

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

April 2005

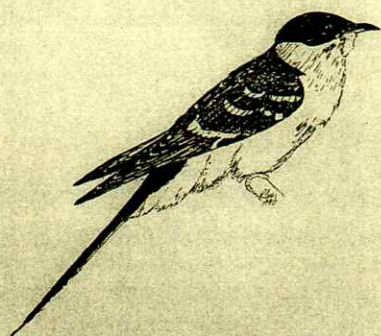
Spring is sprung...

Great spot!

Fifteen years minus one day after the arrival of the Great Spotted Cuckoo which entertained many of us at Shoreham Airfield, another appeared at Brooklands and then near the Norfolk Bridge on April 3rd. Was I alone in checking the date in case I was being taken for a Fool?

Darryl Perry saw this handsome bird by the Adur Recreation Ground, and early on April 6th Richard Ives found it again at Brooklands. Other people were able to admire it there, (and see five Waxwings and a Glaucous Gull), especially when it came down to pull worms from the Golf Course greens. How long will it stay? Here is Richard's drawing of the last bird which remained for almost a month, eating hairy caterpillars.

Shoreham District
Ornithological Society
REPORT 1990



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I hope that most readers enjoyed the Waxwings which reached Sussex in record numbers. Those who had close views of the big flocks in Crawley, Southwater, and right in the centre of Horsham, will certainly treasure the memories. Within our SDOS boundaries, Mike Russell saw six in his Henfield Birdwatch patch at Stretham Manor, and Reg Bradbury and Bernie Forbes added them to their garden lists.

Other birds which attracted much attention included a Great Grey Shrike near Partridge Green for the first three weeks of March, and an Iceland Gull east of Brighton for much of February and into mid-March. It often showed well on the pitch and putt course at Roedean and has been claimed as the first Sussex record of Kumlien's Gull, the race which breeds in Baffin Island and north-west Quebec. There are fine photos on Ian Barnard's website: www.thebirdsofsussex.co.uk.

There were plenty of other seabirds off our coast and Richard Ives has kindly made time to report elsewhere in this newsletter on the auks and other birds he watched at Brighton. John Newnham at Worthing also noted many auks and grebes, and a huge gathering of 309 Red-breasted Mergansers on February 2nd.

John's first Wheatears came on March 16th. A Ring Ousel reached Worthing on 23rd, with the first of several March Swallows. Willow Warblers were singing by the end of the month, and a remarkably early Nightingale was reported from Wickham Farm, Steyning on 25th. Early April has brought another Ring Ousel, a Redstart and a Whitethroat. Enjoy the migration season and the Society outings.

Keith Noble, Newsletter Editor

FIELD OUTINGS

April 24 (Sun)

Goring Seawatch—am only.
Meet 08.00 at Ilex tree shelter.
OS 198, GR TQ 107017.

Leader John Newnham

May 8 (Sun)

Dawn Chorus—am only.

Meet 05.30 at Hole Street,
Wiston. OS 198, GR TQ 143148.

Leader Brianne Reeve

May 14 (Sat)

West Dean Woods

Meet 09.30 in SWT car park.

OS 197, GR SU 845152

Leader Chris Wright

May 22 (Sun) New Forest

Meet 09.30 in Fritham car park.

OS 196, GR SU232141

Leader Bernie Forbes

June 10 (Fri) Ambersham

Meet 19.30 in car park in centre
of Common (West side).

OS 197, GR SU 915195

Leader Dave Smith

RECORDS

Bird records for 2004 should be sent as soon as possible to the Hon. Recorder:

Clive Hope

Hillcrest

Byne Close

STORRINGTON

RH20 4BS.

Phone: 01903 744489

Email: clive.hope@virgin.net

(If you already send records to Sussex Ornithological Society, you need not send to Clive as well—the records are shared)

Busy Times on the Beach

When the area is in the grip of winter there are few opportunities to get out and about before work as the lack of daylight curtails any jaunts to my favourite site. However, as the sun slowly begins to break the horizon ever earlier in January I do have the chance to look offshore in Brighton. I park my car near the Volks railway station on the beach and peer out towards the horizon. Early 2005 will be remembered mainly for the aukfest which lasted for a few weeks in February.

