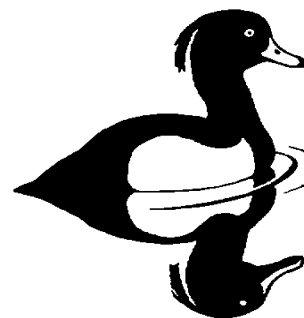


READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

ROC Newsletter

Autumn 2003

No 23



Introduction

This newsletter marks the start of another ROC year and comes with the usual membership information, including the membership card showing all of the upcoming Club events. The committee has again put together a varied and interesting calendar of events, with hopefully something that will appeal to everyone. Carole White has been very busy with the indoor programme, while the excursions sub-committee has tried to choose some interesting venues for this year's trips.

The mailshot also includes the recording sheets for the winter part of the Garden Bird Survey that I hope you will all enjoy completing. I also hope that you have all been completing your summer sheets and will return them to John Farnsworth in due course.

I now email the newsletter to a growing number of people, a method that makes my life easier and saves the club money as well. If you would like to receive the newsletter via email in Microsoft Word form please let me know via an email to my address below.

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

Annual Photographic Competition – 26th March

The annual photographic competition attracted the usual high standard of entries and provided all those who came along with the usual entertaining evening. Judge Gordon Langsbury presided over the competition, with the overall winner being decided by the audience.

Congratulations go to all the winners, as follows :

Best Bird Picture (7 members entered 25 slides) - Winner Dave Massie (Great Shearwater); runner up Dickie Duckett (Great Spotted woodpecker).

Creatures in their habitat (5 members entered 15 slides) - Winner Don Withey (Grey seal and pup); runner up Dave Massie (Cape Fox).

Art in Nature (4 members entered 16 slides) - Winner Dickie Duckett (Translucent Porcelain fungus); runner up Dickie Duckett (Dancing Petrel).

Worst Natural History Picture (5 entered) - Winner June Reynolds ("Can't stop, have business below"); runner up June Reynolds ("I'm over here").

The best overall picture and cup winner was Don Withey, the runner up was Dave Massie.

Greetings from North of Watford !

Moving house is a traumatic business, especially when one has lived in the same house for 28 years, however we are beginning to achieve some sense of order amongst the boxes, and arranging for some changes in layout. The chalet bungalow is in much the same sort of location that we enjoyed in Bucklebury, in a village on a no-through road leading to a farm. The back garden looks out over parkland, with a rookery in the trees – the front garden and drive are adjacent to a small village green with the local duck pond on the opposite side of the road, complete with mallard, coot and moorhen. Our daughters are approximately 20 minutes away as opposed to 4 to 5 hours. The usual garden birds are in evidence (despite our inability, as yet, to provide food and water) and include wrens and goldfinches. The house has three gables in the roof and in the apse of each is a house martin's nest – surely a big bonus. Being surrounded by fields the air is thick with martins, swallows and swifts, but as yet no red kites.

I have made contact with the Harrogate & District Naturalists Society, which has a big interest in ornithology and hope to join when they start up again in the Autumn. The local church has a thriving congregation and the Women's Institute (Joan's area) meet in the clubhouse of the likewise thriving cricket club. I had hoped that the Goldsborough W.I. would be along the lines of the Ryedale (quite close) W.I. in order to pursue the photography interest, but no such luck!

The ROC is much missed and our grateful thanks for the excellent and much appreciated send off hosted by John and Lois Roberts, plus the beautiful glass bowl, as well as the friendship over the many years spent amongst you.

Your newest country members, John & Joan Hannan

Local Bird Conservation Issues

Since the Reading Black Redstart survey was completed, Brian Clews was called in by Reading Borough Council (RBC) to locate the nest in Friar St as the cinema was being pulled down. Work stopped but it seemed that the birds abandoned their attempt and moved, though staying in the area. Work resumed and Brian continued the search. Since then two pairs have been spotted, one at either end of the Street. It seems that RBC are on top of this and all new building, of which there will be much, will take into account the birds needs and provision made for good habitat wherever possible. It has since become known that there are at least five pairs of Black Redstarts in central Reading.

