

# CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB

*Bulletin* No. 406



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

## **RECENT REPORTS SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 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/>).

*Pallid Harrier and Goldfinch by Ben Green*



Grafham Water hosted a trio of scarce Divers and Grebes over the period with a **Black-necked Grebe** on Sep 16th followed by a young **Slavonian Grebe** two days later that remained into November. Finally, and a precursor of the diver fest that was to follow an adult **Great Northern Diver** arrived on Oct 26th. Paxton Pits also produced a **Black-necked Grebe** on Sept 16th and on the 12th an impressive 52 **Little Grebes** were counted at Colne Gravel Pits. The monthly WeBS revealed double figure counts of **Little Grebes** and **Great-crested Grebes** at all the main wetlands in the Ouse valley.

Some periods of strong winds during mid-September saw up to 5 **Gannets** track their way across our skies, mainly in the north and west of the county and surely several more were missed during the movement, an additional bird was reported at Paxton Pits on Oct 6th. A **Fulmar** on Sept 4th alongside a busy A1 junction and a **Manx Shearwater** picked up in a Reach garden on Oct 10th were typical of the quirky places these coastal waifs often end up. Despite some anglers perceptions **Cormorants** were only counted in double figures at a handful of sites and those were all reserves of one kind or other, however Fen Drayton Lakes held a peak of 131 on the 11th Oct WeBS. **Bitterns** were reported from the usual sites including, atypically, a booming bird in early October. At least 2 **Great White Egrets** continued their residency in the county into September at Ouse Fen and then splitting with one at Kingfishers Bridge from Sep 16th – 20th. A single bird was seen at Littleport on 16th Oct.

A striking feature of the period was the national influx of **Glossy Ibis** and Cambridgeshire certainly saw its share of the action. The first remarkable record on Sep 7th, involved 7 together at Chain Corner flushed from the Washes by an even more exotic visitor (more of which later). These birds headed north and despite searching were not seen again for a couple of days when they were picked up flying through at Earith and late in the day found to be roosting overnight at Sutton Gault. This site was favoured for several days until the 17th when they moved along the Washes to Mepal and the flock had disbanded by the 22nd when one was reported. The presence of leg rings on 2 of the birds revealed that they were young birds reared earlier in the year in Spain. Four Ibis seen from the train at Little Thetford on 27th September were likely to be part of the original 7 as was a single, well described by

local fishermen at Grafham Water on Sep 21st. Additionally single, well watched birds were then found at Paxton Pits Oct 1st – 11th and Maxey Gravel Pits intermittently from Oct 8th – 28th.

Wild swans started to trickle back to the Washes with 107 **Whooper Swans** by October 1st. **Bewicks Swans**, however, were still in very short supply by the end of October with no cold snaps in the Baltic or further east to force them westwards in search of food. Amongst the **Greylags** and **Canada Geese** a few wilder candidates were found including 5 **Pink-footed Geese** at Paxton on Sep 14th and another at Wicken at the end of October when a **White-fronted Goose** appeared on the Ouse Washes. Eighteen **Egyptian Geese** at Earith, Westview Marina was an excellent count on Sep 22nd. Wildfowl numbers started to build from the middle of September with 1066 **Wigeon** and 361 **Gadwall** at Fen Drayton Lakes on Sep 20th; however no arrival of **Pintail** was evident with only single figure counts from wetland sites during the period. A few **Garganey** lingered with the last at Grafham on Sep 23rd, mostly females and juveniles they are particularly hard to pick out amongst the eclipse **Teal** which they frequently join at this time of year.

Diving duck peaked in September with 1104 and 1244 **Tufted Ducks** at Grafham Water and Paxton Pits respectively on Sep 20th. **Pochard** remained far lower in number with the peak count of 80 at Ouse Fen on Oct 11th and **Scaup** continued their fluctuating run at Grafham Water with a peak of 3 birds on several dates. A single male **Common Scoter** was on Gunwade Lake, Ferry Meadows on Oct 16th and they were also seen regularly at Grafham Water which must be the most productive inland site in the country for this coastal species. The first **Goldeneye** were reported from early October but were few and far between with a maximum count of 12 birds recorded at Grafham Water on Oct 16th.

There was the usual spread of **Red Kite** records and **Marsh Harriers** were obvious across the fens with young and adult birds ranging far and wide. Eight or more **Marsh Harriers** could be seen roosting at Chain Corner in early September and **Hen Harriers** were represented by four records including 2 on the Washes by late October. The undoubted star rarity of the year, and of the decade for many, was the location of a sub-adult male **Pallid Harrier** on Haddenham Fen

on Sep 6th. The enigmatic vagrant from the eastern steppe showed well, if intermittently, the next day and was enjoyed by many visiting birders. Although seen sporadically over the following days it became much more elusive and wide ranging and was last seen early on the morning of Sep 9th.

With so much attention on the Fen it was not entirely unexpected when the presence of a juvenile **Montagu's Harrier** was confirmed and it was seen several times in the area by a lucky few. Later in the month the same site produced a male **Goshawk** on Sep 26th another was seen at Little Wilbraham Fen next day and one was at Grantchester on Oct 27th. **Buzzards** are now the most frequently reported raptor in the county with counts of 5-7 regular and several double figure counts were recorded. With many eyes looking skywards **Merlins**, **Peregrines** and **Hobbies** were all recorded on Haddenham Fen during the 'harrier week' and were also widely reported across the county. A **Peregrine** was observed chasing a **Hobby** and 2 **Kestrels** at Ouse Fen on Sep 25th.

