

CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB

Bulletin No. 410

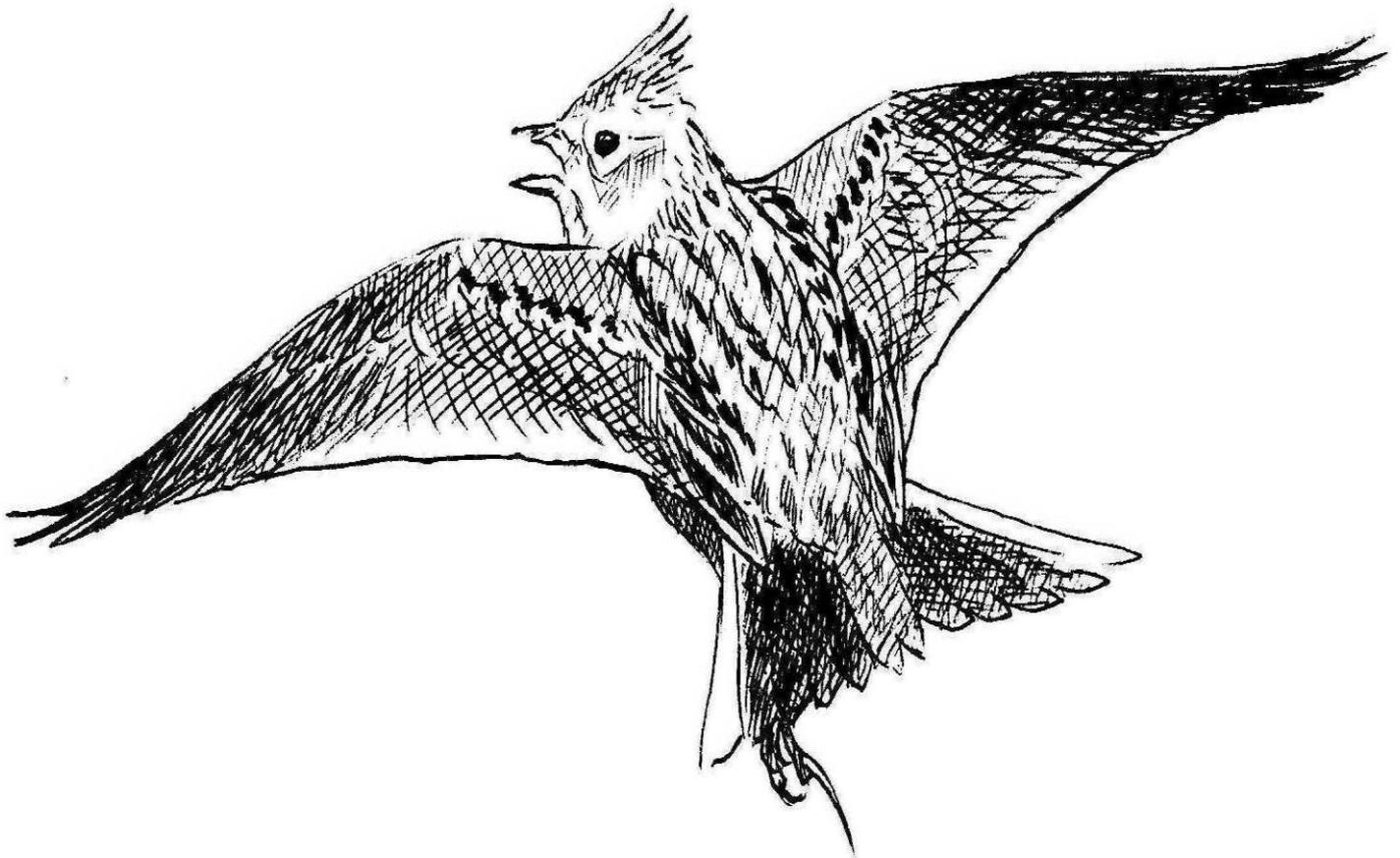


Opinions expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily those of the Club.

RECENT REPORTS MAY/JUNE 2010

These are unchecked reports rather than confirmed records sourced from sightings received by the county recorder or reported on the "What's About?" page on the CBC website.

Skylark by Ben Green



After a cold winter, May and June were generally drier than average, with cool northerlies at the beginning of the period. High pressure with dry and sunny conditions followed, leading to average or above average temperatures and just the occasional thunderstorm or odd day of light drizzle providing some moisture. This weather meant birders could be out most of the time, but there were no great periods of migration and some breeding birds will have faced difficulties obtaining food. The low temperatures followed by dry weather probably reduced plant growth for nesting cover and less insect food as well.

Highlights of the reports received by the bird club during May and June included some late lingering winter species, some rare breeding grebes, **Bitterns**, ducks, plenty of **Marsh Harriers** and **Red Kites** with some of the latter coming to gardens, interesting crakes and cranes, 8 or 9 species of waders breeding, plus a further 18 species on passage. **Turtle Doves**, **Cuckoos**, **Barn Owls**, **Yellow Wagtails** and a few **Spotted Flycatchers** were well reported, suggesting the wider countryside was being explored, but only two records of **Marsh Tit**, one of **Nuthatch** and none whatsoever of **Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers** suggests club members were not going to our woods!

