

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 2001

Birds on our Patch — January to April

During the seemingly unending wet winter the greatest number of interesting reports came from Brighton Marina. January seawatching there produced a Red-necked Grebe (10th), a Pomarine Skua (12th and 26th) and an exceptional total of over 17,000 auks during the month. Other interesting birds in and near the Marina from January to early March were three Shags, two Scandinavian Rock Pipits, up to six Black Redstarts and up to 11 Purple Sandpipers.

Late February brought the sudden closure of most nature reserves and footpaths throughout Sussex due to the threat of Foot and Mouth disease and directed birdwatching attention even more towards the coast. Seawatching at the Marina continued and produced the first Sandwich Tern of the year on 7 March. The first Wheatear was reported from Goring Gap on 15 March, with seven more plus a Yellow Wagtail there the next day. The 17th brought large falls of Wheatears all along the coast with 71 at Goring Gap, 70+ at Sheepcote Valley and 40 at Widewater. Also on the 17th a possible 1st winter American Herring Gull was discovered on the River Adur and remained causing unresolved controversy until at least the 31st. Four Avocets were seen on the Adur (17th) and the first Ring Ouzels at Hollingbury Camp (23rd).

This year, the Peregrines in the nest box on Sussex Heights Brighton laid their first egg on Sunday 24th March (8 days earlier than last year). A colour camera has been linked



John Reaney

to an amateur web site (www.videorepeater.co.uk). At the time of writing it was hoped that the three eggs would hatch about the end of April. All being well, there should then be a lot more action to view on the webcam, particularly when the parents arrive with prey.

Some early dates for April migrants all reported from Sheepcote valley were: Whitethroat (10th), Lesser Whitethroat, Redstart, Whinchat and Grasshopper Warbler all on the 13th.

Thanks to Peter Whitcomb and the SOS website www.susos.org.uk

A message from our new chairman

At the AGM in April I became your new Chairman, taking over the reins from Bernie Forbes.

Bernie has been a powerful influence in the SDOS. We owe a great deal to his unrivalled knowledge of birds and of our local area and we all admire his readiness to pass on his skills to others. I know how much care and patience he has shown on the outings he has led. He helps, everyone, regardless of their ability and so encourages a sense of achievement as well as enjoyment.

I take over the Chairmanship at a sad and difficult time. Because of the restrictions imposed by foot and mouth precautions, anyone who is keen to get

into the countryside, whether to watch birds or butterflies, look at plants, or just walk and relax, is feeling greatly deprived. We have also had a long, unpleasantly wet winter and this makes it all the harder to accept that we cannot explore the places we know so well and enjoy so much.

I think this does provide an opportunity to look a little more carefully at those interesting places which we have been, perhaps, too quick to dismiss in the past. What have we missed in our own gardens, along the hedgerows and in the lanes we pass on the way to some other destination? Do we use our ears to pick up the birdsong in these lanes

and how good are we at recognising individual calls? There are now so many excellent tapes and CDs from which one can learn birdsong: try one in the car!

2001 will be a very interesting year because when at last we do have entry to the countryside again, nature will have taken over again in many unexpected ways. Already there have been many weeks with little or no human intrusion on footpaths and on the Downs. Birds will be nesting undisturbed, flowers will not be trampled, but there will be great gaps in the recording of both. I wonder what we shall learn from it all?

Brianne Reeve

Have you computerised your bird records?

Do you use a computer when sending your annual bird records to Peter Whitcomb, the Society Recorder? Or are you thinking of doing so in the future?

While we know that a few Members keep their bird records on computer, using one of the commercial software packages that are now available, it does look as if others type the records out using a computer before sending them to Peter. If you do this, it would be very helpful if you could also send a copy of the text containing these records on a diskette (or by e-mail if you have this facility). If you do this, we can almost certainly convert this information electronically into the form that we are now using to store the Society records on a database, without the laborious business of retyping all the data into our computer again.

If you already have a computer, but do not yet use it to store your bird records, you do not necessarily have to buy special software to do so (though you will find that this should make it easier to handle large amounts of information, and quickly turn up items of information that you might want to find, such as the dates each year that

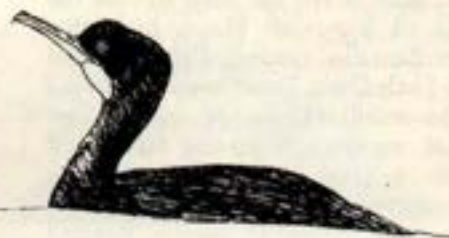
you heard the first Cuckoo, or what birds you have seen at a particular site in the past. If you have a database program you can easily set up your own simple records system, but you can also do quite a lot with just a word processor like Microsoft WORD, by using the Table facility provided.

