



SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2003

Autumn talks and walks

Please note that we restart our 2003 programme with a change of speaker on Tuesday 7th October. In recognition of our Golden Jubilee we have secured the services of Jeffrey Boswell, who will be assisting us in 'Answering Calls of Nature'. Jeffrey describes this as "an ornithological frolic with serious scientific and cultural undertones" and we are promised a talk that is unusual in format, original in content and entertaining to boot. You have been warned!

As some of you will know, Jeffrey was born in Brighton and went to Montpelier College. He has had a long and distinguished career with the BBC Natural History Unit starting in 1958 and becoming its longest-serving producer, and was involved with Peter Scott's much-loved

'Look' series, as well as writing and producing the well-known 'Private Life of the Kingfisher' and many other productions. In his career he has visited 70 countries in seven continents and coincidentally (fitting with our SDOS Golden Jubilee theme) his first important bird-watching experience was from Shoreham Toll Bridge fifty years ago).

For those of you who were looking forward to Brenda Holcombe's talk on the Sub-Antarctic islands of New Zealand, don't worry; she has been re-booked for next February.

There should be no changes to the remaining speakers for 2003. On Tuesday 4th November Tony Marr will be describing 'The Magic Carpet Ride of Bird-watching from Shoreham-by-Sea to the

Antarctic Peninsula', while on Tuesday 2nd December at 7.30 p.m. Bob Edger will be telling us about his work at Beachy Head Ringing Station.

Remaining Field Trips in 2003

Bernie Forbes will be leading an afternoon outing to Amberley Wildbrooks on 25th November. Meet at 13:30 in Greatham Bridge car park. This is a good chance of seeing owls and raptors wintering on the Brooks: last year we saw both Barn and Little Owls and had sightings of several Hen Harriers.

Finally, the year will conclude with the past-President's Saunter at Fort Haven, Shoreham at 9 a.m. on 27th December.

Thank you for your support at both indoor and outdoor meetings throughout the year.

Chris Wright and Brianne Reeve

A conference, a country house and a caterpillar!

On a dreary November day in 1969, the partners of three local firms of Solicitors met for a crunch meeting, at a house in Partridge Green; were we to amalgamate and form what would be the biggest firm on the south coast, or not? Endless discussions had gone on for years, without conclusion; so this was to be it, yes or no. At around 6 p.m. after a day-long session – it was 'yes', and virtual white smoke appeared from the chimney! Thus was born what is now known as 'DMH' – end of commercial!

a friend who was decorating that self-same country house. He excitedly told me of an enormous caterpillar, on a potato plant in the vegetable garden. His vivid description left no doubt in my mind: it

Brian Hargreaves



was a Death's Head Hawk Moth, a rarity indeed. I got together, in a few minutes, both wife and camera, and found not one but two of the beasties. Got good pics, and retired to the Fountain at

Ashurst to recover!

I have only seen one of these exotic moths, and that was over 60 years ago, in the garden of the Vicarage of a Brighton church, where my father was Vicar. I recall that it stayed in the garden for several days.

Those of you who are members of our User Group may have seen my picture of the caterpillar on the Web; but if anyone would like a copy, I would be only too pleased to send one out. Ring me any day after 6 p.m. on 01273 463332.

Stanley Allen

Thirty-four years later, on a baking hot August morning, I had a phone call from

Chris, Judith and I unfortunately had to lead an SOS midweek walk on the day of Stanley's visit. So we turned up hotfoot at 9.30 the next morningto find both caterpillars had disappeared! - Ed.

How many Dotterel make a Trip?



Richard Ives

I had always been desperate to see Dotterels; so much so that I organised a route-march across Europe in search of them! Our boys at Ecotours had promised us at least a dozen at the end of August when Dotterel make their regular migration stopover in the Puszta, the Great Hungarian Plain. More desert-like than the Serengeti, but with the same big, open azure skies. Dry saline lakes, with picturesque well heads looking like lazy giraffes silhouetted against the cloudless sky. Hazy ranches spread over the sea of waving golden grasses. This was the unlikely habitat of *Charadrius morinellus*. Even the Latin name is magical.

This elusive bird sought by many has an unusual lifestyle. For example a female Dotterel having laid her eggs say in Scotland, leaves her smaller mate to brood her eggs while she joins other Dotterel in Scandinavia where she woos another

mate and lays a second clutch! It's always the quiet ones!

