



# Fylde Bird Club

Chairman: Mr. L. BLACOW  
Secretary: Mr. A.J. HINCHLIFFE

NEWSLETTER NO. 55

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## FROM THE CHAIR

As usual I have resisted the temptation to look back on the passing year but one high spot is certainly worth recall. At long last Blackpool Borough Council have made a firm decision to declare Marton Mere a Local Nature Reserve. A draft of the Reserve Bye laws are with the Borough Solicitor and should be published next year.

Several of our members have a long association with the Mere and must feel that all their hard work has at last been rewarded. Although the Mere is to be given the status it deserves our work has not finished. We have a voice on the Management Team, we must ensure that habitats are properly managed and protected from the abuses they suffered in the past.

I hope some of you will help with work parties and possibly become Volunteer Wardens. A new Voluntary Warden scheme is to be organized, those joining will benefit from training sessions and will have the support of the Borough Council. To complete the works outlined in the Management Plan, the Warden will need some help. In return any of our members who do help will expect their efforts to be acknowledged, something that has not happened in the recent past.

Wishing you all a happy and peaceful Christmas and great birding in 1992.

L.G.B.

Twenty years ago I listened to my brother-in-law recounting the experience of a birding trip to Texel. During the long interval of time, Texel remained at the back of my mind rather like dreams of spoon billed sandpipers, birds of paradise and ibis-bills. Unlike some of my pipe dream birding, at least Texel was attainable and April '91 saw Joyce and myself heading for Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, on route for the largest of the West Friesian Islands lying off the North coast of Holland.

No package deals appear to exist for holidays on Texel, although several "Bird Tour Operators" include the island as part of their Dutch Itinaries. Much preferring to do our own thing, we made enquiries to both Texel and the Dutch Tourist Board, receiving all the information we needed. Flight reservations, hotels both on Texel and Amsterdam, plus train and ferry tickets were all reserved and paid for at this end with the help and considerable expertise of Mr Kevin Keegan of Fylde Travel in Poulton.

We had at first thought of driving to Hull and taking the overnight ferry to Rotterdam but on second thoughts, too much time would be lost at no great saving, so flying for us was the answer. In the event Manchester to Amsterdam takes about an hour; the time difference is one hour, so if on the return leg you leave at 9.00 am you land at 9.00 am and if you're lucky enough to have a strong tail wind, you can be in England before you have left Holland, amazing!

Schiphol airport is large, modern and internationally busy, a melting pot of world travel and a thrilling place to watch people of many nationalities on the move. For those interested in facts other than birds, the word Schiphol is the only other word yet found to be somewhat near our own SKIPOOL (recorded in early literature of the Fylde as SHIPOL). Probably Scandinavian, possibly Norse, but certainly brought here by the Vikings, meaning Ship-Pool referring to harbour. Schiphol airport long before being reclaimed from the sea was a safe anchorage for boats rather than aircraft, our own Skipool Creek providing the same sanctuary for Viking longboats.

Once through with airport requirements, it's simply on to your train to head North to the ferry terminal at Den Helder. Trains leave from right inside the airport concourse and are refreshingly punctual, efficient and appear to be staffed by the most courteous of personnel. With only one change of train, we arrived at Den Helder for a little after twelve noon. For those who haven't experienced Dutch bulb fields as a reality, then like us I am sure you would find them a spectacle. Where else could you see such vivid colour on such a vast scale. Colossal acreages of brilliant red, deep yellow, then bright pink, white, purple blue and all on land flatter that a billiard table and it goes on mile after mile.

From the station to the ferry terminal is a short taxi ride; if you have a current day train ticket you use a train taxi at about half the normal cost, just another way of providing efficient public transport. Ferries leave Den Helder for Texel at about forty five minute intervals for a trip taking about thirty minutes.

Texel is perhaps some fourteen miles by six miles, almost dead flat with a terrific sand dune system along its western sea board, it's small area and flatness lending itself to cycle transport with every hotel hiring or in some cases, providing them free. To reach our hotel, we used the public bus, alighting miles from the right place and eventually being rescued by car after a phone call to our hotel.

The "Prins Hendrik" and its owner, the heavily bearded Mr Case Poldimore were as delightful as each other. The accommodation was first-class and the food beyond the best of comment, superb in quality and quantity, in fact the best we have ever had on any of our travels, the Dutch two star grading equating easily with many a five-star hotel we have used and surpassing all.

We had done a little homework and chosen a hotel central for North and South and although on the East side of the island, central distance across East, West, was too little to prove a problem. Dykes in Holland are the banks and not the watercourse below them as in the Fylde and with the Prins Hendrik alongside Lancasterdijk, a main bank and channel keeping back the Waddensee, we had spoonbills and avocets on the doorstep most mornings.

I was under no illusions as to species, feeling confident of seeing little I hadn't seen here in England. I just had to exorcise the ghost of Texel that had haunted me for twenty years. I was looking forward to breeding black-tailed godwits and passage bar tails in full colour and many thousands of the latter didn't disappoint. Breeding avocets, terns of four species, heaps of waders that included many full colour spotted redshanks and of course the Texel speciality of dark breasted brent and full colour ruff; all the above while not exciting to the seeker of rarities, were for us lesser mortals easily good enough to provide the best in good old fashioned bird watching!

Arriving in full sun, the best of the weather held for the first four days and although we only had rain once it was torrential and caught us right out on the salt marsh of the De Schorren Reserve watching a breeding colony of twenty pairs of spoonbills. While the flatness provided us with good cycling, a persistent strong and cold North wind, while sharpening the appetite, reduced unfit bodies to a state of comatose by evening. Neither of us had ridden a bike for at least thirty years and thirty five miles on the first day produced an authentic John Wayne walk; talk about "I was right about that saddle". Hot showers and meals like chicken breasts stuffed with cheese in the most delicious sauce and long nights round an open log fire, were instant therapy for the days ahead.

The wind continued to blow and we continued to perambulate around the island. I am not sure whether we were a little early (last week in April) or whether the strong North winds were holding birds back, for warblers, stonechats and wheatears were only found in low numbers. Perhaps the best find was a fine single male blue headed wagtail one evening, followed by a group of five the following morning. An overnight influx of spotted redshanks produced about a hundred and fifty on a shallow pool where none had been the previous day. This small pool produced good easy watching and good birds daily, breeding avocets, resting bartails, common and sandwich terns, greenshanks, blacktails and ringed plover while the fields behind held brent most mornings.

Texel isn't pretty, in fact with regards to habitat its much like Lane Ends, Pilling and when it blows there is nowhere to hide. It is of course a perfectly placed staging post for north bound waders; dunlin, knot and bartailed godwits were here in fantastic numbers, perhaps hundreds of thousands, no doubt waiting for a shift in the wind. Good days produced high, sky dancing black tailed godwits singing loud and clear, an amazing sight and well worth going for. Marsh harriers are common, but since hen harriers arrived to breed, monties no longer use Texel.

We worked hard for leking ruff, but without luck but we did turn up a single hobby. Little terns too eluded us, but are present in small numbers breeding around Outschild. Short eared owls use the extensive dune system of the west coast line. The dune system is far larger than any I have previously seen and much more time than we had available would have benefited more detailed watching. Extensive walk/cycle ways have been built through the dune system so mobility from area to area is no problem. Also on the west side are some extremely good dry heath and mixed woodland areas that look extremely inviting and attractive bird holding areas. All the woodlands on Texel have free access with many way-marked trails. The heathland with its scattering of mature pines is no doubt the hobby holding part of Texel, though I am sure late May would be soon enough to look for these lovely little falcons in any number.

Texel is of course best known as a migration watchpoint, so spring and autumn are the bonus times to visit. Spring overshoots include golden oriole and bluethroats.

Cont'd/.....

A lot depends on what you want to see; wildfowl and waders, then its got to be autumn for you. If its waders in breeding colour then April won't be too soon, but if you're into warblers, then late May/June would pay dividends. Our species list was 86 for the week, but our bird watching is best described as passive; more competent watchers working the vast numbers of waders present would surely have taken our total to well over the hundred.

A few facts about Texel won't go amiss. The Dutch really care about their birds and during the breeding season the 12 bird reserves on this small island are closed to the public. The island is well wardened and visits to some breeding areas are possible but only if pre-arranged with a warden. Groups are very small and if you want to beat the Germans, it would pay to make your arrangements before your visit. Many areas can be watched from roads and paths and particularly the cycle tracks that cover much of the island.

Accommodation is no problem for the island is a popular holiday spot during high summer for both Dutch and German. (The last week in April gave us much of the island to ourselves). When it comes to Hotels you pays your money and takes your choice. It's also possible to camp or use caravan accommodation, but let me tell you a little more about the Prins Hendrik. The food had been fantastic and on the Wednesday I had complimented the owner chef. Thanking me, he said, "tonight you have fresh fish". Wednesday was the day we got caught in the rain and then dried out by a cruel north wind and between walking and cycling, by tea-time I could have eaten a flock mattress. Each evening the tables had been set with candles and a cozy log fire blazed in the hearth, (quite romantic if you hadn't pushed a bike round all day). Imagine our surprise when the fresh fish appeared, six, yes six, Dover Soles on a silver salver in the most delicious sauce you have ever tasted, with fresh vegetables, roast and boiled, a first rate side salad, preceded by clear vegetable soup, and followed by fresh fruit and ice-cream. If the rewards come like this I'll watch waders with anyone. I could even be persuaded to spend a little time on sea birds!

Doing Texel our way cost approx £370 each, this included one night at the Beethoven Hotel in Amsterdam on the return leg, so as to be near the airport for an early departure. Drinks, house wine with most evening meals plus a few beers and brandies (Joyce aspires to the high life) during the evenings, plus late night coffees, added only another £20. All rooms were en-suite and ours was first-class. The largest town on Texel is Den Burg and compares perhaps with Poulton for size. Most villages are clean and neat with fine old pubs and the people are most friendly. For the botonising birder you would need to go in June, when I am told the orchids are at their best; butterflies in a cold April were few, just whites, small copper (one) and a few blues probably common.

Apart from flower bulb production, most agriculture is beef cattle on the best grass land with sheep on the rougher land and dykes. The sheep are an odd breed with a horizontal head carriage; no lamb figured on the menu for Texel sheep are bred for fine wool. For the birder who packs his mid-day lunch there were some fine smoked meats and cheeses to be bought, but to avoid such a persistent north wind that blew for most of the time were were there, the little village pubs provided a welcome refuge most days.

#### Important Contacts

Main Office: Natuurmonumenten  
Schaep En Burgh  
Noordereinde 60  
1243 JJ's Graveland

Cont'd/.....

Tourist Information (State Bird Watching information)

V.V.V. Texel  
Groineplaats 9  
1791 CC Den Burg  
The Netherlands

Will supply all accommodation information needed.

Birding Contacts  
Society Natuurmonumenten  
C G Boot (Supervisor) = Chief Warden  
Polderweg 2  
1793 A C De Waal  
Texel  
Netherlands

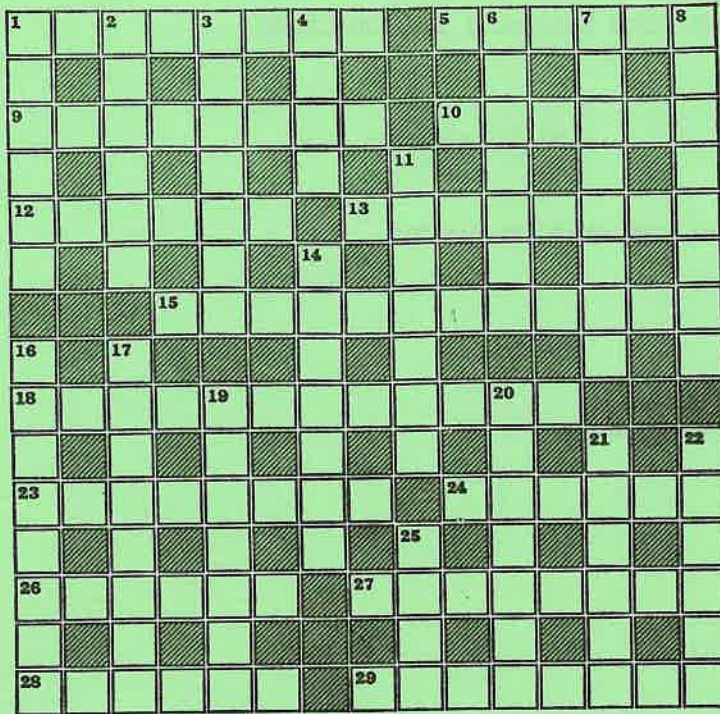
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**B.O.E.E. WADER COUNT DATES 1992**

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<u>Date</u>	<u>Ht(m)@ Time</u>	:	<u>Date</u>	<u>Ht(m)@ Time</u>
Jan 19	9.21 @ 1027	:	Jly 19	8.29 @ 1348
Feb 23	9.09 @ 1436	:	Aug 16	8.76 @ 1248
Mar 22	9.43 @ 1327	:	Spt 13	9.03 @ 1147
Apr 19	9.38 @ 1227	:	Oct 11	8.96 @ 1048
May 17	9.03 @ 1129	:	Nov 15	8.74 @ 1411 .
Jun 14	8.52 @ 1033	:	Dec 13	9.40 @ 1316

GMT times throughout. Add 1hr. for BST  
from 29th March to 25th October 1992.



ACROSS

1. A Russian's bird. (8)
5. These are held in alibi sessions. (6)
9. Flies after N. European waders. (8)
10. Dubious street circular. (6)
12. Not odd back street occasions. (6)
13. Making pot tiles available only when on course. (4,4)
15. Grows better with environmentally friendly digits. (12)
18. Cheam strives to be 24. (9,3)
23. On a log  
— frog. (*Pickwick Pprs*, Ch15) (8)
24. Cardinal guides copper penny to a container. (3,3)
26. What the nervous birder might do. (6)
27. Main place for Schelgel's Petrel. (8)
28. Look in the nature garden. (6)
29. Endless treasure quietly changes to pleasures. (8)

DOWN

1. Bird before a coaster? (6)
2. He would miss a double cinclus. (6)
3. Sound first thing in a *Carduelis*, right. (7)
4. Part of Niagara gets cross. (4)
6. A mere Yank is drunk with a point. (7)
7. Daft birders go there? (8)
8. Revised pint's O.G.s show the way. (4,4)
11. Study a safety device to bewilder. (7)
14. Close french book and make alcohol (7)
16. We have only one grave alternative (8)
17. Tearing after a note can be both enthralling and annoying. (8)
19. Neater conifer? Correct. (7)
20. You might go and see this tramp. (7)
21. A Northerner and royalty may be seen all at sea. (6)
22. Flavours caught in agents. (6)
25. A collonade in which Greeks toast us. (4)

We are always being asked for our top ten favourite birds, but what about our top ten most boring birds. I list mine below. You may not agree, so let's see yours and find the most boring bird included on everyone's list, ♀ Mallard perhaps.

- ♀ House Sparrow - Familiarity breeds contempt and no more so than with this bird. Perhaps one day they'll all bury themselves whilst dust bathing. Ah do I hear someone say - TOUGH.
- Heron - What more can be said that hasn't already been said about this giant 'grey' motionless streak of flesh. How about an open season on them.
- Pheasant - Dumb, Gaudy, Category C, Killer. It's only saving grace is that it is good to eat. Others may say bring back the millinery trade.
- Herring Gull - Scavenger on tips, but really should be tipped on. Should be extinct or found only in Germany.
- Pigeons - Ha Ha Don't make me laugh. Would we really miss them. Thank god for Peregrines.
- ♀ Mallard - Nuff said.
- Guillemot - A Steve Davis bird, this 'really interesting' about on a par with watching paint dry or dung steam. Always best seen flying away, preferably with ♀ Mallards.
- Reed Warbler - Luckily, they tend only to be seen if looking for them. What a blessing, but also three cheers for Cuckoos.
- Rock Pipit - Good Merlin fodder this. The rest should be 'stoned' with the rocks they are found on.
- Canada Gocse - This escapee should all be rounded up and hung by their chin straps. Long live the 'Pinky'.
- Long Tailed Skua - Only kidding.

B. Dyson

## RECENT REPORTS

### SEPTEMBER

Diurnal passage at Fairhaven on the 1st produced good numbers and a good variety of migrants. Between 0700 and 1100 in light easterlies there were 20 Yellow and 30 Grey Wagtails, 10 Tree Sparrows, 7 Tree Pipits, 104 Swallows plus Pied Wagtails and the odd Wheatear. Surprise of the morning went to the two parties of Siskin (total 8!) also moving south and doing so surprisingly early for this species. Similar movements were also noted at Heysham around this time.

The first Meadow Pipits of the Autumn were also noted moving on this date. At LSANR later on in the morning Maurice had a Willow Warbler, 1 Whinchat and 5 Wheatear plus a Spotted Flycatcher - and I quote "sallying up from railway lines". After his Wardening duties he then moved to the Mere in the early evening. 2 Garganey were present but flew East later with a few Mallard. Amale and female Merlin were seen, no doubt attracted by the 6 - 7000 Swallows which were roosting in the reeds; or were they hunting the lone Swift also seen that evening? A Short Eared Owl and a Little Owl were also present for good measure. All in all not a bad days birding.

Frank Walsh spent most mornings at Fairhaven charting the diurnal movements irrespective of whether the conditions were suitable for migration - I look forward to publishing his paper on the subject in the Newsletter! To summarise some of his observations: peak movements of Pied Wagtails took place between the 4th and 9th, the last Yellow Wagtail was seen on the 10th; Tree Pipits were heard if not seen until the 9th on which date the first Chaffinch was seen migrating. His last Swift was seen on the 10th, the only record for him since the 11th August.