January began well, as on the 10th I recorded my first winter Manx Shearwater as it passed eastwards fairly close to the shore—a cracking start to the New Year. Nothing much happened until 30th when I recorded 30 auks offshore. A Woodcock passing east on February 3rd was a harbinger of things to come. On 7th there were 60 auks and the air was full of Kittiwakes (40). Two days later over 100 auks, mainly Razorbills, were fishing and moving east and the Fulmars were obviously taking up residence farther along the coast as I recorded 2 moving that way. Two more Fulmars came on Valentine's Day with a superb Mediterranean Gull and 300 auks.

The following day I recorded 1950 auks east, a magnificent spectacle, as the sea was alive with flocks passing at various distances. The next day was even better with 2890 birds fishing and moving east. The number reduced appreciably on 17th with only (!) 600 birds recorded. The sight of 2 Brent Geese moving eastwards was also a sign that perhaps the urge to seek breeding grounds was a reason for all these birds on the move. But my theories were dashed when there were 700 Razorbills next day, with 120 auks too far out to be positively identified. 800 were there on 21st, 200 on 23rd, and then down to a fairly stable feeding group of 30 Razorbills which stayed until early March. The auk show had run its course, but it had been a marvellous spectacle and shows that just a few minutes looking out to sea every day can produce an interesting array of statistics. I don't think these figures broke any records but had someone else watched during the days of peak movement, I am sure it would have been a different story.

It was interesting to note that every time I looked from the Worthing shelter there were few Razorbills but this was compensated by the concentration of Mergansers and Great crested grebes which favoured the western waters. Worthing could also boast a better selection of rarer grebes with Slavonian and Red-necked on a

number of occasions. My only Eiders of the winter were also recorded there.

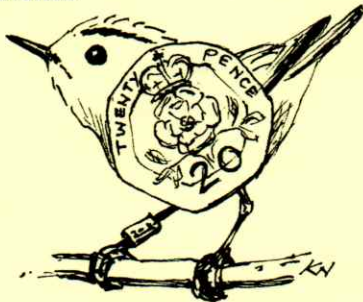
It is difficult to say why there was such a concentration of auks off Brighton, but it is obviously linked with a plentiful food supply. The numbers had dropped off appreciably before the true winter struck, but perhaps by then the birds had already migrated to their breeding ledges in the North Sea. The cold weather did bring in an 'Iceland Gull' but that is another tale, (or should that read tail?)

Richard Ives

A Bird in the hand is worth ... 20p??

Some time ago Mike Russell at Sussex Wildlife Trust asked me to give a short talk about Bird Ringing to students on his 'Introduction to Birdwatching' course, and I racked my brains to think of ways to introduce the subject to people who were only just being introduced to birds! So I got together some slides of birds we had ringed at Cissbury and the Mumbles with maps of some of the recoveries and migration routes. But then I had to explain why we measure and weigh the birds. Measuring was easily explained as often differentiating between similar species, such as Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler, Reed and Marsh Warblers (if you're lucky!) But why weigh them? A fit and healthy bird would be within the normal range for the species, and this really does not vary that much, except prior to migration. Then it suddenly struck me that the weights I have been recording for years really didn't mean that much to me—a Blue Tit is about 9 or 10 grams, a Blackbird about 100 grams ... but I'm one of the pounds and ounces generation. I know perfectly well that a pound is equivalent to 454 grams but refuse to ask for 454 grams of stewing steak!

So how to make these weights make sense? I scoured round the house to find something everyone would be familiar with but weighed the amount of our smallest bird. Eventually after wandering around for some time with my pesola balance in hand, I discovered that a 20p coin weighs 5 grams ... and I had my 'crest equivalent'.



Then it was just a case of multiplication ... 40p for a Blue Tit, 60p for a Blackcap, 80p for a Greenfinch and so on!

Migration of course changes the price. A Blackcap can go from 60p to £1 (in 20ps of course), or from roughly 15g to 25g as it fattens up on the rich harvest of berries in the autumn. Fat is stored in the tracheal pit (a hollow on the breast between the ribs) and across the belly. Some ringers keep fat scores, but you can only do this if you have plenty of ringers or few birds, and of course migration time is the busiest time of the year. I found it amusing to relate this to my own weight, and to think of a gain from 9 stone to 15 stone in just a couple of weeks ... don't think I would get off the ground, let alone fly to Africa!

Weighing the birds we catch helps us gauge their health and the availability of food supplies. If we found autumn migrants were underweight in comparison with previous years, then fewer returned the following Spring, this could be an indication of reduced food supply leading to problems on outward migration. And it acts as a general monitor of the health of our local birds.

