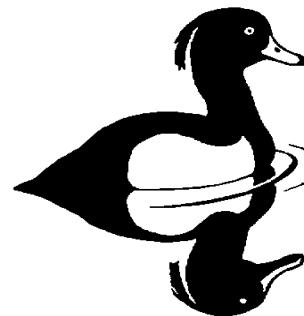


# READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

## ROC Newsletter

Summer 2003

No 22



### John Hannan Moves North

Some of you will already have heard that John Hannan will soon be moving out of the area, as he is moving to live near Harrogate, Yorkshire to be closer to his family. John has been a member of the Club for as long as anyone can remember (since 1964 at least) and has been a great servant and supporter of the Club over all those years. He has served on the Committee, became Secretary in 1986 and for the past two years has taken on the role of Chairman. I am sure that you will join with the Committee in thanking John for all he has done for the Club and wishing John and Joan all the very best for their future 'up North'. Don't forget to keep in touch John – a small item for the Newsletter to let us know how you are getting on would be most welcome!

On the subject of items for the Newsletter, the next one will be sent out with the membership mailshot in September – please send me any items by the end of August.

Ted Rogers (01344 883237)  
8, Ranelagh Crescent  
Ascot  
SL5 8LW  
Email: ted.rogers@btinternet.com

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

### Club Insurance

Several members, particularly those leading trips, have asked about liability insurance. This is an issue faced by many clubs like ours and fortunately there are now insurers offering cover at reasonable rates. So the Committee decided that the Club should take out insurance to cover legal liabilities arising from its normal activities – indoor and outdoor meetings and publications on birds. This was effected in March 2003 and covers civil liabilities of officers and members of the Club to the public and to each other (it is not a substitute for personal accident/holiday insurance). The personal liability insurance extends to overseas trips in connection with ROC activities.

Let's hope we don't use it!

Renton Righelato

### New Subscription Rates

Those who pay by Banker's Order will have received a new form for completion and passing to their Bank etc. Your Treasurer and Membership Secretary ask that you complete your form as soon as possible and send to your Bank etc no later than mid-September. Payment by this method is very helpful to the Club and your use of this method of payment is much appreciated by John and Dot. If you opt to cease your membership of the Club please let Dot know (0118 9427563) and stop your payments.

John Roberts

### Upcoming Excursions

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> August** – A morning walk around the RSPB reserve at Otmoor, Oxfordshire. A good time for return wader migration at this ever improving reserve. Contact Bill Nicoll (01334 455403)

**Weekend Trip to Norfolk – 12<sup>th</sup> to 14th September**  
If you are interested in the weekend trip to Norfolk please register your interest by 18<sup>th</sup> July at the latest so that accommodation arrangements can be made. Please contact Bill Nicoll (01334 455403) or Ted Rogers (01344 883237).

### Mid-Week Walks

The number of people attending mid-week walks has, like the Stock Market, been in decline. The organisers, Dot Lincoln, Harry Matthews and John Roberts hope this has arisen because of poor publicity rather than poor quality of walks (or Contacts?). The walks for this autumn/early winter will continue to be at **10am on the third Thursday of the month.**

**September 18<sup>th</sup>** – A walk in the Hosehill area, meeting in the Sheffield Bottom Car Park (near Theale), at SU647704. Contact Dot Lincoln (0118 9427563).

**October 16<sup>th</sup>** – Meet at the Thatcham Nature Discovery Centre which is signposted from Thatcham, at SU518663. Contact Dot Lincoln (0118 9427563)

**November 20<sup>th</sup>** – A walk along the Thames and around the gravel pits near Little Marlow. Park in the public car park, at SU883875 (not in the pub car park). Contact Harry Matthews (01628 624440)

**December 18<sup>th</sup>** – It is hoped that the new Cuning Man on Burghfield Road, at SU681707, will be open for business by this date. We shall meet at or near the pub, walk along the Kennet and around Burghfield Mill before returning to the Cuning man for a Christmas drink, some food and a chat; but more details of that nearer the date. Contact John Roberts (0118 9482137).

### **“The Birds of the British Isles”**

Cyril Bulmer has passed to the Club a complete set of 12 volumes of Bannerman’s books, illustrated by Lodge, asking that the proceeds from their sale be used in Club funds. A dealer has suggested a price, unseen, of £75-£100 depending on condition (which in this case is good, without dust-jackets), but they are first offered to Club members at £75. Anyone interested should contact me on 0118 9482137.

