

Spring 2017 No.188



The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

£4.50



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Cover photograph:

Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) by Lesley Starbuck

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The Harrier

Spring 2017 No.188

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Editorial

Welcome to the Spring Harrier, I hope you enjoy the articles and photographs. I'm writing this as spring has just about sprung. The dawn chorus is building, I've heard my first Chiffchaff and over the next few weeks the migrants will be pouring in. My recent birding highlights have included a super SOG trip into the Brecks – it's always wonderful to be out birding with SOG members with their sharp eyes and keen ears – and then a flock of Waxwings in my back garden yesterday brightened my week. Summer promises an interesting time as I'm taking part in both the Turtle Dove and Suffolk Wader Strategy surveys. And of course there are the SOG trips and talks to look forward to – I hope to see many of you there too – do come and say hello.

Inside this edition you'll find a short write-up of the AGM, naming our new President and the deserving winners of the Denis Ockleton Trophy, Garrod Award, BINS bird of the year and 2017 BINS cup. Peter Merchant too won an award last year - more details on page 4.

There are updates on two ongoing SOG projects – SCBOP and SOS Swifts – as well as a request for volunteers to help in the 10 year update of the Ringed Plover survey, and Eddie Marsh has once again detailed Suffolk bird activity in the Winter Bird Review.

RSPB's Will Kirby has written an article on Hawfinches and Ken Smith tells of his work researching Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nest sites; both species are notoriously difficult to see and Ken would love to hear from anyone who knows of possible LSW breeding sites. Graham Appleton from Waderquest, this time writing about Lapwings, tells how their moulted feathers can tell a tale.

Rasik Bhadresa, new to SOG, submitted a charming account of a Siskin observation – please remember, all articles are gratefully received, and included if space permits.

This edition's trip reports include Brightlingsea and Abberton, which the more cartographically inclined amongst you will have spotted are in Essex.

There are also a note about Derek Moore's book request, a review of a newly published

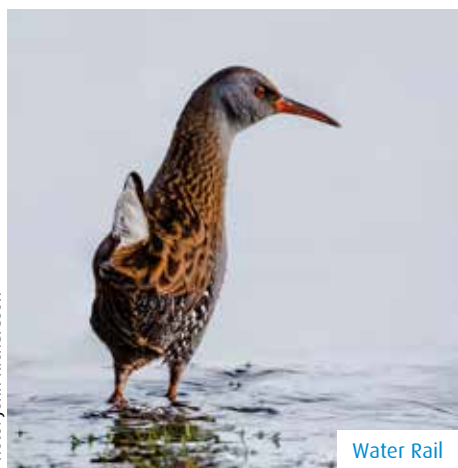


Photo: John Richardson

Water Rail

booklet about Shingle Street's wildlife, an apology (mine!) to Michael Bamford and an obituary of the late Pearson Silburn.

And then, Alison Ballantyne in poetry corner has written about Paul Farley's poem 'The Heron' which has a very rude word in it so you might want to go there first!

Finally, because of new commitments, my time as Harrier editor is coming to an end. I can highly recommend the role: it takes a certain time commitment, is hugely

educational, involves getting to know an informative group of writers and viewing a fantastic array of photographs – great fun, with the odd squeaky-bum moment thrown in. Training will be given to the new editor over a staged handover period and the role includes access to the SOG computer and a seat on Council. I would urge anyone wanting to get more involved in the life of Suffolk birds and birders to consider putting themselves forward – do email me for an informal chat.

AGM

At this year's AGM, held on 2nd March, John Grant was unanimously elected President and in his new role presided over both the presentation of accounts and the re-election of Council. An enjoyable evening was had: a great quiz set by Edward Jackson and Nick Mason was won by Ed Keeble, the fund-raising raffle raised just shy of £100 and the following awards were presented by John.

Garrod Award

Ellie Zantboer

Denis Ockleton Trophy

Nick Mason

BINS Cup for 2017 bird race

Lowestoft Lounge Lizards

The **BINS Bird of the Year** was the Minsmere Cliff Swallow. It was found by Eric 'd'Weasel' Patrick and Steve Piotrowski.



Clockwise from left:
Eric Patrick, John Grant, Steve Piotrowski,
Nick Mason, Jean Garrod, Ellie Zantboer

Garrod Award

Ellie Zantboer was this year's worthy winner of the **Garrod Award**.

Aged just eight, Ellie became the youngest BTO licensed ringer in the UK. She has now ringed over 2,000 birds of 82 species throughout Suffolk as well as on Lundy Island and she regularly performs ringing demonstrations for members of the public. Now aged 13, Ellie has a life list of 294, her most recent being Mandarin Duck and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on the recent Santon Downham trip. The Garrod Award will sit alongside her Unsprung Hero Award, which was presented to Ellie by Chris Packham on live TV. A well-deserved award to a fantastic young birder.

Denis Ockleton Trophy

By Gi Grieco

Nick Mason is this year's winner of the **Denis Ockleton Trophy**. The award, presented annually since 2001, is given to an individual for their outstanding contribution to Suffolk ornithology. Nick, as current editor of the Suffolk Birds Report, is a deserved recipient of the award. Published annually by the Suffolk Naturalists' Society in conjunction with Suffolk Ornithologists' Group, this annual report provides a systematic list of species seen within the county during the year. As well as some superb quality colour photos and ink drawings, it contains a selection of research articles and a ringing report.

Suffolk Birds is an important publication for Suffolk birding and birders, and its production takes up a correspondingly significant amount of time and dedication. The post involves working with the three county bird recorders, organising the section writers, liaising with WeBS recorders and collecting art and photographic material,

as well as sitting on both SNS and SOG committees. Under Nick's leadership, the report has moved to a larger format, both to reflect the growing content and to allow enhanced quality pictures. The frequent praise that Suffolk Bird Report attracts is in great part thanks to Nick's dedicated hard work.

In addition to this already considerable role in county birding, Nick has been a WeBS recorder on the Deben for many years and was one of the Suffolk co-ordinators for the BTO Winter and Breeding Bird Atlas 2007-2011. His input into county recording has not been confined to birds however: Nick was one of the principal members of the Suffolk Dragonfly Group, involved in Suffolk's contribution to the National Dragonfly Atlas between 2008 and 2013 and, along with Adrian Parr, he edited Suffolk Dragonflies, a report published in 2016.

BINS Cup for 2017 bird race

The **Lowestoft Lounge Lizards** were this year's rightful winners of the **BINS Cup**, with all birds counted either seen or heard by all members of their team on the New Year's Day bird race.



Photo: Steve Babbs

The **BINS Bird of the Year** was the Minsmere Cliff Swallow.

Peter Merchant wins the President's Award!

The RSPB gives out just six awards each year to volunteers who have made an outstanding contribution to RSPB volunteering and in 2016 Suffolk's own Peter Merchant was one of the recipients for his work on Havergate Island.

Peter has been volunteering for 29 years at various sites on the Suffolk Coast with Havergate Island his particular focus.

In spite of his dislike of travelling by boat, Peter's love of Havergate has seen him support the wardens to keep the island in top condition. He has seen the island change over the years and has been integral to building and maintaining its infrastructure, which has in turn allowed visitors to enjoy all the island has to offer.

Peter has also seen the island at its worst. As well as the annual battering Havergate gets from the North Sea winds, the 1987 storm and the December 2013 tidal surge both caused considerable damage. Along with his team, Peter didn't hesitate to offer his help in tidying, planning and rebuilding the hides and other infrastructure.

The award, presented by RSPB's new President Miranda Krestovnikoff, recognised Peter's outstanding work as a volunteer and an inspiration to his team.

Peter receives his award from Miranda Krestovnikoff



Photo: RSPB

Pearson Silburn 1934 - 2016



Pearson Silburn was a very long-standing member of SOG.

Although an accomplished birdwatcher, Pearson was never one to push himself forward; he loved his birds, had a very keen eye and just enjoyed what he did.

Not many people know that Pearson was one of Bert Axell's original band of volunteers at Minsmere, where he spent many a day working on management tasks including creation of the scrapes, with his ol' mate the late Derek (Moore) and later manning the moth trap two or three times a year, staying overnight in the bunks in the hut (where he was especially well known for dishing up very large English breakfasts!).

Pearson joined the Wildfowl and Wader counting team on the Stour right at the start

of what was then BOEE – at the beginning of the seventies – and he carried on for forty years until his health started to deteriorate.

He took part in all BTO Atlas and species surveys, most SOG surveys, several for SWT & RSPB and of course the Low Water Counts whilst also helping with Herons and Breeding Bird Surveys. He was also an avid feeder and recorder of his garden birds.

Pearson always enjoyed the SOG evening meetings, valued the friendships made and several times was inspired to go and see at first-hand some of the birds and places he heard about from the likes of Derek Moore, Steve Piotrowski and particularly Bill Baston... so thanks, SOG, for what you did for another GOOD OLD BOY – my mate Pearson.

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group are the grateful recipients of Pearson Silburn's collection of bird books. These will be available at upcoming indoor talks and all monies raised from their donation will go to SOG causes.



Landguard Bird Observatory Library

When Derek Moore passed away on 23rd October 2014 he bequeathed the Suffolk Ornithologists' Group two of his most treasured books: 'The Birds of Suffolk' by Reverend Churchill Babington and 'The Birds of Suffolk' by Claud Ticehurst; both books containing Derek's fascinating personal notes. It was agreed that these wonderful books should be kept in the Landguard Bird Observatory (LBO) library but remain the property of SOG.

A ceremony took place at LBO on 23rd October 2016 when Steve Piotrowski, on behalf of Derek Moore's family, presented the books to Gi Grieco; they were then placed in the LBO Library.

Photo: Bill Oddie



Members of SOG are welcome to view these books by prior arrangement, accompanied by a recognised representative of Landguard Bird Observatory. However these books will remain in the library and not be removed from the site unless specified by a council member of SOG.

