



# The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

£3.25



**Inside:**

- Securing a future for Turtle Doves
- A wild goose chase with a difference
- Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project

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# The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

Spring 2015 Magazine No.180

John Grant and Steve Piotrowski

## Editorial

Acting as guest editors for this issue of The Harrier has rolled back the years for us old-timers. We last worked together in this capacity way back in the 1980s when we would slave over a rather primitive word processor operated by our glamorous assistant Reg Clarke to fill the publication with the ornithological events of the day. The material was often irreverent but never, we thought, irrelevant. It was great fun and teaming up again as co-editors for this issue has also given us a few laughs.

But - and it is a pretty big but - just as there were some troubling conservation issues bubbling away in the 1980s, so there are today. One in particular must be uppermost in many SOG members' minds - the illegal persecution of British birds of prey. Horror stories continue to emerge from the grouse moors of upland Britain and the shooting estates of the lowlands. We have all no doubt celebrated the high-profile convictions of the perpetrators of some truly indefensible wildlife crimes - Britain's first custodial sentence for the persecution of raptors being meted out to gamekeeper

George Mutch being a case in point. Mutch was jailed for four months at Aberdeen Sheriff Court for bludgeoning to death a goshawk he'd caught in a cage-style trap on the Kildrummy Estate in Aberdeenshire. A second goshawk and a common buzzard were also caught - as was Mutch who was caught on RSPB video footage killing the doomed creature and carrying off the others in a sack, probably to suffer a similar fate. Thankfully, Mutch got the sack too.



Hot on the heels of Mutch's sentence came the first prosecution under Scotland's new vicarious liability legislation. At Stranraer Sheriff Court, landowner Ninian Robert Hathorn Johnston Stewart pleaded guilty to being vicariously liable for the criminal actions of Glasserton and Physgill Estates' gamekeeper Peter Bell, who was convicted in 2013 of laying poisoned bait which killed a common buzzard and for the possession of three banned pesticides. Bell was fined £4,450 and expelled from his gamekeepers' association and the estates were similarly kicked out of their landowners' association. Despite his conviction, Stewart was fined only a paltry £675, but at least it appears some progress is being made north of the border.

Closer to home, in a notorious case, Allen Lambert was found guilty of killing of 10 common buzzards and a sparrowhawk, and possession of pesticides and items used to prepare poison baits, on the Stody Estate near Holt in north Norfolk when he worked there as a gamekeeper. The RSPB, whose investigations unit doggedly pursues such horrific crimes, described it as the worst case of bird poisoning ever detected in England. Norwich magistrates gave Lambert a 10-week jail term suspended for a year and he had to pay £930 prosecution costs.

Also in neighbouring Norfolk came the tragic tale of a little bustard illegally shot dead and found on a road near Blofield in January. How many of us would have loved to have twitched it? Alas, we were deprived the opportunity to enjoy this much sought-after vagrant because someone pulled a trigger. We do not know the circumstances of this one – and we probably never will, but a likely scenario is that the poor wretch of a bird was mistaken for a pheasant. If that was the case, perhaps it raises the question of eyesight and identification tests being brought in for shooters!

We could go on – and on – recounting other horrors. Social media now seems full of very disturbing reports. But the fear is, of course, that the cases that come to the RSPB's attention are only the tip of a particularly unpleasant iceberg. Worryingly, the most recent RSPB bird crime review, covering 2013, reveals the investigations unit received 69 reports of wild bird crime in the eastern region – Suffolk, Essex, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Lincolnshire – involving 45 birds of prey. That's 14% of the UK's incidents, making the east the second-worst area after the north of England.



So where does SOG figure in the battle against all this repugnant – and, let's not forget, illegal – persecution? Well, each and every member of SOG can be very proud of the group's involvement in the establishment of the Campaign Against Raptor Persecution (CARP). The group led the setting up of CARP, which has the highly acclaimed wildlife writer Simon Barnes as its patron.

At its launch at The Cut, Halesworth, last autumn, Simon told the audience the campaign was not opposed to shooting, which was a legal activity, but it was “anti-breaking the law” and the persecution of birds of prey was “against the law and is immoral”.

CARP has taken a pragmatic approach, and one that is strictly non-adversarial. Whatever SOG members may think about shooting – and some find it extremely distasteful – such an approach must offer the best chance of co-operation from the East Anglian shooting estates and the possibility of at least a reduction in raptor persecution in our particular area.

The campaign has put the ball in the estates' court. Bearing SOG stalwart Ed Keeble's eye-catching logo, letters are being sent to the estates with the suggestion that they sign up to become “raptor-friendly”.

The letter states: “When farmers plant peas they accept that the crop will attract birds. Damage is minimised by using gas-guns, bangers, scarecrows and other deterrents. This is perfectly legal. However, farmers are realistic and accept that whatever deterrents they use, some of the crop will still be lost or damaged. The same principle should apply when thousands of gamebirds are released for shooting. Such an abundance of food is bound to attract predators, but it has to be accepted that efforts to reduce losses must stay within the law.”

It outlines the campaign's aims as:

- To encourage landowners in East Anglia to sign up and publicly state that they are a "Raptor-Friendly Estate"
- To encourage landowners to co-exist with raptors within the law
- To encourage landowners to make it clear to staff, and to those shooting on their land, that law breaking will not be tolerated and no fines will be paid by the landowner on behalf of those accused and convicted of wildlife crimes
- To encourage gamekeepers to be members of responsible organisations such as British Association for Shooting and Conservation and/or National Gamekeepers' Organisation and promote acceptable practices in their profession. A clause to this effect could be included in the Contract of Employment for new employees
- To encourage landowners to ensure that chemicals and poisons are managed in accordance with COSHH regulations
- Provide good-quality training and guidance to staff on what are acceptable and unacceptable practices on a "Raptor-Friendly Estate"

- Allow BTO/Raptor Study Groups access to land to monitor birds of prey.

So, we shall see what transpires. In the meantime every SOG member can help the cause by being vigilant when they are out and about in the countryside and report any suspected wild bird crimes to the RSPB or Suffolk police. The former clearly works heroically on the issue and the latter has pledged that any such reports will be fully investigated. Another way of helping the cause is to donate to a CARP fighting fund set up by Waveney Bird Club. Cheques, payable to Suffolk Ornithologists' Group, should be sent to: Matthew Deans, SOG Treasurer, c/o 49c Oak Hill, Hollesley, Suffolk IP12 3JY

Your guest editors, together with Simon Barnes, will be attending a national conference on the issue to be held at Buxton, Derbyshire, in March and will report back to SOG. The scourge of raptor persecution perhaps may never be fully eradicated. But, as part of a group, as part of a campaign and individually, we all surely have a duty to at least try to consign it to history.

[Dead Little Bustard shot at Blofield, Norfolk – January 2015](#)



Photo: RSPB

## Securing a future for Turtle Doves

The latest State of the UK's Birds report shows that farmland birds are still on the decline and none more so than the Turtle Dove. Now the country's fastest-declining bird, its UK breeding population has plummeted by 96% since the 1970s. It is a decline so dramatic that the population is halving every six years. If it continues at this rate, the species could become extinct as a breeding bird in the UK within the next few decades. This does not leave a lot of time before our countryside loses an iconic summer voice from its musical repertoire.

As a migratory bird, Turtle Doves face a range of threats across their flyway, which takes them over 3,000 miles from their wintering grounds in West Africa to their breeding grounds here in the UK. Among these threats are loss of habitat on breeding and wintering grounds, disease, illegal killing and hunting.

### SHout - Spring Hunting Out

The hunting of Turtle Doves is permitted in several EU member states. Beyond Europe, sport hunting and functional loss of habitat through disturbance also potentially pose significant threats for birds migrating through the Maghreb, particularly in Morocco and Mauritania. The scale and impact of legal hunting and illegal killing has not yet been quantified, but the annual hunting bag total in EU member states is estimated at 2-3 million birds. If this is an accurate estimate, hunting may constitute a significant factor causing population declines. Turtle Doves have, however, long been a quarry species and it is acknowledged that hunting is not the most significant cause of the population decline. It is, of course, both sensible and responsible to limit every source of mortality until population recovery is achieved,

and consideration given to the idea of a voluntary moratorium on the hunting of this species in some parts of its range.

The EU Birds Directive is a key piece of nature legislation that seeks to protect all bird species naturally occurring in EU member states. Listed on annex II of the directive, hunting of Turtle Doves is permitted in several member states and it is a sought-after quarry species in Malta, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Austria and Portugal. These are all important staging areas for the species during migration. As members of the EU, these countries all have an obligation to protect migratory Turtle Doves in spring under the directive; however, exceptions from parts of the directive can be applied by any member state if certain conditions are met. Unfortunately, the Maltese government has allowed spring hunting and trapping of Turtle Doves almost every year since it joined the EU in 2004. But there is hope on the horizon. The Maltese Prime Minister has announced that on April 11 this year a referendum will be held on spring hunting. This is a landmark opportunity to stop, once and for all, the destruction of so many migratory birds during their spring migration and put an end to the concessions awarded to the Maltese hunting community. If the Maltese people vote to retain spring hunting, the season would be opened the day after the poll. If they vote to stop spring hunting we may just see a few more Turtle Doves returning to our shores having had the risk of hunting whilst on route removed with immediate effect.

To keep up-to-date on the referendum to abolish spring hunting visit the SHout campaign website:  
[www.springhuntingout.com](http://www.springhuntingout.com)





### UK breeding grounds

Once our migrant bird species have survived the arduous journeys of their migrations, dodging the gauntlet of hunting and pushing themselves to physical extremes to make it back to us to raise their young, what awaits them? The answer is a countryside that is increasingly unfit for their arrival, whether that's through the loss of nesting habitat, for species such as Nightingale, or loss of foraging habitat for Turtle Doves. We seem to be asking our wildlife to exist on increasingly small scraps.

Research shows that the main driver of the current decline in Turtle Doves is that adult birds are producing half the number of chicks as they were in the 1970s because of a reduction in nesting attempts. In fact, this reason alone is sufficient to explain their current rate of decline. The reduction in nesting attempts has been associated with a lack of food which is leading to birds being in poor breeding condition.

Turtle Doves naturally feed on the seeds of arable plants, with studies of their diet showing the inclusion of seeds from fumitories, stitchworts, pansies and knotgrasses. However, more recent reviews of their diet have shown a shift from arable plants to cereals over the past 40 years.

It is not yet clear whether this is a result of the general decline of arable plants - a 2007 report by Plantlife identified arable flora as the most threatened group of plants in Britain (Still, K. and Byfield, A. New Priorities for Arable Plant Conservation. Plantlife, 2007). Whatever the reason, the dietary shift may be having an impact on the breeding condition of our Turtle Doves. Are they getting enough variety in their diet, enough nutritional content? Do they have to travel further, expending vital energy in the search for suitable food?