Cyril has been a long term member of the Club, regularly attending meetings and serving on the Committee. Circumstances now prevent his continued involvement and we much appreciate this generous gesture of support for the Club.

John Roberts

### **Memberships, Donations and Greetings**

In our 2001/02 season I received donations to the ROC funds from two members who found that they had to conclude their membership of the Club. The donations were an acknowledgement of the pleasure that their membership had given them and on behalf of the Club I thank Sue Smith and Zoe Feak for their donations , and send back best wishes from their colleagues in the ROC.

Welcome also to John Hobson, a long time member and past treasurer of the Club, who has recently taken up life membership of the ROC.

John attended a recent indoor meeting and brought with him news of Dorothy Herlihy, who although suffering some health problems, wishes to be remembered to Club members from her nursing home in Hythe, Kent.

John Roberts

### **Quiz Evening – February 26<sup>th</sup>**

This years quiz evening was held at the Parish Rooms, St Peter’s, Earley and a thoroughly enjoyable evening it was ! Some 30 people came along to enjoy the usual mix of questions set by quizmaster Neil Bucknell. The main

competition was closely fought with the winners only becoming clear after the final round of Gordon Langsbury’s mystery bird pictures. Alongside the bird quiz John Roberts organised a ‘spot the baby’ competition, which involved identifying club members from pictures of them when they were much, much younger! Suffice it to say that this was even more difficult than the mystery bird pictures that Gordon had put together – the winner only correctly identified four out of the nine babies (and one of those was himself!).

It would have been good to see a few more people at the event - I can only suggest that those who didn’t come along try to make it next year.

For the record the winning team consisted of Richard Crawford, Mike Turton and Ted Rogers, while Peter Standley successfully identified four babies.

Many thanks go to all those involved in the organisation.

### **News from the TABCG**

The Group was typically busy around the Theale area during the early spring, preparing the various breeding sites in time for the summer visitors. The efforts have been rewarded with the Common Terns at Hosehill finally settling on the artificial island, but not before there had been considerable competition with Black Headed Gulls. The terns originally settled on the rafts, until the gulls drove them onto the main island and then, in another move, they all moved to the artificial island. At Moatlands the terns have had an equally unsettled time, but eventually some 30+ pairs settled on the main island, following earlier disturbance, possibly by water skiers.

The Reading Black Redstart survey took place on 27<sup>th</sup> April. At least ten people were involved in the survey and other individuals covered Slough and the Kennetmouth areas. Pairs of birds were seen at Friar Street and Broad Street and a single bird located near to the swimming baths.

On Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> July there will be a “Wildlife Walk” at Hosehill Lake for members of the public, organised by Adrian Wallington (the ranger for Hosehill). It will include Pond Dipping Sessions, information about dragonflies and walks round the site, showing the work done and notable species. The event will run from 2pm to about 4pm, with parking available in the car park of the Fox and Hounds. This is an ideal event to find out more about the site and the work done.

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)

### A Spring flock of Pomarine Skuas

Seeing a Spring flock of Pomarine Skuas would not be unusual on Britain's South coast in May but it would never-the-less make many a birdwatcher's day. To observe a Spring flock *inland* is unheard of and the stuff local birders fantasise about! The following account will hopefully convey some of the excitement which accompanied just such a sighting at Queen Mother Reservoir in April 2003.

On Friday 25th April I was manning Birdline South East, while my partner Jerry Warne got an early start for the drive down to Dungeness - in the hope of seeing some Pomarine Skuas! The morning was quite bright, with a blustery South-easterly, but a solid band of rain spread into East Berkshire during the afternoon (from around 2pm). By early evening I fancied a break from the birdline and, hoping for a Whimbrel or other rain-induced wader, I visited Queen Mother Reservoir. It was still raining when I arrived and I stayed in the car for another 20 minutes or so until it eased; long-range visibility wasn't good (there was complete overcast) but it didn't rain again for another 50 minutes.

Halfway along the north bank of the reservoir I'd noted little apart from an increase in Common Sandpipers when, casually looking upwards, my eye was attracted by a rapid movement almost directly overhead.

A flock of gull-like birds, about 200 feet up, had made a sudden 'whiffling' descent - disturbed by an outward-bound jet from Heathrow - and, with the naked eye, their flappy flight brought Little Gulls to mind. I put down my telescope and raised my binoculars... and almost immediately uttered some prime Anglo-Saxon! Almost directly overhead was an obvious flock of 13 skuas - all of them with tail-projections!