If you intend to keep your records in this way and want help on how to do so, please get in touch with either myself or Terry Hicks. Also, if you are thinking of purchasing special software for bird recording and need any advice, we will be happy to help. We hope shortly to start compiling a computerised database of all SDOS records that we have or can obtain, starting with the last three years, which Peter already has on computer, and then working backwards through the written records that we have, and the Society Reports.

One final point. If you already send records of your bird sightings to the Sussex Ornithological Society Recorder, would you please also send details of those sightings which occur in the SDOS area direct to Peter. Although SOS kindly forward to us a

considerable number of records which they receive relating to our area (and we are in the process of reciprocating this transfer of records), our requirements may differ from theirs as we are dealing with a smaller recording area in greater detail, and items which may not be significant on a County scale, may well be of interest to us. If you really do not have time to sort out which of your Sussex sightings fall within the SDOS area, then simply send Peter a duplicate of the information you send to the SOS Recorder, and we will pick out the necessary material ourselves. Thank you.

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Sussex Highlights

At Rye Harbour up to four Bitterns wintered at Castle Water during January and February while a drake Ferruginous Duck was seen during the first few days of January only. From Pagham Harbour came reports of a very poor winter for Slavonian Grebes. Both Spoonbill and Glaucous Gull were regular there in January as was the usual small flock of Avocets. A White



Stork was in the Chichester area in January and one was also seen occasionally at Pagham.

A Cattle Egret took up residence near Greatham Bridge in January and remained until at least 11 March. The national invasion of Waxwings barely reached Sussex with flyover reports of singles in the Rye area in January but 25 did arrive at Southwater Country Park, south of Horsham on 23 March and 29 were at Crawley on 13 April.

A Green-winged Teal was seen intermittently in the Cuckmere Valley from January to March. In Eastbourne, an Alpine Swift was found dead on 26 March.

The Sussex Bird Report for 1999 was published in December 2000. Copies may be obtained (price £8.00 inc p&tp) from John Trowell, Lorimer, Main Road, Icklesham, Winchelsea, TN36 4BS. The report contains 202 pages and is illustrated with black and white drawings and 16 colour photographs. As well as a review of 1999 and details of all species recorded during the year, there are (inter alia) papers on the status and distribution of both the Hobby and the Nightingale in Sussex.

AGM Notes

President Stanley Allen reported the latest developments regarding conservation matters. For Widewater the WSCC committee on which we are represented having achieved LNR status is now aiming for SSSI designation. The proposed Golf Course west of the airport is now subject to a planning appeal. We support the developers because we prefer a golf course to housing or industrial development and beneficial features such as a scrape are promised. The future of the cement works remains in the balance with a planning application expected.

Stanley also thanked Bernie Forbes who has retired as Chairman after nine years. He said that Bernie would continue to lead many outings and remain at the heart of the Society. He welcomed our first lady Chairman, Brianne Reeve and thanked her for her tremendous contribution as Secretary. While Brianne will remain as Secretary, some duties will be taken over by Chris Wright, Dianne Hicks and Maureen Leves.

Thanks again to Richard Ives for the drawings on pages 2,3 and 4 of this issue.

Pinned down at last!

For the past five years, Shena and I have travelled to that part of west central Spain known as Extremadura. We have timed our visits to coincide with the height of the spring migration period and have never been disappointed. In wide endless pastoral landscapes there are thousands of acres of varied scenery, yet it is the vast areas of dry, stony moorland and huge grainfields that remain in one's memory. This is a region where the heat can be intense even in late March or, fed by a westerly wind, bitingly cold and wet.

This rural wilderness is home to many farmland and steppe birds but also serves as a refuelling point for many passage migrants. Plentiful are a variety of larks; Corn Buntings seem to be standing sentinel on every other fence post. Quartering the fields glide Montagu's Harriers while Lesser Kestrel colonies are a hive of activity.

Patient observation usually leads to good views of proudly strutting Great Bustards. The male's apparent ability to turn himself inside out in his courtship display has to be seen to be believed. The smaller Little Bustard is often



harder to see since it is able to crouch down in grass or grain fields. Fortunately, the male's 'raspberry' call carries far and is a sure way of locating him with his distinctive black-and-white neck.

