

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 2004

Thanks, Jim

After more than three years as editor of this newsletter, Jim Steedman has entrusted it to the hands - or two slow index fingers - of Keith Noble.

I am sure that I represent all his readers in thanking Jim for providing so much information and entertainment. We also owe him a great deal for the excellent annual report, which he continues to edit. I know well that all volunteers work with at least the tolerance of their partners. In Jim's case, I have no doubt that he enjoys real support, so this appreciation includes Judith too.

Jim has written a good part of every newsletter himself, but has also included contributions from many other people. On behalf of the readers, I take this opportunity to thank all the writers and illustrators who have helped him, and whose special talents I shall be calling upon.

When I last edited a similar newsletter, I used to tap out the drafts on my father's old typewriter, before a proper secretary copied them meticulously onto a skin. Then the foolscap sheets were rolled off a Gestetner machine. That was the London Natural History Society Ornithological Bulletin in the early 1970s.

We could not then have imagined how differently this SDOS newsletter would be produced. I am still a lousy typist, but now I can correct my mistakes more easily. When friends have patiently helped me to work the 'Publisher' system, it should be so much quicker to incorporate other people's writings and artwork.

The anniversary book has shown clearly how many talented people are out there, and I look forward to receiving your contributions.

They're coming!

I saw my first swallows this year in the second week of March. A whitethroat and a garden warbler crept along the hedge, willow warblers sung in the trees, and flocks of swifts hawked insects over the garden. From above them, sometimes invisibly high, came the cheerful trills of bee-eaters. As you have guessed by now, this was not Sussex, and the birds were at the other end of their migration, in Zambia.

Thinking of the distance I had travelled to visit my wife Alison, who is working there with a charity through VSO, really brought home to me the amazing journeys which these birds undertake. I will appreciate them all the more as they arrive here.

I'll also be looking and listening for passing waders. Sometimes in early May I hear the 'seven-whistler' calls of whimbrel from the night sky, and usually find a few feeding in damp valley fields. Once there was a bar-tailed godwit with them under Bramber Castle, but usually all the barwits keep moving out at sea. On the best days in late April and early May, many hundreds are seen. The Birds of Sussex mentions a total of 4009 past Worthing on 24 April 1984, and this record appears again in the BTO's massive Migration Atlas. After our Sussex wintering birds have moved out to fatten up in the Dutch and German Wadden Sea, between 600,000 and 700,000 leave West Africa to fly there non-stop. Their next flight takes them to breeding grounds in Siberia.

If the flight from Mauretania to the Wadden Sea via Worthing is an amazing long-haul, it is surpassed by bar-tailed godwits of the eastern race. According to research presented at the Waterbirds

FORTHCOMING INDOOR MEETINGS

Meetings are held on Tuesdays at 7.30 p.m. in St. Peter's Church Hall, West Street, Shoreham, and resume in the autumn with:

October 5th

Natural History of the South Downs

Patrick Coulcher

November 2nd

Ecotours in Eastern Europe

Balazs Szigeti and John Maskell

December 7th

Pulborough and Amberley Reserves—Cows, Ducks, Snails and Water

Pete Hughes, RSPB Warden

FORTHCOMING FIELD OUTINGS

Sunday April 25th . AM only

Goring Seawatch.

Meet 08:00 at Ilex tree shelter
Leader: John Newnham.

Sunday May 2nd. AM only

Dawn Chorus

Meet 4.00 in Greatham Bridge car park

Leader: Bernie Forbes

Sunday May 16th. AM only

Lancing Ring

Meet 10.00 in Ring car park
Leader: Brianne Reeve

**See your 2004 Programme
Card for further details**

Around the World conference in Edinburgh and reported in the Telegraph on 13 April, they make the longest non-stop flight of any bird—7,700 miles in six days and six nights at speeds of up to 50 mph! This takes them from Alaska to New Zealand, with assistance from autumn storms over the Pacific. When ringed and measured before the journey, fat accounts for more than half their body weight. They reach New Zealand emaciated.

Seawatching is not to everybody's taste, but it can produce great numbers



amazing journeys. The commitment (or obsession?) of local members has contributed a lot to our knowledge of migration. I hope that many readers enjoy a great morning with John Newnham on 25 April.

More memories

from Mike Helps

'Fifty Years of Birdwatching', such a lovely book, and even better for finding myself in the photo of Miss Biggs with telescope. Then Mr. Twort's Dawn Chorus poem; I remember being there under Chanctonbury Ring and being told, 'That is a corncrake calling'. I made no notes at the time but the 1960 Report has the record and the outing date as May 15th so I reckon I can now count that one!

