

Army Ornithological Society

NEWSLETTER JULY 2015



FINAL NOTES FROM THE HON SECRETARY

OK, I admit it, I didn't really want to leave the Army and the first opportunity to remain a serving Officer was grasped and I will now be posted as a Full Time Reserve Officer at the Royal Yeomanry in Fulham. This is ideal as it allows me to stay on the AOS books as a Serving Officer and will allow me to take the time off required to take part in some AOS activities.



Hon Sec, Thursley Common © Roger Dickey

May I thank you for all the help and support I received over the last 5 years as Secretary and the 19 years I have spent on the Committee? I handover to Major Ben White and will leave the post in his capable hands. I have enjoyed the responsibility enormously and now look forward to sitting in the seats as an ordinary member at the AGM.

I believe that the last AGM was a success and that we were royally looked after by CPTA; we now look forward to the next AGM in the north of Britain, perhaps just over the border in Scotland.

This newsletter will have a raptor feel about it given the news of alleged raptor persecution in the UK and

Britain's first national Hen Harrier Day on 9th August 2015. PC Josh Marshall, the AOS's own Police Wildlife Crimes Officer has very kindly written an article on Wildlife Crime in Devon but which has a national flavour. Many thanks Josh.

TICE'S MEADOW

Some of you will be aware that I have been part of a team managing and helping to develop an old gravel pit on the border of Aldershot and Farnham for a number of years. Tice's Meadow has become the most recorded site in Surrey and is known for its friendly birders and welcoming atmosphere. Apart from the usual annual management tasks we have taken part in seasonal 24/48 hour Wildlife Surveys with members camping on site and surviving on beer, Fish and Chips and homemade Curry. During our last survey there was a large AOS presence with the following members turned up for the whole of the event or when and where they could:

- Bob Brunton
- Kev Campbell
- Roger Dickey
- Andy Little
- Rich Mooney
- Rich Seargent

AOS members providing support in the past have included:

- Tony Kaduck
- Mark Leitch
- Lynne Millard

Roger kindly supported the survey as the lone ringer and managed to be on site when we had a fall of Sedge Warblers. He provided demonstrations to visitors throughout the weekend and increased the knowledge of a number of families who turned up to see how we were getting on. Since the survey Roger has been back and ringed a number of Common Tern chicks on the rafts that have been floated out.

Tice's Meadow Bird Group has a Blog dedicated to the local wildlife at www.ticesmeadow.org and there is a dedicated Twitter Account (@TicesMeadow) which tweets sightings as and when they occur. We have Bird Forum page for anyone who is interested. Tice's Meadow is in a central location to a number of Military Birders and a greater AOS footprint would be welcomed. We have our own Wildlife Report, the second one which has just been published, and is available through the Hon Sec for the princely price of £15. The Bird Group is ably led by 'The Patch Commander' Rich Horton, whom some of you will know. Please let me know if you would like to visit and I can show you around – the reserve is worth it, especially during migration periods.



L-R, AOS Birders. Kev Campbell, Rich Seargent, Roger Dickey and Andy Little.
© Richard Seargent

MEMBERSHIP

The Society currently sits at 195 members with two members in waiting. This is an overall increase of 5 members despite losing half a dozen at the beginning of the year. It is pleasing to see that we continue to recruit serving members particularly Junior Ranks, the lifeblood of the society.

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

Once again some mixed thoughts from me as the very successful AGM is relegated to the past and we wrestle with conflicting expeditions and fields days for 2016.

Change once more is in the air but I'm heartened that Tony Kaduck refuses to be an overseas member – more of a forward operating base for Ontario birding next year and hopefully thereafter. Also due to move is Mark Easterbrook who has kept us informed and entertained through his blog from Cyprus. This has been a colossal effort and has been one of the best accounts of birdlife in Cyprus that has been seen in recent years. It will be missed tremendously.

Several of our members this year have been, as Andy Harrison calls retirement, 'released into the care of the community'. It doesn't seem to have reduced the birding updates of many on our Facebook page but for others it forces a significant change in the administration of the Society. Tony Giles has had to relinquish his post as leader of our regular expeditions to Ascension. A military signature block counts for much when applying for flights, accommodation and transport and Tony has been very efficiently running the exercise every 9.6 months for a number of years, for which we are all most grateful. Our serving numbers diminish but a replacement is urgently required. Interim arrangements will be made until a volunteer steps forward.