Notable gamebird records included 5 double figure counts of **Grey Partridges** and a **Quail** flushed near Soham on Sep 29th. The **Spotted Crane** at Grafham Wter was last seen on Sep 4th and the seemingly resident pair of **Cranes** briefly increased to 5 on Sep 13th. Three **Cranes** on the Ouse Washes two days later were probably the additional birds, which later settled on the Welney side of the county border. Away from the Washes single birds were seen in flight near Earith on Sep 9th and Ely on Oct 31st.

A frequent comment heard from inland birders this autumn was 'There are no waders about'. This wasn't strictly true but 2009 will not go down as anything but a mediocre year for wading bird passage. Despite the poor form there were highlights and a juvenile **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** at Paxton Pits from Oct 4th – 6th was an excellent autumnal find as was a very smart adult **Grey Phalarope** at Grafham Water also found on the 4th Oct. A few **Pectoral Sandpipers** also made their way through the county and a juvenile at Fowlmere on Sep 12th was the first record at the site and quite unexpected. Ouse Fen has a good track record for producing rare and scarce waders and **Pectoral Sandpipers** were recorded there on Sep 25th and Oct 3rd.

As breeding **Redshanks**, **Lapwings**, and **Snipe** disperse for the post breeding

accumulations can be expected in suitable habitats. **Lapwings** and **Golden Plovers** are often obvious arrivals to arable fields and washlands often returning to favoured areas year after year. Trumpington, Stretham, Ouse Fen, Maxey and Paxton Pits are such favoured areas and attracted flocks of over 1000 **Golden Plovers** and up to 500 **Lapwings**. At Ouse Fen a **Dotterel** joined the winter plover flock briefly on Oct 28th and a **Pacific Golden Plover** was reported briefly at Stretham on Oct 11th. **Snipe** counts were highest on the mid October WeBS counts at the Ouse Washes (61), Isleham Water Meadows (46) and Ouse Fen (49). The latter site also attracted **Jack Snipe** in October with 5 birds counted; a couple were also at Grafham Water at the beginning of the month.

**Redshanks** were either very under recorded or most had moved out to other wintering areas as there were no double figure counts received with just odd birds at Ouse Fen, Ouse Washes, Fen Drayton Lakes and Kingfishers Bridge. The peak numbers were up to 8 at Isleham Water Meadows. **Greenshank**, although widely recorded throughout the period, were in low numbers with several sites recording peaks of 3 or 4 birds. **Common Sandpipers** were also thin on the ground with peaks of 4 at Grafham Water and Paxton Pits. A feature of many late summer visits to wetland sites is the excitable 'tleeu wit wit' call of a **Green Sandpiper**, ever anxious, as they propel themselves skywards. Most wet areas will attract them and wintering birds are certainly unobtrusive and under recorded as they tuck themselves away along the steep sided drainage ditches of the fens. Peak counts during the period were 8 at Grafham Water, Kingfishers Bridge and 6 at Ouse Fen.

There was a peak in wader movement in mid-September when the only **Little Stints** of the autumn were recorded; both together at Sutton Gault and 6 **Curlew Sandpipers** at Isleham Water Meadows and several **Knots** were also recorded at this time. **Dunlins** made it to just one double figure count when 24 flew through at Grafham Water on Sep 4th. **Ruff** were not widespread, being recorded at just 4 sites, however 75 at the Ouse Washes on Sep 12th was a respectable count. **Black-tailed Godwits** followed a similar trend with 13 at Ouse Fen on Sep 12th the peak and only odd birds elsewhere. A **Bar-tailed Godwit** was on the Ouse Washes on Oct 17th and a **Spotted Redshank** was there next day.

There was some continued evidence of Cambridgeshires prime location for skua movements between the Wash and the Severn with a flock of 3 **Arctic Skuas** over Newton along the River Nene on Sept 4th and 6 moving south-west over Paxton Pits the next day. A final bird on Oct 16th was seen heading in the same direction over Huntingdon Road, Cambridge. It is thought that more birds take a similar, cross country route, during north westerly winds at this time of year but pass at high altitude only being seen if forced down by poor weather.

Gull wise the period was pretty quiet with a few **Mediterranean Gulls**, and a single **Little Gull** reported. Gull numbers began to swell at the tips and roosts with the usual smattering of **Yellow-legged Gulls** around and a couple of **Caspian Gulls** found. Notable tern records included 20 **Common Terns** flying south west over Elm on Oct 4th and the last record received was on Oct 28th at Grafham Water. Although a late bird it would have had to hang around along time to equal the latest county record which was recorded on Dec 6th 1953 at Landbeach. A single **Black Tern** was at Grafham Water on Sep 18th and **Arctic Terns** were also recorded at the site with up to 5 birds on Oct 9th – 10th and the last a first year bird on Oct 18th.

