

There's a saying that history has a habit of repeating itself. Well, if the events of 1978 were anything to go by, then let's hope it doesn't. In many ways, the year marked one of the pivotal moments in British post-war history. The general public finally lost confidence in a Labour government, beset by not one, but a series of crisis, many of which were largely of their own making and fully exploited by the media, who were now able to influence public opinion, regardless of the actual facts. That would never happen nowadays, would it?

With the public sector strike towards the end of the year plunging the country into the now infamous *Winter of Discontent*, pay disputes proliferated like something from the new arcade game *Space Invaders*, piles of uncollected rubbish lined London's streets and could have reached the top of John Travolta's flares in *Saturday Night Fever*, whilst the city of Hull effectively got cut off by a TGWU blockade, earning it the title of *Britain's Stalingrad* (being stranded half an hour from Spurn's not necessarily a bad thing though).

My own experience of our apparent descent towards becoming the 'Sick Man of Europe' was nothing but a pleasure, however, as the boiler at Lydgate Junior School went the same way as the tanker *Amaco Cadiz* off the Brittany coast nine months earlier. The resulting fortnight off school in the best sledging weather for years, was well worth the indignity of eating *Heinz* baked beans & sausages out of a tin by candlelight. My weary, butane-soaked parents didn't quite agree of course, but at least we had a coal fire to gather around unlike some people. The fossil-fuelled plume emanating from our Crosspool semi wasn't quite up to the Vatican's standards, however, as an extra box of fire-lighters was required for not one, but two papal elections within just over a month, after the passing of both *Paul VI* and *John Paul I* in August and September respectively. After some deliberation (there was no need for a public phone-in or vote off in those days), it was left to *Pope John Paul II* to claim the keys to the Popemobile and begin a reign which lasted 18 years covering 129 countries – that's an awful lot of screen wash...

In the world of British birdwatching, there were no such machinations, as its ornithological disciples rallied to a different calling - to document around 4,000 localities and the species which inhabit them for the new national Register of Ornithological Sites. The value of all this data to the then fledgling conservation movement cannot be underestimated and has shaped the fight against so-called progress ever since.

The first winter period of 1978 was again largely mild until a late, large snowfall in Scotland and south-west Britain. An Ivory Gull in Norfolk and a Great Bustard, which remained in Kent until April, proved particularly popular, as was the returning Wallcreeper at Cheddar, which gave observers their last chance to add this now mythical species to their British lists.

Spring arrived on cue with the first summer migrants by the third week of March, which coincided with a large exodus of wintering birds such as Robins, Waxwings and Skylarks along the East Coast. An Alpine Accentor at Portland Bill and a Great Snipe in Kent were notable finds alongside the now expected flurry of Nearctic Ring-necked Ducks and Ring-billed Gulls. A spell of warm weather with easterly winds brought a plethora of southern herons in May, including Spoonbills, which were now only a short hop across the North Sea after beginning to establish themselves in the Low Countries. Soaring raptors were also prominent, particularly Honey Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Ospreys, whilst up to 13 Red-footed Falcons represented an excellent return. Inland, a large passage of terns in early May (more on this later), included a spectacular 450 Arctic Terns over Fairburn Ings. With relatively low numbers of common Fenno-Scandian migrants on account of the favourable weather conditions, it was left to a Calandra Lark on Fair Isle, several male Siberian Stonechats, rare spring records of Pied Wheatear in Norfolk and Rufous Turtle Dove in Cornwall, and the first confirmed British record of Pallid Swift at Stodmarsh to get the twitching pulses racing. A White-throated

Sparrow on Fair Isle during mid-June was also welcome having presumably arrived from the opposite direction!

