

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2002

The Influence of Books

When I was very young I remember my parents used to read to me, usually when I was comfortably snuggled into bed. My particular favourites were the series of Pere Castor's Wild Animal Books. These were translated from the French by Rose Fyleman and delightfully illustrated in the rather strange colours which were used in the late 1930's where orange seemed to predominate. The titles appealed to a child's imagination Frou the Hare, Mischief the Squirrel, Scaf the Seal, Ploof the Wild Duck, Quipic the Hedgehog and Cuckoo. Recently I found "Cuckoo" and read it, recalling my childhood of sixty years ago but I was very surprised that it was full of mis-information! The female Cuckoo announces herself by flying through the wood calling, "Cuckoo, Cuckoo." She predates the nest of Great Tits in a hollow tree and then she laid her egg on the ground and, "carefully takes up her egg, still warm, in her widely stretched beak, and gently, very gently, slides it into the tit's nest." At the end of the story the young Cuckoo has grown so big inside the hollow tree that it has to be rescued by a young boy who uses his penknife to make the hole bigger so that the Cuckoo can fly off into the wood! To be fair there is a note at the bottom of the page apologising for the statement about the egg: "The original French text was written some years ago..... the research by Mr. Edgar Chance has proved that the cuckoo invariably lays her eggs directly into the nest of the foster-parent. Moreover it is now known that the cuckoo does not usually select the nest of the tit for this purpose."

Nevertheless I believe these books introduced me to the natural history around me

and in particular to carefully observe anything that I found. The above example is not the only time I have discovered the identification book was wrong, proven by my own eyes. The first view of an Alpine Accentor above Andorra startled me, it was so much more interesting than the Field Guide portrayed. I saw it only a few feet away and, in fact drew in the extra features in the Field Guide so that I should remember that special bird. Then there was the time when I was photographing life cycles and the emergence of a Ladybird from the pupa. It came out bright yellow, totally devoid of any spots (and it was not one of the yellow ladybird varieties). Over the next two days I watched and recorded, both on film and in writing, as first of all the flying wings were extended and retracted, then the outer casing hardened and split and the black spots began to show and gradually the outer case darkened to red. Amazing! Yet the reference books I consulted showed a red ladybird with black spots hatching from the pupal case. That was many years ago and since then I have relied very much on my own observations, on several occasions noting a behaviour that is not mentioned in the books. It is so easy to take what you read as the truth but many books are only quoting information from another book and that might not have been correct. Here is a quotation from a book printed in 1896: "a female Cuckoo flew down to the ground with an egg in its bill. The Stonechats were distracted by the male Cuckoo and the female quietly approached the nest and dropped her egg in it." Perhaps Pere Castor had read that book!

Brianne Reeve

Forthcoming Field Trips

29 September Birling Gap with Chris Wright

Not many leaders get so desperate to avoid leading a field trip that they fly to Australia but in this case Peter Whitcomb has done so! At least I will probably get 'ragged' less by Chris, that is, if I can manage to get there for the 8 a.m. start at the NT car park. Despite the early start, this is not a morning only outing (apparently) so you should bring lunch.

27 October Pagham and Church Norton with Dave Smith

9 a.m. at Sidlesham Information Centre car park.

24 November Shellness with Richard Ives

9.30 a.m. at start of bumpy road to NNR car park

31 December Adur Walk with Stanley Allen

9 a.m. at Fort Haven car park.

Indoor Meetings

Wednesday 9 October In Darwin's Footsteps by Mike Read

Tuesday 5 November Santa's Home Patch by John Wyatt

Tuesday 3 December Bird Migration at Cape May by Derek Moore

See your programme card for complete details of times and meeting points.

THE CEMENT WORKS

Tales Out Of School 3: Hitchcock Happenings

The owners have now submitted a comprehensive planning application for re-development, to Horsham and Adur District Councils – the boundary between these two local authorities runs through the site. The application is contained in two large volumes; Volume 2, the Environmental Impact Appraisal is of interest to us, as it contains a section dealing with the ornithological life within the site. Anyone can see the application at either planning office of the two authorities, but you will need plenty of time to study the EIA! You may be surprised to note that there is no reference to either of the two particular bird species which are of special interest to us; they have been omitted for confidential reasons, but both local authorities have been informed privately of their presence.

