

Spring 2016 No.184



The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

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Great Northern Divers (*Gavia immer*) photographed by Barry Woodhouse @digiscoper using Nikon D3300 T2 mount adaptor & Celestron 100ed scope.

Contact email for articles, photographs, notes and observations is:

harrier@sogonline.org.uk

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Website: www.sogonline.org.uk Email: info@sogonline.org.uk

Twitter: @suffokbirds1 Text/Tel: 07951 482547

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Editorial

Welcome to the Spring Harrier 184, though as I write this, there is definitely no spring in the air. I hope you'll enjoy the range of articles inside.

There is an update on our SOS Swift campaign as well as the 2016 plans for Operation Turtle Dove. Both the Garrod and Dennis Ockleton awards were presented at the AGM – see inside for the winners. Eddie Marsh has taken over the reins of the monthly bird news review and a couple of other changes are detailed in the notes of the AGM.

The 'Wild Ipswich' project to map the county's House Sparrow and Swift populations asks for volunteers; as does an article about Springwatch in Malta – which is vastly different from Springwatch on the BBC. You can read about their work and see how they monitor illegal hunting: it would make for a very different type of birding holiday. Operation Turtle Dove's monitoring programme also needs volunteers, so there are plenty of opportunities to get actively involved.

There's news of the Dutch research into Spoonbills as they journey from Mauritania to Western Europe. I was struck by what a fantastic recovery Spoonbills are making right across Western Europe, with the population taking off in several countries over the last 10 years, giving a much-needed sense of hope. The article's co-author, Professor Theunis Piersma, is a world authority on the ecology of migratory birds and in 2014 was awarded

the Spinoza Prize, the so-called 'Dutch Nobel Prize' worth €2.5 million – we are not worthy!

Stephen Rutt is our SOG exile again, this time from North Ronaldsay, where he shows it's not all bird ringing and survey work, and Alison Ballantyne provides this edition's poem: 'Wren' by Ted Hughes.

Birding highlights for me recently have been the SOG trips to Levington and the Brecks, meeting new members, having a laugh and seeing great birds. My kids had good fun taking part in the RSPB Garden Watch. We were very pleased to see Redwing in our garden, quite chuffed in fact, until I heard that Chris Courtney had got a Waxwing in his! It was nice also to add both Cattle Egret (amongst cattle) and Green-winged Teal to my Suffolk list. I had seen a Cattle Egret previously in Suffolk, but wasn't sure I could tick it, as it was only associating with the Konik ponies at Minsmere.



Photo: Chris Courtney

Waxwing

Great excitement was caused recently when a SOG member sent in a photograph of an odd-looking bird (see photo) in her garden, asking for help in identifying it. It had the sniff of a Yank sparrow with its heavily streaked markings and looked very interesting indeed. It eventually turned out to be a Dunnock – the result of back-of-camera reproduction of a slightly over-exposed image – and the twitch was called off, but not until car parking and fundraising plans were being dreamt of.



Dunnock

SOG has a series of field events and the last spring talk coming up. It'll be great to see

you at any of these, especially the April talk, where Val Lockwood and I are the speakers. If you're going to bring fruit, please make sure it's ripe.

If you've never visited the STANTA area in springtime do book yourselves on the upcoming SOG trip, last year's trip was unforgettable. I hope the Trip Reports will inspire and encourage some of you to come along – there's always a warm welcome.

Finally, massive thanks go to the correspondents & photographers who've contributed to this edition; it's been a pleasure putting it together and I hope you enjoy it too.

AGM

A great evening was had by all at this year's AGM, held on 24th February at the Holiday Inn in Ipswich. Over £100 was raised by the raffle with additional monies raised by the prints, second hand books and magazines.

The Garrod Award

We're pleased to announce that the winner of the inaugural 2016



Ben Moyes & Jean Garrod

Garrod Award is Ben Moyes.

This award, which is to be presented annually, has been set up in memory of Ken Garrod and in recognition of both his past – and his wife Jean's ongoing – huge contribution to SOG and Suffolk birding and honours the year's most promising young birder.

Aged 16, Ben already volunteers for both the BTO and the RSPB, the latter as a guide at Minsmere. During 2015 he completed two spells of work experience at the BTO, taking part in a number of activities that included nest recording and writing for their website, as well as encouraging young birders at the Birdfair. He also completed both a Breeding Bird Survey and a House Martin square survey. As well as all this, Ben competes in the Patchwork Challenge competition and has already had a Suffolk rarity (an extremely well-documented Honey Buzzard) accepted by SORC. We're sure he'll go on to find other goodies in the future.

Ben was nominated by, amongst others, David Walsh, who was particularly taken with Ben's abilities as a birder, citing both his superb knowledge and quick recognition of bird calls – a high accolade from David, who is himself no slouch! – and his interest in the wider natural world, which has led to visits with David to look at Emerald and Scarce Emerald Damselflies at Redgrave and orchids at Market Weston Fen.

Jean Garrod herself presented the award to Ben at the AGM.

Photo: Gi Grieco

Dennis Ockleton Award

Steve Piotrowski was presented with the Dennis Ockleton Award by John Grant for his services to the Suffolk birding community. He then entertained us with a talk on his birding experiences in Suffolk. Steve has been on Council in various roles for 38 years and will continue to run both the SCBOP and CARP campaigns.



Photo: Gi Grieco

Minor changes to the SOG constitution were proposed and endorsed by members present as follows.

Two new additions to Council were voted in, bringing us back to full strength. We know Samantha Lee from the RSPB, whilst Alex Rafinski, new to SOG, joins us as Communications Officer. In addition, the role of Membership Secretary and Treasurer has been formally divided into two distinct roles with Kevin Verlander elected Membership Secretary and Matthew Deans continuing in his role as Treasurer.

The SOG accounts can be viewed via the website.

John Grant presenting the Denis Ockleton Trophy to Steve

Edward Jackson

SOS Swifts – Project Update



Our joint SOG/Suffolk Wildlife Trust project is designed to raise awareness of the steep drop in Swift numbers in recent years and to encourage individuals, communities and county-wide organisations to take action to help reverse these declines. As we move into the project's third season here are areas where we have been active in the past 12 months and some of our plans for 2016.

Swift events for local communities

Our July evenings at Lower Layham and Blaxhall both involved an illustrated talk on Swifts followed by watching the local colonies in and around their nesting sites. We are planning at least two events in different parts of the county this summer. Details will be posted on the SOG and SWT websites, so please do come along if you can.

Recording Swift colonies and nest sites

By 2020 we are aiming to know where all Swift colonies are in Suffolk and whether they are present or absent in each rural parish and urban ward. Last year Suffolk Biological Recording Centre helped us set up a dedicated Suffolk Swift Survey page on their website (see link below). Please use this as much as you can this summer to record Swift screaming parties and known nest sites (both in buildings and in artificial nest boxes). If you know of a long-established colony or a nest site that has regularly been in use for some time, please say so on your record.

As the Swift is a Suffolk Character Species, these records are being regularly forwarded by SBRC to all the District and Borough Planning Departments and are therefore

available to case officers who determine planning applications, particularly those involving major alterations or demolition of older buildings. This does work – last year, records of Swifts seen around a site due for conversion into a housing development in Long Melford led to a planning condition for the developer to include Swift nest boxes within the new buildings. A great result!

If you are willing to be a ‘Swift Searcher’ this summer, looking for colonies in a wider area than just around your own home, please contact SWT on 01473 890089 or info@suffolkwildlifetrust.org

Note that SBRC is being rebranded this spring as Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service (SBIS), but the following link to the survey page will continue to work: www.suffolkbrc.org.uk/swift

Linking up with other groups and organisations

We’ve made some very useful contacts with the RSPB Groups in Ipswich with Chris Courtney, and Woodbridge with Jenny James, both of whom are organising Swift surveys around their towns this year. If you live in or around either town you can find out more via the Local Groups page of the RSPB website. All their records for 2016 will be added to the SBRC/SBIS website. See below for more details.

We’ve helped staff working at the Environment Agency main offices in Ipswich arrange for a dozen Swift nestboxes to be installed within the roofspace over the eaves. They will be playing Swift calls through CD players in June and July to encourage first-time breeding pairs to make use of this new site and we really hope these do the trick!

Churches are often a focus for Swift colonies. We had a very productive meeting recently with Marion Welham, Church Heritage and Tourism Officer for the St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Diocese. Based on information we have supplied, she has created a ‘Swift Alert’ page within the diocese website that encourages Parochial Church Councils to take special care when planning church maintenance. As with any building where Swifts come back to nest year after year, it’s so easy to destroy a colony unwittingly by carrying out inappropriate and/or badly-timed repairs. Take a look here: angelsandpinnacles.org.uk/suffolk-churches/swifts

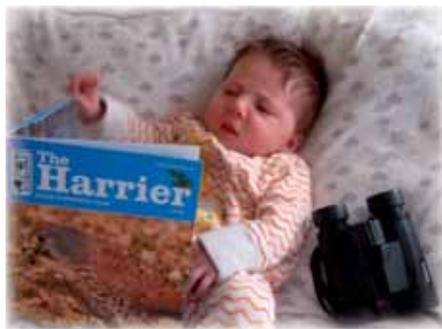
Countdown to Swifts returning

As we go to press there are 41 days till the expected return of our Suffolk Swifts on 7th May! You can find out more about the SOS Swifts Project on the SOG website at: www.sogonline.org.uk/sos-swifts and about Swifts in general on Dick Newell’s excellent blog actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk

Announcement

Laura & Allan Myatt are delighted to announce the birth of their daughter, Thea Alice, on 7th January 2016. Thea first toured RSPB Minsmere aged just 10 days and her favourite birds are suspected to be young Barn Owls, which, being fluffy, smelly, noisy and endearing, have a natural affinity with her!

Welcome to SOG, Thea!



Operation Turtle Dove: From Suffolk to Senegal (and back again)



Photo: RSPB Images

Titan the tagged Turtle Dove

In 2014, two Suffolk Turtle Doves were fitted with satellite tags. With an autumn migration of over 5,000km to take on, there were no guarantees that either bird would successfully survive migration back to their wintering grounds, or that they would complete the full round trip back and return to Suffolk the following year. However, against the odds and in a UK science first, one of them did. Titan the Turtle Dove, tagged in a garden on the Suffolk coast, revealed for the first time the migration route, wintering grounds and stopovers that a UK breeding Turtle Dove makes.

Flying mostly under the cover of darkness, Titan flew across epic landscapes such as the Atlas Mountains, Sahara Desert and the Gulf of Cadiz. The satellite tag also uncovered that he travelled around 500-700km per night flying at a maximum speed of 60km per hour.