### Saving a bird on the brink

Operation Turtle Dove is a partnership involving the RSPB, Conservation Grade, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust and Natural England. Together, we aim to identify the primary causes of Turtle Dove population declines and develop urgent practical solutions.

Dedicated advisers based within core Turtle Dove breeding areas in East Anglia and the South-East engage with farmers and landowners to secure more suitable habitat for the species, in particular establishing greater amounts of foraging habitat to increase the amount of food resource available for the birds early in the breeding season and maintaining suitable nesting sites.

Researchers are using new technologies to discover more about Turtle Dove ecology and the factors operating during migration as well as on wintering and breeding grounds. Captive birds at Pensthorpe Conservation Trust have been crucial in many of the research developments.

Turtle Doves spend two-thirds of their time outside the UK so the RSPB is also working along the species' migratory flyway to co-ordinate the efforts of conservation partners in the UK, Europe and Africa. One priority for this project is to increase our understanding of the impacts of hunting on Turtle Doves. This information will help with advocacy for international action and policy change to hunting controls on flyways. We need to quantify the scale and impact of legal hunting and illegal killing, both in Europe and elsewhere, and provide information that will inform a review and update of the European Commission Management Plan for the species.

To find out more about the work of the project visit [www.operationturtledove.org](http://www.operationturtledove.org)

### What you can do

We all have to take responsibility for the choices we make and how they have wider impacts. I assume, if you are reading this article, you are a nature enthusiast, keen to protect our natural spaces and help wildlife thrive in our country. But when you are out and about doing your weekly shop do you support this with your consumer power? After all, can we blame our suppliers for not doing more if we are not asking for it? Conservation Grade are working with farmers to increase the amount of sustainable agriculture that is carried out across British farmland and to encourage people to support Fair to Nature farmers through their shopping. Shop Fair Trade? Well, start to shop Fair to Nature too and put some conservation power behind your pound. To find out more and the brands that

are Fair to Nature visit [www.conservationgrade.org](http://www.conservationgrade.org).

If you are landowner, or have a friend who is, put them in touch with your local adviser so they can work together to incorporate wildlife friendly practices into their business system.

And, simply, when you are out and about and get the great pleasure of seeing these wonderful birds, let us know. Our work relies on up-to-date information so reporting sightings is crucial. You can do this by emailing sightings to [turtledove@rspb.co.uk](mailto:turtledove@rspb.co.uk) or submitting them online using birdtrack ([www.birdtrack.co.uk](http://www.birdtrack.co.uk)).

Are you a Twitter fan? If so, you can follow the project @SaveTurtleDoves to upload sightings (who will record the first of the year?) or unusual events (like the January bird seen in Lowestoft this year). You can also tell us about your memories of Turtle Doves - we always love to hear from people and their experiences. With spring on its way, keep your eyes to the skies - you may be lucky enough to see one.

To find out more about our work to save the Turtle Dove, or if you are interested in receiving habitat advice, please contact Samantha Lee, Turtle Dove Conservation Adviser by emailing [Samantha.lee@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Samantha.lee@rspb.org.uk)

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)







John Grant

## A wild goose chase with a difference

For some birders, the arrival in Suffolk in December 2014 of four Lesser Whitefronted Geese from a Swedish conservation programme that involves captive breeding and release raised an old chestnut of a conundrum - to tick or not to tick. Some rather cynical, sniffy remarks about the birds' tickability emerged from the more narrow-minded and strictly list-orientated among us, but for many observers it was more a case of simply enjoying the quartet during their Suffolk sojourn. The occurrence also highlighted the marvels of modern technology - one of the geese was fitted with a satellite tracking device - and also enabled many of us to feel privileged to be part of such an international ornithological event.

The fascinating story began with an email sent on December 31 to the RSPB at Minsmere by the Swedish Lesser Whitefronted Goose Project. The message astonished RSPB staff as it broke the news to them that satellite tracking had shown that a Lesser Whitefronted Goose from the

project had roosted on the Scrape on the night of December 30 after having spent some time during the day on an area near Eastbridge. This one clearly had gone under the radar, so to speak, as no visitor or staff member had reported seeing it. Immediate searches of the reserve and neighbouring areas proved fruitless but on that afternoon the ever-diligent David Fairhurst relocated the goose at North Warren - and to his amazement it was accompanied by three others!

A Lesser Whitefronted Goose pen in Swedish Lapland.

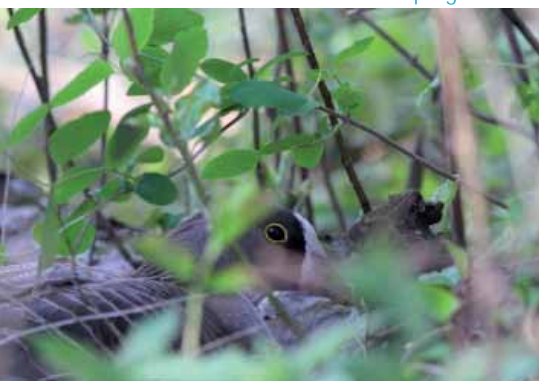
Swedish Lesser Whitefronted Goose Project



The foursome became moderately famous, prompting a mini-twitch, and satellite-gathered data showed that they frequented Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Hazlewood Marshes nature reserve and crossed over the River Alde to Sudbourne Marshes, as well as returning to North Warren at times during their brief visit to Suffolk. They were last reported by observers at the latter site at 1500hrs on January 3, but tracking data showed that they then headed out to sea over Orford Ness, in a south-easterly direction - heading for well-known goose hotspots in Belgium, where some 40,000 "ansers" were gathered. In late February they were still in Belgium, having frequented areas to the east of Bruges, just to the south of Zeebrugge and also further south-east, near Vleteren. At times they were relatively close to 25 wild Lesser Whitefronts that were wintering around Oudeland von Strijen in The Netherlands.

The Swedish Lesser Whitefronted Goose Project's director, Dr. Niklas Liljebäck, was clearly delighted by the international co-operation that was shown as events unfolded. On several occasions he emailed a small band of Suffolk observers who fed back to him information about the quartet. It became evident that the

A female Lesser Whitefronted Goose on her nest in the Swedish conservation programme



Swedish Lesser Whitefronted Goose Project



Swedish Lesser Whitefronted Goose Project

A close-up of a Lesser Whitefronted Goose fitted with a satellite tracking device.

foursome were offspring from wild-caught Lesser Whitefronted Geese that had been caught in a breeding area north of the Ural Mountains. They were released on August 1, 2014, in the breeding area of wild Lesser Whitefronts in Swedish Lapland.

Dr Liljebäck, who is based in Nyköping, Sweden, wrote: "Unfortunately, this flock lost contact with their wild conspecifics early and went to the Norwegian coast. The flock contains birds of three different broods and the constellation of sexes makes this flock highly interesting for us. If they are able to come back to the breeding area in Sweden they may become a valuable recruitment to the wild population. From my colleagues that have had the privilege to have visited Minsmere, I have understand that the birds could not have chosen a better place to take a break or spend the winter."

Hear, hear to that. And as for the "to-tick-or-not-to-tick" question, who knows? More to the point, in the grand scheme of things, when we've been privileged to have been part of such a great story, what does it matter?

## UK House Martin Survey 2015

The primary aim of the UK House Martin Survey 2015 will be to produce an estimate of the current UK House Martin population size, using a method that is repeatable to enable us to measure future population changes. A secondary aim will be to collect further information about nest site selection so that we can undertake some analyses to investigate whether any regional differences exist.

It is anticipated that the survey will be complemented by an additional survey in 2016, which will involve the collection of more detailed information about nest characteristics and timing of nesting activity (a 'nest study'). This is expected to be an online survey with volunteers selecting their own sites.

### The 2015 Survey

The 2015 survey requires three visits to be carried out, a 'recce visit' in mid to late May, followed by two survey visits in June/July. These are timed to coincide with the peak breeding period when most first broods are being fed and before the young have fledged. Our pilot work showed that once first broods had fledged, it became more difficult to work out how many nests were apparently occupied.

The key survey dates in 2015 will be: March-May, square request system available to potential volunteers, online allocation of survey squares to volunteers; mid to late May, 'recce' visit; June 1 to June 24, first survey visit; June 25 to July 19, second survey visit; October 31, deadline for online and return of paper forms to the BTO headquarters at The Nunnery, Thetford.

The UK House Martin Survey is an online survey and we hope that the vast majority

of volunteers will be able to print out their own forms and input the survey results online. However, we do not wish to exclude potential volunteers who do not have online access so please contact me (details below) so that I can organise paper forms and allocate squares online via the national organiser.

The survey design involves the selection of random 1km squares, using a stratified sample in order to produce robust population estimates. The stratification is based on land cover data, which has been analysed using Bird Atlas 2007-11 counts, to categorise the squares into high, medium and low habitat quality for breeding House Martins. All 1km squares without suitable habitat have been excluded (i.e. no farm buildings at all). However, there are a number of 1km squares with only a few buildings in them so it is hoped that fieldworkers will take on additional squares.

A 'recce' visit will be most useful in squares where access issues are likely, where there is a large number of buildings, or where there are known colonies. If there is only a small number of buildings and the visits are likely to be short, a 'recce' visit may not be necessary prior to the first survey visit.

Photo: Jon Evans





Photo: Bill Baston

If no House Martins are found, either during the 'recce' visit or the first survey visit, and there are no signs that House Martins have recently used the square, a second main survey visit is not necessary. The following conditions need to be met for this to apply:

- A visit took place on or after June 1
- The volunteer is confident that she/he thoroughly covered all potential House Martin nesting habitat within the square
- No House Martins were seen or heard during either the 'recce' or the first visit
- No signs of former nesting were seen in the square (i.e. old nests or nest deterrents).

A second survey visit is desirable if the square contains a large number of buildings, even if it appears unlikely that any House Martins are present. In this situation, it will more be difficult to be certain that no House Martins have been missed during the first visit and therefore a second visit will help ensure that our results are robust.

Recording Sheets and instructions for volunteers:

- Map of the survey square (one copy of the map is required for all three visits)

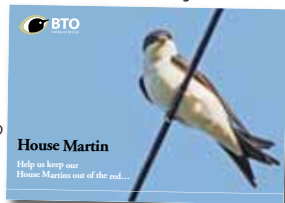
- Visit summary form (one copy is needed for the two main survey visits)
- Colony information form (one or more copies will be required for the two main survey visits, depending on the number of colonies found in the square)
- A copy of the summary instructions and codes.

Copies of these forms will be available to print from the House Martin pages on the BTO website. The survey map is specific to the selected 1km square and will only be available when the volunteer has been allocated a square and has logged in to his/her House Martin survey home page.