To be honest, I wasn't thinking about their identification - I was too stunned - and the first thing that I noted was the variation: 1 wholly dark, 1 barred and 11 light morphs. The light morphs had variable breast-bands but those with the whitest underparts had a clean cut-off between the belly and the dark under-tail coverts. They were clearly Common Gull-sized and had quite broad, but back-swept, wings and as they circled and hung on the wind I noted that the outer part of the wing (the 'hand') was held slightly depressed, recalling a Hobby. For a few magical moments they evidently eyed the reservoir (and me?!) but then quickly regrouped and flew steadily overhead. Although I was looking straight up these were quite good views and I could see that the tail-projections were rounded at the tip - none of them had sharp points to the streamers and as they went over the tail projections began looking blob-shaped! They were now flying steadily away, in formation, and I realized that it was time to get my telescope on them. The tail-projections, which now looked like the classic 'spoons', actually appeared to bob on the down strokes (making the body appear to undulate). I was wondering why the

'spoons' had not been obvious earlier but then it occurred to me - even though I couldn't recall having ever seen an adult Pomarine Skua from underneath before - that the twisted tail projections, which look like spoons in a profile view, would NOT be obvious from below.

With regular wing beats they continued on their northerly heading and disappeared into the gloom. There was still half an hour's light left but my mind was so preoccupied I had to head back. I kept replaying the sighting in my head - everything was right for Pomarine Skua (size, structure, plumage, flight action, even flock-size) but I had never heard of an inland sighting of a flock before! I needed to speak to Dave Davenport - the UK's top skua expert - but it was a while before he returned home. When I did get through I told him "I've had a flock of 13 skuas over my local reservoir: 11 light morphs, 1 dark morph..." and before I could say any more he said "They were Poms then". He went on to explain that the size of the flock and the balance of the plumage morphs "would be impossible for Arctic Skua". He also said that as the more barred birds also had tail projections, they were just more heavily marked individuals; which also fits the probabilities - since 1st-2nd summers are unlikely before mid-May. Dave confirmed that there had been no previous UK observation of an inland flock in spring, although it had long been assumed that some of this passage does continue overland. In fact my partner saw just one Pomarine Skua from Dungeness that day! A good passage had been expected along the South coast but very few had been sighted further East than the Isle of Wight, the rain having presumably impeded movement. It is characteristic for Pomarine Skuas to pass rapidly through UK waters in the spring rarely resting or stopping to feed. When first spotted the Queen Mother flock appeared to have been flying over from the South-east. They did not appear to be attracted by the reservoir or the roosting gulls and, had they not been disturbed by the plane, their northward passage might have passed over unnoticed against the grey sky. Such weather conditions are not uncommon in spring, but inland skua occurrences are especially unpredictable at this time of the year: my last spring sighting was of an Arctic Skua circling over Windsor Forest on a sunny May morning.

Chris Heard

### Club Trip to Norfolk – February 2003

The most interesting birds of this year's trip were the over-wintering Pallid Harrier at Warham Green and Yellow-browed Warbler at nearby Stiffkey Campsite. Perhaps of more significance in the scheme of things was a return to form for Tree Sparrow and Grey Partridge, the latter being seen in good numbers. Also very welcome was a Tawny Owl which roosted in plain view near Holkham Hall and a large flock of Bramblings at Santon Downham. Even the Black Redstart by the chalets in Hunstanton put in an appearance after an absence of several years!

The weekend started for most on the causeway at Abberton Reservoir, Essex where it was just possible to distinguish a

few birds in the early morning mist. Thankfully the gloom lifted, revealing good numbers of Smew (including 2 drakes), Goosander, Ruddy Duck and Goldeneye. Several *sinensis* Cormorant were also seen, the site being a breeding location for this rapidly expanding continental subspecies. A feral Barnacle Goose put in an appearance, but there was no repeat of the wild swans and geese of the previous year due to changes in agriculture practice.

The drive north was broken by a stop-over near Ipswich for a flock of 15 Waxwings, and fast food for those who had skipped breakfast in favour of a brief, unsuccessful search for Bittern in the Lea Valley.