What never ceases to amaze me is how these tiny things make such long journeys—the Willow Warbler (about 40p) which flew from the Faeroes to Cissbury in just 9 days, the Goldcrest (only 20p remember) which made it from the Mumbles to Jersey in just 2 days, and of course all those Blackcaps who set off for Africa in the autumn and return in the spring like K960166, which was ringed in August 1997 as a young bird at Cissbury and returned in 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004 to the same spot!

Val Bentley

Sales Department!

These are 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 grip.

£1 or £1.25 by post.



John Maskell

'Fifty Years of Birdwatching', the SDOS anniversary book, costs £12.50, plus £2.50 p&p, from Terry Hicks, 7 Berberis Court, Shoreham, BN43 6JA. Phone 01273 591120.



Birds, Beer and Berbers Morocco 2005

One of my burning ambitions following a family holiday to Tunisia was to revisit North Africa. This came to fruition in February when I set off with two birding friends. We joined the Birdfinders group to follow our dream, arriving in the evening of the 16th. The first full day was spent north of Casablanca in open forest, birding from the road at the crack of dawn. We knocked off several excellent species as the group came to terms with birding with strangers and their different skills: Black-shouldered kite, Common bulbul, Spotless starling, Pallid swift, Cirl bunting and a new bird for me, Barbary partridge.

Driving north up the coast, we stopped at the ancient city of Rabat to buy bread, soft cheese and tinned sardines. This was our daily picnic nosh, I guess for health reasons and fast food logistics. We ate by a lake and added two lifers, Marbled duck and Red-knobbed coot, with supporting cast of Ferruginous duck, Red-crested pochard and Garganey. There were loads of Black-necked grebes, two Spoonbills, and to add spice 3 Audouin's gulls. A long drive took us to Merja Zerga to try for the mythical Marsh owl. At a vantage point overlooking the massive estuary we awaited the onset of dusk. We had plenty of Sandwich terns and good views of four Caspians but only managed to see two owl shapes a long way off before it became totally dark—all very unsatisfactory. At the hotel we managed to contact a local guide willing to show us Marsh owls at dawn for 25 dirham each, a bargain. We set off before first light and soon had a roosting Marsh owl firmly in our sights, and all the group very pleased especially as this place has a reputation for hassling birders. We encountered no problems and this was a feature for the rest of the trip.

On our long journey into the interior, we stopped at a busy river crossing, Oued Sebou, and added Little ringed plover, Water pipit, and best of all new birds, Plain martins and Little swift. We came across 17 Lesser kestrels feeding close to the roadside. Tucking into cheese and sardines (still a novelty) at Dayet agoua, a large lake with surrounding woodland, we had a fine pair of Levaillant's woodpeckers just overhead; also Short-toed treecreeper, Crossbill, and our first of many Long-legged buzzards. Around the lake were over 70 wild Ruddy shelducks. We arrived after dark at a very cold hotel in Midelt, but the food and beer were enough to comfort any traveller.

Up before first light for breakfast, we birded around the hotel while our driver went into town to fix a slow puncture (another feature of the trip). The mornings were absolutely freezing with crystal clear skies. We found 3 Black wheatears and a fly-by Hoopoe. The bus drove off road over the Zeida plain, very dry and dusty tracks with most of the terrain rocky desert. Our goal was Dupont's lark. We spent the first hour in full winter clothing searching these dry plains, coming across a flock of 100 Lesser short-toed, a few Thekla, and 4 Dupont's larks with cracking views, but the best birds for me were ticks—4 Temminck's larks and 2 Red-rumped wheatears.

On the long drive to Erfoud and the desert proper, the scenery was stunning with the backdrop of the snow-covered Atlas Mountains. We travelled through endless stone and rock desert with eroded mountain peaks, and a true sense of wilderness. At lunch in a narrow mountain pass called Legionnaire's Tunnel, we had Blue rock thrush, House bunting, and 4 Trumpeter finches as company. We moved into real desert habitat, and in a small wadi new birds were soon on everyone's lists: magnificent male Mourning wheatear with stunning summer plumage Desert and White-crowned wheatears all over the place. For me 3 new wheatears in one day—fantastic! With a Desert lark right in front of our bus and a Hoopoe lark close by, a falcon on top of a ruined fort turned out to be a Barbary falcon. By dusk I had 7 new species. We reached Erfoud for a two-night stay in a very atmospheric hotel, a desert fort looking like the film set for *Beau Geste*. Moroccan Berbers in full robes are a stunning sight.

