

Shoreham and District
Ornithological Society
Autumn Newsletter
2018



CONTENTS

Editorial	3
A year to remember.....	4
To list or not to list?	7
Big Year Books	10
March 2018 to July 2018 Highlights	12
Swifts	18
Swifts at Saelig Cottage	19
In our gardens 2017	21
Christmas Cracker?...	28
Birding Adventures	30
Dorian's Photo Gallery	44
Photograph Acknowledgements	46
Officers of the Society	47

EDITORIAL

The Autumn Newsletter brings to you another collection of interesting contributions from a number of members. Three articles, from Brianne, Audrey and Sallie, relate to those summer visitors that have made their homes alongside ours, our swifts and swallows. Tony Benton has written a stimulating review of three big year books, attempts by birdwatchers to see as many birds as possible in a year. These accounts reflect the dedication of individuals to the pursuit of their hobby and, as anyone will know who has spent days birding in tropical rain forests, or hot deserts, the bird watching can be demanding and big lists require just as much effort and commitment as success in other spheres of human activity. Big lists are made from little birds, it is the LBJ's that make the difference, and often they have to be tediously tracked down deep in the hearts of the thickets in which they tend to live. I admire these folk who do big lists but, as I remarked to Tony when he first submitted his article, how many of these birds can they actually remember?

Continuing with the listing theme Jenny has written an interesting article on listing and I am sure many members will relate to her observations and suggestions.

I also wish to acknowledge the contributions from Val, Clive and Dorian. These members (and others not represented in this edition) submit regular reports, and in Dorian's case most excellent photographs, and their efforts provide core content for the Newsletter that is at the heart of every edition.

John Maskell's article relates the bittersweet tale of the fleeting Nutcracker that he saw in his garden and finally there is an article from me. We were a few pages short for this edition so I have assembled a few traveler's tales and miscellaneous observations – I hope you enjoy them!

Roger Smith

A year to remember and not only because of the weather

Brianne Reeve

There is no doubt 2018 will be remembered for its weather and the effect on all wildlife. Early in March we had a very cold spell, snow which did not stay, and bitterly cold winds. Nevertheless the first male Swallow arrived at Coombes on April 3rd and I was thrilled to see him, the harbinger of the forty-second year of Swallows nesting here. But one should never count one's chickens.....April ended the month with wild winds and it was very cold, sending us back in to winter clothes. The male Swallow had disappeared after some very inclement weather and I was beginning to feel there would be no breeding Swallows at Coombes in 2018. Then in May two younger birds were swooping in and out of the garage and there was a lot of twittering from the stable from another young pair; there were no obvious streamers on any of these birds. Also, none of these younger birds recognised me, giving alarm calls if I appeared, whereas the lone male was never bothered by my approach. Both pairs started to breed without making any effort to repair the nests they were using, emphasising the fact that both pairs were inexperienced in preparation for breeding.

However as I write this on August 20th both pairs have raised two broods with dates coinciding with those of last year bar a few days, but the behaviour has been very different. In 2017 the young from both pairs spent time in the stable or garage flying about inside to strengthen their wings and they roosted at night in or around their natal nest for several days after fledging. This year the young from all the broods fledged into the wide world straight from the nest, all at the same time apart from the smallest one in the stable which was not keen to leave the safety of the building even two days after its siblings. The disadvantage of this was that there were hardly any Swallows over the garden from which it could learn what to do or share their company, whereas earlier there has rarely been any time when Swallows were not to be seen swooping, swirling and calling over the garden up to twenty at a time, until dusk. But late this afternoon I found three young

Swallows resting in the stable and then flying back and forth with great confidence.



This summer will be remembered for its incredible heat and lack of rain. No rain here in June and two inches right at the end of July. I was particularly concerned because water is so important for all life and birds need it, not only to drink but to wash themselves, so I was refreshing the bird bath three times a day, especially after visits by Woodpigeons who treat it like a shower, a bath and a toilet, leaving behind scum and filth. However in August I witnessed the most extraordinary behaviour in torrential rain. It had rained heavily for most of the 9th and then it became a lot worse on the 10th. I was staring out of the window with the rain flooding out of the gutters and drain-pipes, wondering how the insect feeding birds were getting any food for their young, when a bird flew in and landed on one of the poles of a bird feeder, sitting very upright; it was an adult male Swallow. I have never had a Swallow land on any bird feeder but this one looked very odd and with binoculars I could see that it had its head right back and beak wide open – drinking the

rain! I tried to take some photographs but the rain was so heavy it was impossible. Then I decided I needed to catch the Swallow which was drenched, the rain was running off it, and I thought it might not be able to fly, I approached to within two yards when it noticed me and flew off round to the stable. It had been drinking for at least two minutes in pouring rain.

I have never witnessed such behaviour before but I wonder whether it was collecting a drink to take back to the young in the nest as food had been in such short supply. I have often seen hirundines taking water from the river, the lower mandible scooping water into the throat, but I had assumed this was to give themselves a drink. This year has been so unusual, with very few places offering water to birds which spend so much time on the wing. I do not know if they get enough fluid from the insects they catch but when they are not available, is it possible that water/rain might be a stop-gap? How has the dry, cracked ground affected the birds which have to dig for their food?

The adult Swallows were able to feed when the rain stopped in the late afternoon of the 10th but there were not many visits to the young in the nest which I monitored. The following few days proved my fears, one of the young was too small to survive. Its three siblings recovered as food was brought in and exactly seven days later two young flew out of the nest leaving the 'runt' on its own, but well attended by the adults. This, last of the forty-second year's broods, left the nest rather unwillingly two days later. I have no idea whether it will put on sufficient weight to carry it on its journey south. Last year eighteen young Swallows fledged safely from the two pairs, the older birds had two lots of five young. This year there were fourteen from two younger pairs. I cannot say this was due entirely to the very difficult weather conditions, I suspect it had a lot to do with the fact that both pairs were parents with no experience.

I am sure we have had more Swallows feeding in the surroundings of the house in 2018 than ever before. They have perched on a dead *Viburnum*, on the telephone wire and the TV aerial, and on the house roof too, so despite

the extremes of the weather it has been a good year for these particular migrants.

To list or not to list?

