

It has been said that on his way to venerable sainthood, Francis of Assisi once emptied his pockets and gave the entire contents to the poor. Whilst he might have bestowed not only his gold coins, but a new *Sony Walkman* had he been around in May 1979, when he was famously quoted by a certain Margaret Hilda Thatcher on the steps of 10 Downing Street, one wonders what he would have made of the new self-reliant, but arguably self-centred, monetarist ideology, subsequently administered by Britain's first female Prime Minister. As if the dismantling of the post-war welfare settlement wasn't enough, the somewhat disingenuous line 'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony' would surely have had dear old Frannie choking on his morning *Frosties* had he been able to look into the future. The first-ever *Bungee Jump*, which had taken place in Bristol the month before, perhaps gave the sick, the elderly and the soon to be unemployed, the most accurate metaphorical clue of what was coming to them.

Whilst both life and politics in Britain would never be the same again, the year 1979 wasn't a great year for dictators elsewhere around the world. In deepest Africa, Idi Amin was deposed in a Uganda now shorn of an estimated 300,000 political opponents, whilst in Iran, the long-serving Shah of Persia was ousted by the *Islamic Revolution* led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shah's pseudo convalescence in the United States to avoid facing the music didn't go down too well in Tehran, however, and led to the 444-day hostage crisis for 52 diplomats at the US Embassy. Further east, rumours that Leonid Brezhnev needed Afghan Snowfinch for his USSR list were left unsubstantiated, when the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan. There was no need to worry though, the United States had a cunning plan to arm the locals - the fact that the word *Mujahideen* means 'engaged in jihad' didn't seem to raise any great concern at the time - what could possibly go wrong?!

Back home, the great Brian Clough (who was often partial to a bit of despot behaviour himself) managed to persuade Nottingham Forest's accountant to part with over £1 million to buy Trevor Francis from Birmingham City - the first ever six figure football transfer fee. Whilst 'old Big Head' turned up to the press conference and hour late wearing tracksuit bottoms and armed with a squash racquet (it wasn't his money remember), the fact that Forest won the European Cup three months' later thanks to the forehead of the same player, arguably helped spawn the current financial insanity of the *Premier League*. Looking back, it's perhaps no wonder that it actually snowed for 30 minutes in the Sahara Desert that year. Given Forest's remarkable journey to the summit of English football, even Saint Francis' boss would have struggled to match Cloughie's achievements.

In the much more egalitarian world of British birdwatching, a remarkable decade of development was slowly coming to a close. After a brief mild start to the year, which saw Britain's first Greater Sand Plover depart Pagham Harbour on New Year's Day, the winter of 1978-79 was the harshest for many years. A series of heavy snowfalls from mid-January plunged the country into what seemed like a perpetual icy grip, which wasn't properly relinquished north of the home counties until the following April. This had a significant impact on resident species, which saw their sharpest declines since the infamous deadly winter of 1962-63. The joy of birdwatching of course, is that even harsh weather brings with it something of interest. With much of Northern Europe resembling the freezer compartment of *Bejam*, a frozen Baltic soon brought thousands of birds seeking refuge into Britain. For inland birders, the shiniest of silvery linings proved to be the remarkable influx of waterbirds, particularly divers, grebes and sawbill ducks. The subsequent write-up of this event by Richard Chandler in the journal *British Birds* remains a classic and proved hugely influential to one teenage birder I can think of. The systematic documentation of the multiple arrival of Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers, made me positively drool, whilst the record influx of Red-necked, Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, plus large numbers of sawbills rightly remains the stuff of legend. The fact that over 50 Velvet Scoters were also recorded during this period would also

prove significant locally (more on that later). Not all these arrivals would survive the harsh conditions, however, and a Brunnich's Guillemot found dead at Rattray Head was sadly a somewhat familiar end for this rare Arctic vagrant.

Elsewhere, large numbers of White-fronted Geese flooded the country, accompanied by an impressive 400 Bean Geese, whilst raptor watchers were treated to Rough-legged Buzzards, Hen Harriers, and Short-eared Owls in some abundance. Hard weather movements of Skylarks, Redwings (many of which originated from Iceland) and other passerines were also evident. There is usually something somewhere amongst a throng of this nature and this year was no different, with a Dusky Thrush in Warwickshire, which stayed for over a month. Amongst the margins of frozen water bodies, birds such as Grey Heron, Bittern and Water Rail struggled to feed amongst the icy blockade.