There was a strong passage of Pied and Grey Wagtails throughout the month. On the 21st 50 Swallows moved South. House Martins were only seen on 5 days with the only big numbers being 47 - on the same day as the Swallows. Skylark passage began on the 20th with 41 counted on the morning of the 30th. 3 Coal Tits were present on the 8th.

Autumn movements were surprisingly light at Rossall with a small passage of Pied and Grey Wagtails, Swallows, Meadow Pipits and Chaffinch. Simon Hayhow has the details Frank - how about two articles?

2 Siskins moved south over Lane Ends on the 7th. On the same day an adult and juvenile Peregrine and 2 Merlins were also present. Sparrowhawks were seen at Fairhaven and the Mere on several occasions whilst a Peregrine was seen chasing the Waders at Granny's Bay from the 4th to 11th. It must have been really tired by the 11th.

Raptor of the month however has to be the immature male Marsh Harrier seen flying south on the 20th off Starr Gate by Ian Blacow and then seen again from Fairhaven by Frank Walsh as it crossed the Estuary southwards.



surprising that more Velvets are not seen. On the 20th two flew north whilst 16 Great Crested Grebes drifted by on the ebbing tide. A Pomarine Skua was noted on the 4th and an adult on the 20th flew determinedly north.

Small parties of duck, mainly Wigeon and Pintail were seen passing south off the coast throughout the month. The regular male Eider returned to Fairhaven Lake on the 20th, obviously off Molluscs and on to Mother's Pride for the winter. 7 Teal seen on the Lake on the 27th was unusual for this site.

2 Whooper Swan flew south at Fairhaven on the 10th and 4 on the 28th. Pinkfeet were migrating in force with several parties up to 310 moving south.

8 Curlew Sandpipers remained at Fairhaven until the 2nd, 2 on the 15th were the last reported. On the 3rd 2000 Black Tailed Godwits, 5000 Knot plus many other scattered Waders were present.

At Skippool 300 Golden Plover and 450 Lapwing were using the sandbanks in the river. On the 16th a Spotted Redshank was at Stanah, spotted by our resident Warden/Chairman during his perambulations. Single Whimbrel were seen there and at Rossall early in the month.

Pied and Grey Wagtails moved past Rossall and Fairhaven during the early days of the month. There was a steady passage of Meadow Pipits with 264 on the 6th - numbers in the latter part of September having peaked at 470 on the 21st.

There was a poor passage of Blue Tits with a maximum of 30 on the 8th. Small numbers of Coal Tits continued to be seen and numbers were higher than in 1990. Long Tailed Tits were also moving, 10 at Stanah on the 4th were unusual as were 5 at Lytham Golf course on the 13th, 20 were at Clifton Hall on the 19th and 8 at LSANR on the 20th. The Siskin passage of early September was not sustained in October with 3 at Fairhaven on the 10th and 26th, and 1 at LSANR on the 27th.

Noticeable by their absence were Goldcrests, obviously suffering the effects of the previous cold winter. Maurice managed to see one at the Reserve on the 26th, his one and only Autumn migrant. By way of compensation he managed to count 4723 Starlings between 0830 and 0920 on the following day. That's quite a lot per minute, his biro must have been red hot.

Stonechats were on the Reserve on the 20th with a pair seen there on the 30th. Summer migrants remained despite the invasion of winter visitors. A Whitethroat was at Stanah on the 2nd, a Swallow at Fairhaven on the 26th, a Blackcap on the 27th and a House Martin at Laverton Road (Maurice's other residence) on the 29th.

I suppose the classic idea of winter visitors is the awaited influx of Redwings and Fieldfares and the hope that the winter will be a good one for Bramblings. The first Redwing was reported from Rossall on the 10th with 123 flying in off the sea and heading north east on the following day. Thereafter migrants could be heard passing over on most calm evenings with passage particularly heavy on the 20th.



The following week-end saw a large movement of terns with 840 Common, 28 Sandwich and 9 Arctics. Accompanying them were 3 Pomarine Skuas, a Bonxie and 5 Arctics. Small numbers of duck flew south and the distracting dots in the 'scope were Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtails and House Martins flying low over the water. Sadly two House Martins weren't Leach's Petrels.

It wasn't really a Leach's month, not enough sustained blows to push the birds inshore. However on Cory's day Len had 11 from the shelter along with 2 Bonxies and on the same date Barry Dyson and Simon Hayhow had 8 close in at Rossall plus 3 Kittiwakes (a rarity this year) and 3 Gannet.

On the 28th 101 Common Terns were counted at Starr Gate plus 86 Common Scoter. The following day's seawatching was not without interest but not for the seabird aspect. Instead 960 House Martins flew north, 600 between 1300 and 1330. Where were they going, why were they flying north? Answers on a postcard please.

None bird interest was provided by a movement of 6 Red Admiral butterflies at Rossall on the 26th with 2 at Starr Gate on the 28th. How fast does a Red Admiral fly and were the two at Starr Gate stragglers from the 26. Inane answers to this inane question to the Editor for the next Newsletter please.

Anyway, Mammal of the month was seen at 390 Vicarage Lane at 0930 hours on the 17th - wait for it! A Grey Squirrel on the flat roof of Maurice's shop windows was chased there by a cat - unharmed, it moved off after a few minutes. Maurice doesn't say whether it was a wild cat that chased it there but no doubt the squirrel was wild enough after spending an out of habitat sojourn in deepest Marton. No doubt it headed to Watson Road Park after that.

## OCTOBER

As mentioned above, a large Shearwater was seen off Rossall on the 1st. The same day also produced an Arctic Skua and a Slavonian Grebe flying north with 4 Kittiwakes and 2 Fulmars heading south. On the 6th 39 Kittiwakes moved south along with another Arctic Skua and 2 Red Throated Divers.

3 Sandwich Terns off Starr Gate on the 6th were late but the single which passed Rossall on the 27th was not so far off the latest recorded in Lancashire on the 5th November 1981.

Movement of the Auk species was discernible throughout the month involving Guillemots mainly with only the odd Razorbill.

Eider numbers off Rossall peaked at 925 on the 27th. 5 Scaup flew north off Cleveleys on the 18th.

An immature Long Tailed Duck had a short stay on Fairhaven Lake from the 12th to the 15th and probably the same bird seen again on the 20th. It soon became apparent that there had been a movement of this species with several reports from coastal sites and lakes in the North West. 7 were seen from Starr Gate on the 20th.

Considering the number of Common Scoter off South Promenade it is

Whilst Frank was "journalising" at Fairhaven a large bird was attacking his milk bottles at home. A Magpie was the chief suspect, and for those of you who have read about the strange and deadly diseases which can be picked up from contaminated milk I can report that Frank was out of the country for the last Bird Club meeting and not in isolation at Victoria Hospital.

Autumnal gatherings of 1050 Lapwings and 216 Golden Plovers were observed at the Radar station on St. Annes Moss on the 2nd. At the end of the month small parties of Coal Tits were seen at Stanah.

Like last year there was an influx of Curlew Sandpipers. 8 were noted in the company of a Little Stint at Fairhaven on the 3rd. By the following day 33 were counted between Lytham and Fairhaven, thereafter numbers declined with 15 present on the 6th and 2 on the 18th and 29th. A Ruff was seen in Lytham Dock creek on the 7th and a Curlew Sandpiper was on the beach at Rossall on the same day.

On the 8th the St. Annes Wader roost held 700 Oystercatchers, 30 Bar Tails, 120 Dunlin, 20 Grey Plover, 46 Knot, 8 Ringed Plovers, 3 Curlew Sandpipers, 1 Little Stint and only 160 Sanderling. The same day, the Birds at Estuaries count between Rossall and Glasson produced 5500 Oystercatchers, 868 Redshanks were on Barnaby Sands, 530 Turnstone at Rossall, 3 Greenshank at Armhill and 4 Curlew Sandpipers at Condor Green.

On the 11th the first Pinkfoot of the Autumn flew in off the sea at Starr Gate and landed near the sea wall. It then flew off inland over the Promenade. On the 18th skeins of 220 Pinkfeet passed south over Fairhaven at 0815 with smaller numbers being seen on several dates later in the month throughout the Fylde.

At the Mere on the 22nd 11 Pintail stopped for a few seconds whilst another 20 flew south. A female Garganey was still there along with 1 Goldeneye and 6 Shoveler.

Meanwhile back at the coast - yes folks it's seawatching time again; please skip the next few paragraphs if you're not already falling asleep or inwardly shuddering at the thought of sitting in the shelter at Starr Gate. However, I have to report that our Chairman hit the jackpot on the 24th when he spotted a large Shearwater moving south just beyond the surf some distance away. As it got nearer it materialised into a Cory's Shearwater, only the second Lancashire record. On the 1st October Simon Hayhow had another large Shearwater at Rossall but too far out to identify specifically.

More mundane species were migrating too:- on the 14th 107 Sandwich Terns, 13 Gannets and 47 Common Terns flew south past the shelter. The following day produced 127 Sandwich Terns, 6 Red Throated Divers and 2 Pomarine and Arctic Skuas. A male Scaup also 'whizzed' its way south, or left if you're mentally gazing out to sea and wishing that you were there.

NO - OK.

The first Fieldfares arrived a little later with 500 plus at the Mere on the 20th and 10 at Pilling on the same day. 17 flew west over Clifton Hall on the 26th.

Bramblings were scarce. 8 flew south east at Rossall on the 6th. 2 flew over Fairhaven on the 13th, 1 was at Clifton on the 19th and 5 were with Chaffinches at Lytham Hall on the 25th.

A Snow Bunting flew in off the sea at Rossall Point on the 28th.

Other not so noticeable visitors were seen during the month. Rock Pipits at Pilling, Rossall and Stanah, Woodcock at the Mere, Ballam and at the shop at Vicarage Lane. When Maurice does sell his shop I hope he supplies a bird list to the new owner.

The Fylde Ringing Group have been active recently. On the 6th 15 Meadow Pipits and 5 Reed Buntings were ringed at Lane Ends. At Winmarleigh Hall there were 2 Tawny Owls along with 1 Bullfinch, a definite rarity for the Fylde. 40 Redwing roosted at Clifton Hall on the 19th of which 4 were ringed, as were 4 Goldcrest and 4 Coal Tits. Approximately 130 Redwings roosted at Singleton on the 20th on which date 24 Chaffinch and 6 Blackbird were ringed. A further 33 Chaffinch were ringed on the 23rd.

You may have noticed that there is a paucity of records and reports from some of the premier sites of the Fylde. Not a single mention of Watson Road Park, Harrowside, the Railway Bushes or Squires Gate Industrial estate. Ed's been having a bad autumn. I just hope that things improve for him in the New Year. Maybe a Nutcracker in Revoc Park?

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S.Hayhow, J.Hopkins, M.Jones, M.Myerscough, R.Stinger,  
E.Stirling, J.F.Walsh.

#### POSTSCRIPT

First of all I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to the Newsletter this year whether it be by supplying articles or by sending in their sightings. My apologies go to anyone whose sightings have not been included. This is entirely due to Editorial incompetence and the filing system which prevails in the Dawe household. When I'm writing the Recent Reports I sit at the kitchen table surrounded by the bits of paper, read through them all and then try to put them into some semblance of order. To look at the table you'd think a litter lout was about with paper scattered all over the place. The filing system is a pile of paper stuck on the topmost book shelf which moves down shelf by shelf as the months progress. I know where everything is providing nobody touches it.

John Cross who has supplied an account of his Spring visit to Texel also visited Dumfries and Galloway and came back with copious amounts of

literature regarding birding opportunities in the area. This is reproduced at the back of the Newsletter. He stayed in Castle Douglas and can heartily recommend:-

Kerr & Sheila Steele  
Rose Cottage Guest House  
Gelston  
Castle Douglas. Kirkcudbrightshire  
DG7 1SH Tel: 0556 - 2513

Maurice has kindly supplied some archive articles written by the late Nelson Harwood for the Lytham St. Annes Express. These too follow from the Postscript and I hope that you find them of interest.

John Fletcher has supplied a Christmas Crossword which looks a bit difficult to me. He's not stated what the prizes for solving it are but no doubt he'll let you buy him a pint if you succeed. I must admit it's not like 'Birdwatching' magazine where you can win a pair of Bausch and Lomb 8 x 42's simply by spotting the differences between two pictures.

Barry Dyson's article about boring birds must strike a chord with readers. I must admit I'd not really thought about it but when I did I thought what makes a bird boring? - is it the way it looks; the way it behaves or a narcotic combination of both. By the way Barry I like Rock Pipits but agree entirely where Canada Geese are concerned. Just the other night at the Preston Society we had a talk about birds of Argentina. The Speaker made the point that millions of Chinstrap Penguins are interesting but just a few clustered on a beach soon become boring. I do hope that we get some other lists - Christmas is the ideal time to compile one but no Aylesbury Ducks or Turkeys please.

At the moment our Secretary is like a walking advert for Focalpoint, equipped as he is with brand new optics (Bausch & Lomb binoculars and a Kowa TSN 3) I can see Father Christmas bringing him a new Goretex anorak just to complete the picture. Another possible item would be a badge 'sponsored by Bass' prominently displayed on his back!

I had to laugh last Sunday when walking along the river bank at Aldcliffe when he asked John Fletcher (still sporting his beard) what he was getting for Christmas. John didn't know, however our Secretary said "Well a new Razor would be a good idea" or words to that effect.

Anyway, enough of that I'll just wait for the protestations of innocence to come or maybe I'll be wiped off the Christmas Card list.

Finally I'd like to wish everyone a very Happy Christmas and an even happier New Year.

A.D.

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

8th September 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe			7	1			8
Cormorant	9		8	4		3	24
Mute Swan							
Pink Footed Goose							
Shelduck			25			1	26
Wigeon	12		73			15	100
Teal	15		200			8	223
Mallard	14		211		12	12	247
Pintail			24				24
Shoveler							
Eider							
Goldeneye							
Red Breasted Merganser							
Coot					17		17
Oystercatcher	1913		3549	5			5467
Ringed Plover				144		2	146
Golden Plover			308	1			309
Grey Plover	1		77				78
Lapwing	6		602			38	646
Knot	40		41			1	82
Sanderling							
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper	4			1			5
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	36		9	441		5	491
Ruff			1				1
Snipe	8		1				9
Black T. Godwit						3	3
Bar T. Godwit	4		60	2		32	98
Whimbrel							
Curlew	44		956			214	1214
Spotted Redshank						2	2
Redshank	121					856	977
Greenshank			1			3	4
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone	35			530		7	592

A Condor Green/Glasson  
 B Cockersands Pt.

C Pilling/Cockerham  
 D Roscall Point

E ICI & CEGB Pools  
 F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.

## B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

## MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

13th October 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe	5		15	-			20
Cormorant	1		4	4 <del>2</del>		3	12
Mute Swan			1	34	2		37
Pink Footed Goose							
Shelduck			697			77	774
Wigeon	150		806			66	1022
Teal			198			80	278
Mallard	6		570		6	103	685
Pintail	2					2	4
Shoveler							
Eider				118			118
Goldeneye							
Red Breasted Merganser	1						1
Coot					12		12
Oystercatcher	350	1	3910	2		200	4463
Ringed Plover				44			44
Golden Plover	1		1465				1466
Grey Plover	6		2				8
Lapwing	480	27	1873			80	2460
Knot			250	500			750
Sanderling				18			18
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	100		5745	2		14	5861
Ruff							
Snipe	1					5	6
Black T. Godwit	21		1			36	58
Bar T. Godwit	37		740			1	778
Wimbrel				1			1
Curlew	200		1489			94	1783
Spotted Redshank							
Redshank	316	39	980			499	1834
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone				474			474

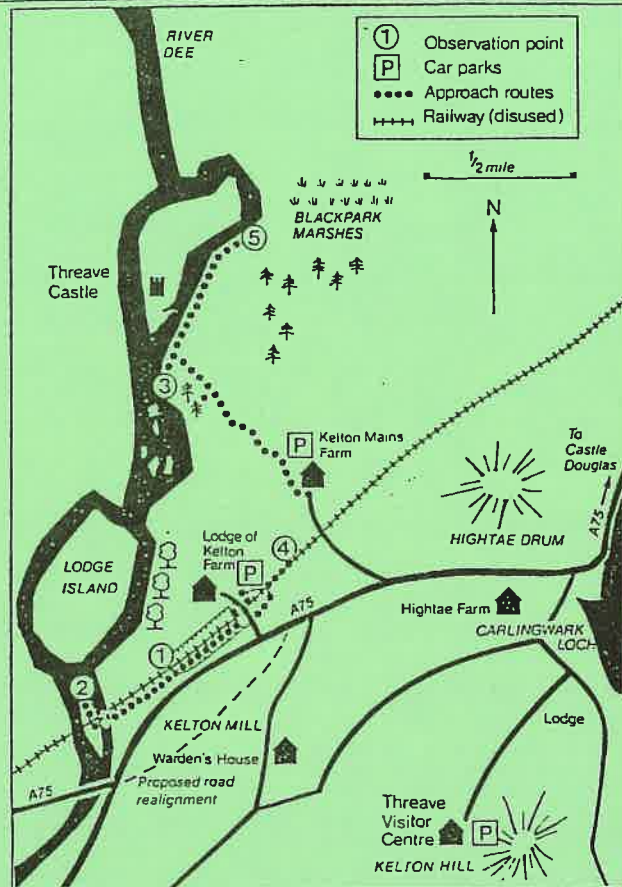
A Conder Green/Glasson  
B Cockersands Pt.

