

# NEWSLETTER

**MARCH 2001**



**Fylde  
Bird Club  
LANCASHIRE**

## FROM THE CHAIR

Firstly I would like to take this opportunity to welcome our new treasurer, John Barker who very kindly agreed to take over from Ian Chandler who stood down at the AGM. Many thanks to Ian for all his work over the last two years and also his offer to help John with the computerised membership list.

2001 has started very well for the Club with the launch of our very own website, which can be found at: <http://www.fyldebirdclub.freeuk.com/>

Anyone who has access to the internet please find time to look us up.

The site contains recent newsletter articles, site guides, membership details and recent reports.

Many thanks to Mike Shaw and his son Chris, who have obviously spent a great deal of time and effort setting up the website and also for managing to do it so quickly. It only seems like a couple of weeks since our secretary first mentioned he thought it was about time we looked in to the possibility of setting up a website.

Anyone who has any ideas or suggestions to add to the pages please pass on your thoughts to Mike or Paul.

Paul Slade

Chairman: Mr. Paul Slade . Secretary: Mr. Paul Ellis, 18 Staining Rise, Staining, Blackpool, Lancashire, FY3 0BU  
Tel. 01253 891 281 Eves. 01772 8529741 Day  
E-mail : paul.ellis2@baesystems.com Or : kinta.beaver@man.ac.uk

**NEWSLETTER**

**MARCH 2001**



**Fylde  
Bird Club  
LANCASHIRE**

**WITH REFERENCE TO THE RECENT OUTBREAKS OF  
FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE**

**May we stress the importance of following the guidelines issued recently by the Government, some of which will be enforced by law, as regards the closure of reserves, footpaths, etc.**

**We hope that most members will already know the enormity of the problem, but some younger members may not realise this. Please, please think seriously about visiting certain areas, especially where livestock are present.**

**Thankyou for your co-operation.**

## Recent Reports

### November

The month was again dominated by low pressure systems bringing very high rainfall, with westerly and south – westerly and mainly mild conditions.

A Little Egret was at Bank Lane, Freckleton on the 5<sup>th</sup>, whilst on the 21<sup>st</sup> there were 8 Goosanders on the Wyre at Little Singleton. 20 Whooper Swans were at Pilling on the 14<sup>th</sup> with 33 at Black Lane Head together with 10 Bewicks on the 18<sup>th</sup>. 54 Whoopers were at Fluke Hall the next day with 30 at Freckleton on the 30<sup>th</sup>. 14<sup>r</sup> Bewicks were at Weeton flood on the 25<sup>th</sup>. 47 Mute Swans were on Marton Mere on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Few Geese were reported, but there were 2 Dark – bellied Brents at Lane Ends on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Early in the month there were 5 Gadwall on the Mere whilst the Ferruginous Duck had moved to Fairhaven Lake by the 27<sup>th</sup> when up to 3 Scàup were present. Large numbers of wildfowl were off Lane Ends on the 26<sup>th</sup> with 1100 Wigeon and 520 Pintail present.

Hen Harriers appear to becoming rarer in our area so a female at Bank Lane together with 2 Merlins on the 11<sup>th</sup> was welcome. The 18<sup>th</sup> saw 80 Sanderling at Little Singleton with Curlew peaking at 500 there on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. A Woodcock was at the Mere on the 27<sup>th</sup> and Med Gulls were present on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. A Barn Owl was seen at Mythop on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and a late Swallow on the 20<sup>th</sup> at Little Singleton was noteworthy.

2 Water Pipits were at Bank Lane on the 11<sup>th</sup> with 5 Rock Pipits at Lane Ends on the same date. Chiffchaffs were present at Marton Mere on the 24<sup>th</sup> and LSANR on the 28<sup>th</sup> where a pair of Stonechats were in the vicinity on and off during the month. A male Blackcap was at the Nook on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and a further pair of Stonechats were at Fairhaven on the 4<sup>th</sup>. The beginning of the month saw

an influx of winter Thrushes with 500 Fieldfares and 200 Redwings at Out Rawcliffe on the 5<sup>th</sup>. 60+ Fieldfares were at Little Singleton on the 9<sup>th</sup> with up to 20 Twite on various dates. 60 of the latter were at Cockersands on the 7<sup>th</sup> with a Lapland Bunting at the Abbey. Single Snowbuntings were noted at Fairhaven on the 12<sup>th</sup> and Lane Ends on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

### December

The month was again mild and wet with lots of low pressure systems bringing west and south – westerly winds. Month end however saw northerlies with overnight frost.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> 2 Red Throated Divers were off Rossall. A Little Grebe was on Fairhaven Lake on the 17<sup>th</sup> whilst on the 27<sup>th</sup> a juvenile Red – necked Grebe moved north past Rossall close in shore. 4 pairs of Red – breasted Mergansers were on Fairhaven Lake on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 2 Bitterns put in an appearance at the Mere on the 30<sup>th</sup>. 8 Goosanders were at Little Singleton on the 27<sup>th</sup> whilst 2 days earlier a male was on Stanley Park lake. 42 Whooper Swans were still at Fluke Hall on the 19<sup>th</sup> with 23 at Saltcotes on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 8 at Little Singleton on the 27<sup>th</sup>. On the 15<sup>th</sup> a single Barnacle Goose was with 3000 Pinkfeet at Horse Park Lane. The 10<sup>th</sup> saw a Green – winged Teal off Lane Ends, with many people anxious to tick this new split. On the 12<sup>th</sup> Marton Mere held 115 Shoveller and 235 Teal whilst the Ferruginous Duck remained on Fairhaven Lake until month end.