Jenny Holter

If you have ever been on an overseas bird trip or indeed an SDOS outing, you will know that a record is kept of birds noted and in many cases a report of the event is shared. But what about your own record keeping? Do you keep a diary or notes of any kind? Despite being much maligned by some, I am an enthusiastic bird lister. So what is the attraction? Here are some thoughts and pointers for getting started:

1. **Decide what lists you wish to run** – annual list, day list, holiday list, UK list, Sussex list, garden list – the possibilities are endless! It is particularly rewarding to get a ‘4 tick’ bird – day list, holiday list, annual list and lifer!
2. A list helps you to **open your eyes and appreciate the ordinary**: a Robin or House Sparrow catch the eye if you are running a day list! You can also note seasonal patterns and fluctuations at a regular location.
3. It encourages you **to get out to different places and habitats** where you are likely to see a greater variety of birds and at different times of the year. It can also get you out of the house even when the weather is miserable (although I must confess to some reluctance when it is very cold and wet. I am by nature more of a fair weather birder!).
4. **It is sociable**: you meet lots of people when you are out, most of whom are very helpful in sharing their knowledge and expertise, or in telling you about different sites of birds that have been around. Last

year we travelled to Cliffe Pools in Kent, and in conversation were told about Oare Marshes about 20 minutes away, where we saw our first ever Bonaparte's Gull, together with Little Stint and Curlew Sandpiper at very close range. Despite the distance, this is still one of my favourite sites as you are 'up close and personal' with so many ducks and waders.

5. It helps you to **recognise the progress** you are making with your birdwatching skills:

Possibly our first 'list' was on our honeymoon on Exmoor in 2003, when we recorded 43 different species. I recall studying our bird books each evening trying to identify the differences between Wood Warbler, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. Did that bird have untidy wings (as noted in the reference book) or not? We returned to Exmoor in 2012 and noted 65 birds on our list – the key difference was that we were now able to identify birds by song and therefore we could now seek out birds such as the Willow Warbler that we would not previously have noticed.

6. **Relish the challenge!** If you are remotely competitive and have friends or family at a similar level of competency **it is fun** to compete against each other and/or to combine your efforts to support each other by sharing information or organising shared excursions. We have managed to enthuse several family members living in Dorset, Essex and Derbyshire and this has certainly boosted out bird-listing opportunities. You don't get Dippers in West Sussex! And, if you need a break on a long journey, why not make it constructive: for example, a leg-stretch at Portland Bill on your way back from Cornwall to see the recently reported Great Spotted Cuckoo?!
7. You can also **compete against yourself**: our first annual list was in 2010 when we recorded 125 birds (I know, some manage 100 on the first day of the year, but we all have to start somewhere). We have

improved on our total each year, but partly because I know what our 'target to beat' is, and we venture out accordingly. Similarly, we aim to maximise our holiday lists; I recall driving around the village at the end of a weekend in Norfolk with 99 species, determined we would not get home till I saw a House Sparrow to take us to 100 in total.

- 8. Create your own rules!** For the purists, the BOU maintain the official list of UK birds, and not all species are included. In my opinion, these are still noteworthy. The spectacle of a Dalmatian Pelican Hoovering up food with his enormous bill agape at Drift Reservoir in Cornwall was a memorable experience whether it is accepted as a British record or not! Just be honest that it is your own list based on your own criteria (and maybe have your official list running alongside)!



On a similar note, most would include birds present, whereas we tend to include only birds seen, although Common Quail would be an exception – not on our UK list, but heard in Spain this year.

9. Use Birdtrack. By entering your records onto their website you are contributing to the bigger picture of bird movements and population changes. It is simple to use and you can enter complete lists or casual sightings and set up regular locations, such as your garden or local patch This enables you to compare your records over time.

10. Alternatively, contact Val Bentley to contribute local Garden Birdwatch information and monitor the changing movements of birds within your own garden. My House Sparrow numbers regularly peaked at around 25 birds 10 years ago but are nearer to a dozen now.

Big Year Books

Tony Benton

Over the years I've enjoyed reading a number of books about Big Years. You probably know the concept: you aim to see as many birds as possible in a calendar year. You define the geographical area, and decide whether to include birds that you only hear.

Recently I've read three very different accounts of Big Year quests, and I thought that I would share my reflections with members of SDOS.

First up was the 'Biking Birder' by Garry Prescott. This self-published book tells the tale of a Green Birding Big Year. Garry travelled the length and breadth of the British Isles on his bicycle. In fact he cycled 6,975 miles in 2016

and saw and heard 318 species. This set a new European 'Green Record'. His only concession to fossil fuels was the occasional use of ships to get to Orkney and Shetland. He didn't have an amphibious bike!

Garry was 60 years old when carrying out this challenge. By his own admission he was slightly overweight and diabetic. For me his sheer willpower, determination and outright courage makes this book a fascinating read. Many of the places that Garry birded are known to me and I particularly enjoyed the evocative descriptions of Shetland.

The book has not been written by someone with honed writing skills (professional editing would have greatly enhanced the end result), but it is still a good read and a wonderful account of what the British Isles has to offer. For me, some of the people Garry met along the way are just as important and interesting as the birds. I think that Garry felt this too.

Next up was 'Birding without Borders' by Noah Strycker. This book is about a global Big Year and the quest to beat the world record previously set by two intrepid British birders. This book is well written and crafted in such a way that I found it a real page turner. I just loved reading about some of the fantastic birds seen along the way; the perils of remote birding in Peru and the deprivations suffered in search of some of the most hard to see birds on the planet. It made me thirsty for some more overseas birding of my own! Noah needed to exceed 4,300 species to set a new world record. You will need to read this fascinating book yourself to see if he succeeded.

My final book was a 'classic', written by Mark Obmascik. Entitled 'The Big Year' and made into a film (not to great critical claim), the original book is a very 'American' account of the tense competition between three very driven, and different, birders doing a Big Year back in 1998. The style includes quite a lot of American vernacular, so perhaps is not to everyone's taste, but I could mostly decipher the slang and work out what was being said!

The pace of the book is good, reflecting the frenetic pace of the quest to see the most birds in North America in a year. The miles covered were truly phenomenal, and the antithesis of a 'green year'! Quite a few dollars were spent as well. The book is tense right to the end, and a new record was set at 744 birds.

So who did I admire the most? Well I think that it has to be Garry from Wolverhampton. His stamina, enthusiasm, and sheer joy of birds and people marks him out as a top bloke. I know that I would enjoy a day's birding with him. But I won't be taking my bike!

If you are interested in reading any of these books, the details are as follows:

The Biking Birder 2016 - A Green Birding Quest for 300. Self published.

Birding without Borders, by Noah Strycker 2017, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, New York

The Big Year - a tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession, by Mark Obmascik. Published by Doubleday 2004, revised Bantam edition 2011.

