

The Shoreham District Ornithological Society's John Stafford Prize 2007-2008

CONTENTS

Introduction	i
A Favourite Walk, <i>John Stafford</i>	ii
Three Level Birding, <i>Jeannette Simpson</i>	iv
Local Observations On Wintering Hen Harriers, <i>Roy Sandison</i>	vii
The One That Got Away...Or Did It? <i>John Maskell</i>	ix
On Becoming A Birdwatcher, <i>Carol Wingate</i>	xii
Monitoring Barn Owls, <i>John Crix</i>	xv

INTRODUCTION

This is the first year of the Shoreham District Ornithological Society's (SDOS) competition in honour of John Stafford, our founder and first president. Society members were invited to submit a piece of writing on an ornithological topic relevant to the society's recording area. Six responded and the twin objectives of honouring John's memory and stimulating local ornithological writing have been achieved. There will be a similar competition for 2008-2009 and hopefully the interest and number of entries will grow year by year.

Out of a good crop of entries John Crix's Monitoring Barn Owls emerged as the winner, with Jeannette Simpson's Three Level Birding the runner-up. These and the majority of the other entries are included in this booklet, which is intended as a supplement to the main SDOS annual report. Our booklet commences with John Stafford's own description of a favourite walk. This was discovered amongst his papers, almost certainly dates from the early '80s, and is an excellent way of starting things off.

The only entry omitted from this publication is a fine piece by Chris Wright describing a dozen years of his work to conserve a Peregrine Falcon and Raven breeding site in the society's area. As there is no way of disguising the location of this site in the piece, and the Peregrine is a Wildlife and Countryside Act Schedule One bird, Chris has asked that his description not be published. It has, however, been lodged in the SDOS's archive and the society is grateful to Chris for writing up this chapter of local natural history.



The society is also grateful to Tony Marr who undertook the difficult task of judging the entries. Tony joined the SDOS in 1953, the year the society was formed by John Stafford and others. He is well known in ornithological circles, not least as a world-travelling leader of expeditions and lecturer on ornithological topics. He put considerable thought and effort into the process of judging all the, carefully anonymous, entries that were emailed in his direction and has even expressed his willingness to do it all again next year.

Finally, and very much in the '...but not least' category, the society's gratitude is due to John Reaney who has produced all the illustrations for this supplement and has thus enabled us to offer something which is visually as well as intellectually stimulating and attractive.

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A FAVOURITE WALK

by John Stafford

I have the good fortune to live in an area that is relatively unspoilt, and with a diversity of habitats. However, one does not have every day free, nor does the weather always invite a walk. If I had to choose a time of the year for a walk, in what season would I go: on a fine spring day with the possibility of a fall of migrants; or perhaps in winter? No; if I could choose my time, I would go on a fine day in autumn.

Walking from my house, south through the town, I would not expect to see much at first; though I once saw a Hawfinch in a town garden. Today there are House Sparrows, Starlings and Feral Pigeons. After about a mile I reach a footbridge over the tidal estuary. Here I stop, leaning on the bridge rails. There are the usual gulls, mostly Black-headed and Herring, and one Lesser Black-backed resting on the flats. Also there are a few waders, Dunlin and Redshank, and a solitary Ringed Plover.

I make a search over the mudflats for anything unusual among the gulls or waders; other than some Mute Swans waiting to be fed by an elderly couple resting on a bench nearby, there is little to see. I cross the bridge to reach the seashore with its sand and shingle beach; there are more gulls and a few passing terns, either Common or Arctic, it is impossible to tell. Far out to sea is a raft of dark duck which prove to be Common Scoters; also I see those flying dots over the waves, beloved of sea-watchers, and I hesitate before letting them go on their way unidentified.

I walk west to have a look at the large saline pool behind the sea wall. It is usually only a resting place for gulls at high tide, oiled and storm-driven birds, and local feral ducks. In the past it has attracted Grey Phalaropes and, once, a Baird's Sandpiper. Today there is one, oiled, Red-breasted Merganser among the regular birds.

As I turn to walk back to the river, a male Black Redstart perches on the sea wall flickering its tail. In the short grass nearby a Wheatear searches for food.

Turning north and walking up the west bank of the river, its mudbanks being rapidly exposed by the outgoing tide, I see many gulls. They are mostly Black-headed, but last autumn there was a Ring-billed Gull there, so I scan them with my binoculars, in vain. Some Lapwing are preening; a solitary Grey Plover feeds at the water's edge. I have a careful look at the Ringed Plovers as we have both Little, Ringed and Kentish here. In the brambles and rough herbage on the bank a Willow Warbler feeds in preparation for its migration flight, I

see a Sedge Warbler and a Whitethroat also feeding before I reach the old wooden Toll Bridge, and a Stonechat perches on a wire nearby. I lean on the rails of the bridge and look up and down the river; a Cormorant flies overhead upstream. A field by the towpath is being ploughed; gulls in their hundreds follow the plough; amongst them are a few Rooks, Carrion Crows and Lapwings.

Moving up river, I turn aside to visit a small reeded pool which has, in the past, yielded both Bittern and Little Bittern. Today only a Reed Bunting dips away over the reeds.

