

When you hear people harking on about the 'good old days' it may be worth reminding them to leave 1974 under the shag pile of history. After all, it's not easy to go all misty-eyed about an OPEC inspired global recession, which saw inflation running at 17.5%, or a 'three-day week' with the added bonus of power cuts on account of a protracted and bitter miner's strike. Once you throw in the commencement of an IRA bombing campaign across mainland Britain and not one, but two General Elections to endure within the space of eight months, when asked the question 'Who governs Britain?' it's a wonder the entire country didn't just pull the bed covers over their head and wait in vain for the muffled sound of *Auld Lang Syne*.

Elsewhere, things weren't up to much either. Richard Nixon became the first US President to fill out his own P45 after the *Watergate* scandal, plane crashes seemed to become as fashionable as bomber jackets, Turkey unilaterally decided to extend its own coastline by invading northern Cyprus, whilst the hopes and dreams of football romantics were crushed, as the skill and artistry of the Netherlands' *Totaalvoetbal* was eventually overwhelmed under the wheels of West German efficiency in the FIFA World Cup Final.

There was no such turmoil in the world of bird watching, however, where there was less of a 'Rumble in the Jungle' and more of a 'Ring-billed in Glamorgan' with further records of this recently discovered Nearctic gull and a Royal Tern in Cheshire providing the ornithological headlines of the year. After a largely mild winter, which saw an unseasonal influx of skuas along the coast from Shetland to Dorset and several overwintering summer migrants, including a Turtle Dove in Inverness and the first-ever winter record of Nightjar on Mull, the spring was something of a disappointment. A prolonged run of unsettled conditions with westerly winds saw a slow return of summer migrants. There were few rarities of note too, apart from a late rush towards the end of May, which typically included a raft of overshooting herons from southern Europe – still much sought after remember in the days before climate change had started to make an impact.

Although the mild weather allowed an early start to what was generally considered to be a good breeding season, particularly for the national Dartford Warbler population, a number of trans-Saharan migrants still appeared to be struggling, with Grasshopper Warbler, Whinchat, Whitethroat and Pied Flycatcher notably scarce. The autumn was the proverbial mixed bag with the early weeks described by Ian Wallace as the 'ornithological black hole of the decade', followed by an influx of drift migrants from late August, which saw over 200 Wrynecks reported and a significant influx of marsh terns. The latter involved over 1,000 Black Terns in the southern Midlands alone, with ten White-winged Black and a single Whiskered Tern caught up in the excitement. The final chapter of the autumn was dominated by the coldest October for 57 years, which saw birds primarily arrive from the north and east, including a spectacular influx of over 250 Rough-legged Buzzards, a pronounced arrival of Waxwings and an avalanche of Snow Buntings in the far north of Scotland.

Meanwhile, further south the fledgling Sheffield Bird Study Group was going from strength to strength as it entered its second full year in operation. Although the Chief Officers of Marcus Moore (Chairman), Keith Tayles (Secretary), Harold Holland (Treasurer) and David Herringshaw (Recorder) remained unchanged, the general committee members of Betty Moore and Philip Nolan were now complemented by the sadly recently departed John Linton Smith.

The annual report for that year provides a good barometer of the progress made by the Group in such a short space of time – a total of 84 pages represented a significant enhancement on the previous year, with the cover adorned with a Firecrest illustrated by none other than Ray Hawley – a legend of Yorkshire ornithology who had recently left the area to become warden of the RSPB reserve at Hornsea Mere. The Editorial by David Herringshaw and David Gosney makes no bones about the Group's future aims, with the justifiable claim that 'Sheffield ornithology is now well and truly on the

move'. There is a small caveat to this bold statement, however, centred on the obvious gaps in knowledge at that time, particularly in terms of the number and distribution of Sheffield's breeding species. In response, the Group's ambitions for the future are made clear – an ornithological atlas on similar lines to the recently published BTO 1968-73 national survey. The growing appetite amongst the membership for surveys was clearly already in place, as the first part of the report is festooned with write-ups. This includes wildfowl counts covering 31 localities, ten stretches of local river covered for the Waterways Bird Survey, an ongoing Garden Bird Survey (Starling and House Sparrow topping the list of 81 species), as well as investigations into breeding Swifts at Millhouses, the prey items of local Barn Owls and finally the preliminary results of an ornithological survey of Harthill Reservoir.