However, two species of the region that have tantalised us have been the Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. We have spent many days driving along country lanes and down dry, dusty tracks in search of these birds. While the other avian residents were usually seen during a two-week visit, it wasn't until our fourth season that we gained distant views of the Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

Thus we returned for a fifth year with the specific aim of 'ticking' the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. For nearly two weeks we visited all the known 'hot spots' and were rewarded with many views of the Black-bellied but their cousins remained out of sight. We delayed our departure for several 'just one more days' in a vain hope.

On a wet and windy Easter Saturday 2000 we climbed a rocky track to the Minas de Miraflores, an abandoned lead and silver mine near Castuera, where a magnificent 360° panorama over the steppes can be savoured. We duly erected the 'scope and scanned. After half an hour 4WD vehicle pulled up and out bounced two female conservation officers from the regional council. They were involved in a project to set up 'false nests' in a bid to find out what predators were at work since even in this apparent natural paradise some species are in decline. The unre-



stricted use of certain harmful 'agrochemicals' is also not unknown in this remote part of Europe - national and international agreements or not! We explained our barren attempts to see the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. "Oh, we saw them coming to roost just over there last week." We soon requested and gained the farmer's permission to camp on his land.

An hour before dusk, we had our first view of six rapid flight Pin-tailed Sandgrouse coming in to roost. High flying and announcing their arrival with a loud ringing call, they suddenly spiralled downwards and disappeared behind a ridge. But they'd been in view long enough to confirm their identity. Had the wait been worth it? Of course - and now we could relax and concentrate on the Stone Curlew calling a hundred yards away and the Chough tumbling in and out of the mine's ruined buildings.

John M Maskell

Matters arising from the 1999 Report

Though I've not yet received any brickbats from Members regarding the 'Useful Information' given in the Report, there are a few things to note. Firstly, regarding the Tide Tables. Because of my misunderstanding of the data generated by the US software, I, in my simple way, thought that GMT stood for what you might also think it stands for, so added one hour to produce the required BST values. This was not necessary, so that the times which appear in the Report tables from now to 20th October are what those of you who are old enough to remember World War 2 will know as Double Summer Time values. The correct High Tide times during British Summer Time can be obtained by subtracting one hour from the printed values. If you would really prefer a printout of the correct

times, please send a stamped self-addressed envelope to me at 18 Manor Road, Upper Beeding, STEYNING, BN44 3TJ.

Another mistake: Summer Time does not end on 20th October (as shown on the tables), but a week later (and thus the values shown in the Report from 21st October onwards are all correct). I've now had a chance to compare our values (calculated using computer 'freeware') with those given in a published set of the sort that fishermen buy. As I anticipated, the difference in timings varies from nil up to nearly 20 minutes, and the height difference almost never more than 10 cm. Taking account of the influences of wind and flood water, our values are as likely to be correct as the published tables.

Regarding website addresses, etc: As I anticipated, the Kent Ornithological Society address has changed (the link on the Kent County Council website is wrong!) and the address is now www.kentos.org.uk. Bird Guides has just modified its rare bird information service. While basic information is still outlined free, to obtain more-detailed information you have to subscribe, the current annual fee being £15. An additional £15 annual subscription will provide a personalised e-mail service (to your computer or WAP mobile 'phone) of sites or sightings in which you have expressed interest. The Brent Lodge Bird Hospital now has a website (www.btinternet.com/~brentlodge) that includes advice on caring for sick and injured birds.

Jim Steedman

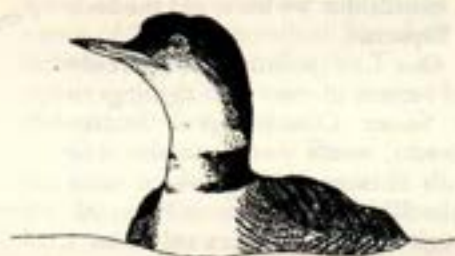
Foot & Mouth hits field trips

In the current climate, it is difficult to find anything to say to lift the general mood of depression. Hardly a day goes by without more rainfall although today a Blackcap has been flitting around the garden as a reminder that in a normal year my daily 4/5 mile river or downland walk would by now be providing the rich rewards of springtime. The news that foot and mouth disease is unlikely to peak until May means that the countryside may be closed to naturalists for several months and that apart from the Goring seawatch, field outings are unlikely to be held until well into the summer. Until restrictions are lifted you should assume that outings are cancelled.

