

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2002/3

Hungarian Rhapsody – adding to our Liszt !

We have just returned from the most exciting birding holiday and do urge you all to consider visiting this magical country. We visited the eastern and north-eastern parts of Hungary, travelling by minibus (window seats) and staying in rural inns with comfortable en-suite accommodation serving home-made country cuisine.

We saw over one hundred species in a week, some at close enough quarters to allow spectacular photographs. For example the Alpine Accentor (that flew through my hair!) and Great Bustards. Other heart stopping moments were viewings of thousands of Cranes coming in to land on the Puszta (Hungarian Plain) seen from a look-

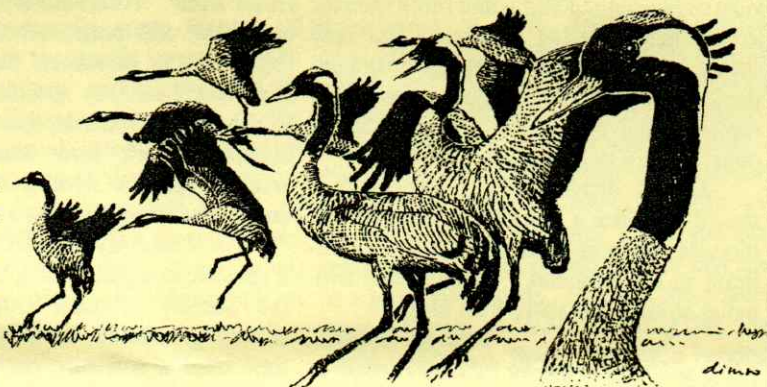
out tower against a spectacular sunset, sorting out Lesser White-fronts from vast flocks of Geese and watching Goshawk, Rough-Legged Buzzard, Long-Legged Buzzard and White-Tailed Eagles as they hunted nearby. Standing at twilight in an old quarry with a huge Eagle Owl gliding overhead. Calling up eight different varieties of Woodpecker in the Zemplen Hills with the added chance of seeing a Ural Owl. The elusive Wallcreeper is the star of the show if you are lucky enough to locate it!

Local History, Geography, Flora and Fauna are added information included for no extra charge! We visited fortresses,

charcoal burners, working lime-kilns, hot-springs, wine cellars, pastoral museums, markets and rare-breeds farms.

En route to the airport, we were even taken to the Basilica in the centre of Budapest to see the Peregrine which lives there! All this was made possible by the excellent knowledge and organization of Gabor Orban, the owner of Ecotours, and his enthusiastic colleague Balazs Szigeti, surely two of Hungary's top birders.

We booked through Avian Adven-



tures which does the complete package at www.avianadventures.co.uk. But you can have a tailor-made tour through Ecotours in Hungary. Do visit their website at www.ecotours.hu to see the whole range of possibilities; this is a company that is really keen to please. Hungary is just waiting to be discovered....don't miss it.

Shena Maskell
[Other tour companies also go to Hungary, many at the time of the spectacular Crane migration, including Bird Holidays (10 Ivelgate, Yeadon, Leeds, LS19 7RE) from whose 2003 brochure Ian Wallace's excellent illustration of Cranes (shown above) has been reproduced. Ed.]

Forthcoming Field Trips

12th January (Sun) Dungeness
All day. Meet 09:30 in Old Lighthouse car park. Bring RSPB membership cards. Grid Ref. TR 088168. Leader: Dave Smith

16th February (Sun) Shellness
All day. Meet 09:30 at start of bumpy road to NNR car park. Grid Ref. TR 052682. Leader: Richard Ives.

23rd March (Sun) East Head
Half-day. Meet 09:00 in East Head car park, West Wittering (charge payable). Grid Ref. SZ 765984. Leader: Dave Smith

6th April (Sun) Burton Pond
All day. Meet 09:00 in Burton Mill car park. Grid. Ref. SU 978181. Leader: Bernie Forbes.

Indoor Meetings

Chris Wright (and others) have made a considerable effort to organise an extra special series of indoor meetings in 2003 to celebrate our Golden Jubilee, so please try and attend as many as you can!

7th January Hen Harriers, Merlins and Peregrines by Kevin Briggs

4th February Bird Migration at Cape May by Derek Moore

4th March State of the Nations' Birds by Chris Mead

8th April A.G.M. followed by **More About Waders** by Tony Prater

See your programme card for complete details of these events.