August 23rd, 39 degrees Celsius and our Hungarian friend was on his mobile to the Hortobagy park ranger. Had they arrived yet? Yes! Eight had been seen that very morning. We spent 3 sunny hours searching the short parched stubbly grassland. The temperature made pleasant by the gentle breeze which always wafts across the Great Plain; the westernmost stretch of the Asian Steppe. And then we saw them... more than 100 Dotterel, torpid and totally approachable. They decorated the baked mud furrows of the farm track. We counted and recounted. They sat in three groups (trips?) totalling 109 – what a spectacle! Many differing states of plumage but all equally handsome; the white eye stripe joining behind the head to appear like a jaunty ANZAC cap! Some were actually asleep in the sun; others head cocked checking the sky for raptors, totally unconcerned by humans a mere 5 metres away. We enjoyed walking amongst them for over an hour until a passing bird of prey 'spooked' them into flight. Then they split into their separate 'trips' and flew off across the Puszta. We later heard the maximum count reached 162. So how many Dotterel would make your trip?!

Shena Maskell
(ECOTOURS UK Tour Consultant!)

Dotterel description.—Length 9 inches. Distinguished from other British plovers by the white band across upper breast, with chestnut patch below it shading into black on the belly; crown blackish, with white stripe passing over the eye backward round the nape; upper surface ashy brown, with paler edges; chin and throat whitish; tail coverts and vent white. Young birds lack the white gorget, and have dull white underparts. Female is rather larger than male.

The Dotterel is a northern bird, breeding on the highest and barest tops of the Cairngorms, the Gramplans and also sparingly in the North of England. It rarely occurs farther south on migration; a few autumns ago a small party spent a few days on London Airport, and there is still one Cambridgeshire farm where migrants regularly halt in spring. But it is a bird of moun-

tains and tundra, and for most birdwatchers a rare and exciting species. The dotterel's breeding behaviour is of particular interest: slightly larger and more brightly coloured than the cock, the hen does the wooing leaving her mate to brood her eggs while she joins other "grass widows"

"In Britain, there are indications that numbers may have increased since the 1950s. Results from the second national survey of Dotterel in 1999 suggests that British numbers are now around 630 pairs. Attributing a cause to short-term changes in population levels is complicated by high itinerancy of breeding birds causing mixing of populations across national boundaries and potential population fluctuations within national boundaries. The international mixing of breeding birds suggests that population monitoring would be best undertaken on an international basis.".....So be sure to look out for any passing 'trip'.....!

Birdwatchers' Memories & Records 1953-2003 compiled by the SDOS

Our book celebrating the achievements of the SDOS since its formation in 1953 is about to go to the printer and should be available by the end of October. Do keep in mind the fact that it might make a pleasing gift for someone! It covers the history of the Society and contains serious articles with up-to-date information, with many reminiscences by members both past and present, some of whom are now well-known in the world of ornithology. There are numerous photographs from the archives and ones taken recently, as well as drawings and paintings from a variety of contributors. Altogether it is a fascinating collection of all kinds of information, with interesting, colourful illustrations that anyone with even a vague interest in birds will enjoy reading.

Now we need your support in buying the book!

If you order before 31st December 2003 the special price will be £11, or £20 for two copies. Postage may have to be added if you cannot collect locally or from an indoor meeting where order forms will be available. Alternatively, put your name down via the SDOS user-group or contact:

Terry Hicks, 7, Berberis Court, Shoreham-by-Sea, W. Sussex BN 43 6JA

It has taken a very long time to put together and we have learned a lot on the way but we feel it was worth the effort and hope you will let us know what you think of the result.

Terry Hicks and Brianne Reeve
Joint Editors

Sales Department!

The Society has two products which may be of interest to members.

These are always available at indoor meetings and usually on outings.

1. SDOS Car Sticker — £1 or £1.20 by post.

2. "SDOS Golden Jubilee" ball-point pen. Black ink. Black and white plastic pen with single commemorative inscription. Comfortable rubber grip. £1 or £1.25 by post.



A brief reminder about our internet User Group. Membership is by invitation (all SDOS members are welcome) and if you are interested please contact Terry Hicks.

Tales out of School 6 – Crex Crex

Acting in my capacity as school librarian I recently purchased a copy of "The Historical Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain & Ireland 1875 – 1900" compiled by Simon Holloway (Poyser, 1996). Its cover has an image that haunts me, since it reminds us of what, in birding terms, we have lost in Britain. A farm worker swings his scythe whilst a Corncrake cowers in the longer grass. The worker's rate is sufficiently slow to allow the bird ample time to escape. Sadly the speedy mechanisation of Britain's farming techniques has had a dramatic effect on the breeding range of the "Land Rail".

In the period covered by the Poyser atlas the Corncrake bred in every county of Britain and Ireland. Nowadays if one wants to see this bird in the U.K. one has to make a journey to the Scottish islands



R.A. Richardson

of Lewis, Coll or Tiree where suitable habitats and late mowing dates have supported breeding.

