

Spring 2018 No.192



The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

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Contents

Editorial	Gi Grieco	1
The Suffolk breeding plover survey 2017	Robin Harvey	2
A call for volunteers in 2018	Chris Keeling.....	4
SCBOP Spring 2018 Newsletter	Steve Piotrowski and Donna Dean	6
The Harrier abroad.....	Adam Gretton.....	9
Winter Bird Review	Eddie Marsh.....	10

Field Trip Reports

Boyton Marsh.....	Steve Fryett	18
Levington Marina to Trimley Marshes.....	Ellie Zantboer	19
Falkenham and Kirton Creeks	Ellie Zantboer	20
Dunwich	Gi Grieco	21
Establishing a Tree Sparrow colony.....	David Tomlinson	22

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Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) by David Borderick.

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Editorial

Welcome to this edition of The Harrier. This being the third edition I've now edited I've decided to continue as editor permanently, emulating previous Chair, Richard Rafe, who took on both roles concurrently! This time thanks to Adam for assisting with the proof-reading. This edition has an update on the some of the projects SOG are involved in; firstly an annual update on SCBOP, with the full version available on the SOG website. Secondly members participated in the SOG Ringed Plover and Little Ringed Plover survey last year and inside some findings are published, while a full write-up will go in the Suffolk Bird Report later in the year. Relating to these articles is one on volunteering, including details for further projects that need volunteers.

In the last editorial I mentioned the new indoor meeting venue, the University of Suffolk (on the Waterfront). The group have had two meetings there so far, both of which were memorable in having those deeply involved in Suffolk birding recognised for their contribution - an article on this will appear in the next edition, but I'm pleased to include two trip reports from someone who was recognised last year, Ellie Zantboer who was awarded the Garrod Award. Ellie has also been the joint leader, with her dad Justin, on two outdoor trips this year, so it is fantastic to have involvement in SOG from a younger member. There are a couple more field trip reports plus an interesting

article on Tree Sparrow occurring in a Suffolk garden, a real rarity these days. Finally a short piece on this magazine abroad - where else will it show up?!

Gi Grieco



Fieldfares



Robin Harvey

The Suffolk breeding plover survey 2017

Introduction

The last survey of breeding ringed plover in Suffolk was undertaken in 2007 as part of the BTO led national survey. In the absence of national project in 2017, SOG (supported by the Suffolk Little Tern Group) organised a team of volunteers to repeat the survey in Suffolk. The survey was extended to include little ringed plover as coverage included sites with suitable habitat for both species.

The ringed plover is today, most well known as a bird of coastal shingle and scrapes. In the past it was also common in the brecks with an estimated 400 pairs at the beginning of the 20th century (Piotrowski, 2003). In Suffolk, a decline in the breeding population inland has been followed by a rapid drop in

numbers on the coast. This mirrors a decline nationally and the species has recently been added to the Birds of Conservation Concern Red List.

The little ringed plover is more traditionally associated with recently created or regularly managed wetland habitat including gravel pits and scrapes. It may also be found on farmland, acid grassland and coastal shingle. The little ringed plover is not thought to be in decline nationally but the breeding population appears to be decreasing in Suffolk. There is general consensus however, that breeding birds have been under recorded in the county in recent years.

Methods

The BTO kindly produced a list of core and sample tetrads identified as containing suitable habitat in 2007. The aim of the 2017 survey was to revisit as many of the previously visited 2km core tetrads as possible in order to obtain an accurate estimate of the current population for both species. Observers were provided with a map and were asked to make two visits to each tetrad, the first between 15 Apr – 14 May and the second between 15 May – 30 June. The number and sex of all adult ringed and little ringed plover were recorded and this information was used to assess how many breeding pairs were in each tetrad. There was no requirement to record the number of fledged young but in many cases this information was gathered as part of more detailed site surveys.

Results

Thirty volunteers visited a total of 85 tetrads in 2017. These included all tetrads where ringed plover had been recorded in 2007 and represented approximately 70 percent of the tetrads identified as core areas during the last survey. A total of 39 pairs of ringed plover and 8 pairs of little ringed plover were located, fledging 41 and 6 young respectively.

Comparison with previous surveys and discussion

Ringed plover

A summary of the results from 2017 in comparison with previous survey years is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Breeding ringed plover in Suffolk, 1979-2017.

Year	No. of breeding pairs	Percent change since last survey	No. of sites	Young fledged
2017	39	9.3	14	41
2007	43	77	22	4 or 5
1987	183	18		
1979	223			

The report on the 2007 survey referring to the catastrophic decline since 1987 stated that “If we are to have ringed plover breeding on our beaches in only a few years time then drastic action is required” (Wright, 2007). It is pleasing to see that this decline has slowed with a nine percent drop in the last ten years. The population is at a low ebb however, and even a small decrease in the number of pairs is significant. It is also noticeable that there has been a huge decline in the number of sites with breeding birds. Only six sites supported a population of three or more pairs in 2017 (Table 2).

Table 2. Key sites for ringed plover in Suffolk in 2017:

Site	Number of pairs	Number of fledged young
Orford Ness	8	11
Landguard	5	7
Suffolk Coast NNR	5	3
Kessingland	4	7
Minsmere	3	4
Shotley	3	?

It is also apparent that the bulk of the population continues to contract to inaccessible sites and/or sites where there is some degree of intervention or protection. Many of these sites benefit from rope and/or electric fencing excluding people, dogs and predators from key breeding areas and this in combination with signage and wardening has been successful in increasing productivity (Table 1). The minimum of 41 young fledged in 2017 is to be welcomed, but this success comes largely with an ever increasing need for intervention.

Little ringed plover

Little ringed plover first bred in Suffolk in 1948 and *The Birds of Suffolk* describes an increase in the breeding population from ten pairs in 1972 to 14 in 1976 and 33 in 1990 (Piotrowski, 2003). Seven locations supported 12-13 pairs in 2007 (Mason, 2008) so the eight pairs recoded during this survey are indicative of a further decline. It is likely however, that the species has been under recorded due to the bias of birders and surveyors to the coastal sites. There would be some value in encouraging further coverage of inland sites in future years.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go Neil Calbrade at the BTO for providing tetrad maps and to the many volunteers who gave up their free time to survey sites. Particular thanks go to those volunteers who found no plovers!

References:

Mason, N – Ed. (2008). *Suffolk Birds 2007*. Vol 57, 86. Suffolk Naturalists Society.

Piotrowski, S (2003). *The Birds of Suffolk*, 144-145. Helm.

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Chris Keeling

A call for volunteers in 2018

The great thing about birding is that it offers something different to everyone whether you enjoy watching birds in your garden, ringing or searching for rarities, maybe that elusive first for Suffolk, or just getting out there in all weathers throughout the year with every season offering something new to see. Birding offers opportunities for all tastes and all ages but, as we all know, our birds and their habitats are under pressure from developments and agricultural intensification both contributing to loss of habitat pushing some species to the edge of extinction in the UK.

