

EDITORIAL

I would like to thank all those who responded to my call for articles. In the end we have an excellent mix from the superb description of where to see birds in Catalonia to two trips in southern Africa. We manage to go north to Barry Buddon to discover the biodiversity of the area as well as an AOS trip to the Cairngorms. My thanks to Mark Easterbrook for arranging a spectacular AOS trip to Cyprus early in the year or maybe that should be to his wife Debs who seemed to do all the work less point out birds. We even manage to get to the other side of the world in this edition with a trip to Australia. I have been bird ringing this year and the articles from our “ringers” who have been ringing at the top of Scotland and from deepest Somerset provided an inspiration. That and the 2nd Barred Warbler recorded in Wiltshire (this time caught), I have provided a range of photos of ‘Birds in the Hand’ throughout the magazine. All photos are copy-write the AOS unless otherwise declared underneath the photo. Having a bird in the hand certainly concentrates the mind when you have to identify, age and sex the bird. I would like to thank everyone who provided photos including some friends who are not members. Finally we start with the expedition report from the AOS trip to Ascension. My congratulations to John Hughes who gained his PhD by making sense of all the data collected over the years from our numerous trips to Ascension. The AOS supported by the University of Birmingham, continues to provide continuity as we shift the aims to increase our knowledge about the sea birds that occupy this lonely spot in the middle of the Atlantic.

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SOOTY TERNS ON ASCENSION ISLAND IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC INTEGRATED POPULATION MONITORING PROGRAMME EXPEDITION REPORT 27 – MAY 2014

(Roger Dickey)

Summary: Despite careful consideration of the optimum survey period for the previous expedition, the breeding peak of sooty terns *Onychoprion fuscatus* in August 2013 was estimated to have been 6 weeks earlier than anticipated. The 2014 expedition was considered to have arrived 2 weeks later than the optimum survey time. In line with its major objective, a complete census of sooty terns was completed. The colony size in late May 2014 was calculated to be $376,414 \pm 89,000$ birds (95% confidence interval). This was twice last season's population size estimate. A further 2,000 sooty terns were ringed and 591 birds were re-trapped, including the recovery of 4 geolocators. Twenty sooty terns were fitted with geolocators on metal rings which now leaves 60 to be recovered. A further 35 brown noddies *Anous stolidus* were ringed at nests in the sooty tern fairs. On Letterbox, 63 juvenile masked boobies *Sula dactylatra* were ringed. In total, 10 hours of ringing training were conducted with the Ascension Island Conservation Office staff.

Background

Since 1987, the British military ornithological societies have monitored the colony of sooty terns and other seabird species on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. The first population census was completed in 1990 10 years prior to the commencement of the RSPB-mediated feral cat eradication on the island. Sooty terns were closely monitored during the two years when cats were culled and monitoring has continued in the post-eradication phase. The return of brown noddies to the main island to nest has also been monitored. This report contains the findings of the twentieth and latest expedition of the Army Ornithological Society (AOS), while working in close co-operation with the seabird monitoring team from the Ascension Island Conservation Office. The study remains focussed on, but not exclusively, the breeding biology of the sooty tern, determining the size of breeding population, identifying and recording levels of predation, site fidelity, sub-annual breeding, and migration strategy.

Aims of the May 2014 Expedition

1. Population census of the sooty tern.
2. Locate and recover geolocators deployed on birds in March 2011, December 2012 and September 2013.
3. Ring masked boobies on Letterbox.
4. Continuation of ringing training and renewal of ringing permits held by Ascension Island Conservation Office staff.
5. Rat indices at Mars Bay.
6. Attachment of geolocators on another 20 sooty terns and ringing a further 2,000 birds.

Expedition Booby 20 – May 2014 - Participants

Warrant Officer 2 Tony Giles	AOS Expedition Leader
Lieutenant Colonel Roger Dickey (retd)	AOS Expedition 2IC
Group Captain Martin Routledge	RAFOS
Lt Cdr Julia Springett (retd)	RNBWS

Warrant Officer 2 Joe Stockil	AOS
Staff Sergeant Dave Mothershaw	AOS
Ms Lynne Millard	AOS
Dr Jim Reynolds	University of Birmingham/AOS
Mr Colin Wearn	RAFOS
Ms Lucy Garrett	University of Birmingham

Members of the expedition were on the island from 15th May to 23rd May 2014 (inclusive). A total of 90 person.days were spent in the field.

Weather

Increased rainfall over several weeks preceding the expedition caused a ‘greening of the island’ with most vegetation in healthy condition and low altitude grasses benefitting particularly. Anecdotal reference was made to the conditions by which sooty terns laid eggs on bare earth and, in the period until fledging, grass will have grown to a height of 2 feet above the nest. Ascension Island Conservation Office staff informed that there had been near continuous rainfall for 48 hours prior to the arrival of the expedition and there was up to 2 hours of light rainfall on the fairs for each day of the expedition. Rainfall was the probable cause of a number of chick deaths when young chicks probably succumbed to exposure in the heavier downpours.

Sooty terns

Area survey

The area of the colony was determined by traversing the periphery of all nesting birds and logging coordinates regularly (as way points) with a hand-held GPS unit. The colony this season comprised five sub-colonies at Waterside and four at Mars Bay. A “Fair Description Sheet” was completed for each sub-colony. The total area occupied by breeding birds in May 2014 was 14.12 ha.

Nest density

Nest densities were measured by quadrats counted on random transects through both fairs. In total 1,070 apparently occupied nests (AoNs) were counted in 81 quadrats. The AoNs per m² are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of parameters used to estimate the size of breeding populations (pairs) of sooty terns at the two colonies on Ascension Island in May 2014. The population size and 95% confidence intervals are determined by multiplying colony area by breeding density of birds.

Colony	Area (ha)	Number of quadrats	Number of nests counted	Nest density (eggs per m ²)	Mean population size ± 95% CIs (pairs of birds)
Mars Bay	8.22	54	688	1.274	104,721 ± 26,901
Waterside	5.90	27	382	1.415	83,486 ± 17,683
Total	14.12	81	1,070		188,207 ± 44,584

Population size

On 15th May 2014 the Mars Bay colony contained 105,000 AoNs and that at Waterside contained 83,000 AoNs, providing an overall total of 188,000 AoNs. The Mars Bay colony comprised areas of the fair where birds have nested in previous seasons but no birds were located breeding on the low lying area that follows the track down to the sea. The fair stretched to the highest 'shoulder' of the bay and nearly all the way to the sea. No birds nested on the clinker. The sub-colonies were treated separately for quadrat surveys which were taken at Mars Bay and Waterside as the few remaining eggs were hatching. To calculate the total population size estimate, the breeding density was estimated from the total number of eggs on the two fairs and total number of quadrats surveyed. This gave an average of 1.32 eggs per m² (from nest density estimates [eggs per m²] of 1.27 at Mars Bay and 1.42 at Waterside).

Optimum survey date

Survey dates are determined by the date of the first egg at Waterside and past expeditions have visited the fairs 42-60 days later, when the colony is at its greatest number of nesting adults and chicks are between 12 and 30-days old. For the second consecutive season an accurate estimation of this 'first egg' date has been difficult to determine. Several factors contributed to this including the continuous and late-laying of eggs on the fairs from the previous season, disguising the new season's initial nesting peak. Nevertheless, it was estimated that the optimum period for surveying this season's fairs (i.e. enabling the confident marking of colony boundaries and there being sufficient eggs within those colonies to be counted using quadrats), was probably 2 weeks prior to the arrival of the expedition (i.e. perhaps close to 1st May 2014). The abundance of sooty tern chicks between 1 and 50-days old supports this conclusion. However, the differences in population size between Waterside and Mars Bay were a reversal of the previous season. Waterside this year had older chicks but fewer incubating adults.

Food availability

Food for both adult birds and chicks was observed from regurgitation when some birds were handled. Unlike the previous expedition, the predominance of sardines and sprats (both Clupeidae) was noticeable with, based on the average volume of regurgitant across all birds, often large quantities brought back to the fairs. There appeared to be little difference between the size of catches held in the crops of adult terns for their own consumption and those brought back to feed chicks. Of note was the tendency for adult birds to regurgitate when handled to be birds that had recently returned to the nest as evidenced by their wet feathers and fresh crop contents. Where this occurred in a particular area, we changed location but retained regurgitated samples that were taken for subsequent laboratory analyses (e.g. stable isotope analysis).

Predation

Although corpses of adults and juvenile sooty terns were found, there was no evidence of large-scale predation. The Ascension Island Conservation Office considered that domestic cats *Felis catus silvestris*, although opportunistic killers, had not specifically targeted the fairs

and that the constant and large numbers of house mice *Mus musculus* represented a more easily obtained source of food. Other predators are discussed below:

Black rats *Rattus rattus*. Previous expeditions noted high levels of predation by black rats at both breeding colonies. However, there was little evidence of rat predation of juveniles at either. Therefore, rat indices were only calculated for Mars Bay with traps moved 20 m further from the colony's periphery after the first night of trapping. Trapping was only of limited success as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of rat trapping at the Mars Bay sooty tern colony on Ascension Island in May 2014.

Location	Dates	Traps set	Captured
Mars Bay west of track	19 th May	30	2
	20 th May	28	0

Ascension frigatebirds *Fregata aquila*. In line with work on previous expeditions, the number of frigatebirds hunting over, and resting within, the colonies was counted. The main centre of frigatebird hunting activity was at Waterside as this was where the majority of eggs were hatching. A summary of observations is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Numbers of frigatebirds at sooty tern colonies on Ascension Island in May 2014.

Location	Counts	Average number	Maximum number
Mars Bay	6	2.3	4
Waterside	3	13	18

Common mynas *Acridotheres tristis*. Historically, mynas have inflicted considerable losses on the sooty tern colonies when they consume eggs but destroy many more by puncturing the shell at the blunt ends. The number of birds visiting the fairs appeared to have reduced significantly and none was seen at Waterside while only five were seen on Mars Bay throughout the period. Losses from mynas were noted on Mars Bay but were considerably reduced compared with previous expeditions. There was no definitive count of eggs destroyed by mynas.

Sally Lightfoot crabs *Grapsus adscensionis*. While there was no direct evidence of losses of birds from this crab species, we found six adult tern corpses within the fair and close to the coast (i.e. within 100 m) that had been stripped to the bone of muscle tissues and internal organs.

New sightings

A single albino chick was observed on Mars Bay on 23rd May 2014. The bird, which was aged as P2, was well-nourished and in the centre of a sub-colony.

Desertion

There appeared to be less cases of wholesale desertion (i.e. tens or hundreds) of eggs across areas of the colony compared with previous expeditions. It is speculation as to whether this

was directly attributed to a lack of disturbance, especially in the Mars Bay colonies now sited on the western ridge and further than usual from public access to the bay.

Re-trapping of adults

Considerable effort was invested in the re-trapping of adult sooty terns with the combined teams of the AOS and Ascension Island Conservation Office staff. An organised and systematic search was conducted to maximum effect on both fairs. The re-trapping process included the search to recover geolocators deployed in March 2011, December 2012 and September 2013 (see Table 4 for details). In total 591 sooty terns were re-trapped this season (436 at Mars Bay and 155 at Waterside) and none of these was a control. A total of 182 man-hours was dedicated to re-trapping.

Ringling of sooty terns

A further 1,990 adult sooty terns and 10 juveniles aged P7 were ringed by the combined ringling teams. The majority of older juvenile birds were estimated to be at least 25-30 days from fledging and, therefore, still subject to higher levels of mortality than birds closer to fledging. Therefore, it was decided to focus the ringling effort on adult birds. The continued ringling and re-trapping of sooty terns is considered vital to the understanding of movement, longevity, distribution, age at first breeding, survival and demographics of the colonies. With now approximately 25,000 birds ringed and approximately 5,000 re-trapped, there is a commitment by the AOS and Ascension Island Conservation Office to combine ringling and re-trapping data for use between the two organisations. To this end, Lucy Garrett who has an MSc in Applied Ecology and Conservation from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, has been accepted as a PhD student at Birmingham University to study the social and genetic networks of sooty terns on Ascension Island. She will be testing hypotheses using the ringling-re-trap database that has been gathered by the AOS during expeditions.

Geolocators

In total four geolocators were recovered from Mars Bay and Waterside while a further 20 geolocators were deployed on adult birds at Mars Bay. Full details of the four devices recovered are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Full details of recoveries of geolocators from sooty terns re-trapped on Ascension Island in May 2014.

Location	Co-ordinates	Date recovered	Geocator number	Colour Rings	Date Deployed
Mars Bay	0566326/9117955	17 th May 2014	L290-2893	B-B	3 rd December 2012
Mars Bay	0565824/9117664	17 th May 2014	H389	G-G	4 th September 2013
Mars Bay	0565705/9117348	20 th May 2014	L290-2879	B-B	3 rd December 2012
Waterside	0569951/9117732	16 th May 2014	H386	G-G	4 th September 2013

N.B. Colour rings were either light blue (B) or light green (G).

Brown noddies

Summary of findings

The number of breeding brown noddies appears to have increased from previous visits and this is borne out in data held by the Ascension Conservation Office. Prior to the arrival of the expedition and since 28th February 2014, a total of 75 nest sites had been monitored (including 14 sites on Mars Bay). This is a significant expansion and monitoring of progress on both fairs will be useful to future studies. Birds appeared to be at several stages of breeding from eggs to fledged and some were still prospecting. Eggs within the same locale appeared to be at the same stage of development but this is an initial observation that is not supported by empirical data. Encouragingly, more nest sites were discovered on Mars Bay but these were well-dispersed from valley floor to the heights above the bay. They typically followed the pattern of nesting close to, or on, rocky outcrops and in proximity to sooty terns.

Population estimate on mainland

The estimate of breeding brown noddies on the mainland should follow the well-documented figures held by the Ascension Island Conservation Office although additional sites were discovered during the period of the expedition and data exchanged. At the time of the expedition it is estimated there had been over 85 nest sites established with an unknown number being successful. Ten sites on Mars Bay were occupied by chicks, some of which were fully fledged. On Waterside, chicks occupied 20 nest sites.

Ringling of brown noddies

A total of 37 brown noddy chicks were ringed (35 on Waterside and 2 on Mars Bay) plus one adult on Waterside. The Ascension Island Conservation Office hold a comprehensive list of all brown noddies ringed outside the times of the expedition.

Masked boobies

Summary of findings

Masked boobies were ending a period of breeding with only a few birds still on nests. However, not all juveniles were fully fledged and the combined teams worked together to ring as many juveniles as possible in the short time available. Most adults were extremely flighty and difficult to catch.

Population estimate on mainland

No full estimate of the breeding population was made on this occasion.

Ringling of masked boobies

In total, 63 juvenile masked boobies were ringed and four adults were re-trapped. Data on re-trapped birds are not available for this report.