C Pilling/Cockernam  
D Roscall Point

E ICI & CFB Pools  
F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.



# THREAVE WILDFOWL REFUGE



## Access:

Several observation points (OP) are shown on the accompanying map and members of the public are permitted to use these between 1 November and 31 March each winter. Visitors are asked to keep strictly to the approach routes indicated on the map and not to go beyond the screened view points. Further details of these "hides" are given below and maps showing their positions, approach routes and car parks are also posted on the tracks leading off the A75 road to Lodge of Kelton and Kelton Mains Farms.

Access to other parts of the refuge, which may involve crossing tenanted farmland, must be under the guidance of the Warden. Conducted tours in parties up to a maximum of 10 are available on every day except Mondays. A charge is made per person, irrespective of Trust membership, with a reduction for children under 16. It is recommended that advance bookings should be made to the Warden at the following address:

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## Observation Points

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Five observation points have been established by the construction of rough screens at places where experience has shown wildfowl to feed or rest most regularly. Wildfowl are very alert birds and a careful approach is required: avoid sudden movements, keep voices low, and if any geese stop feeding and raise their heads, do not move until they start feeding again. In this way you will stand the best chance of seeing birds and of leaving them undisturbed for the next visitors.



OP 1 Lodge Railway Cutting (GR 738607)

Overlooking fields from the disused railway. Car park at bridge over the railway cutting on road leading to Lodge of Kelton Farm. Cross stile into field on east side of road, and on the north side of the railway cutting, descend into cutting by flight of steps adjacent to the bridge, then walk under the bridge.

OP 2 Lamb Island, near Bridge of Dee (GR 736606)

Proceed over the disused railway bridge onto the island. A short flight of steps descends to a path leading through young woodland to the viewpoint overlooking the river at the north end of the island.

OP 3 River Dee, near Threave Castle (GR 740619)

Overlooking pools on the River Dee and the north end of an island much used by geese. Park in the car park at Kelton Mains Farm and follow the public footpath towards Threave Castle. On reaching the riverbank, leave the Castle path, turn left and walk along the bank downstream for about 100 m.

OP 4 Lodge Railway Cutting (GR 743609)

This overlooks fields from the north east end of the railway cutting. Park as for OP 1. Cross stile into field on east side of road, but on south side of railway cutting, walk along the edge of the cutting, past the "causeway", then descend to the level of the old railway line by a short flight of steps.

OP 5 Blackpark Marshes (GR 743624)

A fully enclosed hide was constructed at this point in 1984. It offers excellent views of the River Dee and Blackpark Marshes, where many species of wildfowl may be seen. Please keep to the field edge when approaching the hide.

Other points from which wildfowl may often be observed are:

The Hightae Drum (Horse Hill)

Occasional feeding place for geese which can be observed best from the entrance to Hightae Farm (GR 753612). Please do not park on the main road as this is a dangerous corner. (No shelter provided).

Threave Castle

There is a public footpath, open at all times, from a car park at Kelton Mains Farm. The castle, a 14th century Douglas stronghold on an island, accessible only by boat, is open as follows (except when the river is very high):

April - September

Mon - Sat 0930 - 1900 hrs      Sundays 1400 - 1900 hrs

October - March

Mon - Sat 0930 - 1600 hrs      Sundays 1400 - 1600 hrs

There is an admission charge.

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## Threave Garden

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### Threave Garden

The garden is of great interest throughout the year. The house is not open to the public, but the garden and grounds are open every day from 9 am until sunset. An attractive woodland walk offers a pleasant contrast to the open farmland of the wild-fowl refuge and the opportunity to view a variety of small woodland birds.

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## Main species of wildlife to be seen at Threave

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Great Crested Grebe	Breeds regularly on Carlingwark Loch.
Little Grebe	Common, winter.
Cormorant	Frequent on the river and at Carlingwark Loch.
Heron	Regular.
Kingfisher, Hen Harrier	Seen occasionally on river and
Short-eared Owl	marshes.

### DUCK

Mallard, Teal	Numerous in winter: breed locally.
Wigeon	The commonest duck. Up to 4,000 recorded on Dee in winter.
Pintail, Shoveler	Regular, but in small numbers.
Gadwall, Scaup, Smew	Irregular and infrequent in winter.
Goldeneye, Goosander	The most regular of the diving ducks, the former more abundant than the latter. Oct-Mar.
Tufted Duck, Pochard	Common on neighbouring lochs. Also on river sometimes, especially numerous in hard weather.

### GEESE

Grey Lag	The commonest goose. About 1,500 in recent years. Late October to mid April.
White-fronted Goose (Greenland form)	200 - 400 winter on Loch Ken and small parties may occasionally be seen flying at dusk into Blackpark Marshes. November to March.
Pink-footed Goose	Occurs with other geese in small numbers.
Barnacle, Brent, Canada Geese	Rare. Odd single records in recent years with other geese, mostly on Hightae Drum.

GEESE (cont'd)

Bean Goose

Only seen occasionally and then normally only on Hightae Drum. Late December to late February. Formerly numerous but maximum 30-50 in recent years.

SWANS

Whooper Swans

Regular. October to April usually up to about 30.

Rough Island

20 acres situated off the village of Rockcliffe in the Urr estuary. Access by walking over the mud at low tide from Rockcliffe or Kippford. Nesting site of terns and Oyster Catchers. The public are asked not to visit the island in the nesting season of May/June, as the nests in the shingle beach are not easily seen and are walked upon.

# Threave Wildfowl Refuge

By W. J. McNish

**W**hen the late Major A. F. Gordon presented his estate of Threave to the Trust in 1948, one of his primary objectives—and in accordance with the wishes of his elder brother, Major C. L. Gordon who had died eight years previously in 1940—was the establishment of a wildfowl refuge on that portion of the River Dee between Threave, Netherhall Estate, and the adjacent Blackpark marsh.

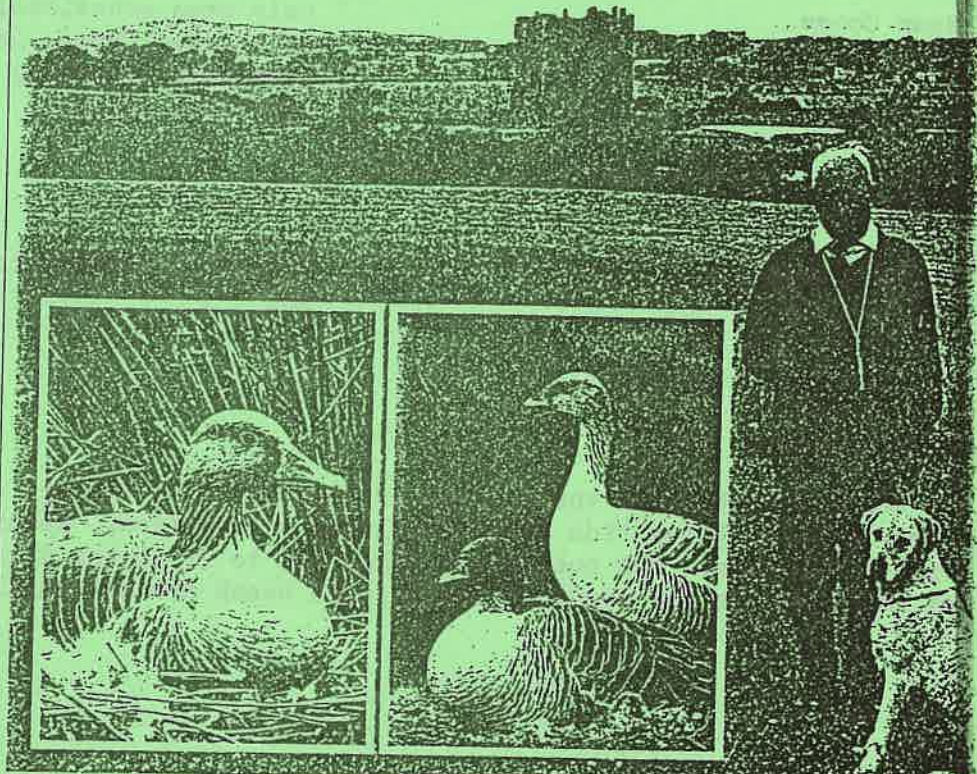
The area is subject to varying degrees of flooding as river levels rise and fall. Although keen shooting men, they were also very much concerned with conservation—a word, seldom, if ever, heard during their lifetimes. Included within the refuge half a mile from the river, and close to the town of Castle Douglas, are the extensive marshes of Carlingwark and Hightae. These marshes are divided by a narrow man-made canal, known locally as 'Carlingwark Lane' which runs from Carlingwark Loch to the river.

Threave has always been well known in ornithological circles as a wintering ground of bean geese. First recorded in 1921 they were regular visitors from December to March. Some 300–500 bean were regularly seen up to the late 1940's, but from then on the numbers have decreased until only 30–50 now visit the area and then not always on Threave.

The common goose on the refuge nowadays is the greylag. First appearing in the 1930's, their numbers gradually increased as the bean became scarce. Now several hundred may be seen on the refuge on most days in winter and many more come to roost in the river and in the Blackpark marsh, which they shared with the bean in former years. Small flocks of Greenland whitefront still roost there occasionally, away from their usual habitat in the Dee-Ken valley some miles upstream.

A few pinkfeet may also be seen with the greylags, although most of that species in this district prefer to stay on farms nearer to the coast. Stragglers of other species appear from time to time such as Canada, and brent. On the river the most common ducks are wigeon, mallard, teal with smaller numbers of pintail, shoveller, goldeneye, goosander, and tufted porchard. There are more of the last two species when lochs in the district are frozen over.

Others seen occasionally are gadwall, scaup, smew, scoter, and in late spring, a pair or two of shelduck.



The author and 'Treacle' on the reserve. Inset left: greylag at nest, right: pinkfoot

The River Dee which forms the western boundary of the refuge is a favourite greylag roost where up to 2,500 birds can arrive in the evening to spend the night in safety. The evening flighting at dusk in winter is an unforgettable sight.

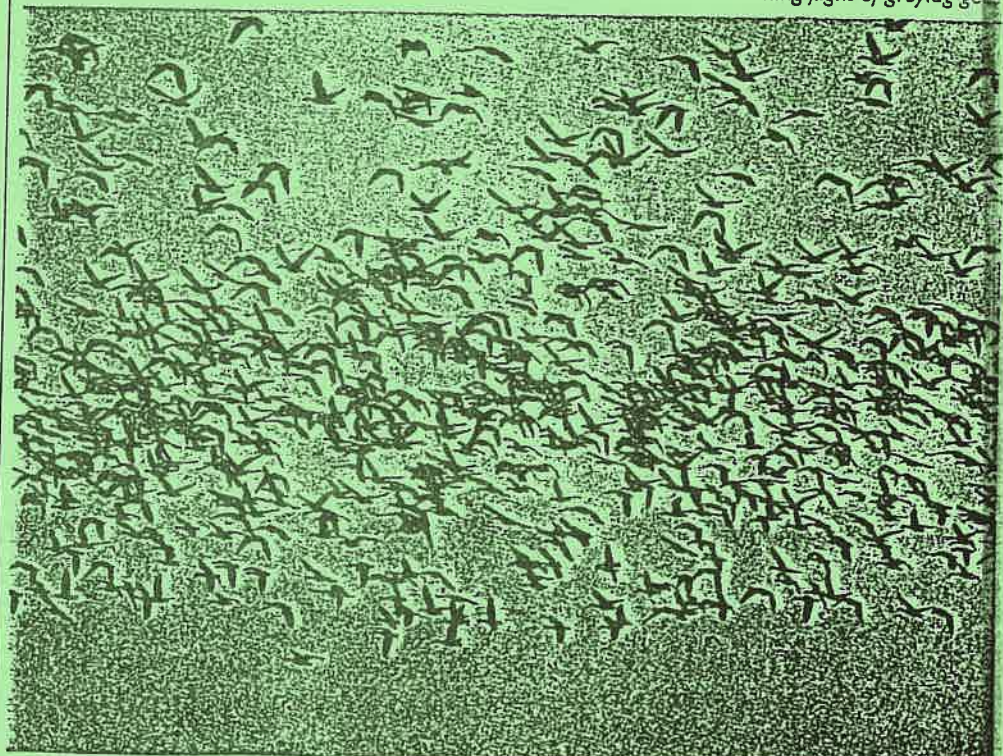
Many other birds inhabit the woods and pastures on the estate—curlew, redshank, reed bunting and meadow pipit to name but a few, while the once common lapwing and grey partridge are much scarcer than formerly.

Threave has three hides situated along the

river and two on the disused railway line Lodge of Kelton, which gives good cover access to hides looking out over the fields which are a winter feeding ground for the geese.

The refuge is open from 1 November to 31 March. The best months for seeing wildfowl are December and January, particularly if the river is low. Further information and leaflets are available from the visitor centre at Threave Garden or from The Warden, Threave Wildfowl Refuge, Kelton Mill, Castle Douglas. Telephone 055 668 242.

Evening flight of greylag geese



# Visitors are welcome at the Wood of Cree

By PAUL COLLIN

THE Wood of Cree is the largest and perhaps the most important area of ancient woodland left in the south of Scotland. Situated five miles north of Newton Stewart, the wood extends for over two miles along the River Cree. The RSPB purchased the wood in 1984 to safeguard its future and manage it as a Nature Reserve. I was appointed as the full-time Warden the same year, having previously worked on a number of RSPB Reserves in the country.

Once much of Britain was covered with broadleaved forests and the history of man is largely a story of woodland clearance so that today only small remnants of the old woods are left. Sadly this decline still continues and recent studies have shown that almost half the ancient woodland in Galloway has been lost since the last war.

Our ancient woodlands are a priceless part of our national heritage, rich in wildlife and of great landscape and amenity value. They have evolved over many hundreds of years during which time their immensely varied plant and animal communities have developed. Once lost these woods cannot be replaced and today there is a growing realisation that these remnants are important to all of us and need to be conserved.

The Wood of Cree, although an ancient wood, is far from natural in structure, having been greatly modified by previous timber extraction. Historical records show that the wood was regularly cut from at least 1760 up until 1920, probably every 25 to 30 years on a system of management known as coppicing. The timber was used in the construction of houses, oak bark for the local tannery while charcoal was produced for the smelting of locally mined lead between 1763 and 1830. Some timber also went further afield as pit props and cotton bobbins.

The wood was last cut in 1920 when it appears that most of it was felled. The trees have now regrown and form a dense even-aged wood of rather small trees. Oak and Birch are the most common trees but there is also Hazel, Willow and Alder. Though the wood already has plenty of interesting wildlife the RSPB aims to considerably improve this interest by active management. This will involve careful thinning of trees to create a more diverse structure, with some trees growing on to maturity and enough light reaching the woodland floor for natural regeneration of shrubs and trees to take place.

This is obviously a long term project which has to be done with considerable care and skill. My main task since starting as Warden has been to prepare a Management Plan for the reserve, based on thorough surveys of the wood and its wildlife, with reference to past records and other interested people and organisations.

The RSPB has considerable experience from looking after a wide variety of woodland reserves around the British Isles and we are confident that in time the Wood of Cree can be restored to something very close to its original splendour.

Already we have started to thin a few trial plots within the



The Wood of Cree supports a wealth of birdlife. (Picture by S. C. Porter for the RSPB.)

oakwood, choosing a range of soil and woodland types. Subsequent thinning will be guided by the results of this work. Some of the timber is being left as dead wood for insects and fungi while the rest is extracted for sale, probably as firewood.

In addition to nearly 400 acres of woodland the Reserve also includes 80 acres of marsh beside the River Cree and 120 acres of moorland with scattered trees above the wood. Conifers recently planted within the latter area by a previous owner are being removed.

The attractive variety of habitats supports a wealth of birds with 106 species recorded of which 55 have nested. Of particular note are those scarce woodland species which visit us each summer and winter around the Mediterranean or in Africa. These include the Wood Warbler with its evocative song which nests at exceptional density with 33 pairs this year, while the Tree Pipit is even more numerous.

The Redstart, a remarkably handsome, yet elusive species that favours the more open woodland edge is also common. One of my favourites is the Pied Flycatcher which is close to the edge of its range here in Galloway. This was first discovered breeding in the wood in 1983 when 2 pairs were found but with the provision of nest boxes these were up to 20 pairs this summer. It is thought that fewer than 200 pairs breed in the whole of Galloway.

These are just a few examples of the birds which rely on the Wood of Cree. However, even if you have

no interest in birds or other wildlife, the wood is still an attractive place to walk in the spring and early summer when the bluebells and primroses are at their best, or in the autumn amongst the fallen leaves when the rowans are full of berries; or stand by the woodland edge in the half light of dusk to have a magnificent Barn Owl glide silently by, just as the Tawny Owls are beginning to hoot from the depths of the wood. The Wood of Cree is truly a wonderful place and it is one we should all be proud to have on our doorstep.

Visitors are welcome to the Reserve at all times and there is a woodland walk about a mile long which follows a loop through the wood, passing an attractive burn with waterfalls for much of its length and taking in a viewpoint looking over the valley and nearby hills.

Alternatively, there is a track which leads up on to the moor or you could just take a more leisurely stroll along the roadside. Cars are probably best left at the clearing in the middle of the wood where there is a Reserve notice with information. No charge is made but we would ask visitors to bear in mind that this is a Nature Reserve and to treat it with due respect. We hope that many more people will take the opportunity to come.

For further information or if an escorted visit is to be arranged then please contact me at: Gairland, Old Edinburgh Road, Minnigaff, Newton Stewart, DG8 6PL (Tel: Newton Stewart (0671) 2861).

