



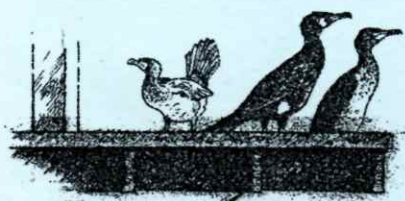
The Shoreham District Ornithological Society's John Stafford Prize 2008-2009

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* Winning Entry



INTRODUCTION

This is the second year of the Shoreham District Ornithological Society's (SDOS) competition in honour of John Stafford, a founder member and first President. Society members were invited to submit a piece of writing on an ornithological topic relevant to the SDOS recording area. Five entries were received this year and the twin objectives of honouring John's memory and stimulating local ornithological writing have certainly been achieved.

The contributions for 2008 – 2009 covered a wide spectrum of interests, making it a difficult choice to decide which was the best. For the second consecutive time John Crix has been adjudged the winner with his entry 'In the Flow' and has received the prize of £100 and our congratulations.

The contributions continue to show the range of interests covered in the SDOS whether it is the positive enjoyment in the company of other members on outings when so much knowledge is shared, making detailed recordings in a favourite area, passing on one's pleasure and enthusiasm to children over many years, understanding the pleasure of watching everyday birds or making a self-assessment of one's progress in birdwatching. It is hoped this booklet will be of interest to everyone and even encourage a few more people to take part next year.

The SDOS is grateful to Tony Marr who has undertaken the difficult task of judging the entries again this year. He was a very early member of the SDOS which presumably had a beneficial effect on his future as he is well known and respected in ornithological circles as a lecturer and a world-travelling leader of expeditions. His decision on the entries was made by giving marks under the following headings: Readable, Interesting, Relevant, Entertaining, Factual and Humorous.



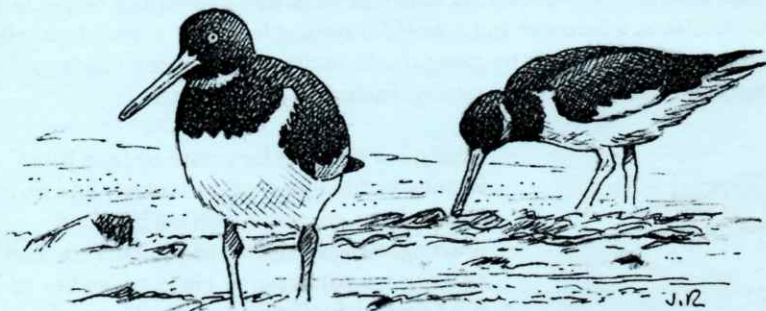
Finally, we are very fortunate to have John Reaney as a member of our society and he is always most generous with his beautiful drawings which enhance this publication and also our annual Reports. He is a member of the Society of Wildlife Artists. Copyright on all the illustrations resides with John Reaney.

IN THE FLOW

Another overcast October morning but the air is neither too cold nor moving too fast so he thinks this day will take its course without the inconvenience of freezing hands or watering eyes. It begins on the Ropetackle walkway - he touches the grain of one of the sea defence sculptures, glances down at the small boats abandoned, scattered at odd angles by the ebb tide.

The first step out of the back of C. S. Lewis' wardrobe and into 'the flow' always comes with this first look through his Swarovski ELs, the magic glasses he now raises to his eyes. Unlatched by Austrian optics the doors of perception swing open and mud and junk and the jumble of riverbed stones suddenly snaps clear and bright and he's walking on the shore with a pair of Oystercatchers: vivid orange-eyed, deep red bills picking at mussel shells. He shifts focus, uncovers a pale huddle of Dunlins on a dark bank below the railway bridge, a place where it's always winter-in-autumn. He pans along the broken ground beside the boats, back into the light, finds well-camouflaged Turnstones turning stones.

Beyond the bridge he passes along a narrow path - mudflats on one hand, scrubby trees to his right. Deliberately not looking too directly at or for anything in particular, he enters a state of non-concentrating concentration, unfocussed attention. And in this state there's very soon nothing much he's missing in the way of slight corner-of-the-eye movements or unusual shapes, or colours which might tell-tale prey. This immersion in the flow of his surroundings must be a place his man-the-hunter ancestors also inhabited - either that or miss the sidling sabretooth. A faint shadow falls upon a brown leaf, he raises the magic glasses, finds a gold-chased Greenfinch.



Often a corner-of-the-eye movement turns out to be a fragment of plastic, flapping in the fitful breeze - or a strange form resolves into an oddly shaped lump of mud, deposited by the river on the drying bank. But often enough there's a prize: the day is too grey for this

Kingfisher to catch fire, but the flash of brown-red, then bright green-blue wings and cobalt rump shooting out rapid and low across the river brings a warm happy feeling and there's even a bonus when the glasses reveal where, far across the river in the lee of the sea scout slipway, the stout little creature has taken up its next hunting perch.