Surveys help us keep pace with change; who are the winners, who are the losers and providing the evidence to lobby for change. Lack of funds and resources means that much of this information is provided by volunteers. Whatever your interests, helping with surveys is an opportunity to contribute to our understanding of birds and their environment in Suffolk, to make a real and

valuable contribution to their continued and future conservation. As SOG Projects Officer, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our dedicated volunteers who have already given so much of their spare time and to ask for your assistance again in 2018.

There are opportunities in the coming year to engage with surveys for a wide range of habitats and species that will, I am sure, appeal to all tastes and interests whether you enjoy searching wide horizons for sea birds, or carefully scoping grazing marshes for breeding waders. There is a great opportunity to explore new farmland habitats that you may not have had opportunity to visit before. If you have time to take on farm surveys and are happy for your contact details to be passed onto farmers please drop me a line at **keeling.chris@icloud.com** or phone 01394 278771 and I will forward your details to the RSPB Farm Survey Coordinator.

Some of you may already have enjoyed early morning farm surveys over the past two summers, listening hopefully for the purring of Turtle Doves, maybe you will be lucky this year as the RSPB are again recruiting volunteers to assist with Turtle Dove surveys across Suffolk and Essex in May and July. For Turtle Dove surveys contact Katy Froud at katy.froud@rspb.org.uk or call 01603 697592.

We do not propose to repeat the Ringed Plover survey this year but the ongoing Suffolk Wader Strategy is looking for volunteers to survey Redshank and Lapwing on coastal grazing marsh. Contact Robin Harvey at robin.harvey@rspb.org.uk or call 01728 648072 if you are interested in assisting.

Also on the coast, Mick Wright will be coordinating the Sea Bird 2000 Census in Suffolk and would also like to hear from new volunteer fieldworkers. Mick has also posted a heads up for an Urban Nesting Gull census proposed over the next two years and would like to hear from SOG members who would like to help with the census. If, like me, you love gulls I recommend that you check the SOG website for more information or contact Mick directly at kupe1515@sky.com.

The monitoring of 1,860 Barn Owl boxes will always be a challenge; nearly 400 barn owl boxes were not checked in 2017 which means that 2018 could be the biggest Barn Owl nest box survey since the project began. We desperately need more trained nest box surveyors who have the time and energy to commit to the project and ensure that few if any boxes are missed this year please contact Steve Piotrowski at spiotrowski@btinternet.com.

And finally, please don't forget what I consider to be the iconic bird of summer, the Swift. Our SOS Swifts campaign has really gathered pace. It's fantastically reassuring to know that so many people enjoy and value the sight and sound of swifts skimming the roof tops and streets in town and village, but the volume of enquiries has increased so much that there's a limit to the time our volunteers can commit. So if you would like to become a volunteer Swift Advisor sign up now by following this link: www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/swift.

If you have any questions or you are having difficulty contacting the project coordinators please do not hesitate to drop me a line at keeling.chris@icloud.com or phone 01394 278771.



Photo: Gi Grieco

Herring Gull

SCBOP Spring 2018 Newsletter

Project Background

The Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project (SCBOP) was founded in 2005, is dedicated to the conservation of barn owls and is now celebrating its 13th year. The project as a whole has advised on the fixing of over 2,000 barn owl nest boxes throughout Suffolk, on nature reserves, farmland and on community spaces like village greens and school grounds. A total of 1,774 of these boxes remain active. As more boxes were fixed between 2011 and 2015, the barn owl population further increased and, in the last six years, an average of 450 boxes have been occupied, a ten-fold increase that includes 2013 when numbers were down due to one of the coldest springs on record. Nowadays, East Anglia hosts the highest densities in Britain with coastal Suffolk and the river valleys accommodating one of the highest, rivalling North Norfolk, the hinterland that surrounds The Wash, N & E Lincolnshire and SE Yorkshire.

The 2017 Breeding Season

In 2017, SCBOP volunteers monitored 78% of its 1,774 nestboxes (down by 5% on 2016) and logged the presence of barn owls in 469 of them. This is close to 2016's record 476 occupied boxes, but the most significant factor from our dataset is the number of young barn owls that reached the fledging stage. A total of 379 broods progressed to the chick stage and although 37 of these failed, a total of 342 went on to fledge, which is a project record. This clearly shows that 2017 was an extremely good vole year in Suffolk with an abundance of prey available.

2017 was undoubtedly an exceptional year for barn owls with monitors reporting high occupancy and productivity. This was

partly due to another mild winter and good feeding opportunities early in the season. The vole cycle appeared to be at a peak and larders in boxes suggested that there was an abundance of food. A high vole population was apparent throughout the season, although there may have been a dip from August to October when a small number of chicks failed to fledge.

The Future and Fundraising

The project involves the whole community and boxes are made by local organisations and monitored by an army of expert volunteers each year. However, working at height to check boxes is not without risk, so we have maintained an extensive training programme to ensure that our volunteers strictly adhere to health and safety rules and have the equipment available to complete the task safely. Last summer we received worrying news that insurers were becoming nervous about providing cover for ladder work following accidents in industry involving people working at height that resulted in huge fines, so we needed to double our efforts. One way of reducing risk is to minimise ladder work and the project is fortunate in that it has a technical expert (Adrian Silverton) in its ranks who is in the process of developing a "Go-Pro" camera system that can be used to view the contents of barn owl boxes from ground level. Grants were received from the Dedham Vale and Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB sustainable development funds, prototypes made and tested, so we are now ready for rollout.

Training workshops were held at Assington Mill and Heveningham Hall during the winter of 2016/2017 and a further programme

Table 1: box occupancy up to February 20th 2018

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
BO Pellet	11	25	53	40	54	36	37	30	24	30	29
BO Adult	12	34	57	55	50	76	151	57	149	116	38
BO Egg	0	17	3	5	4	12	13	14	12	21	5
BO Egg Failed	9	19	23	13	16	19	10	9	21	27	18
BO Young	77	102	123	149	201	289	66	297	240	264	342
BO Young Failed	4	4	3	4	6	12	4	5	12	18	37
BO Total	113	201	262	266	331	444	281	412	458	476	469
Tawny Owl	8	13	21	25	22	21	11	22	20	19	27
Little Owl	1	16	18	16	11	12	8	15	12	7	5
Kestrel	12	23	24	25	17	20	14	21	20	19	21
Stock Dove	71	112	239	253	317	263	325	289	245	287	253
Jackdaw	63	83	141	177	189	206	176	266	270	276	245
Grey Squirrel	6	12	17	8	9	25	28	13	17	16	9
Empty	90	117	199	239	289	236	340	325	311	384	342
Not Checked	203	167	117	163	104	187	353	306	361	299	386
Other	4	0	11	9	7	4	9	4	11	13	17
Number of Active Sites	571	744	1049	1181	1296	1418	1545	1673	1741	1795	1774

of events is planned for March of this year ready for monitoring work this coming season.

