

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 2000

Birds on our Patch — December to April

A Cattle Egret, perhaps the same bird as last year, was found on 31 December near Henfield and was quite elusive but remained until at least 12 January. A flock of 10 Egyptian Geese was found on the same day - an even rarer species than the Cattle Egret in our area. A Barn and two Short-eared Owls were seen on the west side of Shoreham Airfield in early March and up to nine adult Mediterranean Gulls in the Southwick Roost together with an albino Common Gull.

A Gannet perched on rooftops at Marine Square Brighton must have come as a surprise. Seven Garganey on the sea off Southwick (16th) and five Red-necked Grebes displaying off the Marina (24th) were both good sightings.

A smattering of Avocets began to appear on Marina seawatches and there was a good Sandwich Tern passage on the 24th. As March turned to April small numbers of Arctic Skuas, Velvet

Scoters and divers were seen. A female Ring Ouzel and a Tree Pipit were present at Hollingbury Camp on 1 April. However, generally observers reported rather few migrants arriving in the mainly cold weather of early April.

There was better news from Sussex Heights, Brighton. The Peregrines have returned to the SOS nestbox on the 24-storey apartment block for the third consecutive year. As in 1999, the SOS has a video camera positioned inside the nestbox to monitor progress. This year the first egg was laid on 1 April and a second egg was laid in the afternoon of the 3rd. On the 18th the Peregrines were said to be incubating three eggs. A Peregrine nest box has also been erected on the new 100m chimney at Shoreham Power Station and it will be interesting to see whether a pair will take up residence here also.

On 13 April, a Wryneck was watched down to eight feet for 20 min-

utes in a Steyning garden and on the 15th a Corncrake was reported calling but not seen at Shoreham Airfield.



SUMMER SOCIAL

*Wednesday 12 July at 7.30 pm
in the garden at the
Old Rectory, Coombes*

Once again we have decided to have the food provided by Truffles. Please put the date in your diary now and confirm with Brianne on 01273 452497 or 01273 440311 to book your place. (Truffles need to know the numbers by 10 July). The charge per person is £5 for a huge choice of delicious food. Please bring your own drink and glasses.

All these events have been very successful - good company and a relaxed evening - Do come!

Selected Field Trips

- 11 Jun **New Forest with Bernie Forbes** - always promises to be a good day out with possibility of many specialities.
- 7 July **West Dean Woods (Nightjars) Bernie Forbes**
- 16 Aug (Wed) 10.30 am **Levin Down** Brianne has offered to lead an outing to replace the one rained off in April. Please ring her to confirm.
- 20 Aug **Stodmarsh with Richard Ives** - this was the place to be for most of last year and should be well worth the long drive. Do try to go especially if you haven't visited there before.

Chris Wright is our new Field Trips leader. Full details of the above and other field trips are included in your programme card. For any further queries please phone Chris on 01903 814859

What's SDOS been doing?

The following is a summary of the report by our president, Stanley Allen which was read on his behalf at the AGM as he was unable to be present

I think you will agree that 1999 was another successful year in the life of the Society; membership now stands at an excellent level; both outdoor and indoor meetings have been well attended, and we have had some excellent speakers on a wide range of topics, and some very enjoyable field outings.

We are actively involved in a number of local environmental matters. We are represented on a committee considering the environmental issues involved with the future of Upper Beeding Cement Works. We are members of a WSCC committee looking at the problems of Widewater: in the words of Bob Edgar of English Nature, Widewater is dying, and this valuable salt-water lagoon could become completely lifeless. We hope to find some answers - we have already discovered that the beach loos discharge straight into Widewater! We have a delegate on a WSCC committee considering the important area of vegetated shingle around the Fort.

We had another delightful summer social at the Old Rectory and I am pleased to tell you that Brianne has

agreed to let us use her lovely garden again this July. No doubt she will organise perfect weather as usual.

