

Despite the best efforts of the Sex Pistols, Freddy Laker and Darth Vader, 1977 will forever be remembered for the big event which took place during the month of June – as if all that national outpouring of joy, celebration and excessive flag waving wasn't enough, the admission of Cape May Warbler to the British list, thanks to a singing male at Paisley Glen in Clyde, remains the stuff of birding legend.

In other news, Queen Elizabeth II clocked up 25 years of hereditary privilege, although the extra day off school for the *Silver Jubilee* made at least one school kid I know happy enough to put out the bunting (Cretzschmar's or Ortolan preferably). Continuing with the regal theme, it seemed as though the whole world stopped to mourn the passing of a man known as *the King* only two months later, when Elvis Aron Presley was laid to rest in Memphis, Tennessee at the tender age of just 42 – a month before the equally shocking death of glam-rock legend Marc Bolan, who was tragically 12 years younger when he met his demise in a car accident one fateful September evening.

With IRA bombs still targeting London, football hooliganism failing to mask another English disaster at qualifying for a World Cup finals - this time in Argentina (no-one else was ever going to win that one by the way..), inflation rocketing ever upwards and a protracted toolmakers strike at British Leyland threatening to spread a contagion of strikes throughout the country, even 'Sunny Jim' Callaghan, Labour's already embattled Prime Minister, must have found it hard to remain chipper given the dark storm clouds now gathering on the political horizon. Not even the good guys in *Star Wars* would have fancied tackling that lot.

There was no such gloom in the world of British birdwatching however, as birders fortified by the feast of the previous glorious autumn set forth once again in ever greater numbers. The winter was again generally mild, although the fact that Continental Europe was gripped by hard weather resulted in large immigrations of wildfowl (including record counts of Pintail and Bean Geese), waders, Skylarks, thrushes and Bramblings, with several of the latter gathering in flocks of over a thousand. For the rarity-conscious, the winter will always be remembered for the long-staying Wallcreeper at a Cheddar quarry, with another on the cliffs at Hastings making for a remarkable rock-hugging double. Elsewhere, a Pied-billed Grebe was discovered in Grampian, a White's Thrush graced North Yorkshire and there was a marked arrival of five Ring-necked Ducks, which were starting to appear on the radar of inland birders away from their favoured south-west.

Spring was characterised by a warm March, which marked the early return of many migrants, only for bitter northerlies and snow to impede further progress until mid-April. Warmer conditions ensued from early May, with the largest influx of Common Cranes in modern times, numerous southern herons and a spring Yellow-breasted Bunting in Lincolnshire. This was eclipsed by a late rush at the end of May, which brought scores of Wrynecks, Bluethroats and hundreds of Red-backed Shrikes to the East Coast. Amongst the throng were four Thrush Nightingales, a Citrine Wagtail in Lincolnshire and arguably best of all, an Isabelline Wheatear in Norfolk – the second British record and the first for 90 years. A late surge of Nearctic passerines rounded things off nicely including a White-crowned Sparrow and Myrtle Warbler on Fair Isle, a Dark-eyed Junco in Inverness-shire and another White-crowned Sparrow – this time at Hornsea Mere, now residing under the dreadful, bureaucratic pseudonym of 'Humberside'.

In a contrast to the previous year, the summer came late and both migrant and resident species suffered. It was a poor year for divers and grebes, northern ducks, terns and Corncrakes, whilst the decline in Mute Swan due to lead poisoning from fishing weights became significant enough to start grabbing the national headlines. The same could be said for raptors, where Golden Eagles, Goshawk and Peregrine all suffered from persecution, and the wet weather accounted for the low productivity of Osprey, Merlin and Hobby. Whilst waders typically fared better and an impressive

century of singing Black Redstarts held territories across the UK, it was left to two northern colonists to provide the main highlights, with both Shorelark and Lapland Bunting added to the UK breeding avifauna. Amongst the common summer migrants, Yellow Wagtail, Chiffchaff, Whitethroat and Sedge Warblers were up, but Spotted Flycatchers were still struggling to emerge from their post-Sahel trough.