A Peregrine was noted chasing waders on St Annes beach on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Newton Marsh held a Ruff on the 26<sup>th</sup> whilst at Little Singleton counts of 119 Sanderling, 460 Curlew and 213 Redshank were made on various dates. 64 Kittiwakes and 2 adult Little Gulls were off Rossall on the 9<sup>th</sup> with a Med Gull at the Mere on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

65 Common Gulls at Little Singleton on the 27<sup>th</sup> was a good count. Fewer Long-eared Owls have been present at the Mere this year but 1 was there on the 21<sup>st</sup> whilst a Barn Owl was on Lytham Moss the previous day. There were 2 Grey Wagtails at Warton Bank on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 3 Grey and 40 Pied at Preston Dock on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Stonechats appear to be increasingly recorded on a regular basis with 1 at LSANR on the 14<sup>th</sup> and pairs at the Airport fence on the 20<sup>th</sup> and at Fairhaven on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

A female Bullfinch near Preston Dock on the 16<sup>th</sup> was noteworthy, whilst just outside our area there were 40 Siskin at Brock picnic site on the 19<sup>th</sup>. 30 Cornbuntings were at Nateby on the 20<sup>th</sup> whilst Snow Buntings were noted on the 10<sup>th</sup> with 2 at Fluke Hall and 1 at Lane Ends.

### January

High pressure dominated the month until the 3<sup>rd</sup> week when south-westerlies returned, the cold frosty weather being replaced by some further heavy rainfall.

Up to 3 Bitterns were at the Mere on 4 dates during the month, dusk being the best time to catch up with them. 5000 Pinkfeet were at Eagland Hill on the 13<sup>th</sup>, with 3000 at Colcalds Farm on the 20<sup>th</sup>. A Dark-bellied Brent was at Cockersands on the 7<sup>th</sup> whilst a Pale-bellied was north east of St Michaels by the main Garstang road on the 26<sup>th</sup>. A Whitefront was at Moss Edge on the 4<sup>th</sup>. 5 Bewick Swans were at Marton Mere on the 9<sup>th</sup> with 7 Bewicks and 1 Whooper there on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Up to 30 Mute Swans were present at the same site during the month. The Ferruginous Duck continued to be seen regularly at Fairhaven Lake with up to 3 Scaup, and a male Gadwall on the 16<sup>th</sup>. On the 9<sup>th</sup> there were 4 pairs of Red-breasted Mergansers at the site together with 4 Goldeneye, 52 Pochard and 27 Tufted Ducks, the latter rising to 44 the next day. 3 Gadwall were at

Cockersands on the 7<sup>th</sup> with the Green-winged Teal present on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

A male Merlin was at Lane Ends on the 8<sup>th</sup> when a Peregrine was at Cockersands Caravan Park. Several records of Peregrine were also received from Little Singleton on various dates. 11 Grey Partridge were at Bone Hill on the 8<sup>th</sup> when 3 Ruff and 300 Golden Plover were at Lane Ends. The same day 720 Curlew were at Little Singleton. The 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> saw a Spotted Redshank at Cockersands Abbey whilst on the 21<sup>st</sup> a Green Sandpiper was at Marton Mere. 5 Stock Doves were at Bone Hill on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

A first winter Glaucous Gull was reported on several dates at Fleetwood tip, whilst on the 16<sup>th</sup> a near full summer adult Med Gull was at the Mere. The Long-eared Owl continued to be elusive at the Mere but was reported on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> with a Barn Owl at Mythop Road on the 18<sup>th</sup>. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was at Little Singleton on the 20<sup>th</sup>, whilst 200 Skylarks at Ream Hills was a good count on the 27<sup>th</sup>. A Grey Wagtail was in Stanley Park on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 100 Pied Wagtails roosted at BAE Warton during the month. The invasion of Waxwings was only slight in the Fylde, with 15 briefly at Glasson village on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1 at the De Vere Hotel on the 14<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> and 2 at Oxford Road Lytham on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. 2 wintering Blackcaps were noted - a male on 3 dates in a Weeton garden and a female at Little Singleton on the 17<sup>th</sup>. A male Stonechat was at Gulf Lane, Moss Edge on the 3<sup>rd</sup> with a pair at Blackpool Airport adjacent to the golf course on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. The 8<sup>th</sup> saw 90 Redwings, 30 Fieldfares and a Nuthatch at Thurnham with 40 Fieldfares at BNFL, Salwick on the 11<sup>th</sup>. 25 Twite were at Cockersands on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 90 Sparrows (mostly Tree) at Eagland Hill on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 90 Linnets and 85 Chaffinch at Ream Hills on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

Thanks to those of you who contribute records for the recent reports.