The summer months were dull and cool with many northern birds failing to cope with these challenging conditions, although over 70 pairs of Slavonian Grebe represented a welcome increase. Amongst the seabirds, Gannets continued to increase and the colony at Hermaness welcomed back the Black-browed Albatross for another season, whilst breeding Corncrakes and Bitterns sadly continued to move the other way, with numbers of the latter below 40 males, and just six booming in the whole of Norfolk. In the West Midlands, the population of Ruddy Ducks continued to expand, as did scarce breeding raptors such as Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, Ospreys and Hobbies. Despite the weather accounting for many scarce breeding waders such as Dotterel, Temminck's Stint and Wood Sandpiper, it was left to a pair of Kentish Plovers in England (which sadly failed) and the first British successful pair of Purple Sandpipers in Scotland to provide some more positive news. Amongst the passerines, it was a poor year for resident species, particularly Stonechat, which presumably also fell foul of the weather, whilst amongst the summer migrants, Blackcap and Willow Warbler fell sharply and the long-term declines of Redstart, Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat stretched into their tenth year. In contrast, it was a good year for Cuckoo and Spotted Flycatcher, whilst the national population of Cetti's Warbler was now up to 46 sites and breeding Marsh Warblers were located at 15 localities, mostly in the south Midlands.

Compared with the bounty available in recent past, the autumn was generally considered a poor one for rarities. During August, a combination of dull, muggy conditions with westerly winds was not conducive to drift migrants, although the northerlies that followed did encourage the ever-increasing band of seawatchers, with large passages of Sooty Shearwaters accompanied by 20 Great, six Cory's and multiple claims of what was then called Little Shearwater – not all of these were either submitted or accepted of course!

A run of depressions brought more of the same during September, although a brief spell of south-easterlies did provide a rush of both Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers. This influx was associated with a small influx of eastern rarities, which saw a Pechora Pipit on Fair Isle and a Booted Warbler at Spurn. After a westerly gale brought unprecedented numbers of Leach's Petrels into the Irish Sea, there was a significant arrival of Nearctic waders, which included a Semipalmated Sandpiper on the Humber and Britain's first Semipalmated Plover to St Agnes on Scilly. The month of October saw the wind swing back around to the north-east, bringing with it a plethora of classic eastern rarities such as Citrine Wagtails, Lanceolated Warblers, multiple Radde's, three Isabelline Shrikes and a star find of a Red-flanked Bluetail at Donna Nook. As winds returned to the north and west, there was then a curious rarity mix, which included a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in what was then called Humberside, and both Black-throated and Eye-browed Thrushes in Staffordshire and Strathclyde respectively. The autumn came to a close with a large influx of Short-eared and Long-eared Owls in November, accompanied by good numbers of thrushes and incoming raptors such as Hen Harrier, Goshawk and Peregrine.

Meanwhile in the Sheffield area, the SBSG was celebrating its fifth anniversary with an ever-increasing membership, which had reached an impressive total of 222 by the end of the year. The Committee comprised of Marcus Moore as Chair, Jon Hornbuckle as Secretary, and the newly appointed Colin Jacklin as Treasurer, together with Betty Moore, Dave Gosney, George Shawyer and Richard Wells, whilst the indefatigable David Herringshaw continued as the Group's Recorder. As mentioned previously, the 1977-78 joint issue was the first of its kind on account of delays in the production and depicted a fine illustration of a Hoopoe by Paul Leonard. Amongst the usual range of write-ups on wildfowl counts and waterway birds was a survey of Collared Doves in SK38 (there were rather a lot of them) and further progress with the breeding tetrad survey. The development of local RSPB activity in the form of the Sheffield Members' Group was also evident, with the annual RSPB film show at the City Hall overbooked for the first time and extra matinees organised for an estimated 6,000 local schoolchildren.

In terms of the birds, a total of 184 species were recorded in 1978, although the year started with a shock late submission from the previous year. A Dark-eyed Junco observed by Jon Hornbuckle at Thrybergh Tip on 3rd January 1977 was accepted by BBRC as the ninth British record. This first for the area was also the maiden record for Yorkshire and at the time, the first ever winter record. During the next 12 months, a remarkable four more new species for the area were also recorded. This comprised a pair of Bearded Tits found by Roy Frost in a Bolsover reedbed between 15th February and 4th March (with a second pair at Staveley on 7th–9th October), a superb singing Marsh Warbler discovered by Clive McKay at Tinsley SF from 7th–9th June, and an even more remarkable Night Heron found by a youthful Ron Blagden in Graves Park from 3rd–9th July. The year was rounded off by a Long-tailed Skua, which was picked up dead at Stoney Middleton on 5th October and once identified, ended up on the taxidermist's slab in the City Museum at Weston Park.

