

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2003/4

Isles of Scilly 2003

My trip to these islands has become a near-annual event over the past few years and after the 2002 holiday I was ready for a break. Unfortunately I received a telephone call from Chris Wright's wife asking if I was going to do the trip next year. She told me that it would be near his 60th birthday and would like Chris to go as a special treat. Could I arrange it and keep it secret from him? Within a few days I had mustered up fellow travellers Tony Fenton, Jim Weston and myself, booked flights and accommodation. The dastardly plan was set up and the secret was to be kept for nearly eleven months. Certainly most of Chris's friends knew he was going and they all kept quiet.

We set off on 12th October for the journey down to Cornwall in high spirits and with expectations of birds to be found. We were leaving behind fine clear weather and driving into cloud and constant drizzle. Our first stop was my dead cert location for Cirl Bunting near the village of Exminster. The high winds were not very conducive for finding any birds in the stubble fields. Brief views of Woodlark and a rear view of a possible bunting flock disappearing into the murk were all we found except for Basque! Discarded! In the hedgerow which led to one or two earthy comments. On the Exe marshes two Glossy Ibis had been seen so we set off for the short drive. On our arrival in the car park we chatted to a couple of birders that I knew and they gave us the exact location for the Ibis, so after a short walk we had stunning views down to 10 metres, making the telescope redundant. CW had the first new bird for the trip under his belt! For the next part of the master plan, we were calling in to

Mullion Cove on the Lizard, with the hope of seeing Chough. Armed with good site knowledge we walked the cliff tops but with the weather closing in all around we had little chance of seeing anything! We arrived at our overnight stay in St Just and a check of the weather forecast that evening did not lift our hopes too much of flying, due to the predicted low cloud for the following day.

The low cloud with fog next morning was greeted by a communal groan from the group. The flight was not until 11:45 so a call into the Airport first thing was the order of the day. There were no flights for the next couple of hours at least and we had missed any chance of transferring to the Scillonion for the sea crossing, so a visit to Sennen, where a Radde's Warbler had been seen the previous afternoon was in order. Thorough searching of the cliff top and bracken proved fruitless with the warbler moving off overnight. A 'phone call to friends on the Scillies with instructions to let us know if the weather improved but a quick check back at the airport was all gloom and doom. We were reassured by the airport check-in staff taking my mobile phone number and promising to ring me if the weather cleared (not the sort of service you get at Gatwick!) We found Firecrest in the hedge outside the terminal entrance, which gave us a foretaste of the week to come. Checking Nanquidno valley nearby proved good birding with Fieldfare, Redwing, Ring Ouzel, Golden Plover and another superb Firecrest. Dropping down to the lovely and isolated Kelynack valley we spent a couple of hours birding this beautiful habitat. The valley seemed to be alive with crests, and

FORTHCOMING INDOOR MEETINGS
Meetings are held on Tuesdays at 7.30 p.m. in St. Peter's Church Hall, West Street, Shoreham

January 13th
Atlantic Odyssey
Jim Weston

February 3rd
The Sub-Antarctic Islands of New Zealand
Brenda Holcombe

March 2nd
The Work of the RSPB Investigations Team
Mark Thomas

April 13th
A.G.M. followed by Bernie's Brainteasers
A sensory experience with Bernie Forbes

FORTHCOMING FIELD OUTINGS
Saturday February 21st. All day
Downs Link, Henfield.
Meet 09:00 in car park by Olde Railway Tavern Pub.
Leader: Chris Wright.

Saturday March 13th. All day
West Dean Woods
Meet 09:30 in the SWT car park
Leader: Bernie Forbes.

Sunday April 25th. AM only
Goring Seawatch.
Meet 08:00 at Ilex tree shelter
Leader: John Newnham.

See your 2004 Programme Card for further details

2003 and all that

Well the days are drawing in and as Christmas approaches one always reflects back over the year gone by. What a summer, with soaring temperatures and endless days of unbroken sunshine! However, when I reflect over the ornithological highlights there seems very little to mention. Surely with nearly 1,000 hours in the field and much of that in the local area I should have had a list as long as your arm. Alas that is not the case. I found very few decent birds over the past 12 months and more worryingly I did not connect with much that was about!