Now I turn away from the river by a clump of trees where Cirl Buntings used to breed. The path I take leads into a wooded valley with scrub and mature trees; a Chiffchaff calls briefly. I would hope to see both flycatchers, but today only a Spotted is hunting insects from a low branch. A Magpie clacks and scolds - at an owl or fox, perhaps, but I see nothing. At the bottom of the valley a spring breaks out from below the bank and here, they say, you may still find Roman pottery. This spring feeds a reed-fringed pond, then drains down to the river. Today there is surprisingly little bird life: a Moorhen scuttles into cover flashing its white undertail; a few dragonflies bask on the lily leaves; a Reed Warbler feeds quietly among the reeds.

Leaving the pond, I climb up onto the Downs towards the site of an old Iron Age hill fort. I disturb some butterflies from the long grass. Meadow Pipits and Skylarks fly before me and on a corn stook a Kestrel sits. On reaching the top, the view is superb: glistening sea to the south, seafront towns on the coast; to the north, open downland. Wheatears hop from stone to stone. Hopefully, I scan the sky for raptors. Many have been seen here: both kites, the three common harriers, an occasional Goshawk and a Gyr Falcon.

Heading downhill, I walk along a track bordered by rough hedges. Near here Nightjars have nested, and also Ringed Plover in the boulder-strewn fields nearby. The common hedgerow birds flit ahead of me; a Linnet on a gorse bush twitters in the warm sunshine as though it were spring.

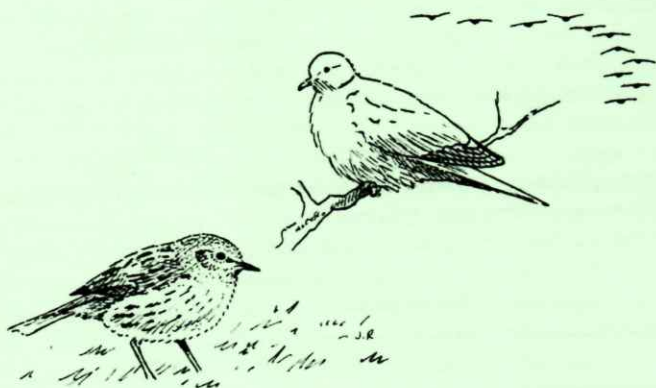
As I come out into the open again, a covey of Red-legged Partridges call as they are flushed. I then cross a road and go along a path down to the river again, past an area favoured by Quail in summer and, once, by the now long-departed Stone Curlew. This time I cross the river by the modern concrete bridge on which I stop. Some late Swallows skim the surface, one House Martin among them.

A Common Sandpiper calls as it flies downstream with its low, flickering, stiff-winged flight, to land bobbing on a stone.

From here I follow the South Downs Way up a valley where cattle graze, and a Painted Lady flies fast over the grass. A few years ago there were Clouded Yellows here in abundance. As I breast the rise, I get a brief view of a Harrier, a Ringtail, as it hunts for food low over the ground; then it is up and out of sight behind the hill.

After passing through a gate, I turn down a lane and, finally, downhill towards home. On the grassy banks that flank the lane are the last of the summer orchids, Pyramidal and Fragrant, and also the Common Twayblade. Yellowhammers and Corn Buntings, sitting on posts, fly before I reach them. After about a mile I am back on the downland turf and looking down on the local Bird Sanctuary and ringing station established for more than thirty years. It lies some hundred and twenty feet below me; a small copse, stream and water meadow - about two acres in all. Over one hundred and forty species have been seen here. I can see someone tending a mistnet; I do not go down, but walk home, to be greeted at the gate by the autumn song of a Robin.

I enjoy that walk at any time, but an autumn day is best.



THREE LEVEL BIRDING

by Jeannette Simpson

The figure three features strongly in the style of bird watching I am about to describe. There are three of us sharing a love of birds: my husband, John, my 90 year old mother, Wynne, and myself. We watch them quite literally from three levels in the house and garden that we share: Wynne has the ground floor and a direct view of the garden from her kitchen, John and I have the next two floors and views of the garden from two different heights - we have binoculars by each window. Finally, our combined bird watching styles are on three levels: participation in the SDOS bird count; daily observation of the behaviour of very common species; and a simple enjoyment of the presence of bird activity and birdsong.

The house and garden in question are in Old Shoreham on the Greenacres estate. The garden is about thirty feet long, twenty feet wide and faces southwest. There is a shed at

the far end, with a cherry tree to the left and two tall bamboos to the right. Behind the shed, but in an adjoining garden, there is an apple tree and behind it, a large conifer. We regard those trees as our own for observation purposes, as the actual owners would not be able to see the bird activity we witness.

Our garden is Japanese style, part paved, but on the left there is a small goldfish pond with a rockery behind it and a three tier waterfall. On the right there is a gravel bed, with a maple by the fence. By the left hand fence and overlooking the pond there is an ancient eight foot tall shrub, which sprouts rampant growth each summer and is covered with small pink flowers.