Titan's outbound journey to Africa, where he wintered for six months, took around a

month to complete. On his return trip, the avian jetsetter spent two weeks making his way through France, initially following the Atlantic coast, before leaving Dunkirk and touching down in Suffolk on 22nd June, within the same area where he was first found and tagged. Over the summer, Operation Turtle Dove staff tried to catch up with Titan, but, despite regular sightings, were not able to discover if he successfully found a mate and produced young.

Titan departed once more for his West African breeding grounds on 17th September last year, safely reaching his wintering grounds by the second week of October.

Unfortunately, due to local political instability, our research team was not able to follow Titan to Mali; however in October a team of two researchers from the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science travelled out to Senegal and recently returned for a second stint in mid-January.

The team's work falls into two parts. First, based at a known roost site (35,000 Turtle Doves were counted there last year), they plan to catch birds and fit lightweight GPS tags to get a better idea of the fine-scale foraging behaviour of wintering birds. And in another science first, we can confirm that the first fitting of a GPS tag to a Turtle Dove whilst in its African wintering grounds has been achieved – welcome on board Françoise! Second, they carry out roving surveys, travelling the length and breadth of Senegal (and Gambia on their latest visit), investigating the factors that determine the large-scale distribution of the birds.

Although it is early days – and no analysis of the data they have collected has yet been attempted – a few patterns have emerged, highlighting the importance of three things: a safe place to roost, a source of water and good foraging habitat. Birds are often found along river valleys and floodplains, which provide not only water, but also the densest cover of trees. As for foraging, the birds have been seen feeding on a variety of sources, including the seeds of wild grasses, rice, sorghum, and even fragments of peanuts.

With just two months left before we expect to see our first arrivals back on UK breeding grounds, 2016 is already shaping up to be a busy year for Operation Turtle Dove.

As a result of a successful EU Life bid, experts from across the Turtle Dove flyway will work together to produce an International Species Action Plan to ensure conservation action is being taken across Turtle Dove range countries.

We will be continuing to trial conservation solutions for Turtle Doves, working closely with our partners – Natural England, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust and Conservation Grade – to deliver habitat advice to farmers and landowners across core Turtle Dove breeding range.

Your help needed

The first phase of a long-term monitoring programme to record Turtle Dove territories annually within core Operation Turtle Dove advisory areas will also be launched – and this is where SOG members are called to action! We are currently recruiting survey volunteers that we can match to participating farm sites within Suffolk and Essex. If you are not averse to waking up at the crack of dawn (literally, as mid-summer surveys will need to start at around 4.30am!) please contact Katy Froud, RSPB Conservation Monitoring Officer on katy.froud@rspb.org.uk or 01603 697592.

Members can continue to support farmers producing our food in wildlife friendly ways; a full list of products can be found on the Conservation Grade website and includes RSPB bird food.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who has supported us over last year and beyond. Our enormous gratitude goes to Heather Maclean who allowed us to catch a Turtle Dove in her garden and named him Titan – we hope to welcome him back this year. Sadly, Heather passed away, and never saw Titan return, but the information that this Turtle Dove continues to provide is part of her legacy. To Jonny Rankin and the Dove Step Team who continue to push human endurance levels to the limit in their efforts to raise awareness and funds for Turtle Dove conservation, go our thanks and admiration. Tristan Reid who completed 1,000 miles for Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon – a species whose story is sadly being mirrored in the decline of the Turtle Doves – is another of our supporters to whom we are indebted. And finally thanks go to all the farmers and landowners who continue to work with us to ensure that each year when Turtle Doves return, they will still find suitable habitat for rearing their young.

www.operationturtledove.org

'Wild Ipswich' Swifts and Sparrows Project – RSPB Ipswich Local Group

Photo: Liz Cutting



House Sparrow

I would imagine that most, if not all of us birders, myself included, could stand accused of having been casually dismissive or even of having made disparaging remarks about House Sparrows at some point during our birding careers!

House Sparrows, for so long that most ubiquitous of urban species, have been re-listed since 2002 and, according to the BTO's 'Birds of Conservation Concern 4' publication from December 2015, are estimated to have declined by 66% since 1969. This sad, long-term drop in the population of House Sparrows provides a link to that other urban breeding species and denizen of our summer skies, the formerly much more 'common' Swift, now also diminishing in the UK by some 3% year-on-year. On the face of it, perhaps 3% doesn't sound that high, but sustained at that level would mean Swifts becoming extinct as a UK breeding species by 2050!

Most of us at least are fully aware there is no longer any room for complacency. But to what degree is this message understood by the wider public?

At RSPB Ipswich Local Group, we decided that we'd like to do something practical to help reverse the downward trends of both of these priority urban species, while at the same time attempting to raise awareness among the wider public.

In partnership and collaboration with other wildlife charities and projects, such as Ipswich Wildlife Group (IWG), the Greenways Countryside Project, SOS Swifts and SOG, we have created a project to survey breeding populations and follow up with an affordable nestbox scheme and planned installation service.

Two surveys, two aims

In 2006, the group conducted a survey of House Sparrows in Ipswich that – although not entirely comprehensive in coverage – revealed the principal areas of House Sparrow presence and absence across the town.

Ten years on we are repeating this exercise, in two surveys. The first is a modified and improved citizen science-style questionnaire; the second a more detailed, randomized

sample survey based on the Protocol for Censusing Urban Sparrows drawn up by the Working Group on Urban Sparrows (WGUS) in 2009.

Whilst the latter provides a statistically rigorous metric, the citizen science questionnaire has great value as both a mechanism for gaining access to otherwise unreachable private areas, such as gardens; whilst also raising awareness of conservation issues and engendering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among residents for 'their' local wildlife.

Once the Swifts arrive from early May we will then also be encouraging our network of volunteers to record Swift breeding and 'screaming party' records directly into the Suffolk Biological Records Centre (SBRC), where the accumulated House Sparrow data will also be input.

The results of all these surveys will feed into conservation management plans across Ipswich, in order to improve urban habitats for these species through nestbox and Swift brick provision; as well as initiatives to identify, preserve and even create new habitat features, such as hedges, shrubs, trees and water features - all this in conjunction with the existing work programmes of IWG and the Greenways Countryside Project.

The information will also be used to help update and extend the Ipswich Wildlife Network: a landscape-scale plan designed both to connect existing wildlife habitats, and improve biodiversity resilience throughout the town.

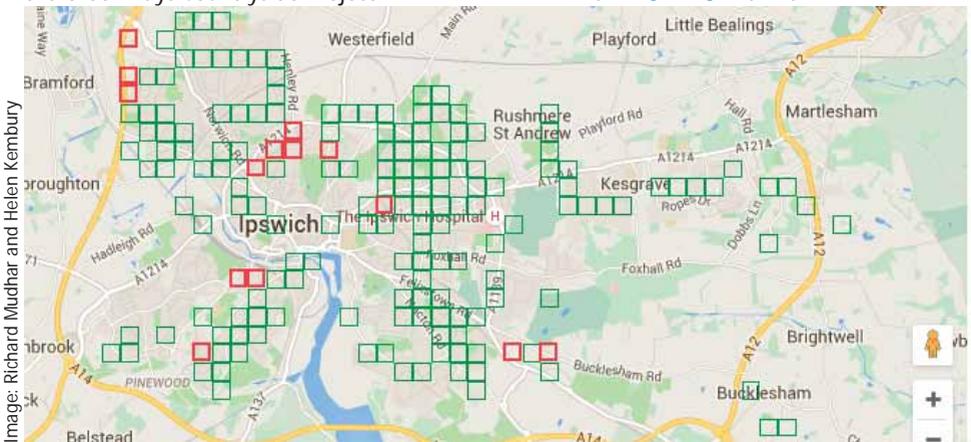
Volunteers needed

Given the great resource of expertise to be found among SOG members, we would like as many of you as possible to participate in these surveys that kick off on 1st April.

The Level 1 Questionnaire can be completed by anyone across Suffolk and, although as the name suggests the Wild Ipswich project is principally focused on Ipswich, records submitted from anywhere in Suffolk will be input on SBRC and will help establish a useful county-wide data set of House Sparrow records. It should be noted that negative records are equally valuable.

The Level 2 WGUS Survey requires a slightly higher level of commitment and allocation of a survey square(s). Each survey square will require two to three visits during April and May, with each visit expected to take around two hours. All help will be gratefully received as we wish to be as comprehensive as we can.

For full details of the questionnaire, surveys, and to volunteer, please see our website www.rspb.org.uk/groups/ipswich



House Sparrow distribution 2006

Spring Watch in Malta

Every April BirdLife Malta organises Spring Watch, a monitoring camp aimed at recording bird migration, hunting pressure, and wildlife crime. Nick Piludu, BirdLife Malta's Conservation Officer and the camp's coordinator, gives an insight into the everyday monitoring work carried out by camp volunteers. Their presence in the field during hunting seasons along with the data collected are of great importance to bird conservation in the Maltese islands - located right in the middle of a migration route, but notorious for bird hunting.

We jump in the car when it's still pitch black. Our equipment - scopes, binoculars, cameras - lies in the back, ready to be used. It's a sleepy drive through the Maltese countryside and still cold this early in the morning, so we keep our windows closed. The bastions of Mdina, the old capital perched on a hill, appear on the horizon, lit up by warm lights. Seeing St. Paul's Cathedral, enveloped by light against the black sky, always cheers me up - even at this ungodly hour.

We drive. The roads get rougher, rubble walls start appearing on both sides as we make our way to our destination: one of the many valleys in Malta where migrating birds are targeted by hunters. We get there when the sky is just starting to turn pink, leave the car, take up our position on top of a hill. The scope is set up, we start scanning the valley. We enjoy a few moments of quiet, soon broken by the first gunshots. One, two. We spot the hunter walking through a field, excited dogs jumping around him. He kneels down, picks up a Quail and puts it in his bag. We record the kill on our datasheets as the Spanish Sparrow roosts start to wake up, flooding the valley with their chirping.

The Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) is one of two species that can be legally hunted in Malta during spring, thanks to a derogation from the Birds Directive of the European Union - a piece of legislation that specifically protects birds migrating to their breeding grounds. Spring

hunting is a dangerous, destructive practice that disproportionately affects bird populations, as it prevents migrating birds from breeding.

Common Quail populations in Europe are dwindling. But things are much worse for the Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), the other species that can be legally hunted in Malta. Turtle Dove populations are crashing, fast. The species has recently been uplisted to Vulnerable by the IUCN, yet hordes of hunters will stalk the Maltese countryside to kill their share.

