

# CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB

*Bulletin* No. 404



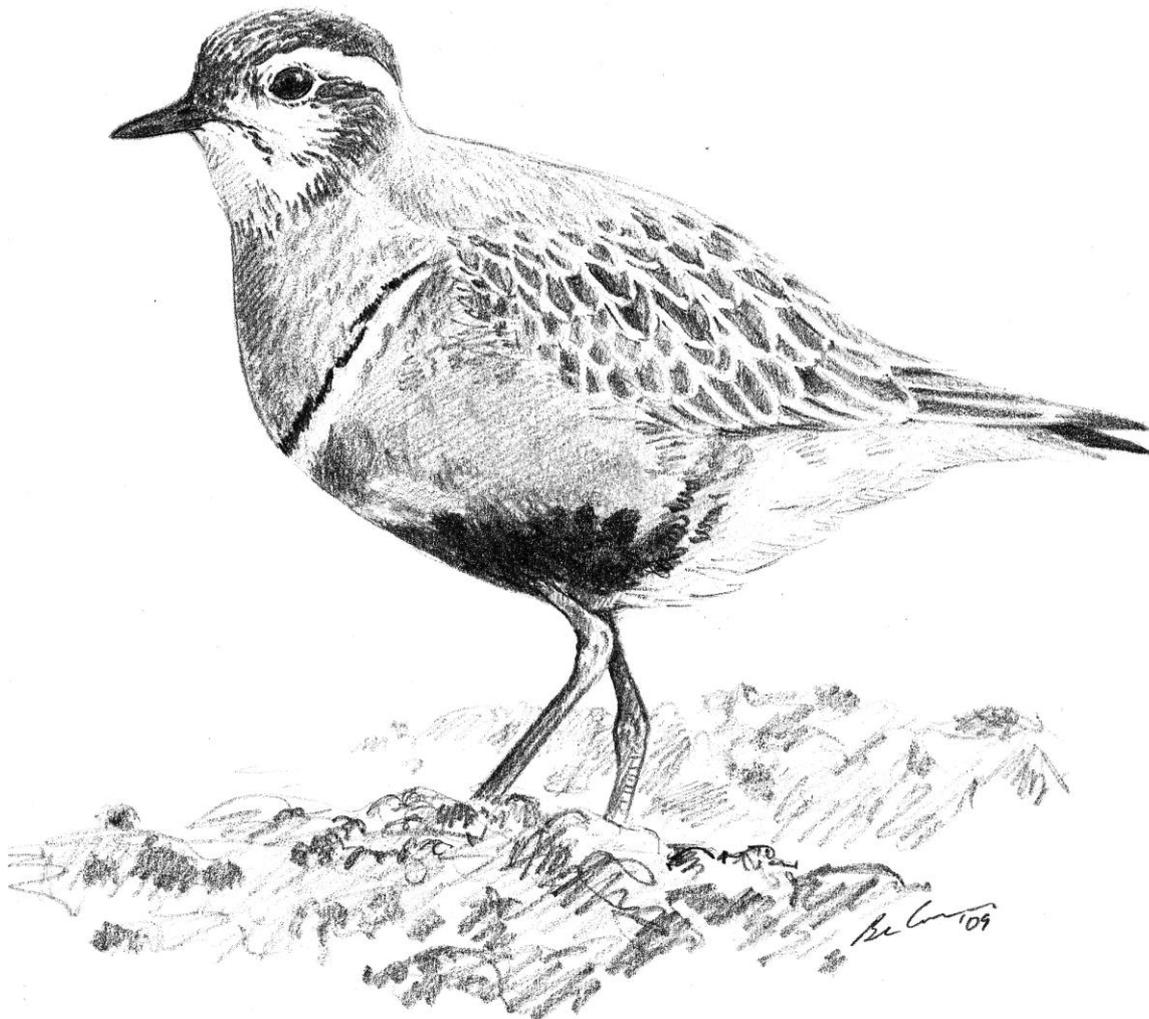
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*Opinions expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily those of the Club.*

## RECENT REPORTS MAY JUNE 2009

These are unchecked reports rather than confirmed records sourced from sightings received by the county recorder or reported on Cambirds (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cambirds/>).

*Dotterel by Ben Green*



During May and June there was an intriguing series of records involving **Black-necked Grebe**. One was seen at Colne Fen on May 3rd, and remained there until early June at least, occasionally visiting Ouse Fen and Earith GP. One was also seen at Paxton Pits on May 4th and this was followed by a pair here from May 31st into June, before this same pair probably relocated to Colne Fen and joined the long-stayer from June 6th to 8th at least. Another single was seen at Ferry Meadows on May 18th.

An adult **Gannet** seen heading north-west over Peterborough city centre on May 15th must have made the observer look twice. **Great Bittern** were recorded from 4 sites during the month, most involving males heard booming. Two adult **Spoonbill** arrived at Ouse Washes on May 17th, with both still the following day, and one on 19th. With several, large and ambitious plans for fenland restoration taking shape is it too fanciful to think that this species could return as a breeder within the county one day? Certainly the abundance of wetlands habitats in the county has proved good for Herons during the last few years, and this was further re-enforced when a splendid **Squacco Heron** was found - the third county record in just 11 years. This year's bird, a first-summer, showed well at Wicken Fen from May 24th to June 14th, and continuing the southern heron theme, 2 **Cattle Egret** were located on the Nene Washes on May 6th. Amazingly, the following day, a third was found, and was soon joined by the original two. All three remained until May 9th, with one seen again on the 11th. The once rare **Little Egret** continues to enjoy its status as a resident species in the county, with peak counts of 29 at Nene Washes on June 14th, 20 at Wicken Fen on May 20th and 14 at Ouse Fen on June 14th – despite these numbers confirmation of breeding within the county remains a rare treat. Unfortunately the rarest southern wanderer may have slipped through the net, as two probable **Black Stork** over Ely on May 24th were, frustratingly, not seen through optics as the observer was involved in a game of cricket at the time!