**Wood Pigeons** are very evident during the autumn and winter as newly arrived birds from the continent swell the large resident population. Eight hundred birds at Comberton on Oct 2nd would seem to be reflective of the large flocks that can be encountered and evening pigeon roosts can also be very impressive, more estimates of these large congregations would be welcome. **Tawny Owls** are another species that become more evident in the winter as they call loudly through the night and calling birds were reported from Comberton, Hardwick Wood, Impington, Kingfishers Bridge, Over, St Ives, Stretham and Toft. **Short-eared Owls** were apparently very thin on the ground with just one record of a single at Grafham Water on Oct 5th.

**Great Spotted Woodpeckers** are more likely to turn up in gardens as temperatures drop and insects become harder to come by, gardens in both Chesterton and St Ives were graced by these pied visitors. **Swifts** were noted in small numbers through the early days of September with the last report on the 18th, around the same time as the last **Sand Martin**. The last few days of October produced a most

unexpected visitor to Witcham as a juvenile **Red-rumped Swallow** took up a brief residency around Silver Street on Oct 27th – 28th; this bird was in the company of both a **Swallow** and a **House Martin** which may have been attracted to insects around the stables.

Lots of Pipit movement was recorded, particularly during late September and amongst the **Meadow Pipits**, 2 **Tree Pipits**, 7 **Rock Pipits** and a couple of **Water Pipits** were also recorded. **Yellow Wagtails** flock up after breeding to fuel themselves before their heroic migration to Africa and several double figure counts were received including 40 at Ouse Fen on Sep 20th when 3 migrating **White Wagtails** were present on Haddenham Fen. A pair of **Black Redstarts** continued to frequent a breeding area and at least 10 **Redstarts** were seen including pairs at Ferry Meadows on Oct 5th and Wicken Fen on Oct 20th. **Whinchats** were recorded at 10 sites through September with a peak of 4 at Ouse Fen on Sep 5th; a single bird was seen in October at Barton on the 5th. After an excellent breeding season **Stonechats** were not recorded widely perhaps reflecting later movement from upland areas, 6 were recorded on the Ouse Washes and 4 from Fen Drayton Lakes and Wicken Fen. **Wheatears** trickled through the county throughout September with a peak of 5 birds on Haddenham Fen on 20th; the last record was a single on Oct 13th at Maxey Pits.

For many birders the first hard and fast sign that winter is truly around the corner is the arrival of **Redwings**, often first detected by call at night and later observed moving across the country in vocal waves. The **Redwing** passage appeared intense this year particularly on Oct 17th when 6000 were estimated to have flown over Grafham Water, similar anecdotal reports were received but few actual figures have yet been received. **Fieldfares** arrived from Oct 1st and were not recorded in such numbers as **Redwing**. Although **Blackbirds** and **Song Thrushes** also arrive from the continent they are often less obvious in their movements. **Ring Ouzels** were seen at Ely on Oct 13th and 2 were present at Witcham on Oct 24th.

**Cetti's Warbler** continued their colonisation being reported widely and reflected in the ringing total at Wicken Fen which numbers 58 individuals so far this year. Most Warblers move out of the county unnoticed, sightings trickling off almost imperceptibly, in contrast rare arrivals will always cause a flurry of

excitement. A **Barred Warbler** in a Fordham garden was one such visitor on Oct 1st-2nd. Two **Yellow-browed Warblers** were also recorded in Madingley on Oct 29th and Comberton next day and continuing the smart and stripey theme 2 **Firecrests** brightened up a Fowlmere garden from Oct 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Spotted Flycatchers** could still be seen through September with peaks of 7 at Hilton and 8 at Ferry Meadows on the 5<sup>th</sup>. It is possible that these birds were migrants as the same period produced 2 **Pied Flycatchers** at Witcham and a single at Hilton. **Bearded Tits** were recorded from 6 sites with upwards of 10 at Ely Beet Farm. In the woodlands tit flocks were starting to form and **Jays** were particularly evident being noted carrying acorns at many sites. **Rooks** and **Jackdaws** also flock up at this time of year and a **Jackdaw** photographed in Peterborough was a lovely study of a 'nordic' bird.

**Bramblings** arrived from the middle of October but were nowhere common with the maximum being 14 at Ferry Meadows on Oct 28<sup>th</sup>. **Crossbills** were reported from a couple of woods and **Linnets** were recorded in 100 strong flocks at 5 sites, including an impressive 300 at Willingham. As winter progresses locating and counting finch and bunting flocks can become a very valuable activity as roving records entered for the BTO/County Atlas help map both the occurrence of species and their density.

The Recent Reports were compiled and written by Duncan Poyser

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## Farmland bird fieldwork – a surveyor's perspective

*Vince Lea*

My second contract as a jobbing birder also came with the BTO. Following the spring 2008 breeding bird survey work described in my last article (see Bulletin 404 May/June 2009), I ended up with another area of farmland to look at from January – April 2009. Once again the purpose of the survey was very interesting from a personal point of view, being another study to investigate the declines of farmland birds such as Corn Bunting, Yellowhammer and Linnet and look for hints at possible solutions too.

