whatever danger they left behind. Binoculars are necessary to see them and you can no longer hear them but you know you will see them again. I count these moments (for that is all they are) as one of the highlights of all birdwatching, if not the pinnacle. They are for me unforgettable experiences and count for times on which I can say I have really lived.

But I digress. Even all these problems pale into insignificance when confronted with the vast wader flocks found in Morecambe bay. Whereas here there is no problem with uneven ground, hedgerows etc, there is the even more irksome and daunting task of counting tightly packed flocks of irregular outline with an almost complete lack of landmarks to assist in fractioning the flocks. When grey plumaged waders flock together I find it difficult to conceive how anyone, especially on an overcast day, can estimate with any accuracy at all, a wader flock in excess of 5000 birds. Surely aerial photography is the only real solution and even this would be of limited use when dealing with flocks of mixed species. Fortunately we are not faced with the problem in North Fylde except on spring passage when such uncountable numbers of Dunlin and Sanderling can be seen on Pilling Sands and Marsh.

As already mentioned birds of a feather do not always flock together and if you happen to glimpse an odd one out you are faced with the dilemma of identifying it there and then or risk trying to relocate it later after continuing with your count. If you choose the first alternative this can affect your count significantly, particularly at peak feeding times when birds are moving about in all directions or are flying away. Even if you choose the latter alternative, late arrivals dropping into that part of the flock you have already counted or birds you are about to count flying away are additional headaches and will test anybody's patience. I suspect that if after several recounts the same is still happening, that we make some sort of inexplicable allowance for these factors which may or may not be accurate. Am I right?

Species such as Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Redshank can, because of their smaller numbers, be counted with a far greater accuracy, but Dunlin, Knots and Sanderling surely require verification by other counters. I certainly would be extremely reluctant to submit wader counts in excess of 5 - 10,000 without back-up. Therefore I submit that if we are to count the vast wader flocks with any real accuracy then there has got to be more openness about our methods and figures. But before you jump down my throat let me say straightaway that I know of no incorrect counts in literature. It is just that I am dubious about the accuracy of any wader count in excess of 5,000. I say that because it occurs to me that counts are often taken at their face value with little or no verification whereas a rare bird receives far more attention and is unlikely these days to be seen by only one observer and therefore verification or at least corroboration is obtained.

By way of an analogy consider the attendance figures provided by the various sources for mass rallies, demonstrations, Royal Family occasions etc etc. How often are the figures quoted in the media from different sources worlds apart. I would agree that some are at variance because of political reasons (e.g. strike action, walk-outs) but estimates of the numbers who turned out to watch Prince Charles and Lady Dianas wedding varied by as much as 100,000, and does anybody really know how many people St Peters Square in Rome can hold.

I think that it is only by comparing each others totals that our accuracy will improve or will be proved already but until we test ourselves and discuss the results we will never know for sure whether or not our counts are reliable. Perhaps a field trip to a large wader roost will dispel my fears although I doubt it. Nevertheless I feel sure it would be a worthwhile exercise if one was to be arranged and we were left to our own devices to count the flock before 'sealing' our answers. They would then be handed to an independent observer to reveal them in the ensuing discussion. There is no need to feel embarrassed or foolish about declaring a number you are not sure about as the end result will benefit us all. Some of us are bound to be better than others but it is only by talking among ourselves that we will learn why there should be such disparity in our totals if that is indeed the case.

I should like to end by describing some of the qualities a proficient counter should have. He should be patient, alert, mathematical, keen, dedicated but above all truthful to himself. Finally I should like to leave you with this thought. It is often said that underestimating occurs amongst inexperienced observers - but who is checking on the experienced.

If you found this article controversial or you have something further to add please respond through the newsletter. By doing so the newsletter will develop into something more than just a vehicle for providing recent bird sightings. We should always be looking for ways to improve our ornithological awareness and what better way than to use our own newsletter as a forum to air our views.

B. Dyson