So on to the autumn, which proved a bit of an anti-climax compared with previous years, but with still enough rarity news to get the recently re-branded 'twitcher' salivating at the mouth. As soon as August commenced, the weather turned warm with a strengthening easterly, bringing with it an astonishing double-first for Britain – as if an Eleanora's Falcon on Merseyside wasn't enough, the singing Ruppell's Warbler on Shetland that followed was greeted with incredulity, before the keenest of the keen headed to the nearest hard shoulder and hitched northwards. Alongside these headline-grabbing birds came a spectacular early fall along the east coast, which involved around 250 Red-backed Shrikes, 110 Icterine Warblers, ten Greenish Warblers and both early Isabelline Shrike and Booted Warbler at Flamborough Head. On the south coast, Aquatic Warblers were abundant, whilst even out west, large falls were experienced, such as the deluge of 2,000 Willow Warblers, 200 Whitethroats and 200 Grasshopper Warblers, which engulfed Bardsey Island on 19th of the month. September brought plenty of waders as expected, including a Sociable Plover and a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Norfolk and Cleveland respectively, whilst the end of the month produced, what was then, solely Fair Isle specialities in the form of both Pechora Pipit and Lanceolated Warbler. The month of October was marked by the second British records of two species with contrasting rarity futures: the Siberian Rubythroat at Donna Nook, discovered by one of the legendary Lorand brothers, has remained an extreme vagrant to this day, whilst the Penduline Tit on St Agnes, has since proved to be a much more regular visitor to these shores. The autumn was rounded off with a Spanish Sparrow on the less well-watched Scilly isle of Bryher and an obliging Franklin's Gull in Suffolk, whilst the year ended with a Siberian Thrush in Norfolk on Christmas Day, which surely recaptured someone's belief in Father Christmas?!

Back home in the Sheffield area, the SBSG was still attempting to consolidate after its rapid early successes, a challenge borne out by the fact that the annual report didn't appear until two years later as part of a joint 1977-78 double issue – this involved another glossy laminated cover depicting a Hoopoe by Paul Leonard, whose artistic talent was really beginning to blossom. The annual report was again the product of David Gosney and David Herringshaw, whose skill and dedication in both the compilation and editing was clearly being stretched to the limit on account of their other commitments. The Foreword provides a number of stark warnings, which still ring true – namely that the Group had for too long depended on the enthusiasm and expertise of just a few members, that many factors were now working against birds at both a local and national level, and that stronger links and closer liaison with other ornithological bodies was necessary to speak out with one voice. All of that could have been written this year!

The Secretary's Report again documented the rapid growth in membership, which was up to 165 at the beginning of the year, as well as a few Committee changes, which saw Keith Tayles make way for Jon Hornbuckle as Secretary and Colin Jacklin take over from Harold Holland as Treasurer. Marcus Moore continued as Chairman, whilst amongst the general Committee members, David Herringshaw continued as Recorder while David Gosney, Betty Moore and Richard Wells were joined by George Shawyer, who had recently established a junior section to encourage youngsters away from the root of all evil in those days - the television set. There were ten indoor meetings, amongst which the obvious highlights were Roy Frost's talk on the *Dukeries*, Peter Robinson of the RSPB on *Wildlife Law Enforcement* and finally, in what was probably one of his last ever public engagements, the great migration guru Kenneth Williamson on *Birds and Climatic Change* – everyone who attended was saddened by his sudden death soon afterwards. Surveys again featured prominently, with Collared Dove and House Martin the species chosen for specific studies, whilst monthly winter wildfowl counts, the Waterways Bird Survey and the ongoing tetrad atlas survey kept everyone else busy,

where just nine squares were required to complete the full set of 300 tetrads. A remarkable achievement even by modern standards.

And the birds? – a total of 175 species were recorded in 1977, with two new species recorded for the first time since the formation of the Group. These included a remarkable record of a Leach's Petrel found exhausted on Broomhead Moor on 24th April, which was then taken into care, but subsequently died, followed by a stunning male Red-footed Falcon discovered by Mick Taylor and Messrs Gosney and Herringshaw at Slippery Stones in the upper Derwent Valley on 28th May.

The year had begun with plenty of local evidence of some of those hard weather movements recorded nationally, including 430 Teal at Thrybergh Res on 3rd January, 450 Lapwings over Ecclesall on 7th, an impressive 62 Pochard at Morehall Res on 12th, which were much more common to the west of Sheffield in those days, and what was then a remarkable record of five Gadwall at Derwent Res on 31st January. Wildfowl also featured prominently in February, with a Red-crested Pochard at Thrybergh Tip on 6th, a party of eight Shelduck at Langsett Res on 13th and a redhead Smew at Catcliffe Flash on 18th. Meanwhile a party of 75 Waxwing at a Nether Edge garden in early February proved to be the largest flock of the decade.