On the rockery mound there is a mesh ground feeder and two poles nearby with feeders suspended from them, seed feeders and peanuts all the year round and fat blocks and fat balls in the winter. The poles have mesh trays for appropriate kitchen scraps. On the gravel area there is a ground level bird bath, and also a water feature set among ferns that sends a trickle of water from a bamboo tube on to a rock with a sparrow sized hollow in it, and from there into a pebble pond.

Some of the birds we observe are usually discounted by most watchers, or even positively disliked and discouraged. The particular group I am thinking of is the pigeon/dove family. The first arrivals were the Collared Doves – beautiful, gentle looking creatures. We enjoyed watching the learning process as they tried to work out how to get seed from a seed feeder mounted on a small tray, eventually working out that if two of them perched on opposite sides of the tray it balanced sufficiently for them to feed comfortably. Further entertainment was provided by a lone Woodpigeon watching them who appeared to be weighing up whether it could manage the same thing (it couldn't, but has managed to find food in our garden, nonetheless).

The "villains", for want of a better word, are the Feral Pigeons. Years ago we never saw any, but suddenly they started coming, and quickly learned the trick of balancing in pairs on the feeder tray. As by this stage we had trays on two other seed feeders as well, numbers during the summer increased to twenty plus, and unable to bear the sight of an empty feeder, I was filling them up every day. This was getting a bit too much! The final straw came when John was doing some carpentry outside the shed late one afternoon, and was constantly having to duck as the impatient pigeons, squabbling and fighting, flew noisily down to feed. So the trays were removed from the larger feeders, but Wynne missed seeing the pigeons – she could recognise them individually - so the small tray has been kept, but the birds have to work much harder now, and numbers have gone back down to a manageable seven or so at a time.

The large number of pigeons had put off some of the smaller birds, who returned when the pigeon numbers reduced. We are fortunate to have a colony of House Sparrows nesting in the hedge of the next door but one garden. They come to our garden to feed, drink and bathe. They love "taking a shower" in the small water feature which has the sparrow sized indentation in the rock. We delight in seeing the males in their smart breeding plumage and

the females flirting by lifting their tails when a male is in sight. We are aware of them working as a social group, with one usually keeping watch from a vantage point while others feed, and are full of admiration for their boldness in diving in to use one of the higher perches on the seed feeders even if much larger birds are monopolising them.

Among the sparrows pecking around on the ground we frequently see one or two Dunnocks. When viewed from our top floor they are immediately recognisable even without the binoculars because of their twitching movements. A treat in the breeding season is to see one of them at the top of the conifer and hear it singing to attract a mate.

Other small bird visitors include Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinches, Greenfinches, Robins, Wrens and Goldfinches – for the latter we deliberately allow certain pondside flowers to go to seed. We also see the occasional Willow Warbler, Blackcap or Grey Wagtail. Bigger birds include Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Redwing, Jackdaws, Carrion Crow, Magpies and, of course, Starlings. These can be divided into two groups: the native Starlings, which are around most of the year, and the continental ones that swoop down in large numbers (thirty or forty at a time), eat everything in sight and then fly off just as quickly.

A highlight of the year is when the Starlings which have bred nearby bring their young to "school". At first we see the youngsters perched on the fence looking anxiously down at this strange new environment, waiting to be fed by the parents; then, when they have more confidence, splashing about in the basins of the waterfall like children at a swimming pool, and making nearly as much noise. It is hard to think of their activity as purely functional and not containing an element of simple fun. The Blackbirds exhibit their own form of indulgent pleasure, sunbathing on the roof of the shed with outstretched wings in good weather.

Our Blackbirds are much more private in their bathing habits, each wanting sole occupancy of the waterfall basin rather than piling in altogether as the Starlings will. To this end, the Blackbirds will even bathe at dusk, when other birds have gone to roost, Mr often standing guard while Mrs enjoys her bath. The sparrows will frequently have dust baths in the summer, in spite of the ready availability of water and do not tend to use the waterfall basin – perhaps the flow of water is too powerful for such small birds.

The presence of sparrows has given rise on occasions to a visit by a Sparrowhawk. The sparrows realise that they are safe if they stay deep in the hedge where they have their nests, but on one occasion one of the Collared Doves was not so lucky. While regretting the loss of one of our regulars, we couldn't help watching fascinated by the sight of the Sparrowhawk using one of our fence posts as a plucking post and disposing of its victim.

Other predators have included a couple of Herring Gulls, looking hungrily at the goldfish, but even fish can learn, and ours seem to know when to dive into the muddy depths and safety. The gulls sometimes look with envy from the fence or the shed roof at the other birds feeding, and have on occasions tried to get on to the feeding trays, but their size has defeated them.

On our top floor we are eye to eye with the gulls as they fly round looking for food and can admire their flying skills at close quarters. However, our favourite view is the twice daily "commuter" flight of the Cormorants down the Adur valley to the sea in the morning, and back up river to roost in the afternoon. From the comfort of our settee we witness swans and ducks flying in the distance, Starlings gathering and migratory flocks of Lapwings.

This is our three level birding, and our gain from it is also threefold: fun, admiration and the satisfaction of helping some threatened creatures to survive.