With spring still dominated by the continuing cold, it was left to a large influx of 200 Kittiwakes across the Midlands to suggest that milder weather was on its way. It was not until the second week in April that southerly winds and warm temperatures finally arrived like a bewildered drunk at a wedding. The avian response was almost instantaneous, although further northerlies held back migrants until the first week of May. An influx of around 50 southern overshoots included Black Storks, Purple Herons, Little Egrets and three Squacco Herons. There were also nine Black Kites, 18 Red-footed Falcons and an abundance of Marsh and Montague's Harriers during this period. After a couple of rare waders, which included Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, it was left to the Farne Islands to stun the birding world, as news of an 'odd tern' amongst the breeding colony of Arctic Terns leaked out on to the grapevine towards the end of May. The resulting hastily taken photos must have left many a rubbed eye in disbelief, as the bird transpired to be the first Aleutian Tern for the Western Palearctic - it remains an astonishing record to this day. After a ground-breaking passage of skuas up the west coast of Scotland, it was left to the exotics to round off what was in fact a spring to rival many a year. This included two Great Spotted Cuckoos, nine Bee-eaters and two Rollers, followed by a Rock Thrush on Scilly, six Subalpine Warblers and a remarkable Ruppell's Warbler on Lundy from 1st June. Not to be outdone, Britain's second Cretzschmar's Bunting tipped up on Fair Isle, whilst a Collared Flycatcher on mainland Shetland presumably arrived in the same vector of south-easterly winds.

The summer months allowed field workers to finally assess the impact of the previous harsh winter, with the results pretty disastrous. CBC figures resembled a hatchet job by the birding grim reaper, with Robin down 15%, Goldcrest down 40%, Long-tailed Tit a whopping 47% and Coal Tit 16%. Other residents were at their lowest levels since 1967, including Wren, Dunnock, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Linnet, Bullfinch and Reed Bunting, whilst Grey Heron also sustained heavy losses. This contrasted with the summer migrants, who were unaffected by the winter weather, with Redstart at their highest levels for a decade. Notable breeding successes included the first Kentish Plover nest since 1956 and further expansion of Goshawk, Cetti's Warbler and Siskin. The summer months also brought several star birds, including the famous twitchable Stella's Eider on Orkney, the second-ever White-tailed Plover in Dorset and a moulting Sardinian Warbler at Gibraltar Point.

The autumn could best be described as unremarkable compared with previous years, and kicked off with a soggy August full of frontal depressions and rain. September gales brought an influx of Leach's Petrels to the north-west, with 400 daily on Merseyside between 16th and 21st, whilst Nearctic waders were represented by 16 Wilson Phalaropes, 40 Pectoral and a pronounced arrival of White-rumped Sandpipers, plus a Solitary Sandpiper in Cornwall. With little in the way of drift migration, it

was left to a brief spell of easterlies to provide a flurry of vagrants such as three Aquatic and single Lanceolated and Greenish Warblers on Fair Isle, a Roller in Hampshire and four Yellow-breasted Buntings in Scotland. The month of October saw a strong anticyclone of high pressure develop over the Continent, but migration was not pronounced until the end of the month, when westerly depressions brought what was then an expected arrival of Nearctic vagrants. This began with another remarkable Belted Kingfisher, this time in Cornwall, and was soon followed by four Swainson's and a Grey-cheeked Thrush in Scilly and Cornwall respectively. Attention then turned to the east, as a huge fall of winter thrushes occurred on Fair Isle, with a record 65,000 Redwings on 14th, followed by 8,000 Fieldfares there on 29th. Elsewhere, a total of 46 Richard's Pipits was twice the number of the previous year, five Red-throated Pipits graced the south-west and rare wheatears included the third-ever Isabelline in Grampian and a Pied in Northumberland. The autumn closed with only the fourth record of Desert Warbler in Merseyside, an Isabelline Shrike on Fair Isle, and last but not least, Britain's first Lesser Crested Tern at Kenfig Pool in Glamorgan.

In the Sheffield area, the Sheffield Bird Study Group continued to develop and the exiting events of the winter months were evident on the front cover of the annual report depicting both Red and Black-throated Divers by Paul Leonard. Although membership had ceased to grow, the fact that 214 members were still on board by the end of the year was clearly testament to the hard work of all those involved. There were some changes at the top, however, with Marcus Moore standing down as Chairman at the AGM and receiving the first-ever life membership for his remarkable efforts in helping establish the Group and steering it through its most formative years. With George Shawyer and Richard Wells also stepping down, it was left to Ian Francis, John Knight and David Marshall to introduce some new blood to the general committee along with the ever-present Betty Moore and Dave Gosney. Keith Tayles was re-appointed to the committee as Chairman, with Jon Hornbuckle as Secretary and Colin Jacklin as Treasurer.

Activity within the Group remained brisk, with a review of the constitution and a membership survey, together with two other appointments of Paul Leonard as Publicity Officer and Vic Gibson as Field Meetings Organiser. A remarkable 11 indoor meetings were held, which included such notable highlights such as the great Donald Watson on the Hen Harrier, Andrew Grieve on Marsh Harriers, Rob Hume on Gulls and Terns, whilst more local speakers included Derek Yalden on the High Peak and Jeremy Lee on Taxidermy. The destinations of field meetings included Clumber Park, Fairburn Ings, Boston Point and Hilbre Island. In her dual role of local RSPB co-ordinator, Betty Moore also documented the Group's involvement in local species protection and a successful outcome for what was then one of the few Goshawk nests in the country.