A.J.H



**Fylde  
Bird Club**

**LANCASHIRE**

## **FYLDE BIRD CLUB COMMITTEE**

### **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT 7:59 PM ON THURSDAY THE 29th OF JANUARY AT BLACKPOOL CRICKET CLUB**

#### **Present**

Chairman; Secretary; Treasurer; Alan Hinchliffe, Stephen Dunstan, Dave Pitman, Len Blacow and Mike McGough. Apologies were received from Ian Chandler.

#### **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 21st of November were agreed to be correct.

#### **Matters Arising**

##### **1) Bird Report**

The Secretary report that the Report had been taken to the printers today and that 150 copies had been ordered. It was believed that enough copies would be available for the 9<sup>th</sup> Feb Club meeting. The Chairman offered to see the printer with a view to getting some copies in time for the Bill Oddie event on the 6<sup>th</sup> Feb.

**Action: Chairman**

Alan Hinchliffe offered thanks to everyone who had helped get the 1999 Report out. The Secretary reported that the Chairman, Mike and Pauline McGough and himself would enter the raw data for the 2000 report.

##### **2) Important Unprotected Bird Sites**

The President's stated that he was waiting to receive maps showing County Biological Heritage Sites, before completing the newsletter article

**Action continuing: Len Blacow**

##### **3) Christmas Cards**

A number of committee members reported favourable responses from the members to the Christmas Cards and it was agreed to repeat the action next Christmas.

**Action complete**

##### **4) Godwit Protection at Newton Marsh**

The Chairman reported that the RSPB had been informed of the names of volunteers from the Club. He added that Sam Jackson and Tony Baker from the RSPB intended to hold a meeting with all volunteers to plan the wardening.

The Secretary read out a letter, which he had written to BAE SYSTEMS requesting assistance in various forms with the project. This request discharged an action accepted by the Club at a previous meeting with the RSPB.

**Action: Complete**

#### 5) Rossall Coast Guards Tower

The Secretary read out a letter from Barry Dyson to Wyre Borough Council, regarding access to the tower, which had been copied to the Club. In his letter, Barry stated that access was still not possible owing to a problem with the lock. John Barker stated that even when the lock had been serviceable, the key was only available between 10 am and 3:30pm. Alan Hinchliffe reminded the Committee that despite assurances, Wyre Borough Council had not erected any interpretative material at the site and that the Club had donated a sum of money for this purpose. The issue was discussed and it was agreed to wait and see what the outcome of Barry's enquiry would be.

#### 6) Marton Mere

The Secretary reported that developments within Blackpool Borough Council, may lead to the LNR moving from the control of the Zoo to Social Services Dept. in the near future. It was agreed that in light of this information, it was pointless continuing to raise long standing LNR management issues, with the Zoo manager.

There was a proposal to consider transferring the running of the LNR from Blackpool Borough Council to a new charitable trust. Iain Valentine had offered to meet with the Club to discuss the concept of a trust on 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. It was agreed that representatives from the Committee should attend this meeting, in order to learn more about how a trust might operate the LNR. A number of committee members agreed to attend.

**Action: All**

Len Blacow recommended that the Club should contact English Nature for their reaction to the idea and this was agreed. It was also agreed that the RSPB and the Lancs Wildlife Trust should also be contacted with a view to becoming involved

**Actions: Secretary**

#### 7) Constitution

The Secretary reported that a new Constitution had been produced which incorporated the latest changes introduced at the AGM.

**Action complete**

#### 8) Lytham Hall Breeding Birds Survey

Stephen Dunstan reported that he had written up his own records. The Secretary reported that production of the Bird Report had continued to take priority but that provision of his and other's data would follow.

**Action continuing: Secretary and Mike McGough to forward records**

Stephen Dunstan asked if the Club wished to continue the survey and lead some more guided walks at the Hall. The Chairman stated that the walks were a good vehicle to promote the Club. Stephen Dunstan stated that we should provide a breeding bird summary from last year's data but added that an improved survey could be produced, given a second year's records. All agreed that these projects were worth pursuing. Stephen offered to re-establish contact with the Town Trust to explore the possibility of running some guided walks and continuing the breeding bird survey.

**Action: Stephen Dunstan**

#### 9) Reality Bird League

Stephen Dunstan reported that following the newsletter article on the proposal only three people had notified him of any intent to participate. Therefore he announced that the project would not proceed. Len Blacow stated that a number of other people were intending to join in. Stephen replied, that as they hadn't contacted him, he could not run the scheme. It was agreed that consideration could be given to another attempt to launch the project, at the end of the year, for 2002.

