



Frylde Bird Club

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

NEWSLETTER NO.66

FROM THE CHAIR

You will be pleased to know that I have resisted the temptation to look forward or backwards to the passing or coming years.

As usual I have donned the red cloak and white beard to give out a few presents. To remove any doubt or suspicions of favouritism I have listed them in alphabetical order.

To Andrew Cadman - The best of luck with his Atlas.

To Paul Ellis - A firm hand and a bottle of courage.

To John Fletcher - A piece of string (to tie his files to his wrist.)

To Alan Hinchliffe - A Pager, 4 new tyres and a Road Atlas.

To Maurice Jones - A phone card.

To Peter Scholes - A World Atlas.

To Paul Slade - Many thanks and the best of luck.

There are several mentions of 'Atlas' but we'll talk about those next year.

In the meantime, many thanks for your continued support, a very Happy Christmas and a peaceful bird-filled New Year.

L.G.B.

ATTENTION ALL BIRD CLUBS

The following information should be brought to the attention of your members and may be reproduced as appropriate for inclusion in any of your newsletters or other promotional material.

Launch of the new Breeding Bird Survey

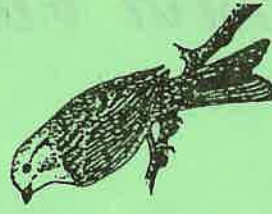
The spring of 1994 sees the launch of the BTO's newest census scheme and volunteers are urgently required.

Around 220 species of bird breed in the UK on a regular basis and keeping track of their populations is without doubt the single most important task for bird conservation. Only with this most basic information can we begin to identify conservation problems and priorities and advise on effective conservation action. Surveying the rarest of these birds, those with annual breeding populations of fewer than 300 pairs, usually involves an attempt at a complete count of the

The solution is to carry out 'sample surveys' in which counts from a number of plots are used to estimate population change over the country as a whole. Monitoring of this kind has the added advantage that birds provide valuable indicators of the general health of the countryside.

Perhaps the best known of the annual sample surveys are the Common Birds Census (CBC) and Waterways Bird Survey (WBS), which, since 1962 and 1974 respectively, have been the main schemes by which population changes of our common birds have been assessed. Both CBC and WBS use a territory mapping method which involves volunteer fieldworkers making around ten visits to their chosen plot through the breeding season and recording all the birds they encounter. This produces high quality information on both the numbers and distribution of birds on a plot and, if fieldwork is repeated over successive seasons, allows population changes to be assessed. As an example of the important results that have emerged, recent studies have shown dramatic declines in farmland birds over the last 15 years. The scale of these changes is both striking and alarming. Decreases over the

period 1968-91 include 85% for Tree Sparrow, 76% for Corn Bunting, 73% for Grey Partridge, 72% for Turtle Dove and 71% for Song Thrush. These findings perhaps confirm our own birdwatching experiences, but only with long-term population monitoring is it possible to put figures to these changes, and thus alert conservation bodies to potential problems.



Moving forward

Whilst recognising the considerable achievements of CBC and WBS, we are keen to improve and extend our monitoring work. Both CBC and WBS may be seen as limited in a number of ways: plots are chosen by observers (and may not, therefore, be representative of the countryside as a whole); habitat coverage is largely confined to farmland, woodland, and linear waterways; plots are concentrated in the south and east of Britain; and both fieldwork and analysis

are labour intensive. CBC mapping fieldwork usually involves around 30 hours per year added to which are up to 25 hours of indoor mapwork and analysis by BTO staff. For many birdwatchers this level of commitment is a barrier to becoming involved and limits our ability to expand the present schemes.

Field trials

For some time BTO has been involved in trials of alternative, and potentially more efficient, census methods, the latest of which was called the Pilot Census Project (1992-1993). This tested different counting methods in randomly chosen 1-km squares of the National Grid. The results of this pilot study are being used to guide the development of the new survey. Regional coverage within the trial was extremely encouraging with over 300 squares counted in each year, ranging in habitat from urban jungles to windswept moors: all are valuable because each habitat is important to certain birds. The species list was impressive, with over 150 recorded. Although rarities are not the focus of the scheme, unusual birds are always

a possibility and these have already included Red-throated and Great Northern Diver, Golden Eagle, Osprey, Dotterel, Quail, Black Guillemot, Golden Oriole, Dartford Warbler, Cirl Bunting and even Red-footed Falcon!



correctly termed a transect) and to describe the habitats present using a standard BTO coding system, and two morning visits to record bird numbers along these transects. Observations are recorded directly onto field sheets and summarised at the end of each visit. At the close of each season sheets and summaries are returned through regional organisers to BTO HQ.