Volunteers will also be able to view online, and print full instructions, a full list of survey codes, health and safety advice for volunteer fieldworkers, additional guidance about surveying in residential areas, a letter of introduction confirming your participation in the survey and an information leaflet to hand out to members of the public. Health and safety guidelines for all BTO volunteers can be found at <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/taking-part/health-safety>

In Suffolk, we have about 100 1km squares to survey. We require your help to make this survey a success so please contact with me or request a 1km square online.

In addition, I am able to allocate survey squares to volunteers using the BTO Survey Management Portal. Potential volunteers will be able to view the map of available squares on the BTO website and submit a request to cover an available square. This request will generate an email to myself, the regional organiser. I can be contacted on 01473 721486, email [kupe1515@sky.com](mailto:kupe1515@sky.com)





## Serins at Landguard

There are 26 Serin records in the files at Landguard Bird Observatory. Autumn singles were noted on November 2, 1980, and August 24, 1987, but since then all records from 1992 to 2014 have been in spring with arrival dates from March 16 to July 7. All are records of singles on one day except for records from May 3 to 5, 2006, plus an intermittent long-stayer, presumed to be the same individual by its habits, noted on April 30, May 11 to June 4 and June 25 to July 11, 2012. Of all the records, 31% have been in the last five days of April and the first five days of May. Many birds do not stay on site for long or are easily lost for some time as they feed on the short turf areas of the nature reserve.

Records at Landguard account for about half of the Suffolk total and this is entirely down to the auditory skills of the finders, with the bulk of birds found by the same few observers. There is also a bias for records elsewhere in Suffolk found by a limited number of observers, so extra vigilance by other members of the Suffolk birding community may pay dividends. Singing birds are poorly represented in the Landguard records but Serin has a very diagnostic trilling flight call, which it issues almost continuously. Perched birds have also been heard making this diagnostic call whilst remaining hidden in the reserve's Holm Oaks before they break cover.

Listening to recordings might help observers "tune in" to the calls, but hours in the field is the best way to learn them. Unfortunately, some Landguard regulars cannot hear Serin calls even when they stand alongside others who can hear them clearly, so listening to recordings won't necessarily help.

Photo: Bill Baston



Identification pitfalls for the unwary are escaped cage birds such as Canary, *Serinus canaria*, and Yellow-fronted Canary (Green Singing Finch) *Serinus mozambicus*, although both these species' calls are different to Serin. The Serin is endemic to Europe and has long been predicted as a colonist of the UK following its well-documented spread northwards from its core area across southern Europe and around the Mediterranean (Berthold 1993). The species has bred a handful of times in southern Britain since the first confirmed nesting attempt in the late 1960s but with just two breeding attempts this century (Holling et al 2009) colonisation of Suffolk no longer looks the certainty it once seemed, despite the warming climate.

Refs:

Berthold, P. 1993. Bird Migration - A General Survey. Oxford University Press. p.6-7.

Holling, M. & the Rare Breeding Birds Panel. 2009.

Rare Breeding Birds in the United Kingdom 2006.

British Birds 102 : p.197.





Photo: Nick Moran

A female Lesser-spotted Woodpecker at Santon Downham in January 2015, proving that the species still exists in Suffolk - but only just

Steve Noble

## The Lesser-spotted Woodpecker in Suffolk

The comment in Suffolk Birds 2013 that there “there may well be less than five breeding pairs left in Suffolk” seems to be unduly pessimistic. My own experience is that this unobtrusive species is generally only seen through chance encounters and, while it has clearly suffered a catastrophic decline in recent years, I would argue that a significant number are probably still being missed. None, for example, were reported at all in the well-watched south-east recording area of Suffolk in 2009, yet we know they were there since they were reported in subsequent years. Again, none were recorded in the Orwell Estuary area in 2004, and yet there are several records since. There are also significant swathes of the county that receive very little coverage

from birders, and while some sightings can perhaps be put down to chance encounters with wandering individuals, it is also likely that some are indicative of resident birds that have simply remained undiscovered.

As far as I am aware, there is also no information on the relationship between the level of reporting and the actual population size. We can, for example, surmise that numbers have declined if the numbers of reports have declined, but we do not know what percentage of the population is being reported at any one time. Even when the species was not uncommon, how many were being seen and/or reported? With obvious species such as swans, it is relatively easy to come up with a population figure

in which we can have a lot of confidence. With more unobtrusive species, there is an unknown section of the population that is always 'missed', and this may possibly increase as the range becomes more fragmented and unpredictable. Conversely, as species become rarer, reporting rates may also rise!

It is interesting to review the records of Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers submitted to Suffolk Birds for the last ten seasons, and to group them into geographic 'clumps' of records (hopefully this is not too arbitrary). That way the apparent 'refuges' of this attractive little bird become more apparent. Birds that 'disappear' from some of these broad localities for several years and then 'reappear' may have been there all along – though perhaps at another wood just down the road! It is also worth bearing in mind that a number of the clusters are along county boundaries and it is possible that records for 'missing' years may be found over the border.

Populations appear to persist on both sides of the Orwell Estuary, and in the Stour Valley area west of the A12. It is possible that a pair or two may be hanging on in the Woodbridge area, around Snape and in parts of the Waveney Valley, but there have been no records from the Gipping Valley for five years. In the west of the county, populations remain around Lackford Lakes, Bury St Edmunds, Lakenheath and Santon Downham. My personal guess is that we still have between 10 and 20 pairs living in the County. Hopefully!

(Some readers may find Steve's assessment a little optimistic, but let's hope it inspires other observers to search diligently for this enigmatic species. If any individuals are found, records should be submitted to the relevant area recorder, of course. Comments on the status of this species would be welcome too – write in to The Harrier to let other members know what you think – Eds)

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## Forthcoming SOG Rookery Survey

As this Harrier is being published just before the start of the forthcoming SOG Rookery Survey in April, this is a plea for members to participate in the project.

A recording form could be found in the last edition of The Harrier and further downloadable forms, along with details about the survey, are on the SOG website - <http://www.sogonline.org.uk/sog-rookery-survey-2015/>

Some volunteers have already earmarked areas they wish to survey, including Newmarket, Haughley, Bucklesham, Martlesham and the square bounded by Yoxford, Westleton, Leiston and Saxmundham.

Photo: John Evans



## Suffolk's Mr Lister rises again

Pacific Swift – New to Suffolk, May/June 2013

Photo: Jon Richardson



It seemed like a good idea at the time. Now it seems as if we created a bit of a monster that rose, Frankenstein-like, with life-giving lightning bolts provided by Suffolk birders' competitive nature, their rather anorak propensity for keeping lists and, more importantly, their sense of fun.

Way back in 1987, when I was editing "The SOG Bulletin" as The Harrier was called then, filling one particular edition was proving to be something of a challenge. As our deadline approached, I recall some ominous blank pages staring at me and my production colleagues – or partners in crime, more like – Steve Piotrowski and Reg Clarke. Then we had a brainwave, inspired by Suffolk's famous three Great Bustards. It was a case of three Great Bustards sparking into action three old bustards. We stumbled on the idea of "Mr Lister" – who had the most species on their Suffolk life list, we wondered. What a great way to unite the Suffolk birding community in a bit of harmless fun, we thought. More to the point, what a great way of filling those blank pages.

So we set out on an SOG quest to track down Suffolk's Mr Lister (We weren't so enlightened in those days. Of course, nowadays we'd embrace a Miss, Ms or Mrs Lister with open arms, err, so to speak). The result was not just an entertaining way of filling a few bulletin pages. The idea really caught on and provided the raw material for many an animated discussion (and perhaps a row or two....remember the "Corncrake" at Martlesham?) among observers in the field, or more often than not, in the pub after a hard day's birding.

Looking back at the first coronation of the King of Suffolk Birders, which took place in the July, August and September issue of the bulletin in 1988 after the submission of many a list, my write-up described the whole process as an "unashamedly flippant piece of bulletin space-filling". However, almost 27 years on, it's a fascinating read. Some big listers of yesteryear are sadly no longer with us, some old stagers are still going strong – and Suffolk's list of birds has soared to heights that back then could barely have been predicted.

I just squeezed into the first “top five” to be published – with a total of 283, which was said to be “very credible” for a “recent immigrant from the South Coast”. In joint third place, on 289, were Steve Piotrowski and the late, very great, Derek Moore. In second place was a young and dashing “Marvellous Mickey” Marsh with 290, a total that back then did not include “sitters” such as Red-crested Pochard and Montagu’s Harrier. But the Mr Lister crown was taken by, as I said then, “the wiry figure with the hunted stoop to his walk, the man upon whom the years appear to have taken not the slightest toll, the man who is brave enough to wear pyjamas when on a birding trip with his Suffolk cronies...it can only be, and it is, THE GREAT GERALDO!” It was, with 301, including Macqueen’s Bustard, Gerald Jobson, of course. What a delight it is to know that the years still do not appear to have taken the slightest toll on him.

We’ve lost dear Derek though. I can certainly attest to his love of the Mr Lister nonsense – it matched perfectly his wonderful sense of humour. He revelled in it. And so, perhaps as some form of tribute to him, how about us reviving Mr Lister in The Harrier? It’s pretty clear that King Steve Piotrowski now, rather appropriately, commands “Pole” position but what about the rest of us – how are the old-timers faring in the face of challenges from the upstarts among us?

It may have felt like the creation of Frankenstein all those years ago – it really did get very competitive at one stage – but let’s have a bit of fun with it again. Submit your Suffolk life lists to The Harrier via the SOG website under the “contact” heading. Enter your total, your highlights and any glaring omissions, and at some stage in the future we will re-visit this “unashamedly flippant” piece of Harrier “space-filling”.

Sandhill Crane – Suffolk’s Bird of the Century, October 2011



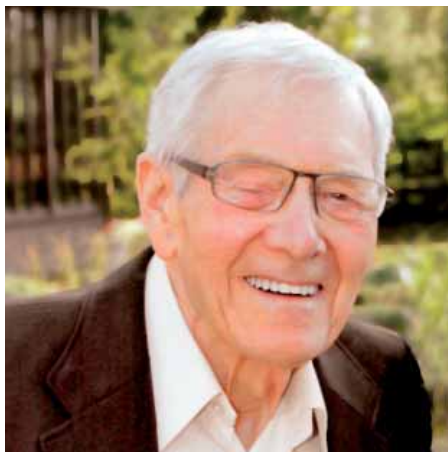
Photo: Dave Hermon

## Ken Garrod, 1926-2015

I first met Ken and his wife Jean on an SOG field trip in the late 1970s. They were both very keen birdwatchers and SOG supporters. I was then a relative newcomer to SOG and this was the first field event that I had attended as leader. It soon became apparent that it was Jean and Ken who were the real leaders - they seemed to know everybody and their bubbly enthusiasm inspired SOG members to develop further their hobby and, most importantly, enjoy their day. I was there merely to find the birds! Jean and Ken ensured that all attendees were included and were quick to query identification points, to the delight of others on the field trip who were often afraid to speak up!