#### 10) Projector Screen

The Club's projector screen was worn out and would need to be replaced very shortly. Mike McGough had offered to make enquires about the cost of a replacement.

**Action continuing: Mike McGough**

## 11) Promotion of the Club

Stephen Dunstan announced that the Club would be able to place an Advertisement in the Lancs Bird Report.

John Barker recommended that the Club should deposit promotional 'Flyers' at local outlets. All agreed and the Secretary stated that he would update the Club's promotional sheet in time for the Bill Oddie event and also produce A4 copies of the meetings programme.

The Chairman appealed for a volunteer to take on the role of a Publicity Officer. Unfortunately no one felt able to take on the task. The Secretary suggested that we should all consider taking on an element of the task to share the burden. Alan Hinchliffe offered to distribute and maintain supplies of promotional materials at outlets.

John Barker also suggested that we should prepare starter packs for new members containing a Bird Report, Newsletter and Car Sticker. All agreed that this was a good idea which the Club had intended to implement in the past.

The Chairman stated that it was probably quite difficult for newcomers to the area to find out about the Club. Mike McGough suggested that the Club could hold an open evening for prospective new members.

Len Blacow stated that it may be possible to hold such an event at the Ribble Discovery Centre at Fairhaven. It was agreed that this idea was worth pursuing.

The Chairman suggested that we should produce a handout listing birdwatching sites in the Fylde with map references. This was also agreed to be a good idea.

**Action: All to contribute to the above objectives**

The Secretary reported that Mike Shaw's son, Chris, had offered to set up a web site for the Club free of charge. All welcomed this development.

Len Blacow announced that he was unable to borrow display boards for use at the Bill Oddie event. Mike McGough offered to try to borrow some. The Secretary suggested that it may be possible to hire a set for a night. He and Mike McGough agreed to investigate this possibility if none could be borrowed. It was noted that the purchase cost of such boards would be several hundred pounds.

**Action: Mike McGough & Secretary**

## 12) Wirestrikes

Stephen Dunstan reported that his request to have markers fitted to power cables at Nateby had been successful and that the markers had already been fitted. All present congratulated Stephen on this success. Stephen noted that the RSPCA and himself had rescued the injured swan, referred to in the previous minutes.

## 13) Wyre Borough Council Guided Walks

The Bird Club led walks in the Wyre Council Guided Walks programme were reviewed. It was noted that the Club would need to ensure representatives turned out for all these events. The first would be on 25<sup>th</sup> February at Rossall, when Len Blacow stated he would be unable to attend. The next, on the 8<sup>th</sup> April was in upland Wyre and Paul Slade agreed to attend. Len Blacow stated he would be leading the walk on the 6<sup>th</sup> May. It was noted that the time of this walk had been changed to 7am. The next walk was on the 16<sup>th</sup> Sept and Len stated that would be unable to attend. It was noted that an extra Bird Club walk had been added for the 9<sup>th</sup> December. No one present knew anything about this booking and it was assumed to be a mistake, however it was agreed that as the Club's name was against it in the programme, then we would lead it. Stephen Dunstan and Mike McGough offered to lead this walk.

## A.O.B.

### 1. Pink footed Geese Monitoring

Stephen Dunstan reported that he had received a proposal from Richard Hearn (of the Wildfowl & W.Trust), for a detailed survey of wintering geese. The proposal included requests to record flock sizes where marked birds are encountered, together with field crop type and family associations, where birds can be aged. Len Blacow stated that a long standing problem was that 'official count figures' had traditionally accepted the inflated numbers provided by wildfowlers, in precedence to birder's figures. The Secretary commented that if this was the case, it was a severe disincentive to birders to contribute. Stephen Dunstan offered to raise this point with Richard Hearn. It was agreed that the request could be published in the newsletter.

**Actions: Stephen Dunstan**

Len Blacow offered to invite members out with him on goose counts. The Secretary reminded the committee that he still held a collection of data on the movements of marked swans and geese, following exchanges of data (with Richard Hearn and others) and that he would make it available to anyone who wished to write an article based on it.

## 2. Microlight Flying at Tarn Farm

The Secretary reported that while on holiday, he had received a letter inviting comment on a planning application regarding the above. The application was for permanent permission to fly from Tarn Farm rather than the annual permission which was currently granted. He added that owing to the deadline imposed for a response and unavailability of other members, he had been forced to respond without consultation. He read out the letter of response which opposed the application. Len Blacow stated that there was a voluntary code of conduct for the microlight pilots but that they did not always obey it. He added that the Planning Office should be reminded of its content. Mike McGough agreed to furnish the Secretary with a copy of the document.

**Action: Mike McGough**

## 3. Jameson Road Nature Reserve

The Secretary stated that Roger Scholes had contacted him, following a chance meeting with representatives of Lancashire County Council, on site at the former power station. Roger had been told that the Council was planning a nature reserve at the site and he had suggested that the Council contact the Club on the subject.