The latest development is that the application is going straight to an appeal, which will probably be heard by the end of this year. The owners have used a rather unusual procedure. Horsham DC asked for further details, before they were prepared to come to any decision, and under the planning regulations, the owners are entitled to regard this as tantamount to a refusal, hence the immediate adoption of the appeal procedure.

As far as SDOS is concerned, we must restrict ourselves to the ornithological aspect. We are in direct touch with the applicants, and they appear to be well aware of the interest. We must hope for the best outcome, bearing in mind that it would be unreal of us to try and block a major development, and, from a disturbance viewpoint, the very considerable clearance of the site before any development can start.

When details of a hearing date for the appeal are known, decisions will be needed as to whether it would be in our interests to appear. Of course, individual members may wish to appear as objectors – or supporters.

I don't think I can usefully contribute much else at this stage, but please do ring me on 01273 463332 if there is any useful planning point you would like amplified and I'll do my best to help. Stanley Allen

Records

Our Recorder, Peter Whitcomb would like details of your sightings for this year as soon as possible, please. And later records, to the end of the year should reach him by the end of January 2003.

As in many south-coast settlements something has seen a growing incidence of rooftop nesting from Herring Gulls over the past decade. Our school's flat roof has become a popular breeding ground with a couple of nests now being the annual norm.

Herring Gull parents viciously defend their nests and fledglings. Even the Carrion Crows are uncompromisingly despatched should they venture too near. It's no easier for humans. The period of frenetic feeding of the chicks usually coincides with that time of the year when the children's packed lunches are partaken on the playing field. Then the excitement mounts as the parent Herring Gulls carry out low-level sorties in their search for carelessly discarded scraps. Hitchcock could well have drawn inspiration for "The Birds" from such scenes. There have been a couple of near misses when

the birds have tried to snatch food from children's lunch boxes and one can foresee a time when it may be deemed unsafe to picnic out-of-doors during the nesting period.

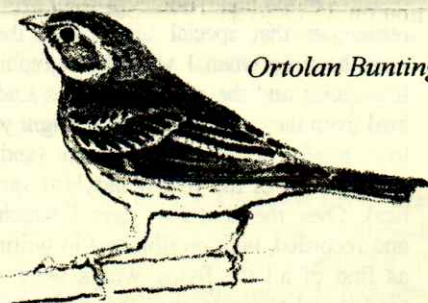
During the first year that the Herring Gulls graced us with their presence the caretaker was so captivated that he made plans to construct a hide on the flat roof so that the children could take turns to get a closer view of the nestlings. His scheme involved using a series of tables to create an approach tunnel. Access was to be afforded by a ladder. I jest not! I discreetly pointed out the Health & Safety implications.... Then a couple of days later he had to go on to the roof to retrieve a football. The Herring Gulls gave him a rapturous welcome with open beaks and wings and the observatory idea was never mentioned again!

John Maskell

Did you miss these birds?

... and one way of possibly avoiding it happening in the future!

There have been three very special birds on our patch in the past few months.

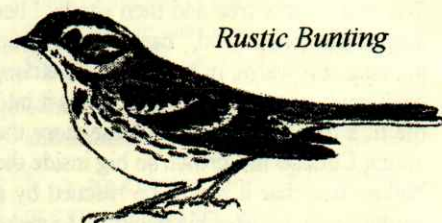


Ortolan Bunting

third rarity, an Ortolan Bunting discovered late one afternoon by Richard Ives near the small pond between Beggars Bush car park and Cissbury was probably only seen by one other SDOS member, as it vanished early the next day.