The library is probably the only bird library in Suffolk. It is in general a reference library although members of LBO do, by arrangement, borrow the books. The library has been built up mostly from donations made by LBO members and Suffolk schools.

Among the collection are books that relate to different parts of the world, such as:

- Handbook of the Birds of the Middle East & North Africa volumes 1 to 9
- A Handbook of British Birds – volumes 1 to 5
- The Birds of Hungary

books relating to individual birds including:

- The Kingfisher
- The Starling
- The Yellow Wagtail

and a few books unrelated to birds including:

- The Orchids of Suffolk
- Fungi & Slim Moulds in Suffolk
- Spiders of Britain & Europe

The library has a full set of Harrier publications, the early ones being printed on an old Gestetner printer. We would love



Photo: Dave Pearsons

to know if anyone else has got a full set! In addition, we have volumes 1 to 47 of Atropos (the butterfly, moth & dragonfly journal) and a good selection of Transactions of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society.

As stated, SOG members are most welcome to visit the library by prior arrangement, at any time a LBO member is available. Usually someone is on site up until 1200hrs most days of the year. Please contact the observatory at 01394 673782 or email landguardbo@yahoo.co.uk to arrange a visit.

The inaugural Derek Moore Memorial Talk, presented by Dr Mark Avery, will take place in the Great Hall at Ipswich School on 15th November this year. Tickets priced £7 are available via 01473 890089 with proceeds going to the SWT Carlton Marsh appeal.



Little Ringed Plover

Robin Harvey and Chris Keeling

Suffolk Plover Survey – a call for volunteers

The Suffolk Ornithologists' Group with the support of the Suffolk Little Tern Group (RSPB, Natural England, National Trust, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Landguard Partnership) is organising a survey of breeding Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers this year. The aim is to repeat the survey of 2007 and to produce up-to-date population estimates for both species.

The 2007 survey recorded a total 43 pairs of Ringed Plover at 23 sites in Suffolk, representing a 77% decline on the previous survey, carried out in 1984.

Evidence suggests that the population has continued to decline, with only 32 pairs recorded at key sites as recently as 2016. Even more worryingly, this trend must be viewed in combination with poor productivity. If current trends continue, there is a very real risk that the Ringed Plover may be lost to Suffolk as a breeding species.

For Little Ringed Plovers, which first nested in Suffolk in 1948, the situation is rather less clear. The population peaked at around 33 pairs in 1990, most being at inland gravel pits. Since then the national survey in 2007 found 12-13 pairs at seven sites but the most recent Suffolk Bird Report (2015) only lists three pairs at two sites. It is not known if the Little Ringed Plover is currently under-recorded or whether there has been a real decline in the breeding population.

A full survey is needed to assess the current population of both species in Suffolk. We will use this information to work with the Suffolk Little Tern Group and landowners to identify sites where we can focus actions to aid recovery. We need volunteers to help survey all suitable nesting sites during 2017. Surveying will require a minimum of two visits during the breeding season (between 15th April and 14th May and then 15th May and 30th June).

If you are interested in helping with the Plover Survey, please contact Chris Keeling or Robin Harvey for further information.

chris.keeling@naturalengland.org.uk

robin.harvey@rspb.org.uk / 01728 648072.



Ringed Plover



Rasik Bhadresa

A Bird Delight

One sunny morning in late February we thought it would be lovely to have a short walk along the footpath encircling the undulating scenic area abutting the north of East End, East Bergholt. An area of much beauty and character, its charm springs from the variation in the lie of the land, the rolling nature of the meadow, beautiful views around every corner as well as a lovely sweep of mixed deciduous woodland following the brook at the bottom of the field: quite simply a haven for wildlife. Both Tawny and Barn Owls frequent the woods, woodpeckers are common and Jackdaws nest at one end. We had just gone past the ribbon of bramble on our right, when as we descended toward the thick alder carr at the beginning of the woodland, we heard a sweet twitter and saw something quite close fleet in the bushes. No more

than a couple of metres away was a small, not so shy, yellowish-green finch with a black crown. It was the graceful Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) – a male. Obliging, it stayed until I had taken a photo or two. Whether it was local to these parts or a migrant was not possible to tell, but it certainly made our day.



Siskin

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nest recording

As most birdwatchers know, the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is in serious decline in much of its British range. The reasons for the decline are not known for sure but work by the RSPB has suggested low breeding success as a possible factor (see Smith et al., *British Birds*, 294-307 (2013) for a review). It would be great to be able to compare the results of the RSPB work with those from the BTO Nest Record Scheme to see whether low breeding success is a general problem. Sadly, over the last few years, the numbers of nest records for this species have fallen so low that this is not possible.

I have been studying Great and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers for more than 30 years, mainly in my own time, but also as a small part of my work with the RSPB where I lead research into Bitterns, breeding waders and woodland birds. Now after 30 years I am retired, but I have maintained my interest and, if anything, expanded the studies.

A few years ago I realised that the opportunity was being missed to collect important breeding data from nests found as part of normal birdwatching – either because the observers were unaware of the potential value of their observations, or because the means to inspect the nest contents was not easily available. So, in 2015, together with Paul Bellamy at the RSPB, I launched an initiative to help and encourage observers to find breeding Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, and where possible to find the nests and facilitate the recording of their contents and outcomes under licence. In 2015 and 2016 this has resulted in 10 nests being recorded each year, a big increase on the one or two reported in previous years. In 2017 I am hoping we can do even better – with your help.

The arrangements are quite straightforward. If you find a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nest, I will visit or organise a visit with a nest inspection video camera to check the contents. Four video systems are available and, depending on demand, after the first visit we can leave one with the nest finder to monitor the nest contents regularly until the young fledge. I have developed the nest viewing cameras over the last 15 years, initially to check out Great Spotted Woodpecker nests, but as the technology has improved I have been able to monitor Lesser Spots too. The nest inspection is done from the ground with the camera on a long telescopic pole which can reach up to 60 feet above the ground and only takes a few minutes. It should be noted that in visiting well over 1,000 Great Spot and 60 Lesser Spot nests, I have found no adverse impact on the birds.



Photo: Tim Preston



Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are a challenge to all our birdwatching skills. They are pretty much invisible for most of the year and only in February and March do they call and drum with any regularity. Once they have settled on a nest site by mid-April they are very inconspicuous until they are feeding young in late May. They can be found nesting in any woodland but seem to be more abundant in well-wooded areas and woods with high levels of dead wood or woods associated with wetlands. The best bet for finding breeding birds is to check out past sites. The birds seem very site faithful, so often turn up in traditional sites over many years. Drumming and displaying drops off rapidly through the day so early morning visits are best.

In general, the Lesser Spot drum is much softer and of a longer duration than Great Spot and seems to tail off at the end rather than ending with a flourish. But it is still possible to be confused by a soft drumming Great Spot. With patience, you can get to see the bird to confirm identity.

The next and probably the biggest challenge is to find the nest. There are a few tricks to help you with this but there is no substitute for persistence. If you find the birds calling, drumming or displaying in an area of woodland, there is a good chance they will nest in the vicinity. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nests are almost always in dead trees or dead limbs on live trees. So in March, before the leaves appear, have a thorough check around the displaying area and note any potential nest sites to be visited later. The birds particularly like dead alder, birch, poplar, sycamore and beech but other species can be used. Then from April onwards make regular checks of these sites looking for birds, or any signs of nest excavation such as woodchips on the ground beneath the tree. Although it won't help you in your first year, my most successful strategy is to make a point of always visiting last year's nest site. LSWs frequently excavate in the same tree and have even been known to re-use the nest cavity itself.

If you find a nest, please contact me as soon as possible so we can discuss getting it inspected with the video camera. Please record the behaviour of the adults at the nest. Even without the nest inspection camera it is possible to work out the stage of the nesting cycle from the behaviour of the adult birds at the nest.

- During excavation, birds will be seen excavating a cavity; but only when they are deep inside and emerging head first to throw out woodchips is the cavity anywhere near complete. Lesser Spots usually make a new cavity each year but often return to the same small area of woodland or the same dead tree if it is still standing. Birds often try an excavation but move on before completing a cavity. This may be an important aspect of breeding, so please record such failed cavities.
- During laying and incubation the birds become very secretive and only change over every two hours or so – at this stage it is easy to assume the nest is no longer active. It is worth being patient and waiting to confirm that the nest is still active if you have the time available, or return regularly to increase the chance of detecting activity.
- During chick rearing, the young are fed every 5-10 minutes and their age can be worked out from the adult behaviour. For the first week after hatching the young are always brooded by one of the adults so there is a changeover every time the young are fed. The young are usually fed inside the cavity until their last week when they can be fed at the nest hole with the adults only going in occasionally.

For their last 2-3 days in the nest the young can be quite noisy, often but not always making insistent begging calls and can often be seen looking out of the nest hole waiting to be fed.

Please note that I will treat all records in complete confidence and will not publish any details of nest sites. The nest records will be treated as confidential by the BTO.



To help with this valuable research please contact Ken using the details below.

Ken.smith.lsw@gmail.com

01243 786079

www.woodpecker-network.org.uk

SCBOP Update

Ongoing maintenance

During the 2015/2016 winter period about 30 dilapidated boxes were replaced like for like and a further 46 boxes were installed. However, 42 boxes had either fell down or were in such a poor state of repair that they have been removed from the monitoring list and will be replaced only if further funding is forthcoming.

The 2016 breeding season

Barn Owls live a topsy-turvy life and their populations are subject to dramatic fluctuations, which are linked to the annual abundance in the short-tailed vole population, their favoured prey, that peaks and troughs every 3-4 years.

In 2016, SCBOP volunteers monitored 83% of its 1,800 nestboxes and logged the presence of Barn Owl in 476 of them. The Shotley Peninsula now hosts a high density of Barn Owls (13 boxes holding Barn Owls in the past five years), but was not covered in 2016, so the figure for occupied boxes should be nearer 485.