The Secretary reported that he had then telephoned Pete Jepson (an ecologist of L.C.C.) to discuss the project. Mr Jepson had invited the Club to send a letter to the Council indicating its willingness to become involved. The Secretary continued, that he had written and sent such a letter, which he then read out. The Chairman reported that he had subsequently received a telephone acknowledgement, which was encouraging. He had been informed that there was indeed an intention to create a nature reserve at the site and that funding was in place. Plans included the provision of hide(s), relocation of the model aircraft club to the riverbank and closure of unofficial access from the dock lands. Len Blacow stated that the riverbank roost of redshank could reach 1000+ and that the relocated model aircraft would pose a disturbance threat. The Chairman replied that he had been assured flying would be restricted to over the old tip only. The Chairman and Secretary agreed to keep the Club informed of developments.

**Action: Chairman & Secretary**

**There being no further business the meeting closed at 22:51 hrs.**





# Project Athene

A project plan for the research and conservation of the Little Owl, *Athene noctua* in Britain, which will collaborate with the International Little Owl Working Groups' International Conservation Action Plan.

## Introduction

It has become evident that the Little Owl has suffered declines across its range in Britain. The extent of this decline is not known. The only national data available have been extracted from Project Barn Owl and from Common Bird Census results. Both of these data sets are inconclusive and do not provide information detailed enough to quantify the decline or offer any reason for the decline. **Project Athene** will put in place the national monitoring network needed to provide population estimates that are required to identify future declines or explosions in Little Owl populations.

To underpin this information, research will be carried out in order to gain an understanding of the population dynamics of Little Owl communities utilising the latest research methods.

## How you can help

Any systematic or casual records of Little Owls either seen or heard calling from 15<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> April inclusive, from sunset to 1 hour after sunset, will be of direct use in the pilot study being carried out this year. Please be as specific as possible about the date, time and location of any sightings or in the case of calling Little Owls, your location and the direction from which the calling is heard. Any other records outside the dates and times mentioned will never the less still be of use.

## What to do with your records

Please pass all your records to me, **Mike Shaw** by post, telephone or E-mail and I will collate them for onward transmission to the project co-ordinator.

By post: -

By telephone: -

By E-mail: -

Mike Shaw  
47, Rydal Avenue  
Freckleton  
PRESTON  
Lancashire  
PR4 1DJ

Tel. (01772) 633151

mike@astronet.freeuk.com

## OPERATION TREE SPARROW.

Birds of Lancashire (Oakes) 1953 stated that the Tree Sparrow - *Passer montanus* - was very local in distribution with no evidence of breeding in the Carnforth, Wennington, and Lancaster districts although winter flocks were present. The species seemed to be absent on the Fylde Plain.

The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland 1988 - 1991 (Gibbons, Reid, Chapman) stated that in 1965, there were some 900,000 pairs, falling to 130,000 to 140,000 pairs by 1983. From the 1988 - 1991 Atlas the British population was estimated at some 110,000 territories with a further 9000 territories in Ireland. (J.D. Summers - Smith.)

The dramatic reduction since 1965 is apparent. This appears to have been mainly due to the loss of suitable habitat together with the change in farming practices, the loss of winter stubble being a prime example, this being a valuable winter food resource.

So much for the general background. So what has Operation Tree Sparrow achieved?

The North Fylde RSPB Wildlife Explorers have provided almost 150 especially designed nestboxes to the dedicated team of birdwatchers and naturalists headed by Mr. R. Danson. The youngsters have themselves fitted some of these boxes at suitable sites in the Fylde, and are already planning to manufacture another 100 boxes this winter. These will be used to replace those damaged by the ravages of our winter, attention given to them by Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, and to take into account the increase to the population brought about by this scheme. Here are the results so far, together with comparative information for previous years.

Year.	No. of pairs.	Youngsters fledged.
1995	38	252
1996	54	328
1997	54	329
1998	54	260
1999	80	519
2000	74	725

The figures speak for themselves. You have all played a part, either by contributing money in support of the project, supporting the youngsters of the Wildlife Explorers in their work, or by giving practical help, time, and assistance as required. I know that Bob Danson and his team are grateful. Many thanks everyone, lets do it again and keep up the good work. This really is conservation in action.

18/12/00

Donald Rusling.  
Assistant Group Leader.  
North Fylde RSPB  
Wildlife Explorers.

## Moreeshuss 25/9/00 - 9/10/00.

I remember collecting stamps as a kid. They were square, rectangular and some octagonal but the triangular ones always seemed the best unless of course you were lucky enough to find a twopenny blue from Mauritius. Well I never was that lucky but neither did I ever in my wildest dreams expect to visit Mauritius; the fact is I probably didn't have a clue where it was. My only other recollection of Mauritius came from my 1950/60's train spotting days when I saw 'Jub' - how many of you remember that nickname- 45617 Mauritius somewhere on the British Rail network. It was 'shedded'-jargon for Motive Power Depot at Carlisle Kingmoor so if I remember correctly it was rare in our neck of the woods, probably an occasional summer visitor on an excursion into Blackpool Central.

