

If ever there was a year from the past that could be summed up in a single word, then 1976 could achieve this in just three letters - hot. Despite a further 40 years of melting tarmac, peeling faces and swathes of forest laid waste to provide the paper for scientists to argue about climate change, the year 1976 is still the benchmark for all things *Scorchio* - bringing with it the worst drought since the 1720s.

For some, however, it was drainpipes rather than standpipes that the year will be best remembered for, as the magical turmoil of punk rock, chaotically led by the Sex Pistols, collided with mainstream culture for the first time. If the older generation were left somewhat bewildered by all this angry, saliva-strewn self-expression, then it's not really surprising, as a changing of the guard seemed apparent in more ways than one. This included the maiden flight of Concord, Harold Wilson's resignation and subsequent retirement, the birth of the computer giant Apple, whilst in one of those strange co-incidences, fatal heart attacks accounted for both Sid James and Mao Zedong within the space of just five months. One wonders what the craggy-faced comedy legend would have made of *Carry on Communism* had it been put into production - *Oooh Maotron* perhaps?

Back in the slightly less totalitarian world of British birdwatching, anyone could have been forgiven for thinking that 1976 would be a classic case of 'after the Lord Mayor's show' given the magical events of the previous autumn. Not so in the opinion of seventies birding doyen Ian Wallace, who later claimed that 'At the time, 1976 was not handed the blue riband of modern ornithology, but, in retrospect, it won it – by a least a head!'

Ironically, the year began with a cold snap with hard-weather movements from the north, which saw significant influxes of Bean Geese (more on that later), Smew, waders and thrushes, together with a moribund Brunnich's Guillemot in Caithness, a fine male Pine Bunting in Sutherland and the reappearance of the previous autumn's Black-throated Thrush in Norfolk – now in much better condition having gorged itself on local berries for the past few months. Wintering owls were also in evidence with a single Snowy Owl in Gwent and up to 170 wintering Long-eared Owls in Kent an indication of how harsh the conditions were further north and east.

The rest of the winter was mild and this continued into early Spring, when some of the earliest ever arrivals of migrants were recorded. This included February arrivals of a Turtle Dove in Kent, five Wheatears in Derbyshire and three Whinchats in South Yorkshire (more on this later too). With windy weather during March preventing further arrivals, it was left to the Isles of Scilly to fly the flag for inbound migrants, when after heavy rain on 22nd March, a deluge of birds included three Hoopoes, 10,000 Fieldfares, 5,000 Redwing, 500 Northern and a single Desert Wheatear. Elsewhere, a Gyrfalcon, two Killdeers, both Ring-billed and Ross's Gulls, together with a Scops Owl and a female Stella's Eider in Orkney's stormy waters, provided a strange rarity mix before yet another spring was stalled by unseasonably cold conditions during the rest of April. This was followed by a month of May full of southerly winds and warm weather, in which overshoots kept on overshooting, including 23 rare herons, six White Storks and 20 Spoonbills, together with a Black Kite, 30 Hoopoes, 20 Golden Orioles, five Savi's and four Great Reed Warblers, three Alpine Swifts, two Rollers and a pair of Bee-eaters! The fact that this remarkable haul included what was then, an impressive 12 Little Egrets, perfectly illustrates how much this species has increased in the past 40 years. Once again, however, it was Fair Isle that stole the national rarity headlines with a Bimaculated Lark on 8th May and Britain's first American Kestrel on 25th.

The summer was dominated by *the* heatwave, beginning in late June and continuing through to August with no significant rainfall in the south and east until mid-September. Many wetlands dried out completely, heaths and moorlands smouldered, but overall the conditions proved favourable for breeding birds. Grey Herons had a good year, as did Gannets, whom continued their attempts to

find new colonies, including the one in Hermaness, where a nest built by a Black-browed Albatross became the stuff of legend for many years to come. Raptors maintained their recoveries with Marsh Harriers particularly in evidence after an earlier spring influx, whilst gamebirds and waders fared well too, with a pair of Turnstone suspected of breeding in Sutherland for the first time. Amongst the summer migrants, a notable increase was noted for Turtle Dove (imagine that nowadays?!) and Whitethroat, which contrasted with declines recorded in the numbers of Redstart, Nightingale and Grasshopper Warbler, the latter being particularly scarce. Amongst the few summer rarities on offer, a second American Kestrel in Cornwall, present for over a month in June and July, provided another bite of the rarity cherry for those not tempted north earlier in the spring.