Adding the word “Community” to our project name worked very well for us and we must thank all those involved for their support. This truly is a “Community” project with every Suffolk parish being involved. The Project is already delighted to have received grants for replacement or repair of such boxes in the Suffolk Coast & Heaths

and Dedham Vale AONBs’ Sustainable Development Funds (SDFs) and the development of the Go-Pro camera system. Such funding assures all of those volunteers involved that despite the project being 12- years old, it is still recognised as being worthy of continued funding. However, this money is restricted to the AONB areas, which is a very small part of SCBOP’s area, so we urgently need to seek funding to cover the areas outside the AONBs.

Further funding is needed to continue our programme of box repairs and replacement and to ensure that the most urgent repairs and replacements of dilapidated nestboxes take place, sometimes in the form of box replacements. The 1,774 boxes being managed under the SCBOP umbrella gives a combined asset value of nearly £250,000! Replacing all the boxes in the immediate future is not feasible, so we will need to prioritise. During 2017, we extended the longevity of many boxes with minor repairs carried out by our volunteer repair teams. This is a low-waste, low-cost approach and will ensure that the boxes get the longest life-span possible before replacement becomes essential. The rolling programme of box repairs by our volunteer team will ensure long term sustainability of the work.

Hand-in-hand with this rolling box repair programme we have equipped our volunteers with tools, equipment and materials and the necessary skills/training to sustain the work that will conserve Suffolk's Barn Owls. This includes running Monitoring/Repair team training sessions to enable them to use harnesses, giving them the freedom to use tools at height.

SCBOP's current management structure, involving coordinators and monitors, has served us well over the project's 12-year history. However, in 2017 we received a number of setbacks and towards the end of the year we received the devastating news that Colin Carter, the project's cofounder and area coordinator for NE Suffolk, was seriously ill. Sadly, Colin passed away just before Christmas and will be sorely missed by us all. Colin was inspirational, managed the finances in the early years of the project and helped set up barn owl box manufacture for a local disabled organisation Special Objectives for Local Disabled (SOLD). On top of this, two of our coordinators have stood down due to professional commitments

elsewhere, so there is a need to change the project management structure. From this year, the project will be managed by six Area Managers, supported by a number of coordinators for each area. We are looking at each management area being autonomous, so each could continue independently should the umbrella organisation cease to operate.

Maintaining such a massive database for barn owls is not without its challenges, so SCBOP intends to be at the forefront in the development of this new system and hopefully one day it will be possible to enter data in the field whilst boxes are being monitored. We are also conscious that we have a huge database that holds a considerable amount of information, which will be useful for those carrying out research in the future. Security of our database is paramount and this year we will be working to further strengthen our systems to ensure that nest locations and landowner details are not compromised and are held in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Acknowledgments:

The success of Project Barn Owl was due to the hard work and dedication of the many fieldworkers and local coordinators from Suffolk, south Norfolk, north Essex, to whom we are very grateful. These conservation heroes have put their hearts into saving the barn owl for generations to come and should be applauded.

As well as the funders already mentioned above, we must also thank other principal supporters such as Chadacre Agricultural Trust (CAT), who have supported the project from the very beginning. CAT and other charitable trusts that award grants will be called upon this year to help finance the rollout of the Go-Pro camera system to allow monitors working outside the AONB areas to operate safely.

The input of local people should not be underestimated. There have been a number of barn owl parties, garden open days, evening lectures that have been specifically arranged to raise funds for the project. This funding has provided a significant contribution to the project, not only for the financial input but by getting people involved and allowing them to see barn owls and their chicks close up, a lifetime experience.

The project would not have been so successful without the enthusiasm and dedication of SCBOP's Fundraising Officer Oka Last, Administration Manager, Kathy Piotrowski, and the Area Coordinators: Simon Evans, Patrick Barker, Chris McIntyre, Ian Archer, Roger Walsh, Andrina Warmlesley, Edward Jackson, Dave Pearsons, Carl Powell, Alan Miller, Etienne Swarts and Colin Carter.

Since the birth of SCBOP, Colin Shawyer and his Barn Owl Conservation Network (founded in 1988), have been supportive and inspirational. Thanks are due to him for his guidance and for keeping us up-to-date with the national perspective.



Steve Piotrowski,
Project Founder and Director,
Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project –
spiotrowski@btinternet.com
or call on 01986 893311

The Harrier abroad

Steven An, an experienced China bird guide, is pictured in Beijing with some past Harriers. Should any members be interested in visiting China, Adam Gretton would be very happy to advise, having been guided by Steven on two very successful trips, most recently in January 2018 that included cranes (Siberian, hooded and white-naped) and pheasants (Reeve's, brown eared and golden) in eastern China. Adam can be emailed at Adam.Gretton@naturalengland.org.uk or his details can be found on the SOG Events card.

If any other SOG members have photos of The Harrier in other parts of the world then we'd be interested to hear from you.

Please email info@sogonline.org.uk

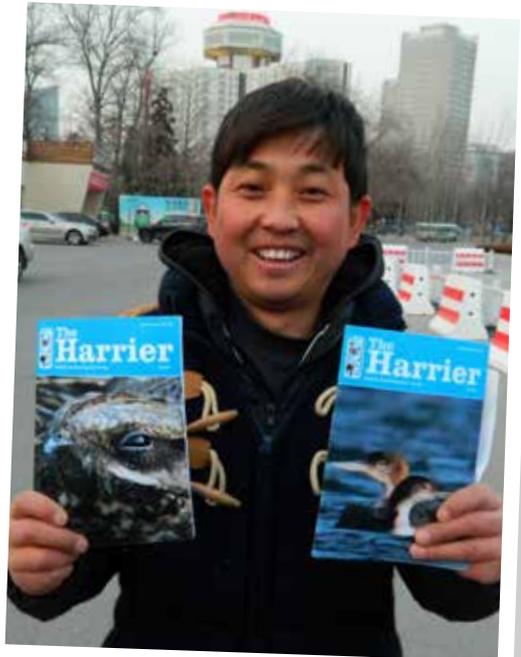


Photo: Adam Gretton

Winter Bird Review

December 2017

Weather:-

December was a very cold and wet month; there were only ten dry days without rain or snow. We had five days of double figure rainfall: 19mm on the 10th, 20mm on the 11th, 13mm on the 26th, 23mm on the 27th and 16mm on the 29th, way above normal average. Total rainfall for the month was 139mm. In the Ipswich area 5cm of snow was recorded on the 10th. December also recorded ten days with lows of below zero with -4C being the lowest on the 12th. Average temperature for the month was a low 4C, the highest recorded for the month was 13C on the 31st.

