

Sheffield Bird Study Group

BULLETIN



NUMBER 187, APRIL 2007

www.sbsg.org

Bulletin

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Dates for your diary

INDOOR MEETINGS

Wednesday 9th May - 7.15 pm – Lecture Theatre 5, The University Arts Tower

Richard Dale and **Helen Hipperson** will talk to us about **South Africa**. The double act of our Hon. Secretary and Conservation Officer will recount their experiences of a three week birding trip to South Africa.

Wednesday - 7.15 pm - Lecture Theatre 7, The University Hicks Building. (PLEASE NOTE CHANGE FROM OUR USUAL VENUE) This will be Members' Night when members have the opportunity to show off their photographs, brag about where they've been and the birds they've seen, enthuse on an interest, talk about their local patch, etc. etc. Past members' evenings have been highly entertaining but it does depend on contributions from members. So, if you would like to participate in any way at all, please contact any member of the committee.

FIELD MEETINGS

Sunday 16th April. Mini-bus Field Trip to Rutland Water - Meet 7.30 am Paternoster Row.

For information and booking on the above trip contact Paul Medforth on 01246 418120 or 07968 092032.

Sunday 29th April, 8.00 am - 12.30 pm. Thrybergh Country Park and Firsby/Thrybergh Tip

An excellent opportunity to get to know one of our most intensively watched and arguably best birding areas - especially for you Sheffield based birders who never get across to Rotherham! Paul Leonard has lined up an excellent morning starting at Thrybergh Country Park. This should produce a selection of summer visitors and maybe the odd tern or wader passing through. After a walk around the reservoir, a short drive will allow the opportunity to visit Thrybergh Banks or Firsby Reservoirs LNR depending on preferences on the day. The venue and date should produce an excellent selection of birds and there is no one better to find them than Paul. Meet at Thrybergh Country Park car park where there is a small charge for parking. Non-members welcome. **For information on this and other local field trips contact Richard Dale on 0114 2862513 or, for Thrybergh only, contact Paul Leonard on 01709 525380.**

Saturday 12th May, 8.30 – 10.45 am. Summer Migrants at Padley Wood

The fourth year running that Ron Blagden has offered this popular trip to Padley. Concentrating on identification by both sight and sound, summer migrants may include Pied Flycatcher, Redstart and Wood Warbler. Padley is one of the must visit sites in Sheffield in the spring so definitely one not to be missed. Meet at the roadside parking at the top end of Padley on the road to Grindleford (SK258800) at 8.30 am. Non members welcome.

For information on this any other local field trips, contact Richard Dale on 0114 2862513.

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Sunday 13th May, 5.00 – 7.30 am. Dawn Chorus at Glen Howe Park

A good opportunity to explore this woodland park in the north-west of Sheffield. A joint event with the Sheffield Ranger service and the Friends of Glen Howe Park, an early start will give us the best opportunity to see and hear a wide variety of breeding birds. Meet at the Glen Howe Park car park, Wharncliffe Side (SK 296942) at 5.00 am. Non members welcome.

For information on this field trip contact Helen Hipperson or Richard Dale on 0114 2862513.

Saturday 19th May, 5.00 – 7.15 am. Dawn Chorus at Ecclesall Woods

It may mean an early start but a dawn chorus in May is something everyone should experience. Paul Medforth has therefore agreed to abandon the mini bus for a day and lead this trip to a more local destination. Ecclesall Woods has an excellent range of species and Paul will help make sense of the different songs that will be heard. Other woodland specialities such as woodpeckers and Nuthatch should be present and the heronry will be active. Meet at the entrance to the woods opposite Beauchief Gardens on Abbeydale Road South (SK324817) at 5.00 am. Non-members welcome.

For information on this and any other local field trips, contact Richard Dale on 0114 2862513 or, for Ecclesall Woods only, Paul Medforth on 01246 418120.

Sunday 20th May, 10.00 am – 12.00 pm. Chapeltown Park

Another chance to explore the park with the Sheffield Ranger Service and the Friends of Chapeltown Park. With spring well under way we should see a good variety of resident and visiting breeders, and hopefully catch up with the Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers. Meet at the southern entrance by the roundabout in Chapeltown at 10.00 am. Non members welcome.

For information on this field trip contact Helen Hipperson on 0114 2862513.

DATES TO NOTE – OTHER GROUPS

Time/Date	Group	Location	Speaker	Title
7.30 pm 12th April	RSPB Local Group	Central United Reformed Church	Tony Hamblin	Winter Wonderland
7.30 pm 3rd May	RSPB Local Group	Central United Reformed Church	Julian Hughes	The Hen Harrier – England's Next Extinction

BREEDING BIRD RECORDS

As you have probably heard, 2007 is the last year of field work for the Breeding Atlas, so, if you haven't already done so, please get involved and take one of the remaining tetrads. In addition, whether you have taken on four tetrads or none, please make sure that you submit all your casual breeding records – if you see a Song Thrush carrying a beak full of worms, write it down and send it in; if you have a family of Blue Tits in your garden nestbox, write it down and send it in; if you have House Sparrows breeding under your roof, write it down and, well, you get the general idea. We can't overstate how important breeding records are, not only for the current Atlas project, but also to increase the value of our database and Annual Report, as well as any information we may provide to outside parties for conservation reasons.