The year began with a visit to Itchenor on 28 January when Great spotted Woodpecker and Grey Wagtail were seen in the car park and on the walk to Snowhill Marsh highlights were Bar-tailed Godwit, Peregrine, and two Little Owls. Two Greenshank were at Snowhill Marsh and around East Head, we saw a Slavonian Grebe and made a good count of nine overwintering Little Stints. During the return walk, we saw a Common Buzzard being heavily mobbed.

The following week's visit to Dun- geness was marred by some very inclement weather that has so typified this winter but our initial seawatch produced many auks and a few Red-throated Divers. From the shelter of the hides at the RSPB reserve we had excellent views of a first winter Glaucous Gull and also saw Ruddy Duck, Slavonian Grebe, Goldeneye, Smew and Peregrine. Six Whooper Swans graced the adjacent ARC Pit while at Lade we saw Great Northern Diver and a male Smew but could not find the Canvasback. After a stop at Scotney for the White-fronted Geese it was on to Rye where after a short walk everyone agreed that they were too cold and wet to wait for the Bitterns to come to roost.

Chris Wright



All year garden bird recording

Martin Ford reports on the Garden Bird Survey Results for spring and summer 2000

For the first time garden bird sightings were recorded through spring and summer. 27 returns were received for the spring period and 24 for the summer.

A total of 58 species was recorded. Perhaps the most notable record was two Yellow-legged Gulls in Stanley Allen's garden in March and a single in July. These were the first recorded in the national BTO Garden Bird Watch.

As might be expected, several summer migrants were seen including Turtle Dove, Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart and Whitethroat.

Blackbird was the only bird present in all gardens for both seasons and Collared Dove was unrecorded in only one garden during the summer period. A Lesser Black-backed Gull appeared in Marilyn Talbots' Rustington garden.

Several recorders noted breeding success. Keith Herbert recorded nine species breeding in his large garden at Uckfield, including Great Spotted Woodpecker. L. R. Keen comments on a lack of Starlings - his crop of elderberries was left rotting on the tree for the first time.

There were several reports of Sparrowhawk 'dining out' on Blue Tit, Dunnock and Blackbird, while it appears that black sunflower seeds seemed to be the most attractive food for the smaller birds.

At the time of writing, end of April 2001, the total number of species recorded since Autumn 1999, has reached seventy-six, this number includes a blue budgerigar seen in a Shoreham garden.

The BTO website now has a section devoted to Garden Birdwatch. Look at www.bto.org/gbw/gbwhome.htm. As well as information about how to join in the survey there is news and information for those already taking part and links to other interesting websites relating to garden birds including some excellent amateur ones. Among the topics featured at present are cat predation (including a link to information about the current American Cats Indoors campaign) and problems with salmonella around feeders.

Those without access to the internet can get details of the BTO survey from GBW, BTO, Freepost, Thetford IP24 2BR.

Editor

Noticeboard

Subscriptions: rates for 2001 are unchanged at: single - £8.50, family - £12 and junior - £2.50. Any subscriptions still outstanding should be sent at once to:

John Maskell at 41 Lawrence Avenue, Worthing BN14 7JJ.



Adur Kestrels: Barrie Watson reports that the A27 Adur Flyover is being strengthened - again! Last year the Consulting Engineers Mott MacDonald noticed Kestrels nesting on one of the pillars near the main bridge, and they have gone to considerable trouble to move the birds to a safe distance should they chose to nest there this season.

An engineer and an ecologist came from Winchester for on-site discussions. All ledges likely to be disturbed have been closed with wire mesh before the breeding season, and two nest boxes have been fastened to pillars under the slip roads, one on either side of the main carriageway. On Sunday 22 April Barrie saw a female Kestrel sitting in the entrance of the southern box, looking out and watching the world go by!



Mumbles Open Day, Saturday 13

October: Phil Clay and the Steyning Ringing Group invite members to visit this private reserve to watch birds being ringed. Drop in any time between 08.00 and 12.00.

Visitors should park in the Fletchers Croft car park in Church Street, Steyning. Enter the car park via Church Street, opposite St Andrew's Church. Take the the footpath from the east end of the church for 50 yards and turn left to follow the footpath to the bypass. Cross, watching out for fast traffic. The entrance will be signposted from here.

This year's Open Day has been postponed to the autumn because of the current Foot and Mouth problems. As neighbouring land has cattle and access relies on other landowners, it would not be appropriate to fix the usual July date at this stage although the risk is minimal.



Contributions for future newsletters are always welcome and should be sent to Pat Mulcock, Pinehurst, West Drive, Angmering, West Sussex BN16 NL.

Email cpmulcock@hemscott.net