Other birds and other taxa of note

White terns *Gygis alba*

White terns were not studied on this expedition. However, breeding pairs in small numbers were seen on most of their regular breeding sites on inland cliffs and roosting in eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* spp.). It was noted that there were more birds in the air than normally encountered in the region from Spire Beach to Letterbox.

Mexican thorn *Prosopis juliflora* encroachments

There were no encroachments noted on any of the sooty tern fairs, nor was it considered that there was an immediate threat to the colonies.

Outreach

Saturday Club

A combined team of expedition members and Ascension Island Conservation Office staff entertained children, parents and teachers from the Saturday Club at Mars Bay, by showing them bird ringing, how geolocators worked and why we use them, and the threat to sooty terns from a variety of predators. The demonstrations were well-received and followed up with an article for the *Ascension Conservation Quarterly*.

Training and support

Ten hours were spent on ringing training with the Ascension Island Conservation Office. Ringing training was led by Colin Wearn.

BIRD IN THE HAND



Sparrowhawk



Barred Warbler



Bonelli's Warbler



Lesser Whitethroat



Lesser Redpoll



Cetti's Warbler



House Sparrow



Redstart



Nightingale



Nuthatch



Blackcap



Swallow



Yellowhammer



Razorbill



Greenfinch



Whitethroat



Tawny Owl



Blue Tit



Puffin



Chiffchaff



Garden Warbler



Goldcrest

THE ARMY ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY TOUR OF CYPRUS

22 – 30 MARCH 2014

(Mark Easterbrook)



The Group – Akhna Dam 30 Mar 14



(L-R) Roger Dickey, Andrew Bray, Tony Kaduk, Mike Williams, Mark Easterbrook (Leader), Richard Seargent, Dave Pentelow & Andy Harrison

Introduction

It started with an arrival which was reminiscent of the retreat from Moscow and ended with a finale that nobody could have predicted. In between there were great views of birds, some disappointing dips, the highs and lows of birding but most of all great company, a common purpose and a very fulfilling and enjoyable tour. Covering 1048 miles during the tour, which is a lot in Cyprus, all of the main habitats and sites were included with the exception of the Polis and Lachi areas which would have required a 10 day tour to do the areas justice.

Acknowledgements

- Roger Dickey – For his part in the planning and advice given during the recce of Feb 13.
- Colin Richardson – For his advice/suggestions for birding success, the Cyprus Scops Owl and his company during the tour.
- Debs Easterbrook – OC Rear Party – for dealing with necessary admin to ensure the tour ran smoothly in the group's absence.
- The "Crew" – For their commitment, stamina and light hearted view of life, despite the lack of coffee.

Daily Itineraries with Birding Highlights

Day 1 – Saturday 22

No birding took place today as the 3 different flights from the UK arrived in the late evening. After a slightly disjointed arrival process the team were formed and on route to Ayios Nikolaos (Ay Nik) for 2 nights and the first phase of the tour. After arriving in the accommodation, bags were dropped and we all ate at the local grill restaurant where much pork, sheftalia and chicken was eaten, all washed down with several KEOs. A good night's sleep on a full belly and ready for the inaugural trip to Cape Greco in the morning.

Day 2 – Sunday 23

Cape Greco can be a bit hit and miss as with any migrant hotspot, but today it was an outstanding introduction to Cypriot birding. Checking the Cape Greco Pines area the first bird that was heard and seen was an Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and several Hoopoes flushed from the ground – a good start. As we walked the area it became clear that there'd been a large influx. Wrynecks were seen well with Tree Pipits, Eastern Orphean Warblers and a female Pied Flycatcher as back up. The ploughed fields in at the Cape gave opportunities to get fantastic views of Cretzschmar's Buntings, Water Pipits, Tawny Pipits, Corn Buntings, Isabelline, Northern and of course the endemic Cyprus Wheatear. We continued to walk under the Army Camp cliffs where 2 late Black Redstarts were joined by a Common Redstart, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and a male Siberian Stonechat. Blue Rock Thrushes, Ruppell's Warblers and Spectacled Warblers were everywhere and we soon discovered a single female Ortolan Bunting. As the group watched a couple of Eastern Subalpine Warblers another *sylvia* came into view and showed very well giving everyone perfect views of a male Cyprus Warbler – pressure off, both endemics in the bag on the first morning.

We continued towards the sea caves from the Army Camp and as we rounded a corner I heard what I thought was a Coal Tit. I saw it in the bins and it was darker and longer than the endemic race that do not leave Troodos. I called Richard over and said "What's this"? He nonchalantly replied "A Coal Tit" – obviously thinking I'd lost it. The group viewed the bird and concurred it was a Coal Tit – Eurasian Coal Tit! The first record for Cyprus. With other birds on their minds, it took me a while to ensure they realised the importance of the find which would require a description – unfortunately the bird was very flighty and as we attempted to get closer for a photo – it did one.

We drove to Ayia Napa Football Pitches on a speculative search and as we drove up I pointed out a target bird on the fence – a stonking male Masked Shrike which was admired by all. Continuing to the famous Ayia Napa Sewage Works we walked around and Tony spotted a

black and grey Shrike which proved to be a very early Lesser Grey Shrike. We eventually tracked down and secured great views of a male dark throated Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, with more of the same migrants we'd seen earlier. A Common Sandpiper was on the lagoons and as we left I broke hard to allow the group to see and photograph a male Siberian Stonechat. We ate our packed lunch at Ayia Thekla but sadly no wintering Greater Sand Plovers remained.



Siberian Stonechat

After lunch we continued to Paralimni Lake and Sotira Pond where a Yellow Wagtail fest ensued. As we grilled them we saw Black-headed (*feldegg* - the majority), Blue-headed (*flava*), a single Grey-headed (*thunbergi*) and many hybrid *supercilliaris* forms. Suddenly, the birds took flight and as we watched a ringtail Pallid Harrier complete with neck collar. The Wagtails settled and Dave Pentelow called a superb male Citrine Wagtail – it just kept getting better! Eventually, Tony Kaduck found a *supercilliaris* with a yellow supercillium making it a *xanthrophis* hybrid – a rare form but sadly it was only seen by one other. Spanish Sparrows and Corn Buntings were numerous and the Spur-winged Plovers gained the usual attention afforded to them when they're first seen. It was time to move onto Akhna Dam to finish off the day. Although there wasn't much here we added Bluethroats, Ruffs and a lone late wintering *sinensis* Cormorant. Sadly, here a Starling was suppressed and the culprit shall be berated for ever more – it was the only one of the tour and would have added to the group

total. I stopped in the local village for the final bird of the day - a Little Owl.

Day 3 – Monday 24

The Larnaca area beckoned and with 83 species in the bag on day one it was going to be a tough act to follow. We paused at Dolphin Rocks, Oroklini Coast initially and our luck was in with 5 Sandwich Terns and 2 Baltic Gulls being on the rocks amongst the reducing Black-headed Gulls – the list was moving. It's all about the list you know? We drove the short distance to Oroklini Marsh and the new hide and started to find new birds immediately with 4 Black-tailed Godwits, numerous Black-winged Stilts some over wintering wildfowl including Pintails, Shovelers, Teals with the stars being breeding Red-crested Pochards that were viewed by all. 12 Greater Flamingo remained and a Snipe crept from the undergrowth. No time to waste, onto the Larnaca Sewage Works and Airport Fields area. As is the norm, many Black Francolins could be heard and we flushed 5 as the mini-bus passed but views were not good enough for such a target bird. At the sewage works we saw the only Armenian Gull of the trip – an adult, along with 1st winter Caspians, a single Slender-billed and a surprise 1st winter Little Gull. 3 drake Ferruginous Ducks were a bonus here and eventually we located a calling Black Francolin which was seen well by all – “tick” another target in the bag.

We stopped at Pervolia on the way to Petounta Point for what was described as a “drive-by” Calandra Lark. I had previously located a cereal field where 2 birds had been displaying. As we drove up, sure enough I could see them. We stopped the crew alighted and I pointed out the large Larks with dark underwings, white trailing edges and a bubbling liquid song flight to the assembled audience. All took in the relevant features and were content – how is that “drive-by”, I call it a judicious use of valuable time and good planning!



Citrine Wagtail – Petounta Point 24 Mar 14

At Petounta, although relatively quiet, in the marsh we saw our first Wood Sandpipers, heard a Water Rail, Great Reed Warbler and Lapwing and secured more great views of a fine Citrine Wagtail. On the upper rocky areas we grilled Isabelline, Northern and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears in the hope of a Desert Wheatear – but no joy. Back at the marsh, more Yellow Wagtails but nothing new and close views of a flock of Greater Short-toed Larks and a couple of Red-throated Pipits. Transiting back through Larnaca to the next site we stopped at Larnaca Airport Pools North where we saw 4 Greenshanks, 149 Greater Flamingos (yes, sadly I counted them), and circa 20 Slender-billed Gulls with a few more on the Salt Lake and our first Great Tit next to the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque. I offered a visit, but the uncultured “A” Team were more interested in birds – can you believe that?

We arrived at the north side of the Salt Lake and as we walked, flushed a Green Sandpiper. We walked across the now dry salt lake to view a remaining puddle which held some waders. Advancing further to reduce the considerable heat haze, we scoped the waders of Dunlins and Ringed Plovers – the only ones of the trip in the majority. As we scoped, Ruffs and Little Stints became apparent. Then Tony “chipped in again”, as he found 2 Sanderlings which were most unexpected for the trip but a great addition to “The List”.

We then drove to one of my favourite self-found sites which always turns up something – Larnaca JUMBO drain. Sure enough and running true to form a Temminck’s Stint and a few Little Ringed Plovers with several Common Snipes. A sharp “shrrreeep” call alerted me to another male Citrine Wagtail – I’ve never seen so many in a spring. Then Richard found one

of the birds of the tour – a female Little Crake bathing and feeding in the open next to the smallest of reed beds – I LOVE JUMBO DRAIN!!!!

We continued to Oroklini Marsh but this time the southern end, as its great wader habitat and I had a bird in mind. In a MR Ben (for those that remember him) type way, as if by magic the shopkeeper appeared – no sorry the Marsh Sandpiper appeared with 5 Ruff and another was seen later and the only ones of the trip. After many hints about coffee related colours and birds etc, I relented and stopped at the Dolphin Rocks café for an afternoon coffee break – I never thought it would come to this, but such was the relentless moaning and winging (mainly from our colonial and chairborne contingent, who were suffering withdrawal symptoms) that I relented. After a short stop we moved to the last site of the day Akhna Dam. We immediately scored with a migrating flock of Night Herons about to roost for the night. Another Greenshank, several Redshanks and a Common Sandpiper nearly finished the day but around the corner in a small pond, some Little Stints and another male Citrine Wagtail – amazing numbers. With the totals now in excess on 100 after 2 days, things could not have gone better. A curry and chilli night around my house, coordinated by OC Rear Party went well and was naturally all washed down with several KEOs – there's a pattern forming.



Little Crake – Larnaca JUMBO Drain 24 Mar 14

Day 4 – Tuesday 25

Phase 2 of the plan commenced with a road trip to Troodos for an overnight stay stopping at Akrotiri, Episkopi and the Dhiarizos River Valley on the way. The best laid plans were interrupted by an enforced early start and late departure due to the news of a Caspian Plover at Paralimni Lake. So we attempted to twitch it. A very early bird (usually seen in April), it would have been a great addition and lifer for most on the trip. Unfortunately despite extensive searching and gnashing of teeth the bird had departed. We did add the first Purple

Heron of the trip though and heard a couple of Quails. We had an uneventful journey to Limassol and arrived at the Port Canal in an attempt to see the White-breasted Kingfisher which was unsuccessful and indeed this bird along with Bimaculated Lark consumed valuable time on the tour and became our nemesis. We did however see Common Kingfisher, Sedge Warbler and the Laughing Dove that I'd seen a couple of weeks previously remained faithful to its telegraph wire. On the way to the new Zakaki Marsh hide 4 Common Buzzards (the first for the trip) circled above us and at Zakaki were joined by a Marsh Harrier. Zakaki was fairly quiet but a Little Egret, Kingfisher and amazingly another Citrine Wagtail broke the boredom.

Driving along Lady's Mile was fairly dull so we parked about a mile from Akrotiri Salt Lake, as I didn't want to suffer the indignity of getting bogged in and walked to the waters edge. Circa 30 Shelducks were present with about 250 Greater Flamingos and careful scanning revealed the only Great White Egrets of the week amongst 129 Grey Herons – Yes I counted them. I scanned the many Kentish Plovers and alerted the team to an interesting bird; we needed to move closer. Finally in position I directed the group onto a pair of Greater Sand Plovers in breeding plumage, complete with orange breast band. Interestingly, their bills were large and noticeable even at distance making them the migratory species *crassirostris* and not the regularly wintering sub-species *columbinus*. As all the wintering birds had departed, this was the only chance of the species so it was a real bonus bird on the list. I had earned my fee again – Ah forgot, there isn't one but at least I wasn't getting grief about coffee stops – thank heavens for small mercies. We proceeded to Bishop's Pool and climbing over a fence got access. A good count of 13 Ferruginous Ducks were present and a Purple Heron perched in the open and was joined by another as they alighted. An Eastern Bonelli's Warbler was seen when leaving the site and we had lunch in the Akrotiri Orchid Glade – well some of the more rounded members of the group enjoyed it but we did add our first Sardinian Warbler of the week.

We drove around Akrotiri Gravel Pits seeing a Wryneck in the Church gardens and a Marsh Harrier nearby. Phassouri Reed Beds was quite disappointing with only 5 Cattle Egrets being present so we proceeded to Episkopi and Kensington Cliffs. The wind had got up but we did have extremely good views of our first Long-legged Buzzards and only Alpine Swifts of the tour. However, the resident Griffon Vultures were conspicuous by their absence so another visit would have to be vectored in when returning from Paphos. At Kouklia Soakaways another Long-legged Buzzard was seen and as we drove to Troodos via the Dhiarizos River Valley another couple were seen. As we drove up the valley floor a couple of Great Spotted Cuckoos were seen – it's a good year for them and was appreciated by all, much better than dipping in Pembrokeshire. Despite checking the known wintering sites for Finsch's Wheatear sadly for the crew they had all departed about a week prior to their arrival. Moving up the valley there was a lot of raptor activity on the hillside above Kadares with a male Pallid Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard and a Kestrel. Tony alerted me to another bird which mysteriously morphed into a Kestrel but his persistence paid off and with a large puff-ball looking white rump and *accipiter* wing shape, it was the most difficult of all the resident raptors to see – a Goshawk. The decision I'd taken to drive the long way to Troodos as opposed to up the normal Limassol route had very luckily paid dividends. We arrived at Troodos Environmental Centre at about 1730 and with the sun still up, although much cooler than the lowlands I speculated that we should give some of the island's sub-species endemics a whirl. Within 20 minutes we had secured good views of Jay, Coal Tit, Short-toed (Dorothy's) Treecreeper and Blackbird with Pallid Swifts above us. Four of the 6 sub-

species had been seen. We had dinner in the Troodos Hotel Restaurant which was enjoyable and went to bed listening to calling Cyprus Scops Owls and Andrew secured a view of one.