In those days, the planning of SOG field events was a bit hit and miss, so I seized on the opportunity to propose Jean as Outdoor Events Organiser with Ken working behind the scenes. Malcolm Bowling, who was then SOG Chairman, wrote to Jean inviting her to join our council and we were all delighted when she accepted. Initially, the role was split east/west between Jean and Dora Berry, both being the first women SOG council members. The role was soon amalgamated with Jean looking after the whole county. For the next 30 years, Jean and Ken worked tirelessly planning events, organising the printing of the programme card and taking numerous telephone calls from SOG members enquiring about field trips or just ringing for a chat. Their friendly, inclusive, all-embracing approach undoubtedly boosted SOG's membership.

During the early 1980s, Ken was working for Eastern Counties Farmers at Ipswich Docks and he introduced us to his work colleague, Barry Lawson, a birdwatcher who had just moved down from the West Midlands. Barry was fresh from organising events for the West Midland Bird Club and Ken saw his potential for him to help SOG. Barry's recruitment led to the birth of a regular and very professional indoor events programme. Initially, events were held at Suffolk College in Ipswich, but we also spread our wings and hosted bird evenings at Snape Maltings, Kelsale, Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds. Jean and Ken were regular attendees and always formed the welcoming committee at the door of every show.



Jean and Ken were very much part of Suffolk's birdwatching scene and, like many others, were keen to see any rarities that visited the county. Few of us "old-school" birders will ever forget the events of January 1987! Suffolk experienced a snowfall of truly monstrous proportions, the A14 was blocked for days by snowdrifts and the Port of Felixstowe was brought to a

standstill, but the birdwatching had to go on and, in particular, the monthly WeBS counts. Rumours began to circulate that a group of Great Bustards had been seen by a shooting party at Harkstead and then three were noted on a WeBS count at Kirton. Despite the treacherous weather conditions, the hunt was on and Jean and Ken joined the search party to locate the birds. They must have travelled along every country lane and scanned every single



rape field in south-east Suffolk but, despite regular reported sightings, few of us birders managed to catch up with the birds! It was amazingly frustrating because as soon as they were spotted they took flight and flew vast distances, only to be lost again. Then came a report that the bustards had been relocated in south Norfolk. Jean was keen to go, but Ken was exhausted. "Not another wild goose chase," he said – "no way!" Jean cadged a lift with Bill Plumb and saw the birds, but this caused great consternation in the Garrod household. In fact, Ken was so upset about being "gripped off" by his wife that he had to visit his doctor to deal with the stress! Needless to say, the birds were eventually pinned down at Theberton nearly a month after the initial sightings and Jean and Ken were the first people I took to see the birds.

Jean and Ken were ever-present on SOG field events, but in the 1990s Ken's health began to deteriorate. He had a triple heart bypass, a pacemaker fitted and then a biventricular pacemaker. Despite these difficulties, he

maintained his wonderful sense of humour, always smiling and always a joy to be with. I often teased him about his pacemaker, saying: "Ken, SOG's bionic-man, we have the technology, we can rebuild him." I even published a note in The Harrier saying that his turbo-charged pacemaker would whisk him to the birds in a flash! I will treasure my memories of Ken, those wonderful SOG boat trips to Havergate Island and Orfordness, the afternoon teas at his home in Foxhall Road, Ipswich, and the regular Friday evenings at Fagbury Cliff and the Trimley Marshes nature reserve. Ken, together with Jean, was jointly given the honour of becoming SOG Vice-Presidents in 2006. In August 2014, they celebrated 65 years of marriage, a magnificent achievement, but sadly Ken's health had already taken a turn for the worse and he spent his last year in Bucklesham Grange Care Home, where Jean visited him every day. His death is a great loss to Suffolk birding and he will be sorely missed by us all. Our thoughts go to Jean and his family.

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Steve Piotrowski

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## Malcolm Forbes, 1945- 2014

It is with a smile and deep fondness that we shall always remember the formidable figure and bellowing deep voice of Malcolm Forbes. He regularly visited the Suffolk coast and spent much of his time birdwatching from the hides at Minsmere. He was without doubt an extremely popular member of the Suffolk birdwatching scene.

I got to know Malcolm in the mid 1980s when he was part of a group nicknamed "The Covehithe Cruisers" who were pioneering seawatching activities off Suffolk. Prior to this period, records of seabirds such as Sooty Shearwater were almost non-existent, limited to one or two sightings annually. However, Malcolm and his group set about changing the concept that coastal

Suffolk was a "seabird-free zone"! He regularly joined other SOG seawatchers such as John Cawston, Stuart Ling, Dale Newton and Roger Walsh at the end of the road that suddenly disappeared over Covehithe Cliffs to mount a vigil and record seabird movements. As a result, seabirds such as Sooty Shearwater and Long-tailed Skua are now known to be regular migrants as they move through Suffolk inshore waters, sometimes in significant numbers.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Malcolm lived in Reydon and would be a familiar figure around the Southwold area. He had an impressive garden bird list, which included Crane, Wryneck and Serin. A Bee-eater that frequented Reydon Smeare for

five days in July 1988 was watched daily by Malcolm during its stay and he proudly directed the hundreds of twitchers that had come to view this stunning bird that was way off course from its more southerly breeding area. I think he had hoped that it would follow him home and he could add yet another great bird to his already enviable garden list.

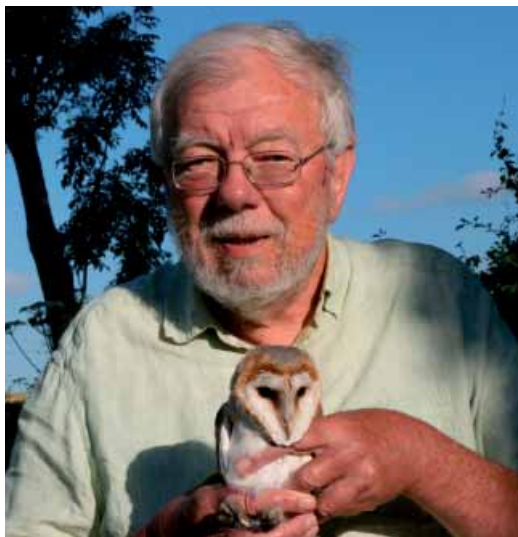
Like most active birders of the 1980s, Malcolm went "a-twitching" with his many friends, sharing the excitement of racing off to far-flung places such as Cornwall, Scilly and Islay to see new birds. Over the years, he meticulously and proudly built up his Suffolk list and kept up with the bird news outlets. In recent years, he became a regular contributor to Twitter. New technology wasn't going to beat Malcolm!

As the original Honorary Secretary of Waveney Bird Club, we thank Malcolm for helping the club during those early pioneering days and for helping it become the success that it is today.

Barn Owls, I have to say though, were one of his biggest passions and when he heard about the Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project he was one of the first to buy a box and fix it onto a very special oak tree on the boundary to his paddock. I personally monitor many boxes every year, but always enjoyed my visits to Malcolm and Ann's, who were often accompanied by their family, and joined them for a sociable beer or glass of wine – it became one of my favourite visits each year. Much to Malcolm's delight his box hosted Barn Owls every year and Tawny Owls sometimes used it earlier in the season as well.

Malcolm and his family were immensely proud of their Barn Owls and, on one very warm and sultry midsummer evening, they hosted a party during which the chicks were ringed in front of many very enthusiastic and appreciative Waveney Bird Club members. There was much fun and laughter and we will never forget that evening. We have some wonderful photographs of Malcolm and Ann together with their children Simon, Sarah and Hannah each holding a Barn owl chick.

Malcolm had suffered from ME for a long period of his life, which was very difficult for him. When my wife Kathy was diagnosed with the same disease he became a great confidante and support to her, for which



she will always be grateful. On top of the ME, Malcolm was so cruelly diagnosed with cancer. This was, of course, devastating for him but, from our chats, we truly believe that it was his love for Ann and deep pride in all his children that made him determined to battle against the disease. Through the treatment he did enjoy a brief period of

remission. It was during this time and with great delight that Hannah gave him a beautiful granddaughter, Esme, whom he adored.

Sadly, when we met last October, Malcolm told me that his cancer had returned and he only had six months to live. It turned out to be less than two months and, in late November 2014, we lost a great friend and fellow birder. Our thoughts are with his wife Ann, and his family

## Winter 2014/2015, with Suffolk BINS

### November 2014

The month started with both **Ravens** showing well at Gedgrave Marshes. A first-winter **Red-backed Shrike** that was first seen 27<sup>th</sup> September was last reported on 9<sup>th</sup> and the Framsdén **Hoopoe** was last seen on 2<sup>nd</sup>.

On 2<sup>nd</sup>, a **Richard's Pipit** was flushed from long grass at Butley Ferry, an adult **Iceland Gull** was seen briefly on Minsmere's East Scrape before flying north and a **Great White Egret** remained on the reserve's Island Mere for most of the month.

A **Purple Heron** (or aberrant-plumaged **Grey Heron**) was seen on North Warren's South Marsh on 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> and again on 18<sup>th</sup> but was elusive throughout. An adult **Black Brant** was present amongst the **Dark-bellied Brent Geese** flock at Levington Creek on 4<sup>th</sup> and Sudbourne on 8<sup>th</sup>.

Strong northerly winds produced several **Little Auks** off our coast on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. **Grey Phalaropes** were seen on the Stour Estuary from 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> and one flew south past Minsmere on 10<sup>th</sup>.

A distant **Scoter sp.**, initially thought to be **Common**, was present on the Stour Estuary at Stutton Ness on 3<sup>rd</sup>. However, closer scrutiny on 5<sup>th</sup> resulted in confirmation of Suffolk's first **SURF SCOTER** - a great find by SOG stalwart Ed Keeble. Thankfully, the bird remained into 2015 allowing county-listers to add this species to their ever-growing tallies. Other birds frequenting this estuary included **Great Northern Diver**, **Velvet Scoter** and **Slavonian** and **Black-necked Grebes**.

Two **DESERT WHEATEARS** were found at Links Road, Lowestoft, and on Gorleston seafront on 5<sup>th</sup>. The Lowestoft individual was a stunning first-winter male that performed impeccably along the sea wall until 9<sup>th</sup> and the Gorleston bird was a female that also showed well to an army of admirers until 14<sup>th</sup>. These two individuals became the fourth and fifth county

records with previous sightings being Landguard 1987 and Easton Bavents 1990 and 2008.