We set off at dawn in Landrovers to spend the whole day off road in true desert, with the temperature rising to 18 degrees around mid-day, our warmest day. One stop was at a camel paddock, where birds fed among the droppings and bedding: 20 migrant Short-toed and resident Bar-tailed larks, (another new species) and several Trumpeter finches. The paddock was outside a desert café, most of which are replica forts with a small restaurant and camping facilities. Here Berber families in tents make a living from transporting goods on camels across the desert. It was amazing to find the variety of species in this hostile environment, just a few bushes around an isolated wadi. An adult Lanner falcon on top of a high dune was soon moved out by a flock of Brown-necked ravens—2 more new species. Other specialities were stunning Desert sparrows coming to scraps of food

around the tables, and Tristram's warbler flicking in a bush, plus Dartford warbler, Black redstart and Wryneck. Feeding in crops on the edge of a large village were 7 Fulvous babblers, and a magnificent Barbary falcon perched in a palm tree. On crossing a massive dried-up lake we encountered 12 Cream-coloured coursers in a loose flock—real dream birds! We added 2 more Lanners, loads of Hoopoe larks, several Long-legged buzzards and our first Laughing doves of the trip. A couple of Isabelline wheatears were a great find, hundreds of miles from any recognised wintering grounds in the east. A very long and enjoyable day made us feel like true desert adventurers, with our faces sunburned and eyes sore from the wind-blown sand.

Next morning we set off at 07.30 after defrosting the windscreen! In the spectacular Todra gorge, we saw a Bonelli's eagle flying over and then perched on a rock outcrop, House bunting, Hoopoe, Crag martin, Blue rock thrush and displaying Desert lark. We arrived at the Tagdilt track, a very high stony desert plain, with sparse cover and looking very empty. Scanning the horizon, we soon located small flocks of Black-bellied sandgrouse and 4 Cream-coloured coursers. Right by the bus we found breeding Red-rumped and Desert wheatears with good numbers of Temminck's larks. We could not find any Thick-billed larks and would have to leave these to another day. Overnight in the Auberge Soleil Bleu, the blue came from the fact that it was freezing cold and had no beer, although the food was plentiful and warming.

The next day on another long ride westwards towards the coast, we stopped where a group had found thick-bills last year. The habitat was very rough rolling hillside with little vegetation and odd small plots of bare ground. Fanning out, we spent an hour searching and found a terrific selection of species including 30 Thekla, 8 Temminck's, 3 Short-toed and a staggering flock of 50 Shore larks of the North African race, 2 Desert wheatears, 12 Black-bellied sandgrouse and a male Moussier's redstart—a tick for many. We were checking the large flock of Shore larks when 6 large larks dropped just in front of some of the party. Frantic waving brought all the rest of the party together and we soon had the Thick-billed larks in our scopes, watching the Holy Grail of desert species down to 15 metres. Sardines and cheese were taken in a delightful olive grove with 3 more Moussier's redstarts.

Continued overleaf

Bird Table Notes



Usually this column is about the regular visitors to our gardens, but this time here instead are some more unexpected sightings from recent weeks.

Alerted by the flurry of birds put up by a sparrowhawk, Bernie Forbes, pruning for once instead of birding, was rewarded by a Waxwing which trilled as it flew over his garden in Lancing on February 5th.

Trevor Rackstraw's wife gave him a convincing description of a Woodcock in their garden on February 22nd. Hard winters push Woodcocks out of their normal habitats in search of ground soft enough to probe.

John and Shena Maskell in Worthing enjoyed watching a Firecrest on March 21st, a little jewel of a bird which every garden watcher hopes to welcome.

On March 21st a male Serin stopped for five minutes to sing in Tony Wilson's Edburton garden. As has been asked for so long, when will these pretty finches move across the Channel to settle regularly in England?

Richard Ives watched an Osprey over his house on March 26th. Perhaps it was the same bird which Stanley Allen saw over Beeding Hill two hours later.

Another raptor went west low across John Feest's Goring garden on April 4th—a female Hen harrier.

I have been told that I take far too long mowing the lawn because I'm looking for birds, and I can't see that changing, Enjoy your gardens and keep watching. Ed.