PEAK DISTRICT BREEDING WADER SURVEY

RSPB and the Peak District National Park Authority are coordinating a survey of breeding Lapwings and other waders in the Peak District in 2007. Some members of the SBSG have kindly volunteered to help, but we are still looking for people to cover several sites to the north and west of Sheffield.

Surveyors need to visit their survey area three times between April and June, and record numbers of waders, especially Lapwing, Curlew, Snipe and Golden Plover. If you are interested in helping, please contact Catherine Gray on 01629 816247, or email catherine.gray@peakdistrict.gov.uk

The Lecture

Farming and Birds

The November speaker was Chris Tomson who until June was running the Peak Birds project, and is now the RSPB's Agricultural Adviser for their Yorkshire, Humber and Peak District region. His background is in farming rather than ornithology, and his job is as a negotiator and facilitator: he encourages farmers to work in a more environmentally friendly way, and helps them to obtain the grants and subsidies that are available. (There is a huge amount of paperwork involved, so help in dealing with it is very important.)

The Entry Level Stewardship Scheme offers funding to all farmers to manage their farms for the benefit of wildlife. The Higher Level scheme is for farmers who have the potential to help some of our most endangered species such as Cirl Bunting, Corn Bunting and Stone Curlew, or who wish to do more for the environment, for example by recreating lost habitats. The Entry Level scheme compensates farmers for loss of income if they adopt less intensive practices, and is a big improvement on the older subsidies which encouraged over-production. Unfortunately there have been problems with implementing the scheme in England (Wales and Scotland have fared better) and long delays in making payments have caused hardship for many farmers. Problems have been partly caused by Defra overspending due to preparations for Bird 'Flu.

Chris began his talk by summarising the changes that have taken place in farming over the last 60 years (the intensification dates from 1947 and the drive to increase food production). All areas of farming have been affected — arable, grassland, dairy, and upland sheep. Although an emerald green sward may look neat and tidy, and be good for milk production, it is no good for Skylarks who cannot raise their broods in a crop that may be cut four times a year. Furthermore, it is devoid of weeds and insects, so provides no food for birds. It is hoped that the new Stewardship schemes will help to at least partially reverse these trends.

An important aspect of the work done by the RSPB is their collaboration with landowners and others. For example, United Utilities (formed by the merger of North-west Water and Norweb, formerly North West Electricity Board) is a major landowner in northwest England, including parts of the Peak District such as the Goyt Valley and Longdendale. RSPB has been working with some of their tenant farmers, and has also helped United Utilities to obtain some £9m from OFWAT to improve water quality and biodiversity.

In the Peak District, as elsewhere, it is not easy for farmers to survive financially. The National Park Authority knows that farmers have to make a living, but is cautious about the introduction of new crops, such as wild bird mixes. They have to consider other issues such as local archaeology, biodiversity, and the appearance of the landscape.

Farmers often try to encourage Lapwing and Snipe to nest on their farms, but it is less easy to enthruse them about the less charismatic Twite, which continues to decline. Twite are ground nesters who nest on moorland edges, and will fly up to 3 Km to flower-rich hay meadows for food. Farmers are encouraged to delay cutting their meadows until after 15th July to give the

birds a chance to complete their breeding cycle. These flower-rich meadows attract Stewardship grants as it is well recognised how important they are to farmland birds. In the Yorkshire Dales about 90% of farmers with the option to join the Pennine Dales Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme have done so, and this will protect important flower rich meadows.

There are some misconceptions about the status of species such as Lapwing: people see them displaying in spring and assume that all is well, whereas in fact the numbers are declining. Furthermore, it is believed that there are only 3 or 4 pairs of breeding Redshank in the whole of the Peak District. RSPB did a wader survey in 2002 and will be repeating it in 2007 in order to see what is happening. There are many reasons for the decline of waders, including the move from arable to grassland (for silage), the draining of land, the reduction of dairy farming, and the abandonment of farmland. Lapwings like cattle because their feet leave muddy indentations in the ground for feeding, and create a generally uneven surface where chicks can take cover. Sheep, however, graze the sward into a smooth short surface unsuitable for feeding or hiding.

When land is abandoned it can go back to rushes, and this is also unsuitable for waders. In some places, RSPB has identified areas that are potentially best for birds, and has paid contractors to control the rushes. They are cut in late autumn, at which stage they stop growing, and are sprayed in spring to remove them entirely. A few rushes are good for Snipe, so a small patch is usually left for them. Digging out scrapes with muddy margins is also beneficial for waders.