A late **Yellow-browed Warbler** was present by the sewage works at Southwold on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. Highlights from Minsmere on 10<sup>th</sup> included two **Ravens** flying south, a **Long-eared Owl** and a **Grey Phalarope** that flew south offshore. A **Rough-legged Buzzard** was noted on 11<sup>th</sup> and a **Shorelark** graced the Scrape on 12<sup>th</sup>.

Also on 12<sup>th</sup> an adult **Glaucous Gull** was offshore from Landguard and the single **Shorelark** at Benacre was joined by two further birds that remained throughout the month, commuting to and from nearby Covehithe Broad.

A late **House Martin** was seen over Westleton on 13<sup>th</sup> and a **Swift sp.** was spotted over Butley on the same day. A probable **Storm Petrel** was seen offshore from Minsmere on 14<sup>th</sup>.

A juvenile **BLACK STORK** dropped into SWT's Trimley Marshes for a couple of hours on the afternoon of 15<sup>th</sup> and was briefly seen the next morning before it was flushed by paragliders. This must have been the same individual that flew over Hazelwood Marsh on 17<sup>th</sup> and then south-east over Bradwell on 24<sup>th</sup>.

Both **DUSKY WARBLER** and **HUME'S WARBLER** were found at Hollesley RSPB reserve and Bawdsey Quay respectively with the Dusky staying until 18<sup>th</sup> and the Hume's to 17<sup>th</sup>, although the latter was very elusive. Further **DUSKY WARBLERS** were found at Felixstowe (opposite Customs House) from 16-20<sup>th</sup> and Boyton on 20<sup>th</sup>.

There were several sightings of **Short-eared Owls** throughout the month with the highest count being an exceptional ten at Gedgrave Marsh 17<sup>th</sup>. It was also encouraging to see several **Hen Harriers** reported this month.

More **Waxwings** were reported with a single along Artillery Way, Lowestoft, on 19<sup>th</sup> being joined by two others to remain until 23<sup>rd</sup>, and five at Creting St. Mary on 24<sup>th</sup>.

There were one or two small flocks of **Snow Buntings** along the coast with 26 at Slaughden being the highest count. Up to four **Spoonbills** were seen in the Gedgrave/Orfordness area late in the month.

A **Little Stint** took up its winter residence on Trimley Marshes from 23<sup>rd</sup>. Two **Great White Egrets** were seen at Lakenheath towards the end of the month. Two **Common Cranes** were seen over Shadingfield then over Island Mere, Minsmere, on the 27<sup>th</sup>. A redhead Smew was present on Covehithe Broad from 27-30<sup>th</sup>.

The first **Tundra Bean Geese** of the winter appeared from 22<sup>nd</sup> with two birds on North Marsh, North Warren. A **Lapland Bunting** was south of Corton sewage works on 30<sup>th</sup>, an **Osprey** flew south over Orfordness, a late **Northern Wheatear** was at East Lane and finally the adult **Black Brant** was once again seen in Thorpe Bay, on the Orwell Estuary.

## December 2014

The first-winter drake **Surf Scoter** remained on the Stour Estuary throughout the month and the three **Shorelarks** continued to show well along the beach between Benacre and Covehithe all month. Nine **Tundra Bean Geese** were present on Minsmere Levels on 3<sup>rd</sup>; the same day also produced a **Lesser Whitethroat sp.** that was heard calling in an Alderton garden late in the day and a **Great Grey Shrike** was seen on Berner's Heath, Elveden.

A confident **Black-throated Diver** was present on small pools east of Little Dingle Hill, Dunwich, on 4<sup>th</sup> and a **Grey Phalarope** was on the East Scrape at Minsmere on 4-5<sup>th</sup>. A juvenile **Great Northern Diver** took up residence on Benacre Broad from 5-18<sup>th</sup>.

A skein of 14 **Tundra Bean Geese** was seen over Orfordness on 6<sup>th</sup> and what was presumably the same flock, but now grown to 16 birds, settled on North Warren from mid-month.

The lack of any really cold weather meant that diving ducks were virtually non-existent. However, a redhead **Smew** spent most of the month on Covehithe Broad and a female **Goosander** was on Alton Water on 8<sup>th</sup>.

Adult **Black Brants** were seen at Kingsfleet (Deben Estuary) and Chelmodiston on 9<sup>th</sup>, at Levington Creek 18<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> (Orwell Estuary). Six **Pink-footed Geese** were present in fields at Micklemere, Ixworth, from 10<sup>th</sup> until the month's end. The **Snow Bunting** flock at Slaughden grew to 55+ birds.

Two **Trumpeter Swans** were discovered at Boyton Marsh on 13<sup>th</sup> and caused some debate, being well twitched by locals and birders from further afield. These beautiful birds remained into the New Year. A good number of **Snow Bunting** and **Twite** were present by Dunwich Shore Pools from mid-month with 60 and 50 birds been seen respectively. A **Great White Egret** remained at Lakenheath Fen from 13-16<sup>th</sup>.

A **Great Grey Shrike** was present at Santon Downham, favouring a small reedbed downstream from the bridge from 16<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>. Four **Jack Snipe** were present on the saltings at the Trimley Managed Retreat from 16<sup>th</sup>.

A **Great White Egret** was seen at Burgh Castle on 14<sup>th</sup> and then south over Kessingland on 20<sup>th</sup> before landing at the shore pools at Dunwich. Good numbers of **Bewick's Swans** were seen to come in off the sea with the peak count being c.100 at Benacre 29<sup>th</sup>. An adult Whooper Swan was present at Kingsfleet from 19<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>.

A drake **Green-winged Teal** was on Orfordness 21<sup>st</sup>. A **Lapland Bunting** was present on the practice green at Southwold golf course on 26<sup>th</sup> and finally 20 **Waxwing** were noted over Weyland Road, Witnesham, on 30<sup>th</sup>.

A **Lesser Whitefronted Goose** fitted with a Swedish transmitter was present near Eastbridge on 30<sup>th</sup>, then on the New Cut before roosting on Minsmere Scrape that evening. The presence of this bird had been detected by satellite tracking and it had not been observed in the field. However, the following day a flock of four **Lesser White-fronted Geese** (all colour-ringed) was discovered on North Warren's North Marsh, including the individual fitted with the transmitter!

Finally, a first-winter **Glaucous Gull** made a late appearance on Oulton Broad on 31<sup>st</sup>.

## January 2015

Overcast and blustery conditions welcomed those who took part in the New Year's bird-race. That said, some good birds were seen on the 1<sup>st</sup> with the highlights mainly being left-overs from 2014. These included the **Surf Scoter** on the Stour Estuary, which remained throughout the month, along with three well-watched **Shorelarks** at Covehithe. A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** returned to Oulton on the evenings of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> and seven **Tundra Bean Geese** kept company with the four **Lesser Whitefronted Geese** until the latter departed on the evening of 3<sup>rd</sup> to be tracked in Belgium the next day.

The feeding station at Dunwich encouraged flocks of 63 **Snow Bunting** and 97 **Twite** respectively. Redhead **Smews** at Minsmere and Covehithe remained all month, as did the overwintering **Little Stint** at Trimley Marshes.

Several **Ravens** were sighted, mainly in the south of the county - firstly over Butley Priory on 3<sup>rd</sup>, at least two birds over Boyton Marsh on 4<sup>th</sup>, a single north over Bawdsey Hall the same day and finally a single bird south over Botany Marsh, Snape, on 11<sup>th</sup>.

Two **Black Brants** were seen on numerous occasions throughout the month on the Orwell Estuary. Several **Short-eared Owls** were reported, the highest count being four from both Orford on 6<sup>th</sup> and Havergate on 26<sup>th</sup> and it was rather pleasing to note an increase in the number of **Hen Harriers**.

A **Lesser Whitethroat** was an unexpected find along the disused rail track at North Warren on 4<sup>th</sup> as was the **European Turtle Dove** at Hubbards Loke, Gunton, from 24-26<sup>th</sup>.

Despite the weather, a small number of **Waxwings** made it to Suffolk. The largest flock was four mobile birds that frequented roadside mistletoe in Ipswich on 29<sup>th</sup>, this flock increasing to six birds from 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. Other **Waxwing** sightings included two birds in Lowry Way, Lowestoft, on 23<sup>rd</sup> and singles birds south over Kessingland 25<sup>th</sup> and on Dunwich Road, Blythburgh, on 31<sup>st</sup>.

It was a good month for **Pomarine Skuas** with several reported from various points along the coastline - the largest group involved four birds off Thorpeness on 26<sup>th</sup>, otherwise it was mainly single birds being noted.

In the "wild west" of the county, a **Great Grey Shrike** spent the month at Santon Downham, also a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** was seen here. Other sightings in the west included a very impressive flock of up to 160 **Tree Sparrows** at Ampton village, a first-winter **Glaucous Gull** in pig fields near Great Livermere on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, a **Great White Egret** at RSPB Lakenheath Fen throughout the month (two birds present from 18-26<sup>th</sup> and three birds noted on 27<sup>th</sup>), c.300 **Bewick's Swans** in fields at Burnt Fen, Lakenheath, on 12<sup>th</sup>, nearby 22 **Corn Buntings** at Sedge Fen and finally six **Pink-footed Geese** at Micklemere throughout the month.

Along with the long-staying **Surf Scoter**, other birds of note on the Stour Estuary included **Black-necked Grebe**, up to 6 **Slavonian Grebes** and a **Great Northern Diver**.

A **Richard's Pipit** was a good find along the South Wall at Breydon on 7<sup>th</sup> and remained all month. Three **Spoonbills** were present on Havergate and occasionally wandered further afield. The highest count of **Bewick's Swan** at Blythburgh was 36 and **Whooper Swans** were at Belton Marshes (three), Peto's Marsh, Carlton, (ten), Minsmere (two) and Kingsfleet (two).

Away from the stronghold of the feeding station at Dunwich, 30 **Snow Bunting** were present at Slaughden 12<sup>th</sup>, three were at Landguard 12<sup>th</sup> and 11 were at Pakefield from 22<sup>nd</sup>.

A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** flew east-south-east over Castle Marshes on 6<sup>th</sup>, which was followed by further sightings on Peto's Marsh on 15-16<sup>th</sup> with two birds present on 17<sup>th</sup>, then single birds again from 18-19<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. Another first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was seen at Ellough airfield on 15-16<sup>th</sup>. Three **Greater Scaup** were present at Beccles Quay from 22<sup>nd</sup> then two birds 23<sup>rd</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> proved popular and showed well to all-comers. A probable **Glossy Ibis** was seen in flight over Breydon South Wall on 14<sup>th</sup>.



and a skein of 24 **Tundra Bean Geese** flew over Dingle Hill on 15<sup>th</sup>.