In an autumn crawling with Wry-necks I just could not get one in my sights – this was especially galling on a September day at Beachy where there were at least three birds present. It was just one of those years I suppose. The Spring was a real washout, quite literally in May, when the westerlies brought front after front but very few birds – fortunately I had connected with most of the passage seabirds in April, as otherwise it would have been rather a depressing story. Where was everything this year? I hear that dreadful storms in sub-Saharan Africa brought havoc to migrating birds – especially hirundines – and that may be the reason for the lack of birds. These storms must also have knocked back Hobby numbers as I had one of the worst years with this dapper falcon, with only a dozen sightings throughout the summer. Even the far-flung field outing to Grove Ferry failed to produce the plethora of sightings

for which this site is synonymous – perhaps we should analyse global weather patterns before we point the blame for population crashes on local factors which may have little or nothing to do with the population dynamics of our birds.

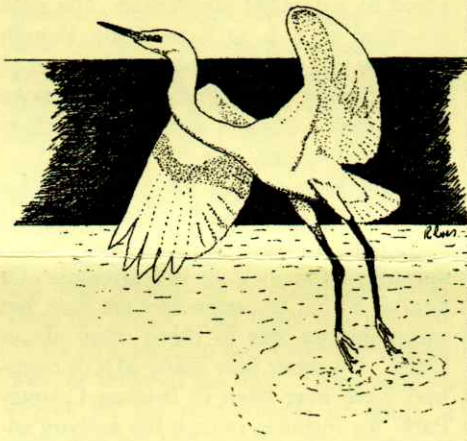
The autumn also passed without too much ado – the fine weather encouraged migrating birds to fly over our local area and not stop. We decry the changeable weather here but at least it gives us a chance to find a tired migrant too exhausted to carry on in its quest for sunnier climes. This did not happen to me and I did not experience a fall of birds which would be stored in the memory banks for ever.

The breeding birds probably fared better. Our Ravens could have done well if it had not been for some mindless, trigger-happy fools taking a potshot at them and wiping out 66% of the fledglings. On a more happy note I was informed of a pair of local Buzzards which raised two

young – the first time at this site in my memory (which is now becoming rather long) – and what a delight to see these wonderful birds using the thermals to the full. Another pleasing trend is in the continuing success of our Peregrines – what a pulse-racing moment it is to see one of these birds flying over. Also where can you **not** see a Little Egret? Even as I was trying to see warblers at Malthouse Meadows four of these snow white herons flew north! It would appear that it is possible to record these wonderful birds just about anywhere in our local area.

The birdwatching year is punctuated by highs and lows and 2003 will go down as rather unexciting for me but then again there is always next year. What are the odds for record-breaking temperatures next summer? It's all in the lap of the Gods.

Richard Ives



Pelagic Field Trip?

Well, not exactly!... but the organisers of Chichester Water Tours, which run regularly throughout the year from Ichenor Harbour have offered to organise a trip around Chichester Harbour for a group from the SDOS at a special rate at a date in 2004 yet to be decided. If you are interested in participating in such an outing would you please let Chris Wright, our Field Trip Organiser, know and we will work out whether it would be feasible to add it to this year's programme. For further details, see the next Newsletter.

Tales out of School 7 – Unusual Visitors

My current classroom has the advantage of a double aspect and takes in a northerly view of the playground and an ivy-clad fence with a glimpse of the South Downs between residential and industrial properties. Looking east over a low mixed hedge is the school playing field. On a typical day one can expect to see Wood-pigeon, Black-Headed and Herring Gull, Carrion Crow and Starling. These are all opportunist scavengers who thrive on pupils' discarded snacks. Sadly my observations would concur regarding the decline of the urban House Sparrow.

Over the years I have been fortunate to observe a number of more unusual avian visitors.... I have always found inspiration from the excellent series of SDOS walks. On one of Stanley Allen's sessions at the Old Fort at Shoreham we gained clear diagnostic views of a Mediterranean Gull. The following day I

scanned a 100+ flock of Black-Headed Gulls on our school field and, thanks to my recently acquired knowledge, I was able to identify a fine Mediterranean specimen. Unfortunately the availability of binoculars and time cannot always be



guaranteed so my checking of any visible gull flocks has tended to be somewhat irregular.