Chris gave several examples of good practice. A farmer in the Chatsworth area replaced his dairy cows with 200 water buffaloes. These create muddy scrapes and pools, and are very good for Lapwings. The farmer is keen to make his farm a "showcase" for good practices: he sells both meat and milk from his buffaloes, and plans to encourage the public to visit. It is very beneficial when farmers are able to run a farm environmentally and cost effectively, as it encourages other farmers much more than theoretical ideas can ever do. Another example is a farmer in the Yorkshire Wolds near Malton. He has flower-rich margins around many of his fields, grows wildlife-friendly crops, for example quinoa which provides winter food, and comfrey and mustard which can also be used for green manure, putting structure back into the soil. He has six pairs of Barn Owl on his farm, as well as Grey Partridges and a good population of hares.

Most of the Forest of Bowland is owned by United Utilities or the Duke of Westminster, and is farmed by tenant farmers. RSPB and United Utilities are working on a five-year Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP) to improve water quality and encourage biodiversity. It will be achieved by: restoring blanket bogs by blocking drainage ditches; restoring areas of eroded and exposed peat; restoring hay meadows and heather moorland; establishing clough woodland; providing new waste water management facilities to reduce run-off pollution of water courses; fencing off livestock from rivers and streams and from special habitats etc.

There is very little shooting on United Utilities land but the improvements to the wildlife play a significant part in the local economy. The week-long "Bowland Festival" in June, when visitors join safaris to see Short-eared Owls and Hen Harriers, contributes an estimated £10,000 to the community in terms of expenditure on accommodation, meals, etc. It is believed that eco-tourism can contribute more to the local economy than shooting does. [Comment from the writer-upper: will someone please tell the Game Conservancy Trust, whose "Manifesto" says the reverse is true?]

RSPB is also doing much work in other areas, and in particular they are keen to encourage wet grassland. Corncrakes have now bred in the Ouse Washes reserve, and one heard calling in the Hartington area gives cause for optimism in the Peak District. Much of the lowland countryside is engineered to control water catchment and flow: the courses of rivers are altered, flood plains are lost, and much effort and money goes into draining. The end result of course is unexpected flooding at times of heavy rain.

Another big change is likely to be a drastic reduction in sugar beet production in Yorkshire when the processing factory in York closes next year. This is due to changes in the world sugar regime which impacts on third world farmers. This is bad news for the UK, as sugar beet is a spring crop and is good for Yellow Wagtails and Lapwings to nest in. In Norfolk the waste tops from the harvested sugar beet are essential food for wintering geese. Although there may be an increase in beet production in Norfolk, this could prove to be only temporary if there is a big fall in prices. Instead of sugar beet, farmers are likely to switch to oil seed rape, or to crops such as borage and hemp which are used for cosmetics and pharmaceuticals; hemp is also a very useful crop for fibre but is not much good for birds. If the loss of sugar beet proves to be catastrophic for the geese, RSPB may have to intervene in key areas, either by encouraging the government to help farmers financially to continue with the crop, or by finding suitable goose-friendly alternatives, or even by the purchase or lease of land.

RSPB has greatly improved its credibility with farmers by the purchase of Grange Farm in Cambridgeshire in 1999, which they have renamed Hope Farm. It comprises 181 hectares (450 acres) and is run commercially, using only the normally available grants and subsidies, with strictly no subsidy from general RSPB funds (although research that is financed from their general funds has been an essential part of its success). Many farmers approve of this enterprise as it will give RSPB a very real understanding of farmers' difficulties, and give credence to their recommendations. For the first two years, RSPB continued to farm conventionally so that they could monitor the ecology of the farm for a baseline. They still grow mainly autumn-sown crops, as these are what most farmers have to grow in order to make a living, and the emphasis is on

trying to find ways in which birds can breed successfully in these crops. In 2006, they planted the largest field with spring beans, a crop which is beneficial to Lapwings. So far, the numbers of breeding Skylarks has tripled, whilst 2006 saw their first successful breeding pair of Lapwing.

RSPB are continually looking at ways to improve things for farmland birds, and are testing out new techniques. For example they encourage the creation of sediment catchment pools planted with phragmites. The water drains into these pools from surrounding fields, and the phragmites clean the water by neutralising the pesticide residues. They are also looking at biofuel crops such as short-rotation coppice which can be used by power stations, such as DRAX.

Another big issue is sea defence, as it is not viable to keep the sea at bay for ever on the east coast. In strategic areas the Environment Agency is letting the sea in to create saltmarsh, an example of this being Alkborough Flats where the Trent meets the Humber. The site is an area of about 400 hectares of low-lying arable which is now jointly owned by the Environment Agency and English Nature. It will create some 200 hectares of new intertidal habitat. Another major undertaking is the Great Fen project in Cambridgeshire which will restore some 9000 acres of wetland just south of Peterborough. Near Gainsborough, RSPB is working with the Environment Agency to turn a large area of arable farmland at Beckingham Marshes into grazing marsh; the long-term aim is to restore an area of up to 800 hectares, which would be capable of supporting hundreds of pairs of waders.

As farming declines in some areas, people from towns and cities sometimes take on the buildings but do not know what to do with the land. Many keep horses, and there are now more horses in the UK than there were in 1900. The Peak Birds project runs courses to show horse owners how they can encourage ground nesting birds. Organic farming will probably continue as a niche market, but is not necessarily good for birds.