Day 5 – Wednesday 26

All hands to the pump for the remaining sub-species. We visited Giant Juniper Picnic Site and had walked about 500m gaining more views of the birds we had seen last night and adding Chaffinch to the list, when I heard some Crossbills above us. Eventually, the group got views of a male and 2 females feeding on the Black Pine cones. One of the more difficult birds to see, I was very pleased. Job done, we continued and came across a brilliant male Masked Shrike that was early on its breeding grounds and I feel sure the fast growing “David Bailey” contingent got some good images – may I remind you, this is not a photographic tour, do not flush that bird! We continued, a short distance to Levadi Tou Pasha Picnic Site. All quiet, a Eurasian Wren tape was played which incited the resident to wake up and start singing moving from tree to tree. Great views of the last endemic sub-species and my pre-tour promise had been fulfilled – both endemics and all the sub-species endemics seen.

We headed off to Prodomos Dam in search of a Grey Wagtail. This was unsuccessful as it would appear that the wintering population had departed. We did however get the last target bird of Troodos in the form of several singing Serin, 2 of which were in display flight. Once more, the crew’s thoughts turned to coffee and the relentless pressure caused me to keel in and stop at my favourite café in Troodos, the Ben Nevis. Here we enjoyed great coffee, Apple Pie and Chocolate Cake. I know – what sort of an outfit am I running. It was like a dudes’ day out at Titchwell. Stopping at the much frequented nut stall before departing Troodos, many varieties of nuts were purchased amidst the usual stall holder’s banter about viagra, eroticism and generally inappropriate sales pitches in the promotion of nuts. On the way down we paused at the Caledonian Falls in the hope of a Grey Wagtail but were unsuccessful but did see another Wren.

We travelled down the Dhiarizos River Valley in the reverse of the ascent. We paused at Kadares once more and right on queue, a superb adult Long-legged Buzzard showed all of the necessary ID features in beautiful sunshine. A little further down opposite a cliff face, I stopped as Roger and I had seen a Peregrine nearby in the recce of Feb 13. Extraordinarily, we first heard a Peregrine and then witnessed the “shift-changeover” at the nest site, the bird stooping and displaying twice, what a fantastic moment for the group. Time in recce is never wasted! Then, another stroke of luck as 3 Griffon Vultures passed over the cliff saving me a regain on the return trip, which would allow us another crack at the White-throated Kingfisher and a visit to another site. We stopped at the Extreme View Café for lunch and the breeding Red-rumped Swallows performed well for the group.



Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush – Anarita Park

We departed after lunch for Mandria in the hope of finding the Bimaculated Larks that had been there for a few days – another dip, this was becoming an uncomfortable habit, we did

see 15 migrating Black-winged Stilts offshore and the only Shag of the trip sat on the rocks. The fields contained the by now familiar Wheatears and Pipits. With morale ebbing, we drove to Anarita Park as Colin Richardson had joined us at Mandria and suggested it might be productive. What a great decision. As we drove in a couple of Eastern Black-eared Wheatears were seen and as we stopped and exited the vehicle a Stone Curlew flew and then posed for the assembled scopes. A Little Owl perched in the open on a rock, Great Spotted Cuckoos flew by and a Hoopoe put in an appearance. A male Blue Rock Thrush was higher up the valley on a rocky scree slope and then “2IC Bagging Birds” Richard found a cracking male Rock Thrush or Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush if you prefer. We decided to move further up the valley and secured fantastic views of this scarce and difficult to catch up with migrant as it went about its business. Birds were moving everywhere and we saw Cretzschmar’s and Ortolan Buntings and discovered the “Bush Of Love”, so named as it seemed to attract every bird in the area. A small leafless dead bush attracted the Buntings, Blackcaps, a lone female Chaffinch, Lesser Whitethroats and Eastern Subalpine Warblers – what a great site and enjoyable hour and a half. As we left another male Rock Thrush sat on telegraph wires – like number 10 busses.

We finished at the Paphos Lighthouse, where some Yellow-legged Gulls loafed and the Black-winged Stilts had made their way around from Mandria. With a nutter walking on the headland contemplating the meaning of life and flushing everything we checked into the hotel. A near mess up with the booking (not my fault, before you start), had me visibly agitated, I think the phrase is - as an LE Officer, I don’t do poor admin. Anyway, all resolved we booked in without difficulty and left the hotel for Colin Richardson’s house and the chance of a Cyprus Scops Owl. As we arrived we could hear the Owls in his garden but they then flew and stopped calling – Sods Law. We travelled down the hill slightly to the village of Armou where at least 6 were heard calling with their double note, different to the nominate Eurasian Scops Owl’s call. Eventually, we got one calling in the torch light and very good views were achieved of this most enigmatic of owls, that will surely be split. We returned to the hotel, did the call-over and went to Tramps Bar, where we had a few beers and supper and thanked Colin for his help as we bought him dinner. We will not mention the leader waking up confused and having a nightmare whilst screaming at Dave Pentelow who started screaming back until the initiator woke up – or will we? Very comical, but we’re all friends here.

Day 6 – Thursday 27

Refreshed we rose early and the Kings Hotel had kindly provided a full Greek style early breakfast. We headed for Mandria for another bash at the Bimaculated Larks which was unsuccessful. As we walked the area an extroverted Wryneck gave crippling views for everyone as it fed actively on the ground. A Greater Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit and Red-throated Pipits gave excellent prolonged views and the ever present Black Francolin called nearby. We drove to Asprokremnos Dam, where Colin Richardson joined us and walked the pines where an Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler and male Pied Flycatcher were seen. Many Tree Pipits were present and 13 roosting Night Herons flushed as we walked the area. The day had been set aside to achieve views of Bonelli’s Eagle and perched views of Great Spotted Cuckoos which all were keen to achieve. We stood at a good vantage point above the dam. As we watched we noted Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards, Red-rumped Swallows, an Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, the only Montague’s Harrier of the trip and a single Pallid Swift. Then, the shout went up and eventually everyone was securing good views of a sub-adult Bonelli’s Eagle. That one in the bag we drove up the Dhiarizos River Valley to Kidasi

once more. Soon we were viewing perched Great Spotted Cuckoos and once more at Kidasi a Peregrine was visible on the nest and a Blue Rock Thrush was close by. Bonelli's Eagles were seen again and as we ate lunch at the Extreme View Café more Bonelli's Eagle views and the sight of 11 Griffon Vultures spiralling over the hillside (probably the whole of the wild Cyprus population). The afternoon became very hot and we moved from site to site without really producing anything of much interest. As enthusiasm was dwindling and people were wilting in the heat, I turned to the tour guides best friend – coffee, beer and a rest. Two in a day, I hear you say and so did they – I must be getting soft? From Mandria we drove to the coast at Paphos in a speculative bid to “make something happen”. As we arrived and started to walk, a Whimbrel flew by – a rare bird in Cyprus and it was extremely fortunate timing that we added this to the trip list – although I put it down to good decision making and planning! Then, missing Garganey from the list Richard found a drake flying up the coast which everyone managed to get onto. The trip list continued to grow unabated.

Day 7 – Friday 28

After sleeping off a Meze and some more protein (Cyprus doesn't suit the vegetarian option) an early departure from Paphos had us grilling the area at Mandria once more for a Bimaculated Lark – without success once again. Red-throated Pipits were evident as was a Tawny Pipit and a Black Francolin called in the distance. Alas, it was time to go and the Bimaculated Lark had lived to fight another day, however we did see a cracking Ruppell's Warbler as we left the area. We continued to the Limassol Port Canal in the hope of seeing the White-breasted Kingfisher that had been previously reported and eluded us. Again without success and I don't like dipping twice in a day, we moved on through Lady's Mile to Akrotiri Gravel Pits. Save for a Masked Shrike, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and a ringtail Pallid Harrier, there wasn't that much to get excited about, especially for the by now seasoned Cyprus birders desperate to increase the trip list. After lunch we made another effort for the Kingfisher and dipped again but did see the Laughing Dove once more before we departed. Stopping at Finikaria, a village on the north side of Germasogeia Dam it looked pretty boring and was until out of the bag – the first Squacco Heron of the year appeared and only one of the tour – result! We drove straight to Oroklini where we added another 2 trip birds with a pair of Glossy Ibises and a Spotted Redshank amongst the many Black-winged Stilts. An impromptu stop at Akhna Dam before returning home for a BBQ was rewarded with a Cuckoo and a breeding plumaged Black-tailed Godwit. As we left a pair of close Great Spotted Cuckoos were seen. The day hadn't turned out too badly after all! I say that because, at the BBQ having quaffed beer like it was going out of fashion, I thought people might like a “wee snifter”. Had I realised that the group were actually a bunch of Jura “Superstition” consuming drunks, I may not have followed this course of action. Not content with that they also demolished my other bottle of Glengoyne “Burnfoot” Malt. I went to bed feeling violated – but it was a good night and once again thanks to my wife for making it happen without a hitch.

Day 8 – Saturday 29

With time running out and wishing to catch some more migrants we headed to Cape Greco. Whilst more exceptional views of birds such as Ruppell's Warbler and Masked Shrike were achieved there was nothing new for the trip, although noting the plumage differences of 2 female Siberian Stonechats was an interesting moment. 12 migrating Little Egrets and 2 Kingfishers were at Kermia Beach and at Ayia Napa Sewage Works more Masked Shrikes and a cracking Eastern Black-eared Wheatear. Paralimni Lake was disappointing so we

moved to Akhna Dam where nothing much had changed from the day before although a White-Spotted (cyanecula) Bluethroat was seen. After an admin period we departed for the north at 1445. At Gulserin Pond a few Little Stints were on offer and at Clapsides Beach, good views of very pink Slender-billed Gulls were enjoyed. On route to Fresh Water Lake South, the alert driver pulled off the road and pointed out the first Woodchat Shrike of the trip, thus avoiding a blank day. The rest of the team were obviously already on the aircraft on the way home and so needed to receive the “Lets focus” speech – we still have birds to see. We proceeded to Fresh Water Lake South to view the 400 or so strong Cattle Egret colony – a spectacle in itself where 4 Night Herons and 2 Little Egrets were also present. On Saturday evening we enjoyed a farewell Meze at a local restaurant which was great value for money and enjoyed by all. Deb and I thank you for our dinner.

Day 9 – Sunday 30

With a real “hooley” of a wind blowing all night from the east, Cape Greco had much to promise. However, it didn’t quite turn out that way. Migrants were keeping low in the wind, so offshore a Sandwich Tern flew by with a Baltic Gull and several Yellow-legged Gulls. In a lull in the wind, the regular singing male Cyprus Warbler performed well for the crowd which was a bonus. As the wind dropped a little, a Cuckoo came in off the sea and I suggested that we looked under the Army Camp cliffs for birds that may be attempting to

shelter from the wind. We had walked about 600m and the team were alerted to a movement that turned out to be a White-spotted (cyanecula) Bluethroat. Several mentioned a Cyprus Wheatear but were distracted by the Bluethroat. On closer inspection it proved to be a pristine male Hooded Wheatear. This was a Cyprus mega (the 21st record), and a lifer for most members of the trip and a Cyprus “tick” for me. In typical Hooded Wheatear style it fly-caught and sallied all within 5m of us. It allowed some excellent observation of the key features and photographs. Another Cuckoo was seen and a male Cretzschmar’s Bunting before we headed off to Ayia Napa Sewage Works via Cape Greco Pines where an Eastern Bonell’s Warbler and Eastern



Hooded Wheatear – Cape Greco Cliffs 30 Mar 14
– 21st Record

Black-eared Wheatear were present. The sewage works didn’t have much to offer so we went for a typical Greek lunch at Ayia Thekla. After lunch we visited the final site of the trip – Akhna Dam. A couple of Common Sandpipers, the ubiquitous Zitting Cisticolas and Cetti’s Warblers were on offer but little else. We headed to the airport seeing Greater Flamingos at Oroklini Marsh before the team were eventually dropped off, thus ending a fantastic tour.

Summary

An outstanding effort from the team! For this time of year the total it is unlikely to be surpassed. A combination of good planning, luck and commitment ensured that a total was seen that exceeded expectations by far. Furthermore, most of the group saw all of the birds, however as is the norm, inevitably some did not see all. That said, all the key species were seen and extremely good full frame views were enjoyed by all. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all who attended for their contribution and making a tour of like-minded individuals so easy to lead. I would also like to thank the group for remembering my wife (OC Rear Party) for her considerable contribution in ensuring all ran smoothly and to the group for replacing my Whiskey which they enjoyed quaffing. Remember, looking for birds in the wind "Is as much use as a "Handbrake on a Submarine" – most of the time.

Highlights of the Week: Amongst a host of great birds, the first Eurasian Coal Tit for Cyprus, good views of Siberian Stonechats but the 21st record of a stunning male Hooded Wheatear (a lifer for all but Dave Pentelow and me) stood out and was a fitting finale to an excellent week.