The sun rises, bringing colour back to the world. Turtle Doves start darting across the valley, invariably spotted by the birdwatchers who have come from all over Europe to join BirdLife Malta in its monitoring work. The migration is recorded, as well as the kills. Again, shots, in quick succession and a Turtle Dove falls to the ground, hidden by the shrubby garrigue vegetation - everything is filmed to be used as educational and campaigning material later on. A few more Turtle Doves disappear behind the next hill, followed by a barrage of shots. We do not see how many go down, but we record the number of shots, which will allow us to estimate the hunting pressure at the end of the season.

Things go quiet as the morning progresses. It's getting warmer, we are hearing fewer shots, seeing fewer birds. Hunters start to pack their guns, put the dogs back in their cars.

We do the same; hop back in the car, make

our way to our base of operations, process our footage and data. Then we join the other teams for breakfast, chatting about our shift,

birds, and how good it feels to finally have a cup of coffee. We take a break. Only a few hours before the afternoon shift starts.

Volunteers are a key part of monitoring work, and BirdLife Malta is very happy to welcome birdwatchers who are not afraid of long hours in the field and very little sleep! Spring Watch 2016 will run between the end of April and the beginning of May, and there are still a few places left. If you would like to join in this spring or in 2017, please get in touch with Nick via his email nick.piludu@birdlifemalta.org.



The changing fortunes of the Spoonbills of the East Atlantic Flyway

Petra de Goeij^{1,2,3}, Otto Overdijk², Tamar Lok¹, Theunis Piersma^{1,3}

¹Animal Ecology Group, Centre for Ecological and Evolutionary Studies, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 11103, 9700 CC Groningen, The Netherlands

²Werkgroep Lepelaar, Visserspad 10, 9142 VN Moddergat, The Netherlands

³Department of Marine Ecology, NIOZ Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, P.O. Box 59, 1790 AB Den Burg, Texel, The Netherlands

The near-extinction of a very common bird

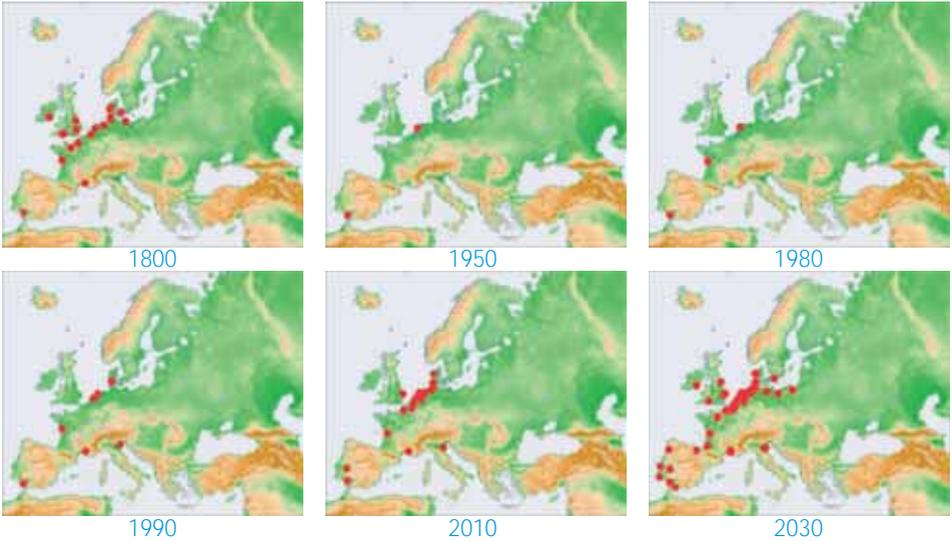
Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia leucorodia* have probably been around in Europe for as long as there have been people. In the Netherlands, skeletal remains of Spoonbills were found in excavations of a 580 BC site. Two thousand years later, from the year 1360, there is an account of Spoonbills breeding in the “Goudsche Bosch”, in the southwest of the Netherlands. In East Anglia, in mediaeval times, young Spoonbills were apparently dished up during feasts of the local gentry, suggesting good breeding numbers. This left one trace in a nice woodcarving in Lavenham church.

Spoonbill and Ibis carvings on a 15th century seat in the church of St Peter and St Paul in Lavenham.



Photo: T. Piersma.

The last known breeding of Spoonbills in the UK was from 1668. Around 1850, in the Netherlands, Spoonbills were reported breeding by the thousands on islands in a single (among many possible) lake, the Horstermeer. Here, eggs were collected, and in the peak of the breeding season it was possible to collect 1,600 eggs twice a week (Brouwer, 1954). In addition, the unfledged chicks were collected and sold to England for consumption. In 200 years the English apparently had not lost the old habits that led to the Spoonbills' demise there. This suggests that that in the Middle Ages and even later many thousands of Spoonbills were breeding in the Netherlands alone. And as their breeding distribution would likely have extended to other wet lowland areas and the extensive brackish river deltas of eg the Elbe, Eems, IJssel/Flevo, Schelde, Thames, Somme, Seine and Loire, it is likely that up to the late 19th century, more than, or perhaps several, tens of thousands of Spoonbill pairs may have been breeding in northwestern Europe.



Distribution of Spoonbill *P. i. leucorodia* breeding areas (key populations in NW Europe) in the period from 1800 (reconstruction), across known times till 2030 (prediction) (modified after Overdijk 2013)).

From the harvesting of eggs, young and perhaps even adults, coupled with the loss of breeding and feeding habitat due to dyke building, drainage and land reclamation for agriculture, industry and housing, Spoonbills went into a steep decline that may well have been amplified by the downstream effects of the use of agrochemical pesticides. At about 1950 the number of Spoonbill pairs reached an all-time low. In the Netherlands only one colony of 150 pairs survived and the single nearest known colony was situated 2,000 km away in southern Spain, in the Doñana. Spoonbills were close to extinction along the East-Atlantic Flyway.

The partial recovery of European Spoonbills

By the 1970s agrochemicals such as DDT and PCB became banned or at least better regulated and protection measures were put in place to protect breeding and non-breeding waterbirds, including Spoonbills. All of these measures, some of which were

actively created by a burgeoning international 'Spoonbill community' (Navedo et al. 2013), paid off with a gradual, but continuous increase in the number of Spoonbill breeding sites and breeding numbers. By 2010 - 2014 around 6,000 breeding pairs were found in western Europe, distributed over 60-80 colonies. Initially the increase was slow: from 10 colonies in 1970 to 15 colonies in 1995, but then the spread continued fast and reached more than 65 breeding sites in 2004. At that point there was stabilization at 65 breeding sites, but in 2012-2014 the increased continued with over 80 breeding sites occupied in 2012. The few big colonies of over 100+ breeding pairs remained, but to this the birds spread to ever larger numbers of small new colonies.

The number of breeding pairs in the Netherlands did not increase much from 1962-1987 (500 pairs), a slow growth in numbers until 1993 (600 pairs, see Voslamber 19), but then a steady increase

up to 2,700 pairs in 2014. During that last period the Dutch population grew steady and logarithmically, suggesting constant relative population growth.

In the 1970s Spoonbills slowly started to recolonize France, first the Loire delta in the 1980s followed by the Somme. Nevertheless the number of breeding pairs in France remained low (1-10 pairs) for many years (1978-1998), but then numbers increased steeply to 700 pairs in 2014. This increase included a new settlement in the Camargue, where the first two pairs got established as late as 1998.

In Spain there was a slow growth from 100 breeding pairs in 1978 to 350 in 1988 and then a further increase to 900 pairs in 1996. From that time onwards the breeding population more than doubled to 1,500-2,500 pairs in 2014, but with huge variations between years in the number of pairs that settled to breed. The big drops to fewer than 200 pairs always were due to severe droughts.

Portugal had its first four Spoonbill pairs in 1988. Portugal had low numbers – fewer than 10 pairs between 1988-2002, but then numbers started to increase to 100 pairs in 2007, dropped back, but then increased quickly up to over 500 pairs in 2013.

In the late 1990s Spoonbills breeding on the Dutch Wadden Sea islands spilled over to islands in the adjacent German part of the Wadden Sea. This started with five breeding pairs on Memmert in 1995, but the expansion continued and Spoonbills in Germany increased breeding population size from 5 to 100 pairs in first nine years after establishment, to more than 300 in the following seven years, reaching 500 pairs in 2013.

In 1995 one pair of Spoonbills also started breeding in Denmark, at Bygholm Velje. Denmark kept having low numbers until

2004, and then the colonies started to grow to 50 in 2010, with a further increase to over 200 pairs in 2013 and 2014.

In the UK the first breeding attempts were recorded in 1998 in Suffolk. In 2008 breeding was successful in Dumfries & Galloway. In 2010 Spoonbills also started to breed in Norfolk (Holkham). Populations have remained small with 1-5 breeding attempts per year, but from since 2010 a slightly larger colony of 6-10 breeding pairs seemed to have chosen Norfolk to breed.

In Belgium the first two pairs were recorded in 2000 at the Zwin. Belgium had only two pairs in the first four years, but from 2005 onwards the number increased to 15-30 pairs.

In most 'new' countries, breeding populations initially remained low, until a point that the growth of the size of established colonies and the number of newly settled colonies quite suddenly 'took off'. It is unknown whether Dutch or Spanish Spoonbills were the source of all these recolonizations, since colour-ringing did not take place then as much as it does now. However, we now know that there have been exchanges of breeding birds between the Netherlands and Spain. Nevertheless, because Spoonbills with Dutch rings are often seen in the German breeding colonies, it is likely that the expansion to Germany and Denmark started from the Netherlands.

Only since 2005 colonies in countries other than Spain and the Netherlands began to make up a sizeable portion of the growing Spoonbill population in western Europe.

Migration patterns

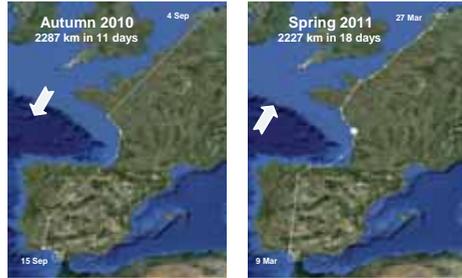
The European breeding Spoonbills of the East-Atlantic Flyway (belonging to the *platalea* subspecies, see Piersma et al. 2012) move south to winter in France, Spain and Portugal, and even cross the western end of the Sahara desert to spend the non-breeding periods in

Mauritania and northern Senegal (Lok et al. 2011). Most French, Spanish and Portuguese Spoonbills winter in Mauritania and Senegal. At the coastal site in Mauritania, the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, the wintering *platalea* overlap with the locally breeding endemic subspecies *balsaci*. Some Spoonbills make the migration in single flights (but never in one go from the Wadden Sea to Banc d'Arguin as is the wont of shorebirds, Charadrii), but usually they make many stops, especially along the Atlantic coast of France.