Away from recording, the Secretary's Report documents illustrated lectures at Weston Park Museum on diverse subjects such as *Birdwatching in Greece*, the *Sheffield Recreation Department's approach to Conservation* and perhaps most notably *Catcliffe Flashes* by the late Colin Jacklin, another early pioneer of the Group. With a roll-call of local sightings now included at the end of indoor meetings, it's no surprise that attendances grew sharply, with 'standing room only' reported at some as getting to know 'what's about' became a primary focus in the days before 'bird information' was even a glint in the eye of the north Norfolk bird mafia. Perhaps in a move to take advantage of this surge of interest, subscriptions were increased by a whopping 25% – a policy the IMF would no doubt have approved of – although 75p a year still sounds pretty reasonable to me!

Moving on to the birds, it's fair to say that 1974 wasn't particularly a classic year, although a glance through the systematic list once again provides some real gems of local recording. The stand out birds of the year were somewhat contrasting in nature. An exhausted Puffin found at Roe Woods, Norwood on 14th October (subsequently released at Bampton Cliffs) was a remarkable occurrence which remains the last record of this local 'blocker'. This was closely followed by a male Firecrest discovered by the aforementioned Herringshaw and Gosney at Broomhead Res on 26th October, the first to be recorded in the area since 1878 (with a further record in the Porter Valley the following month). Away from this excitement, the year will primarily be remembered for the regular sightings of Rough-legged Buzzard, which graced the western moors during both winter periods as part of the national influx. The fact that they were accompanied by between four and six Hen Harriers made heading west a tempting proposition, although it should be noted that there were no records of Peregrine during the year, which was still recovering from its DDT-induced nadir only a few years earlier.

The early months provided by some notable wildfowl records, with three Bewick's Swan at Breck Farm on 3rd January and four reports of Pintail during January and February, including a long-staying pair at Thrybergh Res and a male at Broomhead Res. It was also a good year for Shelduck with impressive parties of ten at Midhope Res on 4th January and seven at Thrybergh Res on 9th January, whilst the healthy numbers of Goldeneye on the upland reservoirs in those days was typified by up to seven at Midhope Res in January and 15 at Broomhead Res in February.

Back then, as now, the spring months were typically dominated by waders and although some species were still scarce with no records of Grey Plover, Whimbrel nor a single Godwit during the entire year, there was still some shorebird bounty available on those relatively undisturbed reservoir margins (dog walkers – take note). On 16th March, an early Knot was at Chesterfield SF, whilst a pre-breeding flock of Curlew at Midhopestones numbered over 100 birds the following day. After a Turnstone at Harthill Res on 6th May, it was the turn of Redmires Res to pull in something special in the form of a pair of Ruff on 13th May – no doubt making a young Keith Clarkson's day in the process as this included a stunning summer-plumaged male. Likewise a summer-plumaged Sanderling on 22nd May liked the place that much it remained for another two months, where it was joined by five other birds on 22nd July and 32 Dunlin the following day!

After a pair of Dotterel was found on a South Yorkshire moorland during 24th–25th May, attention began to turn towards local breeding birds. A total of 15 pairs of Teal was another excellent showing and once again illustrates how scarce this species has now become. On the lowlands, a pair of Canada

Geese was thought to have had their eggs robbed by local school children: given what we now know, a special commendation rather than a telling off might have been the order of the day!

With breeding raptors limited to just three species comprising Kestrel (reported from 41 sites), a recovering Sparrowhawk population and five pairs of Merlin on the western moors, it was left to gamebirds to provide some interest. The traditional lek of Black Grouse in the Peak District was still in evidence, although numbers had dwindled to just two birds. A Corncrake was also heard calling 'somewhere in the area' whilst a breeding pair of Quail was confirmed when a female was seen with chicks at Breck Farm. On the owl front, the lack of any Short-eared Owls was compensated by eight confirmed pairs of Barn Owl and five pairs of Long-eared Owl, whilst that other nocturnal wonder: Nightjar – was restricted to just two records. Amongst the passerines, it appeared to be a good year for Ring Ouzel with six pairs at Burbage alone, whilst a pair of Fieldfare summered in the Peak District but sadly did not breed. In contrast, a successful pair of Stonechat on the uplands was the first confirmed breeding record since 1968 and both Redstart (13 singing males in Padley Gorge) and Wood Warbler (five singing males in the Porter Valley alone) appeared to be in good numbers. There were still some recording challenges though, and one wonders how the section writer managed to analyse the two Reed Warbler records received – perhaps some record slips got utilised during a power cut?!