The impetus for the study was the sudden withdrawal of compulsory set aside which the EU and UK governments announced last year, as a response to concerns over food shortages. It was already well known that set aside fields provided good feeding opportunities for winter flocks of sparrows, buntings and finches (referred to as 'granivores' in the project, meaning seed-eaters). The areas used for the project have been well studied in past BTO projects looking at spatial distribution and habitat usage of farmland birds in winter, and these previous studies had established the importance of set-aside. Having this useful baseline data in place meant that examining the spatial distribution and habitat use in the absence of set aside could really show what alternatives to set aside the birds prefer. If any of these alternatives seem particularly useful, encouraging farmers to incorporate them into their land might help mitigate against the loss of set-aside.

The study sites were all in East Anglia, and each comprised an area of 4 square km, equivalent to a tetrad but adjusted to incorporate only farmland habitats – large areas of wood, settlement or water bodies were excluded. I was assigned six such tetrads, two in Essex near Braintree, two in Suffolk near Clare, and two in Cambridgeshire, at Balsham and Hildersham. In order to determine the location of granivores within these tetrads, I had to walk every field boundary and search every stubble field within the tetrad over a short time period; in theory, every significant flock of birds within the tetrad should thus be located. In practice, it took about 3 days to walk the entirety of a tetrad in the middle of winter when days are short. Birds in winter are much more 'clumped' in flocks, so standard ways of counting them are difficult to work out compared to the territorial activity in the breeding season.

For each field visited, a list was compiled of every bird seen, species and numbers, and the recording form for these birds required details of whether they were on the field boundary, the central area of the field or just flying over. If any of the granivore target species were located, the position was also marked on a field map, in order to study the exact habitats they were using. I also had to record details of the crop use.

After the whole tetrad survey, I would analyse the field maps to determine the most important areas for granivores, which would then be designated as 'hotspots'. A hotspot might, for example, be a weedy field corner, an area of game cover or a stubble field. Any such places with at least a couple of feeding granivores would qualify. If there were birds feeding in a garden adjacent to the farmland, these sites were rejected as they are not farmland habitats. A few birds, in a hedge, that weren't actively feeding would similarly be rejected. Some hotspots were very small but intense, for example a game feeding station on some of the chalky farmland at Balsham had big mixed flocks of Corn Bunting, Yellowhammer, Chaffinch and Greenfinch. Others were quite diffuse, particularly a couple of fields in Essex which had previously been cropped with borage; this plant clearly sheds a lot of its oil-rich seed, so there is a lot of food throughout the field, and these attracted some huge flocks of Linnet and Chaffinch, with groups of over 200 birds, which moved rapidly across the field. Some were very tenuous, such as a grass strip (beetle bank) which held a couple of Reed Buntings.

These hotspots were then evaluated to judge their relative importance. A day or two after completing the whole tetrad survey, I would return to the hotspot areas for 10 minute timed counts, using a suitable vantage point and a telescope to study the feeding activity at the spot. Because an active feeding group of mixed species is hard to count accurately in dense cover, the approach was to count the visible birds every minute (with a talking timer telling me when each minute elapsed), and log arrivals and departures during each minute. If no granivores were seen in this 10 minute period, the

count would be terminated, but if any were seen, a second 10 minute count would be done. At the end of the period, the spot was walked to flush any birds feeding in cover, and these were identified and counted too. Habitat measurements were then taken. These hotspots were revisited after 3-4 weeks for the same observations; a really good seed-rich spot should still be occupied on both visits, while a poor spot will have occasional birds on some visits. Fortunately I only had to collect the data, and not try to analyse it!

Some spots were very surprising; one huge field in Suffolk looked pretty standard with a crop of wheat growing up, but for some reason it attracted a huge Fieldfare flock, and mixed with them there were other Thrushes, Pigeons, Starlings, and granivores including 38 Linnets, 23 Chaffinches, 6 Goldfinches, 8 Greenfinches and 1 Yellowhammer. Another feature of some sites was the importance of Elm in hedges for Linnets and Goldfinches, which feed on the swelling buds towards the end of winter. The most consistent hotspot, occupied on all visits I made, was at Clare, where several hedges converged on the area at the back of a farmhouse, with lots of spilt grain about and weedy areas. Here, 20 or more Yellowhammers plus a few finches, House Sparrows, and the odd Reed or Corn Bunting would jostle in the hedge and disappear off to other fields or drop down to feed all the time. It was regularly disturbed by the farmer and their dogs, so the birds were constantly moving but clearly there was a lot of food present attracting them back to the spot. Counting this spot was particularly difficult as the choice of hedge used by the birds changed from one minute to the next.

It took me 4 weeks to complete the six full tetrads plus the first hotspot recording. This was supposed to have happened at a slightly less frenetic pace, but due to the unique way Defra fund the research, the contract started in January instead of December, as planned by the BTO. By the end of January I had been to all the tetrads. Then in February and March all the tetrads were repeated, alongside some of the repeat hotspot visits from the first round. The idea behind all this repetition was to see how birds behaved as the winter progressed. The methodology works on the assumption that most of the seed sources would begin to be exhausted in late winter, so later repeat visits show which areas are the most durable and important for long term provision for granivores. By late February many stubbles and game cover crops are ploughed up so later visits also show the impact of this practice. I had a bit of time left at the end of the contract to go back to the earliest-visited squares for a third time in early April, in between final hotspot visits. I certainly got to know some new bits of farmland very well, and where the traffic hotspots are on the Haverhill road!

