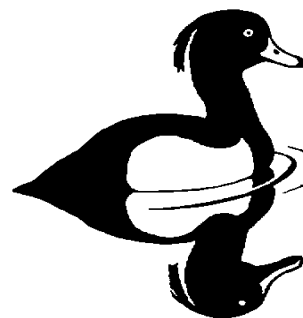


# READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

## ROC Newsletter

Summer 2002

No 18



### Introduction

Having spent a wonderful week in Spain during May you would probably think that my birdwatching highlight of the spring was probably the sighting of an Imperial Eagle in Extremadura or the Wallcreeper that we found in the Picos de Europa. In fact the most thrilling birding moment of my year was provided by the brief sighting of the Wheatear that dropped into my back garden in early April. Why a Wheatear should choose my small area of grass as suitable habitat is a mystery to me, but it gave me great pleasure nevertheless. It just goes to show that the best birding experiences are provided by those unexpected moments. It must be said though that the Imperial Eagle and the Wallcreeper were pretty good too!

I'm sure that some of you have been on exciting trips this year – why not share your experiences with other club members by writing an account of the trip (or just a particularly exciting part of it) for the newsletter. As always all contributions are much appreciated – please get contributions for the next newsletter to me by end of August.

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Many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter. Illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

### Gift Aid Subscriptions

In this financial year we have 98 members who have paid their subscriptions under the Gift Aid scheme, and I have reclaimed £270 from the Inland Revenue. This is important income for the Club and I encourage those of you who are tax payers and not yet Gift Aid subscribers to complete the appropriate form when renewing membership in October 2002. On behalf of the Membership Secretary I emphasise that our subscriptions are due on 1<sup>st</sup> October, not 1<sup>st</sup> January as some members believe.

John Roberts (Treasurer)

### Mid-Week Walks

The monthly mid-week walks have continued with reasonable success, numbers varying from 5 to 17. Dartford Warblers were seen by everybody present at two venues, plus an adder and hornets at Lightwater Country park and a good total of birds generally. Many thanks to those willing to lead. Any more offers?

We intend the walks to continue in the autumn – it is too early to be sure of venues or leaders, but the anticipated dates are 19<sup>th</sup> September, 18<sup>th</sup> October and 15<sup>th</sup> November (i.e. the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of each month). Note the dates in your diaries, especially the September one which will be before the start of the indoor season and close to the time of the issue of the autumn newsletter. Ring either Dot Lincoln on 0118 9427563 or John Roberts on 0118 9482137 for more exact information nearer the time.

Dot Lincoln

### Trip to Langstone Harbour – Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> September

Unfortunately Colin Wilson will not be able to lead this trip (some weak excuse about him being out of the country at the time!). Please contact Ted Rogers (on 01344 883237) in advance if you would like to come along. In mid September there is a good chance of something interesting turning up.

### TAGCG Boat Appeal

After many years of residence under the bramble bush at Hosehill the Theale Group boat has been “lost”. Brian Uttley arrived one day to find it had been moved onto the shingle. He replaced it and went off to buy extra locks and chain, only to find on his return that the boat had completely disappeared. No one knows whether it has been sunk in the lake or stolen, but the result is that the group is now in need of a replacement. The requirement is for a rowing boat capable of carrying at least 4 people. It should be watertight or easily repairable! If anyone knows where the group could find a suitable replacement can they please contact Brian Uttley on 01189 783783 (work) or 01189 832894 (home).



### **New Edition of Local Where to Watch Birds**

A new edition of the Where to Watch Birds book covering Beds, Berks, Bucks, Herts and Oxon has just been published under the new title of 'Where to Watch Birds in Thames Valley and the Chilterns'. It covers 82 principal sites (including 15 new ones), many additional sites and some new illustrations.

The book normally costs £14.99, but for £13.50 it can be ordered through the BCS. In addition the BCS will pay 75p per copy to the club nominated by the purchaser.

To order send a cheque (made payable to BCS) to :  
BCS, PO Box 680, Maidenhead, Berks, SL6 9ST

If you mention the ROC on your order the Club will receive 75p for each order received.

### **Move Over Gordon Langsbury!**

Those of you who have looked at the Club's website at [www.roc.care4free.net](http://www.roc.care4free.net) will know that there is a "Gordon's Gallery" page showing all the bird photographs used in the random picture display that you see when you log in.