The autumn was again the stuff of legend, with a roll-call that still seems incredible even by today's information-saturated standards. With the weather playing a blinder, a remarkable series of complex meteorological conditions brought vagrants from every point of the compass. In August, there were exceptional numbers of seabirds, with large numbers of shearwaters and skuas along the east coast and a Sooty Tern at Minsmere. Easterly airflows in both late August and mid-September saw almost constant arrivals of continental drift migrants, particularly large numbers of Pied Flycatchers. Amongst these came nine Woodchat and a single Isabelline Shrike, as well as a plethora of warblers including a total of 83 Aquatic, eight Greenish, an early Booted, a Sardinian and Britain's first Fan-tailed Warbler in Norfolk. September started quiet, but soon burst into life with birds from further east including a male Pied Wheatear, two Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers, two Lanceolated Warblers, a Pechora Pipit, and arguably best of all (in status, if not appearance) a Pallas's Reed Bunting on Fair Isle.

As if by magic, the weather changed during early October, with a near-hurricane in the south-west providing a harvest of Nearctic landbirds, with a total of ten Blackpoll Warblers, four Grey-checked Thrushes, two Common Nighthawks and a Bobolink. In between these occurrences, the arrivals of Siberian and Asiatic passerines resumed, with 16 Pallas's, numerous Radde's and Dusky Warblers, several Olive-backed Pipits, the eighth British record of Olivaceous Warbler at Flamborough, closely followed by only the seventh-ever Red-flanked Bluetail in Fife. Numbers of more familiar species were also spectacular, including an avalanche of Redwings, which saw an estimated 150,000 in the Northern Isles alone, falls of up to 1,000 Robins, at least 250 Firecrests, 100 Red-breasted Flycatchers, a total of 50 Bluethroats, whilst an exceptional 200 Shorelarks arrived into Scotland, with a similar number of Great Grey Shrikes nationwide. With cold and wet weather in November bringing all the excitement to an abrupt halt, there was still time for late records of Cuckoo, Wryneck, Pied Flycatcher and Red-backed Shrike, before one of the best-ever autumns was rounded off by a long-staying Little Crake in Nottinghamshire, and a typically short-staying Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Hampshire.

Whilst birders elsewhere in the UK may have been scrambling around for space in their notebooks, biro pens had somewhat of an easier time in the Sheffield area, although the year was not without its notable records. The SBSG was now a well-established organisation, with the 1976 annual report a clear barometer of this development, with yet another glossy laminated cover, this time adorned by a fine illustration of a Siskin by Paul Leonard. The Chief Officers were again unchanged, providing the necessary stability required in those early days with Marcus Moore (Chairman), Keith Tayles (Secretary), Harold Holland (Treasurer) and David Herringshaw (Recorder), alongside Betty Moore and Philip Nolan. The only new addition was David Gosney, who not only replaced John Linton-Smith on the Committee, but was an ever-present on the Records, Surveys and Conservation sub-committees, co-compiler of the annual report and also editor of the Bulletin!

Keith Tayles' Secretary's Report commented on another year of progress, with membership up to 165 by the end of the year. The indoor programme regularly attracting 80 members (and friends), with lectures including the Spanish Sierra, Wentworth Park and two special meetings by the YNU's John Mather and DOS's Philip Shooter respectively – both of which were embarrassingly poorly attended. The autumn RSPB Film Show attracted 1,200 people to Sheffield City Hall, whilst the

Group continued to foster good relationships with the BTO, RSPB, YNU and DOS. Within another lively Foreword written David Herringshaw and David Gosney, there is much mention of patch-work (now thankfully back in vogue), with a special mention recognising the efforts of David Glaves in the Moss Valley, Keith Clarkson at Redmires, Ian Francis, Clive McKay John Knight and David Marshall on the western moors around Broomhead and Langsett, whilst lowland stalwarts such as Paul Leonard, Peter and Paul Wragg, Anne & Brian Kidd, Dennis McKay and Roy Twigg also received a deserved mention. Surveys again featured prominently, with eight stretches of river covered under the Waterways Bird Survey, regular wildfowl counts from an impressive total of 38 localities, the first-ever organised surveys on Magpies and the city's parks, three Common Bird Census sites and a progress report on the tetrad atlas survey, which mentioned an excellent start, but some gaps to fill in respect of the limestone dales and urban Sheffield.

So what about the birds themselves? – well, the year began with some interesting records (very interesting in some cases...) mostly on account of the icy grip in which the nation was being held at the time, with arguably the most notable of them all as early as 2nd January. The sight of 32 Bean Geese alighting to feed on the embankment at Redmires Res in the pouring rain must have made Alex Scougall's year even though it was less than 48 hours old. Would this extraordinary occurrence stand up to scrutiny nowadays? – perhaps not, but the past is a foreign country and sometimes these things are best left as they are – part of a nationwide influx one hopes, which saw records from 14 other localities nationwide. There were other notable records in the early months, including a flock of 40-50 Snow Buntings witnessed by a youthful Paul Ardron at Ash Cabin Flat near Redmires Res on 7th January, a male Velvet Scoter over Old Whittington SF enjoyed by Roy Frost and Mick Taylor on 11th, the area's second (and first male) Smew at Thrybergh Res on 31st, which was remarkably followed by a Black-throated Diver the next day - itself the first local record since one at Redmires Res in 1958. The other significant events involved an influx of Berwick's Swan, which saw herds of 18 on Langsett Res and 57 on Ladybower Res remain for over a week, and an unseasonal influx of Dunlin at the end of the January, which saw records from a remarkable 11 localities, including flocks of six at Elsecar Res and eight at Morehall Res on 1st February and the added bonus of a Sanderling for a spritely Malcolm Oxlade. Continuing the unseasonal wader theme, a single Ruff was recorded at Ulley Brook on 15th February and remains the only winter record of this species.