March 2018 to July 2018 Highlights

Clive Hope

March

The 'Beast from the East' was unwelcome but brought with it a few unexpected birds to our 'patch'. On 2nd at Goring Gap, the highlight of the day was a 2CY **Caspian Gull** which spent almost two hours in the field north of the rough area, the first site record. Two **Bar-tailed Godwits** on the beach were the first of the year and six **Golden Plovers** were logged,

including two grounded birds. Passerines included two **Stonechats**, six **Meadow Pipits**, 13 **Fieldfares** and seven **Skylarks**. At Ferring Rife a flock of 23 **Golden Plovers** was in the paddocks on the west side together with up to 30 Fieldfares and several redwings. In or adjacent to the Rife were two **Jack Snipe**, a drake **Pintail**, two **Shovelers**, four **Water Rails**, seven **Teal**, an adult **Mediterranean Gull**, 10 **Snipe**, two **Lapwings**, three **Little Egrets**, two **Grey Herons**, a **Kestrel**, and five **Moorhens**.

At Widewater on 3rd, a Shelduck, 10 Pintail, two Teal, 37 Dunlin, 50 Black-tailed Godwit, a Kingfisher, 8 Little Grebe and 16 Redshank and in the Adur Nature Reserve was an Avocet, a Black-tailed Godwit, c35 Dunlin, a Greenshank, two Shelduck, a Grey Plover, two Curlew and 9 Snipe. The Harbour Mouth had a female Black Redstart and on the Airfield were another 8 Golden Plover. Eight Blackcaps were in a west Worthing garden and next day 14 species in a garden at High Salvington.



Wheatears appeared on the Gap on 11th and Widewater on 12th and a superb male Black Redstart was in Ferring churchyard on 13th. On the 14th a fruitful seawatch from George V Avenue produced an immature Iceland Gull, a flock of six Avocets, two Sandwich Terns, a Shelduck, two Pintail, 44 Common Scoters, 13 Shovelers, four Teal, 279 Dark-bellied Brent Geese, 15 Red-breasted Mergansers, 30 Great Crested Grebes, two Fulmars, 12 Kittiwakes, three Curlews and 18 Red-throated Divers. Presumably the same Iceland Gull - aged as a juvenile - was then in the roost field early afternoon, where it was joined by another two Sandwich Terns. Seven Mediterranean Gulls in the fields included a 2CY and a 3CY. 15 Shelducks at Widewater must be a record!

Another male Black Redstart was at Shoreham fort on the 18th when an Avocet was on Brooklands lake (now almost devoid of water) and seven Sandwich Terns were on the Adur. The Iceland Gull returned to the Gap roost on 18th and 19th in company with one or two Sandwich Terns.

An impressive flock of twenty Avocets appeared on the Adur just north of the railway bridge on the 24th when a huge flock of 600 Brent Geese passed the shore at Ferring at 1215. Six Siskins were in a High Salvington garden on 27th.

April

A Swallow returned to Coombes on the 4th. Seawatching from Worthing and Ferring on 6th and 7th was productive with east or south-east winds blowing. On the 6th nearly 1000 Common Scoters, 80 Sandwich Terns, the season's first six Whimbrel, a Little Gull, four Common Terns and a few duck of four other species passed east in a couple of hours early in the morning. Next day much smaller numbers of the same but with the addition of 14 Divers, six Velvet Scoters and best of all, six Garganey.

A Hoopoe was seen (and photographed) in a Lancing garden on the 6th and on the 9th a Cuckoo was seen and heard north of Steyning. Also on this day



at Henfield Levels wildfowl remaining were 22 Shoveler, 20 each of Teal and Wigeon two Gadwall plus three Black-tailed Godwits. No less than seven Ring Ouzels were found at Cissbury on 13th and a Cuckoo was in Spithandle Lane, Wiston on 15th.

Seawatchers at Ferring and Worthing on 15th, 17th and 19th were rewarded with a good passage of Arctic and Great Skuas, terns and duck. Multiple Red Kites appeared at several coastal locations from 19th. A Redstart was by Ferring Country Centre on 20th. Whitethroats had returned in good numbers by 22nd. A bright male Whinchat was with seven Wheatears in the paddocks west of Ferring on 27th with a Reed Warbler singing nearby. On this date a Common Sandpiper was in Little Paddocks pond in Ferring when others were on Goring and Worthing beaches.

The month ended with cold inclement weather – when will Spring really start we thought?

May

Warm weather eventually arrived over the Spring bank holiday weekend and Swifts appeared at several places although not in any great numbers. Sea-watchers anticipating the annual up-channel passage of terns, waders and skuas had mixed fortunes. Only small numbers of Pomarine Skuas were seen with the total for our patch probably less than 20. No Black Terns made it into the log.

Inland, most warbler species seem to have been well represented. A Firecrest at High Salvington on 18th was unexpected but perhaps a forerunner to the planned breeding survey this year. Up to four Cuckoos at Beeding on 24th were welcome.

The strangest record must be the family of Shelducks seen on the Bostal Road above Steyning on the 29th!



June

Swifts eventually arrived in some numbers at a few sites e.g 16 at Henfield on 2nd and on the 24th 17 were over the Angmering / East Preston boundary. Elsewhere, in common with House Martins and Swallows, numbers remained rather low until later in the month when many members sent in reports from all across the SDOS area.

Arctic bound Sanderling continued to pass east along the coast until 12th. Settled weather in the month meant breeders did well; the ringers at Ladywell, Cissbury and Steyning reflecting this with larger trapping totals than usual for the time of year. Three Red Kites flew over Worthing on 23rd.

July

Exceptionally warm weather throughout the month led to few notable reports. Migration of some waders and Sand Martins began, though generally with low numbers in our area.

A Greenshank returned to the Adur on the 25th and Mediterranean Gulls were evident there and along the coast with small parties moving west on most days in the last week or so. The first returning Willow Warblers were at Goring Gap and Ferring Rife from 24th and eight were trapped at Ladywell on 25th. On the 27th, 129 Mediterranean Gulls were counted at Goring and a Cuckoo, Garden Warbler and Green Sandpiper were noted at the Gap.

The very warm weather broke on 28th and gave way to strong winds and rain.

Swifts

Audrey Wende

This memorable hot summer has enabled Swifts to have a very successful breeding season. It all started so differently when many members became worried that “their” Swifts were not being seen around the usual dates of previous years. At the end of April and the beginning of May, all over the country, Swift supporters were saying the same, and it would appear bad weather and storms in North Africa and the Mediterranean interrupted their migration north into Europe and probably a lot of birds were lost.

Eventually the weather improved and Swifts found their way back to their nesting colonies, albeit later than usual. The RSPB are in their second year of a survey in Brighton (now known as a Swift City) with volunteers visiting the roads known to have Swifts nesting and assessing their breeding success this year. It is great to know that the centre of Shoreham around the Church is also a hotspot for Swifts and many of you were thrilled to watch groups circling and screaming around their nest sites. In late June and July when the juveniles are encouraged to leave their nests these screaming parties are the “sound of summer”. The young birds then have to learn where they live and perhaps go around inspecting future potential nest sites for when they come back in three to four years to breed.