Reaching the vantage point where the riverside path has eroded to rubble and become a step down onto the mud and tide line debris, he stops for some serious counting: 145 Black-headed Gulls, 20 Great Black-backed Gulls, 190 Lapwings, 210 Dunlins, 6 Grey Plovers... every last bobbing Redshank and even the heraldic Cormorant sejan, solitary on its post below the wooden toll bridge, makes its mark in his notebook.

Later, back home, he'll key these records into the national database - so here in the moment of counting he concentrates hard, mutters numbers under his breath, double-checks his species identification. There's nothing slapdash or day-dreaming about being in the flow - not least because when he's moving deep inside there he always feels accompanied by the guides and mentors, significant others, who have contributed to his birdlife education. These teachers are stern dark passengers looking over his shoulder, whispering about accuracy and reputation.

In truth he's still their apprentice and so he's anxious about this counting and recording and he worries, for instance, whether all the Dunlins are really Dunlins or whether he's missing something more unusual in the way of stints or sandpipers. And how can he be sure that this slightly differently coloured Grey Plover, somewhat detached from the others, isn't one of the Golden ones? And then when he hears, but doesn't actually manage to see, a Robin ticking in the scrub behind him it doesn't make it to his notebook - because as far as identification by bird sound is concerned, those doors of perception are barely ajar.

Onwards and over the wooden toll bridge across the river, then north towards Cuckoo Corner. Just a few gulls to identify and count on this stretch of river. A sole Wren shoots back under the wire which guards the engine factory. He notes a couple of Blue Tits flitting in the evergreens beyond the fencing. His immersion in the flow shallows for a while and his mind wanders under the A27 road bridge. Are they really building WMDs in Ricardo's? Why would a dog-walker wrap her pet's excrement in a plastic bag and drape it in a bush? Does the Blackbird which lives under this motorway have to sing extra loudly to make himself heard?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the guru of flow theory, says that flow happens 'when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable*'. And so suddenly it's back into the flow with a vengeance - because here is a flock of about 150 brown sparrow-sized somethings, alighting and rising and circuiting one of the bare fields between the motorway and the Cuckoo Corner ditch. Identifying these birds is definitely a Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi challenge. Even in the magic glasses the swirl is too far away - he notes very brown upperparts, possibly a bit of streaking on the back, rather pale underparts. He strains and stretches to meet the challenge and guesses at Linnets, starts to talk himself into just possibly being able to see a pinkish tinge to some underparts and just possibly some greyish heads. But he's aware that this was the fatal habit of shipwrecked navigators in the days before GPS: make a handful of coastal features fit their guess as to where they might actually be...

Time passes rapidly. He stands absorbed - tries to keep up with the flock with his glasses, wills it to land nearer so he can make a positive identification. Only this will quieten the voices of the dark passengers who are now breathing down his neck and making a bit of a fuss about this being an interesting record for the national database - if he can just get it right. But eventually and despite all this concentration he still has to admit defeat, give in for now, confess uncertainty in his apprentice's notebook. Back home he'll have to do some research, ask around, crank his skill level up a notch or so - M. Csikszentmihalyi would recognise and approve.

The morning has vanished. On his way back towards town, hunting the Meadow Pipits which usually pop up along the dyke path by the airport, he encounters another walker. This one has binoculars hung round the collar of the style of Berghaus jacket, the twenty-first century anorak, favoured by middle-aged men with outdoor leanings. "Aha!" he thinks, surfacing from the flow, shifting into Communication-With-Other-Human-Beings mode, "maybe this fellow birder can help me with my flock of 150 brown sparrow-sized somethings."

But very quickly he notices the focus of this other human being's attention and understands that the man's a Plane Spotter, an alien creature who reputedly finds his own state of flow in the noise and waste and unseemly carbon footprint of aviation fuel burning at a hundred litres per minute. They pass awkwardly on the dyke path, exchange grudging nods of greeting then return to their own depths and immersions: one man sees a helicopter taking off, the other counts the cloud of Lapwings that it raises.

Mild interest in this encounter with the Plane Spotter rapidly dissolves into anticipation of finding abundant Goldfinches in the teasel field by the recreation ground beyond the railway bridge - another count for the notebook.

He finds the teasels deserted but a pair of Pied Wagtails makes its presence known, wings in noisily from across the river, starts feeding in the short grass at his feet.

He stops to unfocus his attention again, let it drift into the view of scattered boats, now almost afloat over on the far side of the river just below where he first entered the flow. The Oystercatchers have moved away but now the grey morning become grey afternoon is illuminated by the brilliant white plumes and humorous concentration of a Little Egret stalking its prey - big yellow wellies lifting and splashing down at the edge of the rising tide.