Following a request received by the TABCG from the West Berkshire County Ecologist, it has come to light that a planning request has been submitted to build additional bunds into the lakes at Searles Lane, to create more fishing capacity. There is real concern about the potential effect of this work as the area around these pits is one of the most important areas in the country for breeding Nightingales. Richard Crawford and I have prepared a submission to the council with assistance from the BTO (see below an extract from the BTO input). Further ecological surveys have also found 92 pairs of Reed Bunting in the area and also a rare species of gnat (only the fourth record of it in the country!).

Also of possibly even greater concern is the Prudential Consortium Development plan, which could cover an area from the railway by Cottage Lane to the West end of Moatlands (Wellman's Water) and from the M4 to the Canal. This could wipe out Searles Lane (with its concentration of Nightingales) and also Moatlands. It may well be that they only want part of the area, but the position of Searles Lane makes it of real concern. Apart from the Nightingales a number of schedule 1, red and amber species could be affected (Cetti's Warbler has bred and juvenile LRP seen).

If anyone would like more information or can offer help or advice please contact me.

John Lerpiner (0118 9426225)

“One of the few positive stories to come of the 1999 Nightingale Survey was the surprisingly large numbers recorded in the Thames Valley in Berkshire. Indeed, Burghfield and Theale Gravel Pits was revealed to be in the top five sites in the whole country with an impressive total of 63 pairs located, representing half of the Berkshire population. The Burghfield and Theale Gravel Pits represents a very important stronghold toward the west of the species range, and is indeed the most important population in the Britain, away from the four coastal counties between Sussex and Suffolk.”



A note from our “Sussex Correspondent”

Reading the Newsletter I spotted the mention of Sue Smith. I spent three weeks recently (25th May - 14th June) in Sue's company on the Ornitholidays trip on the World Discoverer cruising the "Ring of Fire" from Hokkaido, Japan to Nome, Alaska. (I then spent two weeks with another British group doing Alaska and retracing steps taken with Nick Mutch in 1995). After a couple of days birding in Hokkaido (Japanese Red-crowned Crane being the major quarry - successful) we cruised (more in fog than fire at times) along the Kuril Islands to Kamchatka (where there was one volcano smoking actively), then on to the Aleutians and various islands in the Bering Sea. Apart from Steller's Sea Eagle (just a year tick for me, I boast) we had 10-11 Brown Bears on Kamchatka in just one day. Plenty of sea birds of course, including three species of Albatross, including the rarest one, Short-tailed, and some whales. Sue seemed to be much as ever, cheerful and game for almost anything when we went ashore or zodiac riding under bird sea cliffs, and seems to be well settled in Northants.

Our leader was Tony Pym, whom some of the older members may remember once lived in Tilehurst and birded with us, i.e. self, Jeff Hunt, Charlie White, Trevor Guyatt, Nick Mutch, et al back in the 70s before his marriage and move to Pewsey.

John Hobson

Seed and Nuts make a return to the ROC!

Many of you will remember we used to sell nuts and seed at ROC meetings but our volunteers could not carry on indefinitely and the service to members (and the income the club earned) stopped. Carole White has found an alternative option for us and we are therefore welcoming Stuart Phillips of Wildlife Supplies to our meetings on 8 October, 5 November and 3 December when he will offer nuts, seed and birdfeeders to our members. Stuart has kindly offered to make a donation to the club for his sales so please see if you can wait and buy from him. If the arrangement works well for Stuart and our members we will look at extending the arrangements.

(If someone wants to do it entirely for the club we can give advice on how to do it and all that is required is time to bag the nuts and seed and bring them along. Please let Colin Wilson know if you are interested (01252 837411)– it is really not onerous. Meantime, Stuart will be there to meet all your needs and we hope this additional service will be welcome.)

Carole White

News from the TABCG

DEFRA have carried out ringing work on the Canada Goose flock at Hosehill. This is as part of an ongoing survey into geese that are causing problems at Heathrow Airport. All the nearest populations to Heathrow are already ringed, but unringed geese are still being involved in bird strikes. Also at Hosehill the thatch has been removed and the roof taken off the Sand Martin Bank to find that the sand inside had dried out and compacted. It will be dug out, moistened and replaced on future work parties. Water has had to be pumped into the Dragonfly Pond to stop it drying out and there is concern about the quality of the water as algae seem to be forming. Sadly, the site has suffered from vandalism over the holiday period – someone had set up camp the bank by the Sand Martin bank and the occupiers were found fishing in the lake! Also damage was done to the boat's moorings in an attempt to steal it and as a result the boat will be kept off-site for the time being.