Ray Jones and I are both Swift Champions for the SOS and we hope you have been able to locate where Swifts have been using the buildings around your area. These details then need to be submitted on Birdtrack, or you can complete the RSPB Survey form. Please give a six figure grid reference plus the date when you saw them. Using the notes section please record the house number and street name as these details help us to protect their nest sites for the rest of the year when there is no evidence of their presence.

Swifts eat thousands and thousands of insects whilst they are with us, and it is essential that we help these birds by providing nesting boxes around already

existing colonies. Swifts do not live in nature reserves; they like to live in colonies in towns and cities, with humans providing their nesting sites. Swifts have to depart at the beginning of August as the days shorten and the supply of food is reduced. Let's hope they have a safe journey back to Africa where they will roam around this huge continent until it is time for them to return to us in Sussex next year.

Swifts at Saelig Cottage

Sallie Bedford

Our first sighting of Swifts this year at Saelig Cottage was on 7th May when three appeared overhead. Numbers increased daily and by the 27th we had nine visiting and two boxes out of three were in use.

My son and I spent most evenings from about 8.30 pm watching from the garden as they screamed round the house. At 8.30 pm on 2nd June 16 birds were busy overhead with all three boxes being entered. As it became darker they would gradually fly higher until some seemed to disappear into the sky while others came and went into the boxes, sometimes only one, but at other times, two in a box.

Occasionally House Sparrows would go into a box, usually when the Swifts were absent, and our local Starlings showed interest occasionally. Our largest count was of 22 on 14th July: they were intermittently screaming round the house and then flying high overhead.

On 11th July a dozen birds were "banging" audibly on the boxes, one after another in quick succession. I attempted to take a photo but against a brick wall they didn't come out well. People have various theories about this behaviour. My feeling is that the birds are reminding each other where to come back to next year, and also teaching the young birds where home is. It only seems to happen here towards the end of the season. Sometimes they flew so very low, like friendly little bombers, and once wings swished past my

ear making a little whoosh. Like Brianne and her swallows I feel they get to know me.

We saw our last Swifts on 21st August when two emerged from boxes 2 and 3 and flew north instead of heading in their usual direction west across the fields. I reported their departure and Clive suggested that the three he saw fly over Ferring that day might have been them. What a great season we enjoyed with our Swifts! I hope to have five boxes ready for them next year, courtesy of Henfield Shed wood-workers.



In our gardens in 2017

Val Bentley

There were 26 different gardens where SDOS members were recording for our survey in 2017; these belonged to Val Bentley, Tony Benton, Noranne Biddulph, Paula Blake, Reg Bradbury, Brian Clay, Jay Cooper, John Cooper, Martin Ford, Clive Hope, Laurie Keen, Cyril & Maureen Leeves, Sheila Marshall, John & Shena Maskell, David Milton, Janet Paterson, David Potter, Anthony Robinson, John & Jeannette Simpson, Stephen Simpson, Marion Taylor, Gordon & Vera Tickler, Rae Titcomb, David Tomalin, Peter Whitcomb and Martin Wilson. There were 25 forms returned for the first quarter, 24 for the second, 22 for the third, and 24 for the fourth. Eight of these also take part in the BTO Garden Birdwatch Scheme which this year has sent basic data to the county bird recorders – hurrah!

The results from each week were entered onto a spreadsheet, and totalled to see which species were the most frequent garden visitors. Overleaf is the final result with a three-year comparison of positions. Apart from a slight shuffling of the order there were of course no real surprises. Woodpigeon finally sneaked up into the top spot, having been waiting in the wings for the last five years, and Collared Dove fell from 7th to 12 having been at 8th for the previous four years. Greenfinch sadly fell out of the top 15, which allowed Herring Gull to move up another place, and Long-tailed Tit to creep in. Looking back ten years to data for 2007 (from the Annual Report) really does highlight the decline in Greenfinches. There was one quarter (spring) that year where the species was reported from 100% of the participating gardens with an average of maximum numbers at 4.2, this year the highest quarterly percentage was 63% (October – December) at an average of 1.1.

Species	Average % of gardens used each quarter	Overall position 2017	Overall position 2016	Overall position 2015	Maximum number seen at one time	Average number seen per week (all gardens)
Woodpigeon	100%	1	2	5	15 (Taylor)	2.10
Blue Tit	99%	2=	4=	1	33 (Blake)	2.21
Robin	99%	2=	3	2=	8 (Blake)	0.95
Blackbird	98%	4	1	2=	9 (Blake)	1.54
Great Tit	97%	5	4=	4	9 (Blake)	1.34
Dunnock	95%	6	6	6	11 (Blake)	1.04
Magpie	86%	7	9	7	10 (Maskell)	0.91
Goldfinch	82%	8	13	9	50+ (John Cooper)	1.76
House Sparrow	77%	9	7=	10	54 (Maskell)	2.50
Carrion Crow	75%	10	12	11=	4 (several gardens)	0.44
Wren	74%	11	10	11=	5 (Blake)	0.47
Collared Dove	72%	12	7=	8	8 (Blake)	0.63
Starling	69%	13	11	13	50 (Leeves)	2.41
Herring Gull	62%	14	15	16	12 (Maskell)	0.75
Long-tailed Tit	60%	15	17	17	15 (Blake)	1.40

Paula Blake's Henfield garden with its well-stocked and comprehensive feeding station proved extremely attractive to an excellent variety of birds

and, combined with her assiduous watching, provided the maximum numbers for several different species during the year.

The “Also Rans”

Regularly recorded, but not in the top 15, were:

	Average % of gardens used		
Species	2017	2016	2015
Greenfinch	58%	64%	69%
Chaffinch	53%	52%	63%
Great Spotted Woodpecker	48%	38%	36%
Song Thrush	39%	37%	33%
Chiffchaff	36%	26%	25%
Goldcrest	35%	30%	24%
Blackcap	32%	40%	41%
Jackdaw	31%	18%	26%
Jay	31%	27%	31%
Coal Tit	28%	20%	15%
Sparrowhawk	22%	18%	13%

Chaffinch presence remained similar to 2016 after a steep drop from the year before, Great Spotted Woodpeckers increased in numbers, as did Chiffchaff and Goldcrests; in fact the latter species was seen in over 50% of gardens in the final quarter. Jackdaw records bounced back a little after lower numbers seen in in the previous two years, but Blackcap sightings were down this year.

Some Garden Highlights

First Quarter

From January to March 44 species were seen, one fewer than in 2016. A Grey Wagtail turned up twice at Tony's and enjoyed his very large bird bath, Redwings were seen by Noranne, Marion and John & Shena. A Kestrel sat on a tree on the edge of Paula's garden in mid-January, I had two Reed Buntings visiting in March, Reg counted 43 Starlings around fat ball feeders on 2nd Feb and David P saw his first garden Stock Doves (in 30 years) on 8th March. The only Siskins of the quarter were two at Brian's towards the end of March. My most amusing garden visitors were a pair of Mallards which splashed noisily into our fairly small pond in March, sized up the facilities on offer and decided to relocate elsewhere! Both species of Partridge were noted, a Red-legged by David P and a Grey by John C, but this quarter's star bird was a female Black Redstart at Marion's in March!