Up from the riverside path, across the busy coast road and then before crossing Norfolk Bridge he pauses for a lingering scan of the RSPB reserve, hoping to add Grey Herons or maybe a Snipe to the day's bag. But there's nothing more to see and finally he puts away the Austrian optics with the apprentice's notebook. Emerging from the flow he's about to surface in the bustle and buses of Shoreham High Street - it will feel strange.

- Psychology Today, Jul/Aug 97 - Article ID: 899
- <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-19970701-000042.html>

YARD STICKS & YARD BIRDS

A yard is but 3 feet, the metre 3 feet and 3 inches. My teaching career spanned 3 decades and 3 years and recent early retirement has given me the opportunity to reflect on my time spent at the same school in East Worthing. There have been many birding incidents along the way which I now see as a yard stick for my own birding development.

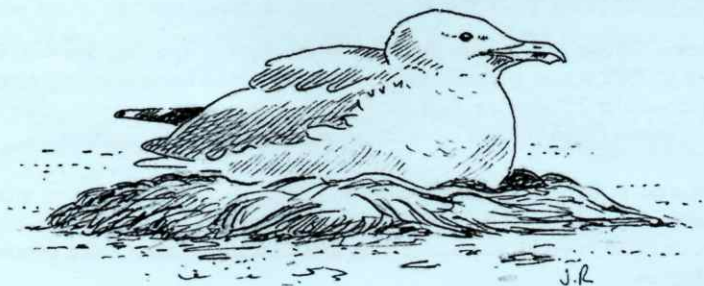
When I left college in 1976 teaching posts were few and far between. I applied for jobs from Cornwall to Suffolk, the Channel Islands to Cumbria. However, it was a middle school in the heart of SDOS territory that came up trumps. I knew nothing about birds in those days. Honestly!

On moving to Worthing I was fortunate to be offered accommodation with the parents of my college pal, David. He was also just starting his teaching career and had decided to "do a project" on birds. I well recall him telling me how he was going to lead an educational downland walk with his brother. "He can identify birds just by their call." I genuinely thought that this must be a joke. A short time later I was introduced to John Newnham but never could I have predicted that I would later get to know him as a fellow birder. I was still at the start of the birding ruler.

It was meeting my future wife, Shena, and her birdwatching father that awakened my interest in birds. I inched forward in my knowledge and soon, like David, I was endeavouring to include avian topics in my teaching. Back in the late 1970s things were much freer and in those pre-National Curriculum days teachers were treated as professionals and allowed a greater degree of flexibility in their pupils' diet.

Stepping out as a Year Leader I regularly led Assemblies and this gave me the opportunity to wax lyrical about avian matters. Also in my leadership role I was able to introduce units of study on birds and flight. These included many rural field trips with visits to Woods Mill and the RSPB's flagship reserve at Pulborough Brooks.

It was the unexpected birding incidents that have made the greatest impact on my memory and helped me to make strides in my own personal development as a birder.



Over the years I have been fortunate to observe a number of more unusual avian visitors.... I have always found inspiration from the excellent series of SDOS walks. On one of Stanley Allen's sessions at the Old Fort at Shoreham we gained clear diagnostic views of a Mediterranean Gull. The following day I scanned a flock of 100+ Black-Headed Gulls on our school field and, thanks to my recently acquired knowledge, I was able to identify a fine Mediterranean specimen. Unfortunately the availability of binoculars and time could not always be guaranteed so my checking of the gull flocks tended to be somewhat irregular.

However, the Herring Gull was a more regular visitor to my field of view. As in many south coast settlements Worthing saw a growing incidence of rooftop nesting in the 1990s. The school's flat roof became a popular breeding ground with a couple of nests being the annual norm.

Herring Gull parents viciously defend their nests and fledglings. Even the Carrion Crows are uncompromisingly despatched should they venture too near. It's no easier for humans. The period of frenetic feeding of the chicks usually coincides with the time of the year that children eat packed lunches on the playing field. Then the excitement mounts as the parent Herring Gulls carry out low-level sorties in their search for carelessly discarded scraps. Hitchcock could well have drawn inspiration for "The Birds" from such scenes. There were a couple of near misses when the birds tried to snatch food from children's lunch boxes and inevitably it was later deemed unsafe to picnic out-of-doors during the nesting period.

In the first year that the Herring Gulls graced us with their presence, the caretaker was so captivated that he constructed a hide on the flat roof so that the children could take turns to get a closer view of the nestlings. His scheme involved using a series of tables to create an approach tunnel. Access was to be afforded by a ladder. I jest not! I discretely pointed out the Health & Safety implication... Then a couple of days later he had to go on to the roof to retrieve a football. The Herring Gulls gave him a rapturous welcome with open beaks and wings and the observatory idea was soon abandoned!