LOCAL OBSERVATIONS ON WINTERING HEN HARRIERS

by Roy Sandison

Since the 18th and 19th Century massacre of birds of prey in these islands, the Hen Harrier has always been a scarce passage migrant and winter visitor to Sussex and it is with the latter aspect that these observations are concerned. From about 1960 reports of Hen Harriers in autumn and winter began to increase and between 1965 and 1969 the trickle of these interesting raptors developed into a steady flow.

Precise dates may be obtained from the Sussex Bird Reports but broadly speaking birds appearing in late September and early October are passage migrants and usually pass through the areas they are first seen in, after a week or so, presumably bound for other wintering quarters. Late October and November birds, however, often remain in favoured downland sites and in this particular haunt in the county, one and sometimes a few birds have been observed regularly through the winter, remaining with us into early April. Over a period of time it becomes possible to recognise individuals by, for example, a missing primary feather or more particularly, in the case of ringtails, by characteristic blotches on the upper wing surfaces and it is then possible to determine their length of stay and also their hunting area.

In the locality under review, namely Park Brow, Steyning Round Hill, Stump Bottom and Lychpole, the winter quarters are precisely determined by a range of high hills to the north and south and by ridges of lower ground to the east and west, the whole forming a deep basin drained by narrow sided valleys. These contain thick coverts of hawthorn, bramble, elder and gorse and provide the cover for the area's game birds, whilst the undulating ground is cultivated, so that in winter it is either supporting young spring wheat, barley and kale or is put down to grass and clover or merely remains a stubble. To supplement the game birds' diet and cover, large swathes of rape and mustard are sown down the steeper hillsides and it is here particularly that the harriers hunt, sailing on the up-currents with their long wings angled into a 'V', turning and twisting as they try to flush, and then grab with their long legs, some of the hundreds of mixed finches that annually winter in these life supporting seed crops. These flocks may contain as many as 2000 birds and sometimes a few Bramblings and an occasional Snow Bunting may be seen with them.

However, in eight seasons fairly continuous observing, involving some twenty-five successful watching periods (that is when harriers were actually hunting) and perhaps a total of ten birds, I have never witnessed a kill in these circumstances, although I have twice come across harriers on open stubble slopes, feeding on undetermined prey. Males have not been known to winter here but they occasionally pass through, whilst on one day a tractor driver friend and keen observer saw four harriers in the area together, one a male. Wintering birds seem untroubled by human presence, one being seen by a surprised tractor driver as it slowly overtook his machine and passed leisurely over the cab whilst quartering.



The Hen Harrier is seldom found roosting but a Welsh Collie of mine once flushed a bird from thick coarse grass on high ground late one November afternoon. Rarely one will interrupt its incessant quartering to perch momentarily on a fence post or small bush, but they do not seem to use these as lookout posts. Their hunting habits seem to be as precisely defined as their territories and in the winters of 1965/66/67, as I hurried up the hill in my scanty lunch hour, I knew, if conditions were right, almost exactly where a bird would be quartering and a series of observations showed that a harrier would invariably patrol the boundaries of its winter quarters in a clockwise direction and from information gleaned from my driver friend, have established that a bird would do this four or five times during the day, hunting commencing roughly between 10 and 11 a.m. and ceasing as dusk fell. The approximate area of this territory would be 12 to 15 square miles.

Occurring as they do with surprising regularity and within such well-defined territories, one is tempted to believe that these are ancestral haunts or migration patterns borne of immemorial visits but until the bird's origins can be proved, this would be mere conjecture,

although it is generally accepted that these are continental visitors and not Scottish breeding stock moving south in winter.

Encounters by the harriers with other raptors are not uncommon, as this territory is also used intermittently by Short-eared Owls during the same period. Pugnacious when hunting, two of these owls, which quite commonly hunt during the day, once saw fit to drive off a female harrier, where all three birds, plus a pair of Kestrels, were hunting over a field of kale. The owls attacked from above, always trying to gain height, the harrier adroitly side-slipping or making very tight, flat turns to avoid them. The owls were persistent but did not press home their attacks to the extent of grappling but eventually the harrier lost patience and made a spirited dive on one owl, which looked like doing it some damage until the latter broke off the affray and both owls sheared off.

Just to show that Sussex does enjoy its share of exciting birds of prey, I was witness to another 'brief encounter' one memorable October lunch hour, when a low flying Hen Harrier that was quartering a field of kale was itself surprised when a Rough-legged Buzzard rose majestically from the crop in front of it and hung menacingly. Although in no danger, the harrier swerved away perceptibly, whilst a pair of Kestrels dived and screamed at their giant intruder.

Although these observations were made some time ago and anyone reading them will readily query some of the figures quoted, especially with the advent of so much detailed literature, I do look back at this period of time, when such sightings were novel, with real pleasure. The virtually unspoiled valley, few people, more varied crops, more bird-song - all contributed to every foray made to this patch.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY...OR DID IT?

by John Maskell

A chance glance out of the window led to two years of twists and turns leaving an image that remains as vivid today as that winter's day more than two decades ago.

Saturday 17th January 1987 was very cold and grey with snow lying on the ground; the sort of day when it was better to occupy oneself indoors. I was keen on meteorological recording in those days and my garden thermometer registered a range of 22-28°F, probably as a result of the strong bitter winds that had been blowing from the continent during the previous few days.