Scarce passage birds included herons, raptors, harriers, **Osprey**, **Red-footed Falcon**, terns, and **Ring Ouzels**, while rarities such as **Blue-winged Teal**, **Whiskered Tern**, and **Red-rumped Swallow** added some interest for twitchers but it seems the northerly wind and it's associated Icelandic ash cloud kept many birds at bay as well as holidaymakers.

Plenty of **Mute Swan** broods were noted during the period, while both the Ouse and Nene Washes held summering **Whooper Swans**. A **Pink-footed Goose** was noted in both May and June at Kingfishers Bridge. A single **Ruddy Shelduck** was reported at Fowlmere NR on May 10th, whereas **Common Shelduck** were rather more widespread of course, and confirmed breeding came from four localities.

Mandarin Duck pairs were noted in the Shelford/Hauxton area only, while their American cousin the **Wood Duck** was seen at Bury Fen (a male) and found to be nesting in Hardwick Wood. More controversially, a possible breeding attempt by **Ruddy Duck** was also recorded. Native breeding ducks are of more interest perhaps, even if less glamorous, and there were some intriguing records of

possible breeding attempts for **Eurasian Wigeon** and **Eurasian Teal**. Broods of young were seen of **Gadwall**, **Mallard**, **Common Pochard** and **Tufted Duck** as well as **Northern Pintail**, **Garganey** and **Northern Shoveler**.

Rarer ducks included 2 **Blue-winged Teal**: a female at Paxton Pits on May 27, and a ringed male at Fen Drayton Lakes Jun 15th and Berry Fen later in the month. **Red-crested Pochards** were seen at Paxton and Grafham Water, the latter site also hosting **Common Scoter**, **Common Goldeneye** and **Red-breasted Merganser** during the period.

Common Quail reports came in from 6 localities, with 2 birds calling at Brampton Wood, and several of the locations held calling birds for extended periods such as Dry Drayton from 10th May for 10 days and Grunty Fen for at least 12 days.

At least two of the **Great Northern Divers** that wintered on Grafham Water lingered into the early days of May, with the last reports coming on the 7th. More seasonal were the two common species of Grebe which were both well into their breeding activities during the period, at various sites, and there were further developments with **Black-necked Grebes** reported in the last bulletin. Two to three birds were seen at three separate sites, although dates associated with the sightings could be consistent with a single pair touring the county and a spare bird. Any additional sightings during the period will be treated in confidence by the club and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, but would be very helpful in determining the true status of this wonderful bird in the county. It would be particularly useful if any proof of actual breeding were available.

Singles of **Northern Fulmar** and **Northern Gannet** were noted towards the end of May, while our 'resident seabird', the **Great Cormorant** was reported from several sites, although no breeding reports were received.

Great Bitterns did provide confirmed breeding reports however; a confirmed occurrence of the first breeding at the Nene Washes with regular feeding flights to a nest observed during June. Other sites reported little more than booming males, which would suggest a poorer breeding season than recent years, perhaps a consequence of the harsh winter. **Little Egrets** are much easier to see and are clearly far more abundant than Bitterns in the

county, with a high count of 18 at Ouse Fen on Jun 20th, but proof of breeding is hard to obtain. Nonetheless breeding was confirmed on the Ouse Washes, and the Nene Washes also confirmed the first breeding record at the site. Elsewhere these elegant birds were seen at ten further sites. **Great Egrets** were seen during May, but as ever with this species the exact number is hard to determine, with individuals capable of great wanderings. A minimum of 2 birds based on one at the beginning of May being seen in non-breeding plumage while one from 12th May was in full breeding plumage. Seven sites held a single from 1 - 18th May but it is unlikely that these were 7 different birds. Now far scarcer in the county than the previous species, singles of **Purple Heron** and **Eurasian Spoonbill** were noted during the period, the former on May 21st at Helpston and the latter at the Ouse Washes on Jun 26th. With both now on the UK breeding birds list, how long before the new wetland projects produce breeding pairs in Cambridgeshire?

A report of **Booted Eagle** will surely prove to be the highlight of the period if it is confirmed, but at the time of going to press no formal description had been received. Any supporting evidence for this – even 'unidentified raptor' would be of interest. The report came from the Molesworth area in early June.

Other scarce raptors included the now well-established **Red Kite**, with breeding confirmed at three sites and further sightings from thirty other sites including one coming to a garden for food in Sawtry! Less confiding but still capable of enhancing a day's birding, **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** were well recorded, with plenty of breeding pairs across the county. The highest count was of 9 pairs at Kingfishers Bridge. A female **Montagu's Harrier** was seen at Farcet Fen on May 15th, followed by a French wing-tagged ringtail at Ouse Fen on the 20th and Berry Fen on the 21st, while a possible male was seen at Lady's Wood on Jun 2nd. A probable **Northern Goshawk** was reported from Caxton on Jun 20th, but will need a description to be accepted. **Osprey** singles involved some six individuals mostly in May, but one on Jun 27th at Fen Drayton Lakes seems quite unseasonal. A **Red-footed Falcon** put in an appearance at Ouse Fen on Jun 1st, staying until the 12th. **Eurasian Hobby** was present throughout the period, with 12 at Fen Drayton Lakes the highest count, but only one indication of breeding activity. The odd **Peregrine Falcon** report came in, including a pair rearing three

young at an undisclosed site. Our commonest raptors, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Common Buzzard** and **Common Kestrel**, were all well reported, with some evidence of breeding for all three.