St Annes ornithologist reviews 1958

# WINTERING SPECIES MADE IT A YEAR TO REMEMBER

By N. Harwood



Gannet.



King-tailed harrier.

THE days which bridged the years 1957 and 1958 were notable for the appearance at Ansdell of certain wintering species.

There was a jack-snipe, which had come from its breeding grounds across the North Sea to the identical ditch in which I saw one four years ago. Also present at that distant date were a water-rail and a woodcock, and they were there again to complete the trio.

Partly due to an invasion of continental birds, there was an abundance of blue tits—and milk bottles suffered accordingly. Most of the damage was done in the region of doorsteps, and the culprits were disappearing without giving entertainment value. So, on one occasion, I transferred the containers to the middle of the lawn and watched through a window. Two out of six tits immediately deserted a string of peanuts and began operations. The better workman, after puncturing the top of his bottle, literally threw bits of metal right and left to a distance of 18in and, within two minutes, was dipping his beak into the cream.

## Snow buntings

At least seven snow buntings, whose nesting site may have been 3,000ft above sea level on the mountains of Scotland (or even in Iceland), stayed for several weeks near Fairhaven Lake. They were not in their best plumage, but contributed many musical rippling flight-phrases by way of compensation.

A broadcast on the conservation of wildfowl almost synchronised with a flight over Granny's Bay of 75 pink-footed geese while several of their casualties were lying on the ground below them.

The first spell of hard weather brought small greenish birds, known as siskins, to Lytham, where they sought their food in the alders while snow was thick on the branches.

After the carpet of snow had disappeared I flushed five short-

eared owls, one after the other, from the reeds by the side of a ditch on Marton Moss. These winter visitors were quite at home on the ground, as they both roost and nest there.

Black-tailed godwits, after a lapse of 130 years, are re-establishing themselves as a breeding species in Britain.

About Shrovetide these long-billed birds deserted the shore for a flooded meadow at Lytham. Fifty pairs of pintail and several mallard and teal also favoured this lake until they were scared by a gunman, who was shooting out of season.

Birds know all about mechanical aids to food production, and 400 common gulls were following various ploughs on the mossland. Others were flying northwards, high overhead and in V-formation. This goose-like behaviour is comparatively rare and is not attributed to any other species of gull.

## In the estuary

At the beginning of March, 70 cormorants were fishing in the estuary. Between periods of swimming and diving they could be seen drying their outspread wings as they stood on the sands opposite Lytham.

I failed to revive a female gullinot which was suffering from oil poisoning. She was in the full breeding plumage of the northern race, so would be missed from her nesting ledge on some Scottish cliff.

Red-throated divers are sociable creatures, and three were certainly not a crowd as they sported just offshore at Starr Gate. In level flight their straight necks were held rigidly at an angle of depression to the line of the body, but they flew with appreciable power.

## To the north

Not until a week after the vernal equinox did the northerly flock-passage of "little birds" become noticeable. It was led by successive speeding batches of meadow plovers, which came across the estuary to Fairhaven and continued along the Lancashire coast to Morecambe and beyond at the rate of 1,000 a day.

For the second year in succession I recorded a (Baltic) little gull at St Annes. This time it was a brown juvenile, with white cheeks and underparts. It had a dark line behind the eye, a blackish half-collar, and wing markings very similar to those of a young (grey) kittiwake.

It is only in comparatively recent times that leading ornithologists have realised that swallows can be partly arboreal, so it was noteworthy when 50 of this species were hawking insects from leafy boughs at Lytham.

A northward-bound whimbrel alighted in a field of oats and began to feed. When neighbouring starlings rose in alarm, this May bird flattened itself on the ground so that its beak, outstretched neck and body were in one plane. It remained thus for a considerable time before taking to the air and sounding a varied version of its sevenfold call.

For the first time in at least nine years, a pair of little grebes

nested within the borough. These small chestnut-headed, diving birds betrayed their presence by long whinnying calls, but during the incubating period they were very good at hiding themselves. They reared three striped young which contrasted with the black downy moorhen chicks on the same pond.

June saw the emergence from their rabbit-hole of the year's first shelducklings. As they were being taken along one of the dykes, they formed a close-fitting crescent of 12 fluffy brown and white orbs at the rear of their mother, and not a drop of water was to be seen separating them from her or one another.

Eleven weeks after the coming to our lakes and rivers of the common sandpipers, their leisurely trek back to South Africa began. They had taken almost the minimum amount of time to nest, lay and hatch eggs, and tend their young.

## Musical notes

The common species was followed by four green sandpipers (misnamed because only their legs are green), which were recognised by dark brown upperparts and underwings, white rump and, best of all, by musical notes like the tinkling of high-pitched handbells.

Frequent companions of pipers round the freshwater pools are (very silent) ruffs, and six had arrived at Freckleton by mid-July. They were adults, with purple and other patches, depending on their breeding plumage. On moving south, they were replaced by less striking birds of the same species, and this process continued until December.

Spectacular ablutions by red-shanks were a feature of the pond life. After swimming lazily for some time they suddenly darted two yards forward, turned in an instant, dashed back, and then repeated the performance. They were equally fast when reciprocating transversely and slicing the water with open wings.

## Long legs

"Chiff, chiff, chiff" was the cry announcing the arrival of a wood-sandpiper. It was rather similar to its "green" namesake but had a shorter body and longish yellow legs which extended beyond the tail during flight.

According to the tales of travellers to such places as Lapland, it is not really a woodland species and normally nests on open ground.

During August a spotted red-shank, whose home is in the Finnish marshes, was the most important visitor to Freckleton. It was blackish-brown throughout except for white spots, mainly on the wings. At times it fed on minute creatures by running in shallow water with the bill wholly immersed.

Contemporary with this bird was the record number of 300 kittiwakes on the shore at Starr Gate, where their typical cries in chorus were unique on this coast. Six Arctic skuas were their unwelcome associates.

Also at Starr Gate, for the first time in my experience, was a



Black-tailed godwit.



Cormorant.

party of gannets. It numbered five, of which two were white adults with long cigar-shaped bodies and black extremities to the six-foot wing-span.

The other three were immature birds with varying amounts of black and white in their plumage. The habitat of this quintet was the sea and the nesting ground a rocky island rising from it.

Their speciality was high-diving and they gave a splendid display of this from heights of 600ft or more, causing great splashes as they entered the water.

For several days in early autumn a rare member of the hawk family was quartering Marton Moss, where it was first observed by Mr P. Carah (King Edward VII biology master).

At a distance and in flight, it was a fairly large, dark brown bird with long wings and tail and a conspicuous white rump. When, in bright sunshine and at less than 30 yards, it obligingly perched on a stook of corn, it showed dark bars across the tail and an unstreaked dark rufous breast.

## Identification

The latter was the diagnostic feature which ensured positive identification of the bird as a juvenile Montagu's harrier, a species last recorded in Lancashire in 1874.

The female and young of the hen-harrier, a winter visitor which I used to see on the Derbyshire moors, are so similar to those of the Montagu's, that they are jointly known as ring-tails.

The flight-note of the (Icelandic) whooper swan is written as "Ahng-ha" and this is what was trumpeted in my ear when, in late November, two of this species surprised me as they came over the sea wall at Fairhaven. Unlike our own mute swans, their wings make little noise as they beat the air, and I heard nothing but voices.

Only once before has the lemon and black knobless bill of the whooper swan been observed in the Pyldy, and that was at Freckleton in 1952.



# ORNITHOLOGIST REVIEWS THE YEAR Birds that made (natural) history in 1961

BY N. HARWOOD



RED-NECKED GREBE

THROUGHOUT 1961 I had frequent contacts with Mr P. Carah and Keith Clements, of King Edward VII School, Lytham, and am indebted to them for accurate diagnoses of several tricky species and for other favours.

Regular correspondence with Mr H. Shorrocks, a Preston ornithologist, was also of considerable assistance.

These earliest noteworthy birds were six little stilts which should have been in winter quarters somewhere between the Mediterranean and the Cape of Good Hope. They were the remnant of 60 birds which had probably been hatched in the region of Archangel and, on a deflected route southwards, had rested on certain muddy lagoons in the Fylde.

Flooded fields attracted 1,000 dunlins, but the stilts preferred the mud. They made history by being the first of their species to be recorded in Lancashire in January.

Referring to the frequency of ruffs, greenshanks, and spotted redshanks, wintering in Britain, text-books use such expressions as "at times," "occasional" and "irregular," yet all three types were contemporary with the little stilts.

## Bugle clue

Welcome additions to these waders were two whooper swans which were flying down river towards Lytham. Their wings were comparatively noiseless, but the fliers were sounding typical bugle notes, which confirmed their identity.

Three Fylde naturalists, playing away from home but still on the Lancashire coast, sighted what proved to be a red-necked grebe 30 yards from the shore. In plumage, it was a dark brown bird with whitish cheeks, white under-parts just showing above the water line, grey flanks and yellow bill.

It was a visitor from the Continent and a rarity on the west side of Britain.

At Marton Mere there was a steerable raft of pochards, with a six to one ratio of red-headed ducks to ducks. Widgeon which could be seen from Lytham Green included 600 each widgeon and shelduck and about half that number of pintail. At Shrovetide many of these overplucked on to ponds in the rain-soaked meadow near the Green-drive.

## Above the fields

High above these fields a falcon merlin was being mobbed by six rooks. By twisting, turning, swooping and soaring, she easily avoided all their sallies, and five of the larger birds gave up the struggle. It then became a duel between the sixth rook and the merlin, and they were harrying each other until they became mere specks in the distance.

Visiting acrobatic skuas had been sought during the last quarter of 1960, but they were not found until St Valentine's Day, 1961. In the company of goldfinches they were extracting seeds from the cones of their favourite alders.

There were stories of large numbers of Bewick's swans in Britain, and these tales were substantiated when, early in March, before continuing their journey back home to Northern Russia, 31 halted in Morecambe Bay. In flight they were a vociferous highlegged-piggiedy collection, but on the

water they were very pleasing to the eyes.

After an absence of many months a party of Canada geese returned to their former home near Lytham Hall, but had difficulty in settling down. They quarrelled among themselves in their efforts to secure suitable nesting sites.

## Secret nest

One pair made no attempt to hide the nest, and it was robbed after three weeks of patient sitting by the goose. Another pair nested in secret and, in due course, appeared with three black-billed, greenish-yellow goslings which were probably the first of their species to be hatched at Lytham.

During the first quarter of the year 500 golden plovers alternated between the shore at Fairhaven and a meadow about a mile inland. Some which were at Freckleton on the Queen's birthday were definitely of the northern type, with a conspicuous white band separating the intense blackness of the face and breast from the crown and back. Their nesting country would probably be Iceland.

May whimbrels appeared in exceptional numbers, and a flock of over 70 was one of the largest ever to be recorded in Lancashire.

Contemporary with them was a wood-sandpiper, which was travelling alone to some country across the North Sea. This bird ranks as one of the rarer waders and is particularly elusive during the spring passage.

## Cockle raids

The peak number of oyster catchers on the shore was of the order of 3,000. They raided the cockle beds. Nests of this species are few and far between, but in early June there was one on Clifton Marsh.

Ruffs have not nested in Britain for 40 years, or in Lancashire for half a century, but they may well reconnoitre the country in the near future. Four males and seven females were in the Fylde during May and June. They were in breeding plumage, with black adornments predominating among the cocks.

The northerly movement of auarlingers (Greenland?) as observed at Starr Gate, extended over a period of several weeks and terminated abruptly in mid-June. On one day 100 were counted, but after that, only stragglers could be found.

They were the last of the waders to seek nesting grounds, and their going was followed by the return of redshanks, dunlins and Iceland's black-tailed godwits, all of which were in appreciable numbers by the early dog-days.

The godwits, in splendid red plumage, were well ahead of the lime shown on the accepted clock-diagram for this species.

The Ribbles marshes maintained their reputation for rarities when a Temminck's stint was seen fraternising with dunlins on a large inaccessible area of grass and mud. It was wary and often hidden, so that a considerable time elapsed before the diagnostic features of dull brown head, back and breast, pale legs and white sides of tail, could be verified.

## Like comedians

The build-up of terns at St Annes began about August Bank Holiday and reached a total of 600, with them was a sprinkling of kittiwakes.

Independent of these, 25 "here today and gone tomorrow" immature kittiwakes looked like comedians as they stood in various attitudes on the shore.

A very dark Arctic skua was cruising on the sea and minding its own business when three common terns recognised the enemy. They dive-bombed it to such an extent that it was forced to rise and fly westwards, and the terns continued their attacks. This is an inversion of the usual skua story.

On the Twelfth an African crowned crane arrived "under its own steam," at the farm of

Mr W. Richardson, of Warton. It was taller than a heron and its normal stance was more horizontal. Its forehead was a large, black, velvety knob, and the head was crowned with radiating golden bristles. The upper half of the cheek was white and the lower half pink. The plumage was very dark grey except that the wings had appreciable white areas. The "tail" was brown and bushy.

In Britain the homes of cranes are in zoological gardens, and this had escaped from one at Southport. Nevertheless, it adapted itself to the new conditions, and, between feeding times at the farm, when it competed with poultry and bullocks for bread, it ranged over an area of several square miles, sounded trumpet notes during flight, and spent some time perching in tall trees.

## Crash-landing

With the coming of September, guns were soon blazing away, and the wounded crane, with a considerable distance from its temporary home at Warton. Fortunately, it was handed over to kindly folk who called a veterinary surgeon to attend to it and give it a dose of penicillin. Within a day or two it was back in its quarters at Southport.

K. Clements identified a bird which he saw in the bushes near Fairhaven Lake as a barred warbler, a species which had not been recorded in Lancashire since 1893.

On the first morning of the Ryder Cup match (October 12) there was no human activity on the shore at St Annes, and the faraway area near the edge of the tide gradually became alive with pink-footed geese. A flock of 40, evenly spaced in a trailing line, flew into sunshine which illuminated their pinkish breasts, and each was a joy to watch as it planned down to join 90 which were already resting on a sandbank.

Small and large skeins continued to appear until there were more than 300 geese, solely and silent in turn, according to whether they were moving or at rest.

No doubt, equally exciting to Mr Carah, who was in the right place at the right time, was the passage offshore at Starr Gate, of 150 gullmots. They were more fortunate than some of their brethren, which, together with many common scooters, were part of a wreck of oiled birds which stretched along the Fylde coast.

## After two years

After being absent for more than two years, a party of jays returned to Lytham woods. Colourful birds in pink, white, blue and black, they were good to see and, in autumn, feeding chiefly on acorns, they could not do much harm.

If a true vagrant from North America, Lancashire's bird of the year could have been a snow goose which had attached itself to a group of 80 Canada geese in an out-of-the-way corner of the county. It was much smaller than its associates and considerably more active.

It tended to run rather than walk, and, by dabbling rapidly at the grass, appeared to be in a hurry when feeding. Apart from its pink bill and legs and black tips to the wings (in evidence during flight), it was pure white.

There was a stranger among the diving birds at Marton Mere. During a (Martinmas) morning's watch it was a dromon, brown and white creature drifting according to the whims of wind and current.

Once, for a few seconds, it showed its head and neck, which were brown except for a white facial stripe, broad round the eye and tapering towards the nape.

## From the Arctic

An afternoon's session with two friends was necessary in order to identify the bird as a long-tailed duck, whose habitat is the sea and breeding ground, the Arctic coasts.

A neighbour described birds



AFRICAN CROWNED CRANE



PURPLE SANDPIPER



LONG-TAILED DUCK

which had been taking berries from the bushes in his garden as having prominent pinkish-brown crests, black eye stripes and bills, pinkish underparts and yellow tips to tails. They were waxwings from Northern Scandinavia which had bypassed the regular watchers.

A purple sandpiper which spent a week or two at Lytham and became a December bird, was one of the few ever to be recorded there. It could only be found at high water, when it avoided sands and mud in favour of stones and shingle.

The purple sheen on the dark brownish head, mantle and breast could not be seen except in good light. Dark lines on white flanks and dull orange legs helped to distinguish it from any of 100 dunlins with which it sometimes associated.

It entertained by jumping from boulder to boulder over narrow channels and by swimming across the wider ones.

# BIRD VISITORS OF 1964

## They came on the wing and with a song

By N. HARWOOD



SHORT-EARED OWL



CRESTED TIT

As in previous years, I am greatly indebted to Mr H. Shorrocks (Preston Scientific Society), Mr P. Carah (King Edward VII School, Lytham) and Mr M. Jones (Fylde Naturalists' Society) for important records and for opportunities of seeing the unexpected.

The first interesting bird of 1964 was a black redstart, which species began to nest in England 40 years ago. Its numbers appeared to increase with the blitz of the Second World War, and it occupied bomb-damaged sites in London and the south-east. Our own fiery-tailed, sooty vagrant haunted the coast at Heysham for several weeks.

Three purple sandpipers came to Lytham, but only one stayed and, almost certainly, it was the same bird which returned for the fourth winter in succession. As before, its companions were 200 turnstones, in the midst of which it needed some finding.

Among 1,200 pink-footed geese at Martin Mere the "odd man out" was a caranale goose which may have strayed from the Solway after journeying from Spitzbergen. Although a protected bird, by keeping that sort of company it was running the risk of being shot.

Equally toothardly were several dark-breasted Brent geese which, from their breeding grounds on the peninsula and islands of Arctic Russia, paid one of their rare visits to Lytham.

### In danger

The 1963 great grey shrike survived a few 1964 volleys of gunshot (which were aimed at bigger game) and behaved quite normally the following day. Mr Carah, who examined its pellets, found that it was feeding on mice, field and bank voles, beetles and spiders. It reappeared in autumn, but was untruffed when mobbed by four tits.