At the time my wife and I resided in a mid-terrace house in Downlands Avenue in the north-east suburbs of Worthing. I'd just finished lunch around 1.45 pm when I noticed a bird that I immediately recognised as something special hopping around on a patch of patio we'd brushed free of snow and sprinkled with digestive biscuit crumbs. It was a bird I'd never spotted "in the feathers" before but I knew I'd seen it many times when flicking through our field guides. I grabbed the binoculars that lay on the table and studied the bird

at less than 10 feet distance. Its jizz was distinctive and its size appeared to be mid-way between a Song Thrush and a Blackbird. I noted its creamy eye-stripe, thrush-like chin, distinctive chestnut red chest (a similar hue to a Redwing's armpits) and paler mottled grey underparts. The back was grey-brown, bill long. Probably due to the extreme cold its movements were slow. Reaching for the current Hamlyn and Collins field guides I found "my" bird, a Naumann's Thrush; couldn't be anything else. Little did I realise just how rare it was to our shores.

Excitedly I telephoned my wife who ran a ladies fashion shop in Broadwater at the time. "Can you leave the shop? You have to come and see this bird."

"Well I have a shop full of customers at the moment so I'll come as soon as I can," she replied. Being more focussed than I she added, "Try and get a photograph... oh, and a witness."

Meanwhile the thrush was still hopping around outside before taking up refuge in our cherry tree where it puffed out its feathers. This all gave me time to attach my longer lens to my 35mm camera, fix it to a tripod and fire off, in those pre-digital days, an extravagant 3 shots!

At the time Richard Ives, a noted Sussex birder, lived directly opposite us so I called on him. Unfortunately his wife reported that he was out birding with another well-known ornithologist, Bernie Forbes. "Please tell them to call in as soon as they return," I implored.

As luck would have it, in the house next door to us lived a reserve witness in the form of 15 year old Oliver who, despite his youth, had actually already been birding longer than my six years. He was at home and soon joined me by the French windows and arrived at the same identification.

An hour had elapsed before my wife was able to temporarily shut the shop and arrive home to her agitated spouse. By now the bird had retreated to the distant corners of the garden and her sightings were somewhat disappointing. Reluctantly she returned to her retailing.

Around 3.30pm, with light fading fast, I was joined by Richard and Bernie. I was so desperate to show them "my" bird but amongst several mobile Blackbirds foraging around the neighbouring gardens we failed to connect.

And that was that. No further sightings.

Being winter time it was several weeks before I finished exposing my film and had it developed. Taken through glass on a grey day the pictures weren't brilliant but one was a candidate for enlargement. 'Boots' were entrusted with the work. Imagine my horror when I went to collect the result a fortnight later to be told that my negative had been **lost!** A darkroom search ensued but the vital piece of celluloid never came to light. As

compensation a copy was made from the original small print but inevitably sharpness was compromised.

With all these delays, but encouraged by several fellow SDOS members, it was August before I submitted my report and supporting photograph to the Sussex Ornithological Society's then recorder, Paul James. His reply confirmed that there had been no previously accepted British records of this race of Dusky Thrush and requested my other two photographs. These were included in his dossier sent on to the next stage in the ratification process.

We now move forward to February 1988 when the Secretary of the 'British Birds' Rarities Committee reported to me that my report and photographs "had aroused great interest and much discussion amongst the Committee". They agreed with me that my bird did not show all the characteristics of a "pure" Naumann's and asked further questions which I endeavoured to answer and then enclosed all my remaining photographic evidence.



By return came the encouraging comment that "I remain convinced that it was not merely an aberrant Blackbird, but we know little about intermediates in the Naumann type so it's off to the British Museum next!"

The tale then takes another twist as it was December 1988 before I received the Committee's decision that my bird was "a Blackbird in a very unusual plumage". Their September reply had been sent in error to Oliver, my supporting observer. A delay had then ensued as the package was forwarded to him at boarding school and he didn't return home with it until the Christmas holidays.

As the letter was addressed to Oliver he didn't realise that I hadn't been informed of the decision!

The Rarities Committee also rejected another Naumann's claim from East Sussex that occurred within a few days of mine. The first accepted Naumann's was the Chingford,

London, bird in January 1990. Interestingly the only other approved record was also a January visitor to London and that was to South Woodford in 1997.

After my disappointment I placed all the documents in the loft and there they remained until I was recently trawling some internet sites and studied some images of Dusky Thrush plumage variations. And guess what....?

So 21 years after my visitation I can still recall the "wow" factor when I first set eyes on my colourful Central Asian guest. I am still convinced of the authenticity of my bird so should the machinations of the Rarities Committee bother me?

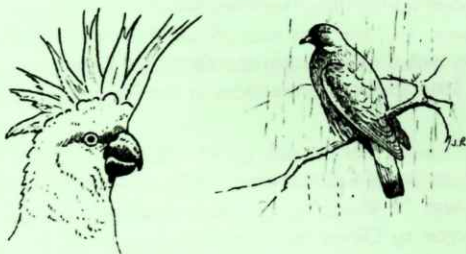
"Each a glimpse and gone forever."