Birds:-



Photo: Andrew Moon

Whooper Swan

Whooper Swans continued into December with five on the scrape at Minsmere on the 2nd and six over North Wall on the 15th. An adult was on Kingsfleet on the 4th, with presumably the same bird on the 22nd. On the 10th, five flew over late afternoon at Great Livermere and on the 17th, at Walberswick, seven were seen with two juveniles on the marsh late in the afternoon. A count of 10 **Bewick's Swans** in Holbrook Bay on the 1st briefly was a good record. Elsewhere regular

records at Minsmere, Westleton and Dunwich and at Boyton Marshes three were present on the 12th. It seems a very poor winter for wintering geese in Suffolk with low numbers still in December. There were five **White-fronted Geese** over Aldeburgh on the 2nd and a maximum of 31 at North Warren on the 23rd. On the 30th at LBO, two **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** were viewed offshore and one was found on Aldeburgh Town Marshes on the 31st. These were the only geese that were reported to BINS during December!

Goosanders were reported from several sites with up to eight at Minsmere, redheads at Shingle Street, Thorpeness Meare and Slaughden by the Martello tower with a drake at Baylham on the 28th. At LBO, a nice drake **Velvet Scoter** north on the 27th while at Dunwich a good count of 500 **Common Scoter** on the 21st.



Photo: Craig Holden

Great Northern Diver

Good numbers of **Great Northern Divers**, with two south off Minsmere and a few records from Suffolk rivers including one on the River Deben at Waldringfield, two south off Felixstowe Ferry, that landed in the mouth of the Deben, one at Chelmondiston, one at Levington and up to two at Stutton Ness. A very showy adult **Great Northern Diver** showed off the Wherry Hotel area, Oulton Broad, from 8th to the 31st, some excellent photographs were taken of this cracking bird.

Very few **Shag** records, with just one off Pin Mill on the 15th, and an adult and juvenile off Stoke sailing Club, Freston on the 17th.



Great Egret

Photo: Craig Holden

Great White Egret were still being reported from Dunwich with up to three being seen on and off all month plus one from Blythburgh on the 12th, one south at on the 12th and one at Minsmere on the 16th.

Wintering raptors records were generally scarce, with only three **Red Kite** sightings, twice at Reydon Smere and one at Lower Hollesley. A nice male **Hen Harrier** was at Boyton Marshes and again hunting over Gedgrave Marshes, with ring-tails seen at Westleton, Walberswick and Minsmere. A few Merlin sightings: Orford Marshes, up two at Boyton Marshes, Levington Creek, Kingsfleet and Gedgrave. The only **Short-eared Owls** sightings for the month were from Felixstowe Ferry with two on the 12th and at one at Levington Creek. It's been a very quiet winter for one of our favourite winter visitors, but on the 1st a single **Waxwing** turned up on

The Drive at Southwold. **Twite** were reported from between Dunwich and Walberswick with a maximum of 50 on the 21st and 26th. **Snow Buntings** still present all month, with sightings from North Warren and Slaughden with a maximum count of 65 on the beach at North Warren on the 23rd. Other records came from Minsmere, Dunwich, Benacre, Kessingland Levels and LBO. A single Lapland Bunting at Slaughden on the 24th. 18 Corn Buntings at Lings Lane, Chelmondiston, on the 2nd was the only sighting sent into BINS in December. In Ipswich, a **Ring-necked Parakeet** was seen in the west corner of Christchurch Park on the 24th.

Scarcer December Sightings:-

A few **Black-throated Divers**; noted in Holbrook Bay on the 2nd, on the sea at Southwold on the 3rd and another off shore from Dingle Marshes. Other records were on the River Orwell between Pin Mill and Nacton on the 14th and one on the Stour from Wrabness on the 17th. A **Red-necked Grebe** was on the sea at Minsmere on the 8th where, on the 15th, a **Black-necked Grebe** also seen on the sea.

A very nice first-winter **Glaucous Gull** appeared at Southwold on the 7th and remained all month at Dunwich Beach, Minsmere and Sizewell. A first winter was also seen at Aldeburgh near the fishing huts on the 15th, with a bird north past LBO on the 23rd. The **Iceland Gull** was still around LBO and was last reported on the 8th. A juvenile **Iceland Gull** was seen 50 yards south of the Cafe at Kessingland on the 29th. A late **Puffin** was seen offshore at Felixstowe on the 13th and 14th. A couple of **Little Auk** records with three north off LBO on the 1st and another single on the 10th.

A **Hoopoe** was seen just over the border in the Waveney Valley at Harleston on the 30th then flew south.

The excellent **Richard's Pipit** along Wades Lane, east of Pin Mill on Coulton Creek, and



Glaucous Gull

Photo: Andrew Moon



Coues's Arctic Redpoll

Photo: John Richardson

Parrot Crossbill



Photo: Craig Holden

Photo: Andrew Moon



Red Kite

Photo: Stuart Read



Glossy Ibis

Photo: Malcolm Pate



Glossy Ibis

remained until the 22nd at least. A **Siberian Chiffchaff** was found by the Sluice Cottage, North Warren calling and showing well on the 30th and 31st. A **Raven** was recorded east over Ipswich on the 30th. The **Coue's Arctic Redpoll** plus two **Mealy Redpolls** with 30+ **Lesser Redpolls** continued to show very well near the car park at Hazlewood Marshes all month. The **Hawfinch** sightings continued into December with sightings from the Sotterley Park area from the Dell to around the Church area all month ranging from 1-5 birds. At **Flatford** there were up to six and at Tattlingstone Place a maximum count of seven on the 19th. The **Parrot Crossbills** were still showing well at St Helen's Picnic Site area at Santon Downham until the 8th with counts of up to 40 birds. The six at Upper Hollesley showed well on and off during December.

January 2018

Weather:-

The weather improved from last month being considerably drier with half the rainfall of December. A total of nine completely dry days and 12 days with 2mm of rain or less, total rainfall being 77mm compared to 139mm in December. Snow fell on the 21st but only amounted to 2.5cm. Daytime temperatures reached double figures on ten days with 13C being the highest on the 24th. There were six nights below zero. Overall, close to average January weather.

Birds Jan 2017:-

A poor January for **Whooper Swan** with a long staying single bird at Kirton Creek and two south at Dunwich then on South Levels at Minsmere on the 25th. **Bewick's Swans** were seen all month in the Darsham/Westleton/Minsmere area with a high count of 12 on the 28th. Singles at Carlton Marshes on the 6th and Kirton Creek on the 27th. An unusual record was a single **Dark-bellied Brent Goose** at Micklemere on the 19th and 22nd. Shame it's such a walk, but Trimley Marshes had a very nice smattering of wintering

geese throughout January, with **Tundra Bean Geese** reaching a maximum count of seven, **Pink-footed Geese** ranging from one to five, but 33 seen on the 12th. **Greater White-fronted Geese** ranged from 4 to 10, plus a nice surprise was the arrival of six **Greenland White-fronted Geese** on the 8th, then on and off till 29th at least. At Dunwich, a **Long-tailed Duck** was seen on occasion with the scoter flock and a female off North Warren.



