

Even by our modern standards of 24-hour rolling news coverage and relentless over-analysis, it's fair to say that the year 1973 was pretty momentous in terms of world events. As if Britain's long-awaited entry into the European Economic Community wasn't enough, the painful withdrawal of the United States' ten year involvement in Vietnam must have seemed like a walk in the park for President Nixon compared with what was on the horizon and his subsequent impeachment over the Watergate scandal. Combine this with the death of Picasso, military coups in both Greece and Chile, a re-enactment of the 'Cod Wars' with Iceland and the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, which later escalated into the OPEC oil crisis, then it's a wonder that Newscasters (as they were called then) had time to pause for breath.

In the far-removed world of bird-watching (the term 'birding' had yet to catch on, of course), the year 1973 will be remembered for a mild first winter period, which arguably saw the first significant documented over-wintering numbers of Blackcap and Chiffchaff, the advance of Cetti's Warblers from Kent to Suffolk and large flocks of Shore Larks on the East Anglian coast (there were a total of 245 in Norfolk alone). Spring was dominated by a very early arrival of migrants and then a sudden halt in April due to snow and freezing temperatures, followed by the best passage of Fenno-Scandian migrants of the whole decade, the latter of which included a spectacular influx of 25 Red-footed Falcons. Although the breeding season was largely a good one, the numbers of some warblers and chats were still recovering from the effects of the Sahel drought a few years earlier. The autumn brought a significant influx of over 170 Rough-legged Buzzards, as well as an Ovenbird on the Outer Skerries, a Sora Rail on Scilly and the first-ever record of Little Swift at Llanrwst in Mid-Wales. Other rarities during the year included a Baikal Teal, Britain's first Ring-billed Gull in South Glamorgan, a pair of Nutcrackers, a Two-barred Crossbill, two Sardinian Warblers and an influx of not one, but three Lesser Kestrels. All of this without the aid of mobile phones, pagers and the internet...!

In the Sheffield area, it was also a momentous year, with 1973 representing the first full year of the fledgling Sheffield Bird Study Group, which had been formed at a public meeting in Weston Park Museum on 14th December the previous year. The inaugural annual report for that year edited by Dave Gosney and David Herringshaw makes fascinating reading, with no artwork or photographs gracing its pages and an evocative cover illustration of a ringtail Hen Harrier drawn by Dave Gosney's dad (possibly in that now sadly neglected artist's medium called 'biro'). However, the importance of what may now seem rather an inauspicious and slender volume cannot be under-estimated, as so much of what we still do today as a Group stems from these first tentative steps.

Within the first part of the report, the early dynamics of the Group can be determined with the Officers listed as Marcus Moore (Chairman), Keith Tayles (Secretary), Harold Holland (Treasurer) and David Herringshaw (Recorder). This quartet was complimented by general Committee members Betty Moore and Philip Nolan. In an enthusiastic Secretary's Report, Keith Tayles waxes lyrical about laying the foundation stones for the future and some of the initiatives by which the Group will hopefully become established. This includes forming links with other local organisations, of which the Derbyshire Ornithological Society must take most credit, with Roy Frost and others playing significant guiding role in helping the Group get off the ground. One of the key early aims was membership participation in surveys and this was already in motion with a pilot of the waterways survey, organised wildfowl counts, a habitats register, a study of breeding Grey Herons and Kestrels, combined with surveys of both winter Starling roosts and garden birds – not a bad effort for the first year!

Although there is no mention of some of the acrimony surrounding the Group's formation and the split from the Sorby Natural History Society, David Herringshaw's editorial doesn't pull any punches with a typically blunt assessment that 'Sheffield Ornithology has, at long last, climbed out of the abyss of stagnation and is now once more on the move' – it's fair to say that 'DH' wasn't one for

sitting on fences! However, what no-one can disagree with is the sentiment within that first page regarding the value of recording and the threat to local habitats by incremental loss. The 'sorry tale, so familiar in the modern age' to which he refers, has sadly continued, despite some notable conservation successes, with many sites within the SBSG area now degraded or lost altogether.

So, what of the birds themselves...? Well, a total of 173 species recorded during the year may not compare much with modern standards, but amongst the 34 page Systematic List, which is in pre-Voous BOU order (remember when Divers and Grebes were at the front...?) there are some real recording gems.

This starts with reference to a good year for Red-throated Diver, with one briefly at Underbank Res on 26th March, only the third documented record for the area followed by a superb summer-plumaged bird at Dale Dike Res on 30 July. Even this pales into insignificance by the occurrence of eight Black-necked Grebes at Agden Res on 13th October – a remarkable record by anyone's standards!

Seabirds are represented by two immature Gannets – one over Hallam School on 13th September, which must have been a welcome distraction from the classroom, whereas another found exhausted within a field in the Rivelin Valley on 3rd October was subsequently released at Flamborough Head three days later. In contrast, there were just three records of Cormorant, including one at Rivelin Dams in November witnessed by a young observer going by the name of 'A Deighton'.