Wildfowl highlights included the annual summering of a couple of **Whooper Swan**, both at Nene and Ouse Washes, there were also a few small groups of **Barnacle Geese** around. **Egyptian Geese** were found to have bred at one site, and this news prompted one observer to remember that he had seen a pair with young (at another site) in 2008 – this species is still only an occasional breeder in the county, but

small numbers were noted summering at a couple of sites. There were 5 **Ruddy Shelduck** reported at Needingworth on June 1st and a single at Ferry Meadows on 29th. Ruddy Shelduck may follow in the waddling footsteps of Egyptian Geese and establish themselves, probably from self sustaining populations in Europe, as a more regular sight on a day out birding.

During the period small numbers of **Teal**, **Wigeon**, **Shoveler** and **Pochard** were noted at various sites and any further evidence of breeding is always welcomed. The peak count of **Pintail** was 3 at Nene Washes on May 2nd, with singles at three other sites. **Garganey** were seen at 7 sites, all involving 1-4 birds, except for a female seen with 10 young. A pair of **Red-crested Pochard** were resident at Paxton Pits throughout, and joined by a spare male on May 24th, a pair were also seen at Maxey GP on May 26th. **Ruddy Duck** have now become something of a rarity in the county, due in no small part to control measures by DEFRA - with sightings from just two sites during the month.

Rare raptors included three reports of **Honey Buzzard**, with singles over Milton on May 9th, St. Ives on May 16th and Newham on June 28th. Even more interesting was the unconfirmed report of a **Black Kite** at Wicken Fen on May 24th. **Red Kite** were seen in ones and twos at numerous sites with confirmed breeding at some of these. This species can become incredibly elusive during the breeding season leading to under recording of potential breeders. Britain's rarest breeding raptor, **Montagu's Harrier**, was reported from Earith on May 3rd and a male at Nene Washes on May 11th. There were just two reports of **Osprey**, one at Grafham Water from June 7th to 9th, and over Kingfishers Bridge on June 11th.

In what was a good spring nationally for the dry-lipped partridge, Cambridgeshire's share of **Quail** included 12 calling males from 8 sites, all arriving from late-May onwards. Given the huge areas of suitable arable across the county there are probably more waiting to be found. Other secretive but distinctive callers included up to 16 male **Corncrake** at the Nene Washes and 2 **Spotted Crake** here too.

Mirroring records in 2008, a pair of **Crane** remained resident in the county. Other wandering birds were seen over Godmanchester on May 2nd, four (a county

record count) flew north-east over Little Paxton on May 15th, and were followed by 2 over Wicken Fen at 11.25am on May 31st, and possibly the same two at Paxton Pits at 7pm on the same day.

**Avocet** numbers were down from those present in March and April, as birds dispersed to breeding sites during May, but 31 were on the Cam Washes again by June 23rd. **Stone Curlew** were recorded at two sites during the period. A splendid group of ten **Dotterel** were present near Whittlesey from May 9th to 13th. These popular birds were well watched and will hopefully renew inspiration to search for spring trips of this mountain plover. There have been far fewer records recently than in the past and many would be Dotterel finders were losing faith in the reliability of the Fenland fields as a stopover for the species.

**Temminck's Stint** were found at Fen Drayton Lakes on May 13th (being joined by a second bird from 14th to 15th) and Maxey GP on May 15th, another was reported from Fen Drayton Lakes on 21st. **Curlew Sandpiper** were recorded at Fen Drayton Lakes on May 13th, and 2 at Ouse Washes on May 16th – unusually, no **Little Stint** were reported this spring. **Wood Sandpiper** were noted on north-bound migration from May 8th to 17th, with 1-2 birds at Sutton Gault, Woodwalton Fen, Cam Washes and Fen Drayton. Return migration started as early as May 31st, with birds at Paxton Pits (including 5 on June 26th), Buckden GP, Maxey GP and Wicken Fen.

Single reports were logged for **Mediterranean Gull** at Ouse Washes on May 2nd, and **Iceland Gull** at Tanholt GP on the same date. **Little Gull** were in short supply, with 4 reports from 2 sites. Terns enjoyed a better showing, including a **Sandwich Tern** over Cambridge on May 3rd, 2 at Kingfishers Bridge on May 10th and 2 at Grafham Water on June 27th, and 2 **Little Tern** at Ferry Meadows on May 13th and one at Fen Drayton Lakes on the 14th. May 13th saw a strong movement of **Arctic Tern** and **Black Tern**, with 38 of the former through Fen Drayton Lakes and 56 of the latter at Grafham Water.

Unusual near-passerines included a **Hoopoe** briefly at Pidley on May 9th, and a **Wryneck** at Paxton Pits on May 11th (found at the same spot as one in May 2008!).

Passerine highlights included a late **Tree Pipit** at Ouse Fen on May 31st, and a female **Blue-headed Wagtail** apparently paired to a **Yellow Wagtail** near Melbourn. A flurry of **Black Redstart** sightings in March and April may have led to the successful breeding of one pair, which raised two young. And another male was holding territory elsewhere in the county. An exceptional breeder, the presence of 3 pairs of **Stonechat** with young, at 3 different sites, is hopefully an indication that the species will prosper in future years. A singing **Firecrest** paid a brief visit to Witcham on the unusual date of May 24th, and an even rarer sound was that of singing **Golden Oriole**, heard briefly at two sites in May – sadly, despite searching, the birds were not relocated on subsequent dates. A **Fieldfare** at Woodwalton Fen on May 13th was a late wintering individual or maybe a migrating Scandinavian bird caught up in the easterly air flow at the time, the latest county record was on May 24th 1980 at the Ouse Washes.

Reports of notable breeding species included at least 3 pairs of **Bearded Tit**, 30 or so reeling **Grasshopper Warbler**, 24 singing **Cetti's Warbler**, 11 pairs of **Spotted Flycatcher** and over 60 singing **Corn Bunting**. Several late reports of **Lesser Redpoll** and **Siskin** suggest breeding may have occurred in the county during the summer and juveniles of the latter were seen at Gamlingay on June 24th.