ON BECOMING A BIRDWATCHER

by Carol Wingate

I have been cajoled to write a piece for entry in the John Stafford Prize competition. It would certainly be an honour to be the first winner, but what on earth can I write about birding in the SDOS area that would make interesting reading? Writing about birds doesn't come with the ease with which I chronicled my recent 'doings' in Tanzania. Not only that, but these days I don't take much part in SDOS activities.

So why did I join SDOS? What makes me a birdwatcher? Why do I enjoy the birds but give so little time?



Each of us has our own path to being a birdwatcher and my journey began in childhood when I escaped from smoggy London into the countryside to enjoy the fresh air and space, learning to identify all around me. Colourful flowers, beautiful butterflies, the myriad shapes of the green trees, the changing seasons especially the autumn colours, as well as the birds were all wonderful. So my journey began as a naturalist rather than a birdwatcher.

Transition to a more dedicated birdwatcher came when I lived in Australia and stumbled on the Queensland Ornithological Society. My serious birding began with the many happy hours we spent on birdwatching outings and taking holidays to areas where I could see some new birds. The activities were social events, around which I built many friendships. Even then, I didn't become an expert watcher ... more a bird observer than a twitcher. Once back in the UK it was automatic to seek out and join a local birdwatching club. First the Worthing RPSB group until its demise, and then on to SDOS.

But why do I take so little part in club activities? I neither go on many outings nor attend many meetings. Thinking about it, two reasons occur to me to avoid outings, and one to shun some meetings. Firstly, I love colour, and the birds in Oz were so bright they made those in the UK look very dull in comparison. Secondly, I am a fair weather birder, hate being cold, and find the atrocious days of grey, windy, wet and cold conditions that are so prevalent here uncomfortable. It has to be a fine day, or the trip has to be to an interesting location, before I'm seen venturing out on a birding trip with SDOS. As for meetings, I find those that present a catalogue of pretty pictures of birds in foreign lands boring. Of greater interest are those where the photos are woven into some storyline, or where accounts of scientific work or conservation developments are presented, especially if they relate to our local area. So these days my birdwatching activities have changed into observing the birds around my home.

I have a scientific background, but am not disposed to doing any bird research. My observations are neither mathematical nor statistical. I am quite happy to leave the number crunching to others and I can only admire the dedication of those SDOS members who do so, such as John Newnham and all the scientific work he does. I am more inclined to contributing information to other people's studies. At QOS we ran an Annual Birdcount, done every springtime (September) when the birds were nesting and movement at a minimum, so numbers therefore fairly stable. We divided our area into grids, and teams of observers all went out on the same day to count the quantity and species of birds within each. It was not unusual to have around a hundred species per day. It wasn't rocket science but over the years we built a comprehensive picture of the birds in our local area.

I love to travel, and find that as a naturalist, or a birdwatcher, you gain a different perspective on the places you visit. You get to meet the locals more, and are spared that boring laze on the beach. I'm not yet a twitcher, but have been known to visit areas where I know a rare bird exists and hoped to see it. That is different from going somewhere just to increase your sighting numbers, or rushing off to see a rare bird that has had the misfortune to land in an unusual area. In fact I get very irritated by the fanatical twitcher mentality, and certainly didn't rush over to see the Great Spotted Cuckoo, or the Bee-eater rarities when they turned up in our patch.

Though I like to see different birds, the day's species count is immaterial. Watching bird behaviour, noting changes in pattern, or frequency, maybe counting abundance, are far more satisfying than rushing around gathering species. There is a magic in sitting still while a rabbit or a bird comes close, and I don't mean sitting in a hide to do so. I have fond

memories garden watching on a hot day while the ruffian Starlings took a bath, and the Sparrows sat around the birdbath edge enjoying a cooling shower in the splashings. Despite the noise of nesting Herring Gulls on the roof of the house opposite, I did enjoy the performance when the young were about to fly. Mum and Dad sat on my roof and screamed at the youngsters to come and join them... and eventually they did!

So, the SDOS Garden Bird Survey is an ideal outlet for my interest in bird observations and I've taken part from the beginning. It puzzled me that there were so few species that visit my garden regularly; for example I rarely see a Robin or Chaffinch, and have only one record for Blue Tit. But there are other species flying around that never actually drop in, especially Herring Gulls. So besides recording the birds visiting the garden I also started to record all the birds flying about. The Gulls both nest in, and are increasing, in my area. My theory is that they scare off all the smaller birds. So if their numbers increase, do the smaller bird counts go down? Well I have kept all the copies of my recording sheets and can tell you that they have, although that doesn't prove that the Gulls are responsible.

My latest observation concerns the difference in garden birds between my departure for Africa in 2006, and my return this January. In the four weeks since I arrived home I have only seen one bird in my Worthing garden – actually two, but Mr and Mrs Blackbird never visit together. Whatever has happened to the Sparrows, the Starlings, and the Pigeons that were regular visitors? They are still around, but now only fly over. My records tell me that there are certainly more Herring Gulls flying about, and whereas in winter I used to record around 15 Black-headed Gulls sitting on the roofs, the most at the moment has been six.