Starlings regularly nested in gaps in the school's fabric in the early days when maintenance was less rigorous. However, the most novel nest site that I ever discovered was that of a Great Tit. The imaginative pair utilised a hole in brickwork that had been created after a drinking fountain had been relocated and the inlet pipe had been removed. Presumably it was the same pair who used it two years running. Amazingly the location was in the school's playground but the clever birds learned to "lay low" during playtime and only a few trusted students knew about the maternity wing.

There have also been changes in a regular yard bird in the form of the Pied Wagtail. On winter evenings in the 1990s scores of these frenetic movers could be found scurrying across the tarmac. However, in the 21st century their local habits changed and numbers appear to have declined. In retrospect I wish I'd been more statistical in my earlier observations.

Knowing of my interest in birds, a colleague came and dragged me away from an after-school marking session one September day. "What's that perky upright bird?" A male Wheatear had just dropped in on its way south. This species featured again more recently as I will relate further on.

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

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

Over the years several racing pigeons have refuelled in our school grounds. On one occasion the children alerted me to one that had been staggering around for a couple of days. It was clearly a sick specimen and was plied with a few tasty morsels in an attempt to aid revival. However, sadly, on the third day it was found dead.

The children who had been monitoring the bird's progress decided to inform the owner. We duly removed the ring to establish number and fancier. A composite letter was then posted to the Middlesex loft.

Meanwhile I needed to dispose of the corpse. The refuse collection was due the following morning so I elected to use this speedy despatch system! As I lifted the heavy galvanised lid of the 'wheelie-bin' there was a sudden movement from within which startled me and I instinctively let go. Seconds later, as I gingerly peered inside the bin, I found the cause of my alarm. A Starling had been rummaging inside and its vertical take-off had coincided with the descending lid. The racing pigeon now joined the body of the starling. Various thoughts sprang to mind including "killing two birds with one stone"!

One of my last major projects was the setting-up of links between our own school and a rural establishment north of Nairobi in Kenya. This culminated in a visit by my wife and I to Koma Ranch in March 2006. The pupils were keen to know about England and our interests. So bring on the birds! Shena's artistic abilities shone through even on the rough blackboard with poor quality chalk and we were soon delivering a variety of lessons on our common local birds and migration. Fortunately a couple of days before our visit the 'Independent' newspaper had produced a fine poster showing the migratory bird routes to/from Africa. Indeed migration was in full swing during our stay and we were able to point to the evidence outside the classroom window in the form of Barn Swallows and the occasional late Northern Wheatears. We stressed the importance of Africa to bird migration and it was wonderful to discuss "our" birds. Well, theirs or ours? We left that open but by the end of our stay the pupils were aware of the significance of African avian life.

I'd finally come full circle and a long way from the probationary teacher who did not know that there was a difference between the male and female House Sparrows frequenting the school yard! I felt I'd measured up to the challenges of my career.

WINTER BIRDWATCH AT SHOREHAM

It was bitterly cold with an icy breeze but the sun shone on twenty-three members of the SDOS as they gathered in the car park at the Old Fort for their end of year meeting. Bernie hurried back from the jetty as he saw folks arriving and in no time we were focused on the first splendid birds of the day: two Peregrine Falcons at their nest box on the chimney at Shoreham harbour. This good start augured well for the remainder of the morning and a succession of excellent sightings came up, one after the other, so that we didn't have time to bemoan our frozen fingers or streaming eyes, though the latter were somewhat of a hindrance to good birdwatching.

Two - or was it three? - Purple Sandpipers below the jetty seemed not to notice our presence though we certainly noticed theirs! Some of us had paid several visits to this corner looking in vain for these gorgeous plump little birds over the previous week. My first ever sighting of Purple Sandpipers was at Portland Bill on a dark winter's day. It was lashing with wind and rain as they fed on the grey rocks with the huge waves coming around them, plucky little creatures that they were.

Several handsome Turnstones went through the seaweed growing on the groyne and one toddled purposefully along the beach among the pebbles, turning stones... Those with telescopes focused on distant flocks of Gannet and other seabirds and the beach to our right was a hive of industry with Carrion Crows and gulls foraging among the debris on the tide line. A flock of Greenfinches danced over the vegetation at the top of the beach and someone saw a Meadow Pipit. A Merganser flew over our heads inland, skinny form straining upwards, and Cormorants flew over in ones and twos, athletic birds with a fast shallow wingbeat, unbeloved of fishermen. One had hung itself out to dry on a harbour pole.

We moved west to Widewater where we gathered on the beach to watch a flock of Sanderlings and Turnstones at the water's edge, with a Ringed Plover, all somewhat alert as there were several fishermen nearby. The sea was choppy and a stiff cold wind was blowing. A Great Crested Grebe broke the surface, clean lines and handsome crest showing bright in the sunlight and a few yards from him a diver showed itself briefly. To my astonishment someone called out "Red throated Diver" and I laughed thinking they were joking but no, the experts know their birds from no matter how short an encounter and I was told the secret of recognising the different diver species. We watched this bird for some minutes as it appeared briefly then dived again close inshore. Our main point of reference was the head of an unfortunate fisherman at the water's edge who, though he affected nonchalance, must have wondered why he was attracting so much attention.