As always, some records from the year clearly illustrate how perilous some breeding species have now become in the area. This includes lowland breeding records of Whinchat near Elsecar Res and Pied Flycatcher 'to the east of Sheffield', Twite recorded from 13 localities, a report of 17 singing Corn Buntings in the Moss Valley (with a roost of 170 at Bolsover on 2nd April) and finally ten occupied localities for Turtle Dove, including Harthill, which held a remarkable 50 birds on 20th June.

The summer also brought the first signs of return passage thanks to another SBSG junior – Clive McKay – who along with Ian Francis started the ball rolling with a superb raft of 18 drake Common Scoters at Strines Res on 21st July. The wee chappie then followed this up with three Arctic Skuas picked up moving west over Big Moor on 18th August, a clear sign of his bird finding prowess which would later bring the first British records of Cedar Waxwing on Noss and Brown-headed Cowbird in Argyll. Elsewhere, waders were again the principal target for local birders, with a memorable day on 19th August which saw a Wood Sandpiper accompanied by two Spotted Redshank at Redmires Res, with further records of the latter at Barbrook Res on 30th and three more at Redmires the following day. With three Knot, two Turnstone, a max of five Greenshank, up to two Little Stint, a pair of Green Sandpiper and up to 20 Ringed Plover present during this period, it's hard not to bemoan what passes for a wader passage at this heavily disturbed site in modern times.

All these patient hours of watching local reservoirs also paid off on the passage tern front too. During the spring, there had been three separate records of Arctic Tern over Underbank Res, whilst a party of 13 Common Terns were seen moving north-east over Staveley on 27th April. In May, a single Black Tern at Elsecar Res on 17th was the start of a good run of these delightful marsh terns, with further reports at Redmires Res and Barbrook Res in August, and both Elsecar Res and Ulley Res in September. Pride of place, however, again went to Redmires, where Keith Clarkson's Sandwich Tern on 15th August represented only the second documented record for the area. Not to be outdone, Barbrook Res rounded off a memorable autumn when Roy Frost found a Purple Sandpiper on 5th October – this was only the third record for the area, but even then, the zen-like attraction for this locally scarce species at this remote locality was already firmly established.

With no divers, rare grebes or scarce herons to report during the year, it was left to another exhausted pelagic species to enliven the systematic list later in the year, with a Shag found at Newton-Chambers factory at Chapelton on 28th October and a superb male Long-tailed Duck at Midhope Res the same day. Other wildfowl of note included 24 Bewick's Swan at Ladybower Res on 21st November, several skeins of Pink-footed Geese, which were now firmly on the radar for local birders and an impressive flock of 13 Shelduck at Redmires Res on 30th November.

The final months of the year were dominated by two species also evident on a national scale. An arrival of Waxwing saw a glut of sightings, particularly from the north of the city which included 50 at Wadsley Bridge on 14th December. Elsewhere, there were 30 (yes, thirty!) reports of Great Grey Shrike from 14 localities during the year, with many evident during late November and December. A rather spartan Escapes section (by modern standards at least) rounded things off, with a Sacred Ibis near Ashford on 12th July while three records of Ring-necked Parakeet towards the year end were perhaps a sign of things to come.

Amongst the final pages of the report, the number of observers had now grown to a creditable 94 contributors and in addition to those well-known names mentioned in the 1973 report, several local luminaries made their first appearance, including Jon Hornbuckle, Ian Francis and Dave Marshall – all three of which had a big influence on the forthcoming atlas project and the Group as a whole. The Sorby Natural History Society was also well-represented, with Austin Brackenbury, Roger Butterfield and Harold Smith also deserving of a mention. Finally, there were also contributions by some well-known names from outside the Group, such as the deadly duo of Richard and Martin Wells, Geoff Mawson of the recently established Sorby-Breck Ringing Group, John Dale of YNU fame and 50% of Barnsley's holy quartet of birding in the form of Messrs J Hewitt and M Turton.

Next up 1975 and a certain European Referendum. Who says history doesn't repeat itself...?!

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