I find such phenological observation data interesting, and important, and ask what future records should we keep? Well, I read in the local paper that Worthing Council have a Lighting Initiative whereby the streetlights will be changed to those creating less light pollution. What effect will that have on the nocturnal birds that visit our gardens? Can I anticipate some owls? Another idea is to start collecting some evidence on how global warming affects our birds. It will change our birds' food sources, so maybe we should be collecting evidence on how. I know it sounds facetious, but maybe someone could design a study where we could contribute simple information from observing those unwelcome Herring Gull droppings that land on our cars and windows. Has the content changed? Do they change colour and consistency? Do they change with the seasons? My point is that we need to ask questions, and every little piece of information helps the jigsaw come together.

In birdwatching we must ask questions, and conversely we must share our knowledge. I'm often irritated by those fanatics in a hide who sshush! someone asking a question, or calling out a bird. Even mis-identifications are a way of learning. Have you never learned by your mistakes? Learning bird-lore from books is to be commended, but it really comes to life when we put what we have learned into practice in the field. With knowledge comes responsibility ... but then comes the dilemma between keeping secret those nestings of Ravens in our area to keep away unscrupulous twitchers and collectors, or broadcasting the knowledge to encourage the locals to keep an eye open and protect the species and its habitat.

So what are my conclusions about birdwatching? Am I a birdwatcher? I'm really not worried what anyone else thinks. I value my own experience, but it may not fit into someone else's definition. If you want to be pedantic I am a bird observer. To parody a popular quote, "Like life, birdwatching is a journey, not a destination".

My thanks to Robyn Black of Queensland for the inspiration for this piece.

MONITORING BARN OWLS

by John Crix

"What is it with Jackdaws? Why do they have this mad need to fill every available space - this A-frame Barn Owl box for instance - with sticks?" I'm contemplating this mystery while perched ten foot up a ladder, balanced precariously against a too-narrow tree trunk hauling out handfuls of sticks and dust, bits of grass, small insects, more dust, and ever more sticks wedged so tightly that only Barrie's heftiest screwdriver will dislodge them. I'm wearing my largest flat cap, not solely as a rural affectation but because when once I cleared out a Barn Owl box and forgot to wear a hat I spent the rest of the day scratching dust, twig bits, and imagined flat flies and beetles out of my hair.

The ladder slips against the tree trunk, I decide enough is enough, and anyway I'm now down to a lower geological stratum. I've reached the dark, friable remains of pellets from when this box was actually occupied by Barn Owls: two years ago, according to Barrie's records. While incubating her eggs the female will progressively chew up the pellets, spit them out to create a soft level floor for the chicks when they hatch. Or maybe it's just boredom, something to pass the time during those long wet days and nights while she's stuck in this strange triangular hole half way up an oak tree, keeping the eggs warm, dependent on her hard-hunting partner for regular rodent deliveries.

These old chewed-up pellet remnants are good for the garden, by the way. I once cleared out a box - a converted tea chest up in the roof of a barn - which had been occupied by owls for the past ten years. Groaning with old pellet matter, it was in danger of collapsing and crashing twenty feet to the floor. I shovelled the dusty ammonia-smelling remains of voles, field mice and the like into a sack, delivered it later to Janet's allotment, talked her into letting me spread it amongst her rows of garlic. Result: Barn Owl fertilised garlic bulbs grow 20% larger than those harvested from 'control' rows - but it takes a special person to relish the ten years' accumulated stench of the inedible parts of dozens of small rodents...

Barrie is one of those special people. In fact he's known across West Sussex as The Owl Man. Turning up at a farm or at the gate of some wealthy householder's personal bit of England he used to be instantly recognised because of the Owlmobile, his old brown and scratched and dented Volvo estate with a pile of ladders lashed to the roof rack. But the Owlmobile died last year and now he transports the ladders round on top of an equally battered green Peugeot, which doesn't have the same "Owl Man cometh!" recognition

factor. In fact I sometimes think we look like rather dodgy and down-at-heel window cleaners when we turn up. It's only when Barrie hauls himself out of the car and is recognised that the closed faces and suspicious glances turn to smiles of welcome.

Time to leave the A-frame on its tree and hope that next year it will attract Barn Owls and not Jackdaws or Stock Doves or hornets or any of the other species which periodically treat owl boxes as a convenient squat. It's our last planned visit of a longish day but as we near Shoreham, Barrie does his usual and points up a farm lane, casually mentioning that there's another box up thataway, perhaps we'd better...

"Please may I have a look at your Barn Owl box?" is his opening gambit and, as usual, the response is an enthusiastic, "of course, go ahead" Because most people are proud and feel honoured that their property has been chosen by Barn Owls as a place fit for raising owl chicks. There's even an element of competition, "has so and so down the road got owls this year?" they'll ask. To which question the Owl Man will provide a carefully discreet response because this Barn Owl conservation business is all about Discretion - and also that other big 'D' word: Disturbance. Many landowners are seriously averse to having birdwatchers invade their property in pursuit of Barn Owl sightings - wouldn't allow boxes to be bolted to their trees or wedged in the rafters of their barns if this were likely. And then there are the extremes of disturbance: the danger of vandalism and destruction of nest boxes if their sites are too well known. So Barrie is discreet and the breeding success and location records are kept confidential.