Well 40 or so years later we celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary there. We nearly didn't as our first choice out of the hat picked by our son Steven was a cruise taking in the Canaries, Madeira, Morocco and Spain. We duly booked it, only for it to be cancelled 4 months later. Next out of the hat came South Africa but I could see as the days went by that Ellen was not altogether keen on the 2nd choice even though we had agreed to include it. So it was by chance that we had to 'make do' with our 3rd and last choice which I knew would be O.K. and it was.

We flew there on 25/9/00 on an overnight Air Mauritius Boeing 767 flight, non stop from Manchester taking just over 12 hours. At first light we were in the Indian Ocean passing over the NE coastline of Madagascar before landing an hour later in Mauritius. Flying across the island with its surreal mountain shapes and coral reef fringed shores, we knew this was going to be a holiday to remember.

By chance a new field guide entitled 'Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands' had just been released which I had eagerly obtained a copy of. I flicked through it and thought wow. I then looked through it to find that most of the birds were only found in Madagascar. Like all small islands that were once gardens of eden they are quickly denuded by mans efforts to settle. In doing this most of the islands endemics have become extinct, among them the Dodo, surely the symbol of extinction. What must it have been like, well nothing like today I thought as we made our way by mini-bus to our hotel. Only the beaches, islands and parts of the south west of the island would be something like it was all those years ago when the island was first colonised by the Dutch in the early part of the 17th century. Now the island is heavily populated, and not too long ago over 80% of the islands arable land was planted with sugar, now thankfully down to 52%. Imagine 80% of the Fylde plain covered with a crop that grows taller than maize or phragmites; doesn't bear thinking about does it. Well thats the negative side, for whats left is heaven.

Only 9 endemics have survived with only one having been able to hold its own, the Mauritius Grey White-eye. The Mauritius Kestrel was down to 2 pairs in 1975 and was brought back from the brink of extinction by the Captive breeding centre now known as the 'Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary' which luck would have it was based within a stones throw of our hotel in Black River in the S.W. of the island. Having restored the population to some 700 birds they are now concentrating their efforts on the Mauritius Echo Parakeet down to 50 birds in 1975 and the Pink Pigeon down to 20 birds but now up to 120 and 400 respectively. When I visited the centre after getting prior permission, the staff were too busy to receive me but were happy to let me wander around the sanctuary where giant Tortoises and Mauritius fruit bats were also being cared for. I could see they were busy but I never did find the time to return there to discuss their invaluable work.

Having identified the birds I might see and only then if I got out to Round and Serpent islands off the north coast, I estimated 45 species would be a good target. In the event I didn't make it to the islands and saw just 37 species without too much effort, apart from a 18 km's hike through the Black River Gorge National Park which was pure magic even if I didn't see many birds.

In the grounds of the hotel were introduced species such as House Sparrow, Zebra Dove a tiny barred fawn coloured dove considerably smaller and far tamer than the Common Mynahs that were also present searching for scraps. The most daring by far were the Red-whiskered Bulbuls. Cheeky chappies, I watched one hop behind the bar and take portions of pineapple that were meant for the

cocktails. They clearly were a successful species as they were widespread throughout the island. A pair of Spice Finches were nesting in the thatched overhang, a species I only once saw again.

The hotel grounds extended to the narrow seashore where dark brown Mascarene Martins were busy collecting nest material and taking it to various off shore craft not yet in use as the season had yet to get under way. I wondered what would become of them and if they had been successful in previous years with their choice of mobile nest sites. They were larger than our Sand Martins, longer tailed and with a brown streaked chest and belly. I saw them every day but never away from the coastline.

A short orienteering walk of less than a mile brought several other species. A colony of Village weavers had taken up residence in a sparse area of woodland where there must have been 60 or so nests in varying degrees of construction. It always amazes me how they start them off on the bare wisp like shoots they choose as their natal site-but they do. Brilliant red male Madagascar Fodies were much fewer in number but were always a delight to see as were the several Ring-necked Parakeets with their high pitched calls. I used to pooh pooh the parrot family although I can't think why. I have seen several species now and they are all marvellous fliers, wonderfully coloured and such intelligent birds that they deserve far greater recognition than they have so far received in natural history programmes.

Other common enough ground dwelling species 'on my patch' were Spotted (Ground) Dove and Madagascar Turtle Dove. Common Waxbills too could be seen in small flocks nervously pecking on the ground, perhaps in fear of the resident pair of Mauritius Kestrels that could be seen laying in wait in the trees. Considerably smaller than our own Kestrel and beautifully plumaged this species would now be extinct were it not for the likes of Gerald Durrell and Carl Jones who acted in the nick of time to ensure its future survival. A sobering thought as they say and one we would all do well to consider when studying the fortunes of some of our own birds particularly those dependent on farmland.