Record-keeping and Recording

I suppose that most people who are sufficiently interested in birds to join a bird society, keep some sort of record of their observations. This may be nothing more than jottings in a diary or a Life List of species seen, notes of birds seen on holiday, and so on. Others may keep records of the first Swallow seen or first Cuckoo heard (nowadays, slightly 'dodgy', given the proliferation of recordings and handheld devices to play them on!). Such records are useful in enabling comparisons of the arrival dates of migrants to be made from year to year.

Quite a lot of people probably stop at this point, but luckily others are sufficiently keen to record their sightings on a systematic basis. When I was young (many years ago!) before the days of computers, this was a rather complex business, involving at its most extreme a sort of double-entry book-keeping process with field notebooks and another set of (probably loose-leaf) books to which these notes were transferred and amplified. Even comparatively recently, when I took up serious bird-watching, I seem to remember being able to buy something

like a cricket scoring-book called a Bird-watcher's Logbook from the shops at RSPB Centres and the like.

The advent of the personal computer has enormously aided the keeping of all sorts of records, and I suppose that (excluding games, e-mailing, surfing the Net, and the like), keeping records on some sort of database is the most common use of this equipment after word-processing. It is, to me, extremely difficult to imagine how the Recorder of an organisation such as our own Society (let alone one of the size of the SOS) managed to sort out all the records he received in order to produce an Annual Report before computers were available, especially as apparently more, rather than fewer, records were sent in.

For those who have (or have access to) a computer, there are now quite a wide variety of pieces of software that can be used to keep bird records. If you own some sort of database (i.e. electronic 'card-index') software, it is not too difficult to set up your own bird-recording program and, if you have access to one of the commonly-used standard spread-sheet programs such as Microsoft's Excel, you can download an excellent set of templates free from the Internet that enable you to enter your sightings very easily and quickly, so that the data can then be manipulated to produce list, tables and graphs using the facilities provided within Excel itself. Alternatively, you can buy one of several purpose-written programs (some SDOS members, like myself, use Bird Recorder 32) specifically designed to handle bird records, that enables one to instantly check how many times and when a specific species has been seen, and produce various lists and charts.

Until recently the SDOS did not have a specific computer program for keeping the Society records. Our much-bigger sister organisation, the SOS, has for some time used a software package known as COBRA (Computerised Bird Recording Aid). I think it is fair to say that in its basic form, COBRA is not the easiest program in the world to understand, and every bird recorder in Sussex is greatly indebted to John Newnham, assisted by Brian Clay and others, who has devoted a huge amount of time over the years in producing extensions to Pete Fraser's basic program, to enable data to be input in many different forms, and indeed write a totally separate piece of software (known as COBR-AID) that enables anyone to enter bird records and then output them in a form that can be read directly into COBRA. Copies of COBR-AID are readily

Tales out of School 4—A Wise Old Owl.....or Two!

One of the main reasons for our recent visit to Hungary was to view the flocks of wintering Cranes. On the first full day of our stay we witnessed the breathtaking sight of more than 10,000 of these large birds coming in to roost. Surely nothing could beat that?

Just after sunrise the next morning Balazs, our dynamic and knowledgeable guide, drove us to the small town of Balmazújvaros on the eastern flanks of the Hortobagy National Park. It was a bright late October day but, like in much of the rest of Europe, the winds were gale force.

Leaving the small town square, dominated by its onion-domed church, we turned down a tree-line residential street and pulled up outside one of the many substantial detached properties. Balazs's initial attempts to gain access to the unmarked property were thwarted but eventually a man dressed in a white coat unlocked the solid metal gate. Where had we come to?

Our party of six were ushered into the small courtyard to the accompaniment of forefingers on lips. Was this a place of worship? No, this was a small technical school catering for the needs of future chefs. Its adjacent small garden I judged to be about four times the size of our SDOS meeting room at St. Peter's and was just large enough to contain a couple of pines and an equal number of willows, i.e. nothing very unusual. However, as we stared at these trees we stood open-mouthed as we watched some

50 Long-Eared Owls trying their best to roost. They were being constantly buffeted by the wind and it was difficult to stifle our amusement as their ear feathers were blown this way and that.