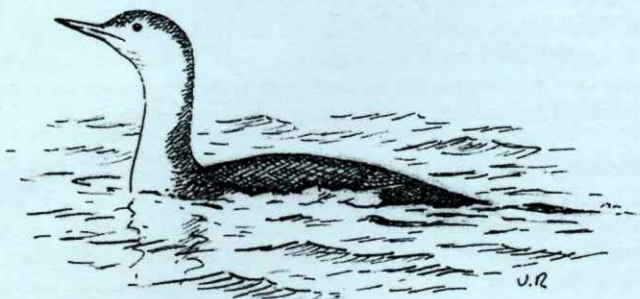
The biting wind eventually saw us move behind the beach huts to scan the enclosed waters where eight beautiful Teal, four ducks and four drakes, were feeding close by unafraid, their heads busy in the shallow water. The continued presence of the sun made each and every sighting a wow factor as the colours seemed to glow with a golden light. Beyond them Little Grebes in small groups disappeared and reappeared their fluffy grey bottoms showing up against the dark water. A keen-eyed person spotted the Water Rail hiding itself under a tamarisk on the far shore. I say "the" Water Rail because it seems that this particular bird

has been coming to the same spot each winter for several years and is well-known in the area and indeed it appears regularly on the SDOS website reports.

Family groups were walking along the footpath behind us, as they do after Christmas, thinking to take some exercise after all the feasting, and one stopped and asked were we looking for anything in particular. "No, just birdwatching," I replied, "nothing in particular." But my thought was that everything we saw was particular that particularly fine morning. A pair of Stonechats flitted along the top of the short bushes, male and female together as they usually are, faithful to each other. In Cyprus where I lived for four years they would suddenly arrive overnight in their pairs and we marvelled at them. One day there were none and the next there they were all over the countryside in pairs, sitting up on the vegetation in their usual manner, like happily married couples, in spite of the hunters and their guns.

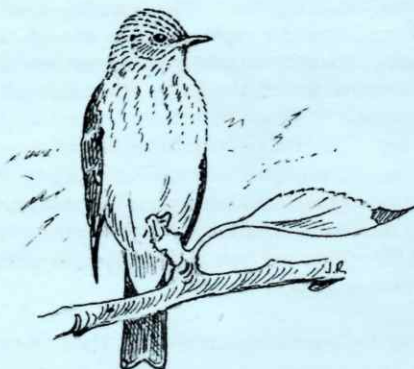
Two Mute Swans graceful in their snowy plumage, an even snowier Little Egret, a very red-legged Redshank and a resting Ringed Plover with his head towards a plank at the water's edge were added to the list - but where was the Kingfisher? "Has anybody seen a Kingfisher," I asked? "There are usually two here." was the reply and sure enough five minutes later a tall member of the group spotted one, having scoped from the eastern end of the far shore to the western end, where it rested on a wall, absolutely still and showing its fabulous colours to perfection.

It was the end of a perfect morning's birding for me though the other members of the party went on to see more species. I drove home in high spirits - what great people birders are, sharing their knowledge and their scopes, seldom in a hurry and enjoying the great outdoors in all weathers. Aren't birds brilliant, I thought as the feeling gradually returned to my frozen fingers. Now where had I heard that phrase before?



IN AN ENGLISH COUNTRY GARDEN

In 1976 I was living in a house which was only a hundred yards from the A27 yet Cirl Bunting was a regular visitor and I remember using a homemade parabolic recorder, made from the bowl of an old Radiant electric fire, to tape its song. Nowadays as I hear the Lesser Whitethroat's song my heart skips a beat as the Cirl Bunting is similar and is imprinted on my brain from all those years ago. In that same garden in one memorable year a Grasshopper Warbler arrived and stayed for four days, its reeling song piercing the early evening silence. In both instances I don't think I was particularly impressed at seeing these two birds in my garden, nor was I to know that the former would become a very rare sight in this area and the latter is a pleasing record but relatively easy to find in 2009.



In April 1976 I was exploring one of my favourite country lanes when I saw a house for sale. I was swept back to my childhood, when I spent endless happy hours on my grandfather's farm sampling every type of soft fruit, followed later in the year with the tree fruits: cherries, plums, apples and pears. Here was an old house and a garden which encapsulated those idyllic days. Within six weeks we had moved in, only two miles from our last house. Watching birds became an everyday occurrence!

I am sure that most people have a variety of tits in their gardens. Here Great and Blue are in evidence all the year round in good

numbers. They appear to put up with each other and find plenty of space to raise their young. There are minor squabbles on the bird feeders but I have learned to make several feeding stations which means the birds can spread out without having to fight for the food. It is obvious if appropriate food is provided the birds which visit regularly are in fine condition. I know I am the only person to feed birds in this immediate area though there is plenty of wild food as I am between two farms and close to woodland.