If any more members would like to contribute weekly counts to the SDOS Garden Bird Survey, please ask for a form from Martin Ford, 29 Foam Court Waye, FERRING, BN12 5RD.

Birds, Beer and Berbers

from page 3

Our drive towards the coast was accompanied by changing scenery with richer soil and plenty of crops and orchards in the Sous valley. We added to the trip list Woodchat shrike, Night heron, flocks of White storks totalling 300, and a kettle of around 120 Black kites. We were delayed by another puncture, stopping by pure fluke right outside a small village garage. After much hand waving and posturing, for 13 dirham or about 80p the puncture was repaired—or so we thought. At Agadir a three-night stay in a very posh hotel in this resort was just what the doctor ordered, luxurious rooms, warm and spotlessly clean, plenty of food, and loads of cold beer—Paradise! In the morning our driver told us the puncture repair had failed and another stop would be needed to complete the job. Over the next two days we visited various coastal habitats. In the hotel garden Moroccan pied wagtail was a potential split from the normal alba race. We drove to the famous wintering site for Bald ibis, stopping off at a lovely sandy beach to scan gull flocks. We found over 90 Audouin's and hundreds of Lesser black-backed gulls; chasing them offshore were 3 Great, and single Pomarine and Arctic skuas, adding a touch of Sussex. Up the coast we came on 87 Bald ibis in loose flocks feeding in scrub and fields on the cliff tops close to the road. We saw about a quarter of the Moroccan population of this great rarity in one morning. Other good birds included our first Spectacled warbler and another Barbary falcon.

The afternoon was spent at the estuary Oued Sous near Agadir and the Royal summer palace, for a feast of waders including 30 Kentish plovers, and 10 Stone curlews, with 40 Spoonbills and an Osprey. We stayed on here to see if we could find Red-necked nightjar. As dusk fell, a nightjar flew over our heads and settled on the track right in front of us, bigger than our normal nightjar with longer wings and tail. Another bird started to call, clinching the identification as we could all hear its mechanical kock-kock song—a wonderful end to another superb day. Our last full day on the coast was spent at the nature reserve of Oued Massa. A large river wound inland surrounded by a fertile agricultural system with intensive crops, and at the sea end reed-fringed lagoons and scrub-covered hills, with a sand bar blocking the river mouth. It was a wonderful place for wintering and migrant birds and these

are just some of the highlights: Subalpine warbler, Wryneck, Bluethroat, Quail, Spanish sparrows, Alpine, Pallid and Little Swifts, Red-rumped swallow, Plain martin, Black-crowned tchagra, Squacco heron, Marbled and Ferruginous ducks.

After a terrific thunder storm in the night, we stopped to visit the famous souk in Marrakesh, and then drove through relentless rain into the Atlas mountains. Rain turned to snow with visibility down to about 200 metres. As we approached the village of Oukaïmeden, right by the road feeding in thick snow were 3 magnificent Crimson-winged finches, new for most of the group, and a large flock of Shore larks. Our hotel was an unlikely looking building for North Africa, built for skiers using the high Atlas piste. We assembled in full winter kit for a late walk around the village in a near-blizzard. Unable to relocate the finches, we were compensated with 40 Shore larks, Water pipit and 55 Rock sparrows. Five Rock buntings searched for food outside a café. The next morning sunshine gave staggering views and total visibility. The mountains were fantastic with snowy peaks and we were above 8000 feet. A stroll around the tiny village gave us hundreds of Alpine choughs, with smaller numbers of Red-billed choughs, wheeling around, their calls reverberating in this high valley. Five Alpine accentors were another good find.

On the drive down the mountain we stopped at the tree line and found Levailant's woodpecker, Barbary partridge, and 2 Bonelli's eagles. Later we managed to add Calandra lark by the skin of our teeth as they flew over the bus. A Hen harrier tussled with our last Lanner falcon, and we finished with some 4000 Cattle egrets around the beautiful rubbish dump on the outskirts of Casablanca, a sight not to be forgotten and crossing it off as a destination to take Carol for the weekend.

Bernie Forbes

Editor's note: much of this newsletter has been written by the usual suspects or drawn from their contributions to the SDOS Email User Group and the SOS website. I have one or two items held over for the next issue, and would welcome more writings and pictures from many members.

Please send them by August 12th to the Editor:

**Keith Noble, 19 Roman Road,
STEYNING,
BN44 3FN,
Email: noble@karg.freemove.co.uk**