The Corncrake is a bird that I have long wanted to hear and, possibly, see. When our good friend Balazs Szigeti of Ecotours Hungary suggested a birding trip to the northern part of his country during the recent May Half-Term week Shena and I jumped at the chance. Doubly exciting was the opportunity to ride on some of the summer-service-only narrow gauge forestry railways.

One day we'd just alighted from the Palhaza line. This is in an area that during the Communist era was in a militarily sensitive border zone where travel was restricted and many other aspects of life, especially farming, evolved more slowly. Our attention was suddenly arrested by a large drifting raptor...an Imperial Eagle. Moments later our auditory senses tuned in to something magical emanating from the adjacent field. The "rasping comb" couldn't be anything other than a *Crex crex*! The bird came closer and closer

and we took up a sheltered position behind a stack of logs. Amazingly the bird emerged from the metre-high grass, flew across a ditch and then returned to the security of its field. It had afforded us excellent binocular views at a range of just twenty feet.

A couple of days later we met with Sandor, a local National Park warden, near the Slovakian border in an attempt to find Hungary's sole breeding pair of Pygmy Owls. One called briefly but did not show itself. However, on this sultry summer evening in the Aggtelek Hills we heard several Corncrakes calling persistently from their breeding meadows. Our local guide undertakes an annual breeding survey of birds in his area and spends most evenings cycling along lonely tracks listening for their comic call. He claimed only one and a half hours of sleep during the breeding season...and a very tolerant wife!

Hungary offers much to the birder and one hopes that imminent membership of the European Community will not see the EU's greedy agricultural policies ruining a more gentle and eco-friendly way of farming. We are glad to have discovered this corner of Eastern Europe at an exciting time as it accelerates away from its restrictive political past.

John M. Maskell

A personal message from our Chairman/Secretary

Many of you have been kind enough to send encouraging messages to me on hearing of my emergency operations in Worthing Hospital in August. I am now due to start some chemotherapy, with another operation planned for February 2004. I have had superb treatment at every stage. However I was really pleased to hear from so many of you and appreciate your kind thoughts. As I cannot write to you all individually, please forgive me taking advantage of the Newsletter.

Brianne Reeve

Next Newsletter

At this point in time it has not yet been confirmed that there will be a Winter Newsletter or, if there is, who will be editing it! Much depends on whether you,

As the Spoonbill flies.....

Only 92 miles away – well, as the birds fly! – is Le Parc Ornithologique du Marquenterre (3000 hectares) on the Bay of the Somme.

It is well worth a visit because not only does the park enjoy the presence of most



Richard Ives

of our birds but in addition the White Spoonbill and Storks. When we visited in June both the latter were nesting in huge flocks very visibly in high trees.

There are plentiful paths and hides, with a picnic area and cafe. Entry is about £6.50 (no concessions).

It is accessible for humans from the ports of Boulogne, Calais or Dieppe. We travelled by car and are unaware of possibility of access by public transport. A day visit for the birds only is possible, as many use it as a stopover on their migrations. However, we made it part of a five-day visit, of which it was the highlight.

Liz Robinson

[There are several fascinating websites, nearly all in French. The 'search-engine' Google offers an automatic translation of these, which can produce some extraordinary English bird-names for some of the species regularly seen, for example 'milans' (i.e. kites), 'sarcelles of winter' (teal), 'sarcelles of summer' (garganey), black and white huitriers', (oystercatchers – from another site it is translated as 'oyster-magpies' which I think I might prefer to 'oystercatcher'), 'foulques' (coots) and 'merganser piette' (smew). Seriously, there have been more than 300 species recorded from the park, 222 being seen in Autumn alone—Ed.]

Websites: www.courrier-picard.fr/cp-internet/patrimoine_nature/leparc.htm
parcsanimaliers.multimania.com/parc_ornithologique_du_marquenterre.htm
www.marcanterra.fr
www.eurobirding.co.uk/somme_estuary.HTM

my ardent readers, keep me supplied with sufficient material. Please send any contributions you may have in any suitable form to me before the end of November.

Jim Steedman

Bird Table Notes



[Your regular garden bird correspondent, Shena, has other matters on her mind this time so I'm standing in for her!.... Ed]

You all know the story. You buy some expensive bird-food, put it outside and, before the shy Robins, Wrens and Dunnocks have had time to come to their senses and eat it, the local Collared Doves, Wood Pigeons and Starlings have scoffed the lot. C.J.Wildbird Foods think that they have come up with a solution to this. It's called a Bird Food Protector and there are two sizes. The one with a wider mesh keeps out pigeons and doves but allows access to squirrels, Blackbirds, thrushes and Starlings; the other also is supposed to exclude these species as well. You may have seen both types in action outside the Visitor Centre at Pulborough Brooks RSPB.