I would like to record a warm thank you to all our Council members - they put in so much hard work behind the scenes. In any society such as ours, it is vital for Council membership to be rotated. This year, we lose Pauline Ford but as she has been doing invaluable work standing in for John Maskell as treasurer while he has been 'world walkabout', she has agreed to be co-opted for a further year. Tony Fenton has also retired after several years successfully organising Field Outings.

The refreshments and raffle are features of our evening meetings and I particularly want to thank Brianne, who in addition to all her other work for SDOS, provides the grub while Terry and Dianne Hicks both serve it up and wash up afterwards.

We still need more new faces on council and I appeal to anyone interested to come forward and have chat with any of us as to what is involved.

Finally, SDOS is its membership and I would like to thank all of you for your enthusiasm and I hope, like me, you feel that SDOS has helped to make your birdwatching - real fun!

SDOS Garden Watch

Martin Ford was very pleased with the number of recording forms which he received for the first two quarters. He hopes you will all carry on all year round and anyone else can start at any time. If you haven't got a form please phone Martin on 01903 242708.

Many of us are also taking part in the national Garden BirdWatch run by the BTO and which completed its first five years at the end of 1999. The latest newsletter indicates that Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldfinch and Coal Tit are being recorded in more gardens while House Sparrow, Starling and Mistle Thrush are in fewer.

The excellent handbook produced by the Garden Birdwatch has now been updated and costs £4.95. It will be supplied free to anyone who joins. Just send a cheque for £10 annual subscription to GBW, BTO, FREEPOST, Thetford, IP24 2BR. Existing GBW volunteers can get a copy for £3.50.



Sussex Highlights

In the Rye area up to eight Smew frequented Northpoint Pit in early January while a Great Grey Shrike was elusive at Offham, nr Lewes from 23-25 January. Castle Water, Rye has gained a reputation as one of the best sites for wintering Bittern with up to six seen virtually every day in February flying to and from their roost at dawn and dusk. Sightings of up to two were still being made up to mid March.

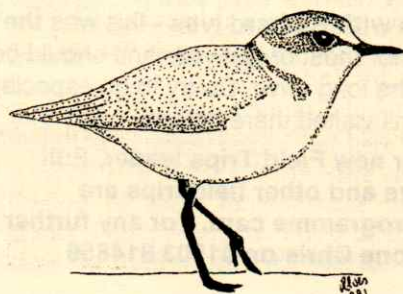
Just after Christmas spectacular flooding in the Arun Valley brought good numbers of Bewick Swans as well as two Whoopers and briefly a Long-tailed Duck which later moved to Chichester Gravel Pits. A Black-throated Diver also frequented the latter

site in January. A Glaucous Gull could readily be found on the west side of Pagham Harbour and numbers of Knot there were unusually high. Both Woodlarks and Crossbills were plentiful on the West Sussex Commons.

Serins appeared at both Selsey and Newhaven around the end of March/early April. On 6 April, a Green-winged Teal took up residence at Snowhill Marsh, Chichester Harbour. On the 8th, a Kentish Plover arrived in Pagham Harbour and a Purple Heron flew over the A27 near Chichester.

On the 15th, a Night Heron appeared at Rye Harbour. By the 19th, there was a Green-winged Teal (probably the same) at Pulborough Brooks together with Garganey and some often highly visible Nightingales. There were Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers briefly in East Sussex on the 21st. However, Bird of the year, so far, has to be the Marsh Sandpiper which arrived at Pagham Harbour on Easter Day and was visible from 3.00 - 5.15pm when it flew into the harbour, but could not be relocated next day.

Thanks again to Richard Ives for the drawings in this issue.



Sussex Bird Report

The Annual Report for 1998 was published in January 2000 by the Sussex Ornithological Society. As well as a systematic list etc, it is illustrated with 17 excellent colour photographs and includes papers of particular local interest about the breeding Peregrines in Brighton and the Current Status of the Buzzard in Sussex.