Water Rail records came from just five wetland sites, while **Spotted Crakes** were heard at both the Ouse and Nene Washes, the latter site also hosting a minimum of 20 singing male **Corncrakes**, a great result for the reintroduction programme. **Common Cranes** have been hinting at attempting to breed in the north of the county (without the aid of a reintroduction programme!) for a couple of years, and 2010 finally saw success with a chick seen in June. Elsewhere a singleton was seen at Fowlmere NR on May 1st and another over there on Jun 15th, two days after one was seen flying over Ouse Fen. Two possibles were reported from Little Thetford, which is perhaps not too far from the Suffolk population.

During this period, waders in Cambridgeshire may be loosely split into two categories; the breeding species, and the passage species heading further north. Dealing with the breeders first, **Eurasian Oystercatchers** were noted at 15 sites, many of which were single fly-overs, but breeding was recorded at 2 locations. **Pied Avocet** occurred at 14 sites, with breeding reported at just 4. This is probably under-reported due to perceived sensitivity of the species, but nonetheless a remarkable total approaching 40 pairs bred this year. **Little Plovers** were reported from 13 sites, though few were records of actual breeding activity; **Ringed Plover** showed a similar distribution of records, with one recorded case of aggression between the two species. Twenty sites held **Northern Lapwing**, ranging from farmland on dry chalk to wetland nature reserves, showing how adaptable this species is if given a chance. A WeBS count of 99 at Needingworth on Jun 27th must have included some young of the year? **Common Snipe** hardly live up to their BOU prefix as a county breeding species, but it is encouraging to hear of drumming birds at newly created reserves such as Berry Fen and Kingfishers Bridge, as well as good numbers at the Nene Washes, with 50 on May 2nd. No reports came in from the Ouse Washes however. Even more elusive are **Eurasian Woodcock**, the only report being 2 at Wicken Fen on Jun 8th. **Black-tailed Godwits** are somewhat easier to count, and the figure of 44 pairs fledging 25 young at Nene Washes can be relied on to be pretty accurate. Figures received from the

Ouse Washes made no mention of breeding success but 110 on May 2nd is good, with 55 still on Jun 26th very encouraging for our beautiful logo bird. Finally for the breeding waders, **Common Redshanks** were recorded at 15 locations, and breeding noted at 3 of these. They probably bred at more sites but no mention was made of this, e.g. at Nene or Ouse Washes. The Nene Washes held 60 birds on Jun 2nd.

Passage waders always create interest, whether it because of their scarcity or attractiveness *per se* or the possibility of them harbouring more interesting congeners in their flocks. **European Golden Plover** have some of the shorter journeys to make and are among the first to be absent from our county in the spring, so birds on Jun 20th (Fen Drayton Lakes) and 25th (Nene Washes) were probably failed breeders on their return journeys. **Grey Plover** on the other hand were doubtless heading north on dates in May, being seen at Ouse Washes, Grafham Water and Nene Washes. Two **Red Knots** occurred on the Nene Washes on May 6th, while **Sanderlings** graced Grafham Water on the 12th, with singles on the following two days and again on 21st, 24th and 26th May. The only **Little Stint** of the period was at Paxton Pits on June 6th. **Temminck's Stint** did rather better with up to 3 at Tubney Fen 2nd - 5th May, one at Kingfishers Bridge on the 8th, and another Fen Drayton Lakes on the 27th. **Curlew Sandpiper** singles came from Bury Fen and Fen Drayton Lakes on 3rd - 4th May. **Dunlin** were seen in slightly better numbers of course, with most of the well-watched wetlands recording one or two; the highest number was 12 at the Nene Washes on May 1st.

Ruff was formerly a breeding species but no reports suggested it bred this year, with just a sprinkling of records, most of them in late June. There were 4 **Bar-tailed Godwits** at the Ouse Washes on 8th May, **Whimbrels** occurred from the 2nd to the 13th May with 4 being the largest group, and **Eurasian Curlew** singles came from 3 locations in May and Jun. A couple of **Spotted Redshanks** were seen early in May, well outnumbered by **Common Greenshank** which numbered some 40 individuals mainly in May; a couple at the end of June were presumably returning birds. **Green Sandpiper** (8) and **Common Sandpiper** (10) were recorded at more sites than **Wood Sandpiper** (4), mostly in small numbers of 1-2 with peaks of just 3 and 4 four Woods at the Ouse and Nene Washes, and 3 and 6 Commons at

Newton on the tidal Nene and Grafham Water. Grafham Water also hosted single **Ruddy Turnstone** on 6 dates in May, with another at Wicken Fen on the 12th. Last and by no means least, a summer-plumage **Red-necked Phalarope** at Maxey GP on Jun 15th was a real treat for the finder, but news came out too late for others.