This figure is a new record and way above the 375 pairs reported to be breeding in Suffolk in 1938. A total of 329 pairs then went on to lay eggs and many raised chicks during the summer and autumn of 2016. However, despite such high occupancy, productivity was relatively poor.

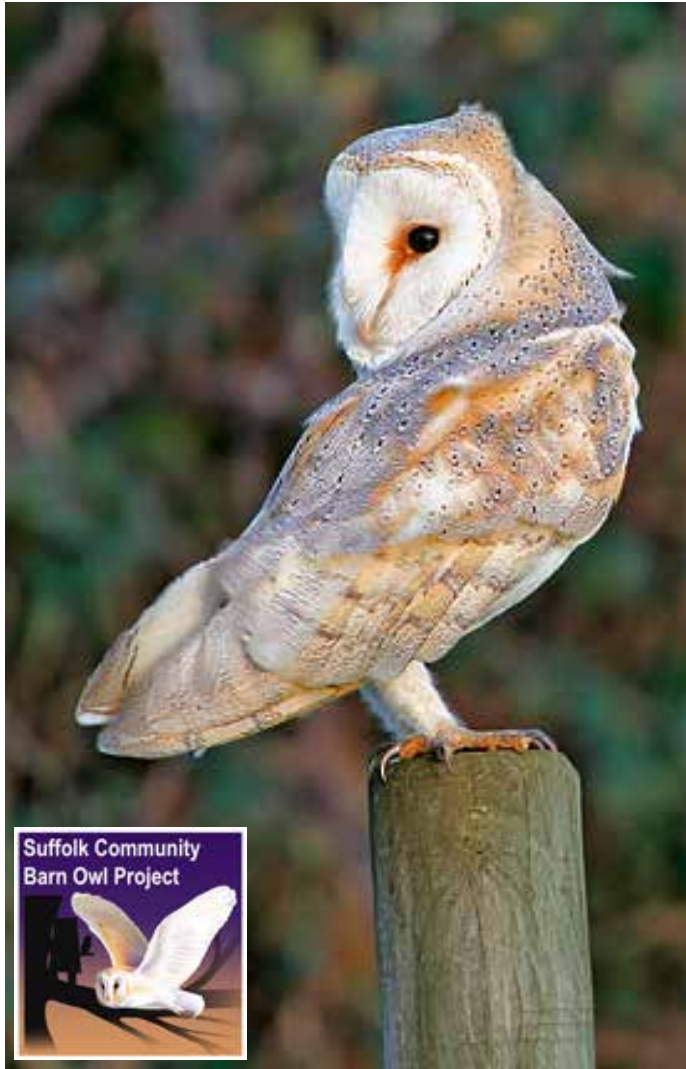


Photo: Bill Baston

The breeding season was far from plain sailing as inclement weather resulted in a stuttery start. Barn Owls normally lay their first egg during the second half of April, so a sudden dip in temperatures in late April/early May wasn't conducive for breeding. To make matters worse, some areas in

southeast England had their wettest June on record and this unseasonably weather was unhelpful as the males were unable catch enough voles to sustain their brooding females or her newly hatched brood. Barn Owls have no water-proofing on their feathers so have to brazen out any wet weather, which may force partners to vacate nests, causing incubation to be interrupted and eggs and recently-hatched chicks to chill and die. SCBOP monitors logged many instances of complete or partial clutch failure early in the season including desertion of

whole clutches and unhatched eggs. The total clutch/brood failure rate was 21% from 103 boxes known to be hosting Barn Owls up to the end of June. Also, many eggs failed to hatch and chicks were lost, so few of the successful pairs managed to fledge more than three chicks. In fact, 79 boxes occupied at the chick stage produced 197 chicks in June, a ratio of 2.5 chicks per box, but as many of the boxes were not revisited after the chicks were ringed, this figure is likely to be lower.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
BO Pellet	11	25	53	40	54	36	37	30	24	30
BO Adult	12	34	57	55	50	76	151	57	149	116
BO Egg	0	17	3	5	4	12	13	14	12	21
BO Egg Failed	9	19	23	13	16	19	10	9	21	27
BO Young	77	102	123	149	201	289	66	297	240	264
BO Young Failed	4	4	3	4	6	12	4	5	12	18
BO Total	113	201	262	266	331	444	281	412	458	476
Tawny Owl	8	13	21	25	22	21	11	22	20	19
Little Owl	1	16	18	16	11	12	8	15	12	7
Kestrel	12	23	24	25	17	20	14	21	20	19
Stock Dove	71	112	239	253	317	263	325	289	245	287
Jackdaw	63	83	141	177	189	206	176	266	270	276
Grey Squirrel	6	12	17	8	9	25	28	13	17	16
Empty	90	117	199	239	289	236	340	325	311	384
Not Checked	203	167	117	163	104	187	353	306	361	299
Other	4	0	11	9	7	4	9	4	11	13
Number of Active Sites	571	744	1049	1181	1296	1418	1545	1673	1741	1795

Table 1: Box occupancy up to 27th December 2016

However, increasing numbers of voles coupled with the unusually warm and especially dry weather conditions throughout the autumn months from August to October meant that all was not lost. Many successful early breeders that had already laid full clutches by mid-April followed up with second clutches in early-July and some that had lost early clutches or broods laid replacement clutches in late-June. Barn Owl nests monitored between July and October proved to be more successful with total clutch/brood failure down to only 6% from 220 boxes. Bumper second broods were reported elsewhere in southern England, but this was not the case in Suffolk. There were three instances of clutches of 7 eggs in July/August, but five chicks was the maximum brood size. This compares with 2014, when there were many clutches of six to eight eggs including one pair that fledged all eight chicks – a Suffolk record. A total of 483 chicks were produced from 206 boxes occupied at the chick stage in July to October 2016, which equates to 2.4 chicks per occupied box, slightly down on June but with a much lower total clutch/brood failure rate. Fledging success of second broods is particularly low in most years, so this figure is relatively good for late-breeding Barn Owls. It was also an extremely prolonged breeding season with chicks still occupying boxes at the end of October.

Experiences in Suffolk conformed well to the national trend, although Shawyer (2016) reports that Barn Owls in the central and western regions of Britain experienced more nest failures, lower brood sizes and far fewer second broods than eastern regions.

The Future and Fundraising

This truly is a “Community” project with every Suffolk parish being involved.

For the future, we are looking at sustainability, not only for the boxes, but also for people. To meet this goal

training sessions are organised annually and applications for grants forwarded to appropriate funders.

A total of 1,800 boxes is being managed under the SCBOP umbrella that gives a combined asset value of nearly £250,000. Replacing all the boxes in the immediate future is not feasible, so we need to prioritise the most urgent boxes in such a poor condition that they threaten the lives of Barn Owls occupying them. The longevity of the boxes can be improved by minor repairs carried out by volunteer repair teams. This is a low-waste, low-cost approach and will ensure that the boxes get the longest life-span possible before replacement becomes essential.

As well as protecting our most cherished areas of countryside, the AONB’s have been able to support projects such as SCBOP through Sustainable Development Funds (SDFs). In 2016, SCBOP was delighted to receive £5,700 from the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB and 5,607 from Dedham Vale AONB SDFs. This money has allowed us to repair or replace dilapidated boxes in those two AONB areas and to provide equipment and essential training. However, funding conditions meant that this work has had to be confined to the AONB areas.

SCBOP’s current management structure, involving coordinators and monitors, has served us well over the project’s 11-year history. However, with so many boxes to monitor, we will be discussing various options with our principal partners in an attempt to provide a new structure that should be in place before monitoring gets underway again this spring. In addition, the BTO are currently trialling a new computer system to take care of our nest and ringing records. Hopefully one day it will be possible to enter data in the field whilst boxes are being monitored.

SOS Swifts

It's time to watch out for Swifts in the skies above you! If you see a 'screaming party' skimming over the rooftops, find an active nest site in a building, or have nest boxes on the outside or inside of your house, please record all this information on the Suffolk Swift Survey website: <http://www.suffolkbis.org.uk/swift>. All these data are sent to the Suffolk planning authorities on a regular basis so that Swifts can be considered when planning applications are determined.

We're also keen to have updates on places and sites where you may have recorded Swifts in previous years. Are they still there? Are numbers going up or down?

Once again, we're offering public talks on Swifts around the county during the summer. Please spread the word and encourage anyone who is interested to come along. All five events start at 7pm and are free – with donations to SOS Swifts welcome!

Tues 4 July	Lavenham	Village Hall
Tues 11 July	Brantham	Village Hall
Thurs 13 July	Framlingham	United Free Church
Thurs 20 July	Haverhill	Old Independent Church Hall
Thurs 27 July	Lowestoft	SWT Carlton Marshes Education Centre



Breaking News: in support of SOS Swifts, local housebuilder Hopkins Homes has kindly agreed to supply and install swift bricks on its new-build block of flats in Framlingham.



SOG Merchandise

We have a range of SOG branded clothing, mugs and mouse mats available for purchase.

Please contact Mark on 01449 723346 or mark@hudsonteamware.co.uk to place an order.



Winter Bird Review

December 2016

December had fifteen totally dry days; 16 had some rain – 14 no more than 1mm – and only two days had any substantial rain, with 11mm on the 10th and 6mm on the 11th. It was not a particularly cold month: ten days were 10°C or above; the highest being 13°C on the 8th and 9th – and Christmas Day was 12°C. Only eight days/ nights recorded temperatures of 0°C or below, the coldest night of which was the 30th at -3°C. The month's average high was 6°C and low was 3°C.