I was interested to read Brian Clay's mention of autumn movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s of warblers and chats bush-hopping in a south westerly direction at Cissbury Ring. He explains that the habitat then changed and the migration apparently decreased. Around 1960 I was living in suburban Patcham. During the August school holidays and at weekends I would often watch our garden from my bedroom window. Especially during periods of fair night time weather and light northerly winds, I witnessed nearly continuous day time movements of

common warblers, bush-hopping south west. At the time my best record was of a late Pied Flycatcher on October 10th 1959, which Mr. Harber accepted. I wonder to what extent these migrations through the suburbs still occur. No doubt the garden and downland habitats are different now.

The 1960s was the time for new birdwatching and conservation ideas, and the Shoreham Ornithological Society was there for young observers with ideas, enabling them to meet and form new groups. Bird watching is generally a classless activity, but for one who failed the eleven-plus there could be difficulties. Tony Marr was without prejudice in that respect and has been a life-long friend. As well as rock music, bird ringing was a subject that divided teenagers' views. Those pursuing their birding at Shoreham Sanctuary and Beachy Head were enthusiastic. The group I teamed up with was luke-warm or opposed to ringing, although at one stage Chris Mead was around to give it hefty support.

Unlike some of my friends, I have rather strayed from the ornithological path, but once a bird watcher, you can never give it up. This excellent book has made me realise what a fascinating 50 years this has been. Thank you, Brianne and Terry and all the contributors for bringing it into such sharp focus!

Have you bought it yet?

'Fifty Years of Birdwatching' costs £15 plus £2.50 p&p from Terry Hicks, 7 Berberis Court, Shoreham, BN43 6JA. 01273 591 120 (Members' discount is still available for a short while)

Terry is also the person to ask if members would like to join the SDOS Internet User Group, exchanging news and views about local wildlife.

Scilly adventures continued

In the last newsletter, we left Bernie, Chris, Tony and Jim in the pub, celebrating a Pied Wheatear and other rarities. Here's what they did next....

On October 17th the master stroke was to be a day visit to the island of Bryher - not the most visited island but one that often has quality birds lurking in its hedgerows. A quick walk around the Garrison before catching the ferry then proved worthwhile. We were walking near the football pitch when a bird flew over. I never managed to look at it with my 'bins but told JW that it looked like a Hawfinch. The next birder we ran into said "did you see the Hawfinch? It has just flown over!" We also saw the

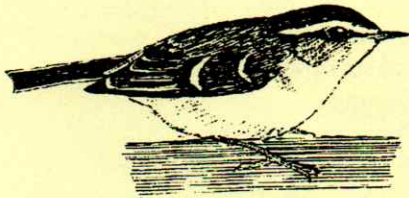
obligatory Firecrest. OK, minds made up, we were just about to go off to Bryher when TF's pager announced the Grey-cheeked Thrush showing well on Tresco. So it was a rush down to the harbour and the boat to Tresco, please!

We soon located the exact spot where the thrush had last been seen but it was in a very restricted viewing area - a ride between conifer plantations, where there were too many birders and scopes with not enough elbow-room. TF managed to glimpse the thrush but had very poor views and we others never had a sniff. The bird had disappeared, and therefore different tactics had to be deployed - to move away from the group, start our own search and hope someone would soon locate it. Wandering round the rest of the island, we saw several Brambling, Siskin, Fieldfare, Redwing, Merlin and the resident Golden Pheasant. By this time our group had spread out a little and CW and myself were well out in front. Turning a corner we were confronted by a very excited birder waving frantically - he had the Grey-cheeked Thrush in his telescope. Quick look in his scope - bingo, bird on the list. We rapidly set up our 'scope with CW on it and I dashed back up the lane to alert the others. Within 30 seconds all the group were wallowing in cracking views - a new bird for BF! We stayed and watched the thrush feeding in a bulb field - it was not really much larger than a Robin, and had certainly come a long way to feed on Scilly worms!

News was coming in that a Tawny Pipit was on Peninnis Head on St Mary's and was delighting many observers. We took the 4 p.m. boat back to our base island and forced-marched up the headland - in our sights a gathering of birders on the cliff top. Straight away we had mouth-watering views of a juvenile Tawny Pipit down to only a few metres, the pipit being completely oblivious to the crowd it was drawing. This was another new bird for CW and a lovely end to a day's birding. Of course the night's topic of conversation in the Atlantic was of quality beer and birds!

October 18th. The plan of action today was a visit to the small island of St Agnes, a lovely windswept place full of beauty and Atlantic winds, and the most westerly of the inhabited islands. No cars, just small tractors and motorised carts and a single small track that crosses the island. In the centre is an oasis of woodland around the Parsonage and the Lighthouse and some very rich bulb fields surrounded by high pittosporum hedges. This area always holds plenty of

exciting migrants. The boat crossing was pretty calm and we landed without any hitch and only around 25 invading birders. We spent a long time searching the hedgerows and soon found our very own Yellow-browed Warbler basking in



the warm sunshine. Actively feeding in the same location we were treated to Firecrest, all seen at close range. On the beach by the small church 3 Black Redstarts were darting amongst the boulders feeding on flies in the company of Rock Pipits.