Waders sometimes swim a few yards but it is an event to be recorded when a whole flock becomes water-borne. This is what happened to 130 black-tailed godwits in early February, but 80 "bar-tails" did not follow their example.

The first covering of snow induced a shore-lark to return to its original territory near the sidemark at Fairhaven, and later 20 snow buntings were counted at the same place.

On the day after St Valentine's songs of golden plover were heard near Moss Side, but from half a mile away over the Ribbles estuary came a distracting musical trumpeting from a line of 24 whooper swans in flight.

On Leap Year's extra day the corresponding notes of the Bewick's swan were heard at Martin Mere, where pink-footed geese were also very vocal.

At the beginning of March the voice of the stock-dove was part of the chorus of the woodland birds. It is rarely heard at Lytham St Anne's, and the species must have decreased in recent years.

alarm from ploughed land near the Green Drive, but left 150 golden plovers on the ground. Usually both flocks rise together and separate in the air.

### 30 redwings

BBC naturalists reported that there were few (Scandinavian) redwings in Britain, so we were fortunate in having 30 near Fairhaven golf course.

Wind, rain and snow came suddenly to interfere with important football matches and cause unexpected movements of waterfowl. These included the arrival on a St Anne's pond of small numbers of duck and drake showmen and peahard and a coot—all strangers to the resident Canada geese which by Palm Sunday began to seek other nesting sites.

The Fylde observers visiting Silverdale saw a pair of bitterns emerge from the reeds of a marsh. The stance of the female was mainly erect—freezing, with bill pointing upwards—while the male walked round her and sounded several booming phrases of which she appeared to take not the slightest notice.

Throughout the first quarter of the year, although in fluctuating numbers, ruffs could always be found near Freckleton, and 25, of various sizes and colours, were there at Easter. They were lively and often pretended to fight among themselves.

### First chiff-chaff

It was 12 days after this that the first chiff-chaff was recorded at Lytham, when his song impinged on the quiet trilling of a small flock of redpolls. The question then was whether or not the species would re-establish itself in the rough.

I visited this small bird on several mornings, and he further rewarded in the shape of goldfinches, goldcrests, willow warblers, a blackcap, a tree-creeper carrying nesting material, and a singing sedge warbler. All these could make their homes in the district, but a pied flycatcher which arrived on April 30 would have to go elsewhere, perhaps to the woods near Brothers Water.

The coming of the (fish-eating) common terns coincided with the depressing news that they were among the sea birds whose eggs had been found to contain traces of poisonous pesticides. These have been blamed for the deaths of large numbers of sea fish in America and are now being detected in British waters.

The event of the year at Lytham St Anne's was an invasion by about 20 collared turtle doves. Some came to the conifers in Lowther Gardens and others were attracted to lawns at Ansdell and Fairhaven, where friends fed them regularly on corn.

Their cooling roused many who wished to remain asleep, but it was a new sound in the dawn chorus. Cocks, with puffed-out throats, could be seen bowing to their mates or indulging in display flights. Juveniles began to appear and thus a new breeding species had been added to the list of the boguagh's birds.

A cuckoo called over Martin Moss in the early morning of May Day, while on the ground there was a straggling flock of 18 whistlers and one whitethroat. Broods of (wild) mallard ducklings were on the ponds and in the dykes before swallows had begun to build their nests. Pointers about other species included the feeding of their meals by cock robins and the perching on posts by common snipe.

### Rare visitors

A pair of garganey (or summer teal), coming up from Africa at the same time as the swallows, could be described as rare visitors. They settled on an extensive farm which had 10 small lakes or pits.

For some weeks both birds could be found on any one of them. Then the drake only was seen and was assumed to be the duck was, on a hidden nest which nobody attempted to find. Some weeks later a young one appeared with both parents, and it was almost certainly the first to be hatched in the Fylde.

At Whitsonside in a Lytham field, I noticed three tiny pinkish-brown birds with short, stout red

eyes, feeding on seeds among grass and weeds. They were (West African) red-eared waxbills which, having escaped from an aviary at Warton, were doing quite well for themselves.

Perhaps the most elusive summer visitors to Lytham St Anne's were quail, which were heard rather than seen. Their oft-repeated song was "wit-wit," lasting about a second. They were like small partridges, and in tall, rough grass were difficult to flush. (It is said that this species of quail is the same as that mentioned in the Book of Exodus.)

### Reassembly

After nesting time Canada geese reassembled at their headquarters. Three broods of goslings (six and two fours) and parents came to the same pond, but lived as separate families and also kept clear of three other adults.

Two spoonbills visited Lancashire for the second year in succession and, within a week, there were such rarities as an osprey and marsh harrier in the same locality.

Before the end of June several black-tailed godwits, in summer plumage, had returned to the Fylde coast from their breeding grounds, which is nearer than Norfolk are still secret.

Banderlings, which breed at barren places in the Arctic tundra, were the last of the small waders to leave St Anne's, but 160 were back again by mid-July. Two hundred bar-tailed godwits, from the marshy areas of the tundra, returned about the same time.

Water birds, wending their separate ways to winter quarters, included wood-sandpipers which, after crossing the North Sea, halted at Freckleton before continuing to Africa, and little terns from the Baltic working their passage to the northern coast of the Mediterranean.

### Water walker

These smallest of all gulls entertained during August by being in perpetual motion while hunting for insects in the air or on surfaces of ponds. One assisted its progress against a strong wind by walking on the water in the manner of a storm petrel.

Heavy rains and flooding ensured that a certain area, in a condition to receive little rain, curlew, sandpipers, spotted redshanks, ruffs and black terns brought by easterly winds. Also on the same pond were several kinds of wildfowl, including scaup, gadwall and colourful (Rumanian?) ruddy shelducks.

Arctic skuas arrived to harry 400 terns and 30 shelducks at Starr Gate, but six seen over the inner Ribbles marshes selected a heron for their attention, and the seven birds spiralled to a great height as they disappeared towards Preston. Later the fortunate observers identified a gyrfalcon which, after attacking a herring gull, proceeded to fly inland.

### Seldom seen

The text books state that spotted cranes are seldom seen, but during the autumn passage, and on prepared ground, Fylde naturalists again attracted the species.

Several Chilean flamingoes which, presumably, had escaped from a private collection, ranged widely over England, and for three days one of these long-legged roseate birds was feeding in a muddy pool to the east of Freckleton.

During October many of the collared turtle doves moved inland from the coast, and 20 were seen on the Moss, where they fed on newly-ploughed land or in a field of mixed grass and stubble. Three, which were perching in a tree, were unperturbed when a kestrel alighted beside them.

Other visitors to the Moss were two short-eared owls hunting for voles at the close of day. Flying low they were usually silent, but one, face to face with me at Syds, uttered a single syllable "wack." When I replied in the same stoic tone it shuddered, lost its flight rhythm (of two wing-beats and a glide) and turned away. Two friends, who habitually



TURTLE DOVE



PIED FLYCATCHER

rewarded by finding a cock firecrest. It was very lively, being seldom stationary for more than a few seconds as it collected insects from behind leaves. Frequently it darted through the air at great speed. It was about the same size and colour as the common goldcrest, but, among other things, a white supercilious stripe distinguished it from that species.

It is stated that the crested tits of Scotland never leave their own country, so that one which visited the alders and conifers of Lytham must have come from the Continent. It was the first ever to be recorded in Lancashire, and was noteworthy for its very white face and underparts. There was a black line through the eyes and all to the sides of the head and another encircling the base of the neck. It was these lines, against their white background, which focused attention on the bird.

At the beginning of November two (North American) white-rumped sandpipers were seen on one of the mud flats of the Fylde. Similar birds (of 1963 and other years) were very approachable, but these, which were associating with 160 restless dunlins, kept their distance.

### "Decoy ducks"

On local ponds semi-domesticated mallard appeared to act as decoy ducks for other species, and "tutted," poached, golden-eye, widgeon and teal were found among them.

Oiled sea birds were in distress along the Fylde coast during several weeks, extending into December. Kindly folk rescued a gullmote at Lytham, while a great black-backed gull attacked and killed a drake scoter which was swimming near the navigation bar.

It is fitting that turtle doves should figure in the penultimate paragraph. Several of the collared variety had been fed regularly by Mrs Lancaster, of Elm-avenue, Lytham, and with them on several days in December she saw a much smaller dove. Its upper parts were mainly of rich chestnut and black and there was a small patch, which included a number of black lines, on the side of the neck.

With the aid of the standard work of reference she identified the bird as an immature turtle dove (as distinct from the collared turtle dove). It should have been wintering in tropical Africa, and was probably the only member of the species to be recorded in England in December since 1894.

(Reprinted from "Lytham St Anne's Express," December 31.

# Their colour and song enrich the year

By N. HARWOOD

## SHELDUCK

There is a constant exchange of information between the Preston and the Fylde ornithologists, and I am indebted to the respective leaders (Mr Harry Shorrocks and Mr Maurice Jones) and their associates for the sight of several species and for the stories of others.

The wind of change which blew 1964 out and 1965 in, and the freezing temperature which followed it, resulted in a clean sweep of pintail, redhanks, oystercatchers, lapwings, snipe and black-tailed godwits from flooded fields at Lytham.

This caused observers to pay more attention to the shore, where most of these water-birds were found together with other species. The (fifth year) purple sandpiper was there and several snow buntings were feeding on the beach at Fairhaven.

Summer visitors staying to winter near the coast included a common sandpiper on a shingle bank by the Lune and a chiffchaff in the reeds at Silverdale.

## Rare in winter

Equally exciting was a green sandpiper, wading and bobbing in a fast-flowing stream bordering Marton Moss. It was finally identified when it showed a large white patch on the rump and tall. A vagrant of spring and autumn, it is seldom seen in Lancashire in winter.

Up to 40 collared doves, during their first January at Lytham St. Anne's, continued to rely on friends for their corn, although, on occasions, they took bread cheese and porridge.

Storms hit the coast with hurricane force and drove oceanic birds inshore. There were many kittiwakes, as well as several little gulls and Leach's petrels, in Morecambe Bay, and at Heysham inland pool. Hundreds of distressed acoters were found on the tide-wracks of the Fylde.

## In the sunshine

It was different in early February, when bright sunshine and a calm sea at Rosell showed red-throated divers to advantage. Here also it was easy to see the depth of a distant ranshill's bill and identify the bird by this feature.

By the end of the shooting season the local Canada geese had been reduced from 22 to 16. With them at their headquarters was a drake scap which, except in the breeding season (in Iceland or Scandinavia?) is mainly a bird of the sea. There was some speculation as to whether or not a little stint, seen by Fylde observers at Crossens, was likely to be the same as that recorded at Lytham in December, 1964.

Parent mute swans decided to break with their families and a pair at Cleveleys refused to allow their cygnets on the pond on which they had been reared. After the Ash Wednesday blizzard there was a period of tranquillity, during which the most interesting bird was a hen lesser spotted woodpecker. She was quietly tapping stout alders, and a feature of her behaviour was the number of times she walked backwards down the trunks. (This smallest of European woodpeckers does not nest locally, but her relatives, the "great spotted" and the "green" are well-known residents.)

## Marsh ducks

Thanks to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, there was watching de luxe from three hides at a new near Silverdale. Nine species of duck—mallard, pintail, wigeon, shoveler, teal, pochard, tufted, gadwall and goldeneye—were there, and two bitterns, each with its own distinctive voice, were booming and occasionally flying over the

in separate territories which were identical with those of previous years.

The first April bird of note was a great grey shrike which appeared near the spot where it was seen in November, 1962. After giving a good display of aerobatics while chasing insects, it disappeared into the woods. It repeated this routine on several days before departing for its nesting site, which could be as far north as Pinmark.

## High-divers

Back at Starr Gate, six newly-arrived Sandwich terns were indulging in high-diving. When they came to rest on the shore they were molested by herring gulls.

Black-headed gulls took turns at dive-bombing a kestrel near Moss Side, but they failed to dislodge it from its tree-top perch.

The cold spell at Easter reduced the volume of song in the woods, but interesting happenings included a woodpecker's sounding single knocks between drumming phrases, and a cock chaffinch which chirped the notes of a house sparrow. Early swallows were hard put to it to find food and were skimming the surfaces of ponds.

On St George's Day in a flock of 400 golden plovers at least 60 splendid specimens had black faces and under-parts separated from their backs by white bands extending from the forehead down the sides of the neck and along the flanks. Thus they were members of the Northern race and would seek their homes in Iceland or perhaps in Arctic Europe.

After seeing these birds inland at Lytham, it was natural to go to the sands at Fairhaven to view the annual assembly of grey lovers and, sure enough, 350 in full regalia were standing there.

## Song in May

For me, May day began with the tone of the blackcap, continued with yellow wagtails and Greenland wheatears on the fairway of a golf course and ended with the pleasurable Freckleton stamby of 40 ruffs coloured in various designs of white, cream, yellow, chestnut and black.

Westerly gales brought Manx shearwaters close to observers at Starr Gate and a red-breasted merganser to Frackleton Pool, where it was in the company of 180 shelducks.

One passing wood warbler seems to be the yearly ration of this species for Lytham St. Anne's. It has a richer plumage than the commoner willow warbler but is usually detected because of its stuttering song.

The garden warbler, which used to sing throughout the nesting season near Ansdell, paid a fleeting visit to the old site and then was gone. The lesser white-throat did not appear there but was faithful to the Ness at Freckleton where it has been a summer visitor for the last 15 years.

At Marton Mere the star bird was a drake garganey which, from time to time, sounded its rattling quack. In the air were numbers of house-martins and, on the tussocky ground, a cock red bunting was sitting on a nest of five lightish-brown eggs which were marked with dark lines and spots. Here also, on the day when hot drinks had to be taken out to players in the Edgoston Test match, a cock warbler remained under cover while rendering its songs.

## No gosling

A pair of Canada geese had bad luck when only one of five eggs hatched. The seven eggs of another pair disappeared, and at the end of the nesting season there were 11 adults but no gosling.

Over the Ribble marshes, lapwings, redhanks, and oystercatchers were in the air together calling loudly and trying to distract my attention from their young, which were crouching in the grass below them.

At Whitnaitide a cock yellow raptail was seen to attack a snipe, and near the Green Drive two pairs of the former were taking food to their nestlings. Corn buntings, yellow hammers and snipe were in the same district.

An excursion to Ellerwater was well worth while for the splendid

to the shore, but the final whereabouts of these young birds was not determined, except that 50 were found south of the Ribble on Hundred End marsh, near which there were also 400 adults.

## Unexpected

Unexpected visitors in the shape of little gulls and common acoters projected themselves into this count and added to the interest.

St Swithin's fine weather appeared to have the effect of increasing the numbers and activity of swifts. Perhaps they were starting on their journey to winter quarters in South Africa.

At Starr Gate, common and Arctic terns, travelling southwards with their juveniles, were antagonistic to humans, dogs and gulls and made token swoops at any potential enemy. But they cried in alarm when they were chased by two dark adult Arctic skuas which arrived before the advent of August.

This was the shore pattern for some weeks, except for sprinkling of kittiwakes and a large increase in the numbers of waders.

At the Plaza Cinema, St Anne's, there was a film showing the colourful birds of Bimring. These included a red-crowned pochard, a live specimen of which was to be seen at Silverdale.

By the really Glorious Twelfth there was increasing activity on the Ribble marshes, where greenshanks, green-sandpipers, little stints, spotted redhanks and curlew-sandpipers began to appear. One of the last-mentioned had been ringed, which was intriguing as the species breeds in Arctic Asia.

## Show-piece

For the second year in succession a Chilean flamingo (from a private collection at Antwerp?) appeared in the Fylde. This time it was on the shore at Lytham, feeding with a black-billed gull, describing circular arcs in the mud. When it made short flights, large areas of scarlet were added to its pink plumage and produced a startling picture. It was a show-piece during the new Bank Holiday weekend.

Occasionally a glaucous gull, whose nearest nesting site is in Iceland, visits Lancashire, and in August one came to Staining. It joined a mixed flock of 300 other gulls and was outstanding because of its large size and colour. It was completely white except for pink legs and a pink bill with a black tip, which plumage denotes immaturity.

Early in September, a variant hooded crow was with these gulls. It had a creamy-buff crown, black face, pinkish-grey nape, shoulders and back and black flight-feathers, underparts, bill, and legs. Hybrids of hooded and carrion crows are of many mixtures of grey and black but, with its crown, this bird was overdoing it.

According to their year-cycle chart native short-eared owls remain near their breeding haunts, so that one which appeared at Marton Mere about this time may have been a foreigner.

Other species which arrived at the same place and whose migrations are somewhat obscure, were spotted crake and water-rail. The latter spends most of its time hidden among the reeds, and those who know its calls have the best chance of identifying it.

At St Anne's, 50 house sparrows, feeding on the ground, came smartly to attention when a cock passed swiftly through their ranks. It did this three times, but apart from sidestepping it, the birds showed little alarm.

## Wild geese

A hundred wild geese flew southward over Lytham at the autumnal equinox, and a second flock was observed there at Michaelmas. One of the local Canada geese was shot and the remaining 10 were reluctant to alight anywhere near the scene of the tragedy.

October 1 marked the end of the large number of terns at Starr Gate. There were 250 on that date, but after that only two and three.

As some species decreased



TREE PIPIT



LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER



MALE BEARDED TIT

parasites on the backs of sheep. One secured a round reddish seed which it extracted from the wood and kept in its beak for a few seconds before swallowing. (Incidentally, there seemed to be an increase of jackdaws at Lytham, and 180 were together in flight.)