First, an interesting addition to last time's review. A Moorhen appeared on the River Deben in Woodbridge after a WeBS count on the 13th November 2016 that was carried out by Laurence Potter and Robert Johnson. Bearing a Green Ring AE32 on its right leg and metal one on its left, it was on the pontoons between the Kingston end and Woodbridge Quay. Enquiries to Dave Fairhurst, who knows of many ringing schemes, produced a link that I passed on to Laurence. Dave in turn made contact with Carsten Lome, who was running this scheme near Oslo in Norway. The Moorhen had been ringed as a breeding bird near Oslo in July 2016 and last seen in Norway on the 11th of October 2016. Interestingly its partner also bears a coloured ring and also migrated, but went to the north over a large mountain range to Bergen where it has been seen and recorded. It will be interesting to see if they return and breed in 2017 – what a find and what a fantastic migration record!

A **Black-throated Diver** was seen sitting on the sea at Slaughden on the 13th followed by a **Great Northern Diver** on the 24th and another at Holbrook Bay on the 27th.

Photo: Barry Woodhouse



Slavonian Grebe

Slavonian Grebes were seen in ones, twos and threes at locations including Stutton Ness, Holbrook Bay, Alton Water, Stoke Bridge Sailing Club, Freston, off Slaughden and Hazelwood Marshes throughout the month and a **Black-necked Grebe** on Alton Water on and off from the 4th to the end of the month. A juvenile **Shag** was seen at Stutton Ness on the 3rd only.

Photo: Chris Courtney



Black-necked Grebe

Spoonbill sightings came from Boyton RSPB Reserve on the 5th, then four on the 20th and four on the Butley River on the 29th. Sightings of **Great White Egret** continued and were still evident throughout the county during the December period, with Dunwich having a good share. The faithful **Cattle Egret** remained at Sandy Lane, Iken all month and another was at Rodwell Dairy, Baylham on the 24th where two were found on the 26th, 28th and 29th.



Photo: Brian Bluffery

Bewick's Swans

Bewick's Swans were seen at RSPB Boyton: 10 on the 5th, 15 on the 10th, 20 on the 24th whilst two were seen three times during the month at Minsmere. Twenty were seen over Westleton on the 27th, 28th and 31st and two at Dunwich on the 30th where four **Whooper Swans** were reported on the 2nd.

The wintering geese continued in good numbers at various locations, mostly **White-fronted Geese** in very good numbers (400+ in various size flocks) from several locations. Good numbers of **Tundra Bean Geese** and a few **Pink-footed Geese** were also reported. A group of seven **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** flew south past Minsmere on the 20th whilst a **Black Brant** was seen at Levington Creek in the field by the car park on the 26th.



Cattle Egret

Photo: Lesley Starbuck



Photo: Chris Courtney

Goosander

A nice male **Hen Harrier** was seen over Minsmere on the 11th, 27th and 28th and another at Carlton Marshes on the 22nd. A showy **Ring-tailed Hen Harrier** was in the Kingsfleet area on the 14th, 15th, 16th and

The **Common Scoters** in the bay off Dunwich continued into December with the biggest counts being 2,600 on the 2nd and 2,500 on the 3rd, the only other sizeable report after these dates was 500 south past Minsmere on the 20th. It was a similar story with the Velvet Scoter: high counts of 29 on the 2nd, 10 on the 16th, just two south at LBO on the 15th and a single same place on the 21st. At Dunwich there were two **Long-tailed Ducks** on the 2nd, 12th and 29th, three going north past Slaughden on the 13th, one at Aldringham Walks Reservoir on the 17th and one past LBO on the 20th. Two **Eiders** were at Dunwich on the 2nd. A single **Greater Scaup** was on Benacre Broad on the 20th, then two on the 26th.

A **Red-head Smew** was seen from Alton Water on the 4th. A first-winter drake **Smew** arrived at Thorington Street on the 10th where it remained till the month's end. At Minsmere, four **Goosander** were seen on the 15th, four at Wilderness Pond, Christchurch Park on the 17th and up to three remained till the end of the month, plus two on Alton Water on the 28th.

28th. Another Ring-tail was at Boyton on the 14th and one at Bucklesham on the 28th. At Felixstowe Ferry/Kingsfleet there was a good sighting of two **Merlin** on the 14th, then one at Boyton on the 20th and one at East Lane on the 29th and 31st.

On the 2nd at Dunwich shore pools, two **Spotted Redshank** were spotted (!). **Purple Sandpipers** were reported all month at Lowestoft (the highest count eight on the 31st), Southwold, Minsmere, East Lane and LBO. The **Jack Snipe** continued at Levington Lagoon.

A Bonxie was seen at Stutton Ness on the 28th. The first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was still lingering off LBO during the month, then later in the month a 2w at Hollesley RSPB till month's end. Still plenty of **Caspian Gulls** being reported from around the county during the month and a few **Yellow-legged Gulls**.

Good numbers of **Short-eared Owls** were still showing at usual SEO sites in Suffolk with five recorded at Shingle Street on several dates. Out of the blue on the 16th a **Hoopoe** was found at Finborough Road Estate Stowmarket on the 16th.



Short-eared Owl

Water Pipit sightings during the month: one at Minsmere on the 5th; one at Levington Creek on the 8th, 13th and 15th; two at Carlton Marshes on the 15th and two at Dunwich on the 30th. At Dunwich on the 1st there was a very late **Swallow**.

This month was quiet on the **Waxwing** front, with singles reported in Long Melford Country Park, Hollow Grove Way Carlton Colville, and Sudbury; three in Beccles Road, Bungay on the 30th and six in Pine Close, Rendlesham on the 30th; five the following day. Another wintering Yellow-browed Warbler was seen this month from another private garden, this time in Ipswich, on the 1st.

The **Great Grey Shrike** in the Sutton Heath area continued all month, but it became very mobile, ranging over large areas both sides of the road, sometimes going missing for many days; another was found at Fagbury on the 15th.

Photo: John Richardson



Photo: Lesley Starbuck

Great Grey Shrike

The **Twite** continued at Dunwich shore pools: highest counts were 70 on the 26th and 50+ on the 2nd, 9th and 29th. A **Hawfinch** was reported from Santon Downham on the 26th. **Snow Buntings** were seen at sites including Dunwich, LBO, Minsmere, Kessingland, East Lane, highest count being 20 at Dunwich on the 9th. The only **Lapland Bunting** report for the month was at Hollesley with seven on the 2nd. Finally **Corn Bunting** sightings were made at Lings Lane and East Lane Bawdsey.



Photo: Lesley Starbuck

Snow Bunting

January 2017

January was a cold month. Although the only day of recorded snow was the 13th with 2.5cm, only two days reached double figures at 10°C on the 9th and 11th and the lowest daytime temperature was 0°C on the 26th. There were 14 nights below zero with the coldest being 22nd at -6°C. The month's average high was 6°C and low was 0°C. Thirteen days were totally dry and eighteen had some rain or snow.

It was a poor year in Suffolk for winter swans especially **Whoopers**; the only reports were 15 at Lakenheath RSPB reserve on the 3rd and two at Falkenham Creek on the 5th. **Bewick's Swans** fared a bit better with 20

over the heath at Westleton on the 1st, 20 in fields north of the village on the 2nd, 23 on the 8th and 12 on the 29th; the same flock coming to roost at Minsmere RSPB on Island Mere on the 7th and there briefly on the 8th with 12 also reported there on the 27th. On the 2nd, five were seen west over Lackford and six at Hollesley RSPB, and the following day three at Lakenheath RSPB. Presumably the same five were joined by another and seen over Elveden and then over Lackford on the 5th, then two were seen on the 7th over Melton Park and finally 14 at North Warren on the 20th.

The wintering geese continued in good numbers throughout the county at many locations - too many to list, although **White-fronted Geese** had a really exceptional winter with a high count of 401 at North Warren on the 20th which interestingly included two sporting Russian Green neck collars. Good numbers of **Tundra Bean Geese** were associating with **White-fronts**: high counts of 20 at North Warren on the 21st and 14 from Trimley and Gedgrave on more than one dates. A few **Pink-footed Geese** were reported around the county, with a highs of 9 from Gedgrave and 8 at Boyton on several dates during the month.

Numbers of **Common Scoters** in the bay off Dunwich decreased in January, with the highest count being 800 on the 5th. **Velvet Scoter** numbers similarly dropped right off to leave a high count of six on the 8th. The Stour held onto this species all month with four on the 1st and still three reported on the 29th. A few **Greater Scaup** were seen from Dunwich, with a high of 9 on the 9th. Mark Cornish found a nice adult drake on the reservoir at Gedgrave on the 29th.

Regarding **Long-tailed Ducks**, the long-staying bird at Aldringham Walks Reservoir continued from the 1st to the 27th at least; 3-6 more were also seen regularly off

Hazelwood and the Alde from the 4th to the 27th. Up to 4 were also seen at Dunwich between the 4th and the 30th. The long-staying **Smew** (drake) at Thorington Street remained from the 1st till the 10th. Minsmere RSPB Island Mere held seven **Goosander** from the 1st to the 8th, then no further reports; at Wilderness Pond, Christchurch Park two were reported on the 4th and 5th only. There were still lots of wintering **Wigeon** and **Teal**, with excellent numbers at Hollesley RSPB.

Black-throated Diver sightings were made from the Orwell: one was seen on the 8th at Woolverstone, ranging from Pin Mill to the Orwell Bridge, still present on the 28th along the Strand.

A **Great Northern Diver** was reported off Slaughden on the 4th, another at Bawdsey Lagoons, East Lane also on the 4th; River Orwell off Levington Marina one was seen on the 5th and still present on the 27th at Pin Mill. **Slavonian Grebes** continued to be reported all month from the River Stour, River Orwell and Alton Water. There were four off Holbrook Bay on the 1st and two off the Strand. On the 21st, there were three on Alton Water and two on the sea at Minsmere on the 31st and a high count of seven was made on the 29th between Stutton and Holbrook Bay. A **Black-necked Grebe** was seen on Alton Water from the 1st to the 21st, mainly off Rabbets Wood, and another off Dunwich on the 9th and 10th. On the Stour a **Red-necked Grebe** was at Stutton Ness on the 1st where it remained till the 29th at least.