The only scarce gulls of the period were a single adult **Mediterranean Gull** at Grafham on June 24th, 4 single **Little Gulls** at various locations, and a few **Yellow-legged Gulls** including 6 to roost at Grafham Water on Jun 30th. Breeding gulls included **Black-headed Gull** at a couple of sites; **Lesser Black-backed Gull** at five, including a bird at Godmanchester which was colour ringed as a pullus at Orfordness in 1998; and **Herring Gull** at three locations in Wisbech plus a bird paired with one of the Godmanchester Lesser Black-backs.

Passage sea terns in the period included six **Sandwich Terns**, one **Little Tern** and rather more **Arctic Terns** including a group of 50 at Grafham Water on 6th May. **Common Terns** were represented by plenty of odd passage/local movement birds plus several breeding colonies at various gravel pits and the like. Marsh Terns began with a pretty solid run of **Black Terns** from May 10th to 27th at various locations, peaking with 14 birds at Grafham Water on the 23rd, and this sequence was nicely topped off with a **Whiskered Tern** at Ely BF on May 28th.

European Turtle Dove records came from 32 locations, representative of the fact that if anyone sees or hears one of these increasingly rare birds, they tend to submit the record (contrast it with the 9 records of **Eurasian Collared Dove**). Only Fowlmere NR (six) held more than 4. Similarly, **Common Cuckoo** is pretty much a must-note-down sort of bird these days, and records came from 25 locations, mainly wetlands with the now all-important Reed Warbler hosts.

Another noteworthy species for any day's birding is the **Barn Owl** and these seem to be faring rather better of late, although the severe winter may have depressed numbers temporarily. Twenty five sites returned records of this lovely bird, many of which were confirmed breeders; the Ouse Washes recorded a max of 5. Rather fewer records came in for **Little Owl** or **Tawny Owl** which is

probably more a reflection of their lower visibility than lower numbers. Breeding confirmation for **Long-eared Owl** came from just 2 locations, neither being their better-known wetland sites.

There were two big counts of **Common Swift**, both coming from Grafham Water; 600+ on May 2nd and 700+ on June 20th. Several confirmed breeding records of **Common Kingfisher** make welcome news after the severe freeze of the winter, although they were absent from two regular breeding sites in the south of the county; hopefully any dip in numbers will soon be made up. There were a couple of dozen records for both **Green Woodpecker** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** but nothing for our beleaguered **Lesser-spots**.

A minimum of 150 **Sand Martin** nest holes were reported from Block Fen GP and 200+ birds at Bury Fen, but otherwise hirundines were not noted in great quantity. A **Red-rumped Swallow** at Ferry Meadows was noted on May 1st and 3rd, adding a touch of glamour in a relatively quiet spring for rarity hunters.

Over 20 places had **Yellow Wagtail** but nowhere came close to the 40 seen at Nene Washes on May 8th, a great count. Just one **Blue-headed Wagtail** occurred, at Woodhurst May 15th, but **White Wagtails** were reported at 3 locations.

Common Nightingale records came from just 5 places, with around 7 at Paxton Pits the highest count. A single singing **Black Redstart** was in Ely on May 25-26th. Following the couple at the end of April, **Whinchats** continued to pass through in odd ones or twos until the 12th May. There was a rather heavier sprinkling of **Northern Wheatear** and two or three reports of **Greenland Wheatear**. **Ring Ouzel** came mainly in twos, the last on the 12th May.

A male **Cetti's Warbler** maintained its presence at the new site of Fowlmere NR, and counts of 6 came from Wicken Fen and Fen Drayton Lakes, 3 at Kingfishers Bridge, and singles from several other locations.

Goldcrests must have suffered far worse in the winter as they were noted at only 3 locations in the breeding season.

Spotted Flycatcher reports came from just 18 sites, with never more than a pair or so each, but it is nice to hear that some bred successfully. **Bearded Tits** were only reported from 2 sites but these held 9 pairs between them, continuing their successful colonisation of the county. **Marsh Tit** records also only came from 2 locations, a clear case of under-recording for this species which deserves to be sought out and monitored in view of its declining status. The single **Wood Nuthatch** record emphasises that birders are probably not visiting our woods enough to get a picture of their breeding birds, as does the fact that all 4 **Eurasian Treecreeper** records came from wetlands!

Just one **Eurasian Golden Oriole** was seen, a green bird on Jun 16th. What was it doing? Two **Common Ravens** were reported from near Peterborough on Jun 27th.

Eurasian Tree Sparrows were reported from just 3 places, one perhaps a new colony with a couple of nest sites. **House Sparrows** and the commoner finch species were also recorded breeding at a good number of locations throughout the county including unusual garden records of **Common Linnet** and **Common Bullfinch**. A single **Common Crossbill** was seen over Emmanuel College, Cambridge on Jun 11th. There was a smattering of **Corn Bunting** records, the highest count being of 8 at Comberton.