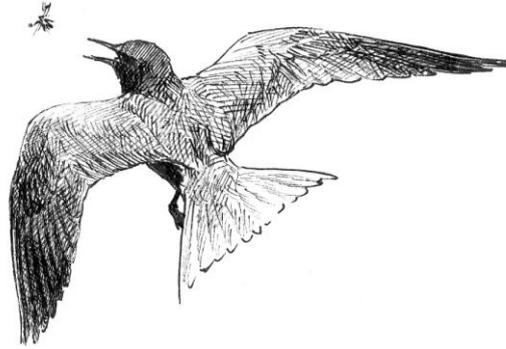
Exotica included a roving **Bar-headed Goose**, a **Green Budgerigar** feeding on aphids in a Stretham sycamore, a **Senegal Parrot** residing in Barway and the assemblage of **Muscovy Duck** and Geese at Ely riverside continue to be accompanied by a small race **Canada Goose** and **Black Swan**.

The Recent Reports were compiled and written by Mark Hawkes

**Contributors:** Colin Addington, Louise Bacon, Rowena Baxter, Elisabeth Charman, Ade Cooper, Steve Cooper, Robin Cox, Mike Foley, Stephen Hartley, Kevin Harris, Mark Hawkes, Fred Heath, Peter Herkenrath, Jonathan Hook, Bob Humphrey, Michael Jennings, Andrew Knights, John Le Gassick, Alex Lees, Stuart & Rita Lingard, Tony Mallyon, Owen & Monica Marks, Tony Martin, Mark Missin, Darren Oakley-Martin, John Parslow, Rob Partridge, Michael Price, Tony Roberts, Clive Sinclair, Nigel Spowell, Jonathan Taylor, Chris Thorne, Jamie Wells,

# A Closer Look – Black Terns May 2009

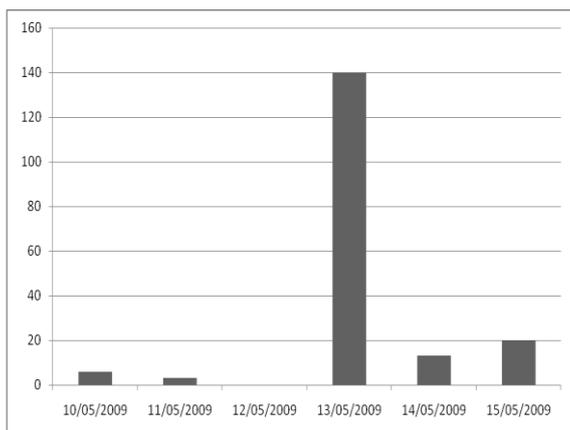
*Duncan Poyser*



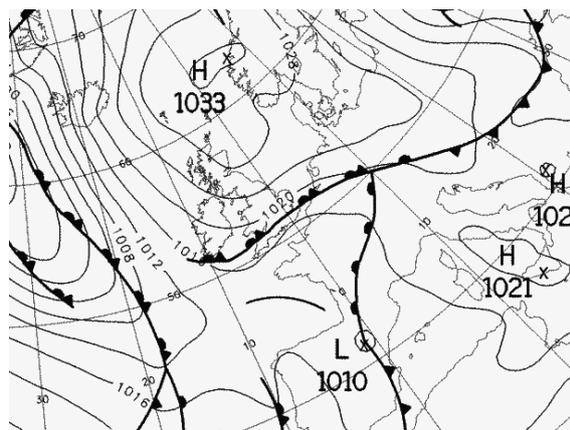
During mid-May weather conditions were classic for producing a strong passage of Black Terns through the county. Although there had been a sprinkling of birds the weather had looked reasonable for Black Tern movement during much of early May. A predominantly easterly airflow was in place for much of that time although no significant numbers of Black Tern had been found. By the 12th the settling of high pressure systems over south eastern and central Europe and another centred north west of Scandinavia set up an easterly airflow that could drift migrating Black Terns towards UK shores. Two other variables also need to be in place to produce good numbers of Black Terns. Firstly there needs to be birds actively migrating towards breeding areas (from late April through May). Secondly conditions on this side of the North Sea need to “push” birds down as they often migrate at altitudes where they remain unseen by even the most eagle eyed birder.

The conditions on the 13th of May had both the easterly air flow and the muggy, overcast and thunderous conditions over Cambridgeshire to make it a very good Black Tern day. In a national context the county, along with coastal Norfolk, had the lion’s share of double figure counts. It is assumed that the Terns broadly follow the Ouse and Nene, from The Wash or dropping into the “valley” through overland flight. This flight path naturally leads birds to the open water at sites such as Grafham Water, Fen Drayton Lakes and Ferry Meadows. Other notable species that migrate to the east of the UK were found in the county on the 13th and included Temminck’s Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, some Arctic Tern passage and a Fieldfare. Their occurrence is very likely to be as a result of the weather conditions.

*Number of Black Terns reported daily in Cambridgeshire May 2009*



*Surface pressure over Europe May 13th 2009*



May 12th had also had similar conditions but there were no Black Terns recorded in the county. You can be sure though, that further east, in the Netherlands maybe or Germany that day, the birds that made it to Cambridgeshire on the 13th were drifting eastwards. When meeting the low cloud and sporadic drizzle that predominated over the county the migrating Black Terns descended from their high altitude flight to be found hawking insects over most stretches of open water in Cambridgeshire, taking the opportunity to refuel before re-orienting themselves back to mainland Europe to find a marsh and a mate and to get on with the all important act of breeding.

# The RSPB & Farmland Birds in Eastern England

*Simon Tonkin – Regional RSPB Farmland Conservation Officer*

The RSPB as well as other conservation organisations has highlighted the need for action to ensure farmland bird populations are recovered and alarming continued declines are halted. The Governments two-tiered Environmental Stewardship Schemes could provide much needed resources for farmland birds right here in Eastern England.

Farmland birds are in decline, which is a fact not to be ignored - For this reason we require urgent action to safeguard and enhance these populations. As an example, we have lost over half of our Skylarks in the last 30 years nationally and also witnessed deeply concerning declines of once common birds like the Corn Bunting.

It is important to ensure the future of farmland birds as an indicator of other biodiversity - the ecological equivalent of the FTSE 100. The RSPB's own arable farm, here in Eastern England is a clear demonstration to how that can be achieved, whilst raising crop yields and also doubling farmland bird populations.