RSPB is also preparing a "Vision for the Uplands" which is a draft blueprint to address the problems of upland farming. There could be a shortage of farmers: at Myerscough agricultural college near Preston, students studying agriculture are in a minority. More popular courses are concerned with other uses of the countryside including equine studies, floral design, and even motor sports!

Chris was thanked for his most interesting and optimistic view of current changes in farming policy, and its all-important system of subsidies and compensation. It is great to hear of positive moves in the Peak District, and further afield, and to be able to look forward to a more biodiverse landscape.

Wendy Thomson

Chris (chris.tomson@rspb.org.uk) asked us to send him any records of breeding Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows or Redshank, and he would very much like some volunteers for the 2007 Wader Survey.

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

In the February Bulletin I asked if members would like to contribute an article for the Bulletin on the subject of their Best Day's Birding. Later it was decided to widen this to cover more than one day's birding as members might find it difficult to pick out only one special day. The contribution below actually demonstrates this dilemma and does cover more than one day. Please feel free to pick on one special day if you have one, or tell us of a number of days, but PLEASE, do write something - on **any subject of your choice** if you have anything you would like to share with other members!

BEST DAYS BIRDING

I was interested to read the note requesting members to send in details of their best ever day of birding. I think birds are so interesting, inspiring and resilient, that I cannot give one particular day, but I can write about certain bird-occasions that stand out from the rest.

Four are by way of thanks to Dave Herringshaw. I remember trying to follow him driving across Anglesey at high speed, knocking Little Owls off the road, to see my first and only Roseate Tern. He also showed me my first Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, in the woods above Roche Abbey, though I now know there is one by Abbeydale Road in Ecclesall Woods.

I had never seen a Waxwing, but in the late 1980's three were reported from a Stocksbridge garden. We rushed there in our lunch-hour, from Myers Grove School, and joined the queue waiting to see the unfazed birds. Sadly, we had to troop back to afternoon lessons. Later, they were around the city nearly every year, a fine sight being 300 in the shrubs by the former Texas DIY store near Moorfoot, watched at leisure from a traffic jam.

Dave's most striking introduction was in the prep room of the Myers Grove biology lab. where he had a Little Auk in a box. It had been found stranded on the main road through Wentworth, a pathetic waif it made, in a large urban school as opposed to Greenland, and I don't remember what happened to it. Perhaps Dave could write in and say?

Incidentally, in the years 1978-82, flocks of Lapwing used to winter on the Myers Grove playing fields, up to 100 feeding and trying to avoid the Black-headed Gulls; a sight unimaginable now!

Unusual garden sightings are also worth a mention. A juvenile Merlin once spent an hour on

next-door's television aerial, presumably wandering from the East Moors. A Grey Wagtail has hunted in the flower-pots and a Reed Bunting, though we are well removed from their typical habitats. A Grey Heron has landed on our hedge, but the one I appreciate the most is the Nuthatch, because when I was a boy we had to go to Linacre to find them. Now they visit the garden every day and even feed in a hanging basket a foot from the kitchen window. We are also visited by Stock Doves, which make a pleasant change from Wood Pigeons and Collared Doves.

A holiday in Islay was something I had looked forward to for thirty years, and an excellent introduction to it last September was to be having an early breakfast by a glass-smooth Loch Fyne and to see an enormous splash in the middle of the loch. It looked as though a 20-stone man had been dropped in, but an Osprey emerged and did a repeat performance three more times. We passed Red-throated Divers all down the shore, a few metres away, in far greater numbers than seem to be in the literature. Although I prefer the local patch to the far-flung, it was an excellent surprise to arrive at Thornham, Norfolk, in early February and to learn that Lesser Yellowlegs might be on the creek. "Birds of England" indicates that we average three visits per year, so it was a thrill to walk to the water amid a host of observers and to see it immediately, feeding and preening as if no-one was there.

Locally, it has been reassuring to see that Greenfinches, Bullfinches, Song Thrushes and House Sparrows have not declined in Bradway since 1990, but I am amazed and puzzled that Buzzards have yet to colonise the Sheaf headwaters rather than pay occasional and brief appearances.

John Kirkham

GHANA BIRDWATCHING 2007

I recently returned from a 16 days birding tour to Ghana. It was a successful trip with over 300 species seen. I had visited The Gambia previously so some of the birds seen were not new for me but I had 53 lifers including some special birds.

Our tour started in Accra, the Ghanaian capital and here we visited Sakumona Lagoon, a brackish lake near the sea. We saw many of our summer migrant waders that were wintering there. These included Spotted and Common Redshank, Greenshank, Wood, Green and Common Sandpipers, Curlew Sands, Ruff and Little Stint. More interesting were the Kittlitz's Plovers, Wattled Lapwings, Collared Pratincoles, African Spoonbills, various Egrets, and Black Heron and Western Reef Heron.