Our field trials suggest that the average visit will take an hour and a half, depending on the habitat, with the total time in the field perhaps five hours each year. We very much hope that such a modest time commitment will allow many active birdwatchers to become involved in the census work for the first time. The success of this ambitious scheme depends on you and we hope that over the first few seasons we can build up annual coverage to over 2,000 1km squares. Surveying your own square or 'patch' has its own rewards as you build up a detailed picture of the breeding birds in a given area and there is always the chance of something new.

The introduction of the BBS does not mark the end of either the CBC or the WBS and each will

run parallel with the new scheme for a number of years.

How to get involved

The BBS is organised through a network of regional organisers throughout the UK. In most cases the regional organiser is the BTO Regional Representative (RR) and he or she coordinates fieldwork and allocates survey squares. If you have three mornings to spare in spring and early summer please take on a BBS square. Observers with more time could cover more squares! For more information on taking part please contact either your local BTO RR or Steve Carter at BTO, National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU. Tel: (0842) 750050, fax: 0842 750030.

The new Breeding Bird Survey is supported by the BTO, the JNCC (on behalf of English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Council for Wales and under a contract from the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland), and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN EGG, A CARPET, AND DAWE'S TOURS ?

It is patently obvious that you can beat an egg, you can beat a carpet but you can't beat a Dawe's tour. (*The old ones are the best!*)

I have enjoyed (or do I mean endured?) a few of these (in)famous tours in the past, but I am always amazed by the tour leader's time keeping and ability to turn up the birds.

I shall just pick a random date and recall the events - 17th Oct. 1993 - in fact a historic date. The first ever WeBS count in the history of wader counting.

I was to be picked up by AD at 0800 hrs. on the day. The tour was to terminate at Lane Ends at 1000 hrs. where a wader count was to be attempted. Two hours to travel 15 miles? My heart sank, it could only mean one thing - yes this must be a mystery tour to Pilling via (Oh no!) Starr Gate!! Once we had passed the M55 turn-off relief flooded over me like tepid treacle. But what route was he going to take? What was he going to find for me? The trip up the A6 was uneventful (except for the tear-jerking tale of ill-fortune and hard times that had befallen Fleetwood F.C.) Once we had turned into Kilcrash Lane and just as I was contemplating invoking the Birder's Charter, Dawe's Tours justified their first class reputation.

The Little Owl spot was approached, and the leader slowed down(?) for the first stop, whilst still doing 55 mph he calmly said "Little Owl, there on the left". Well, I thought he wasn't going to stop to give me time to tick it but he did. (It did go through my mind - its finding was so impressive - that it was a stuffed bird that he had planted the previous night). Within a minute I was duly ashamed of such a thought, as I was given a demonstration of low speed synchronised driving and flying along the road - AD did the driving a male Sparrowhawk did the flying. Their mutual coordination was so impressive that I felt a bit disappointed that the S/hawk didn't land on the wing mirror, it did virtually everything else.

Still plenty of time in hand so tour leader turns left into Bone Hill Lane, stops the car in the middle of nowhere and 100 metres (108yds) to the left, perched on a fence post was a Barn Owl. Admittedly one expects better views from such a quality tour company, so the Owl takes off flies round the perimeter of the field, arrives at Bone Hill Lane and proceeds to fly straight at us I was expecting a cry of "Achtung! Dive! Dive! Dive!" But right on cue, it casually banked to its left and slowly flew past us at a height of 1m (3'3") no more than 3m (9'11") from the car. What's more I am sure that it winked at AD as it passed.

Next stop Pilling water for the wader count but that's another story. Remember you can't beat Dawes Tours - I'll sign up any time. . . .

JLF.

RECENT REPORTS

SEPTEMBER (Not forgetting late AUGUST.

Late August had brought the first of an influx of Curlew Sandpipers into the area. On the last day of the month at Hambleton Marsh 6 juveniles were present along with 1 Spotted Redshank and 18 Knot. The following day (we're into September now), 12 Curlew Sandpipers were at the same location. Up to 6 were in the Stanah area on the 12th along with 2 Common Sandpipers and a Little Stint. From his conveniently placed office at Fleetwood Museum Simon Hayhow observed 6 flying north on the 15th. I do hope he has an office list - I'm pretty certain that Maurice hasn't got this species on his 'shop list' yet. Up to 39 of the same species were in the Lytham area. At Hambleton Marsh 10 Little Stint, 13 Curlew and 2 Common Sandpipers were seen by Chris Batty on the 10th.

Other Waders were prominent too; 10 Greenshank were at the Naze on the 5th and there was a steady build up of Golden Plover and Lapwing on the Wyre. 90 Goldies were at Skippool on the 5th and by the 25th numbers had risen to 300 plus 500 Lapwing also for good measure 14 Heron fished the river.

270 Grey Plover had returned to Fairhaven on the 5th whilst the numbers of Black Tailed Godwits had risen to 1200 by the 9th.