The Recent Reports were compiled and written by Vince Lea.

Thanks to the contributors to the CBC database May/June 2010 :

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Extremadura or bust

Ben Green

The drive north from our base in Trujillo was like taking a trip through a field guide to the western Mediterranean. Azure winged flashes tripped across the road in front of us as we drove through the Holm Oak orchards and parties of be-jewelled Bee-eaters glittered against the black trunks and grey green canopies, miraculous colours contrasting with the haggard looking, lichen bearded branches. Black Kites seemed to occupy every inch of airspace, just above the trees, but every now and then the larger shapes of Booted and Short-toed Eagles reflected the improving weather.

As we entered the Monfrague National Park, the landscape became rockier, with steep hills and winding roads. The main gorge, pink and blue cliffs towering above, provided a sensational framework on which Griffon, Black, and now Egyptian Vultures displayed their prowess. A Peregrine made three or four attempts to take down a pigeon along the front of the cliff, its speed and agility in stark contrast to the lumbering vultures that patrolled the gorge at eye level. Hirundines flashed in front of us in ever increasing numbers including Red-rumped Swallows and bulky Crag Martins that streaked past our ears as we looked across at the cliff. A pair of Black stork had built their scrappy nest platform on one of the rocky shelves, and the two birds greeted each other with a tender ceremony of preens and bows. Further along the cliff a tiny pinprick of jet needled a faint but piercing phrase. It was a beautiful cock Black Redstart, and more appeared as we made our way through the gorge, boldly claiming their crystalline outcrops. On the scree slopes Rock Buntings and Blue Rock Thrushes traversed among the more familiar Dunnocks and Serins. In the thicket behind us a Chiffchaff called strangely, and briefly its apple green form emerged, revealing it to be Iberian rather than the race that is so tied with the onset of a British spring. A large dark shape hung in the wind above the tallest crag. Imperious, it seemed to be looking down on its subjects with self assured satisfaction.



Spanish Imperial Eagle

Over the bridge across the Rio Tajo, a few Alpine Swifts mingled with the martins; sharp dressed sickles cutting through the wind. Further up the gorge the small settlement of Villarreal de San Carlos sat at the head of a small valley that could almost have been magicked there from the Welsh Borders. Robins, Blackbirds and Blue Tits sang from the low trees that surrounded the network of stone-walled paddocks. However familiar it seemed though, things soon became obviously different. We struggled to glimpse the Robins, while Nightingales were more abundant and less shy. Hawfinches fed on a grassy bank and Woodchats and Subalpine Warblers crackled in the bushes.

The rain started in earnest as we made our way back to Trujillo. Out of the wet night bizarre Iberian Newts glowed in our headlights as they were drawn to the cool tarmac. Dawn arrived, reluctant and bedraggled, but soon the warmth of the day started to stimulate the countryside into life. We were looking over the vast rolling plains where we had had such stunning views of Little Bustards on that first sun baked evening. A small trip of urgent plover-like birds suddenly appeared in the distance, hugging the shallow slopes as they rocketed towards a low knoll, and landed near the spreading dome of a Holm Oak, one of the only trees for some distance. Then, more arrived- fat black-bellied birds that nearly disappeared upon landing, so well did their grey brown upperparts blend with the sparse grassland. The Black-bellied Sandgrouse bobbed around like pigeons until they eventually marched down the back of the slope and out of view.

Thanks to information from a birdwatcher we met while watching the Sandgrouse, we drove further west and then north, finding ourselves on a small road that wandered across the damp plain. We knew immediately when we had reached the right place. On a fencepost ten yards from the roadside, a slightly bedraggled grey bird, long, loose wings hanging like a shawl, was patiently waiting for the morning sun to dry its rain soaked feathers. Alert, yellow eyes concentrated not on us, but on others of its own kind. Along a fifty metre stretch of road, ten to fifteen similarly conditioned Montagu's Harriers were quietly becoming airworthy, making short but incredibly graceful dashes across the road, and along the fence line, warming to the task of hunting across the open slopes of grassland.

We left the colony as it began to disperse, and once more drove towards Monfrague, taking a circuitous route that led us past short swarded, stony fields full of Northern Wheatears en route to their breeding grounds in more temperate climes, and an iris covered wet gravel patch, on which two Yellow Wagtails poked around. Unlike the Wheatears, they had already reached their summer land, their dark blue grey heads curiously mirroring the head pattern of a Southern Grey Shrike that we found a short while later. Back at Villarreal de San Carlos we found a pair of Orphean Warblers among the now familiar birds of the region, their grey and silver-white plumage reflecting the colours of the distant mountains to the north- the Gredos.