Four major tasks were identified when the new local ranger took over at Hosehill. It is hoped that a group Duke of Edinburgh Award students can help with these projects. The projects are, raking the cut grass from the East Meadow on Saturday 20th September, cleaning the silt from the Dragonfly Pond on Saturday 4th October, ash coppicing on Sunday 30th November and replanting gaps in the hedgerow on Saturday 24th January. These tasks are in addition to the normal work done by the group and will require extra volunteers. They will start at 1000hrs and go on into the afternoon.

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)McEwan)McEwan)

British Birds and Annual Reports

I have further copies of the British Birds magazine at a "special price". There are too many to bring to meetings, but let me know if you have an interest. The special price is negotiable and it is a buyer's market ! I hold complete years for 1982-1992, inclusive, and odd copies from 1947 to 1990, most in the early 1950s. Previous sales of British Birds and Birding World raised over £100 for Club funds. I have also found a dealer who will buy past copies of our report for the years 1974 to 1984 (inclusive) and 1991. He offers £1 per copy and if anyone has spare, or no longer needed, copies I will readily collect them for sale. The dealer pays the postage, but I do not yet know how many copies he would take for each year.

John Roberts

Selsey Bill and Pagham Harbour Trip – April 2003

"Garganey Day"

The new tax year started cloudy, cold and with a light Northeasterly. Six of us gathered at the usual meeting point in the municipal car park close to the Bill between 7:30 and 8 am. Low tide was at 8 am so the sand/shingle bars were clearly visible some 300/400 metres from the shore.

Apart from the usual gulls and cormorants on the bars, 5 Red Breasted Mergansers were on the sea and a solitary Whimbrel circled over the bars but decided to move on. A Greylag flew from West to East, Gannets were spotted well out, and a few Sandwich Terns wafted by. A quiet sea-watch ended in accordance with the programme at 9:30 when we drove to the Pagham Harbour Local Nature Reserve Centre at Sidlesham. As usual, the Ferry Pool proved to be a good source of birds, the highlight being a handsome male Garganey. A Green Sandpiper was also seen.

We were joined here by 3 more group members and shuttled everyone to Church Norton so that we could walk the West Side Path back to the Centre. Again, the sea off Church Norton Spit produced nothing different and little of note was seen in the marsh near the Severals. The West Side walk was pleasant and usual waders, duck and Little Egret were seen. At the Ferry Long Pool we found Spotted Redshank and a few Black-Tailed Godwits in Summer plumage. On the walk back to the Ferry Pool much activity from Great Crested and Little Grebes, Mallard and Tufted Ducks, Coot, Moorhen and Mute Swan was noticed. Apart from a brief sighting of 2 or 3 Sand Martins we did not spot any other Hirundines, Warblers or Wheatear. Either we were too early or they were late. Back at the Ferry Pool, we viewed the fine Garganey again.

Lunch was taken in the LNR Centre grounds before driving to Church Lane Pagham village to walk the North Wall. At the Breech Pool 2 late Brent Geese and 2/3 Ringed Plover were seen. The harbour, now at high tide produced a flock of summer plumage Black-tailed Godwits amongst others. (Unfortunately, we missed a Short-eared Owl which was seen that afternoon over the fields.)

However, we had stayed dry and were cheered by the image of that male Garganey.

John Lakin

Frensham Trip – March 2003

"Birdwatching's rule of three"

It is sometimes said that successful birdwatching is a roughly equal mix of three things:- skill, luck and persistence. This was well illustrated during the March excursion by the ROC to Frensham common.

The weather was cool, overcast and quite windy, not the best of days for finding birds in woodland and heath. However, no fewer than eleven members turned out, all regulars.

Considering the unpromising conditions this was a surprisingly number, but most of us were just expecting a good walk, a bit of a chat and perhaps a few birds.

