

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Autumn 1997

Birds on our Patch — May to October

Suddenly, the Downs had a new lease of life, with many of the best records coming from the green swathe away from the coast. Raptor sightings actually rivalled those of the 1970's and included a Red Kite around Harrow Hill, at least two Montagu's Harriers between Cissbury and Steepdown during August, a couple of Marsh Harriers throughout the month, an Osprey in early September and a maximum of six Buzzards over Steepdown. One afternoon, two Peregrines were playfully annoying a pair of Buzzards over Steepdown — an amazing sight and perhaps a portend of what the Downs may hold in the very near future as both species are increasing in the county. Hobbies, Kestrels and Sparrowhawks also appeared in excellent numbers.

Dotterel must be our 'bird of the year' with trips being seen both in spring and autumn — the flock of nine present on the last day of August and into early September contained a high proportion of young birds which promises well for next year. This species has had a population explosion in Britain over the last 20 years with the number of pairs rising from 150 in 1972 to over 800 now. Should this trend continue, then our downland should attract over more of these delightful birds.

Rarities during the summer included a White Stork seen circling over Brighton and Worthing and a potential 'first' for Sussex with a Crested Tit seen feeding in a Worthing garden in May! Perhaps this extraordinary record will encourage more people to join in the garden bird survey - who knows what may be lurking in your bushes? Another strange record came from a garden bordering Ferring Rife - the observer noticed a small heron flying down the Rife on two evenings at dusk. It seems likely that this was a Night Heron which is famous for its crepuscular habits.

The faithful Mediterranean Gull returned to Soldier's Point in the harbour at the beginning of August and will no doubt remain until spring. I saw an adult Mediterranean Gull feeding at the top of Chantry Hill and it's likely it was the Shoreham bird - we've always wondered where it went

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VERY IMPORTANT: NEW RECORDER

Peter Whitcomb has taken over as Recorder.
Please see back page for further details.

Forthcoming Field Trips

- Sun 23 Nov** Dungeness with Bernie Forbes
Remember RSPB membership cards.
- Sun 27 Dec** Adur Walk with Stanley Allen
- Sun 18 Jan** Itchenor with Dave Smith (meet in car park at SU798012)
- Sat 28 Feb** Lower Standean with Peter Whitcomb

All the above meetings start at 09.00

Although the 1998 programme has now finally been completed, if any member has any suggestions or ideas for future SDOS outings, please contact Field Secretary Tony Fenton at 14 Rosemary Drive Shoreham (Tel 01273 591291). Tony would also be very pleased to hear from anyone who feels able and is willing to lead an outing at a location of their choice. Please show us your local patch or favourite area.

Indoor Meetings

- Mon 8 Dec** **Members' Evening** Could you offer a contribution which may amuse or interest other members? A game, a piece of prose or a poem, some slides, a story from your own observation, experience or holiday. Just a few minutes please so that we can have something rather different and a good deal of enjoyment.

Brianne Reeve Tel 01273 452497

- Tues 6 Jan** **Keith Noble - 'Sunday Morning on the Beach - Sunday Afternoon in the Garden'**. Keith is with the RSPB South East Office and makes a welcome return visit following his enjoyable talk about the Adur Valley in 1995.

BIRDS ON OUR PATCH

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at high tide. The ringers on the Downs have reported a fairly good year with Whitethroats back to their former numbers and many Pied Flycatchers trapped during August. See the full results in next year's report.

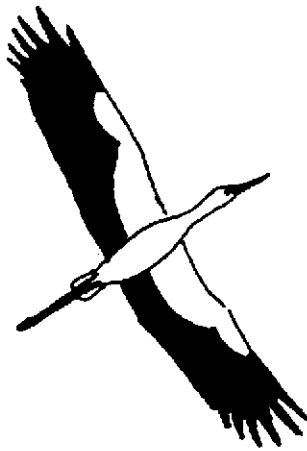
Widewater hosted an elusive Curlew Sandpiper during August and a Black-tailed Godwit was seen there on one day. A few Yellow-legged Gulls appeared along the River, but numbers seemed down on previous years. Migrants had been thin on the ground until there was a large fall of Wheatears and Whinchats on 1 September. Quails



were found throughout late summer and it's reliably reported that three pairs bred at one site. Crossbills also made a welcome appearance with birds moving throughout August. Siskins also moved through in thousands in late summer and early autumn. If you aren't tuned in to their high-pitched call, you will miss the parties as they fly over. A few Redpolls were also with these flocks.

Finally, I would like to thank Rod Shaw who has had to step down as recorder on health grounds and to welcome our new recorder, Peter Whitcomb.