The star Wader of the month was undoubtedly the White Rumped Sandpiper found in the Wader roost at Rossall Point by Roger Scholes on the 16th. Unfortunately it's stay was all too brief, it could not be relocated on the following day.

There was a steady passage of migrants southwards. 3 Sand Martins were seen at Stanah on the 4th plus 1 Grey Wagtail. At LSANR on the 5th a Sand Martin and 1 Yellow Wagtail moved south. On the same day 5 Grey Wagtails dropped briefly into Granny's Bay.

The 5th also brought Maurice two 'firsts' for the Reserve; a bit of an anti climax but yes, the first Robin and Wren of the Autumn were present. 3 Goldcrests were also seen, the start of a good Autumn passage for this species. Many were seen in the Stanah area and throughout the Fylde. On the 24th Simon Hayhow had 4 in Queens Terrace and 4 at Fleetwood Cemetery. Readers please note: I think Queens Terrace could be a euphemism for "from the office window". If so, it would probably be an addition to the office list. The only really surprising thing, considering the abundance of this species in September was that Maurice didn't have them hopping around the hardware in Vicarage Lane.

Other species seemed relatively common - notably Siskin and Long Tailed Tits. 6 Long Tailed Tits were at Stanah on the 20th. On a diurnal watch at the Mere on the following day 33 Meadow Pipits, 3 Siskin and 249 Swallow moved South. Grounded birds included a female Whinchat and an immature male Stonechat.

The following day produced a fall of Robin; 25 were counted around the Car Park at Stanah and on the footpath to Cockle Hall. 1 Siskin, 8 Goldfinch

and 35 Linnet counted makes you realise just what a tough job it is being a Wyre Ranger. I think Len probably uses more notebooks than John Fletcher, which is saying a lot. On the 23rd at Stanah 110 Meadow Pipits and 5 Skylark flew south east and 58 Pinkfeet flew over, moving south west. By the 25th Stanah was 'ticking' with Robins. 40 were counted, in the interests of Science along with a Whitethroat near the Visitors Centre.

There was a good variety of Raptors seen during the month. Chris Batty saw an adult male Goshawk at Lane Ends on the 1st. Merlin and Peregrine were also present in the same area whilst a male Merlin terrorised the Marton Mere Swallow roost during the early part of the month. A 'ringtail' Hen Harrier was reported from the Eagland Hill area on the 7th.

Seawatching was as exciting as ever despite the complete absence of onshore winds. Somehow it seemed strange to have the wind blowing into the Shelter from behind you, rather than full in the face and bringing tears to your eyes. Sandwich Terns were present in good numbers throughout the month with 317 moving south on the 11th and numbers in the upper 20's thereafter. 106 Common Terns also moved south on the 11th along with a lone Manx Shearwater. A solitary juvenile Black Tern was seen on the same day with up to 8 Arctic Skuas also present.

On the 18th there weren't many seabirds to be seen but small parties of Pintail, Wigeon and Teal moved south. 2 Whinchat alighted on the Go-Kart track wall shortly to be followed by 50 House Martins.

The 25th saw an influx of Auks into the area when 110 Guillemots and Razorbills moved south. A Black Guillemot which took off from the water just in front of the Shelter was the real surprise of the day. Red Throated Divers were also moving with 34 counted in the four hour seawatch. Up to 400 Kittiwakes fed well offshore. After such a good day I thought I'd better go down there on the following morning - it was just as good! Highlights were the 906 Pinkfeet which moved south in small parties during the morning; another largish passage of Auks and the presence of an Arctic Skua which moved south close to the Shelter.

As I write this I've just scanned Simon's notes again. Yes folks, you can seawatch from the office too - on the 20th an immature male Eider was on the Wyre and a single Kittiwake was also seen. I'm sure he's got a telescope set up by now.

Fish of the month was a Basking Shark seen at Rossall Point on the 5th September which surprised everybody on the Wyre Borough walk and amply made up for the paucity of Waders.

OCTOBER

At the coast Sandwich Terns were still present in small numbers into the second week along with Gannets and the odd Kittiwake. On the 3rd an almost summer plumaged Red Necked Grebe drifted in on the tide and was seen again on the 9th. It stood out from the attendant Great Crested Grebes not

with unpaid overtime at Bank Lane, Warton. Up to 2 Nuthatch were at Singleton with Chiffchaff and Blackcap noted and the latter species ringed. Over 200 Redwing roosted at Winmarleigh on the 16th and a similar number at Clifton on the following day. Several Goldcrest, Long Tailed and Coal Tits were ringed along with Treecreeper, Chaffinch, Brambling and Greenfinch to name but a few. 30 Brambling roosted at Clifton on the 20th and 205 Chaffinch on the 30th. 200 plus Redwing roosted at Clifton on the 17th and 20th. Just totalling up the numbers would indicate that the Ringing Group managed to ring over 300 birds during the month. No wonder the members of the Group store their information on discs these days.