Recently I was looking down on a Great Tit as it darted back and forth feeding below me and was struck by the extraordinary subtlety of the olive-green on its back. It would take a fair mixture of paints to reproduce such an unusual tincture. Suddenly it was joined by three perky little Long-tailed Tits, noisy and confident as they helped themselves to the peanuts, staying at the feeder much longer at any one time than either the Great or Blue Tits. Once again the colours on these tiny bundles of energy almost defy description. The delicacy of that touch of pink on their flanks combined with the black and white plumage make them one of the most attractive tits. They prove their agility as they hover by our diamond-paned windows collecting cobwebs to bind their nest together. I never search for

nests in case I should leave a clue for a predator but the little Long-tails have been regular breeders for many years.

Above our front door we had an ancient colony of bees and one male House Sparrow learned to sit on a convenient ledge watching the bees as they arrived back at the entrance leading to the indoor hive, then diving on one unfortunate bee just like a flycatcher, would claim his prize. This very day I am pleased to hear the repetitive chirruping of a pair of House Sparrows as they are setting up a home in the eaves of the house.

We have been very fortunate to have good numbers of migrants attracted to the garden. When we first came here I was delighted to find that Swallows were regular visitors. The old stable hosted two families and in the best years we had another family in each of the two garages. There is absolutely no doubt that the adults know exactly where they are as they sweep across the garden when they come some time after April 10th each year noisily announcing their presence. I know one should not put words into their beaks but they could not indicate more clearly, 'Here we are, we're back!' I had a small Swallow entrance cut in the top of the huge stable door as it is not always possible to leave it open. It is about four inches square and they swoop through the space with expert judgement to and from their nest on the old beams. When the young are ready to fledge they line up on one of the cross-beams, watching their agile parents before launching themselves into the great unknown outside. In good years there will be two broods so that by the middle of August we shall have a small private flock of Swallows calling to each other as they career around the house perfecting their flying and feeding skills. The noise rises to a warning shriek when the Sparrowhawk appears out of the woodland at the back of the garden and the adults show incredible bravery mobbing this fearsome predator. In fact although I have seen the Sparrowhawk take Blue Tits, House Sparrows, Dunnock and even a Mistle Thrush I have not seen them successful in catching a Swallow though there have been some near misses. In 2008 I was surprised and saddened to have no Swallows at all, a great loss to the summer sounds of the past 32 years.

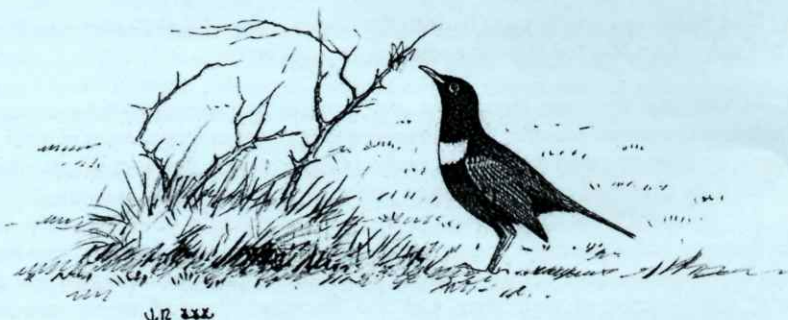
During the 1970's and 80's Spotted Flycatchers were a welcome sight arriving here during mid-May, such trusting birds, they chose to nest on a metal ledge at the southern end of the house only six feet off the ground. Perching in the plum tree with the light from behind, the bird would sit alert and watchful, then make a foray to catch an insect with a surprisingly loud 'snap', carrying its prize back to the original perch. We still have quantities of insects but only a rare Spotted Flycatcher moving through on migration.

Chiffchaff and Blackcap are here throughout the summer but, strangely, I have never recorded either in the winter months. Their presence epitomises the movement of birds in that extraordinary journey called migration. I really do experience a shiver of delight when I hear the first male Chiffchaff calling for a mate and days later the sweet answering, 'prrrt prrrt' which she gives when she arrives. (This is not a sound you hear when the males are alone). The Blackcap has unbounded energy where song is concerned, singing all day long from various high positions in an old tree. Garden Warblers do come into the garden and I enjoy hearing the contrast of their song with the Blackcap. The former an unending warbling of fast, varied notes, whilst the latter to me, is more pleasingly musical, a shorter song with a definite cut-off at the end.

I had to wait a long time before Great Spotted Woodpeckers managed to raise a family here very low down in an old Willow tree. As soon as the nest was vacated it was taken over by a Great Tit which refurbished the hole with moss before losing interest and a Leafcutter Bee took advantage packing its young into the soft wall dug out by the original owners. Surely this is re-cycling at its best! A Little Owl made an unexpected venture into the house by falling (?) down the chimney on two occasions which startled me when I went in to draw the curtains, unblinking, unmoving, we stared at each other! Also both Tawny and Barn Owl calls frequently haunt the night, such exciting sounds to hear.