Knowing of my interest in birds a colleague came and dragged me away from an after-school marking session one September day. "What's that perky upright bird?" A male Wheatear had just dropped in on its way south.

In the last couple of years a Green Woodpecker has been a stunning monthly sighting to brighten our grey urban landscape. Being such a striking creature it has been noticed by many staff and pupils and stimulated much animated discussion; certainly more than some aspects of the National Curriculum!

The birds that caused me most surprise were a pair of Mallards who landed in the middle of the field one summer's day. I caught sight of them as they waddled away from the cricket wicket. They were clearly "out for a duck"!

John M. Maskell

we saw at least 4 Firecrests and found a very elusive Yellow-browed Warbler



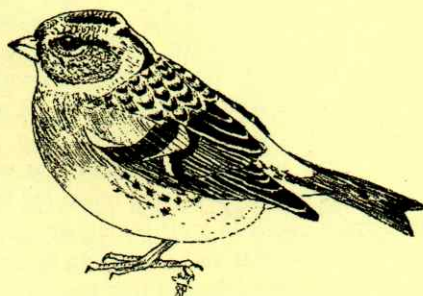
which showed itself to JW and myself but not to the others, although CW heard it call. We also saw plenty of Chiffchaffs and the odd Blackcap. A frantic 'phone call from the Scillies informed us the weather was clearing and caused a mad rush back to the Airport where the staff kept us on tenterhooks by saying it might clear in the next few hours. Unfortunately no flying took place that day and we had to rebook the B&B. Our last walk of this frustrating day was down the Kenidjack valley, finding few birds although a young man in flowery dress and heavy shave-shadow was a little off-putting for the faint-hearted members of the party, as all of us were hoping we would not run into her(?) during our tour of the St Just nightlife!

The next day dawned with rescheduled flights at 08:10, but on arrival at the Airport we were confronted by the prospect of more fog and low cloud. The only choice left open to us was to take the ferry although as TF is unable to travel by sea, we had to leave him behind to take his chance on a later flight if the weather cleared. The crossing on the ship was rather uneventful and calm although CW was not that keen to take his eyes off the horizon. A Merlin flew alongside the ship giving us close views. Distant Manx Shearwater, Razorbill and Guillemot were the only highlights of the morning. On arrival in St Mary's harbour the weather was breaking and we had lost over a day on our trip. We soon decamped into our flat and as we were doing this TF walked in the door exclaiming that they had managed to find him a seat on the helicopter - one of only two seats available. As it was well past midday we decided to spend the rest of the day on St Mary's showing CW the island. We made a fruitless search for the Red-eyed Vireo that had been around for the past few days, and the same result occurred when trying to find the Icterine Warbler and Rose-coloured Starling, giving a blank ending to a very frustrating day

October 15th was our first full day on the islands and the plan was to set off for Tresco, hoping to find the Grey-cheeked Thrush that had turned up a couple of

days previously. As the boats were not leaving the quay until 10:15 we had time to walk around the Garrison before departure, finding Merlin, Swallow and House Martin. Of course, for anyone who has not been to the Scillies before, you must take a boat ride to one of the four inhabited smaller islands. The crossings to the other islands are not that long but can be rough and wet, so full waterproofs are the order of the day. In fact, you often see people that have not done the crossing before, looking rather bemused at the birders slipping on the wet-weather gear for the short boat ride. On arrival at Tresco anticipation was high, the Thrush had been showing well for the past 3 days. Despite this and a through search being carried out no sign of this long-distance traveller was found and it would have been a tick for me!, although Merlin, Peregrine, Fieldfare, Redwing, Siskin, Black Redstart, 26 Little Egrets, 14 Greenshanks, Water Rail, and Green Sandpiper provided a good supporting cast.