Ed was out and about during the month in search of migrants. No new sites this time but some good birds nevertheless. A Garden Warbler was in the Railway bushes on the 10th and maintaining the transport theme a Goldcrest and Blackcap had made it to South station on the same date. A Black Redstart had stopped off short of the terminus to spend two days at Squires Gate station, it's holiday beginning opposite Pontins on the 23rd. A Swallow was seen on the 23rd as it passed over Watson Road, no doubt having made a lengthy detour to see if Ed 'was about'.

A Chiffchaff of the Abretinus race was at Fairhaven on the 30th, however Passerine of the month must go to the Firecrest caught and ringed by Bob Danson at 1500 at Fluke Hall. Unfortunately it didn't stay. This eclipsed Maurice's flyover Lapland Bunting at the Reserve on the 10th and his Yellow Browed Warbler, heard but not seen (sorry Maurice). Here ends the vote of the Walton-le-Dale jury, now back to Norway (nil points).

A Bittern was seen at Marton Mere on the 5th and on several other dates during the month. An adult winter Mediterranean Gull was seen there on the 10th and 25th. A Jack Snipe was at LSANR on the 26th and 31st.

Non tickable bird of the month was once again reported by Maurice. This time a Cockatiel at the Reserve. He doesn't say whether it came to nuts or not. Tickable or not it must have brightened his day considerably after no doubt giving him an initial "what's that" panic.

For Seal lovers a Grey Seal was off Starr Gate on the 5th and Rossall on the 19th.

NOVEMBER

Hot news from the Mere came in the form of a Bearded Tit. Seen on the 6th, a brief flight view and a single 'ping' contact note came from the channel by the island. Later two birds were seen, both colour ringed, which indicated that they originated from Leighton Moss.

During the early part of the month up to 3 Water Rails and a single Green Sandpiper were present.

There was a small movement of Stonechats during the same period, with birds seen at LSANR, South Station and Fleetwood. Also noted were movements

just because of it's size and different 'shape' but most noticeably because of it's different diving action, resembling that of a Little Grebe.

On the 9th 264 Guillemots and Razorbills were seen moving past the Shelter. The 10th saw a remarkable movement of Auks with 1717 passing, comprising mainly of Razorbills. A Bonxie moved south just behind the surf looking magnificent as the sharp light highlighted the white in the wings and the tawny tone of the body.

During September and October there had been good numbers of Common Scoter offshore, the generally calm conditions meaning that exceptionally close views were possible on several occasions. On the 16th on a calm clear day a male Velvet Scoter was seen flying past the Shelter. Later the same day at Rossall Point 6 Whooper Swans flew south.

Up to 250 Auks remained off Starr Gate for most of the month. Parties of ducks became more common and on the 19th 5 Scaup and a Goldeneye were seen. A dark bellied Brent Goose flew north on the 24th. A dark phase Arctic Skua on the 30th provided a good finale to an excellent month's seawatching.

Not a Leach's Petrel to be seen. Where were they all? Answer, 200 miles west of Ireland and heading south having decided they'd had enough of Blackpool and the Illuminations.

There were some very good days of diurnal passerine movements during the month too! Len was at the Mere on the 2nd when 57 Meadow Pipits, 36 Pied Wagtail and 13 Chaffinch flew east. In addition 70 Goldfinch, 50 Blackbird and a Great Spotted Woodpecker were present. At Fairhaven 36 Meadow Pipit, 41 Chaffinch and a remarkable total of 85 Siskin flew south on the 5th. A male Blackcap was heard calling from the island in the Lake.

The 9th saw Maurice at Fairhaven again. Although passage was somewhat light with 9 Siskin, 8 Chaffinch, 1 Redpoll and 3 Goldcrests, at about 0830 he heard about 10 calls of a Yellow Browed Warbler on the wooded island. In the next 20 minutes it gave 3 further bursts of 10 or more calls. It was finally heard calling at 1040, it's only calling in two hours. I should add that by this time Maurice had selflessly dragged me away from the Shelter and I was on hand to hear this final song. What a gentleman.

Meanwhile Len was at Stanah and the Mere. On the 14th 200 Redwing and 300 Fieldfare flew over Stanah in the space of 2 hours. At the Mere on the following day 144 Redwing, 192 Fieldfare, 164 Starling and 35 Skylark were counted. 3 Grey Wagtail and 3 Blackcaps were present. Brambling, Goldcrest, Siskin and Coal Tit were at Stanah on the 19th.

A Snow Bunting and 3 Rock Pipit were at Glasson Marsh on the 17th. On the 24th at Fluke Hall, Chaffinch, Brambling, Goldcrest and Dunnock were present. Semi-rarities in the Fylde, a Bullfinch and Treecreeper were also seen. On the 31st a Snow Bunting flew south at Rossall school.