A male Wheatear near the Sheffield Parkway on 5th March and a Swallow at Ladybower Res on 13th, marked the start of an early spring, with 600 Bramblings at Underbank Res during March and an impressive 30 Ring Ouzels in the Ashop Valley on 9th April a forerunner to some other notable records, which were primarily from the eastern lowlands. This included two records of Spotted Redshank from what was then, the magical wet meadows of Killamarsh, including an early individual on 23rd April, and a full summer plumaged adult on 16th June. A Sandwich Tern at Langsett Res on 29th April was the only report of the year, while parties of 31 Common, five Arctic and two Black Terns enlivened one observer's visit to Ulley Res on 19th June – a day when 18 Common Terns also passed over Poolsbrook Marsh. The star birds of the spring were both passerines, however, with a fine Blue-headed Wagtail discovered at Tinsley SF on 22nd April by Clive McKay and an even more spectacular Hoopoe found by David Vickers in Padley Gorge on 8th May.

Due to the inclement weather, the breeding season was another mixed bag with an impressive 16 pairs of Little Ringed Plover, a record six broods of Black Redstarts mirroring the national trend, six pairs of breeding Dunlin in the Redmires-Ringinglow area, five pairs of Nightjar and ten pairs of Long-eared Owl, which combined with a wealth of both Wood Warblers and Whitethroats, including 32 singing males of the latter in the Moss Valley in early June. The comparative abundance of some species was again well-illustrated, with eight broods of Tufted Duck at Chatsworth, six singing Turtle Doves in the Moss Valley, 640 occupied House Martin nests from a total of 252 colonies and 12 pairs of Spotted Flycatcher at Redmires Res alone. With just a single pair of breeding Stonechat – then a lowland speciality, and six pairs of Pied Flycatcher in Padley Gorge only rearing 20 young from 40 eggs hatched, it was clearly a poor year for many species vulnerable to the weather. This included only three pairs of Short-eared Owl, whilst unwanted attention from the usual sources, led to the successful fledging of just five Goshawk. Despite this, three reports of Quail included a long-stayer at Lowedges which might actually have bred, a male Hen Harrier summered on the western moors providing a tantalising insight into what might be possible, while a pair of Siskin in the upper Derwent Valley represented the first breeding record for Derbyshire. The other summer records of note included an Osprey over Mickleden Beck on 28th June and a pair of Canada Geese, which summered at Barbrook Res, rather than make the traditional northward movement to the Beaulieu Firth to moult.

A Honey Buzzard over Oowler Bar on 2nd August marked the start of an exciting autumn, which saw a party of seven Whimbrel over Killamarsh on 3rd and two reports of Dotterel, with three at East Moor on 21st and a confiding juv photographed at Stanage Edge the following day. This was soon followed by a Wood Sandpiper at Old Whittingham SF on 27th August. The month also saw a regular gathering of 100 Twite at Barbrook Res and a remarkable post-breeding flock of 900 Greenfinch at

Bramley, which remains one of the largest ever counts in the area and unlikely to be repeated given the current devastating effects of trichomonosis. September saw the second of two Gannet records during the year from Eckington, although this one involved an adult found moribund on 25th, whilst a Hobby previously found shot dead in the Loxley Valley, also perished after being taken into care at Sandy in Bedfordshire. The popularity of counting small blobs over Redmires Res by Keith Clarkson started to gather pace during October, with 650 Skylarks south in just an hour and a half on 22nd Oct, a stark reminder of how much this enigmatic species has declined. Other immigrants included a Shag at Damflask Res on 5th October, which was almost certainly the same individual found dead at Castleton a week later, and a remarkable 50 Song Thrushes feeding on Elderberries at Poolsbrook on 8th. November witnessed further movement into the area, with a herd of six Bewick's Swan at Langsett Res on 5th (one of a bumper eight records during the year) and the only Snow Bunting of the autumn over Barbrook Res the following day. The month also saw an impressive count of 537 Mallard at Chatsworth on 12th, up to 38 Little Grebes in Miller's Dale, and a herd of 30 Whooper Swans over Ewden on 13th – a day when the year's sole male Black Grouse was seen on the Eastern Moors, which was followed by an influx of Great Grey Shrikes, including two in the Ewden Valley.

The year closed with some excellent counts of wintering birds, including 7,600 Black-headed Gulls roosting on the roof of the steel works along Shepcote Lane at Tinsley on 18th, single Iceland and Glaucous Gulls at Broomhead Res, 2,000 Fieldfare at Cutthorpe on 14th Dec, whilst frequenting the western moors at this time, were up to seven Hen Harriers (including two grey males) and up to three Merlin – one can only dream of such numbers in the current era of ideologically-driven land ownership.

A total of 126 observers contributed to the annual report during the year, with some familiar names including Paul Ardron, Tony Baverstock, Mark Beevers, Ron Blagden, Kevin Borman, Mike Fenner, Vic Gibson, Pete Gill, Kevin Gould, Ian Rotherham, Keith Warrington and Dr Derek Yalden to name but a few. Next up 1978 and *Saturday Night Fever* - disco's answer to Spanish influenza....

**Richard Hill**