We know all this because in the different European countries juvenile Spoonbills are individually ringed with colour-rings. Many enthusiastic people, often in a volunteer capacity, read these rings all along the migration route in Europe, information that is assembled in scheme-specific databases. In addition, the Dutch team in association with people of the visited national parks have kept up a programme of ring-reading almost every year since the late 1990s. In addition a few Spoonbills captured at their nests in the Netherlands have been deployed with satellite transmitters. Some of these Spoonbills migrate as far as southern Spain to winter. Spoonbill BB31 (Dark blue ring on left and right leg with inscription 31) is an example.



Spoonbill



The satellite tracks of Spoonbill BB31 (Dark blue ring on left and right leg with the inscription 31) in autumn 2010 and spring 2011.

BB31 also shows many more stops during northbound than during southbound migration. Other Spoonbills, which included the birds named Otto, Rogier and Eckard, which all make a long stopover in southern Spain and in western Sahara, migrated to Mauritania.



Satellite tracks of three Spoonbills with the names Otto, Rogier and Eckard. The transmitters were deployed on the birds in 2008 and 2009. Stopover length explains size of white dots!

Constraints on the carrying capacity of wintering areas?

In Mauritania, on the Banc d'Arguin, the European Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia leucorodia* meets the subspecies *Platalea leucorodia balsaci* (Piersma et al. 2012). This is an endemic Spoonbill that is distinguished by the black bill. *Balsaci* breeds and winters in Mauritania (El-Hacen et al. 2013). In February 1997, 7,254 Spoonbills of both

subspecies were counted at the Banc d'Arguin (Zwarts et al. 1998). At the time, 82% were identified as *balsaci* (5,948) and 18% as *leucorodia* (1,306), at a time when the western European breeding population was estimated at 5,000 animals (Fig. 5).

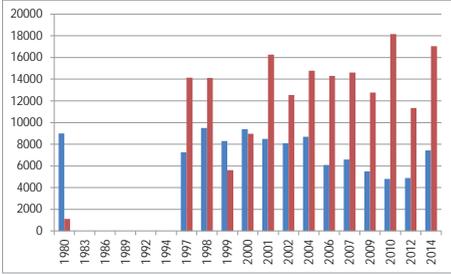


Fig.5 Changes in the numbers of Spoonbills of both subspecies (*platalea*, the migrants and *balsaci*, the residents) counted on the Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania. The blue bars represent the numbers of Spoonbills (both subspecies) counted on the Banc d'Arguin in winter. The red bars represent the estimated number of individual Spoonbills in Europe just after the breeding season (number of breeding pairs times 3 to account for chick production).

It is likely that more than 1,306 European Spoonbills must have been wintering on the Banc d'Arguin, as by February birds are already moving north. Extending these data to other years (Fig. 5) suggests an increasing gap between the estimated total numbers of European breeding birds that should find a winter location somewhere, and the numbers that are actually counted on the Banc d'Arguin. Nevertheless, the gap is not quite as incremental as suggested by Fig. 5 as the local population of breeding *balsaci* is currently in decline (Veen et al. 2012). In 1998, 3,477 *balsaci* nests were counted, and since the year 2000 numbers decreased from 1,943 breeding pairs (Overdijk et al. 2001) to 750 breeding pairs in 2007 (Triplet et al.

2008). The Mauritanian Spoonbill population exhibits low levels of recruitment that appear linked to frequent occurrences of colony-wide desertion of nests (Veen et al. 2012, El-Hacen et al. 2013).

Spoonbills have been shown to be very site-faithful to their wintering areas (Lok et al. 2011). From the second year of life onward they come back to the wintering area that they have settled in during the first and second winter, with birds making movements usually making movements to more southern wintering locations. Yet, over time there is a tendency for the Dutch-breeding Spoonbills to increasingly winter north of the Sahara rather than in Mauritania and Senegal, a pattern that makes perfectly good sense as winter survival is higher in birds that do not cross the Sahara (Lok et al. 2013).

That with increasing breeding population sizes in western Europe not only the likelihood of wintering in West-Africa declines, but also the relative wintering numbers seems to decline (Fig. 5) indicate that now carrying capacity has been reached. This may especially be the case in Mauritania and Senegal, as the decline in survival with increasing breeding population sizes has been most severe in the Spoonbills venturing south of the Sahara, as most would have historically done (Lok et al. 2013). The decline of the locally breeding endemic subspecies *balsaci* on the Banc d'Arguin has not been explained, but is consistent with a declining carrying capacity of this area. We know that the alternative wintering areas in the delta of the Senegal river both in Mauritania and Senegal, have seen incredible loss of wetland habitat (Zwarts et al.).

In view of the enormous numbers of Spoonbills that from the Middle Ages into the 19th century must have migrated to wetlands south of the Sahara, and in view of the low current survival of sub-Saharan wintering Spoonbills and the gradual shift

to wintering areas in southern Iberia (where conditions have improved), we propose that the carrying capacity of the wintering areas in Mauritania and Senegal have seen enormous historical reductions. Although Spoonbills now find wintering areas north of the Sahara (a process that with wetland management in Europe and increasingly benign winters may continue), it is likely that the growth

of the European breeding population will be constrained by factors in winter.

Acknowledgements

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SOG Exile on North Ronaldsay

The plane is tiny. In a March gale it picks up every bit of turbulence. Islands — fragments of rock stretched, frayed and shattered — pass underneath, surrounded by a shallow, stormy sea. The pilot locates the destination: the northernmost of the Orkney Isles, and the plane swings around, descending sideways into the teeth of the westerly gale. We come in over the coastal rocks, turn to face the runway at the last moment and land with a bump. Exhaling. Enthralled. Glad to be alive, glad to be here, glad not to have to go near a plane again.

When you talk about North Ronaldsay bird observatory, you really talk about how you get there — or don't get there. In March the ferry comes once a week, takes two hours and is regularly cancelled. Flying may make you believe in God again but it only takes 15 minutes from Kirkwall airport, though that is itself a day north of everywhere. Getting here is not for the faint of heart or weak of travel insurance. But when you do make it, it can be an utterly astonishing place.

Underfoot: seawater slicked rocks. Ahead of me: the island of Westray across a metal-grey Atlantic, whipped into white waves by the wind. Above me: squalls and clouds racing through the sky. Around me: Fulmars, not exactly flying, but moving through the wind with impossible elegance, shearing along the crumbling drystone dyke like it was a slow solid wave. Fulmars are not the commonest bird on the island, but they are the most visible. They fly straight for you, with scant regard for their safety, pulling away at the last moment. They nest on the ground either side of the coastal dyke, on old sheds, the church spire, under electric fences. It's not uncommon to see them vomit on sheep.

March is not a time for brilliant birding. I had quit my job to work here as a voluntary assistant warden, and March was my time for handling the transition from a life of desk-window-lunchbreak routine, to one on a tiny island, surrounded by birds and governed by the elements.

What else is there to know about North Ronaldsay? Population: 50, decreasing all the time. Fourteen miles of coast for a four mile long island, surrounded by a sheep dyke — the longest continuous drystone construction in the world. It lies 27 miles south west of Fair Isle, visible across the sea most days: rival observatories tussling for visitors — avian and human. On crystal clear spring mornings you can see Foula, 50 miles north. From the top of the lighthouse you can see Sumburgh Head. On some summer days the haar (cold sea fog) rolls in and visibility drops to a few metres. On other days, the waves shattering on the coast fill the island with a binocular-clouding salty glaze. The island is not an unspoilt wilderness. It is mostly flat, pastoral and — like most Scottish islands — littered with dead Land Rovers, the rusting skeletons of which are raided for parts then left to lie on the edges of fields. Iris ditches and drystone dykes are akin to hedges here, sheltering migrants in their innumerable corners. Sycamores are found in a few of the gardens, typically growing no higher than the shelter that lets them grow in the first place. Behind the walls of Holland House, the observatory's main ringing area, they've grown for 200 years to not much taller than four metres. They are the island's premier migrant shelter, surrounded by thickets of impenetrable fuchsia, the sort that a bird could disappear into and never be seen again.

Daily Life

The volunteer's lot is not permanent birding. You are given free accommodation and board, a census route every day and the privilege of birding and ringing here. But you are worked hard for that privilege.

In March, the first major task of the season is to fix the Heligoland traps: chicken wire funnels that lurk behind walls and bushes used to trap migrants for ringing. Then it's creating new stiles over the walls, mending hinges and wooden panels, jobs for a calm day, and in between hammering, I get a chance to see the island between gales: perfectly still, the grass golden in the sunlight and the sky and sea intensely blue. On the loch just beyond the next field a Green-winged Teal displays to an unimpressed female Common Teal, while a Hen Harrier, gingered by the light, quarters the long grass.

After we have finished the work, we hear Mark the warden has trapped a Blackbird. He reads the ring and hands it to me. The first healthy bird I have ever held, its head calmly rests between my index and middle finger, back nestled in my palm, heartbeat thrumming. Improbably light and full of life. To release it, you literally let go with a hand underneath to make sure it doesn't drop like a stone. They never do. They flick their wings and take the shortest route to the nearest cover. The feeling of holding a wild living bird is an incredibly special thing; the chance to contribute to ornithology by doing so is even better.

I may have said that March is not a time for good birding, but just occasionally it produces a sparkling clear day; the sort when Fair Isle looks impossibly close, as if you could throw a stone over it. I was halfway up the island's golf course on the east coast, the first interesting migrant species of the year a female Black Redstart – a dowdy ash and ember plumaged affair – when a second bird appeared suddenly over my head, a Hooded Crow on each wing in pursuit. It soon shook them off, circling, casting terror amongst every other bird. A species out of context takes a little longer to identify. The deep fingered wingtips, grey on white stripes coupled with a long tail, told me it was a hawk. I could hardly believe the sheer size: a chest bulky with muscle, and bulging secondaries. A Goshawk! I watched it drift inland, the island rippling with waves of terrified wildfowl and waders.

It was the 12th island record. It spent three days haunting the south end of the island, being seen on only three occasions. Even on mostly treeless islands they still retain their incredible ability for hiding. It was last seen circling up high and drifting off south, beyond where the crows would go to harass it. Without it, the island seemed less. Smaller and safer. The miracle of megafauna is that they alter everything. The crows seemed jumpier. The geese more hidden. The atmosphere is electrified and it transmits that charge to the watcher. Everything gets triple checked. The sky is keenly scanned. I flushed it the day before it disappeared with a clatter from a sycamore in the garden at Holland, my heart stopped from the shock and defibrillated from the excitement. Its presence as it flew around in its own raincloud of Redshank and Oystercatchers created its own vivid surreal excitement.