Seamus Eaves has sent details of what seems to have been a very arduous ringing month - Singleton, Clifton and Winmarleigh Halls being the main venues

After a Wader Count it's always a bit difficult to decide where to go next. Indecision rules, I think,. Hopefully this coming count will be an exception when John says "let's go to the Manor Inn and I'll buy you a Lucozade to restore life to your limbs". More about that in the next issue.

It's on occasions like the Christmas get together when our Secretary is really missed. Leading us by example he marches us to the Golden Ball and says "why've we come here"!

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to the Newsletter over the year. Your reports have been most welcome so keep them coming. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Don't forget, High Tide on New Year's Day is 1317 and the Shelter is the place to get your year list off to the best possible start.

A.D

December 1993

W e B S WADER COUNT DATES 1994

<u>Date</u>	<u>Ht(m)@ Time</u>	:	<u>Date</u>	<u>Ht(m)@ Time</u>
Jan 16	9.1 @ 1354	:	Jly 10	9.0 @ 1205
Feb 13	9.4 @ 1253	:	Aug 21	9.2 @ 1112
Mar 13	9.4 @ 1156	:	Spt 11	8.9 @ 1453
Apr 10	9.1 @ 1055	:	Oct 9	9.57 @ 1347
May 15	8.5 @ 1351	:	Nov 6	9.9 @ 1245
Jun 12	8.8 @ 1259	:	Dec 4	10.0 @ 1146

GMT times throughout. Add 1hr. for BST
from 27th March to 23rd October 1994.

Meet Lane Ends Car Park - 3 hours before High Tide

of Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush and Blackbirds. Blackcaps could be seen in Eds favourite haunts including three in Watson Road Park on the 8th. Grey Wagtails were also conspicuous throughout the month.

A late Swallow was seen from Fleetwood Museum on the 3rd and more unusual, a Kingfisher was found dead on Knott End Golf Course on the 11th. It was donated to Fleetwood Museum by Len but cannot be included on Simon's office list for obvious reasons.

A House Martin was flying around Fleetwood Pier on the 6th and a single Brent Goose flew in off the sea at Rossall Point.

There were some good totals of Red Breasted Mergansers coming in with the flow of the tide at Rossall: 47 on the 7th and 79 on the 21st. Seawatching from Starr Gate was pretty steady too with Common Scoter totals exceeding 200 on some visits. On the 27th a single Velvet Scoter, 1 Long Tailed Duck and a Black Throated Diver were seen. The following day 9 Eider and 3 Velvet Scoter were seen.

CONTRIBUTORS

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M.Jones and E.Stirling.

POSTSCRIPT

News of John Fletcher's article must have been leaked! Already a letter has been received from an anonymous Wader Counter pointing out some other aspects which he had obviously overlooked. The letter is reproduced in full, below:-

Dear Editor,

I think that Mr.Fletcher rather missed the point about 'Dawes Tours'. Surely Alan took him around the Over Wyre area to demonstrate that there are 'good and Interesting birds' to be seen in the Fylde? As Mr.Fletcher is de facto leader of the Wader Counting team we were rather hoping that he would have pointed out some goodies by now; especially since our ex Leader (now in exile over the water in Stanah with Rossall) is threatening to make a Sunday comeback by taking over the running of the group and no doubt instituting a harsh regime; whereby every field will be counted and no Turnstone left unturned on the beach. When Attila the Len returns there will no doubt be fighting in the ditches, on the beaches etc. Remember Mr. Fletcher - you're only as good as your last bird.

Yours faithfully,

Stool Pigeon.

Which reminds me elsewhere in this issue, I've not decided just quite where yet: there are a list of Count Dates so that you can avoid booking holidays in Patagonia, or at least you know when to fly back specially for a really good tide. Wader counts are fun and give unrivalled opportunities to see JLF in the field or the Salt Marsh. Don't miss it.

'OPERATION APPLE' TO FEED THE BIRDS

Superstore steps in to beat freeze



• Tony Fahey of Tesco and David McGrath of Marton Mere try not to upset the apple cart.

BLACKPOOL'S wildlife has had it tough during the cold spell — but thanks to a superstore, help is at hand.

Birds migrated from Iceland and Russia to the Marton Mere wildlife centre in the hope of a warmer welcome — but they arrived only to be greeted by a frosty reception.

The ground was too solid for our feathered friends to dig for worms.

When David McGrath, nature reserve warden at the Blackpool nature centre, highlighted their plight to his local Tesco store, on Clifton Road, Marton, the days of buckling their beaks were numbered.

For kind-hearted staff have sent hun-

dreds of bruised and blemished apples to the birds to stop them getting in a flap.

David McGrath says the wildlife reserve has a species of herons, which take up residence every year, which are in danger of becoming extinct.