The corn harvest interested the collared doves which deserted the coastal area for the Moss and its scrub. They preferred the ground near a small wood into which they flew when disturbed.

## First time

East Anglia is the home of (English) bearded tits, but once in a while they make sudden journeys to other parts of the country. For what is believed to be the first time they reached Lancashire, said Mr M. Jones saw nine at Formby.

Perhaps it was some of these which he and others later identified at Marton Mere. They were in sight for about one minute per hour as 10 observers for several hours, on and after United Nations Day, tried to determine their plumage. In flight two hens were fawn brown birds with long tails, but at rest one of these was seen to be rich grey about the head. Ultimately a cock, complete with moustache, and another hen brought the total to four.

A BBC naturalist, complicated matters by announcing that five interrupted bearded tits, having Dutch rings on their legs, had been found in various parts of England; so we are in doubt about the nationality of our birds.

Sandstorms came with November, and it may have been these which caused hundreds of redshanks and oystercatchers to seek food in the marshy meadows, round which redwings and fieldfares were decorating the Hawthorns. The shrike was also back, and as this predator has been known to kill redwings they could have been in some danger.

## Face to face

During recent years grey wagtails have been scarce, so it was good to see two disputing territory round a local pond. They fought face to face while mounting vertically in sunshine against a background of trees.

As in 1964, a turtle dove visited Lancaster House, Eims-avenue, Lytham. It was in the company of collared doves which had returned from the Moss to their old haunts and were billing as though it were springtime.

A check on regular winter visitors showed that other arrivals included snow buntings (well camouflaged on the shingle and betrayed by musical twittering), skinkas (sharing the tree-

# Birds in the red

## Nick Nuttall looks at the wildlife winners and losers under years of communism

An attempt to save one of the world's rarest birds, the aquatic warbler, has highlighted growing international interest in the bird-life of former communist countries.

Poland, the European states of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Hungary are home to 17 threatened species, including the imperial eagle, the sociable plover and little bustard.

The bird populations of these countries also include 132 species or sub-species threatened throughout all or part of their European range. These include the short-toed eagle, three-toed woodpecker, the moustached warbler and the rufous bush robin.

The years of communism have been a mixed blessing for the bird world. Although lack of development has left some habitats almost untouched, some species have been hit hard by the use of old-fashioned pesticides, the drainage of marsh and wetland and the use of national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty for hunting and recreation rather than for conservation.

At the same time, restrictions imposed by some of the former regimes meant that their scientists had difficulty gathering information because they were denied access to international research and conferences.

Examples of "winners" and "losers" in the bird world of Eastern Europe are the white stork, which has a population of 30,000 in Poland, compared with just 600 pairs in the former West Germany, and the slender-billed curlew, which breeds in the Soviet Union, and is down in numbers to just a few hundred.

The attempt to save the aquatic warbler is being made by Polish ornithologists, with help from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the International Council for Bird Preservation in Britain. The aim is to gather accurate information on the numbers and habitat of the bird, a migratory visitor to Britain whose numbers have fallen sharply to 2,000 breeding pairs.

The relative poverty of the people and economies in the east have meant that bird conservation has never become very popular. Nevertheless, some areas including mountains, coastlines and ancient woodlands are un-

touched by industrial development and pollution.

Interest in bird-life is gaining ground in the east, especially among the young, with help from the west.

The main challenge for western bird protection groups is to help their counterparts in Eastern Europe assess habitats and numbers while lending experience in winning the support of governments and supranational bodies, such as the European Commission. Some governments, particularly those that have applied for associate membership of the EC, seem keen to link economic and environmental reforms with western-style conservation measures.

Kevin Standing, senior conservation officer at the RSPB, said that in Poland, for example, proposals have been drafted to regulate tourism, reduce pollution, halt land-drainage schemes and back low-intensity agriculture in important bird areas. The country possibly need-

ing the most help is Albania, still one of Europe's most closed societies. Relatively little is known about the country's bird-life.

Nicola Crockford, an expert with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee in Peterborough, and Bill Sutherland of the University of East Anglia, who visited Albania earlier this year in one of the first visits by a western ornithologist, found a disturbing situation.

For example, Albania's only professional ornithologist has retired from his post at the country's only university, in Tirana, and moved to Greece.

In addition, although laws protect birds such as the endangered pygmy cormorant and Dalmatian pelican from hunting and nest desecration, the reality can be very different.

Czechoslovak scientists who visited 32 pelican nests in the important Karavastis lagoon area found only seven eggs that had hatched. The others, Ms Crockford said, had either been pricked by local fishermen or were sterile, possibly because of pesticide poisoning.

Mr Standing said that despite growing popular support for conservation, experts recognised that in many parts of Eastern Europe, balancing bird preservation with the livelihoods of poor rural communities is likely to be an uphill struggle.

## Pioneer flies in from Far East

MORE surprises were expected after the peak autumn passage produced unprecedented numbers of migrants from Asia. In fact it turned out to be a case of the best being yet to come.

Inevitably the influx eased dramatically by early November but the middle of the month was marked by an event everyone had been hoping for — the arrival of a species totally new to Britain.

The Mugimaki flycatcher which appeared in a small wood at Stone Creek by the Humber estuary near Patrington went one better — it was also a first for the whole of Europe.

There was just one unfortunate aspect to this national bird discovery of the year — the number of people able to see this super-rarity was limited to those within a three-hour drive of Humber side.

Although it was found on November 16, its identity was not confirmed until next day. The news spread fast, but there was not enough daylight left for more distant birdwatchers to get there.

The Mugimaki nests in eastern Siberia, Mongolia and northern China. The Humber side visitor was an immature male, with dark grey upper parts, white in the wing, behind the eye and at the sides of the tail base, and flame-orange breast contrasting with a white belly.

It is thus quite different from other flycatchers. The problem was that the Mugimaki is not featured in most identification books — of the range available, only Birds of Japan, which is not widely owned, shows the immature male. So it took a while for the initial observers to work out what it was. About 200 people saw the bird finally and counted themselves very

lucky. Hundreds more arrived on November 18 but were disappointed — it had disappeared overnight.

Naturally, there was much frustration over missing what would seem to be a once-in-a-lifetime bird. However, there is reason to hope that we may not have to wait long before more reach Britain.

The Mugimaki is only one of many species which migrate between north-east and south-east Asia. Others have already become established as regular autumn wanderers to Britain.

One of them is the Pallas's warbler. Forty years ago it was as much a stranger as the Mugimaki is now — a sighting in Northumberland, in October 1951, was only the second ever and the first this century.

Since the 1960s, however, Pallas's warblers have been seen so often they are no longer classed as rarities. In the peak year, 1982, 123 were recorded and over the past two months around 40 have been seen. Obviously the number of sightings has been bolstered by the growing popularity of bird-watching in recent decades, but there is a chance that history will be repeated and this other delightful creature of the Orient will become more familiar.

A host of other exotic long-distance migrants from the same part of the world have yet to reach us — Siberian accretor, grey-streaked and narcissus flycatchers and black-faced, meadow and chestnut buntings to name but a few.

We have experienced such phenomenal arrivals from the Far East this autumn it is just possible that we could see some other total newcomer, such as the accretor or one of the buntings, before the end of the winter.

### Feather report

## Fish ban saves the tern

When a breeding colony of 30,000 birds fails to produce a single chick something is wrong. Some people will argue about that: they claim that in fact one chick, one solitary bird, was successfully fledged. But no matter who is right, we are looking at disaster.

This was the case in the summer of 1990, and it happened not in barbarous abroad but in this country. The bird in question was the Arctic tern: the place Shetland. Nor was this a one-off: it was part of a steeply accelerating decline that had been going on since the early 1980s.

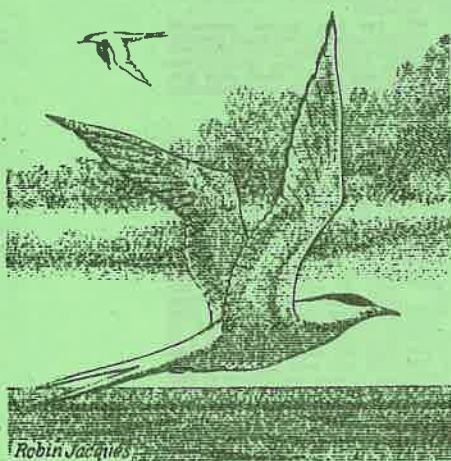
The Arctic tern is, perhaps, the greatest hero in world birds. Certainly, Arctic terns see more daylight than any other living creature: they spend summer in the far north and winter down in the Antarctic. They are polar circum-navigators: brave little wisps of white feathers that every year conquer the entire globe.

The Shetland breeding colonies — and there are hundreds of them — are a vital part of the world population. The islands, and the waters round them, are of global importance for the Arctic tern.

What birds they are: consummately aerial, white swallows of the sea, fork-tailed with swept-back wings, and a fearless ability to plunge from 40ft into the waves after their prey: fish. And it is fish that have been the problem: rather unattractive fish called the sand eel.

This is not a fish that humans eat but an "industrial" fish that humans catch in huge numbers: the fish are crushed, the oil is extracted, the rest fed to salmon in fish farms. Sand eels have been caught in huge numbers around Shetland.

In 1984 it was first noticed that Arctic terns had had a very poor breeding season. Another bad year followed. A three-year study proved con-



Robin Jacques

Hero of the global seas: at last the Arctic tern is breeding again

clusively that the Arctic tern's failure was connected with the shortage of their main food: the increasingly elusive sand eel. Adult birds could survive; the young starved to death.

Meanwhile, the fishing fleet catches were also affected, falling from 56,000 tons in 1982. Simple enough to blame the fishing industry for previous over-fishing.

Alas, nothing is ever quite that simple. Another possible reason for the sand eel decline is the increase in numbers of herring, which eat sand eel

larvae. A further possibility is a change in the ocean currents.

One certainty is that the long-term interests of the fishing industry and the Arctic terns come down to a single matter: a sustainable population of sand eels.

The fishing industry, from July onwards, depends almost entirely on what are called O Group sand eels. These are youngsters: creatures that have never bred. In 1989 the Scottish office of the agriculture and fisheries department stepped in and banned O

Group fishing from July onwards. The idea was to give the group a chance to grow and breed. The result? When fishing resumed catches were still low, the terns still failed. The same thing was tried in 1990. Catches were still low. The terns still failed.

So this year sand eel fishing was suspended completely. Ornithologists were not disposed to predict instant results, but they were wrong. There was an enormous turn-around. For the first time in eight summers the terns had a successful breeding season. Thousands of chicks were fledged. The waters around Shetland swarmed with some of the world's most glorious birds.

No one will stick his neck out about next year. But, unquestionably, the fishing ban helped, and the RSPB and other organisations are lobbying for a further year of complete suspension of fishing. That will allow both terns and sand eels to achieve a more robust population, with a better chance of a long-term future. Good news for fishermen, good news for terns.

There is no solid evidence, and if we hang around waiting for it we will probably lose the terns and the sand eels together. The move on the side of caution, with the banning of fishing for a further year, could not fail to help both.

So we have, for once, a conservation story with a happy ending — except that there is never an ending in conservation; only a hope of continuity. This is because the only ending is extinction.

SIMON BARNES

What's about: *Birders* — watch for large numbers of wild geese arriving from the sub-Arctic to spend the winter here. *Twitterers* — blue-winged teal, Swanbourne Lake, Arundel, Sussex; night heron at Loch Leven, Tayside. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.

### FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK

YOUR questions on country matters — from the reasons for this year's abundance of blossom to the perennial problem of keeping squirrels out of the garden — are already arriving and will be published on these pages soon. Your answers will appear in subsequent weeks. Please send queries to Out of Town, Weekend Times, The Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN.

Feather report

# Right choughed

This was a moment of great delight. That little band of dashing black birds a few hundred yards from me did not say *jack* as I expected. Instead they said *chooooo*. They were not jackdaws, and in the end, I got close enough to see them clearly, and confirm my hopes. They had bright red legs, and wonderful bright red, curving beaks. Not jackdaws, but choughs.

I was on an island off the west coast of Ireland, one of the last strongholds of the chough. No doubt the name originally rhymed with Slough, because the birds, as I heard, do not chuff, but chow.

They are handsome devils, and they fly wondrously well. They love each other's company, and as I watched them, they foraged in the soil on the slopes of a tufted green mountain, a slope inhabited only by sheep with two short legs and two long ones.

Choughs were once a great deal more widespread, and probably a great deal more numerous. They are part of Cornish tradition — some old books even call them "Cornish chough". But they are extinct in Cornwall, as they are in many other parts of their former range.

Choughs, like jackdaws, are members of the crow family. Odd to talk about dwindling numbers of crows, when other members of that family seem more than ever with us: magpie, carrion crow and jackdaw. But choughs lack the infinite resource and sagacity of these birds.

Jackdaws, magpies and carrion crows eat almost anything. They are equipped with a stout, general-purpose bill, and are, by nature, great improvisers. But the chough, with a slender (and impossibly red) curved beak, is a specialist, as its beak is designed for digging into the earth to find invertebrates.

That means that it cannot abide a frost. When the average temperature drops below 4C, a chough cannot make a living, because it cannot dig.

That restricts it to the Gulf Stream coast: Ireland and the west coast of Wales, Scotland and, in theory, southwest England.

Animals that specialise are

always vulnerable to sudden change. Much of the chough's traditional range has undergone the intensification of agriculture and the switch away from pastoral to arable farming.

Choughs are mainly cliff-nesters, coastal birds who feed by probing the soil of the cliff tops. Traditionally, such land has been heathland and rough grassland, all of it used as grazing land on a regular, if sometimes haphazard basis, by the local community. Now the farmland is all cauliflower and other arable crops, which are useless for choughs.

Oddly enough, the reverse has happened on the Isle of Man. In the 1850s, there was a great increase in arable farming alongside the mining and fishing industries of the island. The chough population fell.

Then fishing and mining declined, people emigrated, fields were abandoned, and these reverted to rough pasture and heath. Now the chough population on the Isle of Man is a healthy 60 pairs.

There is talk of reintroduction in Cornwall. Some people are all for it, and as soon as possible. The National Trust and other bodies are starting to put sheep and cattle on areas of heathland that were

traditionally grazed before the last war, and this effectively recreates the chough habitat.

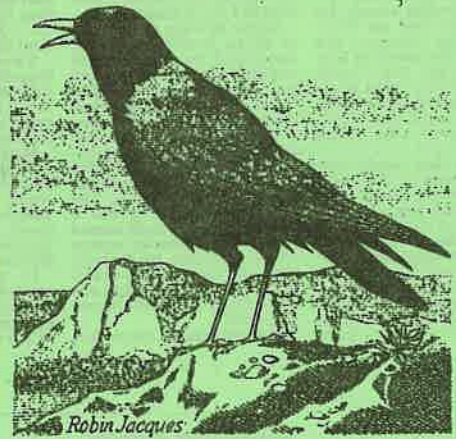
Others feel this would be premature, and that not enough suitable habitat has been created yet. Choughs need to succeed in good numbers if they are to succeed at all. Their social life is crucial to them, as they are noisy birds and need to be in a flock. A half-hearted scheme would be expensive and useless.

There are also hopes of carrying out a full census. There are reckoned to be around 300 pairs in this country, a further 800 in Ireland, and more in Brittany. Accurate figures are vital for good conservation.

There are indications that the chough is holding its own, and even moving into south Wales. That could lead to a further spreading into Devon and Cornwall — the chough heartland, at least in folkloric terms. If that happens, I will be well chowed.

SIMON BARNES

What's about *Birders* — tawny owl establishing territory and making a variety of calls. *Twitchees* — rustic bunting at Littlehampton, Sussex; pied wheatear at Thorntonloch, near Dunbar; another desert warbler on the Isle of Wight; great snipe at North Ronaldsay, Orkney. Details from *Birdline*, 0898 700222



On the way back? The chough appears to be holding its own

# Nature haven's new lease of life

By DAVID CRAGG

BIRD-lovers were today celebrating a massive increase of the largest nature reserve in England and Wales on the Ribble marshes.

The Ribble Marshes National Reserve was first created in 1979.

Today it doubles in size, taking under its wing a massive 10,160 acres.

The changes were being celebrated by staff from English Nature, managers of the site, at their office at Old Hollow, Banks, near Southport.

Also present will be Prof Janet Kear, council member of EN and a director of centres

for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, together with Will Williams, regional officer of EN.

The enlarged reserve has been made possible by a new lease of land from the Duchy of Lancaster and the purchase of a new area of salt marsh.

The new reserve boundaries will stretch between Banks and Heaketh Bank, and from the low tide mark of the Ribble mouth, east to the River Douglas and south to Beacomall boat yard at Heaketh Bank.

It will continue to be managed by English Nature, the advisory body to the Government on conservation matters.

Since first opening the reserve population of wildfowl has increased from 8,000 to 23,000.

In addition the area is a nesting site for gulls, terns, and a number of species of waders, especially redshank, which are also increasing in number.

A total of 130 species have been recorded in the reserve, which is expected to provide roosts for a massive 124,000 wildfowl this winter alone.

Site manager Dick Lambert said: "It is a tremendous success story, due in part to the series of mild winters we have enjoyed in recent years."

## NATURE NOTE

### Flight that's less of a drag

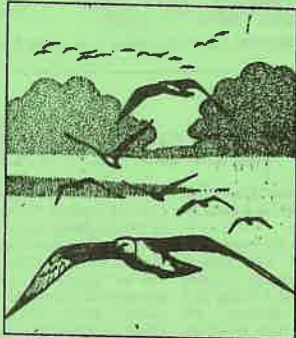
ON FINE evenings I watch for the gulls to appear. Within a space of a few minutes one hundred or so fly over the house, keeping to the line of the main road. They have come, I imagine, from a day spent foraging on the parks and playing fields of Cambridge and they are heading to roosts on the gravel pits. The gulls fly in loose V's, but with a few birds failing to keep in formation.