April came the next day as a damp squib. Unexpected snow settling on the windowpane. Against the sullen black clouds,



Photo: Stephen Rutt

Golden Plovers circled above the fields around the croft while Ravens wheeled about. No birds of prey breed here and though there are only two pairs of Ravens, they strut around the island as if self-aware enough to know they're the biggest, baddest birds here – until the skuas arrive.

The island reverts to its April mean. Grey sky, cold breeze. The threat of rain and no great arrival of birds. The flock of Black Guillemot offshore numbers just under 200, Puffins have started to appear from the northeast headland and Meadow Pipit numbers are distinctly up, and moving along the coasts. In a boggy field by the coast a Great Skua sits loafing after making its way back from the middle of the Atlantic to where they nest every year. Even tired and sat on a hummock, it still exudes the air of an avian gangster. A pirate at sea; and on land, ungainly, bulky and with a faint air of menace. The old Norse name — Bonxie — captures that perfectly. It's still used here, and on other formerly Viking islands.

Back at the observatory a Snipe displays over the entrance track, an inky dark spot on the plain white sheet of sky. It displays with its outer tail feathers askew, set at a right angle to its body, while doing a flight that loops. From several shallow circuits above the marsh, it kicks up, gets enough height to dive steeply, pulls up into a shallow circuit and repeats. All the while the askew tail feathers create a haunting, rattling, whistling sound, a sort of bush-cricket stridulation but deeper and slower. People call it drumming, but it doesn't sound like any drum I've heard. The Orcadian folk name is 'horse-gowk' roughly meaning 'horse deceiver' or 'horse fool', which captures something of the whinnying in it, but not enough to fool. For a bird that looks like earth brought to life, it is a most unearthly sound, and it makes a little moment of magic in the gloom. It's a reminder that I'm a very long way from home.

I have a belief, though, that you can always find yourself at home, anywhere in the world, with birds. It was a mid-April evening, and I was ringing with Mark at the Holland House gardens. This evening it was crawling with Redwings and Twite. We caught a few of each: the Redwing a handful, nipping my fingers; the Twite a small surprise – if you were dexterous enough you could fit three in your hand and have space to spare (though you wouldn't try). As the sky cleared the evening chilled and my hands grew cold. Twite are little bundles of warmth, energy and life. They call quietly as they leave my hand, bounding up into the flax bushes. Then, as the evening turns dark, a skein appears above the western horizon. As they descend, they resolve out of dark shapes into defined light and dark. They honk, a double hiccup like a squeaking gate. Pink-feet. I am transported by my ears from a field in cold wet Scotland, back to a marsh where the horizon seems to encompass half the world and Pink-footed Geese are the most important things. It is instant East Anglia.

Dusk, a few days later. We crowd into the tiny ringing station hut, lit by a weak light linked to a dying car battery. Mark holds a bird bag very deliberately, feeling for the feet and bill from the outside. He gets his hands safely around the bird, I remove the bag from around it and time stops. The first thing I see are its feet. Yellow. Feet too big for the thin legs, hanging half-cocked. Black talons, hooked like a crook, hanging as if half-poised to grip relentlessly. Remorselessly. A hawk moves at different speeds to humans. It operates at a much faster frame rate and with unbelievable clarity and detail. It transfixes me with its eye. A luminous yellow, flickering. A brighter, deeper yellow than should be naturally possible. I see the tiny adjustments it makes to its iris, to its direction, as it looks at us who have temporarily taken it hostage. I see it thinking — no, not thinking — I see its instinct to bloodlust in that eye. The bright heat of

action and coldness of a killer. It gazes at every pore in my skin and the awe in my eye.

Its eye is set in under a furrowed white brow of intent and just back from the lethally hooked bill, made to rip and tear and cut through feathers and skin and warm blood. A Sparrowhawk can fill a room with its fearsome presence. It is a young female: chocolate brown plumages on the black, with creamy fringes to the feathers. A male Sparrowhawk trapped previously was significantly smaller and lighter. There is talk that the male is prettier: blue on top and orange-banded underneath, but I'm not sure what the point of a pretty hawk is. It is not meant to be. We take the length of the wing from the chord to the tip of the primary feathers (241 mm) and its weight, after it bottoms out our first pair of scales, is 345 grams. It has been feeding well for a migrant and confirms our suspicions that it feels and looks like a brute, a bruiser of a hawk. Mark releases it into the night. It slips away, black against the indigo night sky, to the north. I remember to breathe.

All In A Day's Work

Volunteering here involves a lot of mucking in and making do with jobs you wouldn't expect. As a result there's a semi-mystical attitude that the harder you work, the better your bird reward will be. One of my jobs was to install a gate in a dyke, which involved digging a waist-deep hole through stony ground for the strainer posts, then drilling holes to hang the metal gate. We are making the finishing touches when I look up and see Gavin sprinting towards us. Between snatched breaths: "your phones aren't working... Mark's had a White-tailed Eagle".

Tools drop, gate slams shut. We bundle into the Land Rover, shred grass and mud and head to the middle of the island, stopping by the airfield. Gavin notes the gulls going crazy, half the island away: I find the Eagle flying powerfully south, low over the edge of the east beach. A dark giant of a bird, it drops out

of sight. The gulls swing up, wheel around and plunge, then repeat. We jump back into the car, bail out as close as the road will take us and scurry like Snipe across a field towards the dyke. Gingerly we poke our heads over and come face to face with a startled cow, then a flock of sheep. Beyond that, a single brown one? No, an eagle. It flaps a wing at a gull that passes too close. It ignores the first Swallow of the year that flies past it.

To clarify the size of an eagle: it stands as tall and as long as a sheep. The wings are not just long but thick. They appear ungainly, as if it must paddle through the air when it flies. A Hooded Crow drops in next to it, waddles over, tweaks its tail and flies off. The Eagle sits under an aerial bombardment for about half an hour, seemingly unconcerned by the gulls losing their cool in close proximity. The sheep are similarly unperturbed. People would have you believe that White-tailed Eagles and livestock can't coexist, a belief that has torpedoed one re-introduction scheme and is the gripe of farmers on the Scottish west coast. But these sheep graze oblivious to their new near neighbour, the Eagle.

Then it flies. And those paddle wings turn into 2.5 metres of grace and power; lifting up and into the haze, trailing gulls, crows and a Hen Harrier as the bird heads south. I get shivers down my spine. I moved to an island without breeding birds of prey, but find myself repeatedly stopped and thrilled by its visiting raptors.

Tystie Count

April had been poor for migrants in both number and, with the exception of the Eagle, quality. With a lack of birds to ring, the ornithological work season began with the Tystie (Black Guillemot) survey. 5am. Nothing good ever happens at 5am. It is a time for alarm clocks, confusion and the gasping realisation that the day begins several hours earlier than you'd wish for. The sunrise flares pink and rosy through heavy



Tystie

purple clouds and the windscreen of the Land Rover. We drive to the lighthouse. This time of the morning, once you get over the mucky feeling of being awake, is special; cleaner and clearer. I stagger with Mark down to the foghorn and we split: he heads east and I head west. The count is an island staple for the early volunteers. It is a simple thing: two of us start from the same place at the top and two at the bottom of the island. We count all the Tysties we can see until we meet the counter coming the other way up the coast. It is also not a simple thing: you need a coinciding of high tides and high pressure, low wind and low swell and a clear morning. Conditions that only happen once or twice between March and May.

It is eerie this morning. The absence of wind settles the sea to a flat, quiet and shining silver in the early sun. Fair Isle under red light looks close at hand. This morning the Tysties are tucked away in low-down ledges, amongst rocks where I can never see them later in the day. Rafting flocks congregate off the bigger headlands, all clearly visible until they pass over fish and dive as an avian rolling wave. It takes two hours before I bump into another volunteer, halfway down the west coast. She feels the eerie lack of wind too, feels that she's not on the island but somewhere placeless, somewhere other. And the Guillemots — so many. We total it up later and then open Mark's sealed envelope of his predictions of last night. He guessed we would see 650. We counted 653.

May means an island covered in more birds than I ever remember it having. It is entirely possible on fall days to come across a male Common Redstart on a kelp-covered rock and think it the most beautiful thing in the world at that moment. Until, that is, you come across the Pied Flycatchers lining the walls, or the summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver in the bay of the white sand beach, sodden Goldcrests gleaning insects from wet rocks, your first Tree Pipit of the year or a dazzling Whinchat on a fence.

Some mornings you can't dodge the weather. Easterlies and drizzle drag me out. The Arctic Terns are back here too, squabbling over territory and fish, and hanging around the same field that the Lapwings nest in; these currently preoccupied with dive-bombing Fulmars, and drifting into every available gust of wind. A few mornings later a Rough-legged Buzzard drifts in off the coast over my head, losing height and gaining interested crows flying after it. Exciting enough, but after blasé texts to the other volunteers and birders on the island are met with frantic phone calls back, I realise that, although they're familiar to me from the East Anglian winter, it's only the 15th island record of one. Fifty minutes after it flew over my head one final time, it was seen on Fair Isle.

Skua Passage

By mid May the forecast turns horrendous. Several days of northwesterly gales are sweeping across the Atlantic and straight



Long-tailed Skua

for the island, so the morning after they first hit, we get up at 5am, nestle down into the rocks on the Westness headland, each convinced we have the most sheltered spot, and point our telescopes at the dark sea. For an hour as it gets light, the cold seeps into our bones, the stale tang of coffee from the Thermos doing nothing to prevent it. Spirits dwindle, the rocks I am sitting on collapse underneath me. A Black Guillemot lands on the wall next to me and looks at me as if I am absolutely mad. I almost agree. And then a Long-tailed Skua shoots past, a waif with a 65kph tailwind.

Ten then pass, shearing in the troughs and cresting over the waves, thin wings swept back and absurd tails wobbling way behind, looking ludicrously like bent bows, arrow drawn out, ready to shoot. We celebrate: high fives on the rocks, shouting excited nonsense to each other, barely audible in the wind. I then have the good fortune to be looking the right way when a total of nine cut the corner of the headland and fly directly above us. We explode. Even seen-it-all Mark expresses disbelief: we were gibbering wrecks several feet underneath a flock of the most elusive, most improbable, most beautiful Skua. I have just enough time to raise the camera, expose a few frames and they are gone. Dots into the distance, migrating from the South Atlantic to the High Arctic, via our exact headland on this tiny island.

In five sodden, frigid hours, 79 Long-tailed Skuas pass: an island record. Prior to 2013 there had been just 33 records of spring Long-tailed Skuas.