As a survey to examine how birds survive winter, 2009 was certainly a good one to have picked! As you will recall, we had one of the hardest and snowiest winters for a long while. Snow was lying on the ground for many of my visits, and at other times dawn temperatures of -10 C would occur, with ground staying frozen for days on end. Despite this hard weather there were very few days when I had to cancel field visits, and generally, with suitable piles of clothing and quantities of hot flasks, the fieldwork was enhanced by this weather, much more preferable to damp dreary mild conditions when clay farmland sticks to your boots. However, it was very noticeable that the weather took its toll on the birds, with numbers noticeably down on the later visits, and species like Woodcock and Snipe were quite frequently encountered on stubble fields. I had my best ever view of a Woodcock which had chosen one of my hotspots as its daytime resting point, and I only saw it when I was about to stand where it was! It stayed motionless about 3 yards in front of me for a good minute. On my training day near Thetford, the hotspot held a few Bramblings, but surprisingly I never came across any on my study sites.

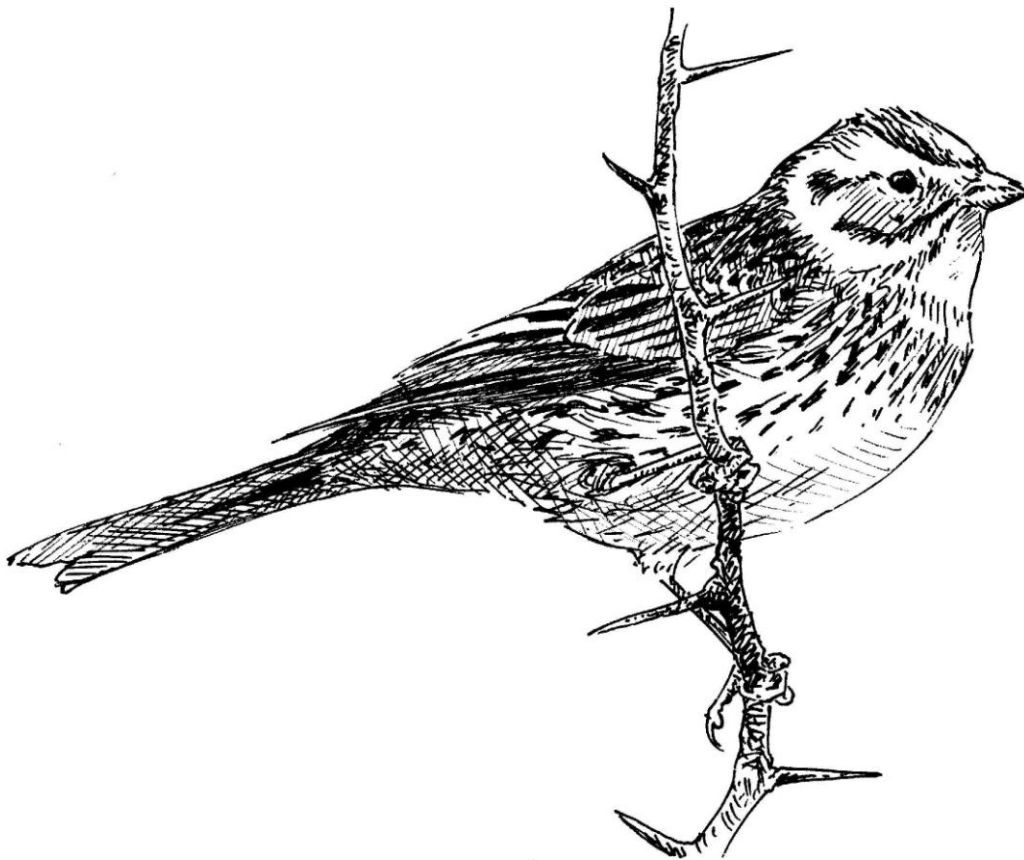
One difficulty with counting the best hotspots was that they would also attract predators, so a sudden appearance of a Sparrowhawk could put all the birds up and make counting very difficult, or they would move away entirely. However, this did add to the birding experience of course, and seeing a Merlin coming to a particularly good Linnets and Corn Bunting site in Balsham was another highlight of the winter.

Being out day after day in the freezing cold, walking at least 10 miles a day, certainly had its effect on my physical being, which helped to bring home how hard it must be for the birds at this time of year. As well as finding my leg muscles back to the sort of condition they were 25 years ago when I was in the school athletics and rugby teams, I found I was eating about 1000 calories more than usual, without any weight gain. Cravings for high calorie food were constant, and sleep was quite a high

priority – short days were certainly a good excuse for finishing work fairly early, though I was up and out well before first light most days in order to get a full day in the field.