We drove along the Gold Coast westwards seeing the old castles en route and spent the next few nights at Kakum National Park where the famous canopy walkway is. This swaying walkway is 40 metres above the forest floor and is not for the ones scared of heights. It has platforms large enough to support telescopes but although we spent several hours there the bird life was poor. We saw Blue Cuckoo-shrike and African Pied and Piping Hornbills but little else. This was my third time on a canopy walkway and like the other two it was very low on seeing birds.

The 607 km square Kakum National Park protects the endangered primary Guinea tropical rainforest and we visited it several times during our stay in the area. We did see Black Bee-eater, Woodland Kingfisher, Black Kite, African Harrier-hawk, Lizard Buzzard and Red-chested Goshawk amongst other species. There were two birds I wanted to see in Ghana and one was the White-necked Picathartes, a passerine rock fowl. This is a near endemic for Ghana and is extremely rare. It was only rediscovered in the past few years. Fortunately one of our Ghanaian guides was involved in its protection and knew where there was a new breeding site which was relatively easy to get to. He was under a misapprehension as when we walked and climbed up a hillside to the nesting cave it took us one and a half hours of strenuous climbing through the forest. We were taken there by two men from a village on whose land the birds are and we first had to see the head man of the village for his permission. This was an experience in itself as the villagers and children gathered round us smiling and chatting. We were the first white birders to visit this nesting cave, apparently, so we were items of friendly curiosity. The birds return to their nesting sites at dusk so eventually we reached the cave entrance and saw the mud nests of the birds on the roof of the overhang and there we waited. After about an hour three birds appeared briefly but we had excellent views of

them before they flew off on seeing us. We had decided that once we had seen the birds we would leave because we had to get back to the village before dark otherwise we should be lost! We descended from the cave ecstatic we had seen this rare bird and managed to reach our vehicle before it was completely dark.

We continued northwards up country to Kumasi, Ghana's second largest town. It was a long, hot journey over some good but generally rough, dusty roads. Few birds were seen as we travelled and the scenery was flat, scrubby and uninteresting.

From Kumasi we drove to Mole National Park where we stayed at the hotel in the park. This is situated on an escarpment overlooking a water hole which usually had numerous elephants bathing and cooling off in the warm water. Large Nile crocodiles lounged on the sides of the pool obviously replete from the Kob antelopes and Waterbuck they had caught.

It was exceptionally hot now with the temperature reaching 45 degrees on several days so we would go out walking in the Park with an armed ranger from before dawn until around 10 a.m. when we would return for breakfast or lunch then go out again around 3 p.m. until after dark. Even the nights were hot with the temperature in the eighties. In the North of Ghana it was a dry heat but in the South it was both very hot and humid.

As we walked around we saw many Red-throated Bee-eaters, Greyish Eagle Owl, various Swallows, Woodpeckers, Barbets and Tinkerbirds. The Barbets seen were Naked-faced, Bristle-nosed and Hairy breasted, a strange mixture! Another highlight of the trip was one night on the airstrip at Mole we watched male Standard-winged Nightjars displaying to females on the runway. An incredible sight as these males would jump around raising their wings with the large standards fluttering from their wings. A really incredible bird to see and we were so lucky to see it displaying in this way.

The other bird I really hoped to see was Pel's Fishing Owl. I had missed it at other places in Africa I had visited so we set out to search for it in thickly foliated trees by a dried riverbed. Suddenly out of a tree a large light-coloured brown owl flew and, yes, we had found the owl. It flew into a nearby tree to continue its roosting but we had great views of it through telescopes and bins. Fantastic!

We also visited a roosting site of Preuss's Swallows one evening. They all gathered in the sky overhead at dusk and after several attempts they flew down and under a bridge over a river in one large flock and disappeared. We watched from the

road above the bridge. Another impressive and memorable sight for four English birder friends.

After our hot but interesting days in Mole we continued N.E to within a few miles of the Burkina Faso border and stayed a couple of nights at Bolgatanga from where we visited the Tono Dam looking for the Egyptian Plover but to no avail. We did see another roosting Greyish Eagle Owl, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Four-banded Sandgrouse, Sun Lark, several Rollers, Hornbills, Grey Kestrel, flycatchers and swallows. Leaving the N.E. we headed back south towards Accra crossing the White and Black Volta rivers. No birds were on the riverbanks as people were bathing or washing their clothes. We stopped at various spots en route and in one pool saw a lesser jacana perhaps the first for Ghana we were told by our guide.

Before we reached the coast at Accra we birded in the Atewa Range of hills amid cocoa and banana plantations and saw some new birds including Eremomelas, Red-breasted Paradise Flycatchers, White-throated Bee-eaters, Violet Turaco and many more.

Our last day was spent in the Shai Hills Reserve near Accra, an expanse of Savannah and woodland where we had Croaking and Siffling Cisticolas, Grey Hornbill, Rock Martin, Hobby Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters and the usual Hooded Vultures, Black Kites and Pied Crows.