RSPB's work with farmers throughout the region demonstrates what we can achieve by working together – ultimately it is farmers who are the only solution to the perennial problem of farmland bird declines, RSPB in the region are here to help farmers turn these declines around.

The RSPB are:

- Providing free advice and full support with completion of applications of both tiers of Environmental Stewardship Schemes to help farmland birds. As an example from April 08 until March 09, the RSPB has delivered scheme completion and advice on 25,264.31ha of land that is now delivering optimal habitat management for high priority farmland bird species in key areas.
- Identifying the Cambridgeshire Fens is one of the top 3 'Arable Species Assemblages' within England, containing important populations of Turtle Dove, Tree Sparrow, Grey Partridge, Corn Bunting, Lapwing and Yellow Wagtail. We have, through Natural England's 2010 Countdown to biodiversity award employed a dedicated farmland bird advisor, Niki Williamson, to work throughout the Cambridgeshire Fens assisting farmers fully to help farmland birds.
- Promoting the RSPB's Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project provides free farmland bird surveys to farmers throughout the region, with a minimum of 30 of them annually within the high priority area of the Cambridgeshire Fens. This also allows the RSPB to follow-up these surveys with free informed advice, leading to improved action on farms for farmland birds.
- Creating demonstration farms have been set-up throughout the region, in particular within the Cambridgeshire Fens. These demonstrate farmland bird conservation and positive management - Farms are now being used by RSPB and partner organisations to demonstrate good practice to farmers.
- Holding frequent farm events together with Natural England to promote farmland bird conservation and management.
- Working together with Natural England developed a farmland bird themed area to incorporate the Cambridgeshire Fens. This will enable farmers, who have 3 or more of the 6 range restricted farmland bird species, to enter the Higher Level Scheme.
- Involved in frequent agricultural policy advocacy; providing input into issues such as set-aside, bio-fuels, food security, advice provision, agri-environment schemes and the farmland bird indicator, at both regional and national level

What can you do to help:

- Forward farmers contacts to the RSPB's regional farmland bird team
- Let farmers and others know what we are doing to try and reverse farmland bird declines
- Assist with the RSPB's Volunteer & Farmer Alliance project by surveying a local farm
- Support the RSPB's regional Farmland Bird team through membership of the society.

# Farmland bird fieldwork – a surveyor's perspective

*Vince Lea*

Is it possible to go birdwatching and get paid for it? To pinch a recent phrase, yes we can! Some people go in for leading tour groups to exotic holiday destinations, others may come up with expedition ideas for which they manage to raise sponsorship or there are those who undertake research projects funded by government or charities such as the RSPB. Somewhere below all these sits the humble fieldworker, employed on a casual contract basis to collect data for ornithologists interested in answering big questions requiring lots of information. In the last couple of years, I have worked as such on a couple of BTO projects investigating the plight of farmland birds.

In 2008 I had my first contract with the BTO, working on a project looking at the impact of the Entry Level Scheme. The ELS is a simple government funded scheme in which farmers are provided with a small subsidy to encourage the incorporation of features designed to improve farmland habitats. These measures are chosen by the farmer from a menu of options, such as sowing a grass strip around the edge of an arable field or leaving longer intervals between hedge cutting operations.

One aim of the ELS was to reverse the declines in birds of the wider countryside, such as Yellowhammer, Skylark and Bullfinch. The idea was that if sufficient farmers would take up the options then improvement would be seen across the land – In theory, improved bird populations on farms using ELS would spread out to the areas not in the scheme. To test this, the BTO will analyse Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data from the period at the start of the ELS (2005) and for the next 6 years of the scheme. BBS data are collected on random 1km squares, by walking 2 roughly parallel 1km routes in the square, on two occasions during the spring. All birds seen & heard during the transect are counted in distance bands to give an index of bird populations for the square which can be compared over time. The indices from all squares on farmland habitat contribute to the 'Farmland Bird Index' showing the overall status of a group of birds associated with the habitat.

In order to get sufficient data on some of the less frequently encountered farmland birds such as Lapwing, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow, the BTO statisticians decided an additional tranche of BBS squares were required, above those undertaken by the volunteers who tend to do one or two squares each; in fact, they worked out that if 600 extra squares were surveyed in 2005, followed by repeat visits in 2008 and 2011 this would give sufficient trend data to determine which species benefited from the ELS, and which did not. These squares were chosen at random as for the usual BBS square allocation, except that any without farmland were rejected.

My role in the project last year was to survey about 50 BBS squares during the spring, covering squares that had been initiated in 2005 but where the original fieldworker was no longer able to repeat the surveys. I inherited two different surveyor's sets of squares, one lot were within striking distance of home, being in south-east Cambridgeshire and bordering areas of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, while the others were located across north Norfolk. All being well, I hope to return to these squares in 2011 to see if the birds have increased at all. Not having done the original 2005 surveys I can't say whether there has been any effect from the ELS. Being assigned random 1km squares means visiting areas that one would never have considered going birdwatching, and in many cases where one would really rather not go birdwatching again, but some of the locations were real gems, with some good birds and lovely countryside to enjoy.

My overriding memory of the project is one of quite high levels of exhaustion, and a severe reduction to my usual spring routines such as studying the nesting birds in the garden and local patch, butterfly watching or impromptu migrant hunting sessions. A typical day would start with a 40+ mile drive at first light. Arriving at the first site and starting a transect, each 1km route would take about 30-45 minutes. With additional time getting from the end of route 1 to the start of route 2, then further walking back to the car, a couple of hours fieldwork would be followed by a second breakfast, before moving on to the next square. The second square would take another couple of hours. Careful planning could produce a schedule that could arrange squares into groups that could be done in a day session.

In the early visits, when first light is fairly late, 2 squares might be the maximum surveying that could be achieved except where squares were very close together and had good footpath access. Later on,

as the days lengthened into May and early June, it would often be possible to get 3 squares done in a morning. The BBS rules require surveys to be done in the mornings when bird activity, particularly song, is at its most intense.