In January and early February over-wintering Blackcaps were reported in more than half of the gardens. Their favourite haunt seemed to be with John & Shena, who reckoned they had five different individuals visiting them and saw them every day they were at home during the review period. Chiffchaffs however were not recorded until early March.

Second Quarter

A total of 46 species in this quarter, one more than in 2016. Returning migrants were seen by several. Four Chiffchaffs were in Noranne's garden on 2nd April, she saw single Garden Warblers and Willow Warblers on three dates apiece, a Whitethroat in late April, and the neighbourhood Swifts first

appeared on 8th May. Brian noted a Reed Warbler in his High Salvington garden in May. Paula had four Tawny Owls around in May – a pair nest regularly in the vicarage garden nearby - and both Noranne and Reg had good views of Red Kites flying over their gardens. On 11th April John C heard a Nightingale singing in scrub adjacent to his back garden in Steyning. Laurie's bird bath was frequented regularly by Blackcaps which were nesting nearby; the only other Blackcaps reported in late May and June were singles by Brian and Martin F. Laurie was also visited by two Willow Warblers on 2nd April, and he was glad to report that Greenfinches were regular visitors this year. John & Shena had many different species nesting, and noted House Sparrows taking feathers into a Swift nest box. On 19th June Rae was treated to the lovely sight of a Goldfinch feeding 3 young.

Third Quarter

There were 42 different species this quarter. Blue Tits had a better breeding season this year, certainly in Paula's garden, borne out by her count of 33 in the first week of July! Reg saw a couple of "flocks" – 41 Starlings and 27 Goldfinches in the final week of August. Jay wondered where her House Sparrows were as they were absent from 30 July through to the end of September, though a couple of passage Willow Warblers brightened up the garden in September. Cyril & Maureen had a maximum "spudger" (or "spadger"?) count of 32 in August, though that was exceeded by John & Shena's 46 in September. Janet saw 3 Green Woodpeckers in July, Marion noted a family of Jays and a Mistle Thrush in early July. Brian recorded four Mistle Thrushes in September, so probably a family. Martin spotted 2 Blackcaps in the last two weeks of September and a Coal Tit returned to Rae's garden after an absence of a couple of years. I probably wouldn't have known I had a Willow Warbler in the garden if it hadn't flown into my mist net on 24th August. John & Shena had up to 4 Willow Warblers at a time in August and early September, and their "bird of the period" was a Firecrest on 24th September.

Fourth Quarter

In the last quarter 46 species were recorded including two which unfortunately do not “count” from an official point of view.

In this quarter Collared Doves were much less frequently seen, recorded in only 54% of gardens, compared with 79% in 2016. This is the main reason for their drop from 7th to 12th place in the table. House Sparrows and Starlings were also in fewer gardens this quarter, 63% and 58% respectively, compared to 79% and 75% in 2016. Both dropped down two places in the table this year.

A scattering of Chiffchaffs were recorded until the end of October, the last ones seen on the 30th by Laurie, who was also treated to the sight of a Spotted Flycatcher on the 10th. Pied Wagtails were noted by Tony, Janet and by Gordon & Vera. Jay in Lancing and John C in Steyning reported good number of Goldfinches with 21 for Jay in mid-October and 30 for John in December. Of the winter visitors I had 2 Lesser Redpolls, but they didn't hang around for long, Redwings were seen in 7 gardens, mostly in ones and twos, but Paula had 16 in the week of 26th November, and John & Shena 20 two weeks later. Firecrests are increasing in number in Sussex, something borne out by Laurie who only had a single garden sighting in 39 years, but received visits from this delightful bird on seven occasions from 15th October to 26th December. An unusual sight for John C was of a Little Egret, preening on the lawn in the sunshine on 9th December! Wintering warblers normally are just Blackcaps – seen in five gardens - but on 20th and 21st December John & Shena saw a Lesser Whitethroat feeding on spindle berries. It remained into 2018. Not the first time this species has wintered, but it's pretty rare with only a handful of previous occurrences, one of which was also in the Worthing area.

And the two that don't count? On 5th October Reg saw a strange bird in a rowan tree which sported two white wing bars, a bright white breast with black streaks. Could it have been an American Yellow-rumped Warbler? Of course it had disappeared by the time he had grabbed his camera. Then on

22nd December John & Shena saw a Nutcracker but the record was not accepted by the powers that be.

In Summary

The geographical locations of the gardens were well scattered: Brighton (2), Hove (2), Shoreham (7), Lancing (3), Worthing (1), Goring (2), Ferring (2), Rustington (1), High Salvington (2), Findon (1), Steyning (1) and Henfield (2).

A total of 62 different species were recorded, including some where the birds were using the skies above the gardens in their search for food. Sixteen species were seen in only one garden.

National Garden Birdwatch results from The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) are much the same as those from our gardens. The first nine species are the same, though in slightly different order, with Blackbird at the top and Woodpigeon fourth. Chaffinch and Greenfinch both declined nationally too, down 6% and 11% respectively, but still – just – both in the top 15. In my own garden Greenfinches are consistently the most numerous species on the feeders, but there are always exceptions! Goldfinches came in 8th in both lists, and are doing very well. BTO Bird Table magazine says that “breeding populations have been on the rise since the 1980s with a national increase of 167% recorded over the past 25 years.” It is possible that “Goldfinches have benefited from the decline in Greenfinch populations since 2005, allowing Goldfinches greater access to garden bird feeders”. Differences were that Coal Tits were 12th nationally, but down at 24th for SDOS, though sightings have increased over the past three years. Herring Gulls are right down at 34th in the BTO results but, understandably much more frequent in the SDOS recording area.

Many thanks to all our recorders for their diligence and interest.

Christmas Cracker?... or Nutcracker not-so-sweet!

John Maskell

In June contributors to the SDOS Garden Birdwatch Survey received from Val Bentley a summary of winter period observations and may have spotted a reference to a Nutcracker that briefly visited our garden last December. So “the cat was out of the bag” so-to-speak! As promised in a subsequent User Group email I thought I’d share a few more details of last winter’s extraordinary event.

I usually spend an hour or more each day watching birds in our West Tarring garden in Worthing. On 20th and 21st December 2017 my wife, Shena, and I observed a Lesser Whitethroat feeding on spindle berries in our garden. This was an unusual case of a possible over-wintering or, more likely, visitor from further East. Having gained some “grabbed” photographs on 21st I was hopeful that I might be more successful on the 22nd from the vantage point of our south-facing upstairs bedroom window. (In fact we recorded a Lesser Whitethroat on 14 dates last winter. After favouring spindle berries it changed its diet to “buggy nibbles” and was last seen on 9th March.)