Why does Gordon get all the glory? We would like to have a "Members' Gallery" too! Having seen the stunning selection of photographs submitted for our recent photographic competition we know that there is considerable talent out there; let's share it with the rest of the world! You are invited to submit your bird (or bird-related) pictures for inclusion in this new feature. Please send slides or prints, colour or black-and-white, together with an S.A.E. to:-

Mike Smith, 5 Nabbs Hill Close, Tilehurst, Reading, Berks, RG31 4SG

Slides/prints will be scanned and returned to owners as quickly as possible.

Chris Robinson

### **Digital Bird Photography - "Digiscoping"**

I predict that the next five years will see the demise of 35mm film, cameras and lenses as the amateur's choice for bird photography. The last year or so has seen a steady rise in the number of people experimenting with digital cameras and telescopes as a means of recording bird photographs. This has arisen with the falling cost of digital cameras and the increase in picture definition arising from the increase in the number of the pixels that can be recorded by the digital camera's "CMOS" chip.

To maximise picture quality several factors need to be taken into account. The telescope eyepiece lens must match in size the camera lens objective lens, or be bigger. If not the picture will suffer a dark halo (vignetting in photo parlance). Ideally the digital camera will have an internal focusing mechanism to prevent the lens twisting

on the eye piece. Finally the camera must be able to be connected to the telescope by some form of adapter. Whilst you can hand hold the camera to the telescope eyepiece, camera shake will inevitably be a problem. For DIY fans a simple tube made from a vitamin carton or similar will suffice for a short while, but really a proper adapter is required. Eagle-eye optics and London Camera Exchange seem to be leading the way with bespoke adapters.

Exceptionally high quality photographs can be achieved with the Leica or Swarovski apochromatic lensed (APO) telescopes especially with the 20-60 zoom eyepieces. These are popular because they have relatively large exit pupil size to match the camera objective lens. Likewise the Nikon Coolpix 990, and later, series of digital cameras are popular because they have a relatively small objective lens i.e. the eyepiece to objective lens match is just about perfect. However less exotic telescopes can be used especially with the fixed focus wide angle eyepieces as these have the larger eyepiece exit pupil size. Where possible the higher grade APO type telescope should be used to prevent colour fringing in the image.

Advantages to digital photography are the extremes of magnification that can be achieved; a 60 x zoom and 3x camera zoom produces 180x magnification, in 35mm terms that is a 9,000 mm lens. CMOS chips are more light sensitive than traditional 35mm film, so good quality sharp pictures can still be achieved even during dusk or dawn. There are no moving parts, which means there is no shutter or mirror movement vibrations of the traditional 35 mm cameras to create camera shake blurring. There are however some limitations with this type of photography. You can only share the pictures by prints or by creating digital WEB page images. The present digital projectors are still too low a grade to use as a slide show projector. Secondly action photography is virtually impossible, there is usually an inherent delay between pressing the shutter release and the image being recorded on the CMOS chip, by which time the subject has moved.

For those further interested in this type of photography, and have Internet access have a look at the following sites:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/birds-pix/> - a discussion group originally set up by "Digiscopers", much sharing of information and digital images - a real eye opener into this type of photography

<http://www.berksbirds.co.uk/photos.htm> - a series of pictures are displayed here by local "digiscoper" Jerry O'Brian (Jerry users a Swarovski EDO scope, 20/60 zoom and Nikon Coolpix digital camera)

Mike Smith

## News from the TABCG

Work parties over the last few months have included the clearing of the island at Moatlands, as well as the one nearest the motorway on Main Pit. Around Hosehill activities have included the clearing of footpaths and reedbeds. Some trees have been cleared and chipped, the chips being used to surround the Information Board and on some of the boggy areas of the footpaths. The Sand Martin bank was unblocked after the winter. The rafts were relaunched and the tape has been removed from the island. The Tern Island will need major repairs later in the year as one end is sinking. A major work party will be called to get this done. In the meantime conveyor belt has been used to temporarily anchor some of the netting, which was loose, to stop chicks getting trapped. A Shelduck nest has been moved to Hosehill and installed under the gorse bushes on the main island.