So concluded an enjoyable tour and I can recommend Ghana for a birding trip. The people were friendly, accommodation and food fine considering one was in a third world country. The birding was good with many highlights. The tour was organised for us by Ashanti African Tours and was well led by the owner, a young Englishman who lives in Kumasi. We had two guides, one a Ghanaian who certainly knew the bird calls in the forest. I would recommend Ghana as a place to go off the usual birding countries.

Roger Dodds

FIELD TRIP REPORT

Holkham and Titchwell 28th January 2007

North Norfolk, the first SBSG field trip of the New Year. Always well attended, always a sense of optimism, a nice mix of the predictable and the unexpected.

So, no surprise then when the bulk of the group latched on to the small party of Shore Larks at Holkham Gap early on. However more of a surprise to the four of us who walked, on the basis of local information, almost to Wells and back in search of the aforementioned larks without success to discover that we'd dipped on a target bird. A party of 30 Snow Buntings and 3 or 4 Scandinavian Rock Pipits provided some compensation.

And more tales of the unexpected. Previous visits have produced great rafts of Common and some Velvet Scoter offshore. Not this time. We counted about 50 Common Scoter with precious few other sea duck. It was the same with the geese. We normally see Pink-footed Geese in the thousands at Holkham. There were hardly any. No doubt the big numbers that some of us had seen crossing the SBSG area in the previous weeks had left a few gaps in the North Norfolk hordes. Obliging however other geese species still occupied the fields: plenty of Brent, a small number of White fronts, a couple of Egyptian Geese, a few Greylags and at least one Black Brant to add interest.

Thornham provided the highlight of the day. Locals assured us that the Lesser Yellowlegs that had been around for some time was showing well close by. Unfortunately dog walkers and birders often occupy the same habitat and big dogs off leads can have great fun charging around salt marshes. To the consternation of Sheffield's finest the yellowlegs had flown. Some distance along the flood bank we relocated it and what a smart quite delicate bird it was. The spirits were lifted and a background gathering of 20 Ruff and a couple of hundred Golden Plover added to the moment.

Titchwell had its surprises as well, again of the default variety. Last year we'd estimated 3,000 Common Scoter offshore, today there were none. Instead a completely different scene. Battling against the strong westerly breeze were perhaps a thousand Common Gulls and in amongst them, at least 10 Little Gulls, several Kittiwakes and a Mediterranean Gull.

And maybe that's what birding's about: frustration, disappointment, surprise and real joy. A bit like life really. The overall verdict on the day: another good'n. A total of 92 species recorded and a storming start for many a year-list. As ever, the whole thing made possible by Paul's selflessness and good nature and as ever, many thanks from all of us.

Pete Brown

LOCAL FIELD TRIP

Upper Derwentdale 17th March 2007.

Having seen the last field trip I led (the vis mig trip at Redmires at the end of October) badly affected by adverse weather conditions – drizzle and strong winds, I was concerned in the days preceding the trip by forecasts of heavy rain and similarly strong winds.

In the event, the heavy rain (even snow!) arrived the following morning, and those present were at least able to keep dry, although the skies were initially overcast, with cloud on the tops opposite Windy Corner, hardly ideal conditions for raptors to be up and displaying. The other desirable weather feature for raptor watching, a westerly breeze to encourage birds to use the hillside and edges to the east of Howden Res, was only too prevalent. A sense of pessimism caused by less than optimum weather conditions was borne out as the designated 0900-1100 slot produced easily more birders than anything else, the 10 or so SBSG members present providing more interest than the birds, the highlight of which was, well nothing!

Around 11 o'clock, however, the cloud lifted significantly and the sun emerged. Within minutes, the birding picked up: a gull picked up distantly to the east drifting towards Howden Res turned out to be an adult Kittiwake, which circled without landing – a Sheffield tick for most of those present, and as we watched it overhead a pair of Goshawks was detected displaying further down the valley, giving rather distant views before disappearing back into the plantations. A few

minutes later a Peregrine appeared, using the wind off the hillsides opposite to circle and hunt, stooping and catching a passerine below the dam wall. This bird was then joined by a second, and they then spent a good 20 minutes over Howden Res, allowing excellent views and clear size comparison between the male and female, perhaps the pair that so many people enjoyed from the Alport hide (read caravan) last season. In the meantime a Common Buzzard appeared over the edge opposite and flew low directly overhead, again giving excellent views, and Sparrowhawk and Kestrel also appeared in the more favourable weather conditions.

In the deciduous plantation behind us Siskin and Chaffinch were in full song, while a calling Nuthatch was a long way up the valley and an indication of the range expansion of this species locally. With all of the raptors we'd hoped for eventually seen, and particularly good views of the Peregrines, plus a local tick for most, there was just reward for patience, and a clear indication of the relation between birds and weather. Let's hope that the other critical relationship – between birds and man – allows the raptors to enjoy a successful breeding season in Upper Derwentdale. No doubt Richard Dale will lead such efforts in his capacity as Peak Nestwatch coordinator: please be prepared to get involved in supporting him in his efforts.