A **Black-necked Grebe** was present on Alton Water from 24<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, but the only report of **Red-necked Grebe** in the period was of a flypast off Thorpeness on 26<sup>th</sup>.

Finally, there were up to 12 **Purple Sandpipers** at Ness Point, Lowestoft, three **Water Pipit** on the shore pools at Dunwich, seven **Corn Buntings** at Lings Lane, Chelmodiston, a **Long-tailed Duck** off Minsmere and several sightings of **Firecrests**, mainly from coastal locations.

## February 2015

The first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was again noted at Ellough airfield on 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> and finally on 6<sup>th</sup>. Nearby, the two **Greater Scaups** remained at Beccles Quay until 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a single until 7<sup>th</sup> and a female Smew was found amongst Teal at Burgh Castle on 8<sup>th</sup>.

A flock of 11 **Snow Buntings** were on Pakefield Beach for most of the month.

**Waxwings** became more plentiful with the Ipswich flock, commuting between Colchester Road and Cedarwood School, Kesgrave, increasing to ten birds from 4-8<sup>th</sup>. Seven flew over Sandy Lane, Martlesham, on 5<sup>th</sup>, a first-winter female was present at Mildenhall, with seven present on 25<sup>th</sup>. In Lowestoft, three frequented Denmark Road on 11<sup>th</sup>, five were in Millennium Way on 20<sup>th</sup> and three were present the next day at the nearby Register Office.

Long-stayers included the first-winter drake **Surf Scoter** on the Stour Estuary, which was now looking rather dapper, three **Shorelarks** and redhead **Smew** in the Benacre/Covehithe area and the wintering **Little Stint** at Trimley Marshes.

The two adult **Black Brants** were seen on the Orwell Estuary at Chelmodiston Marsh from 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>, then Shotley Marsh on 8<sup>th</sup> and nearby the **Black-necked Grebe** was last seen on Alton Water on 2<sup>nd</sup>.

A **Long-eared Owl** was seen to roost in Bredfield on 6<sup>th</sup>. The 36 **Bewick's Swans** remained just south of Blythburgh and pairs of adult **Whooper Swans** were at Kingsfleet and Minsmere.

A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was seen briefly on Covehithe Broad on 8<sup>th</sup> before flying north. **Slavonian Grebes** away from the Stour Estuary are scarce these days, so one on the Alde Estuary, south of Aldeburgh Town Marshes, on 8<sup>th</sup>, was noteworthy.

The over-wintering **Great Grey Shrike** continued to show at Santon Downham all month, the same site hosting a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** on 18<sup>th</sup>. A **Great White Egret** remained at RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

Two **Shorelarks** were discovered on the beach at Shingle Street from 9-18<sup>th</sup> although they were mobile and elusive at times, and eight **Tree Sparrows** frequented feeders at Reydon Smear. The three **Spoonbills** continued to roam the coast, mainly being seen at Minsmere, North Warren and Hollesley Marsh. **Snow Buntings** remained at Dunwich with 41 birds present and six were noted at Landguard and Golf Road, Felixstowe. Two **Smews** (both redheads) were present for most of the month on Minsmere's Scrape.

A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** frequented pig fields at Rymer Barn, near Great Livermere, from 13-17<sup>th</sup> and was then joined by a third-winter **Iceland Gull** on 14-16<sup>th</sup>, a bird that came into roost each evening at nearby Lackford Lakes.

Six **Tundra Bean Geese** were noted at Ferry Farm, Sudbourne, 14<sup>th</sup>. A single **Waxwing** took up temporary residence in an Alderton garden from 14-28<sup>th</sup> and groups of three **Short-eared Owls** were noted at Belton Marshes on 8<sup>th</sup> and Benacre Sluice on 17<sup>th</sup>.

The **Richard's Pipit** remained along the South Wall at Breydon Water up to the month's end and was amazingly joined by second bird between 15-24<sup>th</sup>. A flock of 48 **Bewick's Swans** flew high over Minsmere and out to sea 18<sup>th</sup>. Two **Firecrests** were present at Landguard towards the latter part of the month.

Finally, a mobile **Great Grey Shrike** was present on Upper Hollesley Common from 23<sup>rd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> and a first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was seen on Claremount Pier, Lowestoft, from 25-28<sup>th</sup>.

# Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project – Report for 2014

Photo: Bill Baston



## Prologue

This is an update to the report on the project originally published in *The Harrier* by Hillier (2012). It describes the background to the project, the changes to the environment for the Barn Owl and brings the results up to date to the end of the 2014 breeding season.

## Introduction and Background

### The Problem

The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) has long been a familiar and much-loved Suffolk bird and country folk, especially those living in more rural areas, often still refer to it as the “white owl” or “screech owl”. Suffolk’s breeding population was estimated to be around 345 pairs in 1932, but by 1985 its numbers had dropped by 57% (Shawyer 1998). This dramatic dip in the population was largely due to the loss of grassland, which resulted in a corresponding loss of feeding opportunities. Nesting sites too were becoming few and far between as old mature trees were removed as a result of Dutch Elm disease and, in some cases, as a preventative measure to prevent crops being shaded. And many old farm buildings, which were formerly used for nest sites,

were demolished or converted to houses and offices. A survey of raptors and owls completed from 1995-1998 revealed that Barn Owl population had declined further to around 51-95 pairs (Wright 2001)

## The Two-part Solution

### 1 Agricultural changes aid partial recovery

To sustain good Barn Owl numbers there must be enough prey, year round. Field or Short-tailed Voles (*Microtus agrestis*) need a particular type of habitat - rough, tussocky grass that they can move through in tunnels and that provides their own source of food and nesting habitat. This habitat, in close proximity to a suitable nesting site, provides the ideal conditions for the owls to breed successfully.

Set-aside was introduced by the EU in 1988, a scheme that was to become compulsory in 1992. Its aim was to help reduce the large and costly surpluses produced in Europe under the guaranteed price system of the Common Agricultural Policy. Although environmental benefits were not its principal objective, it did help with the recovery of the Barn Owl as feeding opportunities

increased when new large areas of grassland (as set-aside) became available. Their cause was further helped by the introduction of agri-environment schemes such as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (1987) and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (1991). Both schemes were superseded by Environmental Stewardship in 2005 and this year will change to a new scheme again under the heading of Countryside Stewardship! There is provision within these schemes for payments to farmers who are willing to establish grassland habitats by way of grass margins at field edges, rough grassland in awkward field corners and scrub management. Such habitats are ideal for small mammals; in particular Short-tailed Voles.

## 2 Nest site provision completes the recovery

With more feeding opportunities becoming available it was time to look at the other ingredient to help re-establish a sustainable breeding population. That was the provision of nesting opportunities. The project decided to install specially designed Barn Owl nest boxes. Initially, our ambitions were quite modest as it was planned to install only 90 specially designed nest boxes during the period 2006-2011. However, the willingness and enthusiasm of landowners and of the general public was vastly underestimated and, by the end of the project's first year, around 250 boxes had been either fixed or inherited. Boxes were built using sustainable timber and the work contracted to a local charity (Special Objectives for the Local Disabled - SOLD), providing work for disabled people and later to a local prison. The boxes were installed by professional tree surgeons. By the start of this 2015 monitoring season the project was monitoring 1698 boxes, mostly in Suffolk and a few just across the county borders in Norfolk and Essex. Sites hosting good

feeding opportunities for Barn Owls were chosen such as nature reserves, farmland and community spaces such as village greens and school grounds.

By providing a connected network of good habitat and nest sites we can give them the fighting chance they need to thrive.

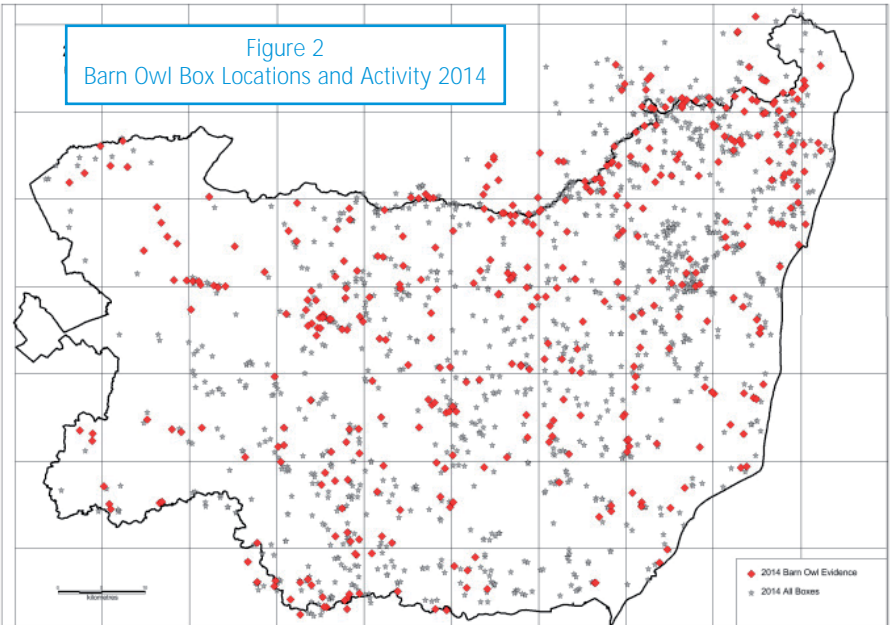
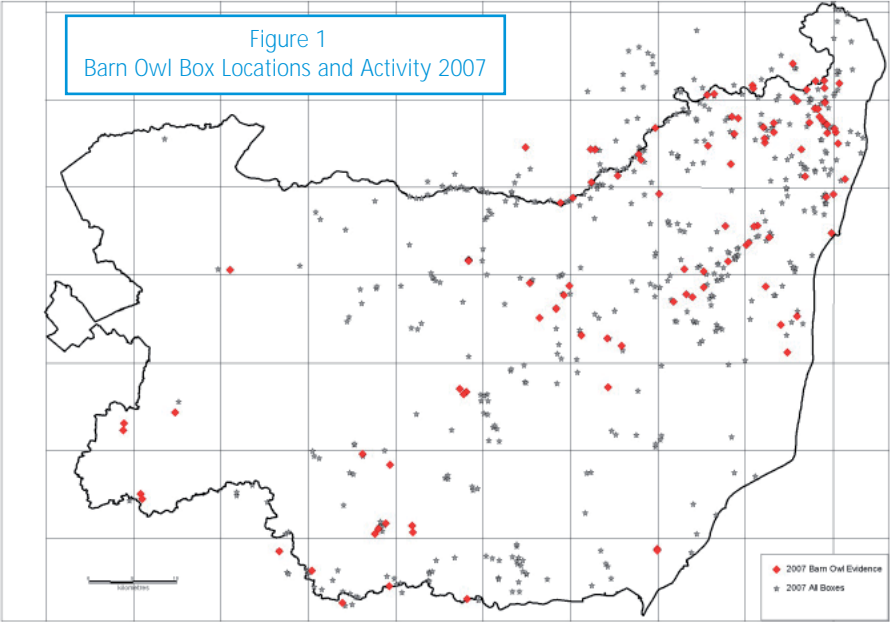
## The Project

SCBOP is dedicated to the conservation of Barn Owls. Originally managed by SOG the project passed to SWT and has now been returned to SOG for management. The principal partners are Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT), Suffolk Ornithologists' Group (SOG) and British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), but a number of smaller independent projects also fall under the SCBOP umbrella including those administered by Dedham AONB, Stour Valley Project, Thornham Owl Project and Suffolk Owl Sanctuary. The project provides advice on habitat enhancement and nest box siting to land owners who have suitable habitat and a monitoring service for the boxes. This system of raising awareness, creating nesting opportunities and managing suitable nearby habitat is having a positive effect on Barn Owl populations across Suffolk.