The **Shag** continued on the Stour and up to three other birds were reported during January on the Orwell – often seen along the Strand.

Three was the highest count of **Spoonbills** during January, this from Hollesley on the 31st. **Great White Egrets** continued and

were still evident throughout the period with Dunwich shore pools being the county hot spot. The faithful **Cattle Egret** remained at Sandy Lane Iken and showed very well all month, and the Baylham bird continued from the 1st to the 5th.

A nice sighting of a male **Hen Harrier** was made over Minsmere on the 2nd and 21st, followed by a male over Sotterley Park on the 6th. Ringtails sightings included one at East Bergholt on the 2nd and one from Marsh Lane Felixstowe on the 4th, 8th and 31st. This bird has probably been in the area all month. The **Merlin** was seen from here again, but only on the 5th, and one was sighted between East Lane and Shingle Street on the 5th.

Wintering **Purple Sandpipers** continued all month at Lowestoft Ness Point (highest count of 11 on the 1st), and East Lane where two were showing very well on and off all month. Other records included one at Slaughden by the Martello Tower on the 7th and 12th and one by the sluice at North Warren on the 12th. The **Jack Snipe** continued at Levington Lagoon during January and up to three birds were seen at the Managed Retreat area at Trimley.

The wintering **Glaucous Gulls** were still being reported throughout January, with the long-staying first winter bird at LBO on and off all month, plus another first winter on the 10th. The 2w at Hollesley RSPB also stayed the whole month and on the 21st both a first winter and an adult bird were reported, with additional reports of a first winter bird ranging between Dunwich, Minsmere, Sizewell, Thorpeness, North Warren, Aldeburgh, and Slaughden all month and single reports from elsewhere during the month. At Burrell Way, Thetford in the Suffolk side, both a first winter **Glaucous** and a first winter **Iceland Gull** were reported from the 17th to the 20th.

Plenty of **Caspian Gulls** were reported from around the county during the month but just one **Yellow-legged Gull** was reported – from Minsmere on the 21st.

The **Short-eared Owl** numbers remained good at the usual SEO sites with up to four continuing to be recorded between Shingle Street and East Lane Bawdsey on several dates. Several **Water Pipits** were still seen at some of the locations reported last month.

Plenty of **Waxwing** sightings in January, including many mobile double figure flocks. Maximum numbers reported at each site: 30 at Rendlesham, 10 at Dunwich Heath, 19 at Bury St Edmunds, 25 at Martlesham Square, 10 at Woodbridge, 50 in Ipswich, 15 at Aldeburgh, 20 at Nacton and 15 at Trimley.

A very unexpected **Pallas's Warbler** was found at Kessingland Sewage Works on the 6th where it remained till the 12th: I am presuming a first January record for Suffolk.

On the 8th a bird was photographed in Newmarket at Brickfields Avenue near the Studland Park Social Club. The heat was on as, from the photograph, the bird was thought to be a Orphean Warbler. It had a white iris and from the pictures, size could not be determined – it looked a first for Suffolk. With many birders at the site early on the 9th, a tick was hoped for. After several hours of waiting the bird finally showed feeding on apples; it was brief, but luckily it re-appeared for a second visit, although these were the only two all day. The many birders had different views of the small bird on their cameras and the majority thought it to be a unusual **Lesser Whitethroat**; and indeed this was confirmed that evening. The bird was again seen over the next two days feeding in the apple tree – as they say, you can't win 'em all.

The very elusive **Great Grey Shrike** continued in the Sutton Heath area all month; it was very mobile, ranging over

large areas both sides of the road, going missing for days at a time despite much searching by local birders. At one point a rumour went around that it had been seen near Kyson Point in Woodbridge! A **Raven** was seen over Kirton near Kembroke Kennels on the 2nd and another over Lackford on the 4th.

The colony of **Tree Sparrows** still continued at Ampton with 50+ being recorded over the month. A flock of 100+ **Bramblings** was reported from the Burrow Hill area at Boyton on the 2nd whilst the **Twite** continued at Dunwich shore pools, with highest counts of 51 on the 4th and 41 on the 29th.

Photo: Lesley Starbuck



Brambling

News of a **Little Bunting** was released from Knettishall on the north end of the old airfield on the 10th – this being its third day. It was feeding in set-aside crop cover, so was very elusive and only being seen when flying to hedgerow and bushes and perching with other finches. There were many **Chaffinches, Linnets, Reed Buntings** and a few **Bramblings, Yellowhammers** and **Corn Buntings**. Although it was reported on and off from the 10th to the 20th, sightings were very hit and miss and there were many disappointed birders who failed to connect in spite of making lots of effort to see this rare species for Suffolk.



Siskin

The only notable **Snow Buntings** count this month were at Slaughden with 16 on the 7th, and on the beach between Thorpeness and Aldeburgh 10-12 on various dates. The only **Corn Buntings** reported during January were four at East Lane on the 1st and nine along Lings Lane, Chelmondiston on the 20th.

February

February was a mild month, with eight consecutive days from mid month reaching double figures, including a massive high on the 20th of 17°C. Eighteen days had rain but only two nights produced temperatures of 0°C or below.

The poor winter for **Whooper Swans** continued, the only reports being three over Woodbridge Tide Mill and a single adult bird in fields between Culford and Timworth on the 19th, 25th and 27th. Similarly **Bewick's Swan** sightings were poor with just eight sightings, the greatest number being 40 going south at Aldeburgh on the 20th.

The wintering geese continued in good numbers into February throughout the county at many locations. **White-fronted Geese** were still very evident, the high count of 300 being at North Warren on the 19th.

Interestingly, a lime neck-collared bird reported recently was not one of the two seen at North Warren on the 20th of January; this individual S16 was ringed on the 4th



Redwing

May 2016, 350km NE of Moscow and was reported again in Holland on the 29th January 2017. More recently there have been four neck-collared birds at North Warren – three green and one red – I hope to have more information for the next edition.

Tundra Bean Geese in double figures were still seen associating with White-fronts – high counts of 103 from the South Wall Breydon Water at Humberstone Farm on the 16th being a possible Suffolk Record Count, and 95 on the 19th. At Hollesley RSPB a possible **Taiga Bean Goose** associating with ten Tundras was reported by Steve Abbott and Nick Mason; Dave Fairhurst and I confirmed the sighting on the 16th, although strangely it was not seen again after this date. There was a Taiga with the Tundras at Breydon on the same day and again on the 17th. The **Pink-footed Geese** were still around the county in smaller numbers with the highest number of 50 counted over Waveney Forest on the 5th.

The **Common Scoter** in the bay off Dunwich continued to decrease in number during February with the highest count of the month being 80 on the 10th. The **Velvet Scoter** remained about the same with five on the 18th and 19th, then only three on the 24th among other sightings. A few **Greater Scaup** were still being reported and the adult drake on the reservoir at Gedgrave remained till the 14th at least. A few **Long-tailed Ducks** were

still seen along the Suffolk coast with the highest number being five seen off Dunwich on four occasions. There were no reports of the long-staying bird at Aldringham Walks Reservoir and the long-staying **Smew** (drake) at Thorington Street was only reported on the 11th. The only other sighting from the county came from Minsmere where a drake and a Redhead arrived on the 8th and remained up to the 26th at least. Six **Goosander** were at Minsmere RSPB Island Mere on the 1st with the only other reports coming from Wilderness Pond Christchurch Park: two females on the 10th and a pair on the 24th.

Black-throated Diver sightings during the month included one on the sea from LBO on the 8th, the River Orwell bird from Stoke Sailing Club Freston on the 12th and 13th, plus off Levington Creek on the 15th. **Great Northern Diver** sightings included one off Slaughden on the 4th; several of the long-staying River Orwell bird from Levington

Marina; one off Loom Pit Lake on the 6th; and two off Levington Creek.

The **Slavonian Grebes** continued to be reported throughout February although **Black-necked Grebe** were thinner on the ground and the only **Red-necked Grebe** all month was from the River Stour, between Stutton Ness and Holbrook Bay.

Reports of **Shag** were a single from River Orwell, a first winter off Nacton on the 5th whilst on the Ore Estuary opposite Havergate a single adult was seen on the 6th and a first winter off Stutton Ness on the 10th.

Occasional **Spoonbills** were seen during the month, high counts of four from Hollesley on the 14th and three at Minsmere RSPB on the 28th. All month, **Great White Egrets** were reported although mainly singles. The very faithful and obliging **Cattle Egret** remained at Sandy Lane Iken and showed very well all month.



Photo: Barry Woodhouse

Fieldfare

A nice male **Hen Harrier** was again seen around Minsmere on the 9th, a Ringtail at Westleton on the 10th and one reported from Lakenheath RSPB on the 4th. A female **Merlin** was seen at Ferry Farm Butley on the 5th and the male was still being seen around Shingle Street/East Lane during the month. A **Rough-legged Buzzard** was observed coming to roost at Waveney Forest during the month. There were mid-month sightings of **Red Kites** at Stoke by Nayland, Levington Marina and Alton Water.

Wintering **Purple Sandpipers** continued all month with the highest count of 15 occurring at Lowestoft Ness Point on the 23rd. There have been up to eight Ruff at Hollesley RSPB all month and a wintering **Greenshank** at Wilford Bridge Melton. Surprisingly no **Jack Snipe** reports this month.

Offshore at LBO there was an **Iceland Gull** on the 14th. The wintering **Glaucous Gulls** were still being reported throughout February, with the long-staying first winter bird at LBO still being reported on and off most of the month. The 2w at Hollesley RSPB was also around for most of the month and was joined on the scrape by a first winter on the 10th. The first winter bird at Minsmere ranged along the coast all month and on the 28th a 2nd winter bird was seen. Very few **Caspian Gulls** were reported from around the county – just singles from Thetford, Sizewell, Butley and Trimley SWT.