Details of membership of the SOS (£10 per year ordinary) can be obtained from The Membership Secretary, John Trowell, Lorrimer, Main Road, Icklesham, Winchelsea, East Sussex TN36 4BS. Members receive a free copy of the annual report. Alternatively, you can purchase a copy of the report for (£8 (includes £1 for postage and packing) from the same address.

If you have access to the Internet, it is well worth visiting the website at www.susos.org.uk. Sightings reports are updated almost daily and there's a lot of information about past records, species status and current surveys. There is also a list of those birders who admit to having seen over 275 species in Sussex. Look carefully, you may recognise a few of the names!

Adventurous visit to wild West Wales

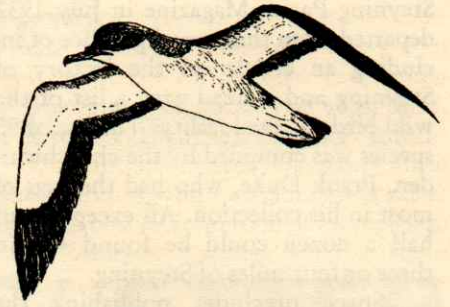
Skokholm had always been a sort of Mecca for me. I dreamed of visiting this tiny uninhabited island off the Pembrokeshire coast and now, at last, it was happening. We loaded everything into the aged minibus and set off in perfect weather and high spirits (there is a tide race in Jack Sound and the island is only accessible in relatively calm conditions). As we left Haverfordwest there was a loud bang and steam poured from under the bonnet: water hose split according to the experts. Never mind – they had a spare, filled up with water and we reached Martinshaven in spite of a continuous rapid drip from under the engine. We joined a few others waiting on the rocks and when the *Dale Princess* came alongside formed a chain to load the cartons of supplies; tomatoes, lettuce, eggs (careful), mushrooms, lemon grass (yes, really). We bounced over the waves in sun and spry looking out for dolphins and gannets and half an hour later landed on this magical island. We were welcomed by the warden and taken to the low whitewashed buildings that are the bird observatory – extremely well run but no main services of course. Washing water is collected in tanks off the roof and warmed in the sun, if any, loos are chemical, gas light is provided by calor gas cylinders, drinking water comes from a special supply in the kitchen and the food is superb (ref. lemon grass above).

There are an estimated 45,000 pairs of Manx Shearwaters breeding on Skokholm and I should think as many rabbits, so the rough tussocky grassland is honeycombed with their holes. Rocks, ragwort and bracken abound

and it all seems to belong to the birds – there was a constant clamour of Lesser Black-backed Gulls by day and Manx Shearwaters at night – a place where human impact was cut down to size. The weather forecast was poor so we decided to look for the Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters that night. As we approached the lighthouse on the way to the Storm Petrel colony, I caught my foot in something and fell heavily. My wrist hurt but I assured everyone that I was all right (well you wouldn't you?) and we settled on the edge of the cliff. It was a beautiful night – mild, starry and moonless – and we were soon surrounded by these delicate little birds that settled all around us and even on us! Later as we walked back to the Observatory Manx Shearwaters were everywhere – they bumped across the path and we had to be alert to avoid collisions.

Next morning, my hand was useless and my wrist very swollen. The warden (both qualified first aiders) were marvellous and a boat was found (with difficulty) to take me to hospital on the mainland. In the end the *Dale Princess* and a Police launch turned up together! The only passenger, I was soon back in Martinshaven where another warden from the West Wales Wildlife Trust met me. He had left students in charge of his normal duties while he drove me to hospital. No one could have had more care and kindness than I did that day. Eventually my broken and dislocated wrist was set and, after a night in hospital, I rejoined the others next day.