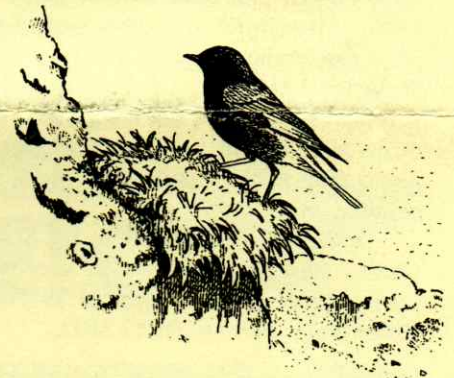
The bird that got away from us on this day was a large pipit that flew in front of me and dropped down into rough grass before I could get my bins' on it. We tried to locate it but all we saw was a rear view as it flew away from us and was lost forever. What a pity it never called: my strong conviction that it was a Richards's Pipit could never be proved and it would have been yet another tick for CW! During the rest of the time we spent on our visit we notched up another Merlin and found 3 Whinchats. We walked over the shingle bar to tick off the island of Gugh, where we found plenty of arriving Fieldfares and Redwings. Out on the channel between the islands hundreds of feeding Shags in massive flocks were

in a diving frenzy after the shoals of small fish. We returned to St Mary's tired and without CW having a new bird for the day, although pleased with our day's birding. However, we only had one last day remaining! Therefore considerable effort would be required to come up with the final day's plan. This necessitated several pints during our last evening.

October 19th, our last day and still no RB fly! No it's not a medical term, but jargon for Red-breasted Flycatcher, one of the banker birds for anyone's first trip to these islands. There had been several seen although we had not run into any of them, and therefore on the final day we were determined to find one, having promised CW that this was going to be one of the easy birds to see on the Scillies. We had planned to spend all day on St Mary's walking the entire island. Checking out the airfield we found 3 Whinchat and lone Wheatear on the grass runway. Crossing the runway one has to obey the lights - if red, wait for the plane to land before proceeding! At Porth Hellick we had cracking views of Water Rail and Jack Snipe from one of the hides. We moved slowly through Holy Vale looking intently for an RB fly that had been seen earlier. This is a lovely damp wooded valley with a very narrow raised path and you need your wits about you to bird-watch and stay upright on the track. Needless to say, BFF slipped off the path, falling into a patch of brambles and nettles and causing much mirth among his gentlemen travellers. The air was bluish with a few

ancient Saxon words. On being pulled out we discovered that I had missed a sharp metal fence stake by less than hair's breadth. This led to many comments about cutting binoculars free from the corpse! We still managed to find several Firecrest, Chiffchaff and single Willow Warbler and late Reed Warbler.

Coming across a small group of birders on the track, this was the place to start looking for the Flycatcher - "it's not been seen for ages" was the reply to our request concerning its last sighting. Settling down for a long wait. I raised my bins' to check out what I thought was a Chiff right in front of me only to find it was the Red-breasted Flycatcher so close. We all managed to get superb views of this petite charmer - even the eye ring was highly visible. It put on a magnificent display - fanning its tail, and performing its dashing flight in amongst the tree and the canopy. Yet another 'lifer' for CW. The rest of the day added little although masses of Fieldfare and Redwing were pouring onto the islands with flocks of Chaffinch and the odd Brambling, and on the walk back to the flat we added yet more Firecrest and Black Redstart.



Tales out of School 8 - Key to Success

Do you believe in uncanny co-incidence?

Regular readers of this newsletter may recall that I told the story of a Carrion Crow with a deformed leg that had been a regular visitor to our school field over a five year period. Checking my notes I discovered that I'd last seen the bird on 26th September 1999 when I'd visited the premises to return my set of keys before Shena and I embarked on a year's sabbatical.

Upon my return in the new millennium, Hopalong didn't. Sadly I had to accept that nothing stands still, even on one leg! My friend had undoubtedly stumbled into the next world.

Moving on, and as we all find ourselves subjected to more red tape, accepted practices are brought into question.

"Sorry, John, but just because you've had a set of keys for more than a quarter of a century doesn't mean it's safe practice."

So there I was on 2nd October 2003 reorganising my key ring in order to hand over my trophies of Yale and Chubb. Something caught my attention just outside the classroom window. Hopalong! What joy! I dashed out of the fire exit laden with questions. How are you? Where have you been? How's the family?

But my friend just hopped off without a 'by your leave'. A nine year acquaintance briefly renewed and one of the happiest moments in my birding life. I realised that enjoying such simple pleasures is clearly the key to successful birding.