There's a bit of chat with the farmer's wife and then she runs off and fetches a digital camera to record this year's Owl Man visit while Barrie and I start unloading all the bits we need from the car: long ladders, climbing gear, a head torch, the ringing kit, and a thing like an ultra-size butterfly net complete with chimney-sweep extension poles.

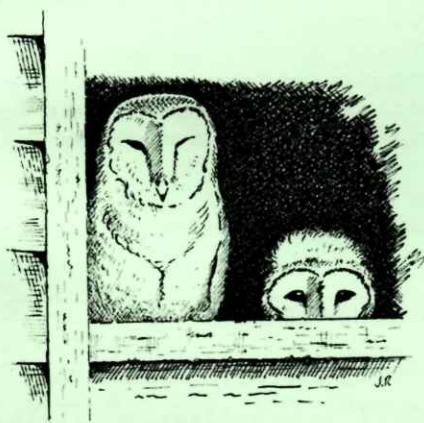
We pick our way through cow manure into the barn. Barrie signals for silence and starts to advance slowly with the big net swaying up in front of him. The farmer's wife and I hold our breath as he deftly clatters it up over the entrance hole in the Barn Owl box (another converted tea chest) and almost immediately an adult female comes hurtling out into its mesh. We wait, but no sign of the male - it's likely he's off hunting somewhere. We'll ring, weigh and measure this ferociously struggling creature then return her to the box once we've investigated how she's been getting along on the breeding front.

I help Barrie disentangle our rather cross female from the netting, ease her carefully out and into a bird bag. And 'carefully' is the key word because not only are these particularly beautiful living creatures that we're handling but they're also *well-armed* particularly beautiful living creatures, with talons which will pierce right through your thumb if you're unwise enough to present yourself as prey.

Once the female is safe and quiet in the dark of her bag we're able to relax a little. Except that Act Two of this small drama is all about getting up there to see what's in the box. A-frame boxes on trees are comparatively easy but some of the boxes in barns are something

else again. This one, for instance, is wedged some thirty feet up in the apex of the barn roof and getting up to it reminds me of my rock climbing days: not looking down or thinking about the drop, careful balancing so as not to dislodge the ladder, and 'psychological belays' which involve clipping climbing slings to any available anchor point and hoping these will be enough to prevent disaster if I lean too far away from the top of the ladder while peering into the box in search of owl chicks.

The presence of one or more adults in a box doesn't necessary mean there will be chicks.



In 2006, a bad year for breeding, we frequently netted a single adult or even a pair, only to find that they'd decided not to bring any children into the world this time around. Because if the male can't bring the female sufficient gifts of succulent vole-on-the-bone then she simply declines to breed. It's all a bit like human life really: fail to take your date out to a sufficiently classy restaurant and that's your lot mate! But 2007 is a bumper year for baby Barn Owls - by the end of the season I will have ringed around 175 of them and Barrie's usage of size 'G' rings will be well over 300.

Reaching the box I hear a tell-tale hissing and in its far back corner I find five owl chicks huddled together, shiny dark eyes staring back at me in the light of the head torch: a good brood. I pop each bemused chick into a bag which I clip to a karabiner on my belt. Back down the ladder and Barrie and I ring and weigh and measure them. The length of feather that's grown out of the quill of the seventh primary gives us a pretty accurate indication of the age of each chick. In this brood the youngest is six weeks old while the eldest is in its eighth week and will soon be flapping around inside the barn. We got here just in time: it's no good trying to monitor population and breeding success if the fledglings have already dispersed. Finally it's back up the ladder and I carefully shuffle each chick back into the box, followed - even more carefully - with their mother.

Barrie and I are both tired and dirty from a long Barn Owl day. Various middle-aged aches and pains already kicking in, I stagger slightly when I get out of the car at the top of West Street. I wave farewell: "...same again tomorrow!"

ABOUT THE SDOS / MEMBERSHIP FORM

The Shoreham District Ornithological Society (SDOS), based in Shoreham-by-Sea, West Sussex, was founded in 1953 and is the oldest birdwatching society in Sussex. As well as covering Shoreham itself, the SDOS recording area extends to Brighton, Worthing, Steyning and Storrington, and our membership also includes a number of people who live outside the recording area.

We hold monthly indoor meetings from October to April at St Peter's Church Hall in Shoreham, usually on a Tuesday evening. Non-members are welcome to attend on payment of a small fee. We also arrange a programme of field outings throughout the year to birdwatching sites around the south-east. Members receive three newsletters a year as well as an annual report. A members-only email discussion group has also been set up to keep all who wish to enrol informed of latest wildlife sightings in the area and other matters that may be of interest.

New members are very welcome. If you would like to join, please photocopy, complete and return the form below.

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

I/we apply to join the Shoreham District Ornithological Society and enclose my/our annual subscription of (please tick appropriate box):

Single £12 ☐

Couple/Family £18 ☐

Junior £5 ☐

Life membership terms on application to the Membership Secretary

Cheques should be made payable to SDOS

Title	Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms
Name/s	
Address	
Postcode	
Telephone	
Email	

Please send to Mrs Shena Maskell, SDOS Membership Secretary, 41 St. Lawrence Avenue, Worthing, West Sussex, BN14 7JJ.