The afternoon drive took us along the valley of the Rio Tormes and up to the Parador de Gredos, where we found Crested Tits, Cirl Bunting and then, briefly, the grey green form of a Citril Finch nestled in the highest sprays of needles of the tallest tree in the misty hotel grounds. The almost constant drizzle turned to heavier rain so we moved onwards and upwards into the reserva, eventually encountering the fast receding snowline at the top of a road that led into the mountains. The evening drew in and the weather worsened. Above us on a sharp buttress of rock, a small herd of Ibex disappeared as the cloud descended, leaving a Wheatear to judge the similarity between its choice of stopover point and its eventual breeding ground further north. We had encountered an amazing array of birds, in contrasting habitats in just a few days, but, like the Wheatear, our time in Spain was up. The next day we were to get back to Madrid, board our flight and be back in Cambridgeshire by the evening. It should have been so simple.

To be concluded in the next bulletin

Cetti's Warblers at the Wicken Fen Reedbed

Michael Holdsworth

Cetti's Warbler, a non-migratory warbler found only in the Mediterranean until as recently as the 1920s, is still dynamically expanding its range in the UK. Cetti's Warbler was first recorded in Britain in 1961, and first bred, in Kent, in 1972/3. The first record for Cambridgeshire occurred in 1977, and the first proven county breeding followed at Wicken in 1980. A bird caught on the Fen that year had been ringed at Hoddesdon. However this initial colonisation petered out after the hard winter of 1984/5, and no Cetti's were to be proved breeding again in the county until 2004 (at two different sites that year, but not at Wicken).

The first Cetti's Warbler of the current recolonisation at Wicken was caught on St Edmund's Fen in March 2005. Then four juveniles were caught in late summer 2005 at the reedbed in the south-west corner of the Fen; perhaps youngsters dispersing from St Edmunds, where a fifth juvenile had also been caught.

Five years on, Cetti's are now widely distributed across the Fen wherever there are damp ditches and deep cover. However, the reedbed remains at the heart of this recolonisation. Of the 288 Wicken Fen Group (WFG) captures of 121 individual Cetti's since 2005, 213 captures (74%) have been at reedbed sites; in fact, in the small study area within 300 yards of the Group's reedbed ringing hut. Other parts of the Fen, and in particular the wooded carr of St Edmunds, provide less suitable Cetti's habitat and hold fewer birds.

Cetti's are usually polygynous and multi-brooded, so can be very productive in a good year. The 2009 breeding season proved exceptionally good for all reedbed species, particularly Reed and Sedge Warblers, and the reedbed Cetti's were no exception. In the six months from 1st June, the WFG handled 45 different Cettis at the reedbed; all within a few hundred yards of each other. Most of these were young birds of the year and only five certain adult individuals were caught in this period. The five comprised the oldest male, one of the birds first ringed as a juvenile in 2005, and perhaps his harem of four females. This dominant male was the only adult male at all caught during the six months from June 2009.

Other studies have suggested that most breeding sites are abandoned in midwinter, with birds making local movements away, and then returning in March and April. This isn't really true at Wicken where singing is heard and birds are caught throughout the winter. However there is some evidence of certain birds being present either in winter or summer but not both.

With numbers having been so high in autumn 2009, there was naturally some concern as to the effect of the severe weather of early January 2010 on this very susceptible species. In fact, the reedbed Cetti's seemed to come through well. As it turned out, seventeen birds (ten males, seven females) are known to have been alive in this small study area at some point during the three winter months December-February, either because they were caught then, or have been caught subsequently. In the spring period March-May this had dropped to ten (seven males and three females), but this number is difficult to interpret.

At any time of year many more males are caught than females. Males may be more readily caught, as they actively defend or encroach upon territories while females maintain a lower profile, particularly when breeding. Or there may be simply more males in the population. In common with other species, it is female Cetti's which tend to disperse further and pioneer new colonisations. The first arrival at Wicken in 2005 was a female, as was the only incoming controlled bird (ringed as a juvenile at Hollesley, Suffolk, two years earlier) as have been all the adult birds arriving unringed into the study area.

This piece is being written at the end of June 2010, so everything is still to play for in this breeding season. June so far has seen the capture of just two Cetti's: one second-year male who has been around all winter, plus a newcomer unringed female; so far no juveniles. The dominant male from 2005 hasn't been caught since April. So is his fruitful reign now over?

Cambridge nesters: update on breeding birds

Vince Lea

May and June are the busiest months for breeding birds, with resident species and migrants all very active. The cold spring finally gave way to much warmer conditions, but the noticeable feature of the summer has been the very low rainfall, which has a range of implications for breeding birds. The most obvious problems are reductions in the availability of soil-based invertebrates such as earthworms and leatherjackets so essential to species like Blackbird and Starling. Dry weather is, however, good news for airborne feeders like Swallow, so long as they can find a source of mud for building the nest in the first place. I have been lucky enough to follow a couple of colonies of these birds in my home village, one set of stables having about 11 pairs and the adjacent farm a further 4 pairs, most of which had a successful first brood and are well on with their second as I write this in July. By contrast, Blackbird nests which were so abundant in the early period have pretty much come to an end; last year I had 4 nests in my garden, this time only 2, and the second of those was built and then abandoned without a single egg being laid.