After the survey work, the other job of the day in the early period would usually be arranging the access for further squares – contacting farmers for permission to visit their land, often in person and sometimes requiring considerable detective work to find the landowner. Other squares with routes on public rights of way might still need checking for parking arrangements and so on. A lot of time was also spent on the phone, contacting landowners or for Health and Safety – being part of a team of lone fieldworkers, it is considered important for everyone to check in at the end of each survey square, to confirm that we hadn't fallen under a tractor or succumbed to some other mishap. I was paid a smidgen extra to receive the calls of 5 other fieldworkers, as well as making my own H&S calls to the office. After a lunch break I'd drive home, calling any additional farmers in the evening if they weren't around during the day. For the North Norfolk area I tended to use B&B accommodation and do 2 or 3 days in a row to reduce the driving.

Later in the season the non-survey time was taken up by form filling, with lots of information to transpose from the field sheets onto data sheets. These data sheets then had to be typed into spreadsheets for the BTO to analyse. I got very familiar with the 2-letter BTO codes for common birds! Despite being a non-listing birder I did get a bit obsessive about ticking off new codes. I didn't expect to find any species I hadn't seen before but there was an urge to get new codes on my list! One day I came across a couple of Ring Ouzels in a Norfolk square, but disastrously they were on the walk between transect routes so I had no cause to put them on my survey form, which by my strict rules means that RZ never got on my list. I did get one sort of 'lifer' on a couple of squares – feral populations of Helmeted Guineafowl (FW). One of my Norfolk squares was in the farmland that backs onto Snettisham RSPB reserve, where my last 2-letter code was ticked in June – MU. Have a guess! As well as the bird data, there were habitat data to collect and record – crop types, hedge characters and so on, plus counts of mammals. There were about 2 weeks of solid typing at the end of the project period.

So what were the birds like? I have already mentioned a few of the good birds, but I would say that for every exciting square there would be two squares of rather limited interest, although only a couple of squares were really dire. The worst by far was one of the Cambridgeshire ones, in deepest Newmarket horse territory. It seems that racehorses have fences not hedges, have their grass kept nice and short by mowing so they eat plenty of formulated food, and any trees are pruned at the bottom to create 'lollipops' with no understorey for nesting. Consequently the square had a few miserable Rooks, Jackdaws and Meadow Pipits with a just a little bit of diversity along the village edge.

One of the best squares was in Breckland, where the farmer was very keen on providing good conditions for birds. On my early visit I had singing Woodlarks as well as breeding Lapwing, Oystercatcher and nearby, but not on the survey route, Stone Curlew. A post-breeding group of these were seen on the late visit and also a couple of Crossbills. Some of the Norfolk squares were real barley-baron territory, with one having just 3 fields occupying the whole square, divided by concrete tracks and no hedges, however this site was near the broads so drifting Marsh Harrier & Barn Owl were seen, and Yellow Wagtail was breeding. One of the top Norfolk squares ran along the road south of Titchwell RSPB, and up the hill into the farmland. Corn Buntings and Grey Partridge were seen on the farmland but my BTO code list got a huge boost when birds in the most distant category included Black-tailed Godwit, Avocet and other waders, various duck and any other species obvious enough to identify at 500m!

A pleasing aspect of the survey was seeing sites with breeding waders – not many, but areas with spring crops like sugar beet and peas usually had a few Lapwing, while one area of wet grazing in Suffolk had Redshank as well. Associated with these species there would sometimes be Curlew (Breck edge), Oystercatcher and Shelduck. One memorable farm near Fakenham had lots of Lapwing, Oystercatcher and Grey Partridge including one rather tasty roadside casualty. Also pleasing was the frequency of Barn Owl and Marsh Harrier, while Little Egret seemed to come at about one or two a week and of course I had a few Red Kites, including a pair in South-East Cambridgeshire which was a new breeding site. Fenland near Isleham was really good for Corn

Bunting and Grey Partridge. On my late visit I had 2 calling Quail – I'd already got Q. on my list from a square in Suffolk so this was just a Cambs tick!

Squares in the south-east of our county often included bits of village and most of these had either or both Spotted Flycatcher and Turtle Dove, while another set of squares in Norfolk had sufficient woodland element for Marsh Tit, Treecreeper and Nuthatch to be reasonably frequent. On the downside, I didn't get a single record of Tree Sparrow, and House Sparrow and Starling were fairly infrequent as well. Being out in the field nearly every day through spring, one would expect to come across various passage migrants – Ring Ouzel were the highlight I guess, but Wheatear and Whinchat often brightened up a day. Some of my H&S phone correspondents reported other goodies like Rough-legged Buzzard, Black Redstart and I think that everyone I was in touch with managed at least one Quail.

So at the end of the season, after typing all my data into the computer, burning a CD and handing in a box full of paperwork to the boss at Thetford, my contract came to an end and I collapsed in a heap. What had I learned? Skylarks and Yellowhammers, the archetypal farmland birds, were certainly not as common as they should be, based on the densities that are possible for these species where they are catered for. I think there was just one site where Skylarks have achieved an equal density to those before the big decline.

My identification skills have certainly got sharper, with calls in particular detected at greater distance and on shorter bursts. I also learned to recognise behavioural movements such as the way Reed Buntings disappear into crops. I was able to discuss the issue of farmland birds with lots of farmers across East Anglia, and can report that the vast majority of them attribute the blame for the decline to 2 factors: Magpie and Sparrowhawk. This year I undertook another contract with the BTO, and had the same story from a different set of farmers, but oddly enough the BTO still insist on doing actual research to find the cause of declines rather than just asking farmers for their opinion! I shall report on my 2009 fieldwork in a future bulletin.



# Swifts on a House

*Dick Newell*

As I write this, on a warm summer's morning, Swifts are screaming outside the kitchen door, up to 16 at a time charging around the house; their exuberance is quite uplifting. By the time you read this, they will have gone at the end of July, apart from, maybe, a late breeder that could hang on into August. It is then a nine months wait before they return.

We have 4 breeding pairs in nest-boxes on the house, and at least 3 additional pairs have taken up residence this year. Although these prospectors will build a nest, they almost certainly will not breed, but we would hope to have 7 breeding pairs next year when they return in May.