So on to the birds, where a total of 180 species were recorded during the year. In line with the country as a whole, the first winter period was dominated by the weather. In January, a lone Hooded Crow (still an occasional winter visitor in those days) was at Chatsworth on 7th, a Kittiwake graced Broomhead Reservoir on 13th, whilst a single Rough-legged Buzzard roamed Barnside Moor on 18th. Then the snow came - those birders which did manage to venture out locally were rewarded handsomely with the best run of scarce waterbirds ever recorded before or since. This included two Red-throated Divers at Damflask Reservoir from 24th February, with one remaining until 18th March and accompanied by a Black-throated Diver from 25th February. Elsewhere, a Black-throated Diver was at Ladybower Reservoir on 18th to 24th February, during which it was also seen along the ice-free River Derwent at Calver on 21st. The accompanying rare grebes were represented by a

remarkable haul of five Red-necked Grebes, with one on the River Loxley below Damflask Reservoir on 31st January, a remarkable three at Ladybower Reservoir from 18th February (two of which sadly perished) and one at Treeton Dyke from 19th to 30th March. With single Slavonian Grebes at Broomhead Reservoir on 2nd January and Ladybower Reservoir on 7th, the incredible tally also included two Black-necked Grebes at Ulley Reservoir on 26th January and another there from 18th to 20th March. Although there were no Smew or Red-breasted Mergansers reported, Goosanders were much in evidence on the upland reservoirs with 17 at Ladybower on 13th January, and counts of six at Derwent, five at Howden and Langsett, with four at Midhope respectively. An impressive 16 were also on the River Derwent at Chatsworth. Last but not least, a party of four Velvet Scoter, which briefly alighted in front of Barnsley's Mick Turton at Langsett Reservoir on 7th January, was arguably the pick of the bunch - it would take another 35 years for another record in the area, which unbelievably would involve the same number, at the same site and by the same observer! Other species in good numbers were Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl, with a remarkable 11 of the latter observed by Roy Frost and Geoff Mawson at Poolsbrook on 1st February, while up to three were also at Catcliffe and Thrybergh Reservoir (as it was known in those days). Meanwhile, 120 Corn Buntings at Breck Farm on 17th February was again illustrative of better times for the "fat bird of the barley".

With cold weather lingering into the spring, many birds were slow to disperse. An impressive 120 Snipe were still on flood water at Treeton on 6th April, parties of Fieldfares remained in many gardens with 1,000 still roosting at Leash Fen on 18th April, whilst a long-staying White-fronted Goose in the Renishaw Park - Breck Farm area lingered until 29th April. There were few wader records of note and tern passage was restricted to a handful of Common and three Black Terns at Barbrook Reservoir on 13th May. An Osprey at Howden Res on 19th May still represented a red-letter day back then, although this was eclipsed by a calling Corncrake in the Loxley Valley on 29th May and a single Marsh Harrier at Thrybergh Tip on 3rd June.

The breeding season provided some notable highlights, with nine pairs of Black Redstart in and around the city centre with ten young fledging from three broods. In addition to the obvious fanfare surrounding breeding Goshawks, it was considered a good year for Merlin, although once again there was no confirmation of breeding. On the wader front, a single pair of Ringed Plover reared two young at a site in South Yorkshire, an impressive 18 pairs of Little Ringed Plover bred on the lowlands, whilst on the tops, a pair of breeding Dunlin was recorded near Langsett Reservoir and six were singing in the vicinity of Redmires Reservoirs. The uplands then provided another breeding milestone for the Sheffield area, as a pair of Red-breasted Merganser, accompanied by eight young was observed at Ladybower Reservoir on 19th July - the first ever breeding attempt. Although a pair of Water Rail with three young represented a notable success even in those days, other wetland birds fared less well with Grey Heron and Kingfisher badly depleted from the harsh conditions during the winter months. Elsewhere, Barn Owl was recorded at 12 localities and amongst the scarcer owls, four pairs of Long-eared Owl and three pairs of Short-eared Owl represented a reasonable return. This contrasted with Nightjar, which had reached its late 1970's nadir with just two males and a female at Wharncliffe Heath on 7th June. Once again, the value of local bird recording is well-illustrated within the pages of an old SBSG annual report, with many valuable records now preserved for posterity. This includes 24 young from seven pairs of Pied Flycatcher at Padley Gorge, eight pairs of Redstart at Broomhead Reservoir, 13 pairs of Whinchats in the Little Don Valley, eight pairs of Twite at Langsett Moor and several pairs of Siskin at Langsett Reservoir and in the upper Derwent Valley. On the downside, there were just five records of Stonechat - an inevitable consequence of

the bad winter. Finally, the year represented the starting point for the Group's inaugural Swift survey, with 100 pairs noted in Millhouses and Walkley alone.