Later May. On the northern isles, birds happen. Eventually, without regard for the wind, weather or timing, something will turn up. It's a matter of keeping the faith. It has been westerly winds all spring. All I had to show for one particular morning was a White Wagtail and a gorgeous summer plumaged Dunlin, singing. Migration hotspots like the

northern isles don't always hold birds though, and for the many days spent fruitlessly flogging tired legs up, down and around walls, crofts, rocks, you have to keep an appreciation for what you do find, no matter how common, or you won't enjoy anything. Or you need a man like Mark, who rings me while I am finishing a kitchen shift: "Hello mate. I've got a Rustic Bunting. Adult male at Ancum. Tell everyone."



Photo: Stephen Rutt

Rustic Bunting

Panic. I run around shouting "RUSTIC BUNT!" down several corridors and in no particular direction until I find the other volunteers. I shout at them. They panic too. We're out in the next minute, racing the Land Rover up the main road, stopping to bundle interested guests in the back.

An adult male Rustic Bunting. Despite the horrendous winds, Mark had magicked one up, a conjuring trick from a man who cannot avoid finding rare birds. He picked up the 'tik tik' call reminiscent of a Song Thrush — which would be unusual for the time and place —

and rooted out a bird that you might perhaps expect, but in the prevailing conditions one that almost defied belief.

We pull up and find Mark looking around. Hearts sink. The sight of the finder watching nothing at Ancum is ominous. It is the dense iris cover that birds disappear into — like a counter magic trick — and never reappear from. This time though Mark finds it again after a nervy fifteen minute wait of forlorn staring and rising doubt. It flies across us, hides in the long grass and then pops up on the fence, not far from us. I don't breathe and I don't quite believe it either. A stripey, red, black and white bird that doesn't belong here. A familiar bunting shape with unfamiliar markings. My first island lifer. It was my first, but not my last, that month.

Guest numbers peaked in the third week of May. When something exciting happens on the island we spread the message to all, but it helps when everyone is in the same place, as at breakfast time. On this occasion, everyone had just finished when the phone rang. I overheard from the kitchen sink's never-ending pile of dirty plates: "Orcas from the lighthouse? We'll be on our way".

An observatory's-worth of guests bundled into the back of two Land Rovers in five minutes flat. The journey shakes us all awake, then it's a nervous wait in a keen wind, guests strung out along the lighthouse watchpoint. From here, Fair Isle to the north and Sanday south, hints of Atlantic rollers collide with the North Sea and the rocks where the seals pup and the Shags stand with wings held out wide. And then there's a shout. Heads snap just in time to see two metres of wet black dorsal fin slowly rise out of, and lower itself back into, the glistening grey sea.

For fifteen cold minutes we watch a pod of five dark dolphins slipping their dorsal fins out of the sea and into our world. Never for very long at a time. They swim past the

headland, out into the bay and down towards the lighthouse on Sanday. They combine effortless grace and murderous intent. The fins just appear and disappear without fluster or fanfare or panicked prey. They just are.

It's all I can manage to think about for the rest of the day.

The end of May. I wake to a bang and Mark's head around the bedroom door. "Get up. Gav's caught a Catharus thrush". I swim through my head in the early morning tired nonsense of it all. A Catharus thrush? In May? I stumble to my clothes, stick two legs in one trouser leg, throw a coat on over my pyjamas, wake up to the familiar bumps as the Land Rover races off up the island. We find Gav in the ringing hut with a bird bag. He looks as if he's seen a ghost, but what he found in the bottom panel of his mistnet was even better than that. Mark takes it out of the bag and we all crane our heads around the hut door. A mid-sized, rich rufous-brown American thrush. The atmosphere is confusion and stress during double- and triple-checking biometrics and fine feather detailing. In the early morning shadows the richness of its colour isn't evident, which complicates it. The conclusion: Veery, the rarest of the Catharus bunch. Mark lifts its wing up and we see the pale stripe between thick dusky bands.

It is released into a small sycamore, where it skulks in the shadows for a few hours, occasionally hopping onto a sunlit branch where it flares red, before vanishing. It was a cathartic Catharus after the effort of a strenuous spring spent mired in the wrong weather; a bizarre and unexpected reward for keeping the faith. Britain's 11th ever, the Western Palearctic's 12th. Only the second spring occurrence east of the Atlantic. Like the Goshawk at the start of spring, a Veery changes everything: it makes our footsteps lighter, makes work seem inconsequential, makes every wall, bush and long grassy corner seem full of promise...

SOG Field Meeting Levington and Trimley

2nd January 2016 - Leader Justin Zantboer

The first SOG trip of 2016 and all the 14 members who attended were eager to stretch their legs after the holiday festivities and enjoy some birding. Fortunately the weather was on our side as it had been forecast wet and windy but, although still breezy, we escaped any rain.

The leader, Justin, had a slight change of plan this year. Instead of going to Levington Lagoon area he decided that we should continue on to the SWT Trimley Nature Reserve. We followed the track to Loompit Lake where a couple of Grey Herons stood on the far shore and a selection of wildfowl including Gadwall, Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Pochard were present. A Little Egret was on the saltmarsh and a Rock Pipit was along the river wall. Further along the path whilst we were climbing a rise, Bullfinches could be heard in the scrub, with two males and a female allowing excellent views, the red fronts of the males particularly resplendent. On the top of the rise, from the viewpoint, we scanned the River Orwell, finding Great Crested Grebe, Goldeneye and three Red-breasted Mergansers. On the river edges, a selection of waders including Curlew, Grey Plover, Dunlin, Redshank and Ringed Plover were also seen. On the far shore, a number of Brent Geese were present and eight Avocets flew up-river. On the track behind us, a very confiding Robin hopped around collecting food, sometimes very close to us indeed.

Reaching the Trimley retreat, a couple of members went out onto the saltmarsh and five Jack Snipe were found, with at least two more Rock Pipits being present in the area. Scanning across the farmland, a Buzzard was found perched in a hedge and a Kestrel flew across one way in front of us as a Jay flew the other. In the ditch, at least one Cetti's Warbler could be heard and one was briefly seen. At the far end of the retreat along the fence line, a number of small birds were present and, on checking, we found male and female Stonechat, three Reed Buntings, Meadow Pipits and a Skylark. Further along, some more small birds were feeding on the track, one of which Justin identified as a Lapland Bunting – a lovely, unexpected surprise. It showed well and allowed some digiscoped photos to be taken, although the poor light and windy conditions made it difficult to get a clear photograph.

On reaching the SWT reserve, we headed into the Winter Flood hide and found a range of birds on the pools including Teal, some smart Pintail and Wigeon, Black-tailed Godwit – with one bird surprisingly in summer plumage – and a Snipe and a Marsh Harrier flew over. We decided to head back as the sky looked as if rain was on the way, but not before admiring the Lapland Bunting again. Back at the car park we thanked Justin for an excellent trip and for finding some good birds on an enjoyable day spent with fellow SOG members.

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SOG Field Meeting to Hemley & River Deben

30th January 2016

Leader Justin Zantboer



Photo: Brian Buffery

Lapland Bunting found on Justin's previous trip

Following a successful trip led by Justin earlier in the month that included finding a Lapland Bunting, we wondered how this trip would compare, and we were not to be disappointed. There were 19 members assembled near Hemley Church for the walk down to the river including one new member - welcome Matt! A chattering group of House Sparrows caught our attention first and then a male Kestrel flying across a field that also had a hare hunkered down.

As we followed the path that went through the hedgerow, an owl flew. We'd seen Short-eared Owl on previous trips and were hoping that this would be a potential bird on this trip, but as the owl flew up and round and further along the hedgerow we realised it was a Long-eared Owl, another great and

unexpected find by the group. We were able to watch it as it settled into the hedge, giving great scope views, but we eventually had to leave it and move on. We took the river path to the left, which allowed us further views of the Long-eared Owl, noting also both Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting in the same hedge. On the Deben, a selection of waders were seen, included Redshank and three Avocets; a flock of Brent Geese also flew down river. Scanning the skies we found at least three Buzzards and a Marsh Harrier. Tracking back and heading towards Kirton Creek we watched Little Egret, Snipe, Curlew, Dunlin, Grey Plover, a big flock of Lapwing, Teal and Wigeon. On the saltmarsh, up to half a dozen Skylarks and a Rock Pipit were seen too.

From Kirton Creek we took the path towards Kirton and near Sluice Farm stopped to scan a maize strip along a section of woodland. Six Redwings were seen atop trees at the far end and a Treecreeper was closer by. A Buzzard flew out of the woodland and careful scanning of the maize strip revealed a flock of Chaffinches. Behind us across the fields a lot of corvids and Woodpigeons flew up, flushed out by a female Peregrine, giving us all good views of her powerful flight.

We backtracked towards the Creek and a flock of finches were noted flying into some alders. Careful scanning produced Goldfinch, Siskin and a few Lesser Redpolls, with males of the latter two looking resplendent. Past the Creek, overlooking the grazing marsh beyond, we spotted Curlew, Teal, a Marsh Harrier and a Buzzard very close by. At the woodland we heard - and briefly saw - two



Long-eared Owl

Bullfinches. As the track swept past the wood at the far end, a flock of small birds could be seen dropping into a field from some elm and elder. Amongst the Chaffinches we found at least seven Bramblings and a couple of Reed Buntings, perhaps more, although their swift movement made it hard to tell. Here we also had a Great Spotted Woodpecker fly overhead. On the last stretch back to our cars, we added a Woodcock and two Red-legged Partridges to our lists.

On previous trips to Hemley we had often popped up-river to Waldringfield but as we'd had such a good time and had taken longer than normal to get round, it was decided to call it a day. We thanked Justin for an excellent trip, agreeing that it had compared very favourably to his Trimley one, with a great selection of finches and buntings, several raptors and the highlight of Long-eared Owl.

SOG admiring the LEO



BINS Round-Up

Lee Woods: Well I am sad to say that this December round up is my last at this present time for the SOG Harrier. As of January 2016 I am handing over to Eddie Marsh who is known to many of you. I am sure he will do a great job.

December 2015 – Lee Woods

The continuous mild and rather damp conditions meant that there wasn't any real movement of hard winter birds from the continent; however, there was still plenty on offer throughout the final month of the year.

Still no real numbers of **Waxwings** noted; just the single bird remaining at The Drive, Reydon 1st-4th then two birds present there 14th to 18th, two birds still at Santon Downham until 2nd, one bird in the cemetery in Bury St Edmunds 4th and finally five birds along Millennium Way, Lowestoft 17th.



Red-necked Grebe

Photo: Barry Woodhouse

A **Red-necked Grebe** took up residence on Alton Water and remained all month, best viewed from either Larchwood or the sailing club. A **Great Grey Shrike** was at Santon Downham 1st-4th. Up to four **Slavonian Grebes** were on the Stour Estuary throughout the month and a single Slavonian Grebe was present on Cove at the Broad and often showed well from 12th to the month's end.