He said: "We also have thrushes, blackbirds and fieldfares with us who all find the cold weather difficult as they can't dig

for worms — they do enjoy apples though when the ground is frozen."

Tesco's fresh foods manager Keith Davis commented: "Tesco is a large countrywide company and, wherever possible, individual stores support the efforts of local groups."

"We are happy to be able to help the wildlife at Marton Mere by providing any apples taken off sale."

Store has aid in reserve

A LOCAL supermarket is doing its bit to help Lancashire's wildlife through the wintry weather.

Fieldfares and redwings, types of thrushes, as well as blackbirds, find the cold weather difficult as they cannot dig for worms. In addition, some birds have migrated from Iceland, Scandinavia and Northern Russia to Marton Mere nature reserve on the Fylde to escape the harsh weather there.

These birds enjoy apples when the ground is frozen and Asda's Fulwood store has been donating bruised and blemished apples which are unfit for human consumption to the Reserve's warden, David McGrath who lives on the Brookfield estate and does his weekly shopping at the store.

Richard Morris, Asda's produce manager, said: "We are happy to be able to help the local wildlife whenever possible and, by providing damaged fruit, we can make a real difference during times of hard ship."

Marton Mere is one of the most important wildlife sites in the North West, particularly considering its small size in comparison to reserves such as Martin Mere at Burroughough and Leighton Moss at Silverdale. Every winter, a bittern, a species of heron totally dependent on reed beds, takes up residence.

Short-eared owls and barn owls are also present at the reserve, along with a Mediterranean gull which is another very scarce species.

The reserve is always open and free of charge. Visitors should park at Blackpool zoo and walk anti-clockwise around the new Herons Reach hotel and golf course complex to reach the reserve.

Visitors that make twitchers twitch

BY DERWENT MAY

FOR the past ten days, thousands of birdwatchers have been visiting a Dorset valley to see a multi-coloured bird sitting in a bush after losing its way while migrating from Siberia to Southeast Asia.

The visitor to Worth Matravers was a red-flanked bluetail — a species regarded as "untwitchable". On the few occasions the bird was seen in Britain, it always vanished before anyone else could see it.

Twitchers won their name because they supposedly twitch with excitement when a rare bird appears. They prefer the name "birders", and are a highly competitive breed. The champion is Ron Johns, a north Londoner in his early fifties, who has recorded sightings in Britain of 493 species.

In 1986, enthusiasts led by Richard Millington, a bird artist, set up Birdline, a

telephone recorded-message service that is updated hourly. They also publish a magazine, *Birding World*, which has 6,000 subscribers.

There are two kinds of birders. The experts are usually the ones who find rare birds. They watch the skies and calculate which winds or storms are likely to bring in particular species. The others are the camp-followers, usually less experienced yet just as eager.

Birders are not interested only in rare species, however. Many are also members of such organisations as the British Trust for Ornithology, which does population surveys of the common (or increasingly uncommon) birds.

□ The British Trust for Ornithology can be contacted on (0842) 750050. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is on (0767) 680551.

NATURE NOTE

CROWS and rooks are wary birds — with justification. If they come into the garden it is usually only to pay a brief visit, unless they have learned that they are safe.

The rooks that come to my bird-table advance cautiously, grab a beakful and make a quick getaway. They know that at any moment a car or pedestrian may come down the lane, or a cat appear out of the hedge, and send them flying back to the tops of the trees. Yet they make the most of that short time by gubbling as much as possible.

One visit by the rooks is enough to clear the bird-table of the day's rations because they stuff food into a pouch in the floor of the mouth. As they fly away, there is a visible bulge at the base of each beak. Magpies and jackdaws are similarly equipped but as they are smaller their impact is less extreme.

The pouch is important for carrying food to the nestlings, but it is also useful for birds that find more food than they can cope with on the spot. The surplus is carried away and buried.

The rook, or other member of the crow family, pushes its beak into the ground, matted vegetation or a suitable nook or cranny and inserts the food.

The site is covered with soil, dead leaves or pebbles and abandoned, but not forgotten. It will be dug up and moved if another bird shows an interest, and will eventually be consumed.

Robert Burton



NATURE NOTE

Massed birds catch the worm

FROM somewhere among the trees comes a chorus of faint piping. Small shapes flit among the branches. It is a flock of tits making its daily round in search of food. There could be a couple of dozen birds, or even more. There will be blue tits and great tits, perhaps some individuals of other tit species, or a group of long-tailed tits, and there may be a goldcrest, nuthatch or treecreeper.

The flock straggles slowly past, with each bird pausing to search for insects and other tiny animals hidden among the foliage or along the twigs and around the trunk of a tree and then hastening on after its fellows.

It used to be said that this assortment of birds banded together for safety. The theory was that the many pairs of eyes made it harder for a hawk to pounce unnoticed. If one bird spots approaching danger, its alarm calls alert the rest. There is also a thoroughly selfish safety in numbers — with any luck it is another bird that will be caught.