During our hour's visit there was time to examine the many pellets that were strewn around beneath the trees. For the occasion of our visit was no frantically "paged" twitch but a regular phenomenon. The school's principal told us that during severe weather up to 200 Long-Eared Owls have been recorded at this central urban site and they are sometimes joined by the Short-Eared species as well. At such times things can become very overcrowded and some birds transfer to the neighbouring garden. The lady owner was reported as being unsympathetic since she makes regular use of her washing line and doesn't appreciate the owls' dietary deliveries!

As we drove away I wondered if they'd consider a teacher exchange. The thought of me as a Hungarian chef is difficult to comprehend. Goulash and owl-pellet stew? Now there's an idea!

John M. Maskell

[This splendid drawing by Dan Powell is reproduced from 'The Long-eared Owl' by Derrick Scott: pub.Hawk & Owl Trust.]



available from John, free of charge.

During the past year, the SDOS has obtained a copy of COBRA and come to an arrangement with the SOS whereby they supply us with records of annual sightings in the SDOS recording area that have been reported to them, and we in return send them details of those sightings reported to Peter, our Recorder. In this way we are quickly building up a database of sightings in the SDOS area during the past 15 years or so for which computerised records are available and hopefully when resources permit we can, at some future time, add in the past records we have documented in our earlier Annual Reports.

As you can imagine, the development of a computerised recording system is something of a mixed blessing for our Recorder, who now has to master the system, and also find time for the tedious business of typing all the SDOS records into COBRA-AID. Peter could do with some help in his work as Recorder, and if anyone is interested please let him know.

He has also noticed that fewer people are sending records to him in recent years. Many of us (and I am afraid that I have been one!) now send all our Sussex records direct to the SOS with a request to them to pass the relevant ones on to Peter. There are two reasons why this is not such a good idea. Firstly, the SOS covers a much larger area and takes a much more widespread overall view than we do. Consequently some records of less-rare species that might be valuable to the SDOS in a local context may not be considered sufficiently important to the SOS to be entered into their computer records, and so would then be lost to us too. Secondly, our 'two-way trade' of data with the SOS is at the moment more of a 'one-way trade' (from them to us) and we may not always be able to rely on this help from them if we cannot offer something in return.

Can I therefore please ask you all, at the start of a new recording year, to do several things? Firstly, if you have any bird records for the Shoreham recording area during 2002, please send them to Peter as soon as possible. If you are also sending this information to the SOS with your other Sussex sightings could you also please let Peter know, as this avoids duplication of records? Then, please keep as many records as you can during the coming year. Even if you are relatively housebound the keeping of garden records is both interesting and valuable. In order to do this and to participate in either the national scheme run by the

BTO or our own SDOS scheme coordinated by Martin Ford (or both) you do not have to feed the birds in your garden. In fact, part of the purpose of these schemes is to compare the numbers and variety of birds in gardens where they are artificially fed with those in which they are not. As the BTO does not have any surplus funds, its Garden Birdwatch scheme has to be self-supporting so participants have to pay £12 to take part, but in return you receive £5 in vouchers that can be used if bird food is ordered from C. J. Wildbird Foods. Computer users, like me, who may have been put off in the past by the rather unfriendly quarterly recording forms used in the Garden Birdwatch scheme (designed to be read by a rather antiquated computerised BTO document reader) will be pleased that now their records can be entered weekly via the Internet. In return the BTO will soon be offering ways in which you can manipulate the data that you have submitted to produce various charts, and to compare your own records with others in your region. Already, you can examine any of the records that you have submitted on paper, and produce a complete garden list with the number of times you have recorded each species.

The Garden Birdwatch data entry procedures are clearly modelled on those used in the BTO Migration Watch scheme which ran very successfully last Spring, and will be repeated for several more years at least, starting in March 2003. This is another very useful way in which you can get involved in record keeping if you have access to a computer. Here you have to select a site (or sites) – this can be your own garden, for example, though it is perhaps better if you can undertake a regular set walk – and you can send in a single set of records for that site or a series of records. In 2002, there were three different sorts of recording that you could undertake, firstly, just of a handful of key migrating species and a few non-migrating 'controls' e.g. Robin, then a more-extensive list of commoner birds, and finally the full UK list, the overall aim being not to exclude anyone from participating by their inability to identify unusual species. The day's records were processed overnight on the BTO computer, and maps were already available the next morning showing the progress of migrants through the UK. These maps have already proved the value of the project, some species appearing first at the coast and working their way inland, while others over-fly the coast and appear everywhere more or less simultaneously.