If you are planning a visit or require more info please feel free to contact me at:
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AOS - CYPRUS 2014 Bird List									
NOTES									
Breeding Endemic									
Sub-species Endemic									
F - Female									
M - Male									
H - Heard Only									
Species	Scientific	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th	29th	30th
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus fuficollis	X	X	X			X	X	X
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo senensis	X					X	X	
European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotlis desmarestii					X			
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax		X	X		X	X	X	
Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides						X		
Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	X	X	X			X	X	
Great Egret	Ardea alba			X					
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	X	X	X			X	X	
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea			X			X		
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinelluz							X	X
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus		X	X			X		X
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		X	X					
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		X	X			X		
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	X	X	X		X	X		
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta	X	X			X			
Garganey	Anas querquedula					X	X		
Northern Shoveler	Anas clypeata		X	X			X		

Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina		X				X		
Ferruginous Duck	Aythya fuligula	X	X					X	
Eurasian Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus				X	X			
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus	X		X			X	X	
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus					X			
Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis			X					
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo			X	X	X	X	X	
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus			X	X				
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata					X			
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Merlin	Falco columbarius				(X)				
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus				X	X			
Chukar Partridge	Alectoris chukar	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Black Francolin	Francolinus francolinus		X	X		H	H	H	
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		H	H		H		H	
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus		H	H					
Little Crake	Porzana parva		X(F)						
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus		X	X			X	X	
Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicephalus		X		X	X			
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	X	X	X			X	X	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		X						
Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus		X	X	X			X	
Greater Sand Plover	Charadrius leschenaultii crassirostris			X					
Spur-winged Lapwing	Vanellus spinosus	X	X	X			X	X	
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		H						
Sanderling	Calidris alba		X						
Little Stint	Calidris minuta	X	X	X				X	
Temminck's Stint	Calidris temminckii	X	X						
Dunlin	Calidris alpina		X					X	
Ruff	Philomachus pugnax	X	X	X			X	X	
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		X	X		X	X	X	
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa		X				X		
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus					X			
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus						X		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		X						
Marsh Sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis		X						
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia		X						
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	X	X	X			X	X	
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola		X	X			X	X	
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		X	X			X	X	
Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus		X						
Common Black-headed Gull	Larus ridibundus		X				X		
Slender-billed Gull	Larus genei		X					X	
Audouin's Gull	Larus audouinii						X		
Baltic Gull	Larus fuscus fuscus		X						X
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis			X		X	X	X	X
Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans		X				X		
Armenian Gull	Larus armenicus		X						

Sandwich Tern	Sterna sandvicensis		X				X		X
Common Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopella decaocto	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Laughing Dove	Stigmatopella senegalensis			X			X		
Great Spotted Cuckoo	Clamator glandarius			X		X	X		
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus						X		X
(Cyprus) Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops cyprius				X				
Little Owl	Athene noctua	X			X	X			
Common Swift	Apus apus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus			X		X			
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba			X					
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis			X			X	X	
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla	X		X		X			
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		X						
Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	X	X	X		X			
Crested Lark	Galericida cristata	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	X	X	X	X	X			X
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis	X	X			X	X	X	X
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Red-throated Pipit	Anthus cervinus	X	X		X	X	X		
Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta	X	X				X		
Blue-headed Wagtail	Motacilla flava flava	X	X						
Grey-headed Wagtail	Motacilla flava thunbergi	X							
Black-headed Wagtail	Motacilla flava felldegg	X	X	X		X	X		
superciliaris	Motacilla flava superciliaris	X		X			X		
xanthrophys	Motacilla flava xanthrophys	X							
Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola	X	X	X			X	X	
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
(Cyprus) Winter Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes				X				
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	H					X	H	H
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica	X					X	X	
White-spotted Bluethroat	Luscinia cyanecula							X	X
Western Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochuros	X (F)							
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	X(M)							
Siberian Stonechat*	Saxicola maura	X(M)						X(F)	
Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cyprus Wheatear	Oenanthe cypriaca	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe melanoleuca	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Hooded Wheatear*	Oenanthe monacha								X(M)
Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis				X				
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius	X			X	X		X	X
(Cyprus) Eurasian Blackbird	Turdus merula			X	X				
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	X	X			X	X	X	X
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	H	H	1	H	H	1	1	H
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis	X	X	X	X	X	X	H	X
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus			X			X		H

Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	X	X			X	X		H
Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus		H						
Spectacled Warbler	Sylvia cantillans	X	X			X	X	X	X
Eastern Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia albistriata	X			X	X			
Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala			X	X	X	X	X	
Cyprus Warbler	Sylvia melanothorax	X							X
Rüppell's Warbler	Sylvia rueppelli	X					X	X	
Eastern Orphean Warbler	Sylvia crassirostris	X					X	X	
Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	X		X	X	X			X
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus orientalis	X		X		X	H		X
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Eurasian Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca	X				X			
Eurasian Coal Tit*	Periparus ater	X							
(Cyprus) Coal Tit	Periparus ater cypriotis			X	X				
Great Tit	Parus major		X	X	X	X	X	X	
(Cyprus) Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla dorothea			X	X				
Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus			H					
Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor	X							
Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator							X	X
Masked Shrike	Lanius nubicus	X			X		X	X	X
(Cyprus) Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius glasznieri			X	X				
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Western Jackdaw	Corvus monedula	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	(X)							
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs				X				
European Serin	Serinus serinus				X	X	X		
European Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Common Linnet	Carduelis cannabina	X		X	X	X	X	X	
(Cyprus) Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra guillemardi				X				
Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	X			X				
Cretzschmar's Bunting	Emberiza caesia	X		X	X	X	X		X
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	X		X	X	X	X	X	X

Seen - 152 Heard - 4 Total = 156. Notes on birds with sites and when seen are on the blog.

Other Items of Interest (to some)

Dragonflies

Lesser Emperor
Scarlet Darter
Common Darter
Slender
Red-veined Darter
Blue-tailed Damselfly

Pippestrel Bat

Butterflies

Orange Tip
Painted Lady
Common Blue
Swallowtail
Eastern Baton Blue
Lang's Short-tailed Blue
Large White

Clouded Yellow
Mallow Skipper
Red Admiral
Cleopatra
Small White
Bath White

Reptiles

Snake-eyed Lizard
 Starred-Agama
 Black Whip Snake
 Spotted Lizard

Orchids

Caspian Butterfly Orchid
 Cyprus Bee Orchid
 Serapia Levantina
 Serapia
 Bug Orchid

Eastern Marsh Helliborine
 Pyramidal Orchid

AOS TRIP 28 MAY TO 2 JUNE COMFORTABLE BIRDING NOT COMMANDO BIRDING IN THE CAIRNGORMS

(Benjamin White)

A small band of determined AOS members revelled in the long drive up the A9 to the Cairngorms for a late May trip to hopefully see a few of the classic Scottish species prior to the re-emergence of the fearsome midge. Based out of Rothiemurchus Lodge with the intent was for four days of birding in relative comfort and with easy access to tea and cake to sustain us. We were blessed by a sustained period of high pressure so fleeces and goretex were soon discarded and replaced by sun cream and hats. Jo Douglas and I arrived on the Wednesday



AOS Members on the Cairngorm plateau

for the very easy 'tick' of an Osprey or five at the RSPB Loch Garten centre with the 42" flatscreen TV providing excellent detail of the feeding of the three chicks. Thursday saw our first foray onto the high hills over to Beinn Mheadhoin with Snow Bunting and Ptarmigan

our companions for most of the day. Tony and Lynn Kaduck joined us for Insh Marshes on the Friday morning with the clear conditions providing excellent views over the marsh. Predictable results followed (Curlew, Lapwing, Heron, and various Geese) but the hazy heat encouraged a slightly slower pace which allowed us to spectate some interesting behaviour including various battles between protective Redshank parents and raiding Jackdaws. The call of cake was strong by eleven so a foray into Kincaig followed, ostensibly to see if the Osprey nest on the loch was occupied but we ended up parking by the café.

Refreshed and ready for more we moved into Crossbill territory in Inshriach Forest and secretly hoped for Crested Tit too. Displaying Siskins and more common types of Tits (with the occasional bushy tail of a Red Squirrel) were our only spots in the forest but it did allow Tony Kaduck to indulge his lepidopterist tendencies with several prolonged and deeply analytical expositions on the beauty and value of butterflies. A couple of small lochans near the car park provided the opportunity to see Goldeneye protecting their patch from visiting birds and, after much studying and checking of the books, we were fairly convinced the three ducklings with the female Goldeneye were in fact Goldeneye ducklings. Never has a white cheek patch been so confusing. The return journey to Rothiemurchus Forest allowed for a short detour to a small burn leading into Loch Morlich to see the tamest Dipper in Scotland. Bored with water and dipping it chose instead to sun itself on a sandbank beach as Tony and Lynn joined it to enjoy the idyllic setting. While a pleasant day we were concerned that we were making little headway in our attempts to see Scottish species but Andy Harrison arrived to point out the Crossbills in the carpark at our accommodation so perhaps we should have



How not to be seen' – a Ptarmigan shows how it is done

spent more time looking closer to home? This location proved ideal for Tree Pipits too though the aggressive Capercaillie that had been challenging cars on the track was by now absent (or flattened). With it getting light so early this far north, it scarcely seemed sensible heading to bed if we were to visit the Black Grouse Lek at dawn so we settled on a far more sensible five o'clock start and then retired to bed.

Five arrived far too quickly and a rather reduced in numbers party strolled out from the accommodation where you could already hear the distinctive bubbling notes of the Lek. The first male was strutting his stuff with tail feathers resplendent and we had the good fortune to see another as we moved around to a better viewing location although sadly it seems most

activity was almost over for the day. As the Black Grouse ended their activities, bags were packed and tripods lugged for our next activity up onto the high ground of the Cairngorm plateau. The ski centre road allowed us to gain some altitude quite quickly and move into Meadow Pipit and Red Grouse territory amongst the heather with some ease. The excellent weather provided wonderful visibility and the birds were also out enjoying it, as were numerous Mountain Hares by now mostly turned from their white winter fur. They almost proved to be the main attraction however, Ptarmigan spotting amongst the rocks resumed with some only being betrayed by their red supercilium at close range so perfect was their grey and white camouflage. With great care we moved towards Creag an Leth choin but the Dotterel remained elusive although an egg was seen amongst the low heath and our disappointment was tempered by the arrival of a particularly noisy Ring Ouzel amongst the crags above the Lairig Ghru and a lengthy lunch laying in the sun with a view for miles. This time allowed us to continue the Canadian cultural exchange with several Gaelic landscape phrases learned and also a gentle introduction to the delights of malt loaf and the jokes found on penguin biscuits, though the Brits got nothing in return eh?

Sunday was to be a more traditional AOS birding day with a number of visits planned to sites noted for particular species. This started at Loch an Eilein with Redstart being a surprising early spot amongst the Coal Tits, Chaffinches, Treecreeper and a Spotted Flycatcher. A lone Goldeneye duckling provoked some surprisingly detailed kidnap plans from Jo and Lynn but we pushed on around the loch and were rewarded by the arrival of several Crested Tits. A flying visit to Loch Garten RSPB centre was followed by a chance for more water fowl at Lochindorb where Sandpiper, Oystercatcher and Red Shanks joined Red Grouse and their chicks on the banks of the loch. Anxious for grebes (and possibly cake and coffee) it was then back to the cars for a move to Loch Ruthven for a 'guaranteed' sight of Slavonian Grebes. Sadly no one had told the Slavonian Grebes and it was only Little Grebes and Tufted Ducks at the loch. Shapes and shimmers amongst the reeds were investigated in some detail but to no avail. Our focus on the reeds may explain how it was we failed to notice the arrival of a particularly large and white breasted Osprey amongst the trees opposite the hide! This, with a great view of a Reed Bunting and the activities of some particularly industrious Great Tit parents, proved to be the highlight of the late afternoon session as Tony was dragged back to the car grebe-less.

With the fine food, good accommodation and excellent weather experienced this time, we dispersed on Monday determined to make a return in Spring 2015. There is of course the matter of the rather elusive Dotterel to find too.



Tawny Pipit



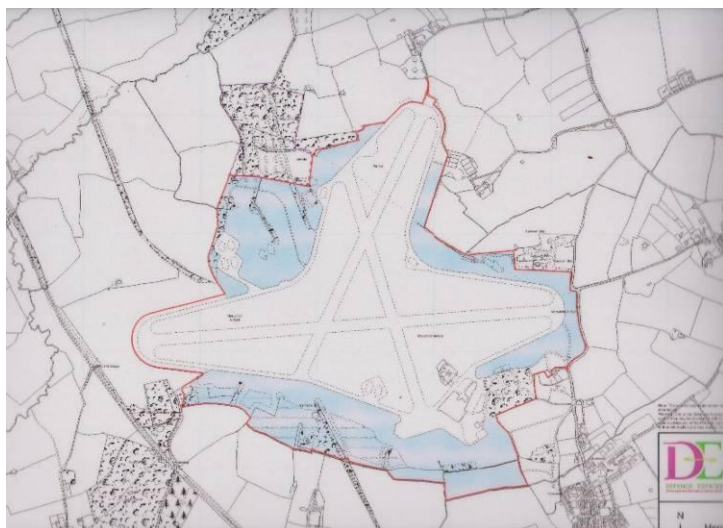
Nightjar

WORKING WITH NIGHTINGALES

(Roger Dickey)

The reducing populations of common nightingales *Luscinia megarhynchos* in the UK and in particular the South West is not reflected at RNAS Merryfield in Somerset, where sympathetic management of scrub and wildlife contribute to the most significant densities of these birds in the region. The random clearance of scrub from this part of Somerset, in the pursuit of tidiness or more often the availability of more arable land, is almost always without consideration of conservation concerns and has implications for the more delicate balances in nature. The RNAS Merryfield Conservation Group has resisted this trend and established a careful balance of operational requirements, recreational interests and conservation to the benefit of nightingales. In 2012 and 2013 they had two of their most successful breeding years, and in 2014, only showed a small reduction in the number of singing males. However, even within conservation there are conflicts of interest and only regular monitoring and adherence to an agreed site conservation plan ensures that the exclusive requirements of tactical helicopters, brown hairstreak butterflies and nightingales are all met.

The nightingale's song must be the quintessential sound of early summer in southern woods



RNAS Merryfield, Ilton, Somerset. Nightingales breed in the northwest and southeast corners

and copses and yet the bird is now Amber listed in the UK. Still common on the Continent, it is becoming harder to find in the west and southwest of England with the majority of birds now in the east and southeast of the country. But as woods and coppiced copses become increasingly sanitised, the nightingale has in recent years favoured dense scrub of bramble and blackthorn which provides additional protection for egg and chick from predation.

At RNAS Merryfield the management of scrub has become increasingly important - too much scrub and the encroachment onto hard standing and training facilities becomes unacceptable in a working environment yet constant trimming opens the understory to predators and leaves the ground-level nests of nightingales exposed. When much of the scrub is blackthorn, there are also implications for the eggs of brown hairstreak butterflies which favour this host plant. A balance has been struck by only cutting back small areas at a time over a period of a couple of years, providing the added bonus of rejuvenated vegetation growth to the benefit of plant and wildlife.

The airfield has the added interest of two distinct nightingale colonies, each holding up to six pairs of birds plus non-breeding adults, separated by a quarter of a mile of open grass and runway. To ascertain whether there is site fidelity to either of these breeding areas, a colour ringing scheme has been approved by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). All nightingales mist-netted and ringed during the course of their short April to July stay in

England are given individual colour combinations denoting colony location and year of capture, allowing future monitoring of inter colony movement. Following recent success at DST Leconfield, an inter-service bird-ringing team is spending several days in support of this survey, not only adding to conservation group data but, as significantly, showing nationally how good habitat management has benefited this bird on the westernmost edge of its breeding range.



Somerset Nightingales are terribly shy



Golden Plover

OPERATION AUK

(Tony Crease)

The annual bird survey and ringing expedition to the range at Cape Wrath was well recorded in its 20th year by Sanctuary Magazine but that magazine's limited distribution makes the article written by the Society's Ringing Secretary, well worth repeating here. There have been two expeditions since.

It has truly been a Tri-Service venture manned throughout by members of the Armed Forces and a variety of subject matter experts from the civilian community. Underwriting most of the operational equipment has been the Royal Navy from Faslane with expertise from Fleet Patrol Group, Royal Marines - the launch pad and safety net of this annual survey. Defence Training Estate (DTE) has also been involved and most of the logistics have been assembled at Catterick Garrison and then moved to Faraid Head with the agreement of Commander DTE Scotland.