The project involves the whole community and the boxes are made by local organisations and monitored by an army of expert volunteers each year. The county has been divided into thirteen areas each with a coordinator. These coordinators manage the 120 monitors who hold permits entitling them to disturb the schedule 1 listed Barn Owls for the purposes of data gathering. A large proportion of the Barn Owls monitored are ringed by BTO trained and licenced ringers enabling the birds to be individually identified and their movements tracked.

This is a project of which all Suffolk people can be truly proud.

The effectiveness of the project is shown by the two maps displaying the distribution of all boxes Barn Owl occupied boxes in 2007 and 2014 in figures 1 and 2 respectively.



## Monitoring results

The previous report in The Harrier showed that the number of boxes and the number of Barn Owls increased year on year showing a great success rate. The tabulation extends the information to 2014.

<i>Number of Sites</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>
Barn Owl Pellet	11	25	53	40	54	36	37	30
Barn Owl Adult	12	34	57	55	50	76	151	57
Barn Owl Egg	0	17	3	5	4	12	13	14
Barn Owl Egg Failed	9	19	23	13	16	19	10	9
Barn Owl Young	77	102	123	149	201	289	66	297
Barn Owl Young Failed	4	4	3	4	6	12	4	5
Barn Owl Total	113	201	262	266	331	444	281	412
Tawny Owl	8	13	21	25	22	21	11	22
Little Owl	1	16	18	16	11	12	8	15
Kestrel	12	23	24	25	17	20	14	21
Stock Dove	71	112	239	253	317	263	325	289
Jackdaw	63	83	141	177	189	206	176	266
Grey Squirrel	6	12	17	8	9	25	28	13
Empty	90	117	199	239	289	236	340	325
Not Checked	203	167	117	163	104	187	353	306
Other	4	0	11	9	7	4	9	4
<b>Number of Active Sites</b>	<b>571</b>	<b>744</b>	<b>1049</b>	<b>1181</b>	<b>1296</b>	<b>1418</b>	<b>1545</b>	<b>1673</b>

Table 1: Nest Site Occupancy for 2007-2014

The sudden drop in Barn Owl presence in 2013 is noticeable. Table 1 also shows that the nest sites provided by the boxes are used by other wildlife with Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*) an amber listed species being particularly assisted.

### 2013's poor breeding season

As is so often the case, winter weather influences Barn Owl populations and was the main cause of the 2013 decline. The winter (defined by the Met Office as December 2012 to February 2013) and the spring (March, April and May) of 2013 being 0.6 and 1.7 degrees colder than average. This put a great stress on the Barn Owls and on their preferred prey the Short-tailed Vole.

Mortality was extremely high and reports of dead owls were reaching the BTO at up to 19 per day. These figures involved only ringed birds that were reported, so we were seeing just the tip of the iceberg with a significant proportion of the UK's population perishing. Many of the birds which did survive were poorly fed and only a few females were able to reach breeding condition. The table below shows the weather averages for East Anglia for the winter and spring of 2012, 2013 and 2014. Note the Act column shows the averages whilst the Anom is the difference from the average. Both 2012 and 2014 were warmer than the average whilst 2013 was colder.



Regional values compared with 1981 to 2010 averages														
(Act=Actual, Anom=Anomaly)														
Date	Max temp		Min temp		Mean temp		Sunshine		Rainfall		Days rain ≥ 1 mm		Days air frost	
	Act °C	Anom °C	Act °C	Anom °C	Act °C	Anom °C	Act hours	Anom %	Act mm	Anom %	Act days	Anom days	Act days	Anom days
Winter 2012	8.20	0.90	1.80	0.40	5.00	0.70	221.40	119.00	118.80	81.00	28.10	-3.10	27.30	-3.30
Spring 2012	13.70	0.40	4.80	0.10	9.20	0.20	463.90	99.00	195.10	143.00	32.60	4.20	8.00	-2.00
Winter 2013	6.40	-0.90	0.80	-0.60	3.60	-0.80	161.50	87.00	175.90	119.00	34.80	3.60	36.80	6.10
Spring 2013	11.30	-2.10	3.00	-1.70	7.20	-1.90	453.90	97.00	125.90	92.00	26.20	-2.20	25.70	15.70
Winter 2014	9.30	2.00	2.90	1.50	6.10	1.80	229.90	123.00	234.90	159.00	48.40	17.10	8.40	-22.30
Spring 2014	15.20	1.90	6.00	1.30	10.60	1.60	500.00	107.00	134.40	98.00	24.90	-3.40	6.60	-3.40

Table 2 Weather Data for East Anglia sourced from Met Office Website

2014 Bounce-back Year

As seen above, the winter and spring of 2014 were warmer than average, so the Barn Owls were less stressed by the winter weather and then the warm spring yielded an early growth of grass which encouraged a swift recovery in the vole populations, thus providing much-needed food.

This meant that Barn Owls could begin nesting earlier than in normal years. Shawyer (1998) has pioneered the

development of an ageing technique for nestlings which involve the measurements of the seventh primary feather recording the distance from feather tip to the point of emergence from the waxy feather sheath, or where the feather has not yet emerged the length of the pin. These measurements can be compared with a table and the pulli's age plus or minus one day can be calculated.

Hatch dates for the 7 years for which the project has sufficient data are shown in Figures 3 and 4 below.

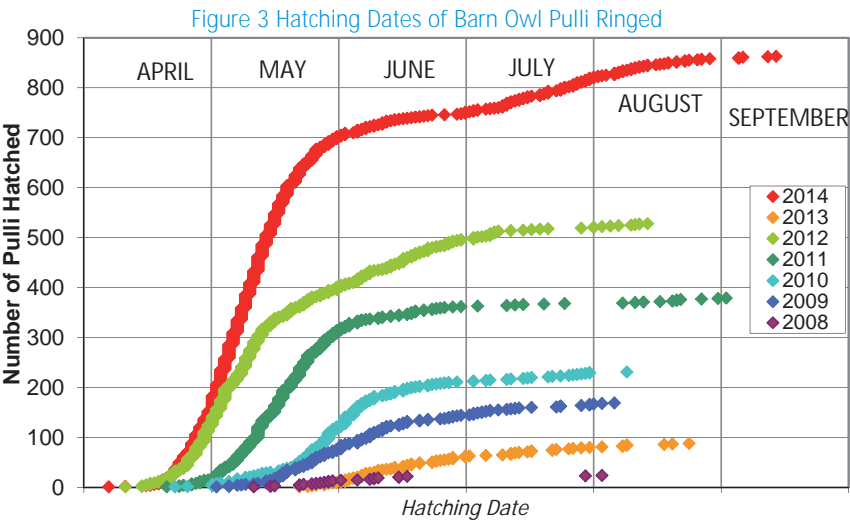
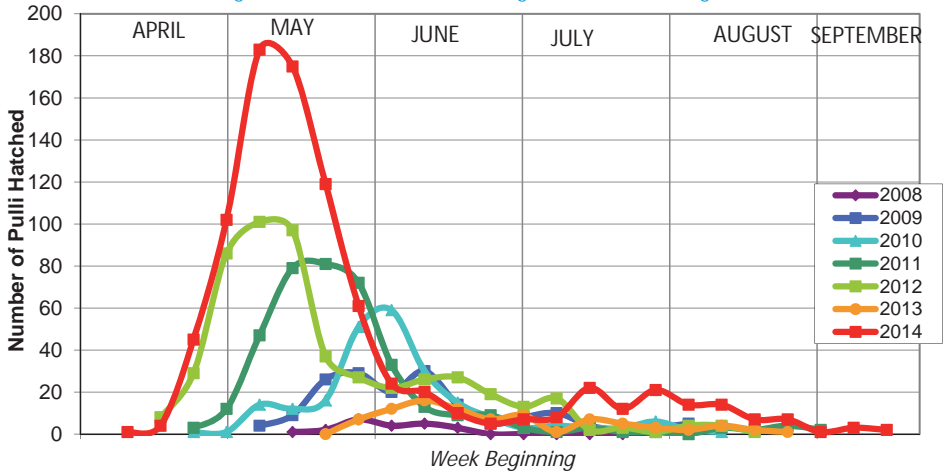
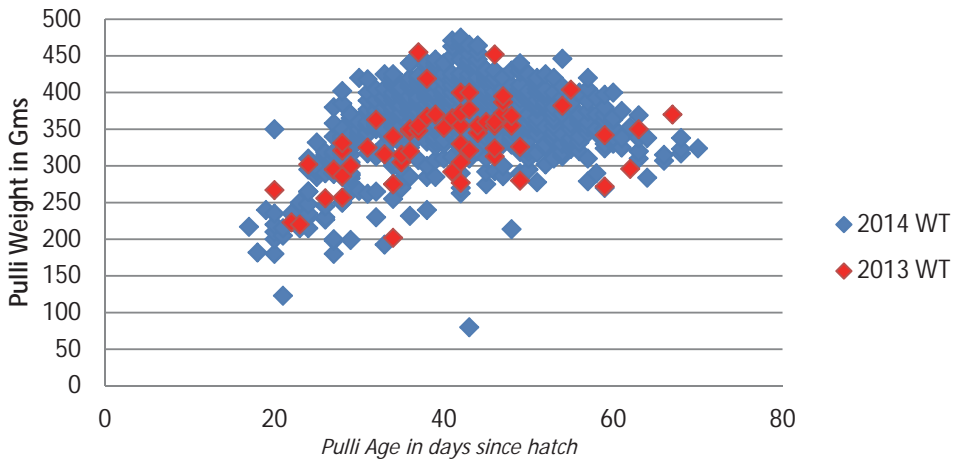


Figure 4 Distribution of Hatching Dates of Pulli Ringed



Anecdotal evidence from monitors suggested that there were large stores of food in the boxes where Barn Owls were breeding and it appeared that the pulli were heavier. However, plotting weight against age for the pulli from 2013 and 2014 showed no significant difference between the poor 2013 and good 2014 years which implies that when the owls were successful in producing young in 2013 there was sufficient food to keep up with the growth of the pulli. See plot below.