I am afraid that, unfortunately, these notes may give the impression that you can only record usefully if you own a computer. This is emphatically not so: Peter will be pleased to receive records from you in any form. However, remember that many local libraries in our area (Shoreham, Steyning, Southwick, Storrington, Lancing and Findon for starters) now have computers for library users to use, with Internet access and (according to the West Sussex Libraries website) this is all free under the Government-funded 'People's Network' scheme. The same website also states that all the above libraries have database software available.

So do please try to do some recording for yourself and for the SDOS in 2003. If you want help concerning submitting records (or you are computer-literate and feel that you can help by entering other people's records into a computer), please contact Peter. If you would like more information concerning bird recording software, or how to use commercial databases or spreadsheets for bird recording, get in touch with me. Our addresses and 'phone numbers are in the SDOS Report and on your Meetings Card. Have a good record-full 2003!

Jim Steedman

Data Protection Act

We would just like to remind you that our Society keeps Membership names and addresses on computer. We do not, of course, disclose any membership information to outside parties.

Attendance at Indoor Meetings

Brianne writes: "You might like to know that, according to the register of attendance that we keep, 99 different Society Members attended at least one indoor meeting in 2002, and of these 17 attended either 6 or all 7 meetings during the year. This still leaves 63 people who never came to any of them (we hope to see you at least once in 2003—I'm sure you won't regret your visit!), but it is not a bad record for a group with a membership of just over 150, and two lectures, those by Gordon Langsbury and John Wyatt, both achieved audiences of 56."

Next time!

With luck, the Spring Newsletter should appear in time for the April indoor meeting. As always I'd really appreciate anything you would like to write (or draw) for this issue. Send contributions to Jim Steedman, 18 Manor Road, Upper Beeding, Steyning, West Sussex, BN44 3TJ or e-mail them to jim.steedman@virgin.net before the end of February.

A Wonderful birding Year. How long will it continue?

As Autumn takes hold and we watch hirundines, passerines and raptors head East and the South for more temperate climes, we should consider how many of them will be coming back.

I have wonderful birding memories of this year and am undecided which is the most haunting. Watching a pair of anxious Ringed Plover parents feigning injury to try and divert Crows that were too near their only remaining chick. Or perhaps, and this was phenomenal, watching ten or more Short-eared Owls hunt over Hooe Level. The count was indeterminate but there were often 4 or 5 visible at the same time. It was an experience that I think of almost as artificial, as if a lot of captive birds had been released at the same time in the same place. In truth it was magical and as a memory will be with me for a long time. However, the highlight of the year and this was even more jaw-dropping was watching a Honey Buzzard wing-clapping for five minutes as it soared above its nest site. Finding a Grade A bird was almost enough but then to see this behaviour was extremely fortunate.

Everybody who 'birds' as a hobby will undoubtedly have their own moments and will look forward eagerly for future ones. My clairvoyance, is tempered with the knowledge that The European Community is on the point of admitting numerous new members, amongst them, Cyprus and Malta. As if it isn't enough that we already have Italy, Greece and France, The Killing Fields for hundreds of thousands of birds who fall prey to the macho machinations of so called red-blooded males who pursue the "sport" of shooting. We are now to be enjoined by two islands where they 'not only' shoot everything they can catch, songbirds, swans, raptors you name it -- they also trap any and everything to eat.

You will recognise that this is a hobbyhorse of mine. I have been writing letters, raising petitions, trying to interest all or anybody who will listen for years, largely to no avail, but it won't deter me. All I ask you to do, when you next see a migrant bird that has struggled up from Africa or across from Asia, is to consider that the biggest and worst Predator that bird has had to endure to accomplish its journey, is Man. Ponder the fact that thousands of its songbird compatriots will be lining the stomachs of Cypriots (one of the richest islands in the Mediterranean) because eating the two or three grammes of meat you can get off a Robin,

is a tradition. If it is a large raptor you espy, consider how lucky you are to be seeing that bird because, if it had strayed over Malta, it would have been blasted out of the sky. Despite my foreboding, I know many thousands of birds will return to these shores and as I wish for myself, I wish everyone reading this, the good fortune to have some birding highlights during 2003.