The wildfowl section is equally interesting, where a bumper year for Bewick's Swan included herds of ten at Pebley Pond on 1st February, 25 at Ladybower Res on 4th November and 18 at Elsecar Res on 28th November – something we can only dream about at present. There were, however, just three confirmed sightings of Pink-footed Goose – a reflection of the much restricted wintering numbers crossing the Pennines in those days, although the 20 White-fronted Geese which flew north over Breck Farm on 10th January must have been a sight to savour. The expansion of the feral Canada Goose population was still in its infancy with records restricted to a couple of sites on the eastern lowlands. By contrast on the uplands, a total of seven pairs of Teal bred on the moorland reservoirs alone, with a total of 40 young hard to imagine in the modern era; likewise the winter gathering of 22 Pochard at Barbrook Res on 28th January would now probably need a prolonged rub of the eyes – something Roy Frost may have actually done on 28th May of that year, when a stunning summer-plumaged Long-tailed Duck graced the waters of this locality, sadly now decommissioned as a working reservoir. Otherwise, the autumn provided the first modern day record of Ferruginous Duck at Langsett Res on 4th September (the only previous report being a slightly dubious record of one on a pond off Herries Road in 1956), with either it or another at Treeton Dyke between 20th - 25th October. Finally, the fact that records of Pintail outnumbered Gadwall by over three to one shows how the fortunes have headed in opposite directions for both these enigmatic species.

In line with the national trend, the year ended with a wintering Rough-legged Buzzard which frequented the western moors towards the year end – only the second documented record for the area after a historical report at Treeton in 1961. This was accompanied by an unprecedented number of Hen Harriers – up to five in north Derbyshire, which included one male, whilst six ringtails and a single male were present in South Yorkshire. The fact that Sparrowhawk were recorded at 30 localities across the area was deemed evidence of a post-DDT recovery, whilst the dearth of raptors in those days was reflected in the absence of any records of Hobby, Red Kite, or Marsh Harrier, and just two records of Peregrine.

Passage waders were also a little thin on the ground, with no Grey Plover or godwit records, just four records of Oystercatcher, three reports of Whimbrel and single Turnstone and Sanderling – this final occurrence came from the then under-rated Harthill Res, where a rare spring Little Stint was present on 22nd May. A trip of nine Dotterel was also present in the Peak District during the same week. In the autumn, a single Curlew Sandpiper at Tinsley SF was followed by further records of Little Stint at

Old Whittington SF, Treeton Dyke and Barbrook Res, whilst a single Knot at Stoney Middleton on 2nd September represented one of the first reports from what later became known as Middleton Moor.

It would seem that the study of gulls was not at the forefront of people's minds in those days, although amongst the throng of 4,000 gulls at Broomhead Res on 2nd December was only the 5th record of Iceland Gull for the area. Likewise, tern passage was also somewhat under-represented, although 15 Black Terns over Barbrook Res on 28th May must have been a bit special, as was a Little Tern found by David Vickers at Ulley Res on 21st July.

During the breeding season, there was a number of notable records including calling Corncrake and Quail, a lek of Black Grouse in the Peak District with at least one successful pair, nine churring Nightjars at Wharnccliffe Heath and a pair of Black-headed Gulls at Tinsley SF, whilst elsewhere, the relatively healthy population of farmland birds was characterised by numerous records of Turtle Dove, Tree Sparrow, Corn Bunting and Twite, the latter of which was thought to be 'rapidly increasing' with colonies at 14 sites from Langsett to Leash Fen and post-breeding flocks of 100 at Bradfield Moor in August, 200 at Wyming Brook on 21st September and 100 at Midhope on 7th October – all counts to pause and reflect on.

Amongst the other passerines, a wintering flock of 80 Corn Bunting at Breck Farm on 29th January was eclipsed by a roost of 200 at Bolsover on 27th March, whilst at nearby Old Whittington SF, a remarkable total of seven Water Pipits took up residence from January to March, with three from 14th October until the year end. It was a good year for Stonechat, with records from an unprecedented 20 localities, whilst the same can be said for Great Grey Shrike, with 13 sightings from 11 sites including one seen to kill a Twite at Leash Fen on 21st October. A single Waxwing at Grenoside in February and 20 in the Loxley Valley in early March were the only records of this now more regular species during the year.

Finally, a Lapland Bunting over Barbrook Res on 27th September represented only the second area record of this rare transient, which we have now become more accustomed to during visible migration watches. A single Snow Bunting on Houndkirk Moor on 6th November and an influx of Brambling during late November, which saw flocks of 500 at Stannington and 300 at both Redmires Res and Midhopstones in early December rounded off what was clearly a memorable first year for the Group.

The list of observers reveals a total of 86 individuals, some sadly no longer with us, but in addition to those already mentioned above, some familiar names like M.A. Beevers, K. Clarkson, C. McKay, M.G. Oxlade, S. Roddis, M. Swift. M.Wells and D. Whiteley, to name but a few, continue to contribute either locally, or now further afield.

Next up 1974.....surely things had settled down a bit by then?!

Richard Hill