Slavonian Grebe

Photo: Ian Goodall

The Gull roost on the scrape throughout the month was pretty impressive and up to nine **Caspian Gulls** were logged, along with several **Yellow-legged Gulls**. A 1st winter/juvenile **Glaucous Gull** was found on the scrape on the 8th and remained all month commuting between here and nearby Sizewell rigs until the month's end and then a 3rd winter Glaucous Gull was found on the scrape on the 13th.



Great White Egret

Photo: Stephen Whayman

A **Great White Egret** was seen intermittently at Hen Reedbeds and Dunwich shorepools throughout the month. Two were seen at RSPB Lakenheath Fen on the 16th and finally one was seen briefly on Kingston Marshes, Woodbridge on the 18th before flying down the Deben estuary.

A probable **Cattle Egret** was seen briefly on the Alde Estuary at Iken 5th only; nearby four **Spoonbill** were occasionally seen at SWT Hazlewood Marshes throughout the month and they often wandered to RSPB North Warren. The discovery of a **Hoopoe**, normally regarded as a spring migrant, on the 5th was a pleasant surprise. It remained until the 6th frequenting the bowling green at Southolt (West of Worlingworth).

Great Northern Divers were noted at Lowestoft (Lake Lothing) from 7th until the month's end with two there on 9th, then initially one bird on the 11th and then two birds 12th to 23rd on the Orwell Estuary (Wherstead Strand), three birds on the 24th, then just one bird from the 24th to 31st, singles

on the Stour Estuary throughout the month along with offshore sightings from various watch-points.

Photo: Ian Goodall



A **Black-necked Grebe** was seen on the Stour Estuary on both the 14th and 18th. Only one **Black Brant** was seen this month: an adult bird that was present in fields just inland of Covehithe Broad on the 15th. Three **Pink-footed Geese** were present on Southwold Town Marsh on the 19th and remained into the New Year.

The female **Long-tailed Duck** remained at SWT Lackford Lakes all month. A drake Long-tailed Duck was seen south off Landguard on the 10th. Three female **Goosanders** took up residence on the Wilderness Pond within Christchurch Park, Ipswich, from the 9th and remained all month.

A 1st winter **Glaucous Gull** was seen off Felixstowe Ferry on the 18th and what was presumably the same bird was then seen on the scrape at RSPB Hollesley Marshes 23rd then off Landguard 29th-30th.

There were several unseasonal reports of **Sooty Shearwater** late month; whether these all relate to the same wandering individual we cannot be sure, but the sightings were from Landguard, Dunwich, Minsmere and Covehithe.

Finally, after initially being found on Breydon Water on 29th October, it wasn't until 29th December that the **Lesser Yellowlegs** was finally seen on the Suffolk side of the channel from Burgh Castle, and again on the 31st.

January 2016 – Eddie Marsh

The mild weather continued during the the first two weeks of the month, followed by a colder spell of single figure temperatures from the 10th- 23rd, returning to milder double figures for the rest of the month.

There were plenty of good quality, long-staying, over-wintering birds to see in Suffolk during January. **Great Northern Divers** continued to show well all month; one at Lake Lothing and up to two commuting between Alton Water and the River Orwell along the Strand, possibly the same two birds that had been on the Stour from Stutton Ness and Holbrook Bay area in the early part of January.

The **Red-necked Grebe** continued to show very well all month mainly between Rabbit's Wood and Larchwood Hide at Alton Water. The long-staying **Slavonian Grebe** on Covehithe Broad stayed all month. Four Slavonian Grebes were at Stutton Ness on the 1st and were also reported from Alton Water, with three on the 11th and one on the 14th. Then on the 12th, a single **Black-necked Grebe** was seen along the north bank of Alton Water, viewed from the sailing club; two on the 13th and 14th, and then three on the 15th between Alton Hall Lane and the sailing club where they remained all month.

A familiar occurrence over the last couple of years is the arrival of **Goosander** on Wilderness Pond in Christchurch Park, Ipswich. During January there have been four birds 2f & 2m. The two Redheads continued from December into 2016 and on the 14th a drake appeared followed by another on the 17th, where they all remained to the month's end giving excellent views and photographic opportunities. Mabel, the famous **Tawny Owl**, was often visible in her favourite oak tree to anyone up at the top end of the park on the east side.

The largest count of **Bewick's Swans** this January was a flock of 30 seen in the Leiston/

Sizewell area on the 26th, 28th and 30th. The flock was often split and they were seen at Minsmere on several occasions during the month, the largest count being 26 on the 23rd. On Covehithe Broad on the 3rd nine were seen and subsequently 13 south off Dunwich on the 12th. Four were present at RSPB Boyton Marshes on the 28th - however, possibly different birds as 30 were seen in Leiston area on the same day. Whooper Swans have been less numerous with the highest count being six at RSPB Minsmere on the 17th and 28th. Other numbers and dates were: at Minsmere two on 13th, four on 23rd, two on 25th, four on 26th and two on 27th. There was a single **Whooper** with Mute Swans at RSPB Boyton on 2nd, 5th and 31st which presumably was there all month.

The usual **White-fronted Geese** numbers grew over the month at RSPB North Warren with the highest reported count being 200 on the 19th. Other notable counts were 86 at Sudborne Marshes on the 24th, 58 on Southwold Town Marshes on the 8th, six at SWT Trimley Marshes on the 8th and 18 at RSPB Boyton on the 2nd. Smaller numbers were seen on Boyton, Reydon Marshes, Dunwich and Trimley Marshes during the month. A few Pink-footed Geese were seen during the month at Southwold Town Marshes, Aldeburgh Town Marshes, Trimley Marshes and North Warren, with the highest counts coming from Aldeburgh Town Marshes, namely six on the 17th and then five at RSPB North Warren from 23rd to the 31st.

There were two **Tundra Bean Geese** seen during January at RSPB Minsmere 4th to the 24th, then probably the same two birds at RSPB North Warren on the 27th to the 30th. There have also been good numbers of wintering wildfowl on the coastal marshes and Suffolk's reserves.

Its been a very poor winter so far for **Short-eared Owls** with only a few reported around the county, unlike the four or five

long-staying birds on Orfordness, Havergate and Orford/Gedgrave Marshes last winter. Four Spoonbills were reported all month, commuting between SWT Hazlewood Marshes and RSPB North Warren. The yellow-flagged individual was ringed as a nestling in Onderdijk, Holland in 2014.

Ness Point in Lowestoft is still the most reliable site to see wintering **Purple Sandpipers** although numbers may still be decreasing. Odd ones have been seen at Southwold, Bawdsey and Felixstowe. Nice to see up to 40 **Bar-tailed Godwits** wintering on the Orwell, often between Levington Marina and the other side of Levington Creek on the shoreline mud.

Resident **Black Redstarts** seen all month around the Sizewell Power Station complex.

On the sea-watching front, **Sooty Shearwater**, **Bonxie**, **Pom Skua**, **Little Auk** and a good number of **Little Gulls** were reported along the Suffolk coast. A **Glaucous Gull** was seen in Lowestoft and an **Iceland Gull** in the west of the county.



Photo: John Richardson

Following a report on 5th December 2015 of a **Cattle Egret** seen on the estuary at Snape, it re-appeared nearly a month later in roadside fields at Iken where it remained all month showing very well, often in with the local cattle. I imagine all the listers have now caught up with this species - a difficult one to get - for their Suffolk list. The question is: will Cattle Egret become a common, year-round resident like the Little Egret? Also on the increase are reports of **Great White Egrets**.



Another bird that has become a regular visitor recently is **Glossy Ibis**, although until now not during the winter. However, one was found on the 10th at Lodge Marsh, Ramsholt. It was seen again on the 11th-12th then probably the same bird was over RSPB Boyton on 14th. Possibly the same bird paid brief visits to Gedgrave 17th and Minsmere on the 18th-19th. On the 20th it was found at RSPB Hollesley, where it was showing well to the end of January. Will this species too follow the Little Egret trend over the next few years?

In the west of the county, the female **Long-tailed Duck** continued all month at Lackford Lakes, an unusual long-staying inland record. There was a nice count of 300 **Common Scoter** off Dunwich on the 8th. The Lesser Yellowlegs appeared again on the 1st (good year tick for Suffolk year listers) at Burgh Castle, dates reported again as 17th, 18th, 19th, 21st and 24th. A few **Hen Harriers** were being reported from the coast and inland to the west, plus the occasional **Merlin**.

On the 17th a **Pallid Harrier** was photographed and reported from Brandon Fen, Lakenheath. This mega species is a much wanted bird for all Suffolk listers and was an excellent find for Neil Rolf, who spends many hours birding and photographing in that area.

A **Lapland Bunting** and five **Jack Snipe** were in the Trimley area, a single **Water Pipit** was at Dunwich and two were seen at Lakenheath with a further showy one at Levington Creek. Fifty plus **Tree Sparrows** and **Bramblings** were at Ampton, whilst three Mealy with a hundred **Redpolls** were at Brightwell on

the 12th. A **Great Grey Shrike** was at Santon Downham on the 12th and 16th with a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** the 21st. On the 24th, a wintering **Ring Ouzel** was photographed at SWT Oulton Marshes. A **Sandwich Tern** was at Bawdsey Quay on the 31st and then seen to fly north. And finally, a **Waxwing** was found by Chris Courtney in his Ipswich garden during the Big Garden Birdwatch on the 31st.

February 2016 - Eddie Marsh

The weather started mild with the 1st having the highest temperature of the month in Ipswich of 13°C and the coldest being -4°C on the 16th. But generally the temperatures were more of the norm with 22 days in single figures and only seven days reaching double figures.

During February, the **Great Northern Divers** continued to show well on Alton Water along with **Black-necked**, **Slavonian**, and **Red-necked Grebe**. The long-staying **Slavonian Grebe** continued all month at Covehithe. Another Slav was seen in the North Marsh at RSPB Minsmere on the 1st. Both **Bewick's** and **Whooper Swans** were reported throughout the county although mobile at times. Lakenheath produced 31 Whoopers on the 21st.

White-fronted, **Pink-footed** and **Tundra Bean Geese** remained at their usual coastal sites, with most reports coming from RSPB North Warren during the month. In the west of the county, the extremely long-staying female **Long-tailed Duck** still remained all month at SWT Lackford Lakes. Christchurch Park still had the four **Goosanders** on the Wilderness Pond all month.