It is a privilege to have Swifts breeding so near, and even more of a privilege to watch them in their nest-box on a web cam. These supreme fliers, with their spectacular aerial displays outside, are the same gentle, affectionate lovebirds that one sees on the nest. One is told not to anthropomorphise, but when one sees a Swift with its wing sheltering its mate, while the two ardently preen each other, it is hard not to.

Was it just luck that Swifts chose our house to breed? In the first instance it was. It all started in 2002, when a pair of Swifts took interest in a hole in the house. One morning, I came out and a Swift was dangling outside, with one wing wedged in the brickwork. A quick shin up a ladder, and I managed to extract it, and to my relief, it flew off successfully.

I felt sure the space in the brickwork was too small so I quickly made a pair of nest-boxes erected near the hole. They took no notice in 2002, but they returned in 2003 when I once saw them enter one of the boxes, but they settled in the hole in the brickwork. I decided that the boxes were also too small, and so started a rather more ambitious project involving the installation of 19 boxes, in 3 cabinets on the northwest corner of the house, ready for 2004. I also installed a speaker on the side of one of the cabinets to play a CD of Swift calls. Immediately, when the birds returned, a pair took up residence in one of the cabinets, quite probably the same pair that struggled with the hole in the brickwork; if so, they would be at least 9 years old this year, as they are still here.

When establishing a new colony, the first pair is the hardest to get. Swifts have their own idea of what a nest entrance looks like, which they probably learn by watching other Swifts. It doesn't matter how obvious the entrance seems to be, if it does not match a Swift's model of an entrance, they can take an inordinate amount of time to find it. However, a Swift CD can be highly effective in drumming up interest, and is key to establishing a new colony.

After the first pair, progress was steady. In 2005, they returned to breed, and a second, non-breeding pair occupied a box in a second cabinet, building a nest of thistledown. In 2006, both pairs bred, but there were no new recruits. In 2007, the same two pairs bred again and a third pair occupied a third cabinet. One of the highlights of 2007 was seeing a fledgling leave the nest. The 2nd pair were late breeders, and there were still chicks calling in the box when the adults seemed to disappear on about 6th August. Assuming they were coming in after dark, I stayed out late on the 9th. It was about 9.30pm, and fairly gloomy, but instead of seeing an adult return, a fledgling Swift fell out of the box, flapping wildly, and shot up into the heavens. I was gob smacked; why was this bird fledging at night? But it makes sense, it has a whole night to practise flying before facing a world with predators the following day.

We were beginning to wonder if we would ever get two pairs in one cabinet. However, in 2008, with 3 breeding pairs, a 4th pair of non-breeders joined the second pair.

The 4th pair built a nest of Corsican Pine needles; a more uncomfortable nesting material one cannot imagine, but, if it is blowing in the wind, Swifts will use it as nesting material. 2008 seemed to be a poor year for Swifts with very little screaming activity, the breeding birds just got on with raising their young, and left, as usual, at the end of July.

In early 2009, Swift was listed as amber, a species of medium conservation concern; this seems to have inspired Swifts to put in more effort this year. A number of people have reported more activity around the colonies, and this is certainly the case here. Could it be that Swifts, displaced from their nest sites, are now concentrating on the declining number of available sites that are left; have we had an influx of continental birds or is it just that the weather in 2009 is more conducive to screaming displays than in 2008?

Despite this, early indications from Birdtrack (BTO/RSPB/BWI) seem to show yet another decline in numbers in 2009. According to the RSPB, we have lost around half of our Swifts in the last 10 years.

Activity around our colony this year has been the best ever, with regular screaming parties every day and new birds entering many previously unoccupied boxes. It remains to be seen just how many new pairs eventually settle, as individual birds will explore a number of alternatives before deciding on where to breed.

Building a new Swift colony requires patience and perseverance. One should regard it as a 3 to 5 year project, and even then there is no guarantee of success. First one needs a suitable place to put boxes. It should be a minimum of 4 metres high, preferably 5 or higher and in a location that is not exposed to the mid-day and afternoon sun. There should be a clear flyway in front. If the location is exposed to the rain, then a waterproof box is to be preferred, untreated wooden ones may deteriorate. North facing walls under the eaves are ideal. Having breeding Swifts in the vicinity is more likely to lead to a quicker result. Playing the Swift CD is essential, as often and as loud as you and the neighbours can bear, but especially when there are Swifts around. The nearer the speakers are to the entrances, the better, but it is also effective when placed in a window or on the ground beneath the boxes. There seems to be no clear preference by Swifts for size or shape of Swift boxes. Probably larger is better. Entrances need to be restricted to 30mm x (65-80)mm to keep Starlings out and are normally placed near the floor of the box, though higher entrances are also used, in which case it is imperative that the inside of the box is rough to enable them to climb out. Swifts invariably use a concave nest platform when provided, it seems they prefer it.



Figure 1: Examples of Swift boxes; a cabinet of 9 boxes, a recycled water-pipe, a soffit hole, a Dutch Zeist box and a Swift brick

Starting a Swift colony is not for the faint hearted, but once started, it can become an obsession. Bob Tonks of Milton installed two homemade boxes on the back of his house in 2007. Often, when he went out, he would leave the CD playing, and again when he returned. When he saw a Swift flying over, he would switch the CD on. Through the whole of summer 2007 and 2008 he never saw a Swift come near the house. He soldiered on this year; then, he received a call from a neighbour who had earlier seen a Swift enter one of his boxes. Bob rushed out, and soon witnessed 2 Swifts entering one of his boxes, (followed by a Red Kite flying over!). He not only has his first pair, and a new bird for his garden list, he regularly has 10 low screamers charging around his garden. These displays are the reward that makes the effort worthwhile.

Swifts depend upon buildings for their nest-sites, and every time a roof with Swifts is renovated, that is the end of another colony. Although bad things may be happening in Africa, and insect numbers are down in the UK, one of the main causes of the decline in Swift numbers is thought to be loss of nest-sites.