In line with the national picture, Spring came remarkably early to Sheffield, with a Yellow Wagtail reported from Staveley SF on 21st February, followed by a remarkable early Whinchat found by Roy Twigg by the Sheffield Parkway from 23rd–26th February. This was rather embarrassingly rejected by the Records Committee at the time, but was rightfully reinstated and remains the earliest ever record for the area. This feat was shared with some other arrivals that year, including a Wheatear at Breck Farm on 26th February and a Ring Ouzel at Mam Tor on 2nd March. Another Whinchat found at Ulley on 7th March was either the Parkway bird or a positively lazy arrival by comparison. After a Rough-legged Buzzard in the Ewden–Langsett area was last seen on 7th March, it was left to a fine pair of Garganey at Catcliffe Flash from 27th March to 8th April, before attention turned back to large raptors, which in those days were much scarcer than they are today. After a cream-crown Marsh Harrier at Pike Lowe, Langsett on 8th May, pride of place went to Redmires Res, where Keith Clarkson and Ken Knowles enjoyed the area's first spring record of Honey Buzzard on the 20th June. Other notable spring records at this time included both Black and Little Terns at Harthill Res on 6th May, followed by a pair of Dotterel in the upper Derwent Valley on 8th May.

The breeding season was marked by the occurrence of a successful pair of Siskin (such a scarce event it featured on the front cover), a pair of Fieldfare at Wharncliffe, which sadly failed at the egg-laying stage and the continued, albeit gradual, colonisation of Goshawk (two pairs) and Black Redstart (three pairs + four singing males). The breeding atlas was also having a positive effect, with an impressive 37 Sparrowhawk nests discovered, ten pairs of Little Ringed Plover, six pairs of Short-eared Owls, five pairs of Long-eared Owl, but just three pairs of Barn Owl, despite a pair rearing two broods at Dore. Elsewhere during the breeding season, Turtle Dove records included singles at

Redmires Res on three dates, a remarkable seven singing males at Midhope on 8th May, whilst a pair was also at Langsett on 15th May. Records of calling Quail were received from both Bradfield and Langsett in June, five sites were occupied by Hawfinch including four at Froggatt, whilst it may not have been known at the time, but the year proved to be the zenith for Black Grouse, which saw a total of eight males and six females at one site and ten males at another, with a single greyhen flushed at a third locality in South Yorkshire.

After an Osprey at Chatsworth on 20th July and two Honey Buzzards over Orgreave on 26th August, attention naturally turned towards autumn waders, with a mud-exposed Redmires Res again dominant, including multiple records of Grey Plover, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank and Turnstone, along with six Bar-tailed Godwits on 12th September and single records of Knot, Little Stint, Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper – the latter in partial summer plumage. Elsewhere, a pair of Wood Sandpiper took up residence at Catcliffe Flash from 9th August-4th September and a Black-tailed Godwit was at Harthill Res on 12th September. Towards the end of September, an influx of Wrynecks brought the second and third records for the area, with one at Bolsover on 25th and another found by Richard Wells at Langsett on 29th, while the dynamic duo of Frost and Taylor also pulled out another Honey Buzzard - this time flying west over Lodge Moor on 10th September. October brought a Rough-legged Buzzard to Leash Fen on 10th, an influx of Fieldfare and Redwing towards the month end when on 26th, a male Red-backed Shrike at Taddington represented the first modern-day record of this species. With records of Great Grey Shrike restricted to (just) four localities, it was left to gulls to provide a focus. This included 234 Great Black-backed Gulls at Broomhead Res during December, which were joined by up to 5,179 Black-headed Gulls, 1,300 Herring Gulls and adult Iceland Gulls on 4th and 30th December.

Finally, the year couldn't pass without a mention of some of the more common species, which are now struggling to maintain a presence in our area. This included the roost of Corn Buntings in the *phragmites* at Bolsover, where Roy Frost saw numbers increase to a record 270 on 16th February, with 70 present again in December and supplementary records in between including 60 at Breck Farm and records from Redmires Res of all places on 19th February and 30th August. Twite also remained numerous, with 140 at Barbrook Res on 25th July and 60 at Redmires Res on 28th August, whilst 170 Tree Sparrow at Lightwood on 27th November and roosts of Hawfinch at Chatsworth and the Moss Valley numbered 12 and seven birds respectively during December.

Next up, 1977 and a Jubilee year for Sheffield birding...

**Richard Hill**