Richard Ives



1998 Subscriptions

The Council has decided that to maintain SDOS's current sound financial position a rise in subscription rates is necessary for 1997. We believe that you wish us to arrange indoor meetings of a high standard. The majority of our speakers are professionals and they do ask and deserve a fair rate of pay as well as their travelling expenses.

As you will read elsewhere in this issue, SDOS has a new Recorder. The Sussex Ornithological Society computerised the county bird recording system some while ago and we feel that it is time that we also computerise our record keeping. The council is therefore considering purchasing a computer for the Recorder's use which will obviously involve substantial expenditure. We hope this will lighten the Recorder's load and help the early production of our annual report.

The subscription rates for 1998, will be:

Single member.....£8.50

Family.....£12

Junior.....£2.50

Please pay your subscription to Treasurer, Tony Bullock, at an Indoor Meeting or send to him at: 65 Roman Road, Steyning, West Sussex BN44 3FN.

Birds at Lancing

Tony Bullock has sent an extract from *Lancing College Magazine* of June 1929 which contains 'a much condensed account of our avifauna' written with the object of encouraging those interested in birds to keep records. The writer condemns the activities of "egg sloshers" which he says were already threatening the survival of the Stone Curlew. He refers to some old records left by former masters and pupils at the school dating back to the 1880's which show Red-backed Shrikes and Nightjars breeding but a reference to a Tree Sparrow nest is given a date (1886), so perhaps they were not that common even then. A century ago, he says, Great Bustard was common on the downs and was regularly coursed with greyhounds near the Devil's Dyke.

Whoever recorded Pallas's Sandgrouse seems to have been rather laid back about it, as the entry is undated. However, the 1929 author assumes it refers to 1888: "A small covey of these rare and interesting visitors were observed during several weeks in May and June on the seashore between Lancing and Shoreham".

SUSSEX HIGHLIGHTS

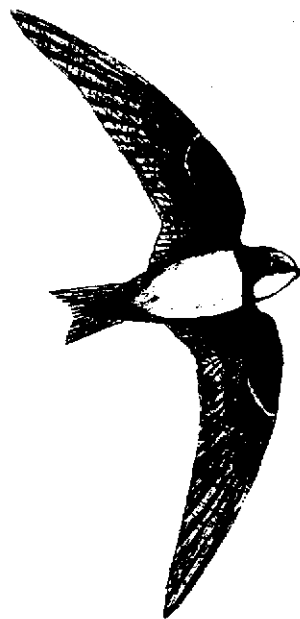
In April a Spoonbill was at Arundel (15/16th) and a Hoopoe was reasonably obliging at Pagham (15 - 18th). The Beachy area did well in May with Bee-eater (14th), 2 Alpine Swifts (17th) and a Sub-alpine Warbler (24/25th). The Spur-winged Plover (of unknown origin) spent 13/14 June at Pett Levels before moving to Dungeness where it took up residence. A Ring-necked Duck spent most of May and June in the Rye area.

The discovery of a sand plover in sun-bleached but good summer plumage at Pagham Harbour on 14 August caused great excitement. The initial identification as a Greater was subsequently amended to Lesser Sand Plover. If confirmed by BOURC, this is a first for Britain. The supporting cast at Pagham during August, included Spot-

ted Crake, Spoonbill, Golden Oriole, Melodious Warbler followed by Red-rumped Swallow in September.

Interest then shifted back to East Sussex with a Pectoral Sandpiper in the Cuckmere from 6 - 11 September and two Red-backed Shrikes and an immature Rose-coloured Starling in the Beachy area. The ringers at Icklesham were kept as busy as ever with 30 Aquatic Warblers ringed during the autumn and even a Corncrake in September.

In early October, an obliging Lapland Bunting at Climping stayed for several days. While a Lesser Grey Shrike found at Sidlesham on 24 October failed to re-appear for the Saturday crowds. However, a Barred Warbler at discovered at Church Norton during the afternoon, was generous compensation.



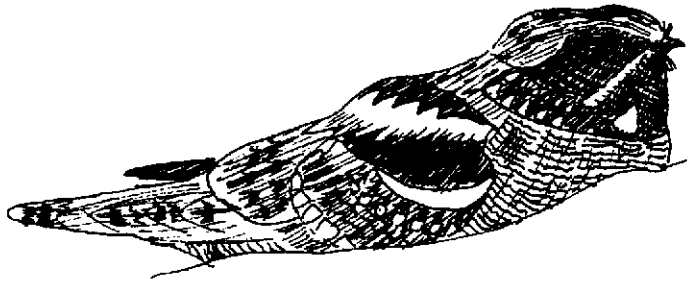
The Great Sussex Race 1997

There is nothing quite like a challenge and this year there was the added rivalry of another team vying for our crown as the record-holders for Sussex. To make matters worse they were our friends from the far flung reaches of West Sussex - a group of desperate people with whom banter reaches fever pitch. The gauntlet was thrown and the challenge taken up - the losers to provide a feast (BBQ, actually) for the victors. The usual rules applied and sponsorship would go to provide funds to save farmland birds both here and in Europe via Birdlife International. We would like to thank all those who sponsored our team most sincerely - in fact, our team raised the second highest amount in the country.