In Eastern North America, a large proportion of the population of Purple Martins and Eastern Bluebirds is in nest sites deliberately provided for them (apparently 1 million homes have Purple Martin nest-boxes in their back yard). The Common Swift will end up in the same situation. It is essential that every effort is made to preserve existing nest-sites when roofs are renovated or insulated, to install Swift bricks in new developments, and then, as a last resort, to install nest-boxes on the outside of buildings. Architects should be encouraged to make an attractive feature by designing nesting places into their buildings.

Should any members feel inspired to have a go at starting a Swift colony then there is plenty of help and advice around e.g. see <http://www.swift-conservation.org/> or call Jake Allsop or me.

**Stop Press:** At the time of going to print, the Landbeach colony has grown to 9 pairs.

## **The Cambridgeshire & BTO National Atlases, 2008-2011.**

*Louise Bacon and Peter Herkenrath*

As many of you are aware, many birders and, it has to be said, many non-birders who are keen to learn more, have been involved in this significant survey of the whole county over the past year and a half. So far, we have had two breeding and winter seasons, and in general, things are well on track.

**What are we doing?** The atlas project has two main elements: Timed tetrad visits (TTVs) - these are structured visits of one or two hours in length to a block of land 2km x 2km (tetrad), with counts and determination of breeding – and Roving records, which are more ad-hoc records, often of sightings with a breeding significance, from anywhere.

**Why?** The British Isles have had two previous atlases, 1968-72 and 1988-92 for breeding birds, and one previous winter atlas. These have all been co-ordinated by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and other partner organisations, and have mapped the distributions and any changes in the fortunes of our avifauna.

As a county, we have also organised atlases (separately for “Old” Cambs and Huntingdonshire & Peterborough) roughly in timing with the last national atlas period. This data sets a baseline against which we can now, 20 or more years on, compare the current status and populations of birds across the whole county. These changes should inform us about what we have gained and, obviously, what we have lost.

At the end of this, we intend to produce a new county atlas, hopefully providing comprehensive information on distribution, possibly on population sizes, and a comparison with the previous atlas data. The national atlas will include population estimates.

**How is it going?** In terms of national targets set by the BTO, each 10km square needs to have eight tetrads surveyed by the TTV method (there are 25 tetrads in a 10km square and 951 tetrads in the county). Many of our 10km squares meet this standard but more of that later. For our county atlas, we hope to get as comprehensive coverage as possible – it would be nice to think that we could cover all 951 tetrads. However, I am not sure that will quite be achieved – we should all try to do our best.

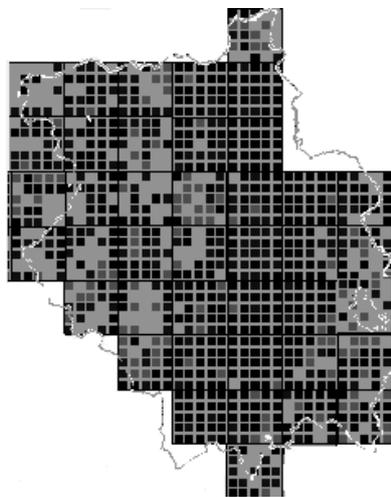
In terms of organisation, the BTO works on a 10km square basis, so whilst we have statistics for most of the county, the 10km squares we cover also have parts of other counties in around the edges, and there are some 10km squares which are administered by adjacent counties (the county with the most land in that 10km square gets to co-ordinate it). However, the statistics for coverage are most probably about right for the county as a whole.

For the 10km squares in Cambridgeshire and in Huntingdonshire & Peterborough (the BTO have two separate “counties” in our county) we have more than 50% of tetrads allocated to observers, which after two seasons out of four is pretty good, and many of these have been surveyed. This is summarised in the table below.

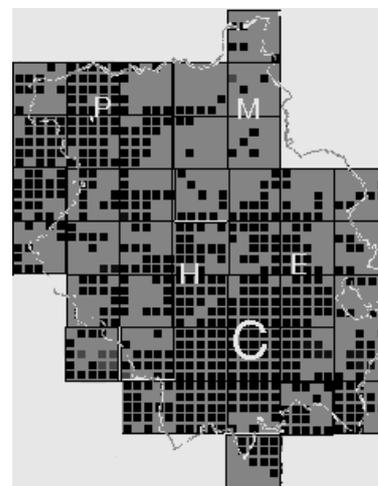
	Tetrads allocated		Tetrads underway/complete		
Cambs	303/525	57.71%	247	81% allocated	47% total
Hunts & P'boro	202/325	62.15%	129	63% allocated	36% total

The count of tetrads underway is based on web submissions – not all of those TTVs recorded on paper will have been included, so hopefully we are nearer 50% coverage than it seems. The difference between tetrads allocated and underway/complete will certainly become smaller over the next weeks as, at the day of writing, we are still in the 2009 breeding recording period.

The coverage is, unsurprisingly, biased towards the centres of our population and towards good birding areas. Out of the 21 10km squares in Cambs, 7 have less than 8 TTVs assigned, and similarly for Hunts, 1 of the 7 10km squares has less than the minimum. Several squares have all tetrads allocated. The



Map showing tetrads with Roving records



Map showing TTVs allocated 2007 -2009

The dark squares represent tetrads where relevant data has been received

C: Cambridge  
E: Ely  
M: March  
H: Huntingdon  
P: Peterborough

Roving records have been sent in for a large proportion of the tetrads in the county. The map above shows near total coverage.

HOWEVER... the dots on the map above may represent a single species recorded with no evidence of breeding, so more can be done even in areas which have records.

The whole effort is administered by the BTO, much data is input on-line, but also paper records are accommodated. The best way to find out if there is an area needing coverage near you is to go to the BTO website – you can look for TTVs without having to register. You can also look up which species have been recorded in a tetrad.

**What next?** We hope to improve the information available on the club's website, including links to the relevant parts of the BTO atlas website to find tetrads, species lists, etc.

There are two obvious strands to where contributors go next – we continue to strive for TTV coverage, especially in the poorly covered areas. Obviously, that is not for all of you, and the one thing that anyone can do is to get a few roving records, especially of confirmed breeding; eg, how often do you see a blackbird carrying food or a house martin going up to its nest whilst out and about – that would constitute a confirmed breeding record. So, by this time next year we hope to be able to report continued excellent coverage of the county, and over the next few bulletins, we will provide you with a few maps of species recorded so far.....