Frank Howard

ID tips - flocks

The idea of including a regular piece about bird identification in this Newsletter arose during one of Bernie's walks, and is mainly prompted by Shena's questions and comments. For me the main benefit of such field trips is to learn about fieldcraft and identification -- any interesting birds seen in the process are a bonus! So here goes -- today's topic is flocks of relatively-common birds and the rarer species that you may find in them --

When you see a Lapwing flock flying in winter, look for any birds that it contains that are plainly not Lapwings. These are most likely to be either Ruff or Golden Plover. Ruff will be mainly grey with cigar-shaped bodies and pointed wings, and if you can see definite size differences, the larger ones are the males. Golden Plover should appear browner than Ruff.

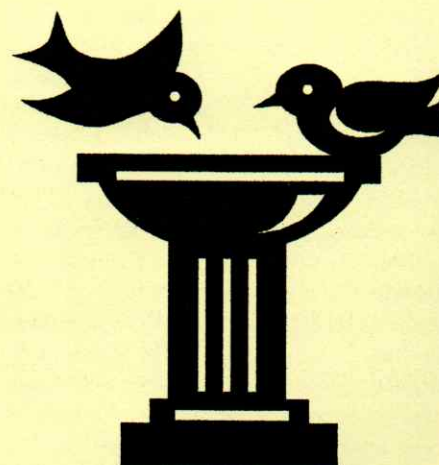
If you can manage to learn only a few calls, try to learn those of Brambling, Redpoll and Twite. Bramblings sometimes occur in large finch flocks, especially with Chaffinch, and their soft, rapidly-repeated 'tchuk-tchuk' and harsh nasal 'way-eeek' flight calls can stand out from the quieter 'chip' flight call of Chaffinches, as do their white rumps in flight.

Redpoll often associate with Siskins, and their presence can be detected by the hard churring 'chuchuchu' (like an old manual typewriter) and hard trilling, which is quite different from the Siskins' clear, twanging and metallic 'tsy-ee' or 'tea-yu'. The females and juveniles are difficult to separate from Siskins, especially in poor winter light, but the Siskin's wing-bars are broader.

Finally occasional Twite may occur in Linnet and other finch flocks, where their diagnostic twanging 'TWA-it' (hence the name) may draw attention to their presence.

If you do not own an audio tape or CD illustrating these bird calls and songs, a large collection is available for free downloading from the Internet at www.ifrance.com/wpbs.

Jim Steedman



Bird-Table Notes

Suddenly I realise why Americans call autumn 'The Fall'. We had one in our back garden.....a 'fall'. It was on Sunday September 8th. Weather had been rainy with low brooding clouds and I was feeling rather cooped up! I threw back the curtains at 8 a.m. and could not believe my eyes; it was like a zoo!

Firstly there were 10+ motley Blackbirds gobbling the berries on our Hawthorn (*Orientalis*). Next I noticed a pair of Blackcaps feeding on the Common Spindle with a Lesser Whitethroat in the hedge nearby. A Willow Warbler was singing, while three Dunnocks indulged in their usual secretive pastimes.

Three Blue Tits bathed in the blocked gutter, watched by a pair of Great Tits, while our Coal Tit raided the sunflower seeds. Two Long-tailed Tits soon arrived as they are never ones to miss a party! A Wren curtsied and burst into song. Four Starlings, two Woodpigeons, two Collared Doves and five long lost Sparrows fed below the seed feeder. Two Robins were chasing off unwanted company, but.....waitaminute just what were they chasing? Three Spotted Flycatchers!

They were soon joined by (what we believe to be) two Pied Flycatchers. The latter preferred to return to the cover of the silver birch, whereas the streaky Spotted preferred an exposed perch on the dead Frisia between sorties. The Spotted had a much longer body and thickset domed head, whereas the Pied looked more compact and didn't adopt such an upright stance. I just hope it was only robins giving chase as we didn't get another glimpse of them. Comments welcomed!

We live in central Worthing, so an experience like this is a real privilege. It renews spirit in any flagging birder. What is more, it gets my husband out of bed on a Sunday morning!

Shena Maskell