Within minutes of setting off the clear piping of a lesser spotted woodpecker drew us to a group of large trees, which we more or less surrounded. The calling stopped and we waited in anticipation as 2 nuthatches, several tits and a great spotted woodpecker left the trees. We waited longer but the elusive lesser spot refused to come out or to call again. Eventually we gave up and moved on. (Bad luck!).

We continued on our clockwise walk round the Little Pond, stopping several times to scan the large fields to the west. These fields were almost bare and covered in shallow furrows apparently following recent harrowing, and they appeared to be largely empty. Careful scanning revealed many small birds hiding in the hollows and close examination eventually produced two woodlarks working their way along a furrow, which were well seen through telescopes. (Skill!).

We pressed on, finding little other than a few common water birds on the Little Pond, and then heading out into the heath towards King's Ridge and the Great Pond. On a better day I expect we would have found Dartford warblers, but the strong, gusty wind kept them down in the cover, so we circled back to the south side of the Little Pond and towards the pine woods. We were about 20 yards from the trees when we heard the loud metallic chipping calls of crossbills and to our delight a fine orange male came and perched on the top of the nearest tree in clear view, where he stayed for several minutes (Good Luck!).

After another fruitless search for lesser spotted woodpecker near the car park it was 11:45 and we were presented with a choice – an early lunch or more birding. The unanimous opinion was for more birding so we drove round to the Great Pond and walked down towards the south-west corner, where the outflow is, and where there is most shelter. As we walked we found a mixed flock of tits, goldcrests and the usual hangers-on, and a selection of ducks including a fine male goldeneye in the corner of the pond. We found several tree creepers (probably 5, but I may be double counting) and had good views of their mouse-like progress along the trunks.

Just as we were about to turn for home we spotted a 'wrong looking' goldcrest moving quickly through the lower canopy. It promptly vanished. We spread out and got fleeting glimpses of its progress as it jumped quickly in and out of the dense holly and ivy-covered oaks. At last it came out into the bare branched above our heads and all (well most of us) could plainly see the pale face markings and bronze green back of a firecrest. (Persistence!).

Felling well pleased, we called it a day and headed for home at about one o'clock.

Bill Nicoll

ROC trip to Dungeness - May 2003

It is 4 years since the club went to Dungeness. The timing was chosen to coincide with peak migration of seabirds and the weather forecasters had predicted (correctly) a light wind from the south, so I was expecting a good turn out. However only 4 people came. Where were you all? As usual, you who did not come missed a good day out. A relatively quiet morning was followed by an eventful afternoon. We saw plenty of birds, and the weather was kind to us, with sunshine and light wind for most of the day; if anything, it was a bit too warm in the afternoon.

We (well, one of us) started early looking out to sea at 'the patch' (the turbulent outflow area where warm seawater emerges from the power station) to be joined soon after by two more early risers. The patch was covered by hundreds of terns and gulls, in the air and on the water, and hundreds more sat on the beach waiting for their turn. Straggling flocks of common scoter flew east in the middle distance, about 200 altogether, and a few sandwich terns, fulmars and kittiwakes meandered their way up-channel. We searched the tumbling mass of common terns and black headed gulls for rarer varieties, and turned up a single Mediterranean gull. A flock of about 20 eider flew by close inshore, easily identifiable at that distance by their large triangular bills and the 'no two the same' piebald patterning typical of that species. Unusually (in my experience) we saw no skuas, shearwaters or whimbrel flocks.

After an hour, we moved inland to seek passerines among the brambles of the trapping area around the Observatory, but they held only a few whitethroats. Two wheatears perched on the power stations fence, and we saw more of these later in the day. We did meet 2 more ROC members there who were just passing by, and though they did join us for an hour, I haven't counted them as attending the trip.

In mid-morning we moved on to the RSPB reserve, where we drove past a female whinchat on a fence on the way in (still there on the way out). We worked our way fairly slowly round the hides (there are 5 there now) and then continued along the nature trail. We found two little ringed plovers, sedge warblers and whitethroats were numerous, but the best birds were in the Denge Marsh pits on the north side where we found a very red knot, a few equally red bar-tailed godwits and a greenshank and several common wader species, while whimbrels flew over uttering the fast repeated calls that mark them out so distinctively from curlews. A cuckoo flew back and forth, calling occasionally. The marsh frogs were unusually quiet but they called from time to time, and we found a few sitting stock still on the weeds in the ditches. A few years ago Dungeness held substantial breeding colonies of little and sandwich terns, but only the commoner gulls and common terns seem to breed here now. The scarcer species seem to have developed a preference for the Rye Harbour reserve (I wonder why?) so we decided to go there next.