Photo: Lee woods

Goosander

Goosanders were still being reported all month; up to four at Minsmere, up to two at Slaughden, at Thorpeness Meare a maximum count of seven, both a drake and redhead at Alton Water, a drake at Pipp's Ford and at times three in Christchurch Park including two redheads and a male.

Great Northern Divers continued to be seen throughout the county this month; at Oulton Broad, the Wherry Hotel Great Northern Diver had moved to Lake Lothing until the 13th, one south off Dunwich, possibly two birds on the River Orwell, one at Alton Water and reported from the River Stour. There were up to three **Slavonian Grebes** on the Stour Estuary during January along with one on the sea in Sole Bay off Minsmere and Dunwich on three dates. **Great White Egret** continued throughout January at Dunwich with three

still being reported all month. A few **Red Kite** sightings this month; two in the Lowestoft area, one over Hoist Covert, Walberswick, one at Carlton Marshes and one at Boyton. A few irregular sightings of **Hen Harrier** during the month; with single ringtails seen at Walberswick, Minsmere, North Warren and at Boyton. Males noted at Breydon South Wall, Dunwich and Orfordness. **Merlin** sightings came from North Warren, a female at Shingle Street, one at Brightwell and at Puttocks Hill, Pakenham one on the 15th. Up to three **Short-eared Owls** by Felixstowe Ferry with a single at Minsmere Dunes on the 10th. A scarce bird in Suffolk these days is **Tree Sparrow**; at Easton Bavents there were 43 on the 13th and five on the 28th. **Twite** continued all month at Dunwich Shore Pools with the highest count being 44 on the 11th. **Snow Buntings** were still present all month from North Warren and Slaughden with the highest count of 60+ birds present between both sites. Also reports from Dunwich/Dingle all month, a maximum count of 10 plus a couple of records from Shingle Street. At Slaughden, a single **Lapland Bunting** was present on a couple of dates.

Scarcer January Sightings:-

A **Red-necked Grebe** was viewable distantly off Harkstead. An adult **Glossy Ibis** was reported being seen over North Wall on the 17th. It was then recorded until the month's end at Minsmere at various locations on the reserve and also spent lots of its time on the Eastbridge Levels. Another was at Carlton Marshes on the 30th and one was also seen at Church Farm Marsh, Wenhaston on the 29th and 30th. A **Common Sandpiper** was found under the Orwell Bridge on the 6th and 21st and probably the same bird at Bourne Bridge on the 25th. On the 14th there was a very nice sighting in Suffolk these days of 23 **Grey Partridges** on Ellough Airfield. There were some single **Bonxies** reported during the month; at Ness Point and twice at LBO. Arctic Skua seen north off Dunwich on the

7th. The very confiding first winter **Glaucous Gull** remained all month being reported most days from Dunwich, Minsmere, Southwold and Sizewell. Some cracking video clips and photographs appeared on BINS and other websites. The first winter **Iceland Gull** continued to be seen in the Lowestoft area, mainly on Kessingland Levels on the 1st, 7th, 13th and 16th. Possibly the same bird was seen north over Easton Bavents on the 4th and at Leathes Ham early morning on the 14th. A 2cy was reported inland at Tuddenham on the 26th, still in pig fields on the 27th and 31st. At Southwold on the 1st Brian Small found and photographed a first winter **'Viking Gull'** (Glaucous x Herring gull hybrid).

Another single **Waxwing** turned up in January, at Steven's Street Lowestoft on the 12th and was present in the morning the following day before it flew strongly off north.

Photo: David Borderick



Waxwing

The **Siberian Chiffchaff** at Sluice Cottage North Warren continued to be seen irregularly with another bird reported from Bungay on the 16th. At Lakenheath RSPB a ringed **Willow Tit** was observed on the approach road on the 19th. A **Raven** was recorded from Alton Water on the 4th and one high south over Baylham on the 30th. The very long staying and very confiding **Coues's Arctic Redpoll**, with a **Mealy and Lesser Redpoll** flock, continued to show very well near the car park at Hazlewood

Marshes throughout January. Sightings of **Hawfinch** continued throughout January; a high count of 14 from Sotterley Park, two at Flatford, eight at Tattingstone Place, two at Minsmere, three at Kentwell Hall, Long Melford and four at Wrentham Churchyard. It's a treat for Suffolks birders to get a chance to catch up with this elusive species. The **Parrot Crossbills** were not showing so well during January at St Helen's Picnic Site area at Santon Downham, though 30 birds showed on the 14th - this being the only report during the month. The six at Upper Hollesley also became more erratic and showed only on a few dates. There was no pattern of when they came to drink at their favourite puddle and many days they would not appear.

February 2018

Weather:-

February was a month that produced temperatures below the normal average. The month had 14 days where rain fell, in total 61mm with two double figure days 12mm and 10mm. The only double figure high was 10C on the 18th and the lowest night-time temperature was -7C. The last three days of the month were hailed the 'Beast from the East' by the media, dominated by high pressure in Suffolk as bitter easterly winds swept in from Siberia. This brought prolonged snowfall with up to 15cm and wind chill down to -10C; the last three days never got above 0C, bringing a very cold end to February.

Birds Feb 2017:-

With the arrival of snowy cold conditions at the end of the month many **Fieldfares** left their countryside feeding grounds and arrived in Suffolk gardens. I have found over the years that as soon as we have snow and cold weather and having apples spiked on trees and on the ground, they soon find this food source. It's amazing, and this winter I had my personal highest count of 70+ on Wednesday 28th, they were demolishing a large box of

apples per day! It was an expensive week - around £30 spent on apples - and it was a relief that this weather only lasted six days and the **Fieldfares** returned to their normal feeding areas in the countryside.

One of nature's wonders was visible at Minsmere RSPB from the North Wall during February; it was an amazing murmuration of 40,000+ **Starlings** coming to roost just before dusk. It drew large crowds on many late afternoons to see the phenomenal display.

Things did not change much for February with most of January's birds still remaining; a few more **Whooper Swans**; up to six at West Hide Minsmere, a single bird stayed at Kirton Creek, two at Boyton on the 14th and eleven at Lakenheath RSPB on the 11th. A slight increase of **Bewick's Swan**; up to 14 birds roosting at Minsmere and seen during the day in the area of Lymballs Lane, Westleton. A single bird continued to be present at Kirton Creek. The highest count of **Greater White-fronted Geese** was 179 at North Warren and there were two neck-collared birds at the site. At Trimley Marshes three **Tundra Bean Geese**, one **Pink-footed Goose**, seven **White-fronted Geese** and the six **Greenland White-fronted Geese** were reported during the month up to the 24th. **Goosander** reports: up to eleven from Minsmere RSPB, five at Thorpeness Meare, two at both Christchurch Park and Lemon's Hill Bridge, Tattingstone. **Red-breasted Merganser** showed very well on Oulton Broad.