Cambridge nesters have continued to visit Cambourne on a weekly basis, looking for ground-nesting species on the country park hill. Our first Skylark was found on the 11th May, with 2 live young which fledged successfully, while the last one of the period, Skylark nest 8, was first seen on June 22nd, when we had our first ever sighting of actual nest-building activity. This nest later held 3 eggs but they were predated. By the end of June most nesting activity on the hill was coming to an end as the vegetation dried up, cover became less dense for the nests and food scarcer for the adults, but we did still have a few active nests on the go into July including our only Corn Bunting. This year we have done slightly better for Reed Buntings, with a total of 3 nests found. The Reed Buntings tend to nest in the dense herbage, making them hard to locate when vegetation is very lush, but this year it was somewhat more open and easier to work. Unfortunately 2 nests failed at egg stage due to the vegetation not supporting the nests; the first failed nest probably got dislodged by a dog off its lead and the second by a heavy thunderstorm. Our third nest lost one egg early on but the other 2 eggs hatched and fledged. We don't find all the nests on the site of course, and other broods of fledged Reed Bunting chicks fledged from nests that we had failed to locate.

At Wicken Fen an impressive array of nests have been found including several difficult nests such as warbler species and Bullfinches. Wherever possible the chicks are ringed in the nest and it will be very interesting to see how many recoveries are made of fledged chicks on the fen itself, perhaps even in future years. Sadly the initial enthusiasm among ringers at the site has dwindled a little but two or three dedicated individuals continue to find nests although they would welcome more assistance on such a large and complex site. Hopefully if pulli do turn into recovered adults at some stage there will be increased incentive to participate in this endeavour. One of the Wicken regulars has really 'got the bug' and is finding nests on his own patch as well, including an excellent Yellowhammer record. Our third main group site is a Tree Sparrow colony, where the birds nest in natural tree holes, making inspection difficult in some cases. A bit of technology helps and small LED lights and a flexible web camera have been useful to view awkward spots. One of the most interesting things this has revealed is a case of overlapping broods, where one large chick was found in a nest with several unhatched eggs. At first we thought these had been infertile abandoned eggs but the following week they were transformed into tiny chicks, so they must have been incubated while the first brood chick was being fed! A full description is being drafted for a note to British Birds.

I have also been using the LED/web camera attached to a notebook or laptop computer as an inspection tool for a wide range of other awkward nests, ranging from Long-tailed Tit to Tawny Owl (the latter requires attaching the business end to a long stick and having 5m extension cables so that the operator can look at the contents on the ground while the camera is up in tree holes or nestboxes). The most outrageous nest this kit has been used for was a Wood Duck, initially located in April but inspected at the beginning of May when at least 5 eggs could be counted. Not only is this a good 'atlas' record, it is also the first ever Nest Record Scheme entry for this species!

All the data from our nest-finding activities get fed into the BTO Nest Record Scheme if you are interested in participating in our activities next year please contact Carl Barimore carl.barimore@bto.org 07879 052 337.

From the Chairman

Peter Herkenrath

In May, I spent three weeks in Nairobi, Kenya, attending a series of conferences of the Convention on Biological Diversity, an international treaty under the United Nations. A global report on the status of the natural world, the *Global Biodiversity Outlook*, was launched during the conferences. It makes rather grim reading, with ecosystems and species in serious decline all around the globe. This is particularly visible in large parts of Africa, where rainforests, wetlands and savanna are under intense pressure from human use and climate change. While in Nairobi, I annoyingly missed the Club's indoor meeting *Into Africa: Where do our migrants spend the winter?* with talks from Phil Atkinson of BTO and Danaë Sheehan of RSPB. I understand that they made the point that conservation of many of our migratory birds has to extend from Britain to their migration routes and wintering grounds. For this reason, the Club has entered into a partnership with a local bird club in northern Burkina Faso, the former Upper Volta. The Oursi Bird Club, part of NATURAMA (the BirdLife International partner organisation in Burkina Faso), works with local communities at the remote Lake Oursi to ensure palearctic migrants – such as our logo bird the Black-tailed Godwit - as well as local breeding birds can continue using this internationally important wetland. BTO and RSPB now work with NATURAMA and our friends at Oursi and undertake research on the use of the area by palearctic migrants. We regularly report on the activities at Oursi, including on the BTO/RSPB work, on the Oursi blog on our website.

At the Nairobi conferences in May, I had the pleasure to meet some of Africa's conservationists, including those from the network of BirdLife partner organisations. It is impressive to hear about their amazing efforts often under very difficult circumstances. The results of their work are that many Important Bird Areas, such as Oursi, are in improved condition, not least for the benefits of our migratory birds. Our indoor meeting in September will start with an Extraordinary General Meeting when Council will ask members for a change in constitution allowing us to address bird conservation beyond Cambridgeshire. Please see the invitation and the rationale elsewhere in this and the previous Bulletin. I hope that the Club will continue to contribute to a better knowledge of our avifauna, in order to ensure appropriate measures for conserving our birds, at their breeding grounds, staging sites and wintering areas.

