

# CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB

*Bulletin* No. 414



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

## Welcome to the January/February 2011 Bulletin

Inside this edition you will find the usual systematic listing of birds seen in the period, in the "Recent Bird Reports", written for this period by Mark Hawkes.

You can also read about Duncan Poyser's eloquent overview of his local patch, the "Ely10", and Stuart Elsom's encounter with the rare Ring-billed Gull.

Then there is our latest report from Oursi which includes bird counts undertaken at Lake Oursi in Burkina Faso, work that was supported from December 2009 to June 2010 by the Cambridgeshire Bird Club. For those who are hooked on bird surveys there are thankfully still four more months of the Bird Atlas Survey remaining to allow you to go out and find those birds. In order to check out how to obtain as much breeding evidence as possible, see Louise Bacon's article on page 10.

And for those who wish to attend an outdoor meeting, please note that there are some that need to be booked as early as possible to ensure a place, as numbers will be limited (pages 10&11).

Finally we would all like to thank Duncan Poyser for his editorship of the Bulletin and also his input to the research committee over the past few years. Congratulations to Duncan and Angela regarding their new-born baby girl Erin.

*From the Editor*

*Great Grey Shrike by Ben Green*



## RECENT BIRD REPORTS – JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011

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.

[For the newer members, the counts of many wildfowl species are made according to the maximum count per month, often *via* WeBS. For instance, Barnacle Geese (10,-) would refer to a maximum of 10 in January and none in February].

During this period, some of the coldest weather in recent history took a grip over much of the Country, but despite much snow and frost, there was little evidence of hard-weather movements of birds, which has previously been a feature of very cold winters.

Peak counts of **Little** and **Great Crested Grebes** both came from Grafham Water; 28 of the former and 58 of the latter both in January – the latter count is very low for this species, especially given the cold weather – perhaps many left the county for continental Europe or the coast. A **Red-necked Grebe** was also present at Grafham Water from Jan 2nd into March and a **Black-necked Grebe** was here on Jan 18th. **Cormorant** counts were also low, but by the end of February up to 54 were already sitting on nests on Ouse Washes. The cold weather did produce a widespread scattering of **Bittern** sightings, with reports so far from 12 sites; peak counts included 4 at Kingfishers Bridge and 3 at Fen Drayton Lakes. **Little Egrets** were recorded at 24 widespread sites; peak counts came from Grafham Water (9, 8), Waterbeach (5,-) and Ouse Fen (2,5); all other counts were of 1-4 birds. There was also an unconfirmed report of a **Great Egret** at Fen Drayton Lakes on Feb 27th. **Grey Herons** peak 10 at Grafham Water on Jan 16th.

The largest count of **Bewick’s Swans** was c.380 near Ely BF on Jan 15th, with the only other reports coming from Kingfishers Bridge (up to 17) and Great Fen (3). **Whooper Swan** records included 30+ over Elm on Feb 25th and up to 24 at Great Fen; smaller numbers were seen at Brampton GP, Kingfishers Bridge and Wicken Fen [no counts received from the RSPB reserves at Nene or Ouse Washes for either wild swan species]. The only report of **Tundra Bean Goose** was a group of 11 at Nene Washes briefly on Jan 20th. Wild **Pink-footed Geese** included 7 over Ouse Washes on Jan 2nd, 2 at Fen Drayton Lakes on Jan 13th and 3 here on Feb 13<sup>th</sup>, with perhaps the same 3 at Hilton on Feb 5th. Singles at Kingfishers Bridge and around Waterbeach

were perhaps of questionable origin. Groups of **White-fronted Geese** included 28 at Mare Fen on Jan 1st, 22 on Ouse Washes on 2nd, 2 at Buckden Marina on 3rd, 3 at Fen Drayton Lakes from 13th, which increased to 6 on 22nd, and 7 on 23rd, with a single also at Roswell Pits on Jan 29th. **Barnacle Geese** were seen at Hinxton Hall (10,-), Kingfishers Bridge (1,-) and Cam Washes (-,1). A **Brent Goose** was at Tanholt GP on Jan 8<sup>th</sup>, and **Egyptian Geese** counts came from Berry Fen (8,-), Cam Washes (-,1), Earith (-,3), Fen Drayton Lakes (8,3), Kingfishers Bridge (3,-), Milton CP (3,-), Ouse Washes (1,-) and Wicken Fen (-,2). **Shelducks** peaked at 35 at Grafham Water on Feb 13th, with reports from 7 other sites.