At 10:15 I turned from scouring the spindle tree and surrounding bushes to see the silhouette of a single stocky medium-sized bird perched upright near the very top of our horse chestnut tree (30 feet + tall) at a distance of less than 50 feet from my unobstructed viewpoint. Focussing with my binoculars I was immediately aware that I was looking at a Nutcracker! As I had just been studying the regular garden species I was able to say that it was larger than a Blackbird and smaller than a Carrion Crow and approximately the same size as a Jay. There were two distinctive features; firstly the large and long chunky beak. This appeared as a continuation from a fairly flattish head. The head had a thin dark brown ‘cap’. The second main distinguishing feature was the overall mid-brownish plumage with intense white mottling which had the appearance of large white spots and white tear-drop shapes. Furthermore, the dark eye looked quite menacing! I viewed the bird for several seconds

before a raucous Carrion Crow in an adjacent pine tree seemed to scare it and the Nutcracker turned and flew off southwards before I could note any other salient features. Frustratingly, although my camera was to hand, there was insufficient time to take any photographs.

Shortly after my sighting we noted a large number of corvids in the garden opposite in a 50 ft. high leafless tree. We counted some 42 Carrion Crows and two attendant Magpies perched or flying around. The Carrion Crows were behaving in a noisy and aggressive manner with much tail-fanning and cawing loudly in the direction of an adjacent fir tree as if trying to drive off an intruder. (This was a record count for us of Carrion Crows in our area. These were definitely Carrion Crows! Strangely, Jackdaws are quite rare in our immediate area.)

The weather was quite mild for the time of year (7 deg C), the air very humid but still with complete stratus cloud cover. It was fairly bright.

Unfortunately Shena was occupied with a phone call at the time of my Nutcracker sighting. Having told her what I had just seen she systematically quizzed me as to the bird's behaviour and appearance and so we eliminated any possible confusion species. The size, jizz, distinctive beak and white spotted plumage left me in no doubt that I had just seen a Nutcracker. I am familiar with the species, having seen Nutcrackers at close quarters on many occasions in Austria.

Still reeling from the enormity of what I had just seen I immediately telephoned a sympathetic John Newnham who advised sending a report to Mark Mallalieu, the SOS Recorder. Mark was suitably convinced by my report and promptly forwarded it to the British Birds Rarities Committee.

For a couple of hours after my sighting Shena and I toured the local area in anticipation and the following day I repeated the search on my bicycle in the hope of relocating the Nutcracker.

Members may well ask, in view of the bird's rarity, why I didn't "go public" at the time. However, I was concerned that such a "mega" would excite a great deal of interest nationally and without further views there seemed little point in creating undue excitement and possible long-distance travel. Mark posted a "Worthing area" record on the SOS website and we hoped for further observations from other birders but none were forthcoming. Sadly this strategy and my own searches drew a blank and, therefore, it again seemed pointless to raise false hopes at a busy time of year. As far as I know there were no other winter records of Nutcrackers in the UK.

Almost 6 months later Mark received a reply from the BBRC that "my" Nutcracker had been designated as "not proven"... which is the response that I was anticipating. As I was the only observer with no photographic evidence and this was a non-irruption year for the species, the BBRC would have had little option than to reach that conclusion.

I have seen many Nutcrackers in Europe. It being such a distinctive species I was confident in my identification at close quarters but alas it will remain as "the one that got away". I leave readers to draw their own conclusions. And remember, we don't always get what we want for Christmas!

Birding Adventures

Roger Smith

A few years ago my wife and I flew off to Alaska with the general aim of riding round for a couple of weeks in a motorhome and then returning to Vancouver on a cruise ship. Extemporisation is my preferred birding style and so one morning I decided to take a walk around a National Parks nature trail in a rather dreary and wet coniferous forest, leaving Anne reading in the van. These northern forests aren't full of birds but notably I saw a Stoat and found a Brown Creeper (a type of tree-creeper), which I was pleased with, and, whilst rambling back, I could see some odd looking scratch marks on the path. Whilst musing on what these might be I rounded a corner and realised they were the tracks of a bear, because there it was, about 40 metres in

front of me, eating berries in a clearing. I was looking directly at its bottom. This was a lucky break as of the two ends of a bear the rear is the less likely to cause one grief. I quickly came up with a plan, as it turned out a successful one, to crouch down and hasten off as fast as possible. Evading the bear was, however, the easier task of the morning.



Alaskan National Parks are full of signs saying if you see a bear report it so immediately on returning to the car park I headed off to the office to discharge my civic duty. In the office was a park official who gave the immediate impression that she was not enjoying her day. Undeterred I marched up to the counter and said I've seen a bear. I must say I did expect some sort of more interested reaction, but I suppose if one was to summarise this person's main characteristic then laconic would be the politest word. Perhaps it was my accent that she found difficult but only after a while did a dull glow of comprehension lit up in her eyes and she uttered her first words - 'where was it'. If one thinks about it for a moment describing the location of a bear in a forest is not the easiest of exercises and,

already, I was losing enthusiasm for bear reporting. So, to keep things simple, I replied 'on the nature trail'. After some further moments of thought she hit upon the idea of getting out the nature trail map and we managed to overcome the first hurdle of the reporting exercise.

More interrogation, however, was to follow. By now I was beginning to get a sense that a posting to this particular remote National Parks office did not require strong inter-personal skills and quick-wittedness. After a few more seconds of steady cogitation she came up with her next question – 'what sort of bear was it'. By now I was quite disenchanted with bear reporting so I just said 'It was brown but I'm from England where we don't have bears, so if you want to know what sort of bear it is then you will need to send someone to find out'. She seemed to accept this idea in her lugubrious fashion and I ambled off. As I climbed back into the driver's seat I said to my wife I've just seen a bear - she replied brightly 'did you take a photograph'. It was just one of those days.

On the same trip we went on a boat excursion to look for marine critters of one sort and another. We'd selected the boat because it was small and offered a broad range of sightings – different from the larger whale orientated trips that go out from the same harbours. The day started with one of those exercises beloved of those who like to attempt social ice-breaking; we all had to say what we wanted to see. This rather pointless exercise eventually assembled a species list similar to that shown in the brochure so off we roared into the northern Pacific Ocean to find them. After seeing some Californian Sea Lions and an amazing crash stop to observe a couple of swimming Rhinoceros Auklets, about the same size as Little Auk, and a good spot whilst cruising at 20 knots' we hit upon a Sea Otter.