The early autumn saw the addition of not one but two new species for the Sheffield area, which without being unkind, probably didn't set the pulses of local birders racing too rapidly. The pair of Egyptian Geese, found by Paul Ardron whilst "stooging around" near Calver from 11th to 14th August, can probably never truly free themselves from the escape proviso that has clung to all subsequent records like an ASBO. The male Ruddy Duck found at the unusual location of Morehall Reservoir on 14th-15th September (by the same observer, but in the company of Ian Rotherham this time), was perhaps similarly on remand, but even by then, was fully permissible as a bona fide species and admitted to the Sheffield list.

Elsewhere, waders were very much in evidence, with the usual suspects of Barbrook and Redmires Reservoirs now joined by another locality, helpfully entitled 'a site in north-east Derbyshire'. The only problem was, nobody but a select handful of people knew exactly where it was, and details were about as forthcoming as the KGB at a Cambridge University prize giving. The place in question was of course Middleton Moor and to be fair, it's not surprising it was kept under wraps for a little while longer - the fact that these tailings lagoons represented the only significant body of water in the White Peak made them absolutely fantastic! Although a record of 1,500 Lapwing on 10th August provides the first indication of the numbers of host species occupying the site, subsequent reports of 17 Bar-tailed Godwit on 4th September and 12 Turnstone on 30th December gave a more accurate picture of its future potential. At other localities, notable records included nine Greenshank over Charnock on 5th August, with eight at Beighton on 6th September, single Wood Sandpipers at Catcliffe Flash on 7th August and Bolehill Flash on 21st August, 21 Whimbrel south-west over Elsecar Reservoir on 15th August, and a Curlew Sandpiper at Barbrook Reservoir on 31st August. After 15 Redshank at Redmires Reservoirs on 3rd October, it was left to a late influx of Little Stint to round things off, with an impressive ten at the aforementioned site with no name and singles at Barbrook and Redmires Reservoirs during the same month.

The autumn also provided one of those remarkable records, which remain the stuff of local birding folklore. You can watch all the upland reservoirs and lowland flashes you like, but if you want Storm Petrel on your Sheffield list, then head for Bernard Road incineration plant - which is precisely what one did on 22nd October, before it promptly died. We'll never know if this wayward tubenose wanted a cremation or a traditional burial as its parting wish - it got neither and was promptly stuffed by a taxidermist and put in Weston Park Museum, where it remains to this day.

November was a relatively quiet month, which saw the sole Black Grouse of the year in north Derbyshire on 4th and two Snow Buntings on Big Moor on 11th. This was followed by an excellent December, which saw 2,500 Redwing at Rivelin Hagg on 5th, a Glaucous Gull at Langsett Reservoir on 7th, 13 Bewick's Swan south-east over Ladybower Reservoir on 13th, and the first modern day record of an Eider in the Sheffield area, when a male was discovered by Treeton Dyke's holy trinity of Ray Platts, Roy Twigg and Pete Wragg on 23rd December.

Counts of passerines during the second half of the year once again highlight the modern declines of many species. A post-breeding flock of 350 House Sparrow at Elsecar on 6th August, 4,000 roosting Swallows at Catcliffe Flash on 7th September, 60 Twite at Agden during the same period, whilst flock of 600 Goldfinch at Grindleford on 28th October remains a record count for the area. In December,

counts of 500 Greenfinch were at Wardlow and in the Moss Valley, 150 Yellowhammer fed at Harthill Reservoir on 13th, whilst at Chatsworth, a Hawfinch roost discovered by David Herringshaw and Roy Frost reached a remarkable 50 birds on 23rd December – what better way to round off an eventful year?!

So that was the 1970's..... No write-up of this great decade could be complete without a mention of the legendary Ian Wallace, whose book *Birdwatching in the Seventies* I have leaned on heavily for these yearly summaries. The great man's influence on the development of British birdwatching is well-established, but tucked away at the back of this fine book, are some interesting predictions for the new decade ahead. Even back in 1981, DIMW was sagely observing that habitat loss and the move to a more uniform landscape formed a major threat to the nation's birdlife. On the development of birdwatching itself, he not only saw birding as a growth industry in the making, but also predicted that people would actually be prepared to pay for rare bird news! Despite the ever-increasing obsession with rare birds even in those days, he rounded off with the hope that as each generation matures, they will then direct their enthusiasm into broader interests and the cause of conservation – given the number of rare bird photographers around these days, one wonders if this is still the case! After a short hiatus, next up will be the 1980's - the decade that picked up the baton and defined modern birding as we now know it.

Richard Hill