Although difficult to prove, aerodynamic calculations show that flying in formation is a means of saving energy. The gulls are drag caused by their own movement through the air and so lessen the power needed to fly.

The formations look too ragged for this to work in practice. However, the calculations also show that the spacing between individual birds does not matter too much. They will get the most benefit if their wings overlap, but the effect still works if they are further apart, and every little saving of energy helps when the gulls are facing a long, cold night.

The evening flight of gulls also reminds me of my childhood on the outskirts of London. Gulls heading up the Thames were a signal that my father would soon be home. This was not always true. My juvenile time sense was not sufficiently developed to know that the gulls varied their departure from central London according to the time of sunset; my father was bound by the rigid timetable of the Civil Service.

Robert Burton



## Birdwatch Bill Teale

# Nutcracker 'spotted in Huddersfield'

BIRDWATCHERS in the region should be on the lookout for nutcrackers. This eastern European bird has been seen in large numbers in Holland last month and one was almost certainly seen in a Huddersfield garden last week.

The nutcracker is a jackdaw-sized bird of a dark brown colour, speckled white with pronounced white under the tail. It favours parks and gardens, especially near woodland.

The last influx into Britain of this bird was in 1968 when 300 were seen in the country, 10 of which were seen in Yorkshire.

A desert warbler, which has



A Nutcracker  
Illustration from The Harrier's Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe

attracted hundreds of birdwatchers, was seen at Flamborough Head up until Tuesday this week, while a rustic bunting was seen at Easington until Monday.

A dusky warbler was also seen at Flamborough and a firecrest was reported at East Newton near Aldborough, Humberside.

A spell of northerly winds brought little skuas to the east coast again with up to 40 seen off Flamborough and Hornsea on Wednesday morning.

At Blacktoft Sands a hen harrier, a peregrine falcon and two merlin have been seen.

Three short eared owls have also been seen and a barn owl is visible all

day from the hide sitting in a kestrel nesting box.

At Spurn, five short eared owls are on view and two Richards pipits and two shore larks were seen on Saturday.

There has been a record count of 47 ruddy duck at Fairburn Ings and 18 gosanders and up to 18 whooper swans. Good movements of fieldfares and redwings have also been reported.

At Hornsea Mere three long tailed ducks are still being seen and the Mediterranean gull that has visited the sea front is back for the eighth year.

Birdline North East invites all birdwatchers to report their sightings on Harrogate (0433) 881630.

## NATURE NOTE

WELL, it really is a story for the summer 2002. I've been told that it is taken a long time to track down the truth. I heard that there had been an

original report and number of reports had been reported with acid rain in the summer.

The attacks were confined to the island area around Cambridge by persistent inquiries and clever deduction, the claims investigators of the British Union managed to identify the culprit. They were mayflies.

Female mayflies lay their eggs while flying low over the surface of a pond. With each simple beat of a wing they breathe in the mayflies' breath for the protective purpose of a limited range of acid rain.

It is not only the mayflies that are affected but will also be seen after any rain or snow.

Successful egg surfaces are now likely to be provided by acid rain, mucus or black rain. Each hatchling is deposited with a protective that forms over the egg and runs through the water, so an appropriate measure becomes necessary.

It is not another example of mankind being fooled by nature. They have decided that it is not the acid rain that is the problem, but the mayflies' breath. It is not the acid rain that is the problem, but the mayflies' breath.

# Chinks appear in the Italian walls of indifference

Just how much battering at the walls of indifference can you take? Is action for conservation effective only as an antidote to despair? It must have seemed like this in spring last year in Calabria. The annual slaughter of birds continued as ever, despite all the efforts of conservationists.

Some of these were, of course, birds on their way to Britain. One of the main north-south migration routes lies over the Straits of Messina between Sicily and Calabria. Calabria, in particular, is the place where thousands upon thousands of birds are killed every year. What can namby-pamby conservationists do in the face of an obsessive macho culture that expresses itself by blasting inedible birds out of the sky?

On two days of spring 1990, at least 1,500 birds of prey were killed: ospreys, honey buzzards, black kites, falcons and harriers. This is all illegal, but such breaches of the law have long been winked at.

Increasingly in recent years, the annual slaughter has been monitored by conserva-

tionists. But what good has it done? On one day in 1990, two cars belonging to conservationists were damaged by poachers. The day after, four volunteers were set on by 20 poachers. And a couple of weeks after that, a forest guard was shot in the chest and seriously injured. It seems hopeless.

This is relevant to us all, for the parochial reason that some of the birds should have flown on to breed in this country, and for the reason that

conservation in all its forms is a global, rather than a parochial issue. The migration corridors of the Mediterranean are, like Britain's polluted estuaries, of vast international importance.

Of course, it is tempting to take the xenophobic approach. But in fact, 18 million Italians voted for greater restrictions on hunting in a 1990 referendum. The hunt-

ing lobby abstained from voting at all, so there were not enough voters to make the referendum binding on government.

Also, there are the committed Italian conservationists of LIPU - the Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli, or if you prefer, the Italian league for bird protection. This is an organisation growing in size and influence every year.

The final results of this spring's migration have just been collated in Britain - these things take time. And what they show is a huge leap forward. Enforcement has always been the problem. This year, the enforcement authorities increased their presence. They brought in a helicopter, and beefed up the effectiveness of the forest guards. LIPU increased its own presence, and added more transport. Communication between the various enforcement agencies

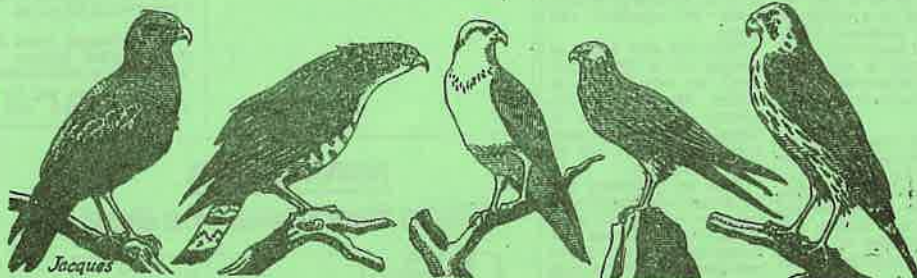
and LIPU improved considerably. And the slaughter of birds has dropped off dramatically.

The Calabria poachers were forced to abandon their shooting sites. These spots, though illegal, have been used for years. Shooting - still continued, and birds were shot, but all the same LIPU made a great advance this year. "We have successfully progressed from the difficult years of general indifference and hostility to the present more favourable situation," said Francesco Mezzatesta, the former secretary general of LIPU. So far so good; but the next test looms when the migration of 1992 begins.

**SIMON BARNES**

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© What's about Birders - redwings are now arriving to winter in Britain. Listen for migrating flocks at night: a long 'seep'. Twitchers - Radde's warbler and two yellow-browed warblers at Flamborough Head, Humber-side. Alpine Swift on Scillies. Details from Birdline. 0898 700222.



Blasted out of the Calabrian skies: (l to r) black kite, honey buzzard, osprey, harrier and falcon are regular hunters' victims

## Feather report

### Feather report

# Stout party after birds

Most people go birding for love, but I've gone birding for Guinness. I have just taken part in the Selangor International Bird Race in Malaysia as a member of the Guinness Anchor Berhad team, sponsored by Malaysia's leading brewer. And we were a pretty sick team, though I say it myself.

The race was organised to raise money for a brave venture, the Kuala Selangor Nature Park, an hour's drive from the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Various corporate sponsors took on eight teams and then turned us loose.

The idea is to identify as many different species of bird as possible in 24 hours. You rocket around the state of Selangor ticking birds like fury. It is at once a frivolous piece of nonsense, a serious test of birding skills, and a neat stunt for raising publicity and lolly.

The money is needed to keep the park going: it is the first time in the country that a state government has collaborated with a non-government organisation, the Malaysian Nature Society. Odd to think that the park was going to be a golf course. But the coastal engineer, Muhammad Akhir, had a Damascus Road experience when he was taken to the area of mangrove, secondary forest and vast tidal mudflat. "I'm a Malaysian, but I never knew there were so many birds. Suddenly I was a committed bird-watcher," he said. The result was this joint venture: a cracking park.

Malaysia is anxious to promote the country as a venue for the increasingly popular notion of green tourism. Why not? There are some wonderful birds to see here. I know: I saw 91 of them in 24 hours.

The secret of bird-racing is to visit as many different habitats as possible, and to pick up all the common birds. Rarities are a bonus. Positive identification by call is permitted: that neglected side of birding is hugely rewarded in bird-racing.

I fancy myself on call, but not on Malaysian call. With 24 hours to get my eye and ear in, I knew I would have to rely on team-mates. I was lucky in these: two Americans and an Austrian, all good birders who know their Asian birds. The opposition included an all-Japanese team, a Hong Kong team, two birders from The Netherlands, and an expert on

marine pollution from San Francisco, as well as a number of local teams.

The race was declared open at 7pm, and the mighty Guinness team spent the next six hours owling. Owling is a very esoteric pursuit. We climbed high into montane forest, and strained ears: "There!" "What?" "And again!" "Can't hear a thing."

Every frog sounds like a bird, and whining insects fill the foreground. Most of the birds sound like frogs. We had three birds to show for all this: great fun, but slow going.

At dawn we were back in the hills, fighting dreadful light and the frustrations of woodland birding: "There! In the tree! The one with the leaves!" You cannot count a bird unless three people have seen or heard it, and everyone is agreed on the diagnosis.

Slowly, as the light improved, we began to score more heavily. We were beginning to work as a team. And then we were away. A stop at a tourist site, Batu Cave, gave us half a dozen basic town birds in as many minutes. An industrial wasteland studded with pools gave us eight more. We charged through a section of ruined rainforest, and coincided with two mixed bird parties: ah, the birds of rainforest, glittering enigmatic jewels in the canopy. Blue-crowned hanging parrot, chestnut breasted malkoha, Asian fairy bluebird.

But time was running out: onward, onward. We drove on to the seashore, and suddenly I was pulling my weight. All the birds were as familiar to me as sparrows: redshank, greenshank, common sandpiper, curlew. We hit our target for respectability, which was 70, and drove for a final flourish around Selangor park.

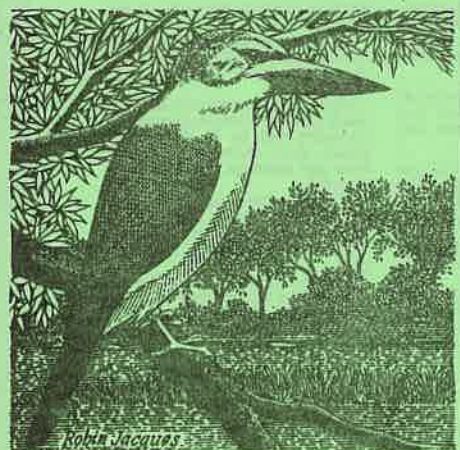
There we picked up five different kingfishers, including the gorgeous stork-billed kingfisher. To my delight I picked up a couple of birds by call, including the lovely dark-necked tailor-bird.

Five minutes before deadline, we were back at park headquarters. We turned our eyes to the radio mast that towers outside the park: there, perched near the top and counting us in, was the magnificent white-breasted sea eagle. That was 91, and thanks very much.

The Guinness team finished third and was well-pleased. The money raised will keep the park going another year. I hope Kuala Selangor Nature Park is the first of many great conservation joint ventures in Malaysia: there is so much there to conserve.

**SIMON BARNES**

© What's about Birders - look for odd birds turning up in tit flocks: tree creeper, goldcrest, chiffchaff. Twitchers - American golden plover near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire; great grey shrike in South Norwood, south London. Details from Birdline. 0898 700222.



Malaysian point-scorer: the attractive stork-billed kingfisher

# Magical autumn in offing

## BIRDS

**Brian Unwin**

WE LOOK set for one of the most memorable autumns on record. With peak migration activity still to come, bird watchers are already nearly punch-drunk.

The summer's reported population explosion of lemmings in the Arctic led to a bumper breeding season for birds which feed on these rodents. One outcome was that in the first week of September larger than usual numbers of long-tailed skuas were migrating from Polar regions to spend the winter ranging over the South Atlantic.

Normally they would have passed Britain to the west, but a gale swept a lot of them into the North Sea, and from the 5th they flowed along eastern coasts, leaving even the most seasoned sea-watchers dumbfounded.

On the 6th, counts of 170 off Flamborough Head, Humber-side, and 124 off Cullercoats, North Tyneside, were

returned, to be bettered only by 255 off Whitburn, South Tyneside, on the 7th, probably the largest number ever seen in a day in England.

Above average movements of these graceful seabirds continued to be reported around northern Britain throughout the month, with a further peak on the 28th when at least 107 passed Whitburn.

We may yet be in for further dividends as other avian predators which have benefited from a summer feeding glut in the Arctic move south. The past week has produced a mini-influx of rough-legged buzzards, normally scarce winter visitors to Britain, including three on the Cleveland/Yorkshire coast and one on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides.

Coincidentally there has

been a succession of other sensations, most notably the 10-day presence on Shetland of only the second American sandhill crane seen in Britain.

As it departed, a White's thrush from Siberia was found near Brora in northeast Scotland - and it stayed long enough for a number of the twitching fraternity to feast their eyes.

These sightings reflect long-distance movements to Britain from the north, east and west, but we have also experienced rare sea birds coming from far to the south.

Most outstanding were reports of two soft-plumaged petrels off Flamborough Head on September 6, another off Galley Head, Co Cork, on the 17th, and a Bulwer's petrel off Hornsea, Humberside, on the 8th.

If ever we needed a reminder that Britain is a magnet to migrant birds, it has come in the early weeks of this remarkable autumn.

## NATURE NOTE

ONE popular myth that still seems to be alive is that the wren is our smallest bird. The goldcrest holds that distinction. The wren can, however, boast a disproportionately long scientific name.

This is *Troglodytes troglodytes*; and, if we give the mainland subspecies of wren its full name to distinguish it from those that live on the Scottish islands, we can add a third troglodytes. The repetition belabours the point that the wren is named after the Greek word for a cave-dweller. The wren is not a cave-dweller, but it is often overlooked that a troglodyte has also come to mean someone who lives a secluded life. That certainly describes the wren, which is most at home in dense cover, in hedgerows, shrubberies and wooden country where there is thick undergrowth.



Unlike many birds, wrens are happy to investigate enclosed places. They squeeze through small openings and come out backwards from confined spaces. In their search for tiny insects, they creep between the stones of old walls and slip through log piles, using their strong legs and feet to brace themselves in awkward corners.

When wrens do come into the open, they fly on stumpy wings, whirring like outsized bumble bees and soon dropping back into cover. Short broad wings are a design for quick take-off and manoeuvrability in tight places, but they are inefficient for long journeys. It is surprising to learn that some British wrens migrate across the Channel to mainland Europe.

**Robert Burton**

# Songsters on the record

WHAT does a birder want for Christmas? I would recommend a new sense, myself. There I was on the station platform in the morning rush, the train cancelled, the following train late and grumpy commuters all around.

And the morning was lit up by a sudden shaft of song: the clearest, brightest song in Britain. Wilder than blackbird, more melodious than song thrush, this sudden, piercing shaft of spring banished for a second all my autumnal sulkiness.

Though spring is the big time for song, mistle thrush can maintain a territory throughout the winter, and they defend it in the time-honoured fashion: with wild bursts of song.

As regular readers of this column will know, I am a fearless proselytiser of the delights of birdsong; the great undiscovered country of birding. The best way to get a toehold into this land is in the company of an expert: the second best is a good tape.

Ken Jackson has just produced a follow-up to his

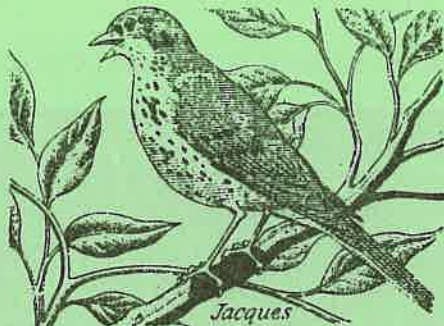
*Beginning Birdsong* tape; this one called, logically enough, *Continuing Birdsong*. The first introduces the neophyte by easy stages to a dozen of the commonest birds in the garden; this new tape travels a little further.

We have swallows and swifts, the haunting delights of curlew, and five minutes of the nightingale, the best singer of them all.

Once you have got the hang of the commonest songs, the world opens up and you become attuned to the entire vocabulary of birds. Song proclaims territory, call is for a thousand other things: alarm and contact among them. And there are so many species to learn.

The answer is *All the Bird Songs of Britain and Europe*; the second edition has just been put together. You can get this on CD, with 396 species, or on cassette with 420 species. It is worth buying a CD player just for the clarity and instant access.

There are also "atmosphere" recordings on CD. Eating Christmas lunch to the sound of nightingales



Jacques

Christmas cheer: the mistle thrush banishes winter gloom

would add a forward-looking touch to a winter feast.

Some birders get the *Bird-watcher's Year Book* every Christmas. This is a 320-page publication that has been called "the birder's Whittaker's". It contains county, national and international contacts, log charts, tide tables, relevant sunrise and sunset times, where to go and when for what birds, a diary and, of course, a British bird list.