It was very interesting to see how many species of birds were found in a tetrad after 3 days surveying relatively uniform habitat, with new species still being added on the return visits for 'hotspot counts'. This shows how the one or two hour visits of a Timed Tetrad Visit for the current BTO atlas really don't give a full species list for a square, but merely an indication of the relative abundance of the species present, showing how important the roving records are as well as the TTVs. Although not the aim of the study, compiling species lists like this was very informative; species such as Little Owl, Green Woodpecker, Little Egret and Peregrine were generally at a low or very low density within a given tetrad, and might not be seen till the second or third day of visiting, but sometimes these rarer species might reveal themselves on the very first visit and then remain absent from the rest of the square. As the project went through to mid-April, the latest visits saw waves of new species being added as migrants started to appear. My very last day was to a site in Essex and I thought it was going well as I added Lesser Whitethroat, Swallow and Yellow Wagtail at the first couple of hotspots. The icing on the cake though, was a couple of hours later, when during the 10 minute timed count a Firecrest passed through the hedge, calling; by the end of my 10 minutes I went to the area of stream-side willow scrub where it was heading, and re-found the bird, singing it's simple but very enthusiastic little song!

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*Yellowhammer*



## Finders Account - Pallid Harrier at Haddenham Fen

*Simon Stirrup*

On the afternoon of 6<sup>th</sup> September my wife Susan and I went for a short walk on Haddenham Fen which is only a mile and a half from home. I had Oliver, our baby boy, in a carrier on my back. This area of fenland is about 7 miles SW of Ely. It is a mosaic of arable fields, growing wheat, potatoes, sugar beet, leeks etc, which are interspersed with poor quality roads, muddy tracks and a network of ditches and dykes.

We returned to the car at about 17:00 and I reflected on another quiet walk on the Fen. I had hoped for a Whinchat, Redstart or other migrant, but had only managed to see a Little Owl and a Willow Warbler. As I stood waiting for Susan to unlock the car I noticed a grey harrier flying low across the potato field towards us. Excellent, a male Hen I thought. However, through bins I realised that the build was too delicate and the flight too buoyant for a Hen and, although I couldn't count the number of outer primaries, the wing tips were pointed. OK, it must be a Montagu's, even better, but as it turned I became confused. Where were the features? I could see no white rump and no bar across the secondaries, in fact nothing much at all and it seemed far too pale even in the dull afternoon light. There was a brown wash to the mantle and to a lesser extent the secondaries so it was obviously not a full adult. It then moved to the far end of the field where it was too distant to see any detail. Here it flushed a small passerine which it proceeded to chase in an agile fashion, giving the impression of a large Hobby. Could it be a Pallid? The idea was ridiculous. I've hardly managed any local birding this year. I couldn't remember when I last saw a male Hen or male Montagu's Harrier and here I was considering a Pallid. My mind was in turmoil. I must be missing something. Only a week earlier I had spoken to a friend who had found a juvenile Pallid in Holland. Was this a dreadful case of auto-suggestion? The harrier then flew back towards us, banked and headed away. As it turned it looked clean, pale and elegant. There was no sign of a hood and I glimpsed a white underwing and a striking black diamond at the tip!

It seemed to take ages to take Oliver off my back, get him into the car and head off after the harrier. There was no sign of it. I had a dreadful feeling that a good bird had just slipped through my fingers. We stopped the car at the far end of the potato field. I jumped out and scanned the fields desperately trying not to panic. There was still no sign. Suddenly, to my immense relief, there it was hunting low over the field and I was gradually able to confirm some of my earlier impressions. However, much of this was subjective or based on the absence rather than the presence of features. It then dropped into the back of a stubble field where I could just see its head. It was time to draw breath. I phoned Paul Mason and asked him to join me quickly with a scope as I had an interesting harrier on the Fen. With no field guide to hand this seemed a good opportunity to phone a friend and go through the identification features in case any subsequent views were brief. I phoned Dave Hatton, but unfortunately, he was out. After about 5 minutes and before I could make any further calls the harrier took flight and obligingly came much closer, seemingly unconcerned by my presence. As it hunted along the edge of the crop I noted again how low it hunted and the agile way in which it twisted before dropping to the ground. I had several good views of the underwing, the upperwing and the fanned tail. I noted that there was no contrast between the head and breast, no terminal or median band across the secondaries, the flanks and underwings were unmarked, and the black diamond on the underwing was small, well defined and contrasted with the whitish coverts. The tail was pale grey with paler outer tail feathers with about half-a-dozen regular grey bars. At the time I was pleased to have seen the detail in the tail as it was a positive feature, but I don't think it was significant. For the first time I began to relax as I was sure I had seen as much as I could through binoculars and felt confident that this was enough to clinch the identification. Logically it had to be a Pallid Harrier – didn't it? I had eliminated the two commoner species and found it difficult to imagine that either species could exhibit such an extreme plumage. Even so the idea of such a huge rarity so close to home seemed unbelievable.

We followed the harrier in the car as it headed towards Aldreth and parked to watch it hunting more distantly over stubble. Dave then phoned back and I put my bins down and followed the harrier with the naked eye. It was useful to discuss the identification of the bird with him and be reassured that I hadn't missed anything. Looking down the road I could see Paul's car approaching and to my horror I realised that I could no longer see the harrier. Surely this wasn't going to be another single observer

sighting? When Paul arrived he was expecting a Monty's and was understandably taken aback when I explained that I thought that the harrier was a Pallid. After Susan took Oliver home for his tea I stayed with Paul and David Hopkins to look for the harrier, but despite searching until dusk we failed to relocate it.

That evening I had limited time available to check the literature. However, I was fortunate to be able to discuss the bird with Bruce Martin who had checked his library. He suggested that he put the record out on Cambirds as a probable Pallid. It was then time to get back to domestic duties and hope it was still there in the morning.