The BTO has organised an initiative to get companies to record birds on their land. Hansons, who own Main Pit, Moatlands, Burghfield Mill and Field Farm, have been entered and the club will be submitting sightings. These will include all species seen feeding (including aerial feeding), resting, bathing and roosting. Fly-pasts do not count, nor do species seen from within the site outside its boundaries. Sightings will be extracted from the records placed in the book at Hosehill or otherwise submitted to John Lerpiniere. At the end of the first quarter results saw the area 5<sup>th</sup> out of twelve with a total of 95 species seen.

At a recent indoor meeting Tina Gower from Reading Borough Council explained the work going on with BAPs (Biodiversity Action Plans) in the Reading area. They are primarily concentrating on gardens, but are keen to hear of any other areas in Reading that could benefit from the initiative i.e. areas that could be improved for wildlife. Anyone who wants further information or has any ideas can contact her via email at [TinaGower@reading.gov.uk](mailto:TinaGower@reading.gov.uk)

Ten teams took part in the Bird Race. There are new names on the trophy this year. The winners with 111 species were Marek Walford, Paul Bright-Thomas and Brendan McCarthy. Five teams scored over 100. A total of 120 different species were seen on the day, which is only one short of the Berkshire record of 121.

The Theale Area Bird Conservation Group always welcomes new members and anybody who can help out at work parties - please contact Brian Uttley for further info. (tel. Work - 01189 783783, Home - 01189 832894)

Information courtesy of TABCG (with thanks to Cathy McEwan)

## Trip Reports

### Trip to Isle of Sheppey – 25<sup>th</sup> November 2001 “Seaweed and String”

Some things in life can be relied on, but sadly weather forecasts are not any of them. I know that they have got better over the years, but as any birdwatcher will tell you, they can let you down badly. Sometimes they lead you to believe that the weather will not be worth the risk of crossing the front doorstep, only for you to discover the sun ‘cracking the flags’ as you peer out between the curtains. On other days, like the day of our trip to Sheppey, they faithfully promise dry weather and then what happens? Given the huge quantities of data they gather and process through some of the most powerful computers in the world you think that they could do a bit better. Maybe a return to the traditional methods of pine cones and **seaweed** would be in order.

To be fair it was still dry when, on the day in question, a select band of ‘day trippers’ gathered on the sea front at Leysdown and viewed the sea in the hope of anything other than the odd passing gull. Sadly, no divers, no sea ducks or anything else of interest was to be seen on the sea. The shingle along the shoreline however did hold a variety of waders – a few Redshanks wandered between the groynes, along with several Turnstones searching among the **seaweed** for tidbits. A distant larger wader was identified as a Bar Tailed Godwit (after the usual discussion about how you tell one Godwit from another – the length of the upper leg being a good way, short in Bar, long in Black). A typically hyperactive Sanderling was spotted on one of the sandier areas, before it took flight and flew past in front of us.

Any idea that we would drive down the infamous rough track to Shellness were scuppered when we discovered that it was in the process of being repaired (we couldn’t complain too much as it may be more readily passable next time!). The alternative of a walk along the shoreline was taken, with a few more waders being identified on the way, including Ringed Plover, Grey Plover and Dunlin. At this point the leader, feeling that the day needed some extra interest, tried very hard to **string** a Common Gull into a Ringed Billed Gull. To their credit the rest of the party remained unimpressed and the leader tactfully withdrew his hypothesis.

It was around this time that the weather took a turn for the worse and the group beat a strategic retreat to the cars, before heading off to the Harty Ferry marshes with the rain beating down. An early lunch was taken in the cars, as we waiting for a break in the weather. Eventually the rain did ease off and our patience was rewarded with various sighting of harriers, both male and female Marsh and Hen being seen. A patient wait in the hope of spotting a Short Eared Owl proved fruitless and we headed on down the track to the RSPB reserve at Elmley.

As there was little light left in the day there was no time to take the long walk down to the hides. However a brief search behind the farm soon located the local Little Owl sitting in its customary oak tree and the fields revealed some Golden Plover among the Lapwings. The group then spotted a small falcon sitting on a fence post, a possible Merlin, or was it another case of **stringing**? Despite the fact that the leader missed the bird altogether (he was 'off duty' at the time, finishing off the remains of his lunch!) the consensus was that it was a Merlin (and nothing the leader said would change the identification!). This brought an end to a somewhat frustrating day, at least from the leader's point of view, I just hope that those who came along enjoyed the birds that we did see between the showers.