Red-breasted Merganser

Photo: David Borderick

At Minsmere RSPB, two redhead **Smew** showed from the 7th to the month's end. **Great Northern Diver** sightings came during the first half of the month from the River Orwell plus one off LBO on the 7th. Still three **Great White Egret** at Dunwich and one at Lakenheath RSPB on the 11th. The very confiding **Glaucous Gull** continued into February and was reported most days along the coast from Southwold, Dunwich, Minsmere and Sizewell. The **Iceland Gull** continued to be reported in the pig fields at Tuddenham; it was seen going to roost at Lackford Lakes on the 16th and was present on the afternoon of the 17th.

Red Kite sightings for this month: up to two birds in the Wrentham Old Churchyard area on the 2nd, one over Reydon, one over Pipp's Ford, and a couple of times over Stoke by Nayland. Further records were one over Livermere and one at Boyton Marshes. **Short-eared Owls** were reported most of the month from Felixstowe Ferry with up to four birds being reported, the only other report came from Hemley on the 3rd. The only **Waxwing** for February were three at Yoxford on the 6th and four at Blofield Road, Felixstowe on the 26th and 27th; what a poor winter for this species - they usually brighten up our dull days. Regular sightings of **Black Redstart** at Sizewell with a good inland record from Winesham, opposite the Fynn Valley Golf Club, on the 5th plus an adult male at Felixstowe Docks by Shed 70. **Snow Buntings** still present all month from Slaughden with the highest count of 30+ birds present on the 1st. The North Warren peak count was nine on the 12th. Minsmere RSPB Sluice/Beach area had up to 22 birds recorded. Smaller numbers were also seen at Trimley Marshes, Levington Marina and Walberswick.

Scarcer February Sightings:-

A **Black-throated Diver** was on Lake Lothing west of the railway bridge on the 8th only.

The adult **Glossy Ibis** remained throughout the month on the Eastbridge Levels and was seen occasionally at Minsmere, often roosting at Island Mere. One was seen at Wenhaston at Church Farm Marsh on the 1st and another at Breydon South Wall on the 24th, with a different bird reported from Aldhurst Farm wetland, Leiston on the 27th. In the Santon Downham area, both a **Goshawk** and **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** were reported. Another **Siberian Chiffchaff** turned up in February, this time at Levington Creek sewage works and showed well until the 25th at least, often very confiding from the footpath. A **Raven** was recorded from Hollesley RSPB early afternoon on the 17th with another north over Needham Market on the 22nd and one nearby at Roots and Shoots, Stowmarket the following day. The very long staying and very confiding **Coues's Arctic Redpoll** continued to show very well near the car park at Hazlewood Marshes until the 18th February when the field was ploughed and drilled. Another possible bird at Covehithe on the 21st. Sightings of **Hawfinch** continued throughout February with sightings from Tattingsstone Place with a peak count of six. Further birds were often being seen along the drive at Kentwell Hall, Long Melford with a maximum of six on the 15th. Wrentham old churchyard also had a peak count of six during the month. A new site for Hawfinch this winter was Stoke by Nayland churchyard with eight reported there on the 14th only. On the **Parrot Crossbill** front, only two reports this month: the six at Upper Hollesley only on the 8th and at least three over Sutton Common on the 15th.

Photo: Eddie Marsh



Siberian Chiffchaff

Field Trip Reports

Steve Fryett

Boyton Marsh

Saturday December 16th

Leader: Steve Fryett

Traditionally the last meeting of the year is a “get away from Xmas shopping” meeting for a few diehards however this year I was astounded by an attendance of 19. I was pleased to see familiar faces, some new members and some old friends from the Shotley peninsula. As is often the case here at Boyton at this time of year it was cold, barely above freezing with a biting wind. A small group of Curlew had found some soft grass in front of the farm which on which to feed together with two Black-tailed Godwit. In the tall Alders, to the south, two Common Buzzard looked as though they had roosted overnight. The most prominent

species on the marsh was Lapwing with no ducks or geese seemingly present other than the usual contingent of Canada Geese, with a single Greylag Goose, and a few Wigeon towards Havergate. A small raptor was noted, but not identified, being harried by a corvid over Gedgrave Marsh and was presumably the same bird seen five minutes later at the top of a tree near the barns. The raptor could clearly be identified as a female Merlin and enjoyed by all of the group. It is likely a second Merlin was present, seen by just one of the group whilst watching the one in the tree. Making our way to the Butley river two Common Snipe emerged from grass by the footpath with a further four seen later. Heading towards Burrow Hill some flashes of water on the marsh held at least four Rock Pipit and a male Stonechat with a pair of Reed Bunting in bushes further along. As we made our ascent of Burrows Hill at least twenty Meadow Pipits were disturbed from the rough grass. At the top, the panoramic view allowed us to see four Common Buzzards, Marsh Harrier and Kestrel with Mistle Thrush, Stock Dove and Grey Heron. On the ebbing river both Teal and Wigeon were noted with 200 Avocet at Butley Mills. We returned back the same way locating a female Sparrowhawk and plenty more Curlew. The two Reed Bunting had moved further along and provided excellent views of this striking bird. The meeting ended at lunchtime having noted five species of raptor, also noted during the meeting was a Muntjac and several sightings of Common Seal in the river.



Stonechat

Photo: David Borderick



Photo: Gi Grieco

SOG at Levington

Ellie Zantboer

Levington Marina to Trimley Marshes

Saturday January 6th

Leaders: Justin & Ellie Zantboer

We had a fantastic turn-out of 24 people, all with high hopes for what we could find. However, the weather unfortunately wasn't on our side as it was overcast and very cold. We started by looking at Loompit Lake. Despite the good amounts of Gadwall and Pochard, there were no surprises. We were delighted to see a very showy Rock Pipit, which kept us company for the first part of our walk as it followed us right along the river wall, occasionally speaking to us. Once the friendly Rock Pipit flew off we scanned through the waders that were feeding along the estuary with Avocet and Bar-tailed Godwit being the highlights. At this point we were all feeling a little bit chilly so it was warming when Justin found a presumed, distant Shag on the river. However, closer views were needed.

As we set off towards Thorpe Cliff to attempt to get better views of the Shag, we had a look for the local Bullfinches but they sadly didn't play 'ball'. So, we got to Thorpe Cliff when a stunning Kingfisher zoomed past. However, only some of us saw it. We spent some time there scanning along the river to try and re-find the Shag, which we did and then confirmed the ID. After that, we were pleasantly surprised to find two Red-breasted Mergansers feeding on the river. Once we managed to get everybody onto these, we carried on to the

Trimley Retreat, where Justin, Daniel, Dave, Will and I went onto the Saltings to try and spot a Jack Snipe. We were successful in our quest with everyone except myself seeing the Jack Snipe, adding to my woe of missing the Kingfisher! However, a male Bullfinch flew over the Saltings, seemingly looking for a tree, which surprised us all. After this, we carried on towards Trimley Marshes hearing but not seeing a Green Woodpecker, which was the only bird of note.