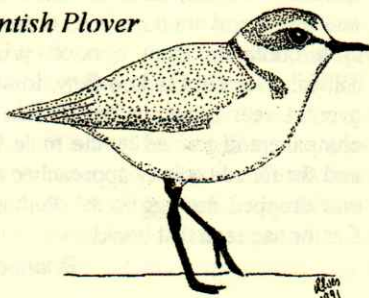
Details of all these sightings, and much other interesting and useful information about birds, butterflies, plants and other miscellaneous matters continue to appear on the SDOS Discussion Group on the Internet. At migration times, the rapid

During 10th May a Rustic Bunting was reported at West Hove Golf Course, which several SDOS Members managed to see (though quite a few didn't!) before it disappeared during the following morning. Then on Saturday 10th August Clive Hope spotted a Kentish Plover on the shore at Goring Gap, which gave excellent views to good numbers of birders before moving on. Unfortunately, the



Rustic Bunting

Kentish Plover



exchange of up-to-date information in this way is extremely helpful, and many of us were most interested in the almost-daily reports from David Harper regarding his regular survey walk near Sussex University. Membership of the Group is by invitation only and, if you are not yet a group member but have internet access and would like to join, please ring Terry Hicks on 01 273 591 120 or e-mail him at terrance.hicks@talk21.com. We would be delighted to have you aboard!

TWO GEMS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Each year many thousands of small warblers leave Siberia on migration to winter in Southern Asia. And each year, for reasons not yet properly understood, a small proportion of these birds set off at right-angles to their correct destination and end up in north-western Europe. These are the 'Sibes' so eagerly awaited by birders throughout the UK, the two species most sought being Yellow-browed and Pallas's Warblers.

Of those that have been seen in Sussex, the Yellow-browed is roughly twice as common as its compatriot, with an average of just over four of the former per year between 1985 and 1994, compared to slightly more than two Pallas's annually (figures from *Birds of Sussex*, published by the SOS). Nationally, it is thought that up to 600 Yellow-browed's arrive in the UK each Autumn, compared to a maximum of 180 Pallas's.

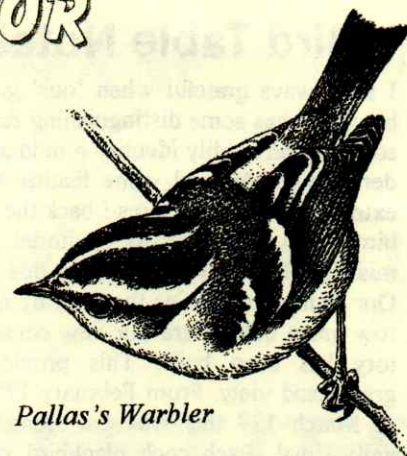
The main Sussex sites where these delightful birds appear are (you've guessed!) Birling Gap, Church Norton and around the Sheepcote Valley area. By far the most sightings have been at



Yellow-browed Warbler

Birling Gap, either in Horseshoe Plantation (below Belle Tout) or, less often, in the gardens at the west end of the bungalows (though various recent changes may have made these less suitable than they used to be). Of these main sites, Sheepcote Valley occurs in our SDOS area, of course, though it is unclear whether this site is especially attractive to 'Sibes' or whether it is just that it is so exhaustively searched. East Brighton Park, located at the seaward end, around the Tamarisk (I think?) bushes is probably the most favoured area. Other likely locations in our recording area include the Ilex Walk at Goring (again a painstakingly-searched area) and Brooklands at Lancing, where my first-ever Pallas's displayed memorably on 25 October 1999. Another well-watched bird was that seen in bushes outside the Asda store at Brighton Marina on 18 November 1998.

Six other Pallas's have occurred in the SDOS area in the past ten years, two together in East Brighton Park on 22 October 1994, one at various dates between 15 and 23 November 1997 in Sheepcote Valley, with another at Whitehawk Hill on 23 November, and one at Portslade Station on 25 October 1999. Surprisingly, in this period there have only been four Yellow-browed Warblers: at Woods Mill on 17 November 1993, at Goring Gap on 5 October 1996, at Sheepcote from 24 to 29 November 1997 and one ringed at Cissbury on 3 October 1997.



Pallas's Warbler

There is an important difference in the appearance dates. Yellow-browed's appear first, most in Sussex being recorded between 1 October and 10 November, with a peak around mid-October. Pallas's come a bit later (11 October to 20 November) and as the above records show, peak very specifically around 25 October.