A surprise was to be taken by surprise by a bird landing on a TV aerial. It was a Whimbrel the first of about a dozen I was to see. They turned up in the most unlikely places, as well as on the foreshore and river estuary, which was a javelins throw away from the hotel if you were Steve Backley. My second short walk took me along a stretch of the river mouth where I saw a single Grey Plover and two Green backed Herons. The other side of the river appeared promising with its emerging mangrove swamp introduced to prevent increasing erosion. I made a mental note to find my way there.

Two days later I made it to the other side having passed various habitats full of life. Dazzling dragonflies, bouncing butterflies, lounging lizards, harrying hornets all met my eye as I made my way to the estuary. What was there; well it was not unlike being back home. 3 Whimbrel, 3 Turnstone- Is there anywhere these birds don't get to- 6 Curlew sandpiper, 3 Grey Plover, 2 Common Sandpiper, 1 Moorhen but as if to return me to reality 2 Greater Sandplover were feeding along a muddy edge. On a later visit here a single Greenshank had returned to winter. However it would seem I was too early for wintering Crab Plovers which I was reliably told are found around the island.

Returning the way I had come children were playing make believe games and generally enjoying themselves. Dressed in colourful but worn clothing, patched together here and there, they were having great fun doing the simple things that are so rarely seen in Britain today. Imaginary gunfights, hide and seek, pulling home made sailing boats at the waters edge, playing with their pet livestock, pulling faces and tiddler fishing to name a few. Football too was a favourite with Liverpool and Manchester United well supported over there. Scrawled on one of the walls on a makeshift training ground in two feet high letters was Preston North End--- bizarre. Seeing me taking their photo they approached in a half-hearted martial arts fashion giggling as they got nearer. They all wanted to look through my bino's which delayed me somewhat but what did it matter, I was on holiday. But enough of that. A recently harvested sugar cane plot was crawling with House Sparrows, Spotted ground doves, Zebra doves and Common Waxbills while by the adjacent tree lined river could be seen several delightful Mauritius Grey White-eyes flitting among the branches and Yellow-eyed canaries feeding on the ground.

Later in the first week I undertook the 18 km trek I mentioned earlier. A taxi took me and two fellow holidaymakers to the start point at Petrin. The Black River Gorges National Park which we were to

walk through comprises 3.5% of the island in its SW corner. It was a beautiful day as we set off along the Macchabee ridge. A loop trail seemed a good idea and certainly allowed you to see the Mauritian tropical forest at its best as well as providing spectacular views. However it was also very dense in places, hard going and extremely humid and I was glad to return to the main trail as it was impossible to see any birds 'inside' the forest. Out in the open we were immediately greeted by graceful White-tailed Tropicbirds as they lazily made use of the updraughts rising up the sides of the ridge. They breed in crevices in the gorges and we saw 25 in total on our way down. Most were in pairs wheeling around as though of one mind. With their long display tail feathers they circled and moved effortlessly in their display territories and we were all dumb struck by the exhibition they put on. Silence is golden at times like this.

Looking far and down on to the forest canopy Mauritian fruit bats were busy moving from tree to tree. With their golden heads and broad brown webbed wings they looked prehistoric as they flapped their way lazily over the tree tops. They dwarfed the indigenous Mascarene Swiftlets which breed in the caves to be found in the mountain gorges. The only Swift to be found in the Mascarenes ( Reunion, Mauritius and Rodrigues) this was the only place I saw them, the pale rump being a dead giveaway when compared to the martin. A Mauritius kestrel put in a brief appearance, quickly followed by an Echo Parakeet judging by its flight call which is most unlike that of the Ring-necked Parakeet of which I saw and heard 11 in total during the day.

The wild flowers were disappointing in variety but that may have been down to the time of year and the fact that I did not venture off the beaten track. Lizards, dragonflies, butterflies and some day flying moths made up for this with many different species being seen, although without a field guide they remained unidentifiable. A mongoose shot across the track in front of us, the only one I was to see. Another introduction they were brought from India to kill the rats that were overrunning the cane fields. As with most introductions it wasn't long before they too became the hunted as their numbers multiplied into pest proportions. As we neared the end of the trail a monkey made itself scarce as it saw us approaching. Several Grey Francolins did the same as they burst from cover deeper into the forest.

It had been a long but unforgettable day as we recounted our experiences in the bar later that evening. I would have returned there by myself on another day if it had not been for a bruised toe I incurred, that made other than flat walking somewhat painful.