The day of the race was far from perfect: squally showers, strong winds and it was perishingly cold especially at 3.30 in the morning as we set off to record our first species. The earliest birds were Tawny Owl, Woodcock, Redshank and Nightjar at Wiggonholt. As we continued north-westwards to Iping, the weather was still grim and the usual species really difficult to find. Even in the twilight we had that ominous feeling that it was going to be a hard slog and so it proved. Everywhere we went our target birds failed to show as species we had located a few days earlier prospecting for nest sites were invisible. The weather had knocked sideways all our

carefully thought out preparation and all the time there was that nagging feeling that the rival team must be doing better.

Our notes from the previous year when we set our record of 136 species made depressing reading as we were behind the clock and feeling well below par. The heavy downpours had



destroyed our chances of picking up soaring raptors but Selsey (the opposition's base!) provided a glimmer of hope as we picked up some birds we don't usually record, such as the Manx Shearwaters which planed across the choppy water and a Great Northern Diver moving up channel. It was here we met our rivals and found they were down on our total but we didn't know where they'd been or where their final onslaught would take them.

We returned to the commons to pick up the species we'd missed in the

dawn murk only to draw a blank on all of them. A hectic dash to Shoreham for Peregrine also proved futile, so it was back to Pulborough, in fading light to trawl the last of the duck and finding another four species brought our total to 123. The other team had decided to finish at Climping where their final total reached 125. Well, we did plan the BBQ but due to the cold, wet summer it never happened. Call it sour grapes, but how about the best of three? Next

year we won't make the same mistakes and the weather will be better. We'll try to beat both our record and the unmentionables from the other end of the county so we can hand back the wooden spoon to them and mine's a T-bone steak (medium to well-done). You have been warned.

Richard Ives

The annual UK bird race is organised by Birdwatch magazine to raise funds for conservation charities. Teams of four must nominate a county and then record as many species as possible (by sight or hearing) in a 24 hour period during the specified weekend in May this being the time of year when it is thought the highest totals can be achieved with most birds in song and migration in full swing. I hear that the rival team have named themselves the Selsey Scorchers and it sounds as if this contest could run and run.

The Editor

Got a Hog?

I wonder if any other SDOS member has a peanut-eating hedgehog in their garden?

We have a large garden, well-stocked with fruit, vegetables, shrubs and flowers. There are five peanut containers placed high up on posts, a bird bath and several bowls of water on the ground.

Two years ago, we noticed a hedgehog eating peanuts dropped by the birds. Since we have some six cats living close by, we cannot put out cat or dog food. So we scatter a few peanuts by the back door each evening. Without fail, the hedgehog comes at dusk - eats the nuts and takes a drink. Sometimes a courting male comes too, and we have seen 'mum' trailing her young offspring up the garden path.

Hazel Jackson

Indoor Meetings and Social Events

Our summer social at the Red Lion last July was a huge success helped by a gentle, pleasant evening weather-wise. The food was really excellent and some extremely energetic Morris Dancers added to our enjoyment of the evening and we soon became adept at avoiding them when carrying our food from inside to the garden. There was so much food that several members filled doggy-bags to take home!

We would hesitate to use the Red Lion again because had it rained, there was no room large enough to hold us all. But we favour meeting at a pub or other good eating/drinking place to save any member host from too much work. So if you've any ideas for 1998 please let me know and your committee will try them out first!

I have arranged a varied pro-

gramme of speakers for 1998 with subjects ranging from local sites like Pagham Harbour to further afield to the North Kent Marshes, the New Forest, Northern France, to the Himalayas and pelagic trips around the world. Please note the dates and support our meetings if you can, especially those in January and October. If you come along then, you'll hear the latest bird news and get back in the swing after the Christmas and summer breaks. Also please note that the AGM is on **Monday 6 April** and that the formalities will be followed by an excellent speaker.

If you know of a good speaker please tell me as I'm always on the look out for new ideas.

Brianne Reeve,
Hon Secretary

New watcher on the patch

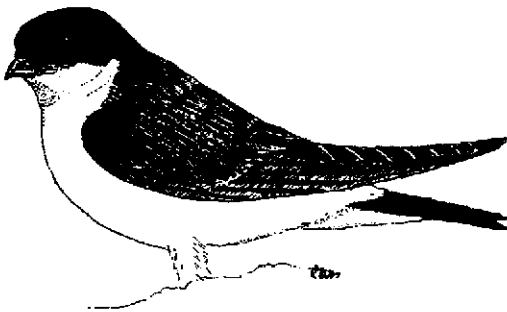
New member, Alan Edwards, writes about his first serious birding excursion following his move to Sussex.