Short-eared Owl numbers are still good and showing at usual sites in Suffolk. Good news: the **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** from Santon Downham are now being seen again with sightings reported along the river on the 15th, 24th and 26th.

There was an unexpected and unseasonal sighting made by Carl Bettle on the 24th of a **House Martin** over Benacre Broad; it was seen later in the day around the Cefas



Crossbill

Photo: Lesley Starbuck

Building on the edge of Lowestoft. On the 25th it was seen at dusk at Kirkley House, then on the 26th – amazingly – not one but two were seen near Claremont Pier early in the morning. On the 27th both were seen again around the Kirkley House area and on the 28th around the Cefas Building. Surprisingly this turned out not to be an early House Martin record for Suffolk, the earliest sighting having been made in 1998 at Southwold on 17th February.

An occasional **Water Pipit** was still being seen at its usual location (see previous reports).

There were still plenty of Waxwing sightings during February, being generally reported as very mobile. Flocks in double figures too many to number were widely reported with Lowestoft and Ipswich both seeing highs of 40 birds.

The very elusive **Great Grey Shrike** was seen a few times during the month in the Sutton Heath area still ranging over large areas both sides of the road. Another GGS was seen at Elveden in the Brecks several times, also reported as very elusive and ranging over a large area. A **Raven** was seen well over Flatford on the 11th although surprisingly this was the only sighting reported during February. A flock of 50 **Bramblings** was reported from Elveden on the 25th. The only report of **Twites** this month was 20 seen near the Bailey Bridge at Southwold on the 20th. And it was good to see the re-appearance of a single **Hawfinch** at Sotterly Park on five days during the month.

Book Review

Adam Gretton

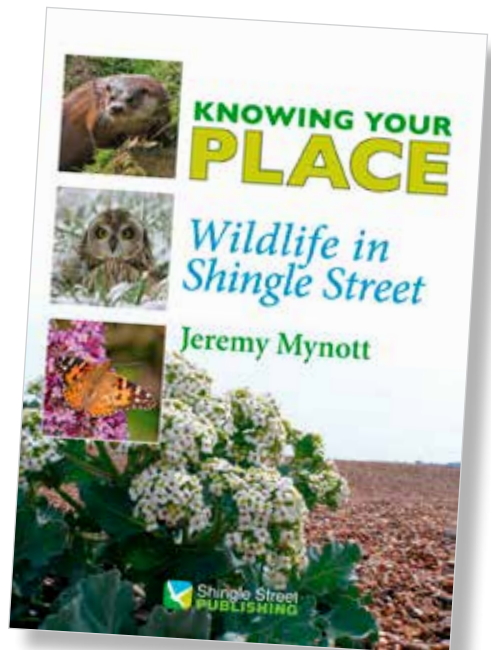
“Knowing Your Place – Wildlife in Shingle Street”

(Jeremy Mynott, 2016, Shingle Street publishing, £4.95)

There can be few SOG members who haven't visited Shingle Street, whether to admire the wintering Short-eared Owls or to look for migrants in the trees and scrub. This booklet summarises the results of multi-taxa surveys led by Toby Abreheart, with the participation of others, including Nick Mason, who regularly moth traps at Shingle Street (379 species recorded to date).

The simple premise behind the survey and booklet is that knowing our local places helps us to value them, and thus conserve them. Writers such as Mark Cocker and Paul Evans have produced recent books focused on their local patches (*Claxton* and *Tales from the Edge* respectively) and this publication has a similar focus, but based specifically on the survey efforts. In all, 1305 species have been recorded from Shingle Street; as well as the moth total above, 314 plants have been noted and 222 bird species, plus 59 spiders, 36 mosses, 28 lichens and even 3 leeches [how many of our local patch lists include leeches?]. A very impressive selection of photos by Suffolk photographers illustrate the booklet, covering species from a rare 2mm high snail and a sea slug, to more familiar species.

Jeremy Mynott encourages others on the Suffolk coast (and inland) to study their local parishes in a similar way, and speculates that the complete list for Shingle Street could reach 2000 species (beetles are a notable gap in the list, with 'only' 48 species recorded to date (out of a UK total of some 4000). Given that Minsmere has recorded some 5300 species, 2000 species for other coastal areas does not seem unreasonable. If you think you have further records to add to the Shingle Street list, or wish to see the full survey report, please visit www.shinglestreetsurvey.org.uk



Field Trip Reports

Ashley Gooding

SOG Field Meeting Essex Wildlife Trust Abberton Reservoir

26th November 2016

Leader Ashley Gooding

Since having moved over the border to Colchester, in darkest Essex, I thought that I would still lead a couple of outdoor meetings to show some members of SOG around the county. Having been to EWT Abberton on many occasions in the past, and not knowing the rest of the county very well, I thought that this would be an easy entry into Essex birding; there is always plenty to be seen at this time of year. As the twelve or so of us met up and exchanged pleasantries in the car park, several Redwings and Fieldfares could be seen in the tall trees across the road and Reed Buntings were heard in the reeds alongside the road.

The plan of action was to go to the visitor centre and cover the hides at that end of the reservoir before lunch, and then move out to various other points around the reservoir

to find any birds we had not yet seen. Once we had booked ourselves in at reception, we headed off on to the reserve. We climbed a small hill and took in the view from there, which looked like a good raptor watch point, and also commented on how good the newly planted wood would be in 20 years' time.

From the first hide it was evident that there were large numbers of birds present – testament to the good work done by Essex and Suffolk Water and the Essex Wildlife Trust in managing water levels to provide perfect conditions for wintering birds. The more common diving species, Tufted Duck and Pochard, were present in very good numbers, along with lots of Goldeneye, Gadwall, Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Mallard. The sun was quite strong and some of the male Goldeneyes started displaying to each other and to nearby females, throwing their heads back and letting out a rasping call. Also present on closer inspection of the muddy edges were a few waders: four Ruffs, two Green Sandpipers, Redshanks and a couple of Snipe. Amazingly, Barry managed to winkle out a Kingfisher so far away that it was on the cusp of vision and imagination, glowing in the sunshine on a reed stem. Several Stock Doves came down to drink at the water's edge joining a good mixed group of gulls.

From the second hide it was much the same with regards to the duck species present,



Lapwing

Photo: Peter Scott

although we did find two Black-necked Grebes, several Great Crested Grebes and a Goosander. A Peregrine, struggling with prey, flew across the reservoir and landed on the pumping station roof. We watched as it plucked, then devoured, its victim.

After a quick snack at the cars, we walked across the Layer de la Haye causeway, picking up a few more waders: three Ruffs, Snipe and two Green Sandpiper; and the bay was full of Tufted Ducks, Pochards and Goldeneyes. Near Billets Farm a large flock of Golden Plovers flew overhead and we concentrated on this area looking for the Corn Buntings that are often around the farm or on the other side of the road where the flash has dried up; however, a female Kestrel was very active in the area which probably contributed to the lack of Buntings.

We continued our walk up to the blind overlooking Wigborough Bay where there were a lot of Dunlins, Redshanks and 20+ Black-tailed Godwits with a few more Ruffs – all feeding on the mud exposed by the intentionally lowered water levels that provide ideal feeding areas for such species. We also had our first Smew of the day – a Red-head – as well as a lone Bewick's Swan and 50+ Pintails.

After lunch back at the car park, we drove to the Layer Breton causeway and, apart from the duck species we had seen previously, including another Red-headed Smew, we added little else to the day's tally apart from some very dodgy looking ducks! This area has become a good bet for Bittern in recent winters, although not today. We then drove round to Abberton church to locate a flock of Scaup, nine birds having been present during the week, but to no avail. We did however find 17 Goosander – 10 males and seven females – a male Red-breasted Merganser and two Common Buzzards, and a few SOG members eventually located a single Corn Bunting.

I would like to thank everybody who attended the meeting which made for a most enjoyable day out.



Photo: Chris Courtney

Ruff

Steve Fryett

SOG Field Meeting Brightlingsea River Colne

11th February 2017

Leader Steve Fryett

I first visited this venue a couple of years ago and thought how much it had to offer for bird watchers, particularly Grebes, so I booked a field meeting in 2017. There is much of a seaside resort feel to Brightlingsea with its open-air swimming pool, painted beach huts and sandy beach. Nine members

assembled at the end of Promenade Way on a raw winter's day with a thin layer of snow present. We started in front of the beach huts looking across to Cudmore country park on the opposite bank of the River Colne. Here we found 22 Skylarks feeding briefly before taking off and heading inland; these were

the only noteworthy birds seen for the next 20 minutes or so, as we made our way west and upstream along the river path fighting against another snow shower and the raw wind. Three Great Crested Grebes provided some interest and we soon found six Red Breasted Mergansers loafing in mid river. We noted one or two male Blackbirds taking flight from around the tideline suggesting these were passage migrants brought down during the cold weather. This area of Essex is well known for wintering Brent Geese so it was not surprising to find quite a few feeding in the margins. Several waders were located, albeit in low numbers, including Redshank, Dunlin, Grey Plover and Turnstone. Both Wigeon and Teal were noted with a couple of sightings of Marsh Harrier. In the distance on

the opposite bank at least a hundred Avocets were roosting. A sizeable flock of Brent Geese were located feeding on an inland field as we reached the end of our walk and returned, retracing our steps. Four Reed Buntings, Meadow Pipit and a female Stonechat made up the rest of the sightings as we completed the walk. The group enjoyed some most welcome hot drinks and rolls in the café at the end of the morning's walk to thaw out.

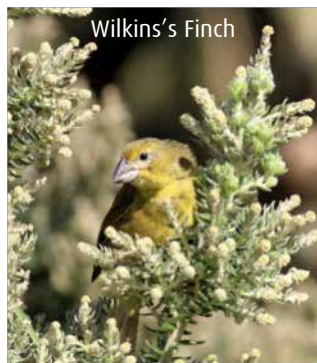
After lunch the remaining members headed off to explore Holland Haven. We were unable to take advantage of the viewpoint for a seawatch, however, as it was too windy, so we ensconced ourselves in the vandal-proof container hide to enjoy the over-wintering ducks and geese.