Lantern Marsh in Suffolk played host to three Rough-legged Buzzard during the winter of 2002/3 and is an awkward place to access. The easiest approach is generally reckoned to be along the west bank of the River Ore from Orford, however the birds are only seen once they take to the air. During the course of a two-hour walk, the group saw all three Rough-legged Buzzards, including one which perched conveniently on telegraph wires, plus Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Avocet and Golden Plover.

The drive north was broken by a stop-over near Great Yarmouth for a flock of 10 Mediterranean Gulls, and more fast food. Unfortunately for Dot, who had already missed breakfast and the earlier stop at Ipswich, the fare on offer at Great Yarmouth was unsuitable. The group, with an increasingly hungry Dot, arrived an hour or so before dusk at Stubb Mill.

For those who have never been to Stubb Mill, the site provides a view over the magnificent Horsey Mere, but can be tricky to find. In winter the mere holds a large roost of harriers, cranes, swans and geese and these should be viewed in the last hours of daylight. Those lucky enough to arrive in good time, had good views of Marsh and Hen Harrier, Merlin, Bittern, Common Crane and Kingfisher, while those who stayed on to the bitter end glimpsed a few Woodcock in the failing light.

After a treacherous drive across Norfolk in the increasingly slippery conditions, made worse by a road closure due to a lorry having got stuck under a bridge, there was just time for an evening meal, much to Dot's relief!

Everybody turned out at dawn for the pre-breakfast sea-watch in Hunstanton and the usual Fulmars, but the group soon moved to the ski-ramp at Heacham where a member of the party had seen Purple Sandpiper earlier in the year. Having failed to locate the ski-ramp, Bill found a Black Redstart, which seemed quite a good trade off. Even better was to come: another meal!

Titchwell RSPB reserve did not provide the usual spectacle. The long-staying, wild Black-winged Stilt was there though, as were three Purple Sandpipers on the beach and a Spotted Redshank on the brackish lagoon. Nearby, the welcome sight of ten Tree Sparrows and four Grey



Partridges broke a three-year long absence from the North Norfolk weekend for these two declining species.

Lady Ann's Drive at Holkham was full of Wigeon, Pink-footed Geese and European White-fronted Geese, while a couple of Egyptian Geese added a touch of the exotic. A Barn Owl quartered the fields, while the saltings were full of Twite and Rock Pipit (*littoralis*). A long search for Shore Lark proved successful, with a couple of birds on the edge of the dunes. At Holkham Hall, Ted soon relocated the roosting Tawny Owl — unlike the usual bird this one was perched in the sunlight, but was well hidden nonetheless.

The main car park at Stiffkey Marsh was full to overflowing being conveniently placed for Yellow-browed Warbler (half a mile to the east) and Pallid Harrier (a mile to the west). With the day rapidly drawing to a close, it was touch-and-go whether the group would have time for both birds. After an agonisingly long search, the Yellow-browed Warbler was eventually found close to the car park and everybody in the group had excellent views in the late afternoon sunshine.

At Warham Green, a large crowd was in place for the anticipated arrival of the juvenile Pallid Harrier and they were not to be disappointed. From extreme rarity to annual migrant in a few short years, UK birders have now been treated to adult male and juvenile plumage of this species, but are adult females still going undetected? The Warham bird approached the roost from the west, while earlier in the year it approached from the east and was rather easier to make out. The identification of the bird was not helped by people (not any from ROC it should be stressed) who called out Pallid Harrier each time a harrier of any species flew into the roost. Even in the misty half-light, however, the bird could be identified by its more rapid wing beats, although I would not like to get that past a rarity committee! Rather more easy to identify were the three Barn Owl and single Short-eared Owl.

Sunday at Holme Dunes dawned comparatively clear, although attempts at sea watching proved difficult when it was realised that the tide was well out. A brisk walk over the beach soon improved matters sufficiently to identify six Long-tailed Duck (including five drakes), while the dunes themselves held a very flighty flock of Snow Buntings plus four Grey Partridge.

After breakfast, the group assembled at Linford Arboretum where the nearby Munford GPs provided the only disappointment of the trip with the non-appearance of a Ferruginous Duck, while a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker proved elusive to all. The area did provide good views of Hawfinch, Bullfinch, Marsh Tit, Redwing and Siskin, while at nearby Santon Downham the flock of Brambling was eventually located. To round off the weekend in fine style, a calling and singing Willow Tit moved through the riverside wood.

Many thanks again to Ted Rogers for organising the event, and to Dot for the enduring of hardships.

Nick Montegriffo