The Atlas project is run by the Research Committee of your Club with help from all of the volunteers involved. We can be contacted by email on [cambsbirdatlas@btinternet.com](mailto:cambsbirdatlas@btinternet.com) or phoning Peter Herkenrath on 01223 276553.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2009

### OUTDOOR MEETINGS

#### Friday 14th August - Barbecue at Fowlmere RSPB Reserve

Barbecue in the picnic area from 7.30pm. Bring your own food to cook. Salad, baps, sauces, soft drinks will be provided – donation towards costs would be welcomed.

We are hoping to arrange a moth trapping session later in the evening. Toilets are available.

Please book by contacting Dick Newell (contact details on back page).

If anyone is interested in a guided walk at 6.30pm, please contact [doug.radford@rspb.org.uk](mailto:doug.radford@rspb.org.uk).

### INDOOR MEETINGS

#### Friday September 11th

#### Eagle's Nest – Birdwatching in Northeast India, a video presentation by Mike Edgecombe

North East India has only in recent years been accessible to visiting birders. The area encompasses the vast flood plain of the mighty Brahmaputra river to the unspoilt forest of the eastern Himalayas. Eagle Nest Wildlife Sanctuary lies embedded in some of the most unspoilt forest of the area. An area hardly explored, it was not surprising that a bird new to science was discovered as recently as 2004. Named after the local Bugun tribe, *Bugun liochicla*, is just one of many superb and rare birds to be found in the region.

Mike Edgecombe lives in Norfolk and has been birding for over 35 years. He has been a council member of the Oriental Bird Club for 9 years. His ambition is not only to see every one of the beautiful Pitta species in the world but also capture them on film!

#### Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve – Special Event

Thursday 12th November 2pm

#### The Secret Lives Of Garden Birds by Dominic Couzens

FPPNR are pleased to invite CBC members to a special event in November at St Neots Priory Centre. An acknowledged expert on bird behaviour, Dominic Couzens is a major contributor to "Birdwatching" magazine and is well known as a natural history author and feature writer. Tickets at £4 are limited to just 120 and are available in advance from the Paxton NR visitor centre or SAE to: Trevor Gunton, 15 St James Rd, Little Paxton, Cambs, PE19 6QW.

### FROM THE BULLETIN EDITOR

You will have noticed in this bulletin a new format to the Recent Reports section. I would like to say a huge thanks to the section writers past and present who trawled through the database to produce the systematic lists for previous bulletins. With a shorter reports section there is now more space for articles, reviews and comment. I hope to utilise this space and continue to produce a vibrant bulletin reflective of Cambridgeshire's fantastic birds, birders and birding. Much of my role involves recruiting volunteers from the club and elsewhere to produce articles. If you do get enjoyment out of writing about bird and county related themes I need as many volunteers as possible to contact me (details on the back page) to discuss ideas for future bulletin content.

*Duncan Poyser*

### FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

We welcome the following new member – Jessica Finch.

*Bruce Martin*

## CLUB CONTACTS

### **Chairman**

#### **Dick Newell**

Old Beach Farm  
Landbeach, Cambridge, CB25 9FD  
Tel: 01223 860400  
Email: dick.newell@googlemail.com

### **Secretary**

#### **John Harding**

3 Cotton's Field, Dry Drayton, CB23 8DG  
Tel: 01954 780777  
Email: johnharding44@googlemail.com

### **Treasurer**

#### **Kevin Harris**

37 Vicarage Meadow, Stow-cum-Quy,  
Cambridge, CB25 9AL  
Tel: 01223 813085  
Email: kevin.harris1@mypostoffice.co.uk

### **County Recorder (Old Cambs)**

#### **Mark Hawkes**

7 Cook Drive, Eynesbury, St. Neots, PE19 2JU  
Tel: 01480 215305  
Email: markhawkes@yahoo.co.uk

### **County Recorder (Hunts)**

#### **John Clark**

7 Westbrook, Hilton, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE18  
9NW  
Tel: 01480 830472  
(No email)

### **Indoor Meetings Secretary**

#### **Vicki Harley**

30 Margett Street, Cottenham, Cambs, CB24  
8QY  
Tel: 01954 250340  
Email: vicki.harley@care4free.net

### **Bulletin Editor**

#### **Duncan Poyser**

14 Bohemond Street, Ely, CB7 4PP  
01353 645908  
Email: hairyfolkster@googlemail.com

### **Other Council Members**

#### **Peter Herkenrath**

19b Pepys Way, Girton, Cambridge, CB3 0PA  
Tel: 01223 276553  
Email: peterherkenrath@yahoo.co.uk

### **Ken Hook**

The Coach House, Scotland Road, Dry Drayton,  
Cambs, CB3 8BX  
Tel: 01954 782407  
Email: kahook@aol.com

### **Research Officer**

#### **Louise Bacon**

236 Wimpole Road, Barton, Cambs, CB3 7AE  
Tel: 01223 263962  
E-mail: louise.bacon2@btinternet.com

### **Membership Secretary**

#### **Bruce Martin**

178 Nuns Way, Cambridge, CB4 2NS  
Tel: 01223 700656  
Email: bruce.s.martin@ntlworld.com

### **Website**

#### **Dick Newell**

Old Beach Farm  
Landbeach, Cambridge, CB25 9FD  
Tel: 01223 860400  
Email: dick.newell@googlemail.com

**The Cambridgeshire Bird Club** exists to promote the conservation of birds and their habitats in the county, identify areas of conservation value and advance the education of the public in the study of birds.

[www.cambridgebirdclub.org.uk](http://www.cambridgebirdclub.org.uk)

### **Birdline number**

Remember that your Cambridgeshire bird sightings can be phoned in free of charge to Birdline East Anglia on 0800 083 0803.

**Please email records to: Mark Hawkes by September 7th**

**Please send records by post to: Louise Bacon by September 7th**

**Next Bulletin due out October 2009, covering July/August 2009**

# GOOD BIRDING!