The only report of **Mandarin** came from what now appears to be the county strong-hold for this species, Wimpole Park, where just 2 were seen. This species seems to be declining within the county (contra to other areas of England, *c.f. Brit. Birds* 104: 116). The highest counts of common wildfowl included; **Eurasian Wigeon** at Wicken Fen (808, 560), **Gadwall** at Milton CP (144,-), **Eurasian Teal** at Wicken Fen (582, 170), **Mallard** at Grafham Water (572, 340), **Northern Pintail** at Ouse Washes (-,200) and Mare Fen (21,-) and reports of 1-8 at 8 sites, **Northern Shoveler** at Grafham Water (215, 81) and Kingfishers Bridge (-,118), **Common Pochard** at Block Fen (-,97), Milton CP (46,-) and Waterbeach GP (45,-), **Tufted Duck** at Grafham Water (1054, 458), **Goldeneye** at Grafham Water (118, 114) and Paxton Pits (108,-) with reports from just 3 other sites for this species, and **Goosander** at Grafham Water (21, 15) and Bainton GP (10,-) with reports of 1-6 from 6 additional sites.

Scarcer wildfowl included **Red-crested Pochard** at Grafham Water, with peaks of 7 on Jan 1st and 5 on 18th, Ouse Fen 3 on Feb 13th and singles at Barleycraft GP on Jan 14th and Wicken Fen on Jan 20th. **Greater Scaup** were represented at Grafham Water with 3 from 2010, increasing to 4 on Jan 8th, and 5 from Feb 12th, singles were also seen at

Roswell Pits on Jan 9th, with the same at Ely BF on Jan 15th, and another at Milton CP from Jan 16th to Feb 1st. The only **Common Scoter** was a female at Grafham Water from Feb 2nd to 3rd. The peak count of **Smew** was 34 at Barleycraft GP on Feb 3rd; just one short of the county record from Feb 1956. Other sites logged counts as follows; Grafham Water (13, 1), Fen Drayton Lakes (5, 5), Waterbeach Pits (3,-) and a single at River Lane GP in January. The only **Red-breasted Merganser** was a female that flew south over Melbourn on Jan 1st. The decline (or extermination) of **Ruddy Ducks** continues, with 8 at Grafham Water and a single at Fen Drayton Lakes.

On the raptor front, **Red Kites** were seen at 20 sites, with all counts of 1-4 birds, except for 6 in the west of the county. **Marsh Harriers** were seen at 16 sites, with all counts of 1-5, except for 7 at Wicken Fen in late-Feb. Hen Harriers appeared at 8 sites, with up to 3 roosting at Little Wilbraham Fen in February and Wicken Fen during both months. Two were seen at Woodwalton Fen and singles were recorded at Chatteris, Grunty Fen, Nene Washes, Barleycraft GP and Ouse Fen. A **Rough-legged Buzzard** was reported at Swaffham Prior Fen on Jan 3rd and Kingfishers Bridge on Feb 22nd. All the reports of **Merlin** were of singles apart from two at Fowlmere that included an adult male (15 sites) – it seems birds gathering to roost in small numbers may well be a thing of the past now. In contrast though, **Peregrines** continue to increase throughout the county; all reports were of 1-2 birds, but from 25 sites.

Game birds were poorly reported, although a count of 30 **Grey Partridges** at Little Wilbraham Fen was encouraging. The largest count of **Common Moorhens** was 74 along the River Cam (between Owlstone Croft and Chesterton). **Common Coots** were concentrated at the larger water bodies during the freezing conditions, with the largest counts from Grafham Water (1300, 947). Two **Common Cranes** were still around the Nene Washes during both months.