Apology

Due to an editorial mishap, some photographs in Dr Michael Bamford's magnificent 'South Atlantic Odyssey' became separated from their original labels at an early stage and were unfortunately not reunited in print until now. The Grey-headed and Wandering Albatross labels were reversed and the passerine titled 'Broad-billed Prion' certainly wasn't a prion, but rather a Wilkin's Finch.

My apologies go to Dr Bamford and readers of the Harrier, and my thanks and a pint to Ashley Gooding for being the first (of many) to point out my error, within minutes of publication.

The photographs with their (hopefully) correct labels are here.



Photos: Michael Bamford



Photo: Andy Hay, RSPB images

Will Kirby, Conservation Scientist, RSPB Centre for Conservation Science

Understanding Hawfinch declines – Saving Species

Research carried out between 2012 and 2016 has revealed new findings about Hawfinch habitat preferences, foraging and breeding behaviour and nest survival. Radio tracking and nest monitoring are providing the scientific basis required to devise actions that could help reverse the decline of this bird of conservation concern.

Hawfinch in decline in the UK

Weighing around 50g, the Hawfinch is the UK's largest finch, over twice the weight of the more familiar Chaffinch. With large declines in numbers and a severe contraction in breeding range, the Hawfinch is on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern and the latest estimate suggests there may be fewer than one thousand breeding pairs remaining in Britain.

Importance of woodland

RSPB Centre for Conservation Science began research into possible causes of Hawfinch

declines in 2012. The first part of the study focused on assessing whether habitat at landscape and local scale was linked to population declines. National Bird Atlas data from the British Trust for Ornithology were used to compare areas where breeding Hawfinch had been lost, with those where they remained. The main finding (perhaps unsurprisingly) was that they are more likely to have persisted in landscapes with a high proportion of mature, broadleaved woodland. Within woodland they preferred nest sites close to glades and tracks over densely wooded areas.

Radio tracking

Since 2013, our study has focused on breeding ecology in an attempt to establish whether poor nesting success could be the reason behind population declines. Finding Hawfinch nests is extremely difficult as they are usually sited high up in the tree canopy. In addition to this, the adult birds

are not particularly territorial or vocal and there aren't many of them. To help us find a reasonable sample, we teamed up with bird ringers in the Forest of Dean and North Wales during the pre-breeding season. This enabled us to fit radio-tags to females and, by tracking the signals, to locate their nests once they begin incubating their eggs. Although this sounds easy, it has proved a steep learning curve with many problems including loss and damage of tags, and the long distances travelled by the birds which sometimes took them outside of the study areas and into difficult terrain.

Monitoring methods

By refining techniques through experience, we have managed to find and monitor over 50 nests from 2013-2016. Nests can be built in any tree species and heights range from 3m to 30m from the ground. Once they have been located, we generally monitor them from the ground using a telescope. However, this limits the information that can be collected as it is not usually possible to see into the nest and we have to rely on adult behaviour to infer what is happening. In some instances, trained climbers have been able to install cameras to view inside the nest, allowing for much more detailed monitoring.

Nest predation

Nest monitoring has revealed the number of young birds hatching and fledging as well as the causes of nest failure, which have included poor weather and predation by Jays, Crows, Goshawks and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Interestingly, there have been no recorded instances of grey squirrel predation, despite these being common within the study woods.

New insights

In addition to measuring breeding success, we have had new insights into Hawfinch breeding behaviour, including evidence that they can have two successful nesting attempts in the same season. Females have also been recorded moving several kilometres to re-nest in a different wood after a nest fails.

Future plans – GPS tracking

Whilst tracking females to locate nest sites, we have learned that Hawfinches move more widely than was previously thought and to investigate this further we are trialling the use of miniature GPS trackers weighing just 1g. In the latter part of the 2016 breeding season, we attached a small number of GPS tags to Hawfinches. These tags store information about the birds location at hourly intervals during the day using information from Global Positioning Satellites and can track the birds' movements over the course of several days. The recovery of our first tag has provided data for the first detailed map of Hawfinch movements, confirming the wide use of the landscape in their daily foraging activity. Over the course of five days, the tagged bird was recorded in 12 different 1km squares and a range of habitats, including woodland, farmland hedgerows and gardens. We hope that further use of GPS tags next year will provide evidence of important food resources available at different times of the year and help establish the foraging range of adults feeding nestlings. This will provide us with key information for the design of future conservation measures.

This work is funded by the Action for Birds in England partnership between RSPB and Natural England, work which would not be possible without the input from many other individuals and organisations which provide access to woods and help with fieldwork.



Photo: Graham Catley

Graham Appleton

Moulting on the move

In most northern waders, post-breeding moult is a distinct phase – between autumn migration and the start of winter – but it’s different for Lapwings.

Primary moult is one of the key stages of a wader’s life. Knowing the length of the period in which birds are constrained by this energetic process may be really important to our understanding of the whole annual cycle of waders. In Oystercatchers, for instance, it has been shown that in periods of low food abundance they cannot finish their primary moult. One or more of the outer pairs of primaries remain, becoming more faded and worn as the next twelve months pass and providing a signal of a previous period of stress (BTO Research Report No 238).

Time to moult

For flocks of waders in Britain and Ireland, autumn moult is generally squeezed in between their return from their arctic and sub-arctic breeding grounds and the start of winter, when days get shorter, the weather gets colder and much of the prey becomes less numerous and harder to access. In the late summer, adult birds start to discard the colourful feathers that they grew in spring and the main wing and tail feathers that have served them well for the best part of a year. The key period of moult is the time in which the ten primary feathers are replaced. The inner one (primary 1) on each wing is dropped first and the outer one is last. Each of the ten primary feathers is scored from

0 to 5, so an old wing has a score of 0 and a new wing has a score of 50. During the process, there is a gap in the wing, where new feathers are growing. So, a typical bird in mid-moult might have ten feathers scored as 5554332100 (moult score 28), with primary four nearly fully grown and primary eight newly discarded. Unsurprisingly, flight capacity is impeded. It’s not a great time to migrate – unless you happen to be a Lapwing.

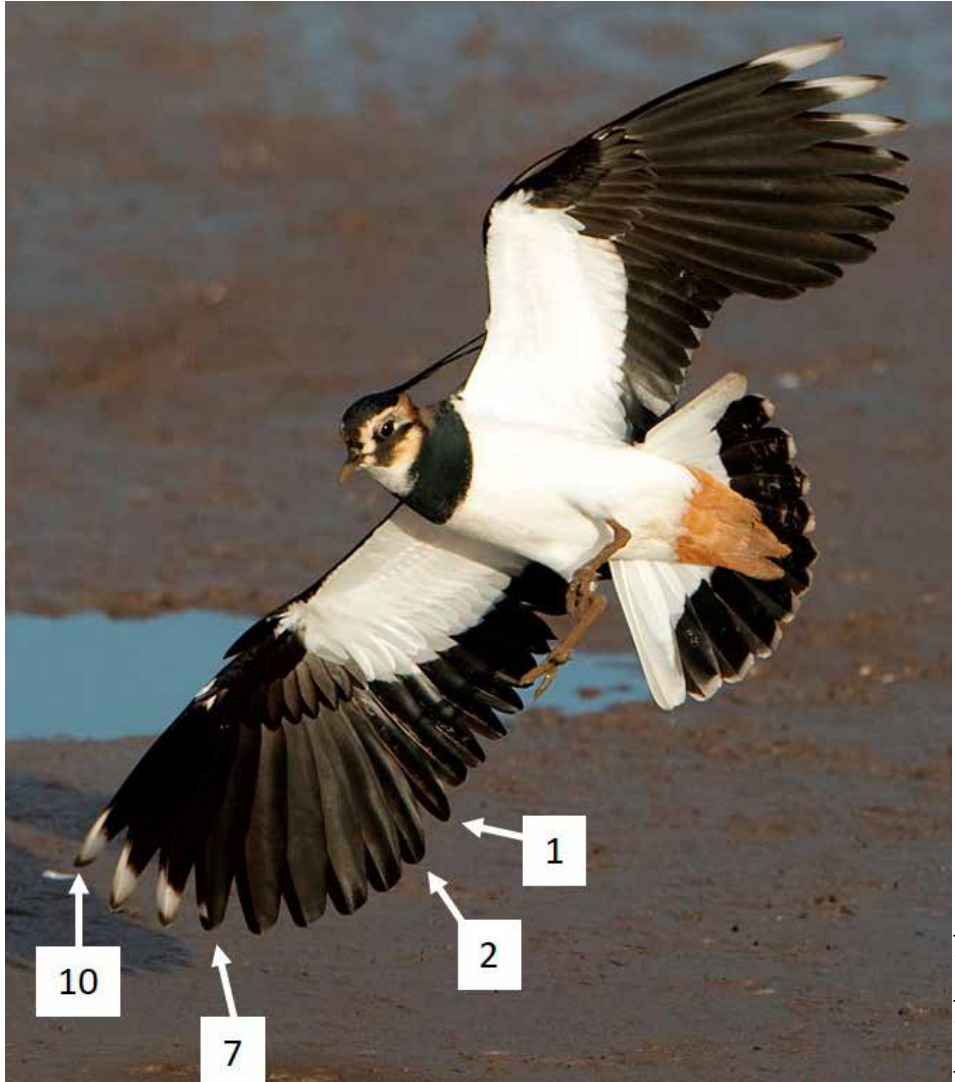


Photo: Graham Catley

The shape of a Lapwing’s wing is very different to that of most waders in the UK

Lapwing moult was first studied in detail in the 1970s, using an innovative technique that did not require birds to be captured. By collecting primary feathers dropped by a flock of Lapwings that spent several weeks near their Buckinghamshire home, David and Barbara Snow were able to estimate the

duration of moult. They did not start picking up feathers until August in 1974 but they were ready for the start of the 1975 season and captured a whole season's worth of data that year, visiting the site every four days during a long, dry summer.