But safety seems not to be the main reason why such mixed flocks gather. The birds learn from each other where to find hidden sources of food. The flocks are most often seen in bad weather when there is a greater urgency to feed well and they break up when the birds have finished feeding. And mixed flocks are not so common in suburban gardens, where bird-tables supply easy meals.



Robert Burton

NATURE NOTE

AT THE end of October I saw the first siskin in my garden. It was feeding on my peanut-dispenser and, at a quick glance, might have passed for a greenfinch. But it was smaller and much prettier, with streaky plumage, and rivalled the tits for acrobatic skills.

So far, I have had only the one sighting and I suspect that the siskin was a newly-arrived winter immigrant seeking somewhere to settle. Siskins are widespread but scattered nesters in Britain, having spread from Scottish pinewoods to the rest of the country wherever there are plantations to provide good crops of cones. They are likely to wander farther afield in winter and their numbers are supplemented in winter with birds from Scandinavia.

Migrant siskins arrive at the end of October and settle mainly in woods where they can find seeds of alder and birch. It is usually only when these supplies fail, in late winter or spring, that they spread into gardens to feed on peanuts and fat. For some unknown reason, they seem to prefer nuts displayed in red plastic mesh bags, although mine are in a more durable white metal mesh cage.

I may be lucky and see more siskins soon if the tree-seed crops are poor or if there are so many immigrants that the birds are forced into gardens early.



Robert Burton

RARE BIRDS IN THE BUSH

- Red-flanked bluetail. The bird of the moment: lost its way from Siberia and spent last week in a Dorset bush.
- Pallas's sandprouse. A rare wanderer from the deserts of central Asia.
- Ancient murrelet. An auk that nests in burrows on the Pacific coast of North America. Brought across on westerlies.
- White-throated robin. Sometimes strays from the oak and juniper-clad ravines of Turkey.
- Demoiselle crane. A small, beautiful crane from the steppes of central Asia.
- Red-eyed vireo. North American warbler blown across the Atlantic on the autumn winds.
- Dusky warbler. A relative of our chiff-chaff that normally lives in Siberia.



The white-throated robin and the red-flanked bluetail

Feather report

Egged on by cuckoo's sounds of spring

Cuckoo! You hear the call a long way off, and you head towards it, scanning the treetops, *Derwent May* writes.

But all too often it remains a "wandering voice", falling silent, then mocking you again from as far away as ever. Yet sometimes you get an unexpected view of a cuckoo. The one I remember best was at Kyleakin, on the Isle of Skye.

I had come across on the five-minute ferry trip from Kyle of Lochalsh the evening before, and first thing the next morning, I went up the hill above the village. I could hear a cuckoo calling up there (it had woken me up), and as soon as I got to the top, I saw it sitting on a telephone wire — this was Skye, and there were no trees around.

It was putting on its usual performance as it called — drooping its wings, spreading its tail, lifting its head high on

the "cuck", and letting it fall on the "oo".

But what was remarkable was the echo. Opposite us, across the blue sea-channel, was a line of mountains — and every time the cuckoo called, its cry came echoing back through the still air from the mainland of Scotland.

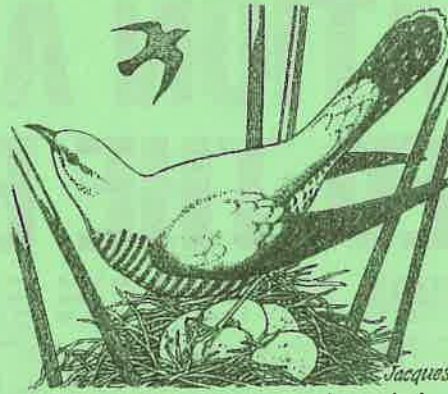
Cuckoos were arriving in Britain from Africa all last week, and they will soon be heard all over the country. If you see one flying, it can remind you of a hawk: it is blue-grey, like a male sparrowhawk, and it has pointed wings and a long tail like a falcon.

But it is not hard to distinguish from the hawk: it has a very peculiar flight, unusually straight, and never bringing its wings above the horizontal. The male, in any case, commonly calls when it is flying: the female, which looks similar, has a loud bubbling call.

Few birds have an odder way of life. The males occupy song territories, and the females take up egg-laying territories, but they all seem to mate very promiscuously.

The females then begin their "research" into the local meadow pipits, hedge sparrows, or reed warblers. Each female cuckoo concentrates its attention on one of those species — on the moors, for instance, you mainly find "meadow pipit cuckoos" and in farmland "hedge sparrow cuckoos". Occasionally they may also turn their attention to other species, such as robins.

They watch the small birds building, and once a female starts laying, the cuckoo comes down in the afternoon, removes one of the other bird's eggs and lays one of her own in the nest. The cuckoo egg is bigger and may even be a



Cuckoo in the nest: the first visitors have arrived

different colour, but the pipit or warbler accepts it.