Other than the aforementioned Bearded Tits, it had been a quiet opening to the year. A herd of ten Whooper Swans took up residence at Renishaw Park, which was also now becoming an important site for Gadwall, which peaked at nine birds by the end of January. Wintering numbers of farmland birds were off the scale by modern standards, with a 170 Corn Bunting at Bolsover during mid-February, 200 Skylarks at Breck Farm and some excellent winter coveys of Grey Partridge, which saw 80 at Thrybergh Res, 73 at Poolsbook and 71 at Staveley - a stark reminder of better times for these perennially declining species.

The highlights of what proved to be an incredible spring began with a Corncrake at Tinsley SF on 23rd April and two summer-plumaged Black-necked Grebes at the same site on 1st May (both courtesy of Tinsley's finest - Clive McKay). A superb Black-throated Diver in full breeding plumage found by Betty Moore at Howden Res from 1st May was soon followed by a pale morph Arctic Skua over Wharnccliffe Chase, which was in hot pursuit of a flock of around 90 'Commic Terns'. Remarkably, this was then eclipsed by a certain Mrs Dixon on 5th May, who contacted David Herringshaw with the startling revelation that she had just tape-recorded a Nightingale singing outside her window which overlooked Graves Park. This proved to be the first (and last) modern day record of this former breeding species, not seen or heard in the area since the pre-war era. The good run of scarce local birds then continued, with an apparently exhausted Hoopoe, which somehow escaped the clutches of the River Don at Tinsley on 25th May, a Wryneck trapped and ringed by members of the Sorby Breck Ringing Group at Old Whittington SF on 27th May and finally the area's second record of Red-footed Falcon at East Moor, which was discovered by the DOS stalwart Ken Smith on 7th June.

Records from the breeding season of that year again show how some of our local species have changed in both number and distribution, with a staggering eight pairs of Teal rearing ten young at Redmires Res and another 14 young reared at Broomhead Res. With no confirmed reports of Stonechat and only a single 'churring' Nightjar on Wharnccliffe Heath, there was even more negative news for Black Grouse, with only a single record of a greyhen at East Moor on 20th May. On a more positive note, a pair of Water Rail reared three young and a pair of Ringed Plover, which successfully bred at Killamarsh, was the first confirmed breeding record for the area. Other interesting records included 15 pairs of Tree Pipit at Langsett, four confirmed pairs of Long-eared Owl and a healthy number of Grasshopper Warbler, all but one of which occurred on the eastern lowlands. Last but not least, a male Brambling established a territory at Redmires Res during June and July, but sadly did not attract a mate.

During the summer months, the apparent seabird homing effect of the Crooked Spire in Chesterfield was again evident, as a Fulmar was picked up at Staveley on 3rd July. This was cared for by the RSPCA before subsequently being released in Pembrokeshire and represented the third record in the immediate vicinity within just five years! The month also saw a record flock of 31 Whimbrel over Gleadless on 25th – a record which stood until recent times and several reports of Garganey at Catcliffe Flash. In August, up to 85 Twite were present at Ewden Height, a staggering 300 Tree Sparrow gathered at Breck Farm and a second Corncrake was seen in the Moss Valley on 15th August.

By recent standards, the wader passage was a disappointment until an influx of Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers enlivened proceedings during September in line with the national influx. The former species was most numerous, with up to 11 at Barbrook Res and smaller numbers at Redmires Res and Tinsley SF, whilst up to two of the latter were at Barbrook, Elsecar and Redmires Reservoirs during the same period.

With no Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier or Osprey records during the entire year, it was left to good numbers of Hen Harrier during the latter months (including three at Redmires Res on 7th October) and a Rough-legged Buzzard in Upper Ewden on Boxing Day to keep up the spirits of raptor enthusiasts. A fly-over Lapland Bunting at Big Moor on 21st October was yet another feather in the cap of the pioneering duo of Roy Frost and Mick Taylor, whilst the ringers of Sorby Breck also came up trumps with a Firecrest trapped at Staveley on 29th October.

With a dearth of Great Grey Shrikes up to the year end, it was left to a Black-necked Grebe at Ladybower Res on 26th November and a Red-necked Grebe at Harthill Reservoir on 17th December to provide local birders with a taste of what was to come during the following winter months – a frozen Baltic and the now famous *Blitzkrieg* of divers and grebes....

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