These are amazing creatures. It takes a leap of imagination to envisage a mink as a component of coat, or indeed a beaver as a hat, and I guess it took some time for folks to work out how to convert a sheep into a woolly cardigan, but with the Sea Otter it is just obvious what it can become – it looks just

like a soggy fur coat. It floats about in copious folds of loose fur – perhaps it rolls it all up like a duvet at night when it has a sleep. It is difficult to describe the overall effect but if you have seen those pictures of people who have successfully lost 15 stone you will get the general idea.

The next stop was for a Brunnich's Guillemot. This might sound easy but the Alaskan Peninsula, like the UK, is south of the cliffs where Brunnich's Guillemot breeds. This Brunnich's Guillemot was sitting amidst about two thousand regular Guillemots. At this point just have a look at your Collin's Field Guide to appreciate the difficulty. Maybe I saw it.



This recollection reminds me of a 'sighting' of Great Pootoo in the Amazon. Pootoo's typically sit on the ends of branches of bare trees, hidden in plain sight by their structure and colouration. I have seen a number of Common Pootoos and they all managed to look, more or less successfully, like

branches, but this Great Pootoo had taken concealment to a higher level of sophistication. It was obvious where it was, the guide described the position perfectly, but I still couldn't differentiate it from the tree branch. Perhaps there should be a third category in lists, seen, heard and in the presence of. I suspect that there should be more birds placed in the latter category than some listers care to admit. Shortly afterwards I realised I could no longer clearly see the numbers on the gantry signs on the M25 and got some distance glasses. Perhaps that was the problem.

I always enjoy birding from boats. It is, perhaps, not of great benefit in the U.K., but in the vastness of tropical swamps and jungles, and on major rivers and the seas, birding by boat enables one to access a world unseen by terrestrial beings. Even a cruise ship may provide opportunities. When the children were younger we went for a New Year trip along the Nile. I sat on the top deck much of the time with my telescope observing river terns, large flocks of ducks and waders at the river's edge. It was entertaining birding but the trouble is you can't stop a cruise ship for a closer look. The ancient buildings and tombs were impressive and the Egyptologist had a detailed command of hieroglyphics but ancient Egypt seems a bit remote somehow. I think I appreciate much better the linkage between the Classical Greek and Roman civilisations and the present day. Luckily it was a large group and one could wander off, un-noticed, to observe the birdlife. From memory Nile Valley Sunbird was the special bird of the trip – the rest of the birds seen were regular north African species. Anyway at the end of the Nile Cruise we moored in Luxor with a free couple of days for local activities.

I'd had enough of ancient Egypt but I knew that the hotel on nearby Crocodile Island had a resident bird guide. The obvious thing therefore to do to see some decent local birds was to attempt to twitch the bird guide. It was over a decade ago: now one would probably send a text or an email but at the time a direct search seemed the only possibility to quickly establish contact. Most warm weather hotels have similar layouts – you just walk across the lobby and out into the garden – so I came up with a plan. I would arrive in a taxi, breeze through the hotel lobby and look around the garden

for a bloke of Egyptian appearance carrying binoculars. It worked a treat; identification was immediate as there he was showing a couple of women a Nile Valley Sunbird. We quickly cut a deal for an excursion the following morning and then I went for a stroll around the shoreline and fields of Crocodile Island. Being an island there was less hassle than is usual in Egypt, just a few small children tagged along, and I was soon able to locate the local speciality, Red Avadavat, an Indian bird originally but nowadays with colonies around the Mediterranean.

The following morning I rolled up in the taxi, eager to discover what avian delights the day would hold. The first part of the excursion was by moped. I wouldn't say that I am a seasoned moped pillion passenger but I climbed on board with my Scopac firmly secured on my back and off we went to arrive at a small rowing boat. I looked at this boat with some trepidation as this was Egypt and the Imodium was only just about working, but off we set and all went well. It was a delightful trip with many Bluethroat flitting around at the bases of the reeds, Painted Snipe, a first for me for the Western Palearctic, and a sighting of wintering Jack Snipe. This lot just couldn't be seen from the shore as the reed beds were too extensive. Afterwards we cruised through the suburbs of Luxor to a coffee shop – a thoroughly entertaining morning's birding enlivened by a novelty ride on a moped.

Most of the lodges on the bigger southern African Rivers offer boat excursions and some of these can be very good. The normal boat is a flat-bottomed aluminium 'punt' with some sort of canopy but the boat run by the Namibia national parks department out of Popa Falls on the Kavango River was something else. We had booked an afternoon trip but when we arrived the boat did not immediately inspire confidence. The upper parts were similar to the recently demolished SOS hide at Paghham Harbour only with more holes to look out; overall the vessel had the appearance of a large, dilapidated, floating garden shed. Nevertheless we climbed aboard and set off; after all the only real danger was of capsizing and being eaten by crocodiles. It chugged off across the river and then the first bird was a White-Backed Night Heron, an excellent sighting. These are skulking things that hide under the

overhangs of river banks and it was the first one I'd seen since a river trip in the Gambia fifteen years before. This type of sighting emphasises the benefit of birding from a boat – the SASOL field guide account for this bird incorporates the phrase 'easily overlooked' and we all know what that means. There were also kingfishers, bee-eaters and other odds and ends and it was a surprisingly good outing.

Our boat excursion at the next lodge along the Caprivi Strip was less successful. The fundamental mistake was to go first thing in the morning. It was freezing added to which the river channel was rather narrow and the boatman was clearly, and probably rightly, scared to death of getting cornered by a hippo. His basic technique, therefore, was to race along the narrow stretches at top speed. Presumably hippos keep their heads down if a boat is racing towards them or perhaps you just bounce over the top of them like in a James Bond movie and carry on. Whatever, after two hours of this we were frozen stiff and had to lie down in the sun like reptiles for half an hour to recover.

The Caprivi Strip is also an accessible location for Pel's Fishing Owl. This is a large, somewhat mystical, brown owl that lives along the major rivers of tropical Africa. Probably it is not uncommon but by reputation it is difficult to see and some bird reports incorporate accounts of a ghostly shape, ethereally suspended in the gloaming, that silently descended to the water surface before seizing its quarry and disappearing noiselessly into the tropical night. It was with such images in mind that we set off for Drotsky's camp in northern Botswana where I was reasonably confident we could find someone who could engineer an encounter. On the way we stopped off at the supermarket in Shakawe just across the Botswana border to buy some meat for the barby. One of the fascinating things about supermarkets in southern Africa is that old British brands remain on their shelves, I didn't make a note of what was on offer but one wouldn't be surprised to find tins of Crosse and Blackwell soup, or packets of Paxo stuffing or Cerebos salt. By 4pm, shopping over, we were in the boat looking for the owls. I had imagined that we would be leaving later but the boatman seemed confident that we would

see the owls and we headed off upstream. Soon enough, there they were – two of them perched in a tree just behind the supermarket in Shakawe! It was a bit of a let-down really – they were just perched there, blinking, like most other roosting owls. Still a tick is a tick.