The cuckoo egg hatches slightly sooner than the other eggs in the nest, and the young cuckoo that emerges does not take long to heave out the other eggs or tiny nestlings. The deluded "parents" then feed it until it is a brown avian monster, far larger than themselves. With its screaming cry, the cuckoo chick may even persuade other parent birds to join in the good work. Nor does it hesitate to peck its

foster-parents if it is hungry or otherwise dissatisfied with them.

Its true mother, meanwhile, pays no more attention to it. She goes on prowling round the countryside, even destroying nests of her host species that already contain eggs or young, so that they will have to build another nest and lay again for her convenience.

The female cuckoo generally lays an egg every other day, probably producing about 12 in an average year. As the

summer wears on, the male cuckoo's call deteriorates, and you hear curious "cuck-cuckoo" sounds. All the cuckoos, young and old, are on their way to Africa by early August.

For years, controversy raged over whether female cuckoos laid direct into their victims' nests, or whether they laid the egg nearby, then picked it up with their beak and put it in.

In the years before the second world war, a painstaking but frascible naturalist, Edgar Chance, proved that the female cuckoo always lays her egg directly into the nest, though sometimes she has problems with an awkwardly placed nest, and the egg falls to the ground. When that happens, she lets it lie.

Mr Chance recorded his findings in a book called *The Truth About the Cuckoo*. It is one of the most entertaining bird books I know — not least because he deals with opponents of his arguments about as mercilessly as the young cuckoo deals with its fellow-nestings.

What's about: Birders — house martins are now returning to most parts of the country. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222. Calls cost 36p per minute cheap rate, 48p per minute at all other times.

Wild goose chase that keeps farmers' guns quiet

Crofters on a Scottish island are being paid not to shoot migrating birds that graze on their land.

John Arlidge reports

EACH morning Ross Lilley leaves his lighthouse keeper's cottage on Islay and drives to the top of a nearby hill. There he sits in his car, binoculars and clipboard in hand, counting geese.

Mr Lilley, 25, is Britain's only goose officer. Each winter he counts tens of thousands of Greenland white-fronted geese and Barnacle geese which nest on the Argyll island, outnumbering humans ten to one.

The birds destroy valuable grazing land and for years farmers tried to scare them off using guns, gas, kites and balloons. The goose chase, however, proved unsuccessful and after the birds were classed as a threatened species, farmers turned to Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), a body the Government set up last year to administer nature conservation, in Scotland, to find a solution.

Last October Mr Lilley and his SNH colleagues started a £300,000 experimental "goose management" scheme, compensating farmers for the damage the geese cause. This year the full programme was launched with farmers paid about £9 for each goose that feeds on their land.

Mr Lilley drives from farm to farm calculating the average number of geese on the fields of the



Ross Lilley, the man with the job of counting tens of thousands of and Barnacle geese that migrate to the island from Greenland for the winter



110 farmers and crofters who have joined the programme. Last year payments ranged from £40 to £11,000. Paying farmers not to shoot an endangered species is unusual, Mr Lilley says, but financial incentives are vital "in a marginal economy".

"Islay's economy is based on agriculture which means that anything — like the geese — that threatens farming, threatens the whole island," he said. "The problem is, the geese that come here each winter are themselves a

marginal group. Most of the world's Greenland and Barnacle populations feed here for seven months of the year. They depend on the good grass. We had to set up a scheme that would benefit people as well as the birds."

Relations between the farmers and conservationists, like Friends of the Earth, have been tense. Two years ago locals gathered in a village hall to barangue David Belamy and other environmentalists. "There was a feeling that the conservationists had got on their

high horse and were telling farmers they should not do this or that," Mr Lilley said. "But we have overcome that. Unlike some environmentalists we understand that wildlife cannot simply be left alone. It has to be managed."

Although farmers welcome the principle of the scheme, many say compensation levels are too low. Angus Kerr, 40, who farms 85 cows and 850 sheep on 3,500 acres, said: "We accept that we cannot shoot the geese but the money we receive instead is not

nearly enough. When they come they just destroy the land. If you are talking about nibbles per minute, they are lawn-mower quick. With less good grass to eat... my sheep and cows are less well-fed and produce fewer lambs and less milk."

"Over the past year I have lost £6,000 in potential lamb, beef and milk sales but I have only received £1,000 under the scheme. Without geese I would have 40 per cent more breeding animals and 40 per cent more in-

come. I'm afraid that if they are not increased we will resort to shooting once again."

Mr Lilley rules out culling is not an option. We simply know enough about the population to say that it would not cause a long-term decline in numbers.

"The level of compensation already three times that of similar schemes in Holland and North America. We have to fine-tune this year but we have to achieve a partnership