The initial remit, driven by concerns expressed by the stakeholders including DTE, Natural History agencies, and local residents of the nearby town of Durness, was to assess and review the thriving seabird colonies and other notable species. Over the years the group has been joined by many interested parties, including, on a number of occasions, the Admiral, Flag Officer Scotland, Northern England and Northern Ireland. Situated on the far-flung north-western edge of Scotland, north of the 58° Latitude line, this outstanding Ramsar Site has been accorded virtually every conservation designation possible. Closer to the Arctic Circle than to London this majestic yet fragile wilderness is routinely exposed to the extreme vagaries of the weather every week of the year.



Guillemot and Razorbills at Clo Mor

Getting to know a coastline like this, approximately 18 km from Faraid Head to the lighthouse, takes time, tenacity and great care. In the early days we gingerly felt our way around but as ever, confidence grows to the point where we have become comfortable but ever wary of the prevailing conditions. Very quickly we learned to respect the boggy terrain, wet cliff ledges, the tides, and the critical six metre swell.

So what have we learned from our days bouncing around in Mark 1 Raiders, often soaked, often covered in guano, most often smiling! We have ringed more than 40,000 birds gaining an amazing insight into survivability, productivity, site fidelity and the longevity of the key species. Birds we have handled have moved to Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Faroes, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Portugal and South Africa, and the recoveries have featured casualties that flew into searchlights at sea, died after oiling or died after storms.



Newly hatched Black guillemot chick – Op Auk team

It is fair to say, however, that in keeping with many other sites around the UK coastline, numbers of seabirds today are significantly less than they were 20 years ago. Whereas in the early days birds prospered on the cliffs within the clearly-defined target area nowadays however there are none at all, and even in the quieter zones outside the main templates, numbers have severely declined.

For the gull species the reduction began at the turn of the century and numbers

have dwindled rapidly on the islands. Places where we had ringed hundreds of great black-backed gulls reduced to zero. Herring, common and black-headed gulls, and kittiwakes followed suit with their earlier totals much diminished. Fulmars however seem to be steady state with a decline that seems more gradual.

Within the auk species the reality is probably worse, with the most notable reduction in the puffin from 25,000 breeding pairs along the Cape to around 5,000 pairs. This iconic species, much loved by visitors to the area, is sadly in a state of accelerated decline. Alarming, the guillemots and razorbills have followed suit with a total crash in productivity in 2008 and 2009. In both these years the entire population failed, at the egg stage in 2008 and the young dying in their first week of life in 2009. The view that met us of the boulder field at Clo Mhor in 2008 is difficult to describe: the eerie silence in what is normally a busy, thriving, raucous colony, was almost too much to bear. This stretch of cliffs was a graveyard of dead chicks with thousands of broken egg shells where marauding scavengers - often great skuas - had broken apart and eaten the deserted eggs. A similar picture emerged inland on the lochans, where we saw hundreds of near fledged black-headed and common gull chicks floating dead along the shoreline.

What is behind these desperate scenes has been debated within the team and in the literature and also discussed with Scottish Natural Heritage and eminent seabird specialists. We had first hand experience of the devastation created by the weather when, for instance, on one occasion a storm blew away every single kittiwake nest in the area overnight. Numerous circumstances were considered, but time and again the pendulum swung back to food availability. Eventually it was concluded that entire groups of birds had failed due to a lack of their staple diet, the sand-eel, and they had been forced to abandon their breeding ledges en masse and return to the sea.



Ringling Kittiwake chicks in situ – Op Auk team

Information received from various sources advised that sand-eels have a low tolerance of sea temperature change and their shoals, sometimes covering an area of 80km², have moved further north and out of range of the Cape Wrath colonies. The familiar picture postcard of puffins with a beak full of sprats was becoming an exception. In their place were found kittiwakes and common gulls choking on pipe fish - a long, spindly, spine-like creature they are unable to swallow or regurgitate. Any food was better than none it seems.

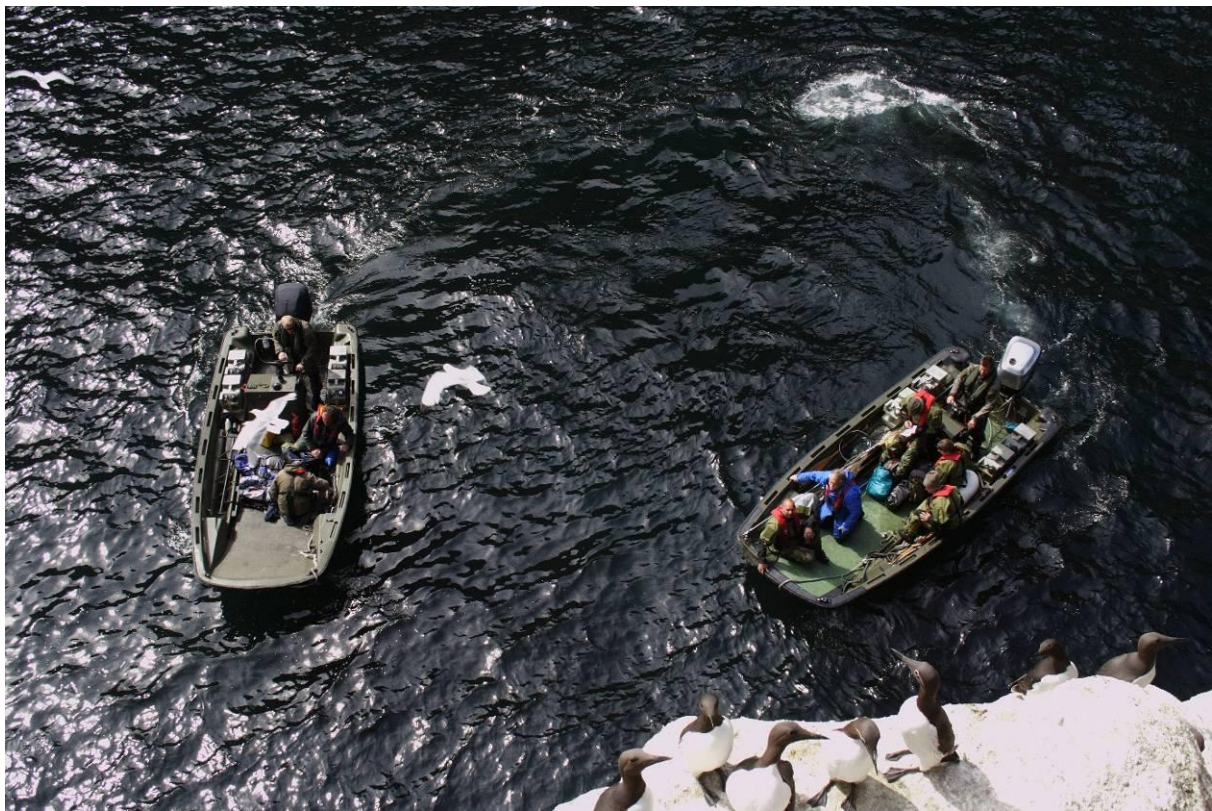


Red-throated diver with young

Tern colonies, which are unpredictable in any case, have been affected too, but because they seem able to survive on smaller fry they appear to have survived the worst. Arctic terns remain the most numerous, but a colony of sandwich terns have taken up residence in the area and common terns continue in very small numbers.

For years we have ringed the storm petrels who breed in the stone piles, the walls and even in the heather, but these very numerous pelagic wanderers that drift between hemispheres seem, also, to be less prolific. The storm-petrel produced our longest recovery to date when one ringed on the range in 1997 was recovered off Port Elizabeth, South Africa, some 18,000km away, over three years later.

Cape Wrath and Faraid Head have produced magical moments too; no year has ever been the same and new experiences have occurred almost daily. So what have been the highlights? Wading through the ankle-deep guano amongst hundreds of squawking guillemots in Clo Mhor cave; mist netting a fleeting merlin; flushing a flock of twites; the recovery of a migrating swallow on the Isle of Wight ringed in the nest as a chick at Faraid Head, an encounter with a sand-covered badger on an early morning walk, the corncrakes seen and heard on the inshore lochs, an adult skua feigning injury as the young are ringed, or a balmy day perched on top of Pavingstone Point.



Assaulting a stack – Op Auk team

Our 20 years have seen a colossal reduction in the seabird population at Cape Wrath but we have been assured this has happened before and that they will eventually bounce back – though we do seriously question this optimism. A restricted number of juveniles have entered the adult populations in recent years so there are fewer to breed and there is much room for improvement. Faraid Stacks where once we were afraid to take a single step for fear of standing on young auks is now bereft and hardly any breed there at all. On a more positive note the arctic skua, whose numbers are dwindling on Orkney, has a slightly better foothold

on the range area than it has had for some time, and the red-throated divers, always a delight to see and hear, seem to be holding their own. Nature is full of surprises and sometimes disappointments. It is reassuring, though sad, that the reduction in the seabirds at Cape Wrath is due to natural causes, rather than military activity, which was the initial fear and the reason Operation Auk was instigated.

I must finish by acknowledging the contributions made over the years by the many conservationists who carried out the work and the servicemen and range staff who helped facilitate the expeditions. It has been a joy!



Brambling

BARRY BUDDON ANNUAL OPEN NATURE DAY " SURPRISE - SURPRISE "

(Bob McCurley)

The Nature Day held on Barry Buddon TA Estate has been an annual event since the first one was organised by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) in 1989 when only 10 attended . Since then the event has grown to take in members of all 5 local Conservation groups comprising the RSPB, SWT, Scottish Ornithological Club (SOC), Dundee Naturalist's Society and the more recently formed Angus and Dundee Bird Club. This has led to the increased turn out of participants. Over the years we have found August the most productive month to hold this event for the range of flora and fauna. On the chosen day any member of the public is welcome to attend as it is written in the by-laws that one day must be made available for the general public to appreciate the natural history treasures the training area has to offer. Barry Buddon Training Area is near Carnoustie on the Tay Estuary and covers 930 hectares with some 20 ranges. It is a SSSI site as well as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds.

This year the event was held on 4 May with a turnout of 60 plus members of the 5 local wildlife groups involved. We assembled at the Main Camp Car Park at 10am to be welcomed by our new Commandant, Captain Harry Roy, who gave us an intelligent briefing highlighting the importance on the health and safety aspect of our visit to the estate. We then set off to seek out the natural history treasure's Barry Buddon always has to offer with the Naturalists and Bird Watchers going their separate ways. In addition to the large variety of birds which breed on the estate there is a great variety of Lepidoptera which recently has produced the rare Purple Hairstreak as well as Comma and Grayling. A first for this year was the Green Hairstreak with no less than 6 feeding on Whins and looking like just newly emerged. Our first stop however was to Cowbyres as the event sets up an overnight moth trap which this year surprised us with the trapping of the Emperor Moth; another first for the day. The training area also caters for those with a botanical interest with uncommon specimens such as Adders Tongue Fern, Butterfly Orchid and, my favourite, Grass of Parnassus.



Green Hairstreak



Emperor Moth

Two firsts already this year but there was more to come. The area has 56 breeding species of bird and anything is possible such as the successful breeding of Long Tailed Skuas on the estates in 1981 /82. Some Rarities which have graced Barry Buddon over the years have featured Red Necked Phalarope, Blue Winged Teal and Pectoral Sandpiper. On this occasion word was passed down the grapevine that another first had in fact been found! This time it was a singing Grasshopper Warbler that was both seen and heard in a nearby reed bed! Normally this is a difficult bird to see however this particular bird was very obliging as it was advertising its presence inviting a female to join up with him. This was a great start to our day and at the close we had accrued a grand total of 9 Spring migrants newly in from their African Wintering grounds viz. Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Wheatear, Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Swallow, House Martin and Sandwich Tern. In total 61 bird species were recorded. It had been a wonderful and productive day. A note of thanks was submitted to Captain Roy and his staff for their help and cooperation in ensuring another successful annual open Nature Day. The next day will be held on 16 Aug 15.

TWO RESERVES IN CATALONIA

(Peter Hubert)

Every summer several million migrants, mostly from Northern Europe, descend to the Costa Brava and the Costa Daurada, the coastal areas to the North and South respectively of Barcelona. They are in search of sandy beaches, seafood restaurants and sunshine. But both coastal stretches have more to offer. This article will describe two world class bird reserves, one on each stretch; it will describe the habitats; it will say a little about some of the species to be seen; and it will offer a little advice about when are the best times to visit.

Both reserves are on the coastal plain and front onto the open sea of the Mediterranean. On both reserves the check list is in excess of 370 species including vagrants. At both reserves, on a good day with reasonable weather and the aid of a telescope, a list of between 50 and 60 species is easily obtainable.

Aiguamolls de L'Empordà

The northern reserve is called Aiguamolls de L'Empordà. It lies just over the border from France on the Bay of Roses, on the North-east coast of Catalonia and within sight of the Pyrenees to the North. Aiguamolls is Catalan for 'wetland' and the reserve is just that: it is part of a former rice farm that became a reserve in the mid 1980s. The reserve is divided into two: an area of about four kilometres long by one deep that is about 4,200 hectares. Access within this area is restricted, with the public being confined to the foot paths. Grazing is conducted in several areas of pasture but no other agricultural activity takes place and all hunting is prohibited. This area is set within a much larger area that stretches along 15 kilometres of coastline and back inland for a further 10 kilometres. This larger area is managed as a conservation area, with construction controlled, farming subject to some restrictions but some development has taken place and hunting is allowed in season.



Aiguanalls looking north towards Roses © APNAE

The weather is generally benign. It can boast more than 300 days of sunshine a year. Rain is normally infrequent but it can be very heavy. Ground frosts are almost unknown and the maximum summer temperature is around 34°C. It can have very strong cold winds from the

North (the 'Tramontane'). This pushes the small birds to take cover and it makes for uncomfortable birdwatching from some of the hides.

The Aiguamolls reserve is open to the public without charge, though there is a charge for car parking and bicycles are not permitted on the footpaths. The habitat is varied with extensive areas of rough pasture for cattle and horses. These fields have high hedges and trees. At the North end of the reserve and the South end there are stretches of open water surrounded by reed beds. Along the shore line are low sand dunes that shelter small saline lagoons from the open sea. A long foot path runs from an excellent visitors' centre through the length of the reserve with ten well sited hides and a high observation tower. The pasture areas and some of the wetland areas can be viewed from the footpath without disturbing the birds. Running through the reserve is a large irrigation system that was originally created to support the former rice farm. It now brings in fresh water from the Pyrenees so that the 'wet' areas can be



Greater Flamingo with EURO ring
L/JC from the Carmargue

flooded. This flooding takes place from late September through until early May. Thereafter most of the wet areas dry out during the hot summer weather. Only the coastal lagoons remain flooded.