My favourite bird book of the year is *A Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*. It is simply a list, and it goes on and on: more than 9,200 species.

Every page is a fascination and a delight: from the first bird (ostrich, seen that) to the last (thick-billed raven - I must go to Ethiopia to see

that), it enthralls. So many, such diversity, your mind is bogged by the wonder of it all. This book is one of the greatest celebrations of life I have ever opened. Let us hope the list goes on and on forever.

© *Beginning Birdsong and Continuing Birdsong from Sounds Natural, Upper End, Fulbrook, Oxford, OX18 4BX; 16 each inc. p.p.* All the Bird Song of Britain and Europe from *Wildsounds, PO Box 309, West Byfleet, Surrey, KT14 7YA; CDs: £49.95, cassettes £29.95, inc. p.p.* Nocturne with Nightingales and Birds Awakening £12.99 inc. p.p. *Bird-watcher's Yearbook* from *Buchingham Press, 25 Manor Park, Maidstone, Bucks, MK18 1QX; £10.50 inc. p.p.* A *Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World* by *Richard Howard and Alec Moore, published by Academic Press, £22.50.*

# Birdsong in the key of life

How I loathe the week-end. Tomorrow is the gloomiest day of the year for me: a day in which the world seems to revel in misery. For we wake up to find that we have been robbed of an hour of daylight.

Let us give thanks, then, for robins. In the midst of all the ghastliness that accompanies the end of British Summer Time, we have a wistful hint of life-affirming joy. Medical men talk about Seasonally Affective Disorder, or Sad, a clinical problem that comes when we are deprived of sunlight.

The best cure is to prescribe yourself a small dose of robin. Try it. Go anywhere with a few trees or the odd bush, and listen. Do you hear any birdsong? You do? Then it is a robin, because scarcely anything else sings at this time of year.

Birds sing in the spring. It is easy to sing at that life-affirming time of year, when food is plentiful and the air crackles with life: copulation, hatching, rearing. But robins sing almost without stopping all year round. They sing in the spring, they sing in early summer. They shut up during their moult, but when autumn comes and spirits begin to droop, they start all over again. And this time, it is a different song.

Spring is a time of glorious explosion. The air is filled with the song of hundreds of birds, dozens of species. But as golden October declines into sombre November, the robin sings a new song: softly, gently, meditatively. It is always described as wistful.

Even *Birds of the Western Palearctic* describes the robin's autumn song as "softer and more wistful than spring song, and tends to contain longer phrases".

Later the book adds that an example of the autumn song has "no triads but four of six phrases ended as diads". In which case, I suggest we stick to "wistful".

The male and female robins sing, and they lighten up the dark days of autumn better than any other bird. The meaning of the song, though, is neither gentle nor wistful. It is more a bugle call.

Robins sing in the autumn and winter because they hold territories in the autumn and winter. Most songbirds only

hold territory during spring, when a small patch of country will provide enough to feed the adults and their young.

In winter, birds spread out, form flocks, forage and are forced to live on their wits. But the robin's solution to the same problem is to hold territory: to chase off rivals and exploit the resources of a single, small patch.

Only if the weather turns desperate are the territories abandoned. Then the birds spread out, join flocks and move - if they can - to places more abundant in food.

The robin will have singing duels with nearby rivals. These are heart-lifting to the listener, and a matter of life and death to the birds.

They will not hesitate to attack intruders: in very exceptional circumstances they will fight to the death. But in the vast majority of physical encounters, the weaker bird retreats rapidly.

In autumn, robins will take on not only other robins, but also other small songbirds they encounter.

Some people, enjoying this contrast with their traditionally cuddly image, like to say that robins are "vicious". This is as nonsensical as to say they are genuinely feeling wistful when they sing. This is the way they have evolved to organise their lives.

I do not know what is daffier: soppy anthropomorphism, that says robins are seriously wistful; or tough-guy anthropomorphism, that calls robins vicious monsters. Both show a fundamental lack of understanding.

But even so, I believe this makes better sense than the traditional behaviourist approach which insists robins are no more than a kind of feathered clock; a machine for singing and copulating.

True: a robin's song has a very important function. It is also a life-affirming sound amid the deathly horror of European Standard Time.

SIMON BARNES

© What's about *Birders* - a number of *bumblings* have been sighted on the east coast. Keep an eye open for them further inland. *Twitcho* - nutcracker, *Stoke-on-Trent*, *Staffordshire*; *Radder's warbler*, *Killing, Norfolk*; *Isabelline wheatear*, *Isles of Scilly*. Details from *Birdline* 0898 700222.

# Rare gamebird falls at forest fence

By MICHAEL MCCARTHY, ENVIRONMENT CORRESPONDENT

FOREST fences put up to protect trees from young deer are proving fatal for one of Britain's most endangered birds. The capercaillie, a turkey-sized gamebird which has already become extinct in Britain once, frequently crashes into fences round Scottish pine forests and is undergoing another worrying decline.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds discovered from research at its Abernethy reserve in the Highlands that deer fences were deadlier than foxes, pine martens, pesticides, food shortages or any of the other threats advanced to explain the capercaillie's drop in numbers. The collisions were also the principal

cause of death of another threatened gamebird, the black grouse, and the society has decided to remove internal fences from forests in the reserve.

Yesterday it said that its findings were in line with similar research from the



The capercaillie: extinct once before in Britain

Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in Deeside. However, Peter Mayhew, the society's reserves manager for north Scotland, said that the reasons for the bird's decline were many and complex. "The fence problem is just one," he said. "Our research will continue until a solution is found. We cannot let the capercaillie vanish from Scotland."

The size of the bird's population in Scotland is unknown, Mr Mayhew said. "Numbers have been falling for years and the species has entirely vanished in some areas."

*Red Data Birds in Britain*, the handbook of endangered species, estimates the capercaillie's Scottish

population between 1,000 and 2,000. Historically, the bird was restricted to Scotland and northern England.

It became extinct there in the mid-18th century, when it was wiped out by hunting. It was reintroduced into Perthshire in 1837 and spread throughout east and central Scotland, but has been undergoing a marked decline since the late Seventies.

The Forestry Commission has refused to let shooting rights for the capercaillie since 1982. The felling of ancient Scots pine forests, the bird's preferred habitat, is regarded as another principal cause of its decline.

Weekend Times, page 7

# Ill wind blows in twitcher's 'disease'

By TIM JONES

THE storm that has been battering parts of Britain has brought with it good news for thousands of amateur ornithologists - and bad news for their employers, who may find a mysterious increase in days lost to "illness".

Throughout the land, from the Isles of Scilly to lonely Loch Lubhair, near Crianlarich, rare birds are landing unexpectedly and people afflicted with twitchers' disease are driving through the night to track them down and render their temporary domiciles even less restful.

It can be no fun being a Pied-billed Grebe or a Sora Rail, a secretive marsh bird with only 12 sightings recorded in the UK over the past 150 years. One minute, you are a young bird enjoying a comfortable existence in North America and the next, whoosh: you hit a 150mph air current and end up in a swamp near St Mary's, Isles of Scilly or, in the case of the grebe, on a strange lake in Scotland. Life becomes even less endurable when scores of human beings

trample down the reeds and heather to take your picture and tick you off their list.

For the twitchers, the sound of a great storm sweeping in is music. Many would consider exchanging their grandmothers for the chance to drive through the night to seize the moment, while the more organised plan their holidays to coincide with the storm season.

Perhaps reflecting the gen-

eral misery of life in what used to be called the Soviet Union, most of the feathered vagrants are from that troubled land. Others come from Romania, Bulgaria, Iran or Iraq.

Ian Dawson, of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, says that the "jewel in the crown" for any twitcher is the Desert Warbler, which can be seen at Flamborough, on Humberside's North Sea

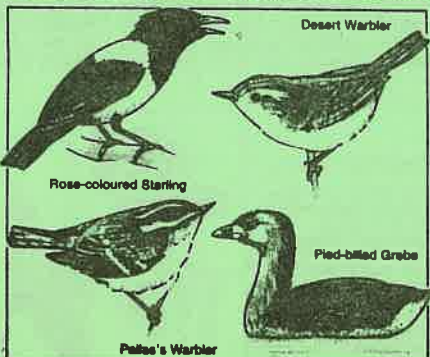
coast. It has been recorded on these shores only six times before and normally lives in the southern Soviet Union.

Sadly, many of the wayward birds are so far from their usual migratory routes that they will not survive.

There is some good news. The RSPB has praised police for 40 successful prosecutions last year, in cases ranging from egg stealing to game keepers poisoning magnificent birds of prey.

Yesterday, supporters of the society delivered 55,000 postcards to the EC environment commissioner, calling for an end to the import of birds caught in the wild.

Barbara Young, the society's chief executive, said: "The international trade in wild birds is of great concern to the British public. It has brought many birds to the edge of extinction. Only new legislation to prohibit the importation of wild birds in the community will end this inexcusable and unsustainable trade in death."



Weather, page 22

© The buff-breasted sandpiper, a rare visitor from America, was spotted amid much excitement in Hampshire yesterday. By break-fast-time, 100 birdwatchers were waiting on Pennington marshes with their cameras, videos, sound recording equipment and binoculars to record its every move. Eventually, the rare species came into view. Lenses were focused, the excitement was almost tangible... when down flapped a sparrowhawk and, in a flurry of feathers, ate it.

## The race is on to clock up 500 species of British bird. A bemused Colin Dunne follows breathlessly

**A**t this time of year, they are on the move all over Britain. Flocks of them, gathering in their masses, swooping to distant islands and windswept rocks, oblivious to all danger, blindly driven by the mysterious sweeping tides of nature. No, not birds. These are twitchers, the bird-watchers who follow the birds in their own massive migration. Now the twitchers are all of a flutter.

For one thing, October is peak-viewing time, when twitchers dare not leave the telephone for news of a rare sighting. But that is not all. Other forces are at work too. This month, for the first time, a list of the top twitchers' ratings is being published, which means that the casual competition between them is now recorded with all the formality of a football league table. Add to that the knowledge that one of the front-runners will become the first in twitching history to record seeing 500 different species, and you may understand the excitement.

Once every few years, this esoteric pursuit finds its way on to the news pages, like the recent dash to see the sandhill crane in the Shetlands, which confirms the rest of the population in the opinion that twitchers are all irretrievably potty.

Seeing a beautiful bird is one thing, but what is this hysteria which drives people to hurtle here and there, driving long hours, chartering planes, hiring boats, spending lifetimes and small fortunes, to tick off a name on a list? It requires a soul-felt love of nature, combined with the feverish urge of the collector.

Every day of the year, Lee Evans is out birding. Even when there isn't a unique bird on view, he'll still be on the road to catch a glimpse of one of the less rare species. With his streaked hair and gold-cross earring, this 30-year-old man is as pleasantly ordinary as you could wish, until he begins to talk about his obsession (his word). This is a man who has measured out his life in fan-tailed warblers and brown shrikes.

Driving down to Chichester to see a pectoral sandpiper, he told me with some pride of the sacrifices he has made for his hobby. There was the harlequin duck which wrecked his marriage. Evans was all ready for his wife's sister's birthday when it turned up on Shetland, so naturally he had to go. He got back in time for a friends' party but then a Brunwick's guillemot appeared on Shetland, so back he went again. It was too much. His wife didn't actually cite the duck and the guillemot in the divorce but it did make a tabloid headline: "Birder's Wife Has Flown".

Another obscure duck cost him an eye. Speeding up to Lincolnshire, he was in a road crash - he's had eleven while on bird dashes - which left him with metal rods in his head, and a glass eye. But at least he got to see the duck later.

Twitching is a relatively new pastime. Only a handful of people bothered with it before the Seventies, when it suddenly began to catch on. What spread it to a wider public was the introduction in 1987 of Birdline, the telephone service which, 24 hours a day, gives an updated list of what can be seen, and



STEVE CHIRDO

Lee Evans and lens: "It's like drugs... If I lost my birding, my life would finish instantly."

That 500 doesn't seem so far away now."

Both Heard and Evans work for Birdline, and so are free to speak about their obsession. Others, fearing employers might notice their sudden disappearances from work, are more discreet.

At Chichester, beside a muddy reed bed across the path from the blue and white boats at rest in the yacht basin, Evans set up his telescope and focused his one eye on the birds which swam, fed and dozed, and which looked indistinguishable to non-twitchers. Evans was muttering into his tape recorder, information for reference later to Birdline. "Five curlew sandpipers, two spotted redshanks, a greenshank, and there it is, the pectoral sandpiper, so called because of its Rambo-like chest.

**T**his, quite simply, is his life. His home, at Little Chalfont, near the M25 for a quick take-off, is filled with stuffed birds and record books. He listens to shipping forecasts more keenly than any fisherman: bad weather blows birds from America and Siberia off-course, and brings them within range of his eager telescope. His dedication has made him one of the big-name bird-men, standing ninth in the lifelists with 467, and every year for the past five years he has broken his own record for the highest number of annual sightings. With 320 so far this year, against his total of 359 last year, he is poised to do it again: no one bothers to compete with him.

He pays for it, and not just in domestic harmony and health. Each year he covers 90,000 miles bird-hunting, at a cost of £20,000. He has chartered aircraft, helicopters and boats. This month he'll be in the Scillies, which is the only place to be for the right-thinking twitcher at this time of year. Migrating birds may tire after thousands of miles, Lee Evans never does.

Heartbreak as well as exultation, is the lot of the twitcher. "Worst miss?", he says. "The ovenbird in County Cork. Drove to Fishguard, ferry to Rosslare, hired a car, six hour drive to the west coast, knocked up the cable-car guy and went over to the island with a load of cattle, a two-hour walk to where it had been reported. Gone. Turned round and came back." To be fair to Evans, it is not simply a matter of ticking a list. He loves the birds. He once spent six hours watching a wallcreeper in the Cheddar Gorge.

He is quite frank: "It's like drugs. I get withdrawal symptoms if I don't go out, even for a day. If I lost my birding, my life would finish instantly."

Domestic life with his girlfriend Carmel is settled, because she knows how it is: she comes second. "Carmel knows that. If there was a bereavement in my family, if she was seriously ill, say, I'd still have to go for a tick. I hate to say it, I know morally it's probably unacceptable, but that's the way it is. I expect I shall die birding." ●

## A time for twitchches and nervous ticks

where. It allows twitchers to dial and dash.

Evans gave the hobby wider attention by publishing the list of the top twitchers, first in his magazine for the UK400 club, for those who have seen over 400 species, and later in the monthly *Birding World*. There are now about a million people with a general interest in birds, 20,000 keen enthusiasts, perhaps 3,500 fanatics, and 250 who have passed the 400 figure.

Among these you find the ones who qualify for birding's highest accolade: maniac. They have their own vocabulary: birder, for someone who simply likes to see rare birds; twitcher for someone who only wants to see "a tick", one he's never seen before, which can be ticked off his list; a twitch is the response to the arrival of a rare bird, and twitchable describes one that is accessible; lifelist is the total of ticks in a lifetime.

They speak the names of the top bird-men much as cricket fans talk on. What spread it to a wider public was the introduction in 1987 of Birdline, the telephone service which, 24 hours a day, gives an updated list of what can be seen, and

pechora pipit on Fair Isle, Dave Holman, who has the advantage of flexitime in his work, chartered a plane from Norwich with two friends at a cost of more than £300 each. They saw the crane, then thought they had missed the pipit, only to discover later that it had simply moved down the road where other birders had been watching it. Holman is fifth in the listing, but one of his rivals rushed to the north of Scotland twice in the same week to see a White's thrush, and missed it both times.

**F**or all the intense rivalry, the truthfulness of the sightings is taken on trust. Twitchers share their information via Birdline: after that, it is a matter of commitment, the willingness to lavish time and money on getting there, and luck. When they fall into their cars at four in the morning, on the whisper of a chance sighting hundreds of miles away, they know that they may arrive hours later to find a new piquancy in that old cliché, the bird has flown. Often it has done just that. They relate stories of their near-misses with as much passion as their successes, as though to emphasise the risky nature of the enterprise. When news came of the crane in Shetland and a

At this time of year, they dare not leave the country. Heard, 35, a teacher from Maidenhead, returned from America last year and rang Birdline from the airport to check if he had missed anything. Yes: there was a rare sandgrouse on Shetland. He flew straight up there and, miraculously, caught it. "That was a very nervous flight," he says.

He is second in the listings, but likes to stay relaxed about the competition. "We used to muddle along, picking up news on the grapevine. Now it's become more competitive and some people, who'll go anywhere and spend anything, have upped the stakes.

### NATURE NOTE

**T**HE NESTING season for rooks is still some months ahead, but their behaviour on a bright but gusty day showed that the preliminaries are already beginning.

Our local flock was using the wind to put on a show of aerobatics that seemed to owe a lot to high spirits. Pairs of birds were chasing each other in headlong dashes punctuated with sharp swerves and dives. Whether these were just flights of fancy or whether the birds were showing a serious interest in each other, I had no means of telling.

The rooks have also been congregating on the ground, not spread out as when feeding but in assemblies. As with the aerobatic displays, these have the appearance of social occasions and there are signs of partners being

chosen. Every now and then a cock rook starts to pay court to a hen.

A male rook in display is a fine sight. He may not have the colours and outrageous plumes of a peacock but he acquits himself well. His strutting is every bit as vigorous and stately. He holds his head high, droops his wings and paces towards the hen, spreading his tail in a surprisingly handsome fan as he bows and calls to her. Not even his black plumage is dull; it is shot with glossy green and purple in the autumn sunshine.

As the days shorten, these displays will cease, but they have laid the foundations for serious courtship in the rookeries as soon as the weather improves.

Robert Burton