After that trek, and apart from a Madagascar Partridge seen from a bus on a days undersea walking excursion, the only other birds I saw were seabirds. Unfortunately they were not visible from land at least not from where we were staying. Even on a day cruise on a catamaran I only managed to see two distant Noddies and a few unidentifiable dolphins likely to have been either Bottle-nosed or Striped dolphins. It would seem the only way I would get to see some seabirds at close quarters would be to go on a deep-sea fishing expedition. Luckily I was based at the best place on the island to do just that, although it wasn't until the last morning on the day we were to depart that I finally got to go. Even then things nearly took a turn for the worse as the person I was sharing the boat with failed to turn up. I was agreeably surprised then to find that the 'captain' was prepared to take me birdwatching for the price I had negotiated beforehand.

The captain was called Jocelyn Emilien, a typical happy go lucky sort who was perhaps more than a little curious about someone who would hire his boat other than to go sea fishing. Not that he wouldn't take the opportunity to do some fishing of his own for where the birds are the fish are also. He prepared several lines trailing the back of the boat all lured with imitation squid. It was a calm morning and remained that way for the 6 hours we were out.

About 4 miles from land we saw our first Sooty Terns flying purposefully across our bow heading toward a frenzied party of birds just visible in the distance. This was our cue to alter course and head for the disturbance. As we made our way there we went through a school of at least 8 Short-finned Pilot Whales a joy in itself. As we got closer more Sooty Terns passed us, always at a height of c.30 feet. They are biggish, the size of Sandwich Terns but hunt differently. Instead of plunge diving they swoop over the surface snatching at prey not unlike marsh terns but without their bouncy buoyancy.

Their monochrome colouring gives them a striking appearance but on balance I have to say I preferred the shape and colour of the Noddy terns.

By the time we reached the action the birds had split into smaller groups and the helmsman steered erratically amongst them. Common Noddies outnumbered the Lessers four to one. They flew much lower than the Sooty terns, no more than 10 feet above the sea I would say. Strong fliers with fast wingbeats they were difficult to photograph. I saw about 50 commons all told and was taken by their two tone milk and dark chocolate brown appearance and white forehead. Also their elongated length brought about by their long narrow decurved bill and drawn out tail. They were just super birds to watch.

My favourites though are Shearwaters and I wait patiently for this family to be the subject of a Croom Helm or Poyser. Shearwaters are sheer joy to me. Whoever named these birds could not have chosen better. Skimmerwaters just hasn't the same ring about it. They are the bee's knee's. I can't have enough of them. I could watch them all day as they innately manipulate the air movements in the wave troughs to their advantage. In the silky waters of the Indian ocean I saw two species, the Wedge-tailed Shearwater, all dark morphs, and the recently named Mascarene Shearwater. The Wedge-tailed was by far the commoner of the two and I can see them now drifting slowly on bowed wings just above the surface for unlike the terns they make use of the lowest airspace. They are superb fliers, seemingly on cruise control as they glide effortlessly, occasionally banking as aircraft do when changing course. They appear to have a very long pointed tail from a distance, but when you are on top of them, it is still long, but also broad and perhaps not surprisingly wedge shaped. The secondaries also come across as broad based while the overall appearance is that of a large dark brown slow moving shearwater. They dived under water in pursuit of their prey.

The Mascarene Shearwaters were fewer in number and much smaller than the wedge-tails. They had black upperparts and white underparts and flew arrow-like at speed with fast wingbeats but not quite as blurring as those of Little Shearwaters. Because of this and their tendency to criss-cross our path rather than circle us the views were not as satisfactory and their flight action not as pleasing to the eye, at least my eyes.

We wandered about always chasing the feeding birds. A single White-tailed Tropicbird was resting on the ocean surface the only one we saw. It took off as we got too close for comfort. A Lesser crested Tern outpaced us as we tried to catch up with it. A beast of a skua could only have been Antarctic Skua which winters in these waters with some over-summering. It is the southern counterpart of Great Skua and has been known to have forced Wandering Albatrosses to regurgitate. All too soon it seemed we had to make our way back although by now we could not see Mauritius at all as the entire length of it, about 40 miles was covered in black cloud. It rained heavy on our return but brightened up about two miles from the coastline. It had been a wonderful experience but the fishing had been disappointing with only one Borito to show for several hours line dragging. Perhaps the calm waters had had something to do with it for earlier in the week taken from rough waters I had seen good catches landed at the quayside of Tuna, Marlin, Yellow-finned Tuna and Dorado. We said our goodbyes and I wished Jocelyn all the best for the future. I have his address, fax and telephone number if anyone should want it.

In a few hours time we would be returning to rain lashed Britain. I could tell you so much more about the island but these reports are essentially about the wildlife so I will limit my other thoughts to just a few lasting images. Washerwomen laundering in the local river, electric blue dorado fish on the quayside which tasted delicious, suggestive sega dancing, bustling markets, great food, rugged scenery, happy smiling faces, pedestrian policemen, shanty settlements, sugar cane fires, extravagance, poverty, warm balmy days, crystal clear waters, undersea walking, catamaran cruising, the best holiday rep ever and great hotel. If you want to chill out then Moreeshuss is for you.

B. Dyson  
20/1/01.