Although to reach Aiguamolls from their breeding grounds in Northern Europe wildfowl and waders must cross the European land mass, many do. From late July the first waders, probably failed breeders, reach the reserve. They join the large number of breeding Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) and their offspring. The Black-winged Stilts mostly vacate the reserve by early to mid September. As the climate warms, they are travelling less far south; in winter they are numerous on the coasts of Alicante and Murcia. As autumn approaches and more of the reserve becomes flooded the number of waders and the variety of species increases.

Apart from Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and an occasional Jack Snipe (*Lymnocyrtus minimus*), few waders remain through the winter. Autumn also brings the wildfowl. Huge flocks of duck gather throughout the winter; harsh weather in France and counties to the North and West bring further influxes, especially Wigeon (*Anser Penelope*). The only goose to visit regularly is the Greylag (*Anser anser*), but in some winters very small numbers of other grey geese can turn up, such as Whitefront (*Anser albifrons*) and Bean Geese (*Anser fabalis*). Arctic swans, such as the Bewick's Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) are very uncommon, occurring once a decade.

Autumn brings other migrants: raptors such as the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), which come along the Mediterranean coast from Northern Europe in good numbers during September, Bonelli's Eagle (*Hieraaetus fasciatus*), which breed just north of the Pyrenees in the Aude department of France and Booted Eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), that come from the Auvergne, also in small numbers. The Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) breeds in good numbers in the Carmargue. Flocks remain to feed in the lagoons along the coast from there to the Pyrenees most winters; many more migrate in stages down to the Ebro Delta and

on to lagoons further south towards Andalusia. When water levels are not too high it is possible to read the 'Euro rings' on some, and thus trace their life history.



'Black' White Stork © Joan Ventura

A popular bird with visitors is the White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*). 60 pairs breed around the reserve, with more at sites on the edge of the larger conservation area. Their nests are clearly visible from the footpaths, so that the nuptial performances of the adults and the progress of the growing young can be easily seen. At the end of the summer flocks from coming down the valley of the Rhone in France come through the reserve where they pause to rest and feed. With them are small numbers of Black Storks (*Ciconia nigra*), which come from further West. Care must be taken in identifying these as there are several 'Black' White Storks; some show some white in their plumage; others are almost entirely black. The difference in size and style of flight are diagnostic. Up to about 70 White Storks remain on the reserve during the winter; they are fed on day old chicks – males! (Do not return in the next life as a male chicken).

Other regular autumn passage migrants include the Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) and the Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*); small numbers may linger for days or even weeks. A member of a ringing team working at Porton Down that is ringing Stone Curlews (*Burhinus oeddicnemus*) has recently been investigating whether some of 'his' birds winter at Aiguamolls. Flocks of up to 500 Stone Curlew has been recorded in vineyards on the coastal plain near Perpignan, just over into France. There are reports of groups wintering very near the coast a few kilometres South of Aiguamolls reserve within the conservation area. There are several migrant species whose numbers are increasing in Southern France. These include the Red-rumped Swallow (*Hirundo daurica*) and the two species of 'brown swifts' – the Alpine Swift (*Apus melba*) and the Pallid Swift (*Apus pallidus*). None breed on the reserve. The Red-rumped Swallow is an early migrant, often travelling with other hirundines, but it is

easy to pick out because of its larger size, 'heavier' flight and the very obvious flash of pink and white on the rump. The two swifts migrate later than the Common Swift (*Apus apus*); they move individually or in very small groups; late birds occur in the third week of November; any 'swift' seen after the third week of September should be carefully scrutinised as it is unlikely to be a Common Swift. The dull brown colour, the larger size and the deep scything wing beat, along with the large white patches on the underside of the Alpine Swift and the small white chin patch of the Pallid Swift are diagnostic.

The very varied habitats on the reserve allow several interesting passerines to remain over winter. In the vegetation along the ditches and around the ponds Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia cetti*) are a common bird, usually heard before they are seen. At the edges of the reed beds and in the many large bushes that poke up out of the reed beds it is worth keeping an eye out for Bluethroats (*Luscinia svecica*) and the Penduline Tit (*Remiz pendulinus*). Small numbers of Fan-tailed Warblers (*Cisticola juncidis*) are resident in several places; the hovering display flight is a frequent give-away.

Spring is always an exciting period on the reserve. Wildfowl depart for their breeding grounds. Small flocks of waders pass through. In recent years increasing numbers of Collared Pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*) have been recorded; small numbers breed on the salt pans and saline edges to the coastal lagoons along the French coast. The reserve intermittently hosts the increasingly rare Southern Great Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*). The male takes up residence and holds territory from mid February. The female arrives around early April. It shares a similar habitat to the more common Woodchat Shrike (*Lanius senator*), a species found in the plains on the edge of vineyards and olive groves; the Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*), though present in very small numbers in the plains, seems to prefer the higher ground. In the undergrowth beside the ditches the screech of the Water Rail (*Rallus chloropus*) can be heard frequently and occasional the Spotted Crake (*Porzana porzana*) can be seen, as it creeps through the low vegetation. With spring comes the bird song. The area has most of the species of warbler that enjoy wetlands and reeds. Some, such as Savi's Warbler (*Locustella luscinioides*) and Moustached Warbler (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*) are elusive and difficult to see, whilst others, such as the great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) may be heard from a good distance away. However, the song that dominates the reserve in spring is that of the Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*); several hundred pairs breed across the reserve. In late summer a walk of 200 metres along the track through the reserve should allow the viewer to see up to 10 or 15 hopping in the open on that track.



Purple Gallinule

Spring also brings colourful birds: there is a large, noisy breeding colony of Bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) that makes it nesting holes in a large bank near the visitors' centre; the gorgeous blue of the Roller (*Coracias garrulous*) can be seen towards the public road at the back of the reserve. The Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) is only seen on migration, unlike its darker counterpart, the Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

that stays. The Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) is another interesting visitor that breeds at the reserve. It favours the reed beds in the southern third of the reserve. It is a ground nesting bird and is readily distinguished from its larger cousin, the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*). The Purple Heron has a very thin, snake-like head and neck; it is smaller and, in flight, has a noticeably faster wing beat than the Grey Heron.

Amongst the more interesting birds that are present throughout the year are the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and the Purple Gallinule (Swamp-hen) (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). The former does not breed on the reserve, but flies in from the high ground behind Roses. They are particularly active in the late afternoon in the areas favoured by the smaller waders. The Purple Gallinule is a species that has been introduced to the reserve on at least two occasions. It is a small turkey sized bird that normally lives further south towards Valencia and Andalusia. The dry summer and the occasional cold winter have hindered its survival in the past. The Short-toed Eagle (Snake eagle) (*Circaetus gallicus*) is present from early spring through to late autumn. It is the smallest of the local eagles and feeds almost entirely on reptiles. These it seeks out by hovering as it searches, before dropping on its prey. Snakes are held in the bill just behind the head where the bird cuts the spinal cord. It slowly swallows the reptile head first; not infrequently one can see the tail still wiggling energetically at a time when its head is already being dissolved.

A final few words about Aiguamolls should include Roses Bay. The society hosted by the reserve, the APNAE, runs boat trips from Roses harbour round the bay each early spring. Lasting about two and a half hours, the trip follows the coast line of the bay down past the Aiguamolls reserve before heading across the bay towards Cadaques, where the artist Salvador Dali had his home. During such a trip one might expect to see some 40 Black-throated Divers (*Gavia arctica*), Gannets (*Sula bassana*), Cory's Shearwaters (*Puffinus gravis*) and Yelkouan Shearwaters (*Puffinus yelkouan*), a Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*) or two, and four or five species of gull; as one would expect, the skuas give dramatic flying displays as they pursue the gulls to encourage them to disgorge the sardines they gathered from the back of the boat. On the cliffs near Cadaques, a Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) is usually present and, from time to time the delicate little Wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*) is seen flitting up the rocks and sheer cliffs; this bird descends from the high Pyrenees to winter in the milder coastal climate.

The Ebro Delta

The Ebro Delta is in quite a different league. It is a large triangular area that is split down the middle by the River Ebro which rises in the mountains North of Burgos. The delta area is all subject to controls in the interests of conservation. It has already been said that it is triangular with each side being about 25 to 30 kilometres long with one side running parallel to the motorway running South-west from Tarragona towards Valencia and the other two sides being the shore lines running to the mouth of the Ebro River as it exits into the sea. To access the Delta area one leaves the motorway at Amposta, a town about two hours drive from Barcelona and 45 minutes from Tarragona, the ancient Roman capital of Iberia. The Delta is home to a flourishing rice growing agriculture, the biggest in Spain, with the Ebro supplying the huge system of irrigation channels that flood the rice fields at the appropriate times. The division of the area by the Ebro produces two 'reserves' that have much in common in the way of habitats, but also some differences. Apart from the bridges at Amposta there is one other bridge across the river before the mouth.



Map of the Ebro Delta

The rice covers approximately three quarters of the surface area of the Delta. The rest is open water, salt marsh or small villages. Only the areas of open water and some of the salt marshes are fully protected with access restricted and hunting prohibited. Hunting is permitted over the rice growing areas in the hunting season except in the vicinity of dwellings.

The rice growing season affects the bird watching. Few of the birds in the rice fields are easily seen during the main growing season of the summer months. Harvesting takes place from early September until mid October. Once harvested, the fields are a quagmire of flooded

ruts from the tractors. Then they are ideal for water birds of many species: egrets, herons, duck, waders and gulls. There are areas outside the rice areas where there is excellent birdwatching throughout the year.

Such is the size of the whole area that it would take two full days to cover the areas both south and north of the river. Doing both would result in much duplication. Both areas have rice growing, salt marsh and a large sheltered bay. There are fresh water ponds that are closed reserves in both areas, but those on the southern area are larger and have more and better observation points. Both areas have long sandy beaches that in winter have waders such as Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) that are rarely seen elsewhere on the delta. If the visitor is restricted to a single full day then it is recommended that the South area is explored.

Recommended places in the south include the following:

a. The open water called La Tacada.

This is near the junction of a long sandy spit that Punta de la Banya in the extreme South. A rough surfaced lane leads down the East side of La Tacanada. Half way down this is a track junction. A walk down the track running inland provides good views over the rice fields and irrigation ditches to the North. On the fields waders of many species are possible depending on the amount of water. The ditches are frequented by Water Rail (*Rallus chloropus*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) and Kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*)

throughout the year. During the summer months Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) and Squacco Herons (*Ardeola ralloides*) patrol them. Further along the road there is a large hide that provides excellent views out over the water. In autumn the several thousand Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) arrive from the North. By November the water will have a carpet of ducks. Many feed on the lake; others go out to the fields to feed and return to rest and to roost. The species to be seen are those found in good numbers also at Aiguamolls and include Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), Wigeon (*Anas Penelope*), Gadwell (*Anas strepera*) and Pintail (*Anas acuta*). Common here but not at Aiguamolls are the Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) and the Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*). The other diving ducks are uncommon at both reserves. Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) are numerous throughout the year. The Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) is a winter visitor. Though very common in winter on the lagoons just North of the Pyrenees it is rarely seen at Aiguamolls, the water being too shallow.



Greater Flamingos on La Tancada

b. The Tancada Information Centre & Sant Antoni salt pans.

At the end of the road on the right is the information centre 'Món Natura Delta de l'Ebre'. In addition to providing information it has viewing points that look out over the open water of La Tancada, to the North, and the old salt pans astride the road to the South. The salt pans are one of the best places in the delta to see migrant and wintering waders: Avocets (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Spotted Redshanks (*Tringa erythropus*), Greenshanks (*Tringa nebularia*), Black tailed Godwits, Little Stints *Calidris minuta*), Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) and Knot (*Calidris canutus*). Because the Delta area is so rich in food many unusual species are attracted to it. On the edges of the scrapes that form the old salt pans Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne tschegrava*) loaf and preen. These are non-breeding birds or failed breeders. Other species to keep an eye out for are Audouin's Gull (*Larus audouinii*) and the Slender-billed Gull (*Larus genei*). Audouin's Gull is a little smaller than the much more common Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus cachinnans*) and is distinguished by its large strikingly red bill which has a black tip to it. It has a small breeding population across the Mediterranean and it is largely resident throughout its range; 40% of the Spanish population breeds at the Ebro

Delta area. The Slender-billed Gull in winter looks much like a Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*), but a little larger and, as its name suggests, a long, slim bill. In winter it can be found amongst the huge flocks of gulls that forage across the Delta; 30,000 Black headed Gulls have been recorded some years.



La Tancada Information Centre

c. El Clot & L'Encasyissada lagoons.

These lagoons are to the West of La Tancada and the information centre towards the town of Sant Carles de la Ràpita. Together they are a very much larger area of open water than La Tancada. There are four view points: Two by the causeway between the two lagoons and one on the North side of La Clot and a raised concrete 'Mirador de Patrau' at the West end of L'Encasyissada. This is accessed by a good surfaced track that runs north from the road between Sant Carles and La Tancada; it provides superb views out over the open water and the surrounding fields. Inevitably, most of the species seen on La Tancada will also be seen here. There is a regular roost for Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) near the mirador; flocks of over 20 roost in a tall tree. In the fields adjacent to the lagoons flocks of about two dozen Purple Gallinules (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) can be seen feeding.

d. The bays of Port del Fangar and Port dels Alfacs.

These are two sheltered bays at the North and South edges of the Delta that are created by the settling of the mud that is discharged from the river. Because they are shallow they provide a sheltered feeding area for the longer legged waders such as Spotted Redshanks and Black-tailed Godwits and for duck, particularly the diving duck such as Pochard and Tufted Duck. A winter visitor to these bays is the Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*). Up to 300 may winter between mid November and February. The Velvet Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*) is an irregular winter visitor; however, nearly 80 have been counted in some winters. Both species will have carried out a remarkable overland migration from their breeding areas in the far North of Europe

The Delta area is an enormous food bank (not just for humans with the rice crop) but for birds. Throughout the year there is bird movement almost everywhere one looks. Winter is a dramatic time with up to 300,000 birds across the Delta (according to the Ebro Delta winter census). To provide some idea of the vast numbers here are some survey totals for a few selected species from the overall check list for the Delta of nearly 400 species:

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) Up to 2,000 with up to around 600 breeding pairs.
 Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) Up to 2,000 from early October to March, but few remain to breed.
 Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) More than 300 breeding pairs.
 Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) At least 2,000 but none remain to breed.
 Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) More than 600 in winter; up to 30 pairs breed.
 Wigeon (*Anas Penelope*) Up to 6,000 some years with 19,500 in 1975.
 Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) Up to 2,000 most year, with a maximum of over 400 on occasions; 200-300 breeding pairs.
 Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) Between 5,000 and 14,000 in winter. Small numbers breed.
 Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) Up to 3,000 winter, with up to 1,700 breeding pairs.
 Pochard (*Aythya farina*) Between 600 and 4,000 wintering and a maximum (in 1980) of 14,800.
 Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) Up to 100 in winter
 Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) Around 400 pairs breed with up to 1,500 present in winter
 Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) Around 1,000 breeding pairs and 300 to 600 birds in winter.
 Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) Some over winter with over 200 some years.
 Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) 700-800 regularly over-winter with a maximum of over 2,000
 Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) Around 8,000 over-winter with a maximum of 16,000.
 Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) Numerous on migration, especially in spring; about 150 over-winter.
 Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) 3,000 in winter.
 Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) Between 100 and 250 over-winter.
 Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) Concentrations of around 1,000 at the end of the winter (February).
 Slender-billed Gull (*Larus genei*) Up to 400 pairs breed.
 Audouin's Gull (*Larus audouinii*) Up to 4,000 pairs breed.
 Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*) Around to 700 pairs breed.
 Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) Up to 5,000 pairs breed.
 Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) Up to 650 pairs breed.