At 07.00 on 12 September, the day seemed perfect for birding and despite my two-year-old's pleas to "come and look at the birdies", by 07.15, I had escaped with a 'morning pass' to examine my new patch. The drive to the coast took 30 minutes and by then it was blowing a gale and raining. However, now I was here, I was going to make the most of it and I continued onto Mill Hill hoping for a clear view across the Adur Valley. Ever the optimist, I scanned the fields looking for Dotterel, but Stock Dove and Jackdaw were the order of the day. The rain eventually abated and the wind eased and I worked my way down into the thickets overlooking the river. I was quite content watching a small party of

farm, eventually disappearing from view. "That's more like it," I thought, "I wonder if she caught breakfast?"

After a while, I decided to move west in search of slightly different habitat and as I parked in Ferring, the sun evaded the clouds and began to warm my wet and windswept clothing as I set off along the Rife towards the beach. Recent clearing work, while essential, has not provided ideal habitat and a rather indignant Moorhen surveyed his much reduced reed cover. I added Linnet and Meadow Pipit to my list, House Martins and Swallows followed me along and a lone Grey Wagtail brightened the Rife's dark, grey mud.

The beach and the waders provided a welcome change. Oystercatchers and Grey Plovers, some in the last stages of summer plumage, worked the foreshore,



Long-tailed Tits, when suddenly, everything went up. A female Sparrowhawk, twisting and turning with amazing agility catapulted through the farm buildings to my right, over the barn turned again in pursuit across the field in front of me, then back through the Turnstones scurried about and I settled down to comb the area. Something dark moved about 20 yards away — a Curlew? No, too small. A Whimbrel? Yes, the slight build and lateral crown stripe confirmed it. A police helicopter put everything to flight, but fortunately, the Whimbrel returned and I spent another 15 minutes watching it stocking up for the long migration ahead. Further along the beach, Ringed Plovers, so striking yet so easily overlooked mingled with the other waders, Pied Wagtails ran along the outfall from the Rife and a passing Great Black-backed Gull brought my list to 50.

By 12.30, I was trudging back to the car, my pass had expired and it was time to return to being a 'dad'. The list for my adventure stood at 53, with no rarities but a good selection of Sussex birds. I think I'm going to enjoy living here!

Submitting Records

The council is sorry to announce that ill-health has forced Rod Shaw to resign the post of Hon. Recorder. We thank Rod for his meticulous and time-consuming work over the last few years and wish him a speedy return to health. The Council is grateful to Peter Whitcomb for agreeing to step in and act as Recorder pending the next AGM when his appointment will be recommended to members.

Please send records to Peter Whitcomb, 99 Barnett Road, Brighton BN1 7GJ. Early year records should be sent now with the remainder by the end of January 1998. Please help by noting whether scarce or rare records have been submitted to the SOS for authentication.

Next Issue

The spring issue is planned for early May and the last date for copy is 6 April, the day of the AGM. Many thanks to all who contributed this time. Please send contributions to Pat Mulcock Pinehurst West Drive Angmering West Sussex BN16 4NL.

INFORMATION AND REQUESTS

With this Newsletter you should have received a copy of the Rules of SDOS (1997 Edition). Please keep for future reference.



The council recently discussed a query on the position of the east and west boundaries of the SDOS recording area. It is confirmed that the Eastern boundary is Ordnance Survey easting 35 (thus including the entire Sheepcote Valley, part of East Brighton golf course and Bevendean) and the western boundary is easting 08 (thereby including Ferring Rife, part of Harrow Hill and Chantry Hill).



Our president, Stanley Allen, has an almost complete set of SDOS Annual Reports lacking only those for 1955 and 1956. If any long-standing member has spare copies of those issues, he'd really like to have them. Please contact him at a meeting or 'phone him on 01273 463332.



Stanley also has some spare copies of the reports for 1959, 1968 to 1974 inclusive, and 1979 to 1983 inclusive. If anyone would like any of these please get in touch with him.



Anyone seeing any Dolphins or other cetaceans from the Sussex coast is asked to report sightings to Stephen Savage 51 Eastbrook Road Portslade.



Clive Hope is organiser of the SDOS garden survey and is looking this year for another increase in the number of gardens taking part. Please refer to the 1996 Annual Report for a full account of last year's survey. You should receive a survey form with this newsletter but for any queries please 'phone Clive on 01903 744489.



There's still time to catch the 1996 BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition at the Booth Museum in Brighton which continues until 16 November.