John M. Maskell

On October 20th we departed the small airport at 11:10 with news coming in of Little Crake and Bobolink at Porth Hellick - birds too late for our schedule. That is what always happens on these islands when you leave. Our journey back was uneventful except for the dead-cert stop for Cirl Bunting near Exminster. After a short search we located a splendid male in the hedgerow sitting up a blackberry bush, and had full front-on views. This was another new bird for CW, his 10th and final tick for the trip. Not bad for his first visit. Will he be going again? Yes its already booked!

Bernie Forbes.

Bird Table Notes

Three reed buntings, up to five siskins, and a pair of bullfinches visited the editor's Steyning garden in April. The buntings and



siskins came to Hi-energy no mess mixture, but the bullfinches were after fruit buds. I filled in one of Martin Ford's Garden Bird Survey forms for the first time and found it fascinating. Recording the highest number of each species every week concentrates the mind, and I am sure that I noticed more than I have before. My son Robert's sharp eyes were a big help, and with his sister Gemma he noted something I have never seen.

'On the afternoon of 5 April, I watched a magpie snatch something from the garden pond. Through binoculars I could see clearly that it was holding a newt in its beak. The magpie repeatedly struck its prey against a paving slab and remained occupied with it for a few minutes. Afterwards the bird appeared to wash its bill and took several gulps of water. It then went to another part of the pond and again plucked something from the water. I could not see what this object was, and the magpie left the garden moments later. When I went out to look, I found only a small part of the newt remaining on the slab.'

Additional contributors to the SDOS Garden Bird Survey would be very welcome—contact Martin Ford at 29 Foam Court Waye, Ferring, BN12 5RD.

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, 41 St. Lawrence Avenue, Worthing BN14 7JJ



Widewater, deep water

Stanley Allen reports that problems with high water levels continue.

It has recently been discovered that the policy for controlling the levels, as discussed at the last meeting of the West Sussex County Council (WSCC) Management Group for Widewater, has been drastically altered. The inlet valve which controls the inflow of sea water has been left open for many months — hence the high water last summer. The results have been hardly any muddy fringes, and a great fall in the numbers of waders using the lagoon.

Unfortunately a number of organisations have fingers in the pie, including WSCC, Adur District Council, Lancing Parish Council, the Environment Agency (EA) and Friends of Widewater Lagoon (FOWL).

We believe, (but it is hard to find direct evidence), that control of the inlet valve has somehow fallen into FOWL's hands. Although that organisation has done some splendid work in caring for the lagoon in the past, its present committee seems more interested in maintaining high water levels and a lagoon that is, in their words, 'not muddy or smelly'.

When the pipe was installed, at the suggestion of English Nature and the expense of the engineers of the sea defence works, it was clearly understood that it was for emergency use, if levels fell dramatically. The pity is that it has proved impossible to make a proper assessment of the effect of the sea defence works on the lagoon. We had hoped that at least four or five months would elapse so that this could happen, but misuse of the inlet has prevented it.

If any members who visit Widewater regularly, and have noticed the changes, feel strongly enough to register a view, it is probably best to write to:

Neil Mitchell of WSCC at The Grange, Tower Street, Chichester, PO19 1BH;

or Peter Midgley of EA at Saxon House, Little High Street, Worthing, BN11 1DH, or to both.

The best letters are those that ask questions, so that you receive an answer and can follow up if you wish. Write as individual birdwatchers and express your own concerns, rather than on behalf of SDOS.

If you would like more information, please email: stanley.allen@talk21.com.

What next?

I'm new to this, and I'd like your help.

I shall be putting together the next newsletter in August before I leave for a month's sabbatical with the wardening team at Titchwell. Between now and then, most readers will come across something of interest which could appear here.

Perhaps you will enjoy a day when the birds turn up in abundance.

You might see a new species or watch unusual behaviour.

Do you have a favourite local site which you could tell us about—or a particular species?

What is happening to the breeding population of your patch? In these hard times for many formerly common species, such reports are really valuable.

Can you help others to increase their chances of seeing and identifying birds



they rarely encounter. Some watchers report many raptors passing over in autumn. Where, when and how should we look for them?

Do you have a favourite bird book or piece of equipment that you could tell us about?

Thanks to Richard Ives for the pictures used here. We could use some more pictures in clear pen and ink, and how about some cartoons?

And if you can't do it yourself, but have a good suggestion for someone else to follow, that will be useful too.

I'd like to have lots of items, which need not be large, so that the next issue contains a wide range of interests.

Have a great summer and please help by sending your contributions, by 10 August to: Keith Noble, 19 Roman Road, Steyning, BN44 3FN noble@karg.freemove.co.uk