I thoroughly enjoyed the rest of



the week. We saw over 80 bird species including Choughs, Ravens, Red Kites and Peregrines (note: using binoculars is excellent exercise for a broken wrist). The minibus received a new water pump and my shiny white plaster was duly decorated with storm petrels and Manx Shearwaters. On the last day we went to the Dovey estuary. It was wet and windy and the sweep of sand was deserted except for a group of people in the distance some huddled under golf umbrellas. We were looking for possible waders among the gulls and terns when a young man came up to us. Were we going to be much longer? They were making a low budget film with Timothy Spall and the man who had put up the money was nearly having a heart attack as time was running out. We said we would be half an hour and that seem to satisfy him. We learned later that the film is called 'Hands Up'. If you see it, look out for the scene of the desolate rain-swept estuary, but you won't see us. We had gone around the headland.

Pauline Griffiths

Pauline travelled in August 1999 with Cambrian Bird Holidays

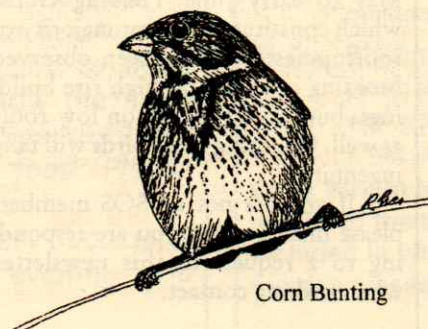
The UK's Birds 1999

The State of the UK's Birds in 1999 is the first in a series of annual reports jointly produced by the RSPB and the BTO summarising the fortunes of bird populations in the UK. Copies are available free by post from the RSPB and can also be downloaded from their website: www.rspb.org.uk. You will need an Acrobat Reader to be able to read it but this can also be downloaded from the web.

The report shows that conservation effort is proving more successful for rare than common species. Populations of scarce species, in particular birds of prey, have on average doubled since 1970 and the number of birds species breeding in the UK is also increasing. However, on the basis of recent declines, lapwing, house sparrow, starling, willow and marsh tit may soon

need priority action plans.

The steep decline of once common farmland species continues. Shortages of food resulting from the use of pesticides reducing productivity may be a key factor in the case of Corn Buntings, while the reasons for the decline of Bullfinches and Reed Buntings are less clear.



Corn Bunting

Where shall we go tomorrow?

Pett Pools Nature Reserve, East Sussex. From mid July to the end of September, volunteers from the Sussex Ornithological Society will be at this Sussex Wildlife Trust Reserve every weekend to help visitors identify wading birds (high tide best). Exit the A259 at Ore, east of Hastings, by taking a right down a small lane signposted to Fairlight and Cliff End. You will find the pools one mile past Cliff End.

There are interesting walks over Pett Levels which can be excellent for a range of small migrants especially from late August onwards alternatively carry on to visit Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, a little further east.

Pat Mulcock

Birds of Steyning in the 1930s

Steyning Parish Magazine in July 1932 departed from their usual practice of including an article on the history of Steyning and instead gave a list of the wild birds of the locality. The list of 95 species was compiled by the churchwarden, Frank Duke, who had the eggs of most in his collection. All except about half a dozen could be found within three or four miles of Steyning.

Space precludes publishing the whole list but here are some extracts: Wood Warbler - very rare. Nested last year in Ashurst district.

Greenfinch - becoming rarer and confined to particular localities.

Hawfinch - very rare. Nested this year in Ashurst district.

Grasshopper, Reed, Garden Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat - all rare.

Wryneck - nested regularly in Steyning.

Whinchat - rare, nests on the Downs.

Tree Sparrow - very rare, nested this year on the Downs.

Red-backed Shrike - not common, nests in district

Woodlark - very rare, nested last year at Horton.

Kingfisher - rare, nests locally.

Corncrake - nests in district intermittently.

Long-eared Owl - rare, nests on downs.

Tawny Owl - rare, nests locally.

Barn Owl - becoming rarer.

Raven and Peregrine both nested last year on Seaford Head.

Stone Curlew - nests on Downs.

A number of species, such as Nightingale, Nightjar, Water Rail and Turtle Dove, that we would consider noteworthy, are listed without any comment as to their status. Mr Duke's birdwatching seems to have been very much a spring/summer activity centred on breeding birds. He apparently ignored winter visitors not even mentioning common and conspicuous ones like Fieldfare and Redwing. There are no gulls or terns on the list and the only waders are Lapwing, Ringed Plover and Redshank. Another surprising omission is Cirl Bunting which should have been present in the 1930's.