We did find Pectoral Sandpiper on the Great Pool and had a very close encounter with a party of splendid Golden Pheasant — are they wild you may ask — well they looked angry! News was coming in of a Little Bunting found not far away in a very weedy field, so we set off and spent the next hour looking into a rank field of weeds and asparagus with 100 Chaffinches being lost in the vegetation. Occasionally something spooked the birds and they would all fly up into the nearby Sycamores. Trying to find the bunting was a nightmare but in the end we all managed to snatch brief views, and in doing so we also found a couple of Brambling. To end the day we heard that



a splendid male Black Duck had been relocated on the Abbey Pool and a stroll down there gave us brilliant 'scope views, with Chris notching up another two new birds in less than hour.

October 16th started in a mad panic with a quick visit to the shops for provisions. On our return we meet Owen Mitchell who told me that a Pied Wheatear had been found on the other side of

the island. They had already booked a taxi bus and it was leaving in 5 minutes! Rallying the troops, we were ready and waiting for the 'bus when we spotted a Rose-coloured Starling on the roof by our flat - not a wonderful adult, but a first-year bird though still a worthy bird and another new one for CW. We just had time to get the 'bus and we were off in hot pursuit of the Wheatear, arriving on site well in front of the crowd. A quick negotiation with the farmer and we had access, right up close with the Pied Wheatear and right in poll position of the gathering birders. Another tick for CW, his second new bird in 30 minutes! The Wheatear stayed around all day and drew a large crowd of admirers. The remainder of the day was spent wandering all over St Mary's, finding Kingfisher, Firecrest, Black Redstart, Merlin, a late Willow Warbler and Reed Warbler. In the afternoon we spent some time waiting for a Wryneck to appear out of the bracken and sun itself on a large rock. In the end we had reasonable views. On the way back to the flat we called in at a hide on Lower Moors and had close views of Jack Snipe. With only one hour of light left we headed off home, only to receive a phone call from OM saying that they had found a Lapland Bunting up the other end of the island. CW TF and JW headed off to find the Bunting [another new bird for CW] whilst I walked back home for a pot of tea and feet-up time (BF suffering from strained knee ligament and having seen loads of Laps in the past!) Mission accomplished, the rest of the guys came back to the flat tired but happy. All that was left to do, was cook our dinner and then celebrate in the 'Atlantic'!

Bernie Forbes

To be continued.....!

Sales Department!

The Society has two products which may be of interest to members. These are always available at indoor meetings and usually on outings.

1. SDOS Car Sticker — £1 or £1.20 by post.

2. "SDOS Golden Jubilee" ball-point pen. Black ink. Black and white plastic pen with single commemorative inscription. Comfortable rubber grip. £1 or £1.25 by post. John Maskell



Membership of the SDOS internet User Group is by invitation. (all members are welcome). Please contact Terry Hicks.

Bird Table Notes

Now is the time when it pays to keep a close watch on ivy and other bushes for wintering Black-



caps. In our garden they tend to adopt a low profile, mostly keeping well within the bushes themselves and I find it best to look fairly early in the day when birds first start to feed. We are lucky if we get one, though some favoured Worthing gardens hold up to four, I'm told! I gather you can improve your chances if you put out special food (Graham Roberts, our County Ecologist, makes something called Blackcap Cake!). Though basically insect feeders, they can get by on berries in winter (or cheese, bread and fats if the berries run out). This partly explains why they arrive early in the Spring. Unlike, say Flycatchers, they don't depend on available insects for survival.

The BTO has just produced a new and vastly improved edition of its *Garden Birdwatch Book*, which contains some really up-to-date information about wintering Blackcaps. The majority (but not quite all) that nest in Britain spend their winters around the Mediterranean, or in the northern part of Africa, and those we have here now are migrants from central Europe, where they cannot find enough winter food. The dispersal pattern of these birds is wide – some do go in a southerly direction but others come to us instead. Apparently, some probably always did but there are many more now, partly because our winters are milder and partly because of the vast increase in garden bird feeding which has occurred in the past 15 years. Unlike some species, Blackcaps are quite 'spunky' and able to hold their own when competing for bird-table food.