At the AGM we very sadly had to thank Richard Seargent for his time as Honorary Secretary as he is also very swiftly reaching the end of his military perch. Richard took over the post soon after I became chairman and I am personally indebted to him for carrying me through many AGMs and

committee meetings. Collectively, we are most grateful to him for the arrangements that he has made on our behalf. Charismatically he has persuaded many Camp Commandants and range staff to 'come up with the goods'. We will miss his ability to procure mess barmen, obtain free accommodation, recruit more members than the rest of us over the last 5 years, and I will refrain from mentioning 'postage'. All with great style and good humour. Thank you Richard!

To close therefore, I wish our new Secretary, Ben White, good luck and a reminder that the Society is not behind you but alongside.

FLYER

The Society now has a recruiting flyer. Should you wish to have some copies to aid recruiting please let me know and I'll pass on through the post. Perfect to leave in social areas in military establishments.

EMAIL ADDRESSES – A CONTINUED REQUEST

I only have 126 email addresses registered. Should you have received this newsletter in hard-copy format and would like to cut down postage and packaging I would be grateful if you could send your email contact to Richard.Seargent115@mod.uk and I will ensure that future emails will be sent in e-format.

Rest assured that your address will not be used for any business within the society without the approval of the Chairman and/or the Hon Sec.

WILDLIFE CRIME IN DEVON PC JOSH MARSHALL



Hobby © Kev Campbell

The aim of this article is to inform readers of current wildlife crime threats to birds in Devon and the priorities as they stand in 2015, and whether reported offences have increased or decreased during the last five years or more. I also touch on issues that are nationally important but also relevant to Devon.

Nationally, raptor persecution attracts a lot of media attention, and sadly Devon has contributed to this in the last five years. Raptor persecution is a priority for the National Wildlife Crime Unit and is high on the agenda of

Devon and Cornwall Police. Media attention is always polarised when reports of raptor persecution take place. The national picture suggests that convictions are mainly of persons involved with the game industry, as well as pigeon fanciers. While this is often the case, I must stress that it is a rogue minority that is responsible, giving responsible practitioners a bad name.

2011 was particularly bad in Devon with two confirmed poisoning cases. In one, four dead Goshawks and a Buzzard were found together in a wood. Tests confirmed the use of a banned pesticide deliberately used as a poison in all the birds. These birds were found just 400 yards from a pheasant shoot! However, there was no evidence to link anyone to the crime. At another site in South Devon a dead juvenile Peregrine was found close to an eyrie, and again analysis revealed an illegal pesticide. The effect on this site was that all the young and one adult disappeared; all were presumed to have been poisoned, and at a nearby site the birds similarly disappeared but no

corpses were found. This highlights that finding any corpses for analysis to confirm a suspected poisoning is difficult, and often relies on evidence from the public in the shape of local enthusiasts.

In both these cases, despite extensive media coverage, no specific evidence was available to link the crimes to an offender. With the majority of these incidents, there is nearly always a lack of witnesses or evidence to secure a conviction. I firmly believe that more persecution goes on in Devon but little is reported, as the birds often meet their fate in the middle of nowhere.

Expectations of the public are of course high, while police resources are low. A police investigation where lines of enquiry are limited often gets left in the 'undetected' pile. This can cause frustration, and sometimes unfavourable public comment on social media. Rest assured that I also feel the same frustration, but we cannot send people to court when there is little or no evidence.



Red Kite © Debbie Bowles

Devon is fortunate to hold a number of species specially protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This includes birds that many may think are not protected. The legislation makes it an offence to recklessly or intentionally disturb a Schedule 1 bird whilst it is at a nest when this is being built, has eggs, or when there are dependent young at or near the nest. Licences are available that allow monitoring of such species; these are issued through the British Trust for

Ornithology on behalf of Natural England. They are normally issued to people such as workers on raptors, ringers and nest recorders. Licences also available for photography of Schedule 1 birds 'whilst at or close to the nest' and these must be applied for through Natural England.

As cameras have become standard equipment for most birders and even non-birders, with this comes the desire to 'get the shot'; and consequently there has been an increase in reports of disturbance to nesting Schedule 1 species, and others, by photographers. In a recent conversation with a senior member of the RSPB investigation team, he told me of his current concern at the number of such incidents taking place. People need to be aware of their responsibilities under the 1981 Act, and in Devon I have unfortunately had to deal with intentional disturbance of Schedule 1 birds at the nest. In one recent case, two men were caught on covert camera (owned by Devon Birds), taking photographs at a Peregrine nest site (with a poor success rate) in South Devon, and I am currently investigating another alleged disturbance of a Peregrine nest site in Devon.