Figure 5 Pulli Weight by age for 2013 and 2014



Note that the young grow very quickly to a maximum weight at around 6 weeks from hatch and then lose weight towards the usual adult weight of 185 – 350 gms for the female and 275 – 285 gms for the male (Shawyer 1998).

## Productivity

Due to the large number of sites and the relatively low number of monitors there are not many records of fledging and the fact that chicks are ringed does not necessarily mean that they fledge. A total of 14 chicks from those ringed were found dead in boxes later and some of the smaller pulli in larger broods that were ringed may also not have fledged. However, early indications show that the number of pulli in each brood was also at its highest level since the project began, with broods of seven being noted in four parishes and eight in another. In total, 906 pulli were ringed from 1131 that were reared, which gives an overall fledging success rate of 3.77 pulli per nest site. Boxes will be checked for the remains of dead chicks during the initial box checks this summer, so this figure may be revised accordingly.

It is not unusual for monitors to often come across large clutches, but rarely does this result in a chick fledging from every egg. In previous years, clutches of 12 and, on one occasion, 13 have been found, but such

large clutches are rarely successful. Why such large broods? Barn Owls are relatively short-lived species with the longevity record of a wild bird standing at only eight years. They also have to brazen out poor vole years and perhaps not nest at all that year, so will lay large numbers of eggs in good vole years to compensate. To help their cause males can be bigamous, especially in good vole years, and will serve two females at the same nest site or at two sites close to each other. This could explain the apparent large clutches at single nest sites. The males carry out all the hunting, whilst the females incubate and need to catch enough prey to sustain the females. Also, on some occasions, females may incubate a clutch of infertile eggs and then lay another clutch that may also be sterile, which again would explain unusually large clutches. Seven pulli fledging from a single nest is the most ever recorded in Suffolk up to 2014, but a brood of eight which fledged from a box at Redgrave and Lopham Fen beat that record. Broods of seven recorded in 2014 at Nayland, Assington, Flatford and Wickhambrook are also worthy of note.

Steve Plotrowski showing  
Barn Owl chick to pupils of  
Bawdsey County Primary School



Photo: Kathy Plotrowski

# Movement

Most of the Barn Owl pulli and some adults monitored by the project are ringed. This provides us with an insight into their movements. Young Barn Owls are known to disperse from their natal areas soon after fledging and studies have shown that 37% of pulli ringed move more than three kilometres from their nest sites within two weeks of fledging (Bunn et al 1982). In 2014, 42 of the 68 adult Barn Owls handled were already carrying rings, giving the Project a series of family trees as well as tracking their movements between boxes.

The known movements of all Barn Owls are shown in figure 6 below

Photo: Andrew Plotowski.



A-frame box., Rookery golf course, Carlton

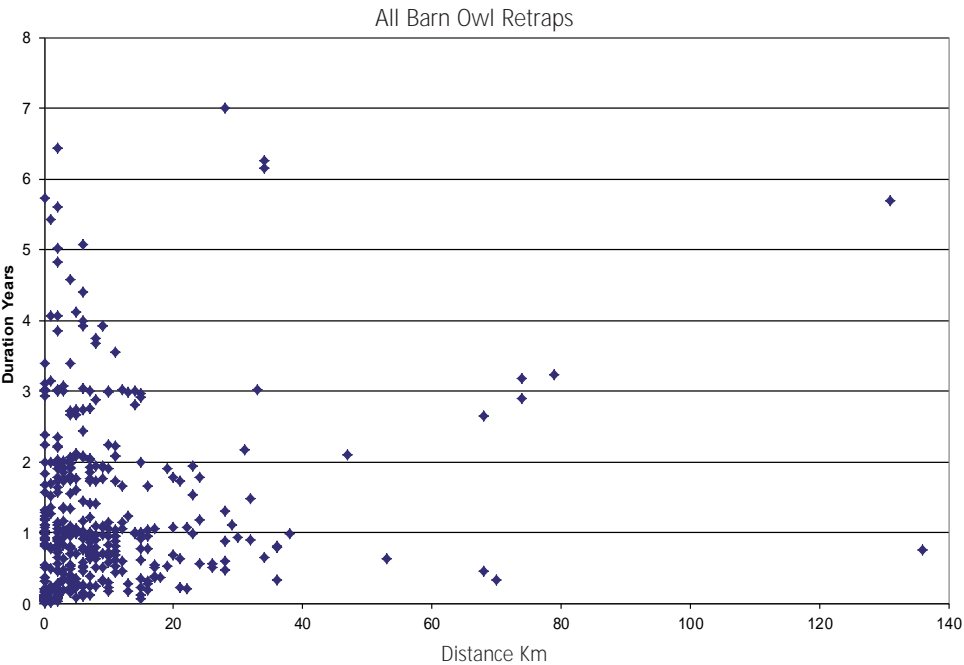


Figure 6 Movement of All Ringed Barn Owls in Project

And the Barn Owls that were ringed as pulli and then recovered dead are shown in figure 7.

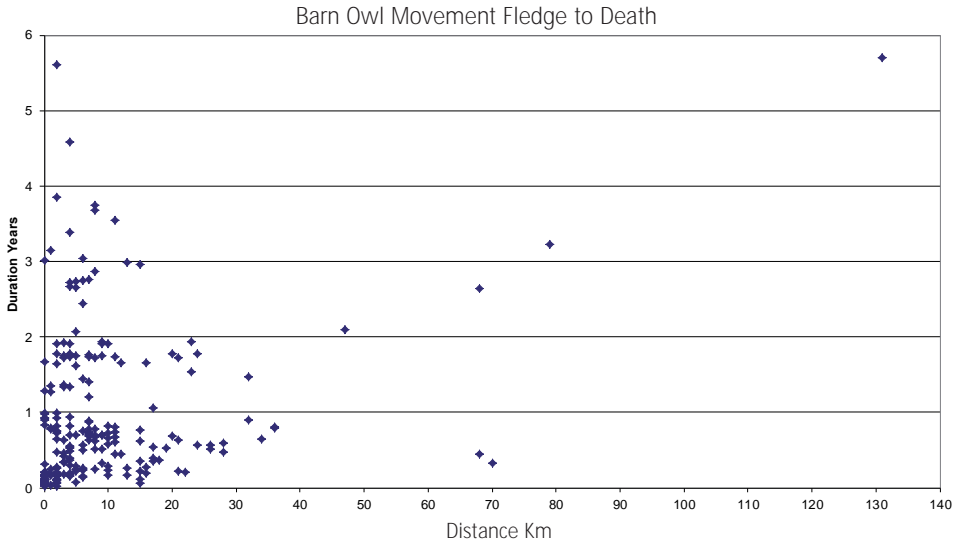


Figure 7 Movement of Barn Owl Ringed as Pulli and found Dead



One notable movement involved a Suffolk-ringed chick in 2013. Project Area Coordinator Patrick Barker ringed a brood of two pulli at Lea Farm, Great Ashfield, near Stowmarket, on 7th August 2013 and one of these (a female) was found incubating a clutch of eggs in a box in Muston, North Leicestershire, on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2014, a distance of 136 km. She raised three pulli in her newly adopted county. Jim Lennon, of South Notts Ringing Group (who monitor boxes in North Leicestershire on behalf of the Vale Barn Owls Project), said:

*"This was the first time in five years that the box has been used; we had several instances of this in 2014. The female was not moulting when caught, and we checked for a second breeding attempt which did not happen in that box, but chicks seem to have got away okay"*

Photo: Katie Smith

Patrick Barker holding two barn owl pulli





## The Project celebrates its tenth birthday

This year SCBOP will be 10 years old and plans are already underway to celebrate its success by holding a series of special events. The programme, launched to a full house at the Fisher Theatre, Bungay, on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2015, will no doubt develop as the year progresses. Further SCBOP events have been planned as follows:

- 8<sup>th</sup> July – live Barn Owl ringing at Linstead Parva with Waveney Bird Club
- 11<sup>th</sup> July SWT's Lackford Nature

Reserve Centre – all-day workshop for Barn Owl enthusiasts by Steve Piotrowski (please contact Leslie Walduck of SWT, Brooke House, Ashbocking, for further details)

- 23<sup>rd</sup> September, Stowupland Village Hall, Church Road, Stowupland – joint SOG/Stowmarket SWT Group lecture by Steve Piotrowski
- 19<sup>th</sup> October, The Cut, Halesworth – a fund-raising party including a special lecture by Dr Colin Shawyer, UK's leading authority on Barn Owl conservation and author of *The Barn Owl* (1998).

## Acknowledgments:

The authors would like to thank the hundreds of people involved in this project including the box owners, area coordinators and monitors. Special thanks go to Felicity Hillier for interpreting the data and producing the graphs and to John Grant for his comments on the draft.

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# Suffolk Ornithologists' Group



## Who we are

- Founded in 1973 by a group of Suffolk birdwatchers
- Associated with the Suffolk Naturalists' Society
- SOG remains an independent birding group and is a registered charity

## What we do

### Networking

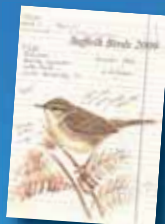
- A voice for Suffolk birdwatchers
- With established links to many naturalist and conservation organisations

### Media

- Strong web presence - [www.sogonline.org.uk](http://www.sogonline.org.uk)
- Active Twitter feed - [@suffolkbirds1](https://twitter.com/suffolkbirds1)
- Quarterly magazine - **The Harrier**
- Annual review - **Suffolk Birds** report

### Trips and talks

- Annually (20+) field trips - ideal for novices or experts and young or old alike
- Opportunities to visit hot spots and receive practical ID tips in the field
- Programme of talks and presentations - variety of topics (county, national, or international) with quality speakers



### Protecting birds

- Actively lobbies to protect habitats and birding amenities
- Provides a county-wide field force of bird surveyors (50+)
- Organises and promotes bird surveys
- Inspires and undertakes conservation projects
- Bursaries available
- Numerous conservation achievements:

- Contributed to several species breeding successes (Barn Owls, Peregrines, etc.)
- Undertakes monitoring and ringing
- Involvement on community and education projects
- Organises and hosts dawn chorus walks
- Assists with fund-raising for bird hides
- On-going participation in key bird surveys for the BTO, such as BBS, the Bird Atlas, various species surveys and WeBS
- Provides surveys for commercial organisations, such as environmental waste companies etc.



Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

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