Continuing with the owl theme in popular birding destinations like Goa and The Gambia locations of roosting owls are well known along the coast and any competent local guide will be able to show you one, but inland, on three occasions now, I have encountered the phenomenon of the ‘owl man’. The purpose of the owl man, on a day to day basis, seems to be to know where the owls are. On the face of it one wouldn’t imagine that there was a strong passing trade for owl sightings but, if one believes in the infallibility of the market to deliver sensible outcomes, then the fact that such people exist must indicate that there is a demand. Their existence, however, has to be judged in the context of the African market where expectations are low and

incomes even less. In a general sense one welcomes the appearance of an owl man but you also have to accept that after shelling out a fistful of dollars for the guide it is now time for a few dollars more.

My first encounter with an owl man was in Kenya. We had been on a 'Tesco Points' Virgin Safari to Tanzania (this was before Tesco Points were devalued and you could get some really good holiday deals) and, as it was a long way but a rather short holiday, we decided to stop off in Nairobi on the way back, rustle up a guide and go up into the Aberdare Mountains and visit Lake Naivasha in the Rift Valley. The first afternoon we finished up round the back of Mt Kenya. This is an old volcano and a bit chopped up by erosion, unlike the near perfect cone of Kilimanjaro, but nevertheless I was fascinated to find that the spot that we were in was quite arid, obviously in a strong rain shadow.



I think our guide thought he knew where the owl was but it had moved and then there wasn't a decent mobile signal to phone up the owl man. So we returned to town, picked up the owl man and headed out of town. After that it was easy – the owl was sitting next to the main road on a cliff!



The next owl man was in The Gambia. I had organised a guide for morning excursions before the family got up, and about 11am we arrived at the Faraba Banta bush track which is about the nearest spot to the coast where one can see birds like vultures and eagles. We picked up Bataleur and African Hawk-eagle fairly quickly. This area is also a location for Greyish Eagle-owl. In the past this has been considered to be a race of the more southern African Spotted Eagle Owl but it is now thought distinct, and the respective bird's ranges are separated by the equatorial forest belt across Africa. We eventually found the owl man asleep under a tree, and he found the bird for us, but I still find it remarkable that someone sits under a tree all day in the African savanna on the off chance that a birder will roll up and give them a few dollars.



The final owl man wasn't an owl man at all but it is the same idea. It was Christmas through to New Year and we had been on a cultural and wildlife tour of Sri Lanka. It was clear from reading the description of the tour that the wildlife bit would be largely about Elephants but Sri Lanka also has about 25 endemic birds and there was a good chance of seeing some of them in the Sinharaja Forest Reserve so I arranged a guide for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day at the end of the trip. There was an opportunity window of about a day and a half and my wife and I had agreed that, after a couple of weeks cooped up in a van with travelling companions, I would benefit from some free time!

So the driver rolled up at the hotel and off I went. By the standards of the Indian sub-continent the journey was remarkably sedate but eventually we arrived at the transfer point where one had to get into a jeep to ride up a rough road into the mountains. Then we picked up the guide to go for a walk. By Christmas, certainly much of India, leeches have ceased to be a problem because it is the dry season but Sri Lanka is wetter and they were

present and active. There are two broad strategies with leeches – you can wear shorts and sandals and brush them off as you go along, and DEET helps too, or one can go for leech socks that seal round the outside of long trouser legs. The locals were doing shorts and sandals so that was what I went for.

The main excursion was to be on the morning of New Year's Day. The last bird of 2011, in deep twilight was a delightful Indian Pitta and this turned out also to be the first bird of 2012. The time between was less delightful as the night was freezing cold. Beyond the general organisation I hadn't given this trip much thought but it was actually the middle of winter and quite high up so it was an uncomfortable night.



We set off in the morning and the local guide almost immediately picked up a Sri Lanka Spurfowl, a most tricky bird as it skulks in dense vegetation. There

were a few more sightings and then we stopped to look for Sri Lanka Frogmouth. This bird is like a nightjar but with a large mouth like a frog. They weren't there. I must have looked a bit disappointed because, although I didn't realise it at the time, the local frogmouth man, who presumably had been on standby, was now called out to begin his search. Such is the power of the mobile phone.



We proceeded with our walk and the next target was Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush. It wasn't present in an area of marshy ground and then I looked down and there, around my feet, their bodies swaying above the leaf litter as they detected a source of heat, was an army of leeches looking for dinner. It was time to leave.

Arriving back at the jeep I was told that a search for Sri Lanka Frogmouth had been successful. The frogmouth man had them staked out in a bush half way down the slope on the drive back to the car. We disembarked from the jeep

at the apex of a hair pin bend and headed off down the steep slope through long wet grass to the bush where I obtained splendid views. Another steep traverse led us back to the road where the jeep was waiting. Everyone was clearly very happy at the success of this venture so, after standing on one leg at a time to brush off the leeches that were rapidly advancing towards my knees, I paid the frogmouth man and we set off for home. As we drove away I reflected upon the fact that I had now achieved a hat-trick for Sri Lanka Frogmouth but it would have been churlish to tell them that.

In conclusion you will probably see a lot more birds if you go on a bird-tour but extemporisation can be a lot of fun!







Photograph acknowledgments

The source of photographs is sometimes clear from the text or other markings and those are not listed here. Note also that some of the bird photographs are illustrative; they may not be of the actual bird referred to in the account.

Front: Black Redstart : Dorian Mason

Back: Sedge Warbler : Dorian Mason

Page 5 Barn Swallow: Dorian Mason

Page 9 Common Quail: Roger Smith

Page 13 Pied Avocet: Dorian Mason

Page 15 Eurasian Hoopoe: Dorian Mason

Page 16 Common Cuckoo: Dorian Mason

Page 20 Common Swifts at Saelig Cottage: Sallie Bedford

Page 31 Black Bear, Yellowstone, USA: Roger Smith

Page 33 Common Pootoo, Ecuador; Roger Smith

Page 37 Pel's Fishing-Owl, Botswana, Roger Smith

Page 38 Cape Eagle-Owl, Kenya, Roger Smith

Page 39 An owl man leads the way, The Gambia, Roger Smith

Page 39 Greyish Eagle-Owl, The Gambia, Roger Smith

Page 41 Indian Pitta, Sri Lanka, Roger Smith

Page 42 Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Sri Lanka, Roger Smith

Page 43 Pig-tailed Macaque, Borneo, Roger Smith

Page 44 Barn Owl, Dorian Mason

Page 45 Little Grebe and Spotted Flycatcher, Dorian Mason

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