David Wood

COPY DATE FOR JUNE BULLETIN

The next Bulletin will be issued at the June meeting on 13th June. Please note that any items for inclusion in the Bulletin must be received by Margaret Miller by email to margaret@margaret6.fsnet.co.uk or at 14 Worcester Close, Sheffield S10 4JF by Monday 4th June.

www.sbsg.org

We're back on the case! The website has now been updated with this year's list of speakers and field trips. We will also update the 'recent sightings' page, hopefully on a weekly basis. Any records you would like to share can be submitted via the 'submit records' link on the site.

RECENT SIGHTINGS

Not a bumper selection this month, due to the enforced early deadline because of Easter and the persistent Northerly airflow seemingly holding up the arrival of many of our early migrants over the preceding weeks.

Whooper Swan	Pronounced passage through the area included 68 N over Grindleford and Baslow on 23rd March (SB,PW), 48 N at Staveley (per MNR) and 20 on Derwent Res (RD) on 24th, and 21 at Middleton Moor (RPB) and 120 N over Sothall (MSh) on 25th.
Pink-footed Goose	4 at Middleton Moor on 12th (RPB) and 2 at Ladybower Res on March (RD).
Shelduck	5 at Redmires Res on 14th March (MGA).
Mandarin	2 pairs on R Sheaf, Millhouses Park on 11th March, with 3 nearby at Abbeydale on 15th (OB). Also one at Harthill Res on 13th March (MSh).
Pintail	Pairs at Middleton Moor on 7th March (RPB) and at Rother Valley CP on 10th March (RG).
Shoveler	29+ at Catcliffe Flash on 14th March (RDRW).
Goldeneye	A male was at Howden Res on 21st March (RD).
Red-breasted Merganser	A male at Ladybower Res on 14th March (RD).
Water Rail	One at Blackburn Meadows NR on 14th March (KBo).
Peregrine	Seen at Tinsley cooling towers on several occasions (KBo,DWf).
Golden Plover	360 at Peat Pits on 18th March (RD).
Lapwing	68 at Redmires Res on 3rd March, 80 at Stone Moor on 5th March and 60 at Peat Pits on 18th March (RD).
Jack Snipe	2 at Blackburn Meadows NR on 28th March (KBo).
Curlew	24 at Redmires Res on 3rd March, with 28 there on 6th (MGA); 69 at Middleton Moor on 12th March (RPB).
Kittiwake	One at Howden Res on 17th March (RD).
Lesser Black-backed Gull	360 roosted at Middleton Moor on 7th March (RPB).
Ring-necked Parakeet	One near Sothall Medical Centre on 24th March (MSh).
Barn Owl	One at Bowshaw on 12th March (KBo).
Kingfisher	One on the R Don at Beeley Woods on 3rd March (RD), 2 on the R Don between Hawke St and Newhall Rd on 12th March and one flew over stationary traffic on the M1 at Woodall services on 19th March (DWf).
Lesser-spotted Woodpecker	2 at Wharnccliffe Side on 27th Feb, 4 in Beeley Wood on 3rd March and 2 at Tin Mill Rocher on 5th March (RD), with 1 at Rother Valley CP on 10th March (RG) and 2 in Wooley Wood on 11th March (NRP).
Sand Martin	One at Thrybergh CP on 8th March (PL) closely followed by one at Rother Valley CP on 9th (RJC). 5 were at Rother Valley CP on 15th March (ST).
Stonechat	One at Firsby Res on 5th March (DWO), and one singing at Redmires Res on 6th March (MGA). Pairs were at Wharnccliffe Chase on 27th March (DWf) and Upper Padley and Burbage Valley on 28th (JSh).
Wheatear	One in the Burbage Valley on 28th March (JSh).
Fieldfare	75 roosted at Redmires Res on 14th March (MGA).
Redwing	85 at Stubble Hollow on 12th March with 49 there on 17th March (JSh) and 42 at Blackburn Meadows NR on 28th March (KBo).
Blackcap	A singing male at Millhouses on 2nd-3rd March (PLB), a female in Chapelton Park also on 2nd (NRP), a pair at Walkely Bank on 9th (MGA) and a singing male at Birleyhay on 27th March (RDRW).

Chiffchaff	One singing at Firsby Res on 5th March (DWO) with increasing numbers of records over the following days including 4 at Harthill Res on 13th March (MSh) and 6 at Rother Valley CP on 15th March (ST).
Brambling	200 at Edge Mount on 28th Feb, and singles at Strines Res on 7th March and Aston Common on 10th March (MNR).
Siskin	10 at Spring Wood, High Green on 11th March (DWf), 3 E at Blackburn Meadows NR on 28th March. Very numerous in the Upper Derwent Valley throughout March (RD).
Lesser Redpoll	30 at Low Hall Wood on 10th March (RD), 70 at Spring Wood on 11th March (DWf), 30+ at Pit-house West on 23rd March, 6 at Wharncliffe Chase on 27th March and 3 at Blackburn Meadows on 28th March (KBo).
Crossbill	2 at Hagg Side on 7th March (RD).