The **Cattle Egret** stayed all month at the junction of Sandy Lane/Ferry Road in Iken. Although it was not reported as seen in the later part of February, it was spotted again on the 4th of March and was showing very well. The **Glossy Ibis** remained at RSPB Hollesley during the first half of the month, but was not seen after the 15th. There was a report of

another Glossy Ibis flying over the Felixstowe Dock Complex on the 12th. **Great White Egrets** were reported from Walberswick, Reydon and Lakenheath during the month. The five over-wintering **Spoonbills** seem to be mainly commuting between North Warren and Minsmere throughout the month.

Ten **Purple Sandpipers** were reported at Ness Point on the 1st with 13 on the 6th. The wintering **Lesser Yellowlegs** again made appearances at Burgh Castle on the 11th and 19th.

On the sea-watching front, things seem to quieten down somewhat, with a single **Bonxie** reported from both Felixstowe Ferry and Landguard on the 4th to the 6th with a **Pomerine Skua** on the 3rd from Landguard too. There was a **Glaucous Gull** seen on the sea at Southwold on the 13th. The **Iceland Gull** was reported on the 12th with two 1st winter **Caspian Gulls** at the gull roost at SWT Lackford Lakes.

The **Sandwich Tern** that was found by Mark Cornish on the 31st January was seen again on the 1st at Felixstowe Ferry and the Dip, then heading south off Landguard on the 6th. Amazingly it was then seen again well inland on the 21st by Laurence Potter by the Foxhall roundabout.

A Ringtail **Hen Harrier** was seen on Westleton Heath on the 25th and 26th and the long-staying **Water Pipit** remained at Levington Creek till the 17th but no news since. The single **Waxwing** remained in a garden at Marlborough Road, Ipswich until the 3rd. It has been a poor winter for this stunning winter visitor to the UK; they are always good value during the gloomy winter days.

A **Green-winged Teal** arrived on the Blyth Estuary on the 1st. Interestingly the bird was bearing a Portuguese white nasal saddle previously fitted at São Jacinto, Aveiro in Portugal on 21st Jan 2015. It was in amongst 800 **Teal**, where it remained until the 20th. Two redhead **Smew** were found at RSPB

Minsmere on the 7th by Matthew Deans, where they remained all month.

Also at RSPB Minsmere, between the Rhododendron Tunnel and Island Mere Hide, a **Firecrest** showed on and off all month, with three seen on the 18th. Two Firecrests were also seen at Furze Wood Lowestoft on the 19th, one at Santon Downham on the 21st and one in Holywells Park on the 16th.

Two **Common Cranes** were seen regularly at RSPB Lakenheath during the month and at Minsmere a **Little Stint** made a nice winter's day appearance on the 29th, surely an over-wintering bird!

A **Great Northern Diver** was reported regularly off Levington Marina, and in a Lower Ufford garden a **Mealy Redpoll** was visiting a feeder on the 5th and maybe for longer. A single **Snow Bunting** was found on Orfordness near the lighthouse on the 20th. This species has been thin on the ground this winter.

There was also some corvid action in the month: on the 8th a **Raven** was seen low over Westerfield being mobbed by Crows. A **Hooded Crow** was then seen at North Warren on the 14th and maybe the same bird was seen at Minsmere on the 15th coming in off the sea. Finally at North Warren on the 14th a **Nordic Jackdaw** (Scandinavian Race) was seen.

Towards the end of the month there seemed to be a bit of a **Red Kite** movement: a single over Levington Creek on the 28th and four just north of Bury St Edmunds on the 29th. Two **Red-crested Pochard** were discovered at Lackford Lakes on the extra day of this month too. Finally, and perhaps saving the best till last, in the Santon Downham area three really excellent birds were reported, of which the latter two are very difficult species to see in the county these days. These were **Great Grey Shrike** on the 25th and 29th, **Hawfinch** on the 27th and a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** on the 29th, now a rare bird in Suffolk!

Wren Poem

Ornithologists, entomologists, biologists, zoologists... indeed most 'ologists' are obliged by their work to impart knowledge about their subject in a particular way. Depending upon the level of complexity they must strive to be objective and to use language precisely to convey findings and information for those wishing to know more about living organisms specifically, in our case, birds. Describing concisely and avoiding ambiguity takes enormous linguistic skill.

I read the entries in a couple of identification guides to see how precise the information is about Wrens. The following are drawn from the relevant entries from 'Collins Bird Guide', text and maps by Lars Svensson and 'Birds' by Robert Hume.

Wren behaviour: 'it spends most of its time low down, on or near the ground'; habitat: 'it is found from sea level to high up in mountain areas, from forest to to almost open spaces, (hmm, that really narrows it down); identification: 'ludicrously small tail that is usually raised vertically,' (double hmm, Svensson allowing opinion to creep in here) and then 'reddish brown above and sullied brownish white below with fine dark vermiculations'. Finally, voice: 'a rattling, hard 'zerrr', as well as single hard clicking 'zeck' notes' plus 'song amazingly loud for so small a bird'. As expected, identification guides strive to convey information about a bird's physical features, aspects of its behaviour, the sounds it makes and its habitat.

So does Hughes's poem.

Wren

Who owns

Each tail-feather barred like a falcon?

He does - that freckled inspector

Of the woodland's vaults. Burglar

Alarm of the undergrowth. King

Of the lowest hovel of winter bramble.

The wren is a nervous wreck

Since he saw the sun from the back of an eagle.

He prefers to creep. If he can't creep

He'll whirr trickle-low as his shadow -

Brief as a mouse's bounce from safety to safety.

Even the ermine snow-flake's nose can't start him -

When the thicket's drifted, a shrouded corpse,

He's in under there, ticking,

Not as a last pulse, but a new life waiting.

Lonely keeper of the gold

In the tumbled cleave.

A bird out of Merlin's ear.

Silent watcher. Suddenly

Singing, like a martyr on fire,

Glossolalia.

Ted Hughes (1930-1998)



So what's the difference? What is Hughes doing that makes his observations so different? First, Hughes does not have to obey the normal constraints of language because poetry doesn't. Second, his description of the Wren engages our emotions and asks that we reflect on our own knowledge of this bird to see if we agree. Third, it amuses. Clearly these three are not the aims of a bird guide.

Hughes opens with a question and uses language familiar to anyone interested in birds: 'tail-feather', 'barred' and 'falcon'. Aha! I know what he is talking about. I know also that the poem is called 'Wren' and I begin to search in my mind's eye for the knowledge I have of Wrens and falcons to ask if their markings are the same. But does the question do even more? Hughes is not going to make this simple. For me, the answer to the question begins to explore the bird's behaviour as well as its physical features. It is almost as if we catch sight of the bird and we ask: 'What is it? What did you see?' And, the answer from Hughes is not simply 'a Wren', but is instead a complex description which suggests both identification features ('freckled') and behaviour ('inspector'). The choice of 'inspector' does more than convey the way the bird moves around the depths of the undergrowth ('vaults') looking at everything. It conjures up officiousness and self-importance and now I am amused by the picture he has painted of this bird in just two words.

Hughes moves rapidly from physical features, to behaviour, to the bird's physical attributes such as its voice. How does 'Burglar alarm of the undergrowth' convey so much? Burglar alarms are a warning: they go off suddenly, they make you jump and they are incredibly LOUD. So there we have it. A perfect description of what happens if you go too near a Wren.

In the third stanza, Hughes moves into another area of Wren lore – the fable of the Wren and the eagle. The eagle boasts that he can fly higher than any other bird and sets off to prove he is the best with all the other birds trying to keep up. Of course they fail one by one as the eagle flies higher and higher close to the sun. Where is the Wren? Hidden among the back

feathers of the eagle. So when the boastful bird has reached his limits, the Wren moves out from hiding and flies just above the eagle's back. The Wren is crowned king of the birds and the moral of the story is self-evident. But Hughes doesn't make what might be an expected reference to the Wren's cleverness or modesty or victory. Instead, he unexpectedly suggests the Wren is 'a nervous wreck' from an experience so close to the sun, which explains why the bird 'creeps' or hides near the ground. Ornithologically suspect, but still entertaining.

As we've said, poets don't have to follow the same rules as prose and in stanza four Hughes certainly doesn't, as he plays around with words to create another observation of the bird's behaviour and voice. He creates a new verb: the bird will 'whirr trickle'. Both words contain an element of movement and sound which, followed by 'low as his shadow', adds another reminder of the bird's secretiveness.

In stanza five Hughes still has the Wren hidden in undergrowth but this time in snowy winter ('a shrouded corpse') where the bird is 'ticking'. I love the ambiguity of this verb. Is it the sound the bird is making or its heart beating as it waits for life to begin again in spring?

The next stanza remains a puzzle for me. 'Lonely keeper of the gold' in the tangled vegetation kind of makes sense – perhaps the bird is guarding its territory. However I am really puzzled by 'A bird out of Merlin's ear'. Merlin was King Arthur's tutor, a shape-changer and wizard, but what was special about his ear? Any ideas?

The magical last stanza, with its shocking, unnerving imagery, gives me goose-bumps. Every part of it powerfully conveys aspects of the Wren. 'Silent watcher' strikes me as sinister. The bird is hidden, we don't know it's there. The contrast between the neutral 'singing' and the shock of the simile 'like a martyr on fire' creates the suddenness, the shock, the explosive piercing quality of the bird's 'amazingly loud' (thank you, identification guide) voice. And what a finish! That religious reference to speaking with tongues conjures up the rapture of its almost out-of-control voice. Wow.

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Harrier Editor: **Eddie Bathgate**
Suffolk Bird Report Editor and SORC Link: **Nick Mason**
Outdoor Events Coordinator: **Gi Grieco**
Indoor Events Coordinator: **Adam Gretton**

Members

Robin Harvey (to 2020)
Adam Gretton (to 2017)
Nick Mason (to 2017)
Kevin Verlander (to 2018)
Ed Keeble (to 2018)
Samantha Lee (to 2020)

Honorary Vice-Presidents

Jean Garrod
Mike Hall
Robin Hopper
Mike Jeanes
Mike Marsh
Philip Murphy



Bird Recorders

North-east Area Recorder:

Andrew Green, 17 Cherrywood, HARLESTON, Norfolk IP20 9LP
Tel: 07766 900063 Email: bird-ne@sns.org.uk

South-east Area Recorder:

Scott Mayson, 8 St Edmunds Close, Springfields, WOODBRIDGE IP12 4UY
Tel: 01394 385595 Email: bird-se@sns.org.uk

West Area Recorder:

Colin Jakes, 7 Maltwood Avenue, BURY ST EDMUNDS IP33 3XN
Tel: 01284 702215 Email: bird-w@sns.org.uk

Membership Secretary

Kevin Verlander 9 Heron Close, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 1UR



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](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

For birds & for birders

SOG Registered Charity No. 801446

www.sogonline.org.uk