It was cold and quiet on the river wall until we saw a distant Common Buzzard circling up high and a small flock of Barnacle Geese feeding in the field, adjacent to the Trimley Reserve. Once we arrived at the reserve, we realised that there was such a myriad of us that we couldn't all squeeze into a single hide. Therefore, we split into two groups with myself and Justin taking one half into the winter flood hide and Peter Merchant taking the others into the summer flood hide. This proved a good move for myself and our half as we were lucky enough to see a Bearded Tit pinging close to the hide. We felt bad for the group that went into the summer flood hide as they weren't able to see or hear it. Moreover, we spotted a Marsh Harrier, from the winter flood hide, quartering the marshes. Otherwise, the lagoons were quiet.

We made our way to the Reservoir hide, as one big group again, where most of us enjoyed the two hubristic Peregrine Falcons that were sat up on one of the dock cranes. Despite, those Peregrines, we didn't see very much else of note in the Reservoir hide. As a result of this, we began to take a quicker walk back to Levington as the weather started to close in a bit. Our walk back was quiet, with a female Stonechat on the Trimley Retreat wall

being the only bird of note. We finally made it back to Loompit where we saw up to seven Grey Herons mostly in the trees. In addition to this, I also saw a beautiful little Goldcrest. When we finally reached the end, Gi Grieco took a picture of all of us a one big SOG group to round off a good but at times, hard working trip. As always though, the company was of the highest order.



Ellie Zantboer

Falkenham and Kirton Creeks

Saturday January 20th

Leaders: Justin & Ellie Zantboer

Sadly, the rain started as soon as we all got out of our cars, which was not ideal considering the distance that we were going to be covering. We once again had an amazing turn-out, with 24 members arriving to join us on our trip. We were all slightly disheartened by the weather but not to be deterred, we set off. As soon as we started walking, we saw a carpet of beautiful Snowdrops in the church yard, where a Coal Tit was singing rather nicely. This was then followed by a Common Buzzard, which flew over the track. However, only the tail end of our group managed to see it. As we progressed towards Falkenham Creek, the fields held good numbers of Curlew and Red-legged Partridges and several Lapwings but really not much else.

Apart from two Little Egrets and two Bar-tailed Godwits, Falkenham Creek was reasonably quiet. Consequently, our attentions were

switched to the fields focusing on distant flocks of swans. Our perseverance here paid off as, not only was the wintering Whooper Swan found amongst the local Mute Swans but we were also lucky enough to find a Bewick's Swan too. Other birds noted here were: Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier whilst a Chinese Water Deer also appeared, which everyone but myself and Justin saw. After this, we continued along the river wall noting a good selection of waders that included: Avocet, Dunlin, both Bar and Black-tailed Godwits, Grey Plover, Turnstone and a brief fly over snipe species, which looked small! Also along the river wall, were a pair of Stonechats and a few Meadow Pipits and Reed Buntings.

We continued our walk towards Kirton Creek, which was fairly quiet, apart from a close Common Buzzard, a fly over Great Spotted Woodpecker and at least one Siskin in the

woods. Cetti's Warbler were conspicuous here by their absence! Before carrying on towards home, we stopped at Kirton Creek's wood shed to look for a roosting Owl. However, we were unsuccessful in this. With the rain getting heavier, our walk continued through farmland where we chanced upon a sizeable flock of sparrows, buntings and finches. We managed to count at least 12 Yellowhammers amongst good numbers of House Sparrows, Chaffinches and Reed Buntings and were

rewarded with the first Brambling of the year for many of us. In all, the flock consisted of at least 100 birds!

This was a fitting finale, as we headed back towards the warmth of our cars. Despite how wet and cold we all were, we thoroughly enjoyed the birds and the atmosphere of the walk, especially when Dan shared out his bag of sweets. Again, a great crowd. Let's hope for better weather for 2019.

Gi Grieco

Dunwich

Saturday February 17th

Leader: Gi Grieco



Photo: Gi Grieco

I took over responsibility of trip leader for the day as Steve was unable to attend due to family circumstances. It was a glorious calm sunny day as eleven members assembled at the beach car park. The plan was to do a big loop, going out along the shingle and back via the edge of the woodland. We went up on to the shingle ridge to scan the sea, which was eerily calm with a silvery luminous sheen from the sunlight and haze. Visibility was great inshore but less so further out. We picked up a number of Red-throated Divers, Great Crested Grebes and a couple of small flocks of Common Scoter. Further along, a much larger raft of scoters in a long line was spied and when they flew it was estimated to contain over 400 birds – a fantastic sight. The odd Cormorant and a couple of small flocks of Brent Geese also flew offshore.

As we walked along we were glad to hear several Skylarks, their wonderful aerial song display a sign of spring to come, as was a Buff-tailed Bumblebee. A female Stonechat was also noted along the shingle ridge. In the pools along the edge of the marsh a selection

of waders included Redshank, Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Further in Lapwing and a couple of Curlew with a number of geese and ducks, mostly Teal and Wigeon. As expected these days a few Little Egrets were seen and, along with these, three Great Egrets; this species is also starting to become a regular sighting in Suffolk like its smaller relative. We also saw a third heron species, a single Grey Heron. As we scanned the marsh up above the tree line we saw a number of raptors circling in the thermals, mostly Buzzard along with Marsh Harrier and a single Red Kite. Some members also saw a Sparrowhawk. Later on a Kestrel hovering was our fifth raptor of the day.

On reaching Corporation Marsh we headed inland and as we passed Dingle Hill we heard Bearded Tit in the reedbed. Once in to the woodland we saw Great Spotted Woodpecker plus a number of finches around a garden feeder that included both Greenfinch and Brambling. A Siskin was also heard flying over. The final stretch back to Dunwich village was generally quiet. Back at the car park we

said goodbye to some members while a few decided to have lunch scanning the sea again. Good views of close Red-throated Divers and Common Scoter, then the scoter flock was found again and, this time, when they flew the number was estimated to be nearer 600! We decided to go on to Minsmere to do a bit of birding before waiting to see the Starling murmuration. We saw a single female Smew on South Scrape and 10 Snow buntings were very confiding near the sluice. We

stood about 20 metres ahead of them and watched as they came closer and closer and went passed us giving fantastic views down to 2 metres! We headed back to North Wall to join around 300 people all waiting for the amazing spectacle to unfold. The sight and sound of the Starlings, particularly in the final stages, gave all present a superb show – a great way to end a nice day on the Suffolk coast.