Records were received from the following observers, with apologies for any omissions

MG Archer, S Ashton, S Bailey, O Biddulph, RP Blagden, K Bower, PL Brown, RJ Croxton, J Crooks, R Dale, R Greasley, H Hipperson, AD Hirst, J Kingsland, P Leonard, MN Reeder, J Sherwin, M Sherwin, S Thackeray, RDR Williams, D Wood, D Woodriff, P Wragg, Rother Valley Study Group.

POOLSBROOK CP AND BEYOND

I'm sure many SBSG members are now well aware of the delights of birding at the CP in winter when a good selection of gulls are usually present. A safe car park, good toilets and a welcoming cafe make this a premier site for gull enthusiasts. Recently, however, one or two people have asked me to point out directions to other nearby spots where the gulls can be found, should the CP fail to produce. I hope this short piece is of help.

STAVELEY LANDFILL

Still being used as a landfill, but fast nearing its capacity. From Staveley take the minor road that runs west(ish) towards Barrow Hill. After passing the chemical works on your left and then the entrance to the landfill (again on your left) you will reach a narrow bridge with traffic lights. Go over this bridge for about 200 yards and take the first left towards Barrow Hill. As you go through the village you will pass an obvious school on your right, about 100 yards beyond this is a narrow turning on your left, between stone walls. Take this turn and park at the steel barrier after c50 yards. The tip lies straight ahead and best views are obtained by walking up a mound to your left and scanning the landfill area. Try and avoid a visit in a cold northerly wind!!

BRECK FARM

Frequently flooded in the wet winter months and always worth a visit. Directions as above from Staveley, but instead of the left turn into Barrow Hill take a right straight opposite down Breck Lane. Drive down the lane, past the farm itself, and scan the flood water. Views here are a bit distant, but anything of interest should be easily spotted. In prolonged wet spells Wigeon and Teal are around and Short-eared Owls have been seen here too. Please park sensibly and remember farm vehicles use this lane all the time.

MARKHAM COLLIERY

Often used this winter by good numbers of gulls as they rest/loaf/preen during the day. Turning right from Pools Brook CP take the fairly new road that sweeps around the back of the village past the reed beds on the left. Continue for about 1/2 mile until you reach a T-junction. Turn left here, under the M1 and down to a mini roundabout where you turn right and immediately scan the large open area on your left. Again please park sensibly.

ERIN VOID/LANDFILL

The largest of the two tips and looks to have few years left at least. Easily accessible from the CP at Pools Brook. Park in the smaller of the two car parks on the east side of the big lake. Walk around the smaller lake and take the obvious, and only, track up the hill. After a couple of hundred yards this path crosses a tarmaced service road, frequently used by HGVs so please be careful here. The tip lies immediately beyond this road so try and gain any vantage point you can. Remember that these tips are in a constant state of change so what might be a good vantage point may prove to be not so good a few weeks later.

I hope this is of some use.

Kev Gould

PS. On 25/3 there was a first-winter Iceland on Staveley Landfill, a first-winter Glaucous on Breck Farm, and a superb adult Iceland on Pools Brook CP (one of only 10 gulls present there! All 3 within 30 mins!! Good Luck!

GIFT AID AND MEMBERSHIP

In recent years there have been changes to Gift Aid legislation, making it easier for charitable organisations to reclaim income tax on the contributions, including subscriptions, made by members.

The group is constantly looking for sources of income to offset the increasing costs of running the group, such as printing the excellent Annual Report, (the better it gets, in terms of photos etc, the more it costs) and also room hire for our Indoor Meetings.

Gift Aid is a means by which every basic rate tax-paying member can contribute to the group's income, courtesy of the Inland Revenue (what an incentive!). If you have paid your 2007 subscription, or are about to pay, please complete the tear off slip below, and return it to any committee member at an indoor meeting or send with unpaid subs to Margaret Miller by post. Alternatively, please send it to me at:

Anselm,
White Edge Drive,
Baslow
Derbyshire
DE45 1SJ

Please take the time to do this, as we can potentially raise hundreds of pounds for the group.

Ron Blagden
Treasurer

GIFT AID FORM

NAME

Are you a basic rate taxpayer? YES/NO

Do you agree to Sheffield Bird Study Group treating your membership payment for 2007, and future membership payments, as a Gift Aid contribution?
YES/NO

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions for 2007 became due in January and many remain unpaid. This is the last bulletin you will receive unless your subscriptions are received by the end of April.

We have a good programme of speakers planned for next year, and many local and more distant field trips are also in the pipeline. The subscriptions remain the same at £14 for individual members, £16 for family membership, and £7 for juniors (up to age 16), which I am sure you will see as good value for money. A subscription form is below. To renew, please see Margaret Miller at any meeting, or send your cheque payable to Sheffield Bird Study Group, together with a stamped addressed envelope for return of your membership card, to Margaret Miller, 14 Worcester Close, Sheffield S10 4JF. For new members an application form is available at meetings, on the website, by phone to 0114 2304110 or by e-mail to margaret@margaret6.fsnet.co.uk.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION 2007 RENEWAL FORM

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