If you have never been to Rye Harbour imagine Dungeness with caravans instead of a power station! The same stony wasteland of shingle predominates, but it does have the advantage of some arable fields to the north and a river to the east. We parked in the (free!) public car park by the Martello tower and walked through the unsightly caravan park and across the fields to reach the hides overlooking the ternery pools. We were rewarded with exceptionally close views of the seabird colony on the islands where sandwich terns were present in large numbers with many common terns, and where we were delighted to find a substantial colony of Mediterranean gulls. They were hard to see, being on the wrong side of the island, but we later counted 24 on the ground and I think there were more flying around. Good numbers of little terns seemed to be setting up home on the shingle nearby, and at times they flew past very close, chattering loudly. As we sat in a hide looking out through the heat haze towards the sunlit fields behind the pools we were amazed to see a short eared owl hunting actively. It flew right round the nearest field, quartering the ditches and banks, coming quite close at one point. Had no one told it that it was supposed to be in Scotland by now?

At half past four we set off back via the riverside track and called in at the hide overlooking the wader scrape. To our great good luck we arrived just at the very moment when one of the locals located a dotterel. One of the group took a quick peep at it through his telescope (just in case it flew) while the others attempted to locate it themselves. Almost immediately, before we had found it, it did indeed fly off, going very fast, and disappearing in an unknown direction. What to do? It was getting late, we had no idea where it had gone and it was a new species for most of us. The local chap advised us that it had been on or near the fields south of the pool for most of the day so we decided to search there. We scanned the field for 15 minutes, finding plenty of ringed plovers, before decided that it was gone and that we should head for home as it was a long journey back. I took one last look and, would you believe it, one of the ringed plovers had a chestnut and black belly and a size 11 eye-stripe! Yes, you've guessed it already, it was the dotterel, a perfect summer plumage female. It moved about in full view about 200 yards away, and when the breeze calmed the heat haze, we got clear views.

What a way to end a good day, with a 'life tick'!

Bill Nicoll



ROC Trip to the Forest of Dean – May 2003

On a lovely day in May a happy group of ROC birders made their way to the RSPB Nagshead reserve for some excellent birdwatching in a beautiful place. While the weather was changeable (mainly sunny but with the odd shower), the birds were consistent and the birdsong was spectacular through most of the day.

At Nagshead a brand new reserve centre has opened with all the comforts needed after a long drive. Unfortunately, it was so new the rota for manning the centre was incomplete and no-one had opened it when we got there! However, later in the morning we all enjoyed relief and comfort at the half way stage of our trip around the reserve!

The Pied Flycatchers were evident around the walks and Spotted Flycatcher was one of the first birds found. This lovely bird is not at all common nowadays and I confess is the only one I have seen all year so far! The other bird catching our attention regularly with some excellent views was the Wood Warbler. Its strange song alerted us quickly and the usual challenge of finding it in the lower branches commenced.

As the leader of the trip I have to admit to a serious failing. A young Tawny Owl had been seen and heard that morning on the path near the centre but I failed to take note which path and how near! Smugly having already found several Tawny Owls this year I felt very relaxed about the prospect of another and failed to find this bird – a serious failing as a Leader making me question my suitability for future trips. However, I have a feeling that will not be a major factor in my selection for the next seasons programme! I can only promise to pay more attention next time!

We enjoyed what I call good value birding at Nagshead and found the Tree Pipits in the normal place. The bird that eluded us was the Dipper. Often this is seen on the stream at the bottom of the reserve and across the road. However, on this day (and sadly on a previous day this year) no Dipper appeared. What did appear was a Mandarin Duck, a pair of them in fact and they seem to be well established there on the streams and lakes in the Forest.

After lunch we sought a place for ice cream and Symonds Yat was ideal. Magnums in hand we enjoyed the spectacle of Peregrines from the watchpoint including a young bird making an early appearance on the rocky ledge so we could all have a good long look.