So it's well worth making a special effort to seek out these warblers over the next two months, in places such as those mentioned and similar locations such as churchyards, etc. Note that nearly all the sightings have been very close to the sea. I will watch the birding websites for news of invasions on the east coast (generally the most likely area – apart from the Scillies, which specialises in Yellow-browed! – to see these species) and post details on our own SDOS website. So please let me or some other Committee Member know as soon as possible if you come across one. Let's try and make this the 'SDOS Sibe Autumn' if we can!

Bee-Eaters: From 1955 to 2002

At the end of July you may have read in the newspapers that Bee-eaters had nested and reared chicks on a Wildlife Trust Reserve in County Durham and the last time that happened was in 1955 when 7 young were raised in a sandpit here in Streat, East Sussex. Several members of the Shoreham Ornithological Society were able to watch these most colourful of birds. Eric Hosking came to photograph them and at least two of our very junior members at the time managed to visit the site. I have been reading Roger Wilmshurst's notes made at the time 47 years ago! There are seven A4 pages of closely written text with detailed descriptions of the adults and their distinctive flight and minute by minute records of how and what the adults fed to the young. It makes fascinating reading with

the added bonus of superb drawings and all this from a teenager.

It made me wonder how SDOS members keep their records. I write up my sightings almost every day using a 4-colour biro to help me pick out what I have seen. Black is for general information like place, weather and time, red for birds, blue for butterflies and green for plants. I carry a small tape recorder which I use as I walk and then play it back to write up the records when I get home. It is both enjoyable and useful to be able to look back over the years, see how dates and numbers compare and know that those records are absolutely reliable because they are your own. I admit I do not trust most statistics and I hate counting things that move and are individually unidentifiable. Did four



or six Blue/Great tits visit my bird table or was it just two birds returning over and over again. Did I see three different Clouded Yellows this morning or was it the same one just on a circuit looking for another Clouded Yellow? It simply isn't possible to be certain.

However, records are important. There would not be very much to our Society if a record of what has been seen over the last 50 years had not been carefully kept so that we can look back on it, see how the various species have fared and ask why so many are no longer found in our area. It is part of the reason for making a special effort to celebrate our 50th year. I am still hoping some of you will offer me a small contribution on any aspect of bird-watching. A few lines will fill a space and add another snippet of interest. Think about it please and let me know as soon as possible.

Brianne Reeve

Bird Table Notes

I am always grateful when 'our' garden blackbird has some distinguishing feature so that I can readily identify him in a border dispute. An odd white feather or an extra-curved beak ensures I back the right bird when it comes to territorial skirmishes! There have been many this year. Our front garden joins the back by a narrow green belt where our new conservatory has been built. This provides a grandstand view. From February 17th until March 12th this was the scene of a daily ritual. Each cock blackbird would run the line across the lawn, sometimes performing figure of eights but more usually running past each other like passing trains. Gradually the back garden male pushed the border to the narrowest point and a compromise was reached. Both females then set to nest building, one in the front, one in the back. At the time of writing they have both reared two young. We had a hand in that too, but next time...



Following an SDOS birdsong talk by Richard Ranft in April 2000, where he proved to us that blackbirds are great plagiarists, we determined to influence our blackbird's song to aid identity. John stood under the favoured song-post and, at the end of the bird's repertoire, which was already notable for its pan-pipe scale, he added a wolf-whistle (he would!). The blackbird cocked his head and copied this, thus adding a touch of Bob the Builder to Papageno. We can now tell his whereabouts and, sad to say, he has moved along a garden. This could be because our new neighbour is an *opera* singer. We await developments...

Shena Maskell

Next time!

With luck, the Winter Newsletter should appear soon after Christmas. As always I'd really appreciate anything you would like to write (or draw) for this issue. You could write and tell us all about your birding holidays! 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 November.