Summary

This article has scarcely addressed the status of species that are not closely identified with wetlands and open water in the Delta area. The coastal situation of the Delta on a prime migration route and the variety of habitats to be found, allow many other species to pause and build up energy reserves before heading on to breeding or winter areas far away. Many of these remain to breed; others to over-winter. The number of species and the total of individual birds that remain over winter are increasing with the warmer climate.

The two reserves are different in size and scope. Both take a lot of getting to know so that the observer gets best value from a visit. Both need a full day if all the main habitats are to be visited; a vehicle is necessary for getting around the Delta, though there is plenty of scope for walking around many of the locations within the Delta. Finally, Aiguamolls is superb to visit at any time between late September and late May; the Ebro Delta has plenty to offer the bird watcher at any time of the year. Both can be reached from UK with cheap flights to Perpignan or Girona, for Aiguamolls and Barcelona (Reus) and Barcelona, for the Ebro Delta.

References:

The few guides in English that describe either of the two reserves are of limited value; they generally lack adequate detail. The best guides are in Catalan but, with an adequate understanding of French (or even the Latin you may have learnt at school), they can be very useful.

‘Els Ocells del Delta de L’Ebre’, Albert Martínez-Vilalta, Anna Motis & Dibuixos de Francesc Jutglar. Lynx Editions 1991

‘Els Ocells Del Park Natural Dels Aiguamolls de L’Empordà’, Jordi Sargatal, Josep del Hoyo. Lynx Edicions 1990

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Kingfisher

FAREWELL TO MARLEE?

(Nicholas Beswick)

Ten years ago Judy and I moved to south Wales at the same time as her oldest friend, Sue, moved to New South Wales. Travel 200 miles north from Sydney to Taree, a town near the mouth of the Manning River and then head 15 miles inland. That's Marlee, barely a hamlet, in cattle ranching country on the edge of forested mountains. We went over soon after we moved for the girls' joint hundredth birthday and have been several times since. But, ten years on, Sue was finding the property's 51 acres getting too much on top of her day job and decided that she needed to live somewhere rather less isolated. So, this year's visit for the 120th would be our last to Marlee.

Early spring in NSW: the dawn chorus is different. Butcherbirds and Australian Magpies start tooting and whistling (think Clangers) at the first hint of light, joined by the Kookaburra's manic laughter – Green Woodpecker on steroids – as day actually breaks. Wallabies emerge to graze on the lawn. The joeys look far too large to fit back into their mothers' pouches but somehow they do, long hindlegs and all. Bowerbirds soon appear to forage for insects stirred up by the animals. The Satin Bowerbird lives up to his name: stout Jackdaw size but a fabulous shiny black plumage and an amethyst eye. I never found his bower as there are far too many deadly Brown and Black Snakes to risk venturing into the undergrowth where one could tread on one. But we did conduct an experiment: putting out plastic bottle tops. Sure enough, the blue ones disappeared but green was ignored. That bowerbird must have had the smartest bower in the district so I hope it did the trick for him. The Regent Bowerbird also put in a guest appearance, a fantastic creature of gold and black but the females of both species are marked with cryptic greens and browns. Neither was popular with Sue as they would make short work of her ripening citrus fruit for a healthy five-a-day diet!

Breakfast on Sue's verandah would be accompanied by close inspection by the fairy wrens. Early Australian naturalists must have vied with each other for superlatives for the males: Superb, Splendid, Lovely, Unsurpassable (OK, I made the last one up) but the vivid colours of these feisty characters fully justify the names. Sue's property boasted three species: Superb, Variegated and Red-backed, the last being scarlet and black in contrast to the blues of the other two. Along with the fairy wrens come the honeyeaters to feed on the nectar in the spring flowers. The smallest, Eastern Spinebill and Scarlet Honeyeater, hover at the flowers and are only a little larger than hummingbirds. The larger Lewin's Honeyeater is drab in comparison but instantly identified by its call, sounding like a distant burst of machine-gun fire. They would be joined in the flowerbeds by the Eastern Yellow Robin which performs very much like robins everywhere and Willie Wagtail which, unlike our wagtails, wags from side to side. This year brought a new delight: a resident family of six Brown Quail, no bigger than thrushes that did a morning and afternoon circuit of the garden, scurrying off like clockwork toys if they felt threatened.

Australia would not be the same without its parrots and Marlee has its share. The King Parrot lives up to its name, being the largest and decked in bright green and red but it has a plaintive un-parrotlike whistle. Not so the Rainbow Lorikeets that screeches about, always in a rush. Rosellas are no less colourful in the trees while the grey and mauve Galahs forage on the lawn. One afternoon a fearful screaming announced a special visitor that sadly stayed all too briefly: a Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo.

Water supply is a constant challenge: it's either feast or famine. On our first visit 11 inches of rain fell in three days. All the farms have small man-made ponds, 'dams', for water storage and these attract ducks, herons and even cormorants. The tiny, dazzling, Azure Kingfisher preferred the creek at the bottom of the valley. I spent some time watching the creek at dusk for Duck-billed Platypuses, to no avail as we were, I learned, there too early in the spring. The creek was also a favoured haunt of thornbills and gerygones, classic LBJs, Australian style. I discovered that www.xeno-canto.org was invaluable for recordings of songs and calls but, even with that help, there were several that remained unidentified. On my last trip one such had been especially frustrating. It lurked in a patch of long grass and had a very distinctive song but would never emerge to give me even a glimpse. This time I was more fortunate: a brief view suggested a likely suspect that was confirmed by xeno-canto: Tawny Grassbird. That had been bothering me for three years!

During our visits I have seen quite a few raptors at Marlee. This year both Wedge-tailed and White-bellied Sea Eagles appeared on our first day, circling low over the property, much to the annoyance of the Magpie Larks. In fairness, Magpie Larks get annoyed by just about everything. Black-shouldered Kites, very much like the Iberian ones, and Nankeen Kestrels both demonstrated their hovering techniques but there was sadly no sign this time of the exotic Pacific Baza. The local corvids were, though, much in evidence but these take some identification, all being large black crows. The widespread Australian Raven has a pathetic wailing "aaaah" call that tails off with repetition while the Torresian Crow, common around Marlee, has a clipped, businesslike "ah". The more localised Forest Raven is the pirate of the three, with an "arrr"!



Australian Pelicans

Of course, we didn't just stay in Marlee but travelled round while Sue was working, in an ancient Suzuki runabout that clocked up its double-century, 200,000 Km, on one outing. Our first trip to a local beach brought an extraordinary sighting: a White-chinned Petrel flying close in along the shoreline. I knew instantly that the regional bird recorders would be sceptical and I wasn't disappointed. Overall, though, the Manning River and its estuary was a better bet.

Ospreys and Sea Eagles showed off their fishing techniques, the latter plucking fish from the water while barely getting its talons wet. The handsome Brahminy and plainer Whistling Kites also patrolled the waterways, with one of the latter pirating a Silver Gull's meal in skua fashion. Crested Terns were ubiquitous but good views of Gull-billed, Whiskered and

Caspian were highlights. Enormous Australian Pelicans hang around, their big yellow-rimmed eyes watchful for scraps, or lumber over like B-52 bombers. As they particularly like perching on lamp-posts it's prudent not to loiter beneath one.

My main birding day was at the Cattai Wetlands, just off the Pacific Highway. This is a new reserve that has been created to address acid pollution resulting from a disastrous drainage scheme a century ago. On my last trip I had to make special arrangements to visit; now it is open to the public. Habitats include a large shallow lake, brackish creek, grassland and forest, so unsurprisingly it boasts a huge bird list that made my day's tally of 56 species look pretty unimpressive. Top of the bill was the Comb-crested Jacana, a small wader that literally walks on water, using its huge feet to spread its weight over the lily pads that cover the lake. Another highlight was a visit to an unfamiliar site: Boorganna Nature Reserve, high on a plateau north of Marlee. This precious remnant of rainforest has some enormous trees and birds exclusive to the habitat. The Noisy Pitta is a gloriously colourful character that pokes around under the densest cover but my favourite find was the Logrunner. This was described in my field guide as shy: not so! One almost ran over my feet while it busily dug away in the leaf litter while four others were having a furiously loud territorial dispute. A longer visit will be a must on my next trip.

Back at Marlee, new spring arrivals appeared almost daily. Most obvious were various cuckoos, starting with the mournful trills of the Fan-tailed. This was soon followed by the exotic Horsfield's and Shining Bronze-cuckoos. The former foraged on weeds in the paddock while the latter preferred the woodland edge behind the house. Neither stayed long. The last to appear was the Channel-billed which I heard flying over honking while I was in the outside loo. Perhaps I should start a "Dunny List"? I wasn't too sorry to have missed the arrival of the Common Koel as its endless, doleful chanting of its name becomes extremely tedious.

Inevitably, it was time to return home all too soon. But the good news is that Sue has moved to Harrington, on the mouth of the Manning River, with a great range of superb habitats on her doorstep and Cattai only a short drive. The Rainbow Bee-eaters on a wire outside her new house were a mouth-watering appetiser and, with the huge Crowdy National Park at the end of her road, the bowerbirds may still not be that far away. And I may yet have to go back to Marlee in search of that elusive Platypus!

Marlee Birds September 2014

Maned Duck	Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	Brown Gerygone
Pacific Black Duck	Galah	Eastern Whipbird
Brown Quail	Australian King-Parrot	Gray Butcherbird
Little Pied Cormorant	Crimson Rosella	Pied Butcherbird
Pacific Heron	Eastern Rosella	Australasian Magpie
White-faced Heron	Rainbow Lorikeet	Pied Currawong
Cattle Egret	Green Catbird	Black-faced Cuckooshrike
Australian Kite	Regent Bowerbird	Crested Shrike-tit

Wedge-tailed Eagle	Satin Bowerbird	Gray Shrike-Thrush
Brown Goshawk	White-throated Treecreeper	Golden Whistler
Collared Sparrowhawk	Variegated Fairywren	Rufous Whistler
White-bellied Sea-Eagle	Superb Fairywren	Olive-backed Oriole
Masked Lapwing	Red-backed Fairywren	Willie-wagtail
White-headed Pigeon	Eastern Spinebill	Gray Fantail
Brown Cuckoo-Dove	Lewin's Honeyeater	Magpie-lark
Crested Pigeon	Yellow-faced Honeyeater	Torresian Crow
Wonga Pigeon	Bell Miner	Australian Raven
Bar-shouldered Dove	Noisy Miner	Eastern Yellow Robin
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	White-cheeked Honeyeater	Welcome Swallow
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo	Noisy Friarbird	Tree Martin
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo	Striated Pardalote	Tawny Grassbird
Channel-billed Cuckoo	Yellow-throated Scrubwren	Silver-eye
Pheasant Coucal	White-browed Scrubwren	Australasian Pipit
Azure Kingfisher	Brown Thornbill	Red-browed Firetail
Laughing Kookaburra	Yellow Thornbill	Chestnut-breasted Munia
Sacred Kingfisher	Striated Thornbill	
Australian Kestrel	White-throated Gerygone	



Grasshopper Warbler

MARLOTH PARK AND THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK 15TH AUGUST TO 5TH SEPTEMBER 2014

(Ray Marsh)

We started our holiday with five days in Marloth Park, a private Bush Urbanisation with approximately a thousand properties scattered in the natural bush habitat throughout the park. We had hired a house from a birding acquaintance so the garden was well equipped with feeding stations and, like most of the gardens in the park, was totally unfenced and open to the bush so allowing the animals in the Park to come and go at will. Once the local birds had realised that the feeders were back in operation we were visited by a constant stream including; Black-headed Oriole, Dark-capped Bulbul, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Black-collared Barbet, African Hoopoe, Kurrichane Thrush, Greater Blue-eared Starling and several species of weavers including several Thick-billed Weavers that have a wickedly looking oversized bill. A nearby tree was home to a family of Lesser Bush Baby and each evening we were entertained by these charming creatures as they leapt prodigious distances between trees before alighting on the tree where I had squashed a banana onto the trunk. Other mammals visiting the garden included Great Kudu, Impala, Grey Duiker, Zebra, Giraffe, Warthog, Banded Mongoose, Vervet Monkey and Chacma Baboon.



Tawny Eagle

The northern boundary of Marloth is the Crocodile River which also separates Marloth from the Kruger N.P., the nearest entrance to the park being just twenty minutes drive away. A view point over the river not only produced great views of the mammals such as herds of Elephant numbering up to thirty animals, Lion, Zebra, Giraffe, Hippo, various species of antelope and once a herd of around 500 Buffalo coming to drink, but also good numbers of

birds. Birds I saw here included Goliath Heron, Martial Eagle, Tawny Eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle, African Fish Eagle, the endangered Saddle-billed Stork, Woolly-necked Stork, Hadedia Ibis and five species of Plover. I spent many hours wandering through the bush encountering various animals and a host of birds coming into breeding plumage including; Magpie Shrike, Brubru, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Retz's Helmetshrike, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Wire-tailed, Pearl-breasted and Lesser Striped Swallows.

After five days of relaxing in Marloth we set out for a 0600hrs entrance into the Kruger N.P. where we were to spend ten days, staying overnight in five different campsites. The campsites are well equipped with a restaurant, small supermarket, a shop and accommodation ranging from camping pitches to two bedroom bungalows. The Park rules are simple, you

must be inside a campsite by 1800hrs when the gates are locked and reopened at 0600hrs, outside the campsites you are not allowed to get out of your vehicle apart from when in specially designated areas. We spent five days travelling northwards then reversed our route for the next five days, the highlights of the trip included seeing the Big 5 (Lion, Leopard, Rhino, Elephant and Buffalo) before lunch one day then repeating the feat in the afternoon; early one morning coming round a bend in the road to find the way blocked by five Cheetah who were in no hurry to move on; getting up close to several Rhino and having Lion, Hyena, Zebra, Giraffe and many species of antelope walk past the car paying us no attention what so ever.