For further reading, there is an interesting article by WRP Bourne in the Sussex Bird Report for 1994 about his birdwatching experiences on the Downs just before and after the war and how the habitat destruction happened. He writes: "I have subsequently been to a lot of good places for birds all around the world, but none have been better than the South Downs at dusk on a fine night in June before the bulldozers came, with butterflies giving way to moths over the flowers on the lynchets, Hobbies overhead, Nightingales, Nightjars and Woodlarks tuning up all around and Stone Curlew calling in the the distance."

Many thanks to Brian and Hilda Metcalfe for sending me the Steyning article

Pat Mulcock

Oddments

Subscriptions: rates for 2000 are unchanged at: single - £8.50, family - £12 and junior - £2.50. Any subscriptions still outstanding should be sent at once to:

John Maskell at 41 Lawrence Avenue, Worthing BN14 7JJ.



House Martins: A member is trying to encourage residents of Mile Oak and Portslade to erect nest boxes for House Martins. There was a thriving colony of over 40 pairs in the 1970s, sadly reduced to only 6 pairs in 1999. Reports indicate that the species is in serious decline in the SDOS area.



Annual Report The 1999 report will be my fifth and it's time for someone to come forward to take over from 2000. At present, I am both report and newsletter editor. Someone may wish to take over both but I would be willing to carry on with the Newsletter for a while longer, if someone preferred to start on the report only. You definitely need a computer but it may be possible for one to be supplied. Most of the copy for the report is now supplied on floppy disk or via email so there is little copy typing. It is mainly a matter of fitting everything together and checking for errors. If you would like to discuss this please get in touch with me, Pat Mulcock or with Peter Whitcomb or Terry Hicks.

My email address is now: cpmulcock@hemscott.net. Tel/fax 01903 776251. Snail mail address: Pinehurst, West Drive, Angmering, West Sussex BN16 4NL.

Contributions for the autumn newsletter, as always, most welcome.



Attendance at Indoor Meetings:

You will know that we have been keeping a register of attendance during the last six meetings and 91 (out of a total of 167) members have registered at at least one meeting. Only four people have attended every meeting but 33 have attended at least four times. The average attendance has been 47, with Andrew Cannon of the BTO Garden Bird-Watch gaining the largest audience of 55. Brianne would be very pleased to hear from anyone with any comments about any aspect of the Indoor Meetings.

Mumbles Open Day

Saturday 22 July

Phil Clay and the Steyning Ringing Group invite members to visit this private reserve to watch birds being ringed. Drop in any time between 08.00 and 13.00. Access is by kind permission of Seeboard with parking along their Steyning grid station access road, east off the A273 Steyning By-pass, three-quarters of a mile north of the Bramber roundabout.

Last year some 70 people from three societies attended. During the morning, 73 individuals of 13 different species were trapped. The vast majority (34) were Reed Warblers and 30 of these were juveniles. The low number of adults suggests most may have moved elsewhere for pre-migratory feeding. The four adults had all been ringed before, one here as a juvenile in 1994, showing the site fidelity of these long-distance migrants which return to breed at the same site from which they fledged.

Gulls on Rooftops

This is the difficult one!

As part of a census of all breeding seabirds, the Sussex Ornithological Society must this year try to count the Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls nesting on roof tops in the county. These are mainly but not exclusively in coastal towns.

If you are able to help, please contact your local 10km square steward if you know who it is, Ewan Urquhart on 01608 659703 (evenings) or email matthew.sennitt@buck.ac.uk.

The counts will take place in late May to early June. Herring Gulls, which constitute the great majority of rooftop-nesters, have been observed breeding not only on high rise buildings, but more recently on low roofs as well. Counting these birds will take ingenuity.

If you are not an SOS member, please mention that you are responding to a request in this newsletter when making contact.