The first **Oystercatchers** were reported at Grafham Water on Feb 3rd, with a peak of 4 at Fen Drayton Lakes on Feb 27<sup>th</sup>. **Pied Avocets** were seen at Grafham Water on Feb 13th and 25th, and a group of 3 **Ringed Plovers** were at Ouse Washes on Feb 28th. **European Golden Plovers** were only reported in small numbers,

with 2000 at Ouse Washes on Feb 17th and 1100 near Ely BP on Feb 27th, and **Northern Lapwings** in even smaller numbers – probably both affected by heavy snow cover on arable fields. Likewise, **Dunlins** were only seen at 3 sites, with the peak being just 8 at Nene Washes, and **Ruff** were only seen at Ouse Fen on Feb 6th and 5 at Nene Washes on Feb 12th. **Jack Snipes** were very thin on the ground, with records from just 4 sites of 1-2 birds, and the peak count of **Common Snipe** was 18 at Ouse Fen on Feb 13th. As is often the case with **Eurasian Woodcock**, the biggest count was made by beaters during a shoot, c.15 at Kingfishers Bridge on Jan 8th; all other counts were of just 1-2 birds. **Black-tailed Godwits** were also only present in small numbers, with 120 at Fen Drayton Lakes and 30 at Ouse Fen both on Feb 27th. **Eurasian Curlews** were seen at 6 sites, with the maxima being 4 at Kingfishers Bridge on Feb 24th, a **Common Greenshank** was seen at Grafham Water on Jan 13th (a similar date to one in 2010; also during a very cold snap) and 1-2 **Green Sandpipers** were seen at 7 sites.

All the records of **Mediterranean Gulls** were of singles birds, at Cottenham (Long Drove), Grafham Water, Milton Tip, Fen Drayton Lakes and Ferry Meadows CP. As is typical for the time of year, **Yellow-legged Gulls** were only recorded in single figure counts, and there were just as many reports of **Caspian Gulls** (again, all of 1-2 birds). The only **Iceland Gull** roosted at Grafham Water on Feb 6th; and different **Glaucous Gulls** were logged here on Jan 2nd (a juvenile), 9th (an adult) and 15th and 16th (a 2nd-winter). What was surely the same adult was also seen on Ouse Washes on Jan 16th.

The largest count of **Rock** (or more precisely, **Feral**) **Pigeons** was 110 at Wisbech on Feb 28th and some encouraging counts of **Stock Doves** included 164 at Block Fen on Feb 17th and 150 at Ouse Washes on Feb 5th. **Woodpigeon** counts included 2200 at Comberton on Feb 7th. Many **Barn Owls** were reported, including 4 at Kingfishers Bridge, but **Long-eared Owls** were recorded at just one site (up to 4 birds). **Short-eared Owls** were noted from 12 sites, with a notable count of 10 on the Great Fen west of Woodwalton Fen on Feb 14th.

**Common Kingfishers** were reported at just 7 sites – it might be that this species will have

fared poorly during the very cold weather, so reports during the spring will be interesting. **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** were seen at 5 widespread locations, including some drumming. The biggest group of **Skylarks** was just 50 at Fen Drayton Lakes on Jan 14th (this species being susceptible to the same problems faced by European Golden Plover and Lapwings). Single **Water Pipits** were seen at 3 sites and **Grey Wagtails** at 5 sites, whilst 90 **Pied Wagtails** were seen around Wisbech port area.

The large-scale **Bohemian Waxwing** influx continued (or at least more birds were being found in other areas), being recorded from 43 sites (not including a number of different sites within Cambridge, Huntingdon and Peterborough). Numbers were greatest in the north and east of the county, with peak counts including 160 in Werrington, 110 in Cambridge, 109 over Wisbech, 90 in Huntingdon and 85 at Oakington – a fuller analysis should be possible when all records for the winter of 2010/11 have been received.

A **Black Redstart** was seen in a Cambridge garden on Jan 28th, but strangely, **Stonechats** were only reported in 1's and 2's from just 6 sites. Easily the largest count