Some positive news is that egg collecting has dropped dramatically since the introduction of custodial sentences in 2000. The reduction in this hobby, formerly widespread, appears to be through the loss of ageing practitioners; new recruits seem to be few or non-existent, especially with the deterrent of custodial sentences. School boy egg collecting (certainly a major factor in recruiting many birders into their present hobby) no longer exists. Maybe this is something we can thank the 'Playstation generation' for! The damage they now do nationwide is negligible. Indeed RSPB investigators believe that there are now only very few egg collectors still active nationally, but incidents have still been reported over the last five years, with a few confirmed



Short-eared Owl © Matt Lang

cases. The most recent case in Devon was in 2012, when a South Devon man was convicted for possession of wild bird eggs.

It is still important to keep some information out of the public domain. This applies particularly to raptors (and rare breeding birds) as they are still threatened by persecution and disturbance. I have had many conversations with ex-egg collectors at the Bird Fair and locally. Many have now turned the corner and are putting their skills to use for the BTO nest recording scheme. Interestingly, much of their information was gleaned from our very own bird reports; despite some precautions being taken when reporting, careful analysis of the published information, followed by study of maps that display suitable habitat, gave them all the clues they needed. Sites for birds such as Cirl Bunting and Cetti's Warbler in Devon were also well known within collecting circles. A well-publicised wardened location for Cirl Bunting may be an excellent idea, but a quick check of neighbouring coastal areas with similar habitat would also prove fruitful. In fact, some supposedly wardened sites where these birds are fully advertised on boards and in social media offer little protection from persecution. I have wandered around a number of such places in the breeding season and have never encountered a warden!. However, such reserves act as focal points where certain species can be seen, diverting attention from wider areas. Even so, we should still be vigilant in such areas. In a recent incident, roosting owls were potentially being disturbed at a reserve by photographers, following posting of sightings within the bird news media. This shows that we need to think about how we use the power of modern media and always put the interests of the birds first.

The greatest care should be exercised when reporting breeding sites of raptors such as Goshawks and Peregrines, both of them commonly targeted. However, most of the people who may persecute these species need little help from us as they are already well aware of sites for their 'target' species. We must remain vigilant and report any suspicious incidents where raptors are concerned. Buzzards are not offered the special protection of Schedule 1 raptors, but are often persecuted by the same people who want to take out Goshawks. Tethered or wing-clipped pigeons near breeding areas, and dead animals left out in unusual situations should be reported. The standard reporting procedure for this type of incident would be to call the Police who will secure the necessary evidence and then inform Natural England who will arrange for collection of the bird and subsequent testing.

Throughout the summer months I commonly receive and deal with reports of commoner species being targeted. I receive regular reports of Herring Gulls being killed or their nests and eggs being destroyed. The destruction of House Martin and Swallow nests is also commonly reported during spring and summer. I also receive allegations of birds' nests being destroyed during tree felling and hedge cutting. Whilst I do not doubt that this goes on, my advice to any person reporting such instances is to provide actual evidence, including the site and active status of the nest if at all possible. This can be through videos or photos, or even by asking an officer to attend and witness the nest, and prevent any work from being undertaken. We can then take action against the relevant people. Without evidence, the job is nigh on impossible. It remains an offence to destroy any nest of a wild bird, including that of the Herring Gull which is now a Red-listed species.

Appendix 1 - Confirmed cases in last five years:

2014

- 1 Shot Peregrine.
- 1 shot Buzzard found in a freezer in Newton Abbot.

2013

- 2 Buzzards poisoned.

2012

2 Disturbances of Peregrines at the nest.

2011

- 4 Goshawk 1 Buzzard 1 Peregrine poisoned.
- 1 Juv Peregrine poisoned near nest site.

Appendix II - What to do if you witness wildlife crime:

Suspected poisoning. Contact numbers: If an incident is on-going with offenders on the scene then call 999. To report a suspicious incident or to speak with a Wildlife Crime Officer call 101.

Natural England Wildlife Investigation Scheme, if suspected poisoning incidents have taken place 0800 321 600.

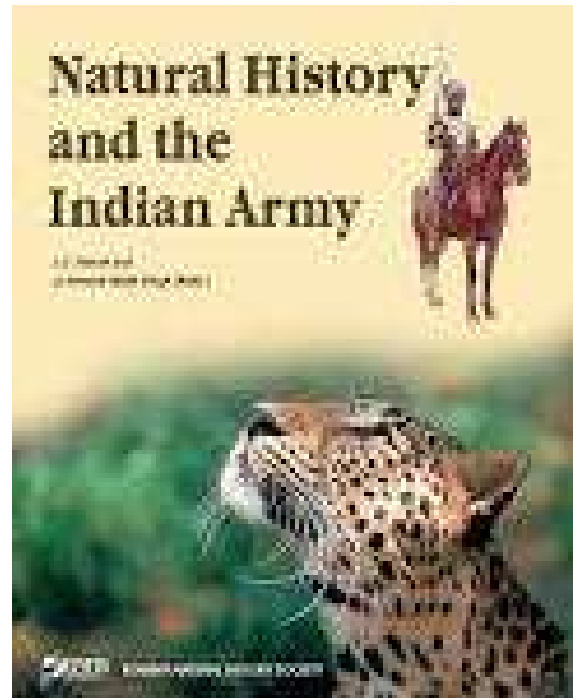
Disturbance, contact numbers as above.