When these birds go back to their breeding grounds they usually have a 2-week advantage over those that have been lounging around the Med all winter. This gives them a competitive edge – they get the best breeding sites, and probably achieve the best breeding rates. And then, of course, all those extra offspring will hopefully follow Mum and Dad and spend their forthcoming winters with us too!

Jim Steedman

Best Birdwatching Sites in Sussex Adrian Thomas and Peter Francis. (Buckingham Press. 2003. £14.50)

This is the second of a new series of county and regional site guides being published by Buckingham Press, now run by David Cromack (who has been editor of the magazine *Bird Watching* for many years) and his wife Hilary. Their first guide (to Norfolk) was enthusiastically reviewed in the birding press and, in my opinion, this one is even better. Adrian Thomas, who is RSPB Press Officer for the South East, and Peter Francis, a keen Sussex birder, have, with a lot of local help (including at least five SDOS members), clearly researched their 192-page book very well. They give extensive details of 57 Sussex sites, of which 8 fall in the SDOS area. Each site is provided with both a small location map and a much-larger detailed one, and from 2 to 6 pages (depending on the importance) are devoted to a detailed description. The sites are rated on a 1- to 5-star basis, though I'm sure you might quibble with some of these ratings – is Pulborough Brooks RSPB really worth 4 stars, while Selsey and Climping only rate 2?

The authors also list target species for each site with the likelihood of your seeing them. Thus, a 20% rating means you may be lucky once in 5 attempts. Of course, all our favourite sites are here, but much interest lies in those other places listed. I wonder how many SDOS members have ever been to Buchan Country Park, for instance (which the authors admit they never expected to include but which they found "stuffed with birds, including Crossbills, Siskins and Redpoll").

Two things I especially liked were the pages highlighting Sussex birding month by month, and two chart-calendars, one giving dates from March to November for species migrating through Beachy Head (with estimates of numbers), and another listing peak dates for Spring sea-watching (in terms of birds passing per hour) – information derived from Dick Gilmore's Splash Point records.

All in all, extremely good value, especially if you buy it from Pulborough Brooks RSPB at their special price of £13. There are the odd slips – clearly Hilary (who drew the beautifully clear maps) has never visited Cuckoo Corner or she wouldn't have put it on the east side of the Adur – but these shouldn't detract from a work literally brimful of useful material (including some of John Reaney's lovely line drawings).

For your information

Peter Whitcomb would like your 2003 records as soon as possible please. Please send them to him at 99 Barnett Road, Brighton, BN1 7GJ, stating whether or not they have also been sent to John Hobson, the Sussex Ornithological Society Recorder.

By the time you read this, we should be selling copies of our *Golden Jubilee Book* (though 'there's many a slip', as we know all too well to our cost over recent weeks). Sadly the same problem that spoiled pages 54 and 55 of my 2002 *Report* (text 'leaking' from one page to another) meant that several fresh sets of proofs had to be prepared and checked, as our Editors wanted to pass a set that were exactly right before the book is machined. Unfortunately, in order to get the *Report* into your hands by the December indoor meeting, I did not insist on this safeguard – and now I wish I had!

With your *Report* you should have received a replacement page for 54-55. If, by chance, you did not, please let Brianne know. And also let her know if you'd like a copy (or another copy) of the *Golden Jubilee Book*.

If you have not yet paid your 2004 subscription would you please do so at the next indoor meeting or send it to our Treasurer, John Maskell at 41 St Lawrence Avenue, Worthing, BN14 7JJ.

Having produced this Newsletter for more than three years, this is to be my last as Editor. Who exactly will edit the next one is not yet finalised though various suggestions have been made. If you think that you would like the job, please contact any Branch Committee member. A final decision will be made at our March Branch Committee meeting. The next Newsletter should appear in April and I would welcome any contributions by the end of February, which I will then forward to our new Editor.

I have offered to stay on as Report Editor for at least one more year (my fifth year of involvement) but if you have a real yen to do this job I will be happy to hand it over also – just let me know!

My personal thanks to all those SDOS members who have helped me by contributing material to those Newsletters that I have produced, and especially to Richard Ives for the use of so many of his drawings to illustrate these pages. As is so often the case, all the sketches on the preceding pages are his handiwork.

Jim Steedman