Avifauna dubiosa

Inventing bird names is one of those occupations useful on many dull birding (and other) occasions, such as waiting for passage to start while sea watching, or sitting in a car in torrential rain (or snow). We all know about the Forstar Petrel, don't we, and even the environmentally-friendly Unleded Petrel, but there must be many similar undiscovered rarities. So I was pleased to find recently an article entitled 'Comic Turns' in a second-hand copy of Tony Soper's *A Passion for Birds* which I picked up in one of the Brighton Oxfam shops, that lists some of these rare species. Unfortunately space (and copyright restrictions) prevent me from reproducing the whole piece, but here are a few of the gems.

Glucose Gull, Grape Lover, Lady Chatterley's Plover, Arctic Stuka (may not be immediately apparent to non-World-War-2 buffs, until you visit a breeding site), Common Sandpaper, Backchat, Hipfinch, Wee Tear, Would Lark (the females sound especially interesting, though it was later pointed out that the Sure Lark was a much more-reliable proposition), Spotted-fly Catcher, Wide Pagtail and Temminck's Stink.

These (and others) were all originally suggested by Jeffrey Boswell in *BTO News* as useful additions to the British List, when further suggestions were invited. What follows are some of the numerous replies.

Bar-tailed Oddwit, Carry-on Crow, Harsh Marrier, Torn Yowl, and Red-backed Strike (much rarer since glasnost presumably!). Common Scooter (*Melanitta lambretta*) is a frequent passage migrant. In larger stores expect to see both Y-fronted (*Anser cumfifrons*) and Lesser Y-fronted (*Anser indecenta*) Geese. Other Petrel species included the Cutprice Petrel and the Siphoned Petrel, closely related to the Lesser Castrol. Chat species include the Backchat, Ceaseless Chat (*Nagsicloa perpetuum*), Tea-time Chit-chat and the Rocktalk (previously known as the Stonechat).

Ardeola ralloides was renamed the Squaw Coheron, closely allied to the Stucco Heron. Norman Kirkman, who discovered the latter, also unearthed the Neverwort (*Alauda shelleyi*), the Little Creep (*Crepulus minor*), the Dapper (*Cinclus sinartus*) and the Arctic Bedroll (*Carduelis dormiendus*). Flid Piecatchers (or Fried-pie Catchers) and Warden Garblers are widely distributed, and sur-

prisingly, the Once Bittern is quite common, while the Waste Knot and the Want Knot are normally found together.

Those fascinated by this delve into a lesser-known ornithological field are encouraged to beg, buy or borrow Tony Soper's book, which contains some other fascinating items for bedtime-reading.

Editor's Note: This article is my bid to get sacked as Newsletter Editor. Be warned – unless you, my readers, come up with more-worthwhile articles than this, you will probably be subjected to a second instalment in a future issue. And if you can think up any more interesting species names for possible publication, please write and tell me. By the way, Bearded Twit occurs in Part 2, as does Richard's Poppet....

SHOREHAM ART GROUP

If any member is interested in painting or drawing, do come and join us; we meet in Room 6 at the Shoreham Centre on Tuesday mornings, starting in September 10th, and this term will last up to and including December 10th. Each session is for about 2 hours from 10 till 12. Don't expect expert tuition – but friendly advice and suggestions are always available if needed.

If you are interested, please phone me on 01273 463332, any morning, or after 4 p.m. You'd be very welcome to come to the Centre for a trial run! Peggy Allen

I wonder if you have any interesting anecdotes on the following questions. The answers can come to me by snail mail (i.e. post), e-mail to briannereeve@yahoo.com or by telephone.

How did you come by your first and consequent binoculars or telescope or both? How do they compare with what you use now? Quality, cost, weight, handling, etc.

Which books did and do you use to aid bird identification?

If you are a photographer, what kind of camera or camcorder did you use? Have you given up or moved on with the modern technology of a digital camera and computerized pictures?

Brianne Reeve

Illustrations

Richard Ives supplied the pictures of Kentish Plover and Yellow-browed Warbler. The Pallas's Warbler drawing was by Richard Millington and is taken from *Bird Watching*, and the Bee-eater and both Bunting sketches are by Ian Wallace and appear in that excellent book *Birds by Character* (Macmillan). My thanks to all.