BOOK REVIEW – NATURAL HISTORY AND THE INDIAN ARMY GERRY BIRCH

Natural History and the Indian Army. By JC Daniel & Lieut Gen Baljit Singh (Retd). The Bombay Natural History Society. 2009. ISBN 0-19-806450-0.

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) has produced a medium sized coffee table book describing a wide range of natural history topics written by members of the Indian Army over the period 1778 to 2002. The BNHS was founded in 1883 and has produced works of reference since 1886 and is the leading non-governmental organisation in the Indian Subcontinent. The authors or co-editors, JC Daniel and Lieutenant General Baljit Singh (Retd), have put together a unique record of observations carried out by Indian Army officers from the time of the initial East India Company to the post 1857 'Raj' period and up to the present day (2002).

The early days, particularly in what we know as the 'Victorian era', was a time of initial exploration when not much was known and it was fashionable for English (& also the Scottish et al) gentlemen to take an interest in such matters as amateurs. Many became collectors and taxonomy and field sports



© Bombay Natural History Society

featured strongly. In those days rifles and shot guns were used for collecting specimens which have largely been replaced by high powered optics which were then not available. The Indian Army attracted high quality young officers most of whom achieved high marks on passing out of Sandhurst. Whereas those with less financial means would not have been able to afford the life-style in a British regiment, candidates selected for the Indian Army could afford to play sports such as polo, pig sticking and hunting, often big game, on Indian Army pay. There was always the chance of action and possible glory with skirmishes on the Frontiers. Many found themselves in remote places with, compared to today, time on their hands. The differing articles reflect their interests and activities. The chapters in modern times indicate the growing need and

understanding for conservation which today's officers have taken on board. Many come from land-owning families so are able to see the effects on wildlife in modern India close to.

Each chapter is a paper on a particular topic taken from the authors' work which the editors have researched. Short biographical notes on each of the contributors accompany each paper. Contributors include Lt Col JH Williams otherwise known as 'Elephant Bill' on elephants. Maj RWG Hingston, medical officer with the 1924 Everest Expedition, whilst a knowledgeable 'birder', has written a detailed piece on caterpillars. There are chapters on the 'big cats', the history of hunting with local packs of hounds which was developed in the garrisons around the country and fishing.

One chapter, written by Surgeon Major TC Jerdon of the Indian Medical Services, is about the 'hunting leopard'. Jerdon is more usually known in the birding world as his name is connected a number of Asian species including Jerdon's Babbler, Jerdon's, Bushchat, Jerdon's Laughing-thrush and Jerdon's Bushlark. It is interesting to note that a good proportion of the papers have been written by members of the Indian Medical Services presumably due to their scientific training. The book is well illustrated with colour and black & white photos and reproductions of 19th century prints.

This work will appeal primarily to those who have had the good fortune to travel around India and the national parks and to those who love India or whose relatives once lived and worked there.

FORECAST OF EVENTS

The forecast of events is attached. It has been updated includes a number of the usual favourites. All are encouraged to attend and join the usual cohort of diehards. Also please note the start of the year birding trip in Norfolk where extreme birding comes to the fore.

BRITISH BIRDS

A flyer for British Birds at a reduced rate is attached. Members, who don't subscribe, are strongly recommended to take up the offer.

AOS SHOP

Is your initial AOS tie looking a bit worse for wear? If so please contact the Secretary who will be delighted to send you a replacement at the bargain price of £4 including postage.

The AOS polo shirts continue to sell. If you have not yet purchased one then get one ready for next year's AGM (through Andrew Bray). These polo shirts have been a useful tool for recruiting new members whilst out birding.

www.vistaprint.co.uk can design your own baseball cap with AOS logo. All you need is the logo in the header in electronic format (available through the Secretary or as the header above if you have received this as an e-copy). Eight days later you'll receive a cap through the post. A number of members have already received these caps on the AGM and others have ordered personally.

Alternately Andrew Bray can provide baseballs caps with a cut-down version of the logo (embroidered) through his own contact.

MEMBER'S PHOTOS



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