By the way, while in Nairobi, I found very little time for birdwatching but spent half a day in Nairobi National Park. It was packed with birds and mammals and I worked hard to identify the species. I failed on many occasions, most larks and cisticolas being way too challenging for my little knowledge of African birds. It was too late to encounter any palearctic migrants but I thoroughly enjoyed the diversity of species. And even in the middle of busy Nairobi there was always something to note. For example the Black Kites that tried to grab food from our breakfast tables in the courtyard of our hotel, happily tolerated by the waiters and waitresses. Birds never fail to amaze us!



ATLAS UPDATE

Louise Bacon for the Research Committee

This bulletin should reach you just in time to spend an autumn evening or two planning your final year's input to the BTO atlas project. The final winter of fieldwork starts at the beginning of November. Whilst we are fine in terms of meeting the national atlas targets, there is still work to do if we are to get a realistic assessment of coverage for the county. There are gaps everywhere, even in Cambridge – this is because a few people who signed up originally have been unable to complete their squares and they are now flagged again as available.

If you have signed up for a timed tetrad but not yet submitted data please let me know whether you will be doing it this season or that you will not be able to manage it. Perhaps you have actually done the TTV but it's still sitting in your notebook. Please keep me informed of any problems and add your counts to the BTO atlas system.

There are some interesting birds out there, in the small woods and farmland of the less populated parts of the county. Why not team up with a couple of friends and go out and take a couple of squares each, make a bit of a contest out of it to see who can come up with most species?

Planning is underway for the production of a county atlas publication at the end of this project – those doing fieldwork might even get a discount! Further updates on this and a formal request for people interested in the publication side will be made next year, but signing up to participate in the final year of fieldwork is just one way to get your name in the list of those who participated!

So, take a look at what tetrads are available near you and make your birding trips count.

Notice of an Extraordinary General Meeting

There will be an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club to take place before the Indoor Meeting on Friday September 10th (usual start time of 8pm). Council proposes an Amendment to the Constitution.

'A.4 of the Constitution to read: 'the education of the public in the study and conservation of the avifauna in particular in the county of Cambridgeshire but not exclusively.' (Currently A4 is worded: 'the promotion of the conservation of birds within the County.')

Rationale

At the 2010 AGM it was pointed out that the Council's decision to use some of its funds to support the Oursi Bird Club in Burkina Faso might breach the aims of the Club as defined in the Constitution. The Charity Commission was approached and came up with the wording of the Amendment that Council is putting before members. At the same time, at the AGM, the use of Club funds for purposes outside the county was challenged by some members and Council agreed to discuss the matter. At a recent Council meeting it was resolved that Council supported the use of the majority of the Club's special Fund to help finance the County Bird Atlas, and that no further payments to the Oursi Bird Club were envisaged. The change to the wording of the Constitution should therefore not be seen as opening the door to similar payments to causes beyond the County, although it may be that Council will wish to support the Bob Scott Appeal, which also has an African focus. The EGM will give the opportunity for members to discuss these matters further.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2010

CBC CONFERENCE: FARMING AND BIRD CONSERVATION

in collaboration with the British Trust for Ornithology and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Saturday 16th October: Cottenham Village College

Sunday 17th October: Farm visits in Cambridgeshire

Farming is of fundamental importance to us all for food production. In the UK, 75% of land is farmed, so farming practices have major impacts on birds and other wildlife. Our conference will provide an opportunity for birders and farmers to meet and hear about the present situation of farmland birds and their conservation.

Over three sessions on Saturday 16th October we will be informed and entertained by speakers from the British Trust for Ornithology, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other organisations. Our speakers will cover the historical background to the present state of farming and farmland birds and other wildlife, research on farmland bird populations, and how farmers and others are working to conserve farmland birds.

On Sunday 17th October there will be an opportunity to visit several working farms in the county to learn how the land is managed for both agriculture and to enhance its value for wildlife. The farms have been chosen to reflect the varied nature of farming in the county. Information on the sites can be found on their websites:

Countryside Restoration Trust Farm, Barton – www.livingcountryside.org.uk/larkrise.htm

RSPB Hope Farm, Knapwell – www.rspb.org.uk/community/blogs/hopefarm

Park Farm, Thorney – www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/spotlight/michaelsly.asp

Shropshire Group, Hainey Farm, Soham - www.gs-growers.co.uk/ukgrowers/detail.asp?ItemID=14

INDOOR MEETINGS

Friday 10th September Cottenham Village College

Birds of the Russian Far East by Chris Collins

Chris Collins has been a freelance bird and wildlife guide for a number of years. Focusing on the Kuril and Commander Islands and Kamchatka Peninsula this talk discusses one of his favourite parts of the world – the Russian Far East, an area that very few birders have been to.

Friday 8th October Cottenham Village College

The Rutland Water Osprey Reintroduction Project by Tim Mackrill

Tim has managed the project since 2005. This talk will cover the full story of the project – from the translocation of young Ospreys from Scotland to satellite tracking of migration and the first successful nests in central England for more than 150 years.

FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

We welcome the following new members – Doug Mackay of Bluntisham.

Bruce Martin

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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

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 early October 2010, covering July/August 2010

GOOD BIRDING!