One morning we watched as a Tawny Eagle plucked its prey just two metres above our heads, we were only the second vehicle to arrive on the scene, but very quickly others arrived and soon there must have been over £50,000 of photographic equipment pointed at the eagle. The river bridge at Lower Sabie Campsite is superb for close up views of water birds and did not disappoint with, Hamerkop, Saddle-billed Stork, African Open-billed Stork, Goliath Heron, African Jacana, Black Crake, Water Dickkop, Kitlitz's, Blacksmith, Three-banded, White-crowned, Crowned and African Wattled Plovers, the wall of the bridge was used as a fishing perch by Giant and Pied Kingfishers and as a resting place for Lesser Striped, Wire-tailed and Pearl-breasted Swallows, Little and White-rumped Swifts.



Giant Kingfisher

Driving slowly on the dirt roads through the scrub we saw; Crested, Swainson's, Natal, Coqui and Red-necked Francolins, Temmink's Courser, Red-crested Korhaan, Southern Yellow-billed, Red-billed and Grey Hornbills, as well as three family groups of Southern Ground Hornbills with their ridiculously long eyelashes and comical walk.

In total I had over 150 species for the ten days in the Kruger N.P., we had enjoyed really close up views of Martial and Tawny Eagles, Kori Bustards, Ground Hornbills and, for me, one of the most beautiful birds in the world, the Lilac-breasted Roller which was very common with a daily total of between 30 and 40 birds. After ten days with up to ten hours a day driving at between 20 and 40 kms per hour a relaxing final six days in Marloth Park was a welcome change.

List of birds seen

White-breasted Cormorant	Temmink's Courser	African Stonechat
Reed Cormorant	Collared Pratincole	Bearded Scrub-robin
African Darter	Rock Dove	Green-backed Camaroptera
Grey Heron	African Mourning Dove	Long-billed Crombec
Goliath Heron	Red-eyed Dove	Bar-throated Apalis
Purple Heron	Cape Turtle Dove	Fan-tailed Warbler
Great Egret	Laughing Dove	Rattling Cisticola

Cattle Egret	Namaqua Dove	Tawny-flanked Prinia
Squacco Heron	Emerald-spotted Wood-dove	S. Black Flycatcher
Green Backed Heron	African Green Pigeon	Pale Flycatcher
Hamerkop	Brown-headed Parrot	African Paradise-flycatcher
Woolly-necked Stork	Purple-crested Turaco	Cape White-eye
African Open-billed Stork	Grey Go-away-Bird	Chinspot Batis
Saddle-billed Stork	Burchell's Coucal	African Pied Wagtail
Marabou Stork	S. White-faced Scops Owl	African Pipit
Yellow-billed Stork	Pearl-spotted Owlet	Magpie Shrike
Hadedda Ibis	Giant Eagle Owl	Black-crowned Tchagra
African Spoonbill	Fiery-necked Nightjar	Brown-crowned Tchagra
Egyptian Goose	White-rumped Swift	Grey-headed Bush-shrike
Secretary Bird	Little Swift	Orange-breasted Bush-shrike
Hooded Vulture	African Palm Swift	Retz's Helmet Shrike
Cape Vulture	Speckled Mousebird	S. White-crowned Shrike
White-backed Vulture	Red-faced Mousebird	Brubru
Lappet-faced Vulture	Pied Kingfisher	Black-backed Puffback
Yellow-billed Kite	Giant Kingfisher	Greater Blue-eared Starling
Tawny Eagle	Brown-hooded Kingfisher	Cape Glossy Starling
Wahlberg's Eagle	Grey-headed Kingfisher	Burchell's Starling
Martial Eagle	White-fronted Bee-eater	Red-winged Starling
Brown Snake-eagle	Little Bee-eater	Common Myna
Bateleur	Lilac-breasted Roller	Red-billed Oxpecker
African Goshawk	Purple Roller	Yellow-billed Oxpecker
Coqui Francolin	African Hoopoe	Scarlet-chested Sunbird
Crested Francolin	Green Wood-hoopoe	White-bellied Sunbird
Natal Francolin	Common Scimitarbill	Marico Sunbird
Swainson's Francolin	African Grey Hornbill	House Sparrow
Red-necked Francolin	S. Yellow-billed Hornbill	S. Grey-headed Sparrow
Small Buttonquail	Red-billed Hornbill	Red-billed Buffalo Weaver
Helmeted Guineafowl	S. Ground Hornbill	Thick-billed Weaver
Black Crake	Black-collared Barbet	Village Weaver
Common Moorhen	Crested Barbet	S. Masked-weaver
Kori Bustard	Bearded Woodpecker	Lesser Masked-weaver
Red-crested Korhaan	Wire-tailed Swallow	Spectacled Weaver
African Jacana	Pearl-breasted Swallow	Red-headed Weaver
Kitlitz's Plover	Lesser Striped Swallow	Red-billed Quelea
Three-banded Plover	Brown-throated Martin	White-winged Widowbird
Crowned Plover	Fork-tailed Drongo	Pin-tailed Whydah
Blacksmith Plover	Black-headed Oriole	Long-tailed Paradise-whydah
White-crowned Plover	Pied Crow	African Firefinch
African Wattled Plover	S. Black Tit	Red-billed Firefinch
Common Sandpiper	Arrow-marked Babbler	Blue Waxbill

Wood Sandpiper
Marsh Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Black-winged Stilt
Water Dikkop

Dark-capped Bulbul
Sombre Greenbul
Yellow-bellied Greenbul
Kurrichane Thrush
Mocking Cliff-chat

Bronze Mannikin
Cut-throat Finch
Golden-breasted Bunting

TRIP TO MANA POOLS , ZIMBABWE OCTOBER 24TH TO 27TH 2014

(Anne Nason)

Ian and I came out to Zimbabwe in mid-October to stay with the family, and once again they had planned an exciting trip for us. We set off from Harare in their Landcruiser for the Mana Pools National Park at 6.30am on the 24th. The drive took six and a half hours including several stops, the first at Lion's Den, between Chinoyi and Karoi, for a breakfast snack and to stock up on biltong, reputed to be the best in Zimbabwe. This road is the route to Kariba but also the main trucking road to Zambia so the traffic was fairly heavy and it was not easy to overtake as we descended the steep downhill road into the Zambezi valley. On arrival at the park the usual procedures of paying park fees and checking in took some time but finally after the last hour and a half on laterite roads inside the park we arrived at Stretch Ferreira's camp on the banks of the Zambezi, looking across to the hills of south eastern Zambia on the opposite side of this vast river.

Stretch is one of Zimbabwe's real characters – so-called because of his height of at least 6ft.



Pel's Fishing Owl

6'! He is one of the few guides in the park qualified to walk with clients through the bush and he knows the elephants personally - which ones can be approached on foot and which ones cannot. He is a great animal man and we soon realised that animals would be paramount and birds would have to take a second place! In spite of that, one of his young guides found us a pair of Pel's Fishing Owls, and Stretch pointed out several more specials to us.

October is the end of the dry season and the animals and birds are concentrated on the open plains near the Zambezi with the land parched and dry and many of the trees without leaves. The safari season ends about the end of October when the rains begin and as no permanent structures are allowed in the park, all the safari

camp are taken down and packed away – a massive logistical operation. Stretch is one of the few safari operators who can use the same riverside spot every year, but even so the tents all have to be taken down at the end of the season. The bar and sitting area was pleasantly cool where one could watch the hippos and crocs in the river and the egrets, herons and spoonbills on the marshy area nearby, but the tents, even in the shade, were very hot in the afternoon. The water in the jug beside the basin was almost too hot to touch! The generator was only on in the evenings until 9pm and then off until drum call at 5am, so it was definitely “early to bed, early to rise.” No fans are provided, so it was still very hot during the night.

There is an extensive bird list for the park, but we saw huge numbers of a few species of birds rather than many different species. Four species predominated: Meve’s Starling seemed to be everywhere, in the trees, on the ground and in the camp. Flocks of Cape Turtle Dove and Emerald-spotted Wood Dove rose in clouds as we drove by and there were literally hundreds of Red-billed Hornbills.

Several small lakes and marshy areas attracted congregations of waterbirds and we encountered two of the local “specials,” the Long-toed Lapwing and the Rufous-bellied Heron. Unfortunately both were too distant for good photographs. However, apart from those there were many different species of interest; Saddle-billed Stork, African Openbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis, Hadedda Ibis, White-crowned Lapwing, Water Thick-knee and Ruff, some of which still had white necks, remnants of their summer breeding plumage.

On one game drive we came across a large male lion beside a dead hippo – Stretch said it was an old hippo almost certainly killed as a result of a fight with a younger rival, and the lion was guarding it. The following morning we returned and there were two male lions (brothers) at the carcass, hyenas skulking in the background and at least 30 vultures on a tree nearby, waiting for their chance to feed. The vultures were mostly White-backed but a few Hooded Vultures were present - one even on the ground near the carcass, but not brave or foolish enough to get too close. We saw two other species of vulture in the park, but only single birds of both Lappet-faced and White-headed Vulture at a large waterhole with baboons and impala nearby,



Western-banded Snake Eagle

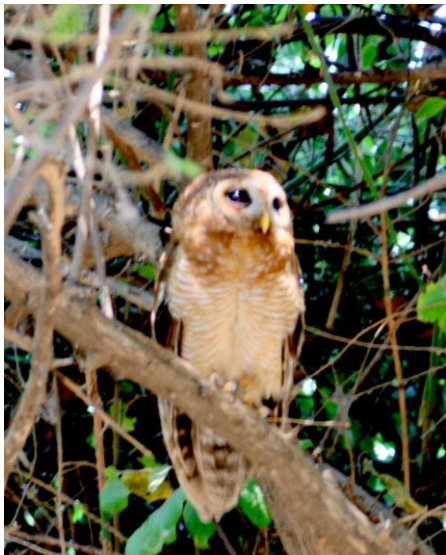
African Spoonbills feeding in the shallows with the rhythmical side to side movement of their bills and a Hamerkop treading the water with his feet. At another kill, an impala, probably killed by the wild dogs, a jackal was feeding with White-backed Vultures and Marabou Storks on the ground waiting for their chance.

Stretch found the wild dogs for us, and we sat under a tree only about 30 metres from them, as they rested in the heat of the sun. It was a large pack of over 20 individuals including eight pups. Wild dogs are one of the special animals in the Mana Pools National Park, but

visitors are not always as lucky as we were. Shortly before we had seen a pack of hyenas on a hunt, a rather chilling sight as they were running “with intent” and the herds of impala were scattering.

Surprisingly we did not spot many birds of prey in the park, but a Western-banded Snake Eagle was a good sighting as we were walking back from photographing the Pel’s Fishing Owl. It had a significantly pale head so was probably an immature bird. Fish Eagles were common along the river and a few Bateleur were spotted in flight with their distinctive short tail and underwing pattern. The only other eagle we saw was a Tawny Eagle which was surprising, but the breeding season for raptors is mainly over. A few smaller raptors were spotted in flight like African Goshawk and Ovambo Sparrowhawk, but as Stretch was looking for the wild dogs, we didn’t stop. The Pel’s, of course, was the find of the safari and it was sitting at the top of a tall strangular fig tree, with its larger mate partly hidden behind leaves nearby. The young guide who had found it, called us up on the radio and we walked with Stretch about 200 yards to locate the guide and then have the owls pointed out to us. The guide explained they had been mobbed by a Yellow-billed Kite and had moved, but luckily the male was still clearly visible.

Around the camp there were Jameson’s Firefinch and cheekiest of all, the Yellow-bellied Greenbulbs which will actually feed out of Stretch’s hand or fly onto the dining table to eat the butter and clean up the breadcrumbs. Arrow-marked Babblers and Bulbuls also come to eat the seed that Stretch puts out for the birds. Our granddaughter spotted a Wood Owl very close to the sitting area which was obliging enough to stay and be photographed. Giant Eagle Owls are present in the park, but when Stretch walked us to a known roost, all that was left were two large pellets and a huge primary wing feather on the ground beneath.



Wood Owl

During our three nights at Mana Pools we went on six game drives, the morning ones beginning at 5.30am and the evening ones at 4.30pm. It is forbidden by the Park authorities to use headlights at night so sometimes Stretch had to hurtle along in the dusk like a rally driver to reach the camp before dark. Unfortunately that meant that we were unlikely to pick up nightjars on the park tracks.

On our last morning Stretch decided to take us on foot to see his favourite tree, a huge strangular fig with an extensive spread. On the way we encountered one of the enormous bull elephants who walked to within about 15 metres of us and then stopped. We were able to take photographs before he turned and walked slowly off – a truly fascinating experience. One of Stretch’s favourite elephants, big Vic, (as he has a V-shaped notch in his ear) had been spotted earlier but as he was with

cows and a calf, it was too dangerous to go and greet him. Walking back to the vehicle we noticed a dead vulture and Stretch mentioned that poisoning is an ever-present threat.

Other species seen in the park were both Retz’s and White-crested Helmet-Shrike, Red-billed Oxpecker on kudu and buffalo, Crowned Hornbill, a party of Ground Hornbill and a fleeting

glimpse of a Collared Palm Thrush. Our son-in-law spent several hours fishing for tiger fish and spotted a Skimmer on the river and a Goliath Heron. Two colonies of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters were nesting in a bank of the river on both sides of the camp, and Ian photographed a Giant Kingfisher guarding its nest hole in the river bank. Lilac-breasted Roller and Green Wood-Hoopoe were also seen, but not in the usual numbers.

The drive back to Harare only took five and a half hours as we had one brief stop at the park gate to show the receipt proving that we had paid the park fees and another short stop at Lion's Den, a half-way house.

It was a particularly memorable visit to Mana Pools and to walk with elephants guided by such a remarkable character as Stretch, was an unforgettable experience. The bird sightings were less than usual but to see both Pel's Fishing Owl and a Wood Owl was certainly a highlight of the birding part of the trip.

And finally

As I write this I am sitting in the garden in Harare, listening to the birdcalls. The garden has a large stand of musasa trees at the back and beautifully laid out shrubs and flowerbeds around the house. This morning I have heard the calls of Purple-crested Lourie, Kurrichane Thrush, Southern Boubou, White-browed Robin-Chat and Dark-capped Bulbul, a pair of which is nesting in a vine close to the house. Their nests are small cups which look too small to contain the bird, but they are obviously very successful as the garden is full of them. Blue Waxbills and Southern Grey-headed Sparrows are coming down to feed on the seed on the hanging bird table. A Paradise Flycatcher is flitting around the trees and a few days ago we even saw a Long-crested Eagle in the garden. Other visitors have been a Lesser Honeyguide and a Black-collared Barbet. It is not surprising that we have been told that Harare gardens are one of the best bird-watching places in the country.



Siskin



Long-tailed Tit



Pied Flycatcher