Ted Rogers

### **ROC Long Weekend to North Norfolk (15-17 Feb 2002)**

For many, the highlight of this year's trip was the first-winter / second-summer male King Eider off Holkham Gap. The bird was surprisingly easy to pick out from the Common Eider flock, even at distance. Thanks to the intrepid individuals who crossed the treacherous sands of Wells Bay and guided late arrivals onto the bird using mobile phones, most of the group had satisfactory views of the bird. Also at Holkham Gap were Red-necked Grebe and Snow Bunting. Inland, at Lady Anne's Drive, the vast Pink-footed Goose flock, the sights and sounds of which epitomises winter birding in North Norfolk, included at least one Barnacle Goose.

The weekend had got off to a good start on Friday at Abberton reservoir in Essex where Smew, Goosander, Scaup, Whooper Swan and Bewick's Swan all afforded excellent views. There was also an opportunity to compare Tundra Bean Goose and Pink-footed Goose, there being four of the former and three of the latter.

Moving north to the Suffolk-Norfolk border, the group experienced its only disappointment of the weekend with the non-appearance of the female Rough-legged Buzzard at Haddiscoe Marshes. To rub salt in the wound the bird was seen the next morning, where it was joined by a Great White Egret! The Mediterranean Gull flock at Great Yarmouth provided some compensation.

At Stubb Mill near Horsey Mere, 9 Crane, 10 Marsh Harrier, 3 Hen Harrier and 2 Merlin roosted, while those who arrived early also saw a Bittern. The first of the weekend's several Barn Owl was also glimpsed.

After the traditional viewing of the small Fulmar colony at Hunstanton and a hearty breakfast, Saturday morning was spent at Titchwell. In addition to the usual wildfowl and shorebirds, the freshwater and brackish marshes held Spotted Redshank, Avocet, Kittiwake and Yellow-legged Gull, while year-listers were grateful for the eventual appearance of the long-staying Black-winged Stilt. When a Water Rail worked its way up a ditch in full view, it

started to become clear that this year's trip was rapidly becoming one of the most successful ever.

This feeling was reinforced when the group walked up onto the beach at Titchwell to be met by the sight of more than two dozen Long-tailed Ducks just off-shore. Nobody could remember ever being able to view this species under such ideal circumstance of bright sunlight and calm seas.

At least eight drakes were in winter plumage, surely the most attractive of all Western Palearctic anatidae forms.



After eventually locating the sole Purple Sandpiper on the beach, few could resist a final look at the Long-tailed Duck flock.

Just inland, five Corn Buntings made up in part for the group's failure to find this species last year, although Tree Sparrow and Grey Partridge continue to elude most of us.

After the excitement of Holkham and the King Eider, some of the group stopped in at Titchwell on the way back to the hotel to view the Woodcock roost breaking up. Each evening, the birds leave their daytime roost deep in scrub in order to feed during the night on the freshwater marsh; presumably they return to the roost at dawn.

In sharp contrast to the previous year, the early morning stroll around Holme was highly successful with Red-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe on the sea, plus Merlin, Peregrine and Barn Owl over the dunes. Of course, it helps when you can see more than a few yards!

Black Redstart and Golden Pheasant failed to put in an appearance on the drive south to Lynford Arboretum, where the over-wintering Olive-backed Pipit had not been seen for several days. This site has some of the most accessible Hawfinch in the country and it was not long before the group were enjoying excellent views of this cracking bird. The opportunity to compare the songs of Willow and Marsh Tit was a bonus. The former has a Wood Warbler-like *pui pui pui* while the best Marsh Tit can manage is a soft, tuneless *shuppi shuppi shuppi*. Occasionally, in early spring, Willow Tit also has a short, sweet warble, but this is seldom heard in the south.

A short stopover in the Lea Valley provided all concerned with the most astonishing views of Bittern, down to a few feet. With a supporting cast of Water Rail and Kingfisher, 3♂ and 3♀ Smew added to the ornithological cornucopia. Finally, a calling, summer-plumage Little Grebe hinted of spring which at the time of writing is still some way off, but by now will already be well under way.

Many thanks to Ted Rogers for organising the event and for all who volunteered their cars.

Nick Montegriffo

A total of 133 species were recorded over the weekend. If you require a full list of species, please send an SAE to me at 13 Cranesfield, Sherborne St John, Basingstoke, RG24 9LN.