There have been the surprising rarities: a Woodcock plummeting down in deep snow one very cold winter's day, an exhausted Nightjar which I nearly trod on in the vegetable patch, a Raven being mobbed by a Sparrowhawk, both giving a spectacular display for some while overhead. A breathtaking moment when I realised I had a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker prospecting the trees, but it was a fleeting visit. In the lower orchard was an old, tree stump covered in Ivy, and there, bold as brass, a Tree Sparrow, no two! What delightful birds they are, a more definite colour than a House Sparrow and such an unexpected species to find in my garden. A Reed Warbler, out of its normal habitat, which visited and stayed in the garden for up to five days in two different years. A Ring Ousel seen in exactly the same place in the back garden in May and October in two consecutive years.

In checking my records I see that we have recorded 63 species here of which 31 have nested successfully. Naturally the uncommon visitors are a bonus but it is the Robin, Dunnock, Wren, tits and finches which provide daily pleasure in my country garden.



GORING GAP

This is one of the few 'strategic gaps' on the West Sussex coastline, i.e. where building development does not extend to the shoreline. Known as Manor farm in former times, it is a small area of approximately 120 acres. It encompasses for recording purposes the land south of the Ilex Way to the sea, with its eastern boundary is Aldsworth Avenue, Goring, and its western boundary as Sea Lane, Ferring.

The habitat is limited, with shingle beach and exposed low tide mudflats to its south behind which are mainly arable fields and some hedgerows. The north west side until recently held a thriving colony of White-letter Hairstreaks. On the eastern side runs a narrow woodland strip known as "the Plantation". Provision of a permanent area of fresh water, such as a scrape or pond would increase the area's attractiveness to birds, and to wildlife generally. Apart from a tiny pool in the centre of the Gap it holds no fresh water.

The value of Goring Gap is to the species that either breed, feed, or roost there, or use the area as a migration 'funnel' north in spring, or south in autumn. The majority of the following observations are personal, the most unusual of which have been accepted by Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS).

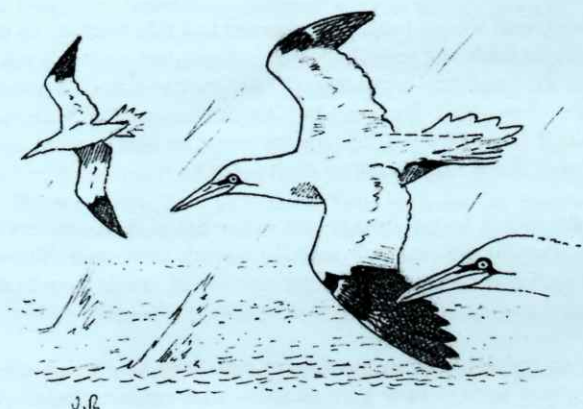
The field adjacent to the seafront on the Ferring side once held a high-tide wader roost. Over the last 10 years waders have only roosted here occasionally, for example when there is a particularly high tide. It seems most waders now roost on the shingle beaches anywhere from Brooklands to the east and Rustington to the west although many at times attempt to settle on the beach opposite the field. The reason for this change of roost site is unknown although on a single occasion I've seen Peregrine fly in fast and low, and take a Dunlin. Perhaps the waders feel more vulnerable to predator attack?

Waders commonly found are Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Redshank, and Turnstone. Far less frequent and only recorded occasionally have been Golden Plover, Lapwing, Curlew, Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit, Purple Sandpiper, Ruff, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, and Knot. The beach has produced two Kentish Plovers in the previous 30 years, one of which wintered; one Grey Phalarope, and both Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint. A rare opportunity to view a summer plumage individual of the latter occurred in June 2004 when one was present on Jun 18, with Sanderlings. Avocet has also graced the beach.

In well over thirty years of watching the site it still has not surrendered a single national rarity to me, although others have found both Gull-billed Tern and Blue-winged Teal. However, a Whiskered Tern, which flew east along the tide line at nearby Worthing beach in May 1985, must surely have passed the Gap!

Sea watching produces not surprisingly similar species to those at Worthing beach although our regular watch point has been lost, as some kind souls have burnt down the seafront shelter. Included amongst the unusual to have passed the Gap have been Sooty Shearwater, Balearic Shearwater, Storm-Petrel, Garganey, Goosander, Velvet Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Little Auk, Glaucous Gull, Iceland Gull, and Roseate Tern. More regular have been Arctic, Pomarine and Great Skuas, Little Gull, and Black Tern. The most spectacular

movements however involve the commoner species. Atmospheric indeed are large early spring Brent Goose movements, the now increasingly rare hard-weather movements of marsh ducks passing close inshore; and a heavy spring passage of Common Terns or Bar-tailed Godwits. Challenging mixed species wader flocks never fail to impress.