Early next morning, I joined Bruce and Paul on the Fen, but there was no sign of the harrier and I had to return home. Just as I was leaving for work I received a welcome phone call from Bruce to say that Mark Hawkes had spotted the Pallid Harrier over the original field. During the next 2 hours it was great to see an increasing number of local and Cambridgeshire birders enjoying the Pallid Harrier as it floated around the Fen. I enjoyed prolonged scope views and although the harrier was more distant than the previous day it was an obvious Pallid. At about 11:00 we lost the bird and I headed off to work. Susan, Oliver and I returned to the fen in the evening and were surprised by the number of birders and cars on the Fen. We had more good views, including the sight of the Pallid and a Kestrel sat on the ground next to each other and briefly sparring in the air. Even Susan, who is not a birder, was impressed. At c18:30 we lost the harrier in the direction of the Old West River and that was the last time I saw it. Over the following 2 days there were a couple of isolated sightings to the south of Aldreth and sadly that was it.



## A Pallid Harrier and seven Glossy Ibis

*Bruce Martin*

I received a phone call on the evening of Sunday September 6<sup>th</sup> 2009 from Simon Stirrup to say that he had seen a probable male Pallid Harrier on Aldreth Fen late that afternoon when out walking out with his family. He explained in detail the circumstances of his find and although he still had a slight reservation about the likelihood of the identification (who wouldn't in the middle of the Cambridgeshire fens), I felt from his description a Pallid Harrier was indeed what he had seen.

So the next morning I was up at 5.30am and out by 6 to look for the bird. I arrived at 6.25 in the area Simon had last seen it and saw that Paul Mason was already looking from the other side of the stakeout field. Mark Hawkes and James Hanlon soon joined me and then Owen Marks stopped further along the road to make a triangle of viewing points. One or two Marsh Harriers began to hunt out to our west which gave us hope that the bird Simon had seen would soon begin to quarter the fields looking for prey. It must have had a lie in for it wasn't until 08.18 that Mark picked up a sleek, grey harrier over the same potato field where Simon had seen it yesterday. He called out Pallid Harrier and we each realised that this was indeed the gorgeous male we were all hoping to see.

I phoned Simon with the good news and he sounded so relieved in contrast to when I had spoken to him a little earlier with negative news. He soon arrived and we watched it quartering the fen covering quite a large area. At times it seemed to hug the ground moving slowly along making it difficult to see. On other occasions it moved very quickly almost 'turning on a sixpence' when something caught its eye highlighting how much more agile Pallid is compared with the other harrier species including Montagu's.

Other birders began to arrive and a few of us moved to join Paul further into the fen. We then lost sight of the bird and I left at 10.20am. As my wife, Gwen, hadn't seen it, we went back later in the afternoon to find unsurprisingly many more people searching for the bird. It wasn't long before we saw it again but quite distant and Gwen was having difficulty in picking it up. It then headed across the A1123 Earith to Haddenham road into North Fen so we decided to drive to Chain Corner and view the fields from the Ouse Washes bank at Chain Corner. We weren't the only ones as around twenty other birders decided to do the same thing, to get a grandstand view from the top the bank. We hadn't been there long before we saw it again quartering the fields. Then it flew on to the Washes near Sutton Gault and turned south along the opposite Washes bank and past us.

As it came along the washes others saw it put up seven black birds and Alan Hitchings (a rarity himself) called out Glossy Ibis, heads turned to look for it, no one expecting what they were about to see. Noting the direction they were looking I did the same and saw these seven black birds go overhead. On the first take I thought they were Cormorants as I was expecting just the one Glossy Ibis and it was only when I realised they had down curved bills that these were the birds Alan had seen, not just one but seven of them! They then circled back and headed north to disappear over Sutton.

I know that everyone fortunate enough to be there was stunned and delighted. No one had any idea that they had been on the Washes and if it wasn't for the Pallid Harrier who knows if they would ever have been found. Fortunately one quick thinking birder, Matthew Rodgers, managed to take some quick shots of them and once I had recovered I asked him if we could have copies for the CBC web photo page. To this he readily agreed. Meanwhile the harrier which momentarily took the back seat had crossed back to North Fen and continued south to Haddenham Fen. We then drove back through the fen but didn't see it again but had plenty to tell a number of friends before we headed for home. The Ibises however did settle and allowed many to enjoy these vagrants during their visit to the fens.



## **CBC supports bird monitoring at Lake Oursi in Burkina Faso**

*Peter Herkenrath*

Members of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club will know that the Club has started a partnership with the local bird group at Lake Oursi, an Important Bird Area in the very north of the West African country of Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta. The BirdLife International partner organisation NATURAMA (Fondation des Amis de la Nature) supports local people with managing the natural resources at the wetlands of Oursi, a site well known for its significance for Palearctic migrants, including many species of waterbirds, waders and warblers. With support from a number of donors, a comprehensive programme of bird monitoring has been implemented at Oursi for some time but funding has now come to an end. The Council of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club has decided to bridge the gap in funding with a donation of £1,000, which will enable NATURAMA and its local group to continue with bird monitoring while long-term solutions to funding are being sought.