Back in January I purchased one of these latter contraptions so that I could develop a Pigeon and Starling-free zone in order to feed quite-costly insectivorous food to my Dunnocks, Wrens, etc. Within a day or so I watched several Starlings running through the mesh openings with impunity, so I sent a photograph of this to the suppliers pointing out that the product was claimed to be Starling-proof. I mentioned that, although I knew Starlings were now a BTO Bird of Conservation Concern, I had already purchased one of their purpose-made Starling Fat Feeders and Fat Bars to support our local population, and that they had the run of three of our four garden peanut feeders, two bird tables and all the ground seed that I put out for other birds, as well as the suet provided every day for Dunnocks and Wrens, but which was immediately gobbled up by the same Starlings.

For many weeks I got no reply despite sending several letters, faxes and e-mails, but eventually I was told that nobody else had had such a problem. However, because of trouble with squirrels a Mark II

version was under construction and I would be sent a sample to test and comment on. And, nearly five months later, I am still waiting....!

However, recently one of our members, Audrey Wende, asked about my experiences with this device. She wrote "Does it keep out squirrels and pigeons? I have a very large, dominant pigeon who keeps coming so I think I shall have to buy one of these cages."

So in response, I lent her mine. These are her comments: "It is working very well. The two fat pigeons are walking around looking most unhappy but the blue and great tits have easily adapted to dropping through the bars. The sparrows are showing a certain nervousness but are willing to take a chance to get to the seed. The Collared Doves are rather suspicious of the whole structure and do not settle near the cage. It is proving very interesting to watch the birds' reaction to all this."

And a few days later: "This bird protector is proving to be quite an interesting exercise. After I wrote to you last Monday reporting on how the birds regarded the cage, we left it covering the seed table whilst we did the mid-week walk on Tuesday. It's now Wednesday and there has been some rain overnight. We realise there is quite a lot of seed uneaten, which on close examination turns out to be a very small quantity of cereal (which we realise the Blackbird would have eaten but could not get in) but quite a lot of grain - mostly wheat.

From looking at this I realise that the seed firm put a lot of wheat in this mixture (especially for pigeons?) as they are the only birds that cannot get through the mesh. Sparrows do not seem to have thought it worth eating (quite strange!) Our local fat pigeon who has spent the last two days walking around the table has not turned up today so as I felt the seed was getting a bit damp and sticky I thought I would remove the cover to see what came and ate it. The squirrel has eaten some and two Chaffinches have stayed for some time, so it has gradually gone down. I think my summary at this point in time is that the pigeons and Collared Doves must eat a lot of the seed a lot of the time.

However I feel it is because CJWB food Ltd. put a lot of wheat seed into their sacks and we are paying to keep the pigeons happy. If I can only keep the pigeons and Collared Doves out my seed bill will not be so expensive." Editor

Garden Bird Survey observations

Comments noted on the SDOS garden bird survey returns for Spring 2003 indicated Blue and Great Tit breeding successes. Linnets attempted breeding in Roy Bradbury's Lancing garden and young Crows took advantage of several gardens.

Looking through the numbers of gardens recording particular species over the past three years I highlighted Magpie and Song Thrush returns and noted that more gardens recorded Magpie than Song Thrush for the Spring, Summer and Autumn returns while each year for the Winter quarter (i.e. Jan to Mar) more gardens recorded Song Thrush than Magpie. Is this just coincidence?

On the subject of thrushes it would be appreciated if the type of thrush was always defined, i.e. Song or Mistle, on your survey record form. While also on the subject of recording, if you record any unusual species or particularly large numbers of regular visitors, please also inform Peter Whitcomb, our Recorder.

Thanks to all those who contribute garden records. Any additional contributors to our SDOS Garden Bird Survey would be very welcome. Martin Ford

Commercial Break!

I am excited to tell you all that I am now the (unwaged!) UK agent for **Ecotours of Hungary**. I can help anyone who is keen to arrange private trips to Hungary, Romania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Do contact me if you are interested. Having had four holidays with Ecotours in the last 12 months, you may guess that Eastern Europe is addictive!

It still has the unhurried charm that we, in Britain, enjoyed in the 'fifties, with a stunning species list of Birds, Butterflies and Wild Flowers. The guides are fresh, enthusiastic and very knowledgeable. They run their own 'birdline' and certainly make sure that you to see your target species, (please see my article about Dotterel on page 2).

Accommodation, cuisine and (of course) wine, are amazingly good quality, being more Austrian than Albanian in flavour! Prices are still reasonable.

Please do consider a visit soon, before any EU agro policy intervenes...!

Shena Maskell

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