The primary feathers of a Lapwing are unusually distinctive

Photo: Graham Cattle

David & Barbara Snow

David & Barbara Snow were each respected ornithologists in their own right and David was the author of the BTO's *Guide to Molt in Birds* and senior scientist in the bird section of what is now the Natural History Museum. Wherever they lived or worked – from Trinidad to Tring – they observed the birds around them, so when a flock of Lapwings gathered to moult near their home they decided to collect the feathers that they dropped. They discovered that it is possible to use the individual patterns of white spots and the lengths of primary feathers in order to assign primary number to discarded Lapwing feathers, and that this could be done with certainty for primaries 1, 2, 7 and 10 (with 1 being the innermost). Reference to a small sample of BTO moult cards allowed David & Barbara to assign moult scores of 1, 4, 29 and 41 to the points at which these four distinct feathers had been dropped and collected. The synchrony of moult in the two wings was evident: "Several times we found pairs of feathers lying exactly where they had been dropped, separated by a body width".

Much of what the Snows discovered from recording in detail the feathers shed by their local flock of 70 and 120 moulting Lapwing in 1974 and 1975 is still relevant. They suggest that the collection of dropped feathers might be a useful adjunct to the study of moult in situations where birds roost in the same place on a daily basis, as might be the case for flocks of gulls or individual raptors.

David and Barbara also collected secondary feathers and tail feathers. As there is a difference between the outer tail feathers of adult and first-year birds they were able to show that early moulters included a higher proportion of first-year birds. The paper is well worth a read. (David W. Snow & Barbara Snow (1976) Post-breeding Molt of

the Lapwing, *Bird Study*, 23:2, 117-120).

As far as I can ascertain, nobody has tried to use this technique again. I feel partially responsible, having written a follow-up paper with Clive Minton that pointed out some flaws in the methodology. These related to a lack of linearity in the progression of primary moult, as measured using the normal score of 0 to 50, based on 0-5 for the ten individual feathers, and the time taken to complete moult once the last primary has been dropped. Using data from Lapwings caught in cannon-net catches in the English Midlands, Clive Minton and I found that Lapwing moult starts very early, with median commencement and completion dates of about 7 June and 29 September – an estimated duration of 114 days and much longer than that suggested in the figure produced by the Snows. (G. F. Appleton & C. D. T. Minton (1978) The primary moult of the Lapwing, *Bird Study*, 25:4, 253-256).

Lapwings are strange

Most waders that we see in the UK have distinct moult and migration phases to the post-breeding portion of their annual cycle. After having successfully raised a brood of youngsters or attempted so to do, Turnstones, Bar-tailed Godwits, Knot etc. leave their nesting areas in the high Arctic and fly thousands of kilometres, arriving on our shores in July and August. Although some populations, such as most Dunlin of the *schinzii* race, only pause to fatten up and then move on to moult further south than the UK; many waders that use the UK during autumn undergo a full moult during this period. One can imagine circumstances in which a small flock of inland-moulting Curlew that use the same roost site on a daily basis might be studied in the same way as the Snows studied their Hertfordshire Lapwings, as long as the patterns on individual feathers allow the primary

number of some of the individual primaries to be assigned with a degree of certainty.

Unlike most of their wader cousins, many Lapwings migrate while moulting their primary feathers. Arctic species have to make long-hop migrations and are restricted in their choice of feeding areas by the distribution of estuaries, but Lapwings make short movements and can break their journeys as often as they like. The North Sea is the biggest barrier they face when making journeys from as far east as Russia but a crossing from the Netherlands to Suffolk is less than 150 km. Lapwings arriving on the east coast of England have been seen to have gaps in their primaries, despite the fact that these feathers deliver most of the lift and propulsion.

Moult strategy is not the only strange thing about Lapwings; they have also been shown to exhibit abmigration, a phrase coined by the late Chris Mead. Although most British-bred Lapwings return to their natal areas to breed, as shown by Pat Thompson et al in 1994, a small number of birds breed a long way from where they were hatched, including Russia, Norway and Sweden. The continental birds are thought to have joined flocks which happen to be travelling east in spring. Given that birds as old as 12 years of age have been found breeding in Russia,

it is assumed that, having once travelled to a new breeding area, birds will repeat the journey each year. Genetic mixing at large geographic scales would potentially explain a lack of plumage variation across the large range of the species.

Collect some feathers

Moult is currently only studied when birds have been caught but perhaps it might be possible to use digital photography to establish the moult duration of colour-ringed individuals or to use the Snows' technique of collecting feathers from a moulting flock of birds over a period of a few weeks. On an annual basis there may even be opportunities to monitor change. A reduced rate of moult, as measured by the annual collection of discarded primaries, could provide a way to assess inter-annual variation in stress. I wonder if moult periods have increased for birds on the East-Asia Australia Flyway, where they are experiencing reductions in feeding opportunities on their southward migration via the Yellow Sea. Wouldn't it be interesting if a technique first described by the Snows forty years ago could be used by a new generation of wader biologists when investigating the latest issues of conservation concern.



Photo: Graham Catley

An August high-tide roost. Perhaps Curlew feathers could be collected at low tide?

The Heron by Paul Farley

Although the Grey Heron is probably one of the easiest birds to identify, bird guide editors cannot leave out an entry on this bird based on the premise that ‘everyone knows them anyway’. The following descriptions from bird books are helpful (although the Dorling Kindersley judgement of ‘surprising agility’ remains unexplained). Collins Bird Guide 2nd edition gives us (their italics): “very *big*, strongly built Heron. Flies with *slow, somewhat irregular beats*, all the time with *wings strongly bowed*, often high up”. Collins Complete Guide to British Birds tells us: “in flight, note the broad wings and slow flapping wingbeats; the neck is held in a hunched ‘s’ shape and the legs and feet trail

behind”. Dorling Kindersley’s Birds of Britain and Europe adds: “it may also stand high in a treetop, or fly with surprising agility high overhead”.

But what they don’t do, and what Paul Farley’s poem The Heron does do, is to paint a vivid and amusing picture of this bird in such a way that we know exactly what characteristics he is describing. Farley uses basic knowledge of this bird but he does so by using language and poetic devices that might shock some, but they amuse me.

(Warning: this poem contains strong language).

The Heron

One of the most begrudging avian take-offs is the heron’s *fucking hell, all right, all right, I’ll go the garage for your flaming fags* cranky departure, though once they’re up their flight can be extravagant. I watched one big spender climb the thermal staircase, a calorific waterspout of frogs and sticklebacks, the undercarriage down and trailing. Seen from antiquity you gain the Icarus thing; seen from my childhood that cursing man sets out for Superkings, though the heron cares for neither as it struggles into its wings then soars sunwards and throws its huge overcoat across the earth.

Paul Farley

Photo: Barry Woodhouse



Grey Heron

Were you shocked? So why does he use the 'f' word or, to be more accurate, taboo language and what effects does he create when he does so? And that's not all he does in the opening sentence. I will come back to the taboo language in a moment. Farley is clever. The title 'The Heron' gives no clues as to how this poet is going to approach his subject. At the end of the first line we have absorbed the words 'begrudging' and 'avian' used to describe the 'take-off'. 'Begrudging' is not a neutral word. He is already beginning to create his view of this bird's personality as well as a description of the way this bird leaves the ground. The metaphor comparing the Heron to how humans describe powered flight begun with 'take-off' is extended as he uses 'they're up', 'departure' and 'flight'. So the Heron is airborne but with great reluctance. And it is that reluctance that the taboo language captures so unexpectedly and amusingly. The Heron's supposed utterances are in italics. But it is another comparison. In Farley's imagination the Heron taking off is like an old man struggling out of his chair and speaking to, I presume, his wife. She appears to have asked him to go to the garage and buy her some cigarettes ('Superkings' to be precise). He is grumbling, annoyed, more than irritated and one of the functions (there are several) of taboo language is to show strong emotion. He's going, but he resents being asked and resents going. And now I have in my head the sequence of a Heron's take off: that unfurling of wings that seem too long for full control, that lack of grace, that bent neck and head bobbing and the hunched look as the flapping starts. Cranky old man? Absolutely.

What's next in Farley's observation? I thought about the connotations of 'extravagant'. What does Farley want to imply? Spending money excessively, going

beyond reasonable limits, or possibly, elaborate and lavish display? Maybe all of these. Certainly when we read 'big spender' in the next line the excessive spending of money connotation seems to be in Farley's mind. But it's not money – it's energy. Such a big bird requires a lot of fuel and 'calorific waterspout of frogs and sticklebacks' reminds just how costly – in terms of consumption of other creatures – it is to get this bird into the air.

Now Farley moves to use another reference to describe this strange pre-historic looking bird. The words 'Seen from antiquity you gain the Icarus thing' asks the reader to picture Icarus as he soared into the sky with feathers attached to his arms by wax. Ungainly? Half-finished? Bit ragged? Out of control? Possibly all these and more. The reference seems to me to suggest the impossibility of this bird being able to fly at all – and yet it does. And once it has struggled to get up it soars, but unlike Icarus does not crash into the sea. The poem concludes with a return to the idea of the Heron resembling an old man and it seems to be a personal reflection by the poet on his childhood – that even as a child he saw the bird's movements in this way. This time the size of the bird's wings is compared to the old man's overcoat – perhaps too large for a shrunken frame.

Have Farley's observations developed my knowledge of this bird? Well, perhaps not direct knowledge of the bird, but Farley's poem did make me think about and marvel again at how old this species is, how strange a creature it is, how dependent it is on other life forms in the food chain and how amazing it is that it survives at all.

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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
- Active Twitter feed - @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.



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