For the results of bird monitoring at Oursi and other news from our West African partner, please visit the Oursi blog at the CBC website.

### **Roving Records Atlas Day – 14<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

One thing we seem to be sure of is that poor weather and CBC roving days seems to go hand in hand. Last winters event was the coldest day many of us have experienced in a long while and this winter saw the wind rise to force 8 or more during the day. Although far from ideal weather for finding birds 14 surveyors were out and about finding and counting birds in under recorded tetrads. Highlights included Black Redstart, Crossbill, Nuthatch, Woodcock, good company and cheer.

*'Everyone I spoke to thought I was mad to spend a day travelling around the bleak remote fenland of Wisbech counting birds, especially as the weather forecast was gale force winds and heavy rain. However, we had a busy day, counting birds in 22 tetrads and escaping the worst of the weather until the afternoon. We saw plenty of birds although many smaller birds not surprisingly stayed hidden due to the weather. Highlights for me were spotting a Little Owl, two Barn Owls, a few Tree Sparrows and a huge flock of Lapwings, Plovers and Starlings flying together. A warm welcome greeted us at the end of that cold wet day, with delicious food and good company, an enjoyable finish to an interesting day.'* - Suzanne Harwood.

*'Despite the poor weather with strong winds and some heavy rain showers, we managed to visit some 20 poorly-covered tetrads in the fens of northern Cambs, recorded 58 species of birds and scored 216 roving records for the atlas. There was a mixed flock of thousands of Lapwings and Golden Plover, and we watched a Peregrine hunting and a Woodcock flying across a field. It was great fun, including at the social in the evening.'* - Peter Herkenrath

### **Volunteers at indoor meetings**

Do you enjoy the chance to socialise with other members during the refreshment breaks at indoor meetings? Please help to make the refreshment break go well by volunteering to help with making tea, coffee, serving refreshments and washing up. If you can help at one or two meetings please contact Vicki Harley (contact details on back page).

### **Nature in Cambridgeshire**

Volume 51 of Nature in Cambridgeshire has been published recently. Among the usual wide-ranging coverage, there are articles on analysis of Barn Owl pellets, the Great Green Bush Cricket, Ladybirds and Click Beetles, as well as several botanical topics. Further details of this and earlier issues are available at [www.natureincambridgeshire.org.uk](http://www.natureincambridgeshire.org.uk). Copies of volume 51 and many others are available from Vicki Harley (contact details on back page). Please note if you contact me directly you should receive a quicker response than using the Museum of Zoology address given on the journal's website.

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2009**

### **INDOOR MEETINGS**

#### **Friday December 11th - St Johns Church Hall**

##### **Christmas Social**

Come and enjoy mince pies and mulled wine in good company while listening to inspiring short talks by club members. Please contact Vicki Harley if you would like to give a short presentation

#### **Friday January 8th - St Johns Church Hall**

##### **Gardens: Good for birds? by Mike Toms**

Gardens, and the birds that use them, are commonly dismissed as being unimportant in conservation terms. However, increasing amounts of evidence demonstrate that gardens do have a role to play and this talk examines that evidence, drawing on data collected through the BTO's garden-based surveys. Mike Toms is Head of Garden Ecology at the BTO and has written widely on the topic of garden birds and wildlife gardening.

#### **Friday February 12th - St Johns Church Hall**

##### **Titchwell: Past, Present and Future by Paul Eele**

Paul Eele has worked for the RSPB for over 15 years on many reserves including Haweswater, Ouse Washes, West Sedgemoor and Otmoor before moving to Titchwell as Assistant Warden in 2002. He became Warden in 2007 and is responsible for the practical management of the reserve. The talk will focus on the changes that are going on over the next few years with the Coastal Change Project.

### **FROM THE COUNTY RECORDER**

In an effort to improve the production time of annual Cambridgeshire Bird Report can all observers please send ALL their daily records and outstanding description for 2009 to me before 28th February 2010. We would all very much appreciate if all these records could be together by the above date. Many thanks in advance.

*Mark Hawkes*

### **FROM THE BULLETIN EDITOR**

Thank you to the increasing number of contributors who have written so enthusiastically about their birding in issue 406. A new team has been created to review the monthly records and write the Recent Reports section. I would like to thank in advance Steve Cooper, Richard Patient, Vince Lea, David Heath and Mark Hawkes for volunteering to share the load and write this section over the coming year. Finally I would like to highlight the continued work of Ben Green who currently illustrates much of the bulletin, his excellent work is for sale and he can be contacted on [bengreen@talk21.com](mailto:bengreen@talk21.com)

*Duncan Poyser*

### **FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY**

Older members of the Bird Club will be saddened to hear of the recent death of Dr DRC Willcox. Denys and his late wife Beatrix were active members of the Club in the 1970's and 80's and Denys was Chairman from 1980 to 1984. Our thoughts go to his son and daughter and their families.

*Bruce Martin*

**Erratum** – Steve Cooper is the Diehards stalwart driver and team member. Although his brother Ade has bird raced with the Diehards "*he tried it once but could not stay awake therefore no good on a bird race!*" he was not in the record breaking team of 2008 as stated in Bulletin 406.

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**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 January 7th**

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

**Next Bulletin due out February 2010, covering November/December 2009**

# GOOD BIRDING!