David Tomlinson

Establishing a Tree Sparrow colony

I'd moved to a sparrowless zone. This was my view after my first year of living in Suffolk. After 12 months at Bowbeck, near Bardwell, I still hadn't seen a single sparrow in my rural garden. Then, exactly a year and a week after moving to Suffolk, the very first sparrow appeared; the date was 20 October 2005. Rather to my surprise it wasn't a House Sparrow, but a Tree Sparrow. It stayed for 10 minutes, allowing me to get some pleasing photographs before it flew, never to be seen again. There were no more sparrow sightings of any sort for another three years. Then, on 5 October 2008, I had one more brief sighting of another Tree Sparrow. It seemed as if these birds would never be anything other than rare visitors to my garden.

Claud Ticehurst wrote at length about Tree Sparrows in *History of the Birds of Suffolk* (1932): "It breeds in many localities and is generally distributed but is not plentiful except in a few places". However, he did suspect "Tree Sparrows are often overlooked by those who do not know them very well", adding "within my own experience one may go far through the country-side and not see one and then come on quite a number".

Though they may have been localised

breeding birds, there was evidently a big wintering population. "The numbers resident in the county are as nothing compared with the numbers that come in autumn from overseas or pass south along the coast," Ticehurst noted. There was apparently a heavy coastal passage, starting "at the end of September. It continues on most days throughout October and reaches the maximum in the last half of the month. After about 10th November the stream slackens."

Like Ticehurst, Bill Payn (author of *The Birds of Suffolk*, 1962) considered that the Tree Sparrow was probably overlooked, "but I think that there are few parishes in the county where it does not breed". He agreed with Ticehurst that the bird was "a pronounced migrant. Many reach us in October and November from overseas".

Tree Sparrow populations have long been known to be cyclic, peaking and then collapsing for no apparent reason. By the time Steve Piotrowski's *Birds of Suffolk* (2003) was published the Tree Sparrow had become thinly distributed, with a rapid decrease since the mid-1980s. Steve does quote some fascinating migration figures for the early 1960s, such as the 8,000 logged at Minsmere between 3 October and 17

November 1961, including no fewer than 2,350 in three hours on 1 October. I'd loved to have seen that.

It is clear that by the Tree Sparrow was close to extinction in our county, though a few breeding pairs still clung on. The bird's perilous status led to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust launching its Tree Sparrow Project, which ran from 2008-2011. Its main aims were to make people aware on the bird's plight, to stabilise core populations and create opportunities for the species to thrive, disperse and re-colonise. To achieve this, SWT offered starter packs and information leaflets to people willing to encourage Tree Sparrows into their gardens: the pack included nest boxes, bird feeders and seed. As I thought my land might well be able to attract these sparrows I took part in the project.

The project was a brave effort, but how successful it was remains debatable. However, it did coincide with sparrows appearing more frequently at Bowbeck. In October 2009 a pair put in an appearance on 20 October, but as in previous years they didn't stay around. Exactly a year later another pair arrived in the garden, but this time they must have liked what they found, as they remained, and by December four were feeding here regularly, with numbers increasing again in the New Year.

By the following autumn a pattern was becoming established: the first birds would appear in early October, with numbers increasing during the autumn and winter, reaching a peak of 20 plus in February. The SWT had established that Tree Sparrows are keen consumers of red millet, a seed that few other seed-eating birds are keen on. (Nicholas Watts has established a terrific population at Vine Farm in Lincolnshire by feeding millet). I tried both red and white millet, thinking it would be the key to success, but it wasn't. My birds much

preferred Jacobi Jayne's Special Mix 50:50, which is mainly black sunflowers and which is what I provide in my garden. (I have three standard feeders dispensing it).

I also have another large-capacity feeder at the end of my field, a couple of hundred yards from the house, where I feed a coarse mix of wildbird food bought cheaply from my local seed merchants in Pakenham. This includes a lot of wheat that the sparrows like, as do Yellowhammers. In mid-winter the field feeder draws as many birds as the garden feeders, a reminder that Tree Sparrows are naturally hedgerow rather than garden birds.

Knowing of my growing Tree Sparrow flock, Patrick Barker made several attempts to net the sparrows at the feeders. However, they are crafty little blighters, and adept at avoiding the nets. On one occasion the bag was 60 birds of a variety of species, including Great Spotted Woodpecker and Yellowhammer, but only a single Tree Sparrow.

The sparrows first prospected my nest boxes (mainly Schwegler) in March 2012,

Photo: David Tomlinson



but it wasn't until 8 April 2013 that I first saw birds carrying nesting material into a box. They fledged a brood in May, but then disappeared, disappointingly not stopping for a second brood. There were other compensations that spring, most notably a Grey Partridge pair that brought their small chicks to feed in the garden. However, no Tree Sparrows were seen until October, when a few pairs started coming to the feeders. Numbers never built up, and they had all disappeared by mid March.

Tree Sparrows are unpredictable birds, so I was delighted when a single individual appeared in the garden that summer, giving me my first-ever August record, though it wasn't until November that the sparrows started appearing regularly again, with numbers reaching 20 by the end of the month. Similar numbers remained around all winter, with several loitering into the spring, when a trio of Stone-curlews raised my hopes by showing signs of attempting to breed in field next to the house. Sadly, the Stone-curlews departed, but the Tree Sparrows remained and one pair bred, their four chicks ringed by Patrick on 13 May. They produced a second brood, too, again ringed by Patrick. They may well have had a third, as they remained around well into August. One of the young ringed sparrows was controlled (trapped and released) some seven kilometres away in August, at Great Livermere, where there is another colony.

The sparrows were back in October, and numbers soon started to build up, with birds invariably to be seen at any of my three feeding stations throughout the day. They remained around all winter, with the first nest-box inspections noted on 17 January. By the spring there were still numerous pairs around, checking out the boxes, but it was a pleasant surprise when many of them decided to nest here. With half a dozen Schwegler boxes available, plus

several wooden boxes including a three-compartment sparrow terrace, they had plenty of boxes to choose from.

Quite how many pairs nested was a mystery, as there were almost certainly pairs breeding in neighbours' gardens where they were unrecorded. My guess is at least seven pairs, possibly more. Patrick ringed no fewer than 45 juveniles. Productivity was high, with at least one nest producing four broods. It seemed, at long last, that a viable colony had become established. The sparrows were now resident, with birds to be seen every day, though it was unusual to see more than 15 at once. For spring 2017 I put up more boxes, and most were occupied. However, the breeding success wasn't monitored as closely – the arrival of Patrick's daughter, Charlotte, in early June curtailed the time he had available for ringing.

Tree Sparrows are mysterious birds, with colonies building up, flourishing for a few years, then collapsing for no apparent reason. My colony is still on the up, with numerous birds present this past winter. I've put up another half dozen boxes, so I'm hoping for a bumper breeding colony this spring. If any SOG members would like to see the colony, simply send me an email to fix a date at dhtomlinson@btinternet.com.

Photo: David Tomlinson



Tree Sparrow

Council for 2017

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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

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