Our programme is aimed at visiting lovely places at the right time to give of their best and we hope you will join us on future visits. Every effort is made to help people find the birds and we always enjoy fresh company and sharing our birding experiences with others. We look forward to seeing you on one of our carefully planned trips for the new season!

Colin Wilson

In Search of the Wallcreeper

In my early days of birdwatching there were certain birds that I particularly wanted to see. Scanning through my only bird guide, the Observers Book of Birds, all those years ago the Brambling and the Redstart took my fancy, for no particular reason. It was a few years later that I saw my first Brambling, appropriately spotted taking a drink at a small pool in the garden of the RSPB's HQ at the The Lodge Sandy. It was sometime later that I saw my first my first Redstart, a stunning male (I probably wouldn't have recognised a female!) which landed next to my car as I sat quietly in a car park in the New Forest.

Over the ensuing years, other birds have caught my eye, only to be replaced by others as I have added them to my list. Until last year the Wallcreeper was very high on my 'most wanted list'. You only have to see the pictures in any European bird guide to realise that this is a 'must see' sort of bird. With that curved bill, plainish grey plumage and those unbelievable red wings, it resembles a huge exotic moth more than a bird (curiously it is most closely related to the nuthatch family, rather than the treecreepers).

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to find Wallcreepers on previous trips to the Spanish Pyrenees, last year's trip to Spain provided another opportunity. After a few excellent days in Extremadura we headed north to the Picos di Europa. The Picos is a stunningly beautiful part of Spain and the cable car at Fuente De makes reaching the high tops fairly easy. After parking at the bottom near the cable station, we were soon heading up to the top, at nearly 2000 metres. The cable at Fuente De is apparently the longest single span cable in Europe and the spectacular ride is almost worth the trip on its own. Once at the top two things strike you – the height and the significant drop in temperature. You can look back down to where you've been (they even provide a flimsy looking wire platform to further test your nerve, should you be brave enough to stand on it – I wasn't!).

Our information told us that Wallcreepers had nested in 2001 at a rock face up towards the snow line and we headed confidently across the barren terrain in search of the place. The first bird encountered was a Water Pipit, huddled against the wind, looking every bit as cold as we felt. Having located the chosen spot we scoured the rock for long enough to convince ourselves that no Wallcreepers were to be found – our efforts were only rewarded with distant views of Black Redstart, birds that we took to be Alpine Accentors (but could not be sure of the identification) and walkers all wearing far more clothes us ! We finally admitted defeat and retraced our steps, slipping into that feeling familiar to most birdwatchers that this wasn't going to be our day.

However on the walk back a brief glimpse of white gave away the presence of a Snowfinch on the rocks well below us. After a while a reasonable view was had, as the bird sat on the leeward side of a boulder. Spirits lifted, we were then further rewarded by an amazingly close encounter

with an Alpine Accentor only a few feet away! Well, if we saw nothing else the trip would still have been well worth it.

We had always planned to do the long walk back down to the car park and were setting off on the obvious path around the mountain when we spotted a couple of birdwatchers looking up the rocks above. The usual greetings found them to be English and of the belief that a Wallcreeper had been spotted flying up to the cliffs above the path. Hope springing eternal (at least for a while) we waited, we watched, we ate our emergency rations and we discussed the weather (it being thankfully considerably warmer round this side of the mountain!). Eventually a slight movement on the scree below us caught our eyes, but didn't promise to be anything other than another Black Redstart, until it flashed those wings. And what wonderful wings they are – "Wallcreeper!" was the assembled cry, as the bird flew across below us and then around to the scree above. On landing that strange decurved bill could clearly be seen, until those wings flashed again and it was gone.

With little chance of another sighting we set off, with an added spring to our step, down the path to the valley, seeing both species of Chough on the way. The fact that the walk down was a lot further than we had thought, that it took a lot longer than planned and frankly nearly killed me can all be overlooked. We had seen the elusive Wallcreeper (and a few other superb birds as well) and it was all very much worth the effort.

Ted Rogers

PS In colour, this picture of the Wallcreeper captures those wonderful wings well, with apologies for those who will seeing it in black, grey and white !