It's a good site to look for birds on the sea, autumn through to spring. Slavonian Grebe is annual, the most being seven together in March 2005. Black-necked and Red-necked Grebes are occasionally noted. In the winter months Red-throated Divers can occur in sometimes-significant numbers, e.g. 62 on 15 Dec 2008 and the year seldom passes without a Black-throated Diver or two on the sea. Great Northern Diver is rare although near annual here. The stretch between Worthing beach and Ferring beach attracts at times large numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers including a county record of 340 in Nov 2004. Three-figure counts are now frequent. Great-Crested Grebe can also appear in high numbers, and noteworthy was 301 in Dec 2005. Other species to look out for on the sea in winter are Common Scoter, Eider, Razorbill and Guillemot. In recent years there have been significant numbers of principally Razorbill moving back and forth offshore, in Jan and Feb. I think the most amazing sight I've been lucky enough to witness here was a flock of between 2,500 and 3,000 Gannets feeding close inshore on Boxing Day 2005. The noise alone was incredible!

This is not a site for the rarity hunter although over the years at least three Serins have been accepted. Also unusual has been Whooper Swan, Montagu's Harrier, Osprey, Short-eared Owl, Dartford Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Great Grey Shrike, Lapland Bunting, Snow Bunting; and in June 2005, a Common Rosefinch in beach vegetation was the first discovered in our recording area since 1869!

It can be a good site for passerine migrants in spring and autumn, usually in small numbers and dominated heavily by Wheatear. Yellow Wagtail, Stonechat, Spotted Flycatcher, and all of the commoner 'sylvia' and 'phylloscopus' warblers are regular. Less so are Pied Flycatcher, Redstart, Ring Ouzel, Tree Pipit, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler, and I've

only found single Grasshopper Warbler (Aug 2007) and Wood Warbler (early 1980's). Nightingale has gone unrecorded for many years.

Black Redstart is now less frequent in winter than formerly. At this time of year one or two Rock Pipits '*petrosus*' can usually be found on the shingle. Occasionally Feb/Mar turns up a 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit, race '*littoralis*'.

Sparrowhawk and Kestrel can often found, with Buzzard now becoming more regular. Hobby is seen arriving or departing in most years. Honey Buzzard, Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier and Merlin have been noted very infrequently. Peregrine sightings are now several per annum.

Redwings and Fieldfares only occur here in any numbers in hard weather, and in these conditions you might be lucky enough to flush a Woodcock from the Plantation, or perhaps find a Brambling or two.

Thirty years ago this was a regular wintering site for Tree Sparrow but alas, no longer. Autumn can often produce visible finch migration, in particular Goldfinch with occasional good Siskin numbers, together with a few Redpolls and Bramblings. Swallow and House Martin migration over the Gap in September can run into thousands, and Meadow Pipit can arrive in numbers. Woodlark has been recorded on a handful of occasions.

A number of breeding species has been lost here since the 1970's, including Yellowhammer, Spotted Flycatcher, Lesser Whitethroat, and Willow Warbler and probably reflects a national trend. Grey Partridge until recent years was a common sight but suffered a dramatic decline. From a count of forty-three in late 1997, just 7 pairs remained in 2000; six individuals in Jan 2001 was the last record. There has as yet been no re-colonisation. The reasons for this tragic decline are unknown, speculatively disease may have been a cause or perhaps a human element was involved. Similarly, well into the 1990's the area hosted a wintering flock of up to 500 Linnets; I'd be lucky to find one now.

Some species regarded as common elsewhere are distinctly scarce or absent here. No fresh water means Coot and Little Grebe are unrecorded. Also not yet noted is Nuthatch whilst Jackdaw and Rook are strangely rare and Bullfinch has not been seen for at least ten years. On the plus side Little Egret is now a common sight on the beach, and Mistle Thrush has returned with at least two pairs.

There has been no noticeable change in either Whitethroat or Blackcap breeding numbers over the period, and Skylark is back to between six and eight pairs. Corn Bunting has bred twice but not recently. Coal Tit and Treecreeper are irregular. Both Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers breed but Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has not been seen since the 1980's. Long-tailed Tit has increased. Autumn sees an influx of Goldcrests in variable numbers and Firecrest often accompanies them, exceptionally four to five of the latter. Pied Wagtails arrive in autumn and winter in small numbers. 287 in Oct 1998 was exceptional.

The area does suffer dreadfully from disturbance and particularly from walkers and uncontrolled dogs along the beach at low tide in winter. Add to this 'escaped' jet-skis, aircraft, cars, and large numbers of people on fine weekends, and I've probably put you off ever going there! The most peaceful time to visit is on a cold, bleak winter's day.

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 this annual report. Some previous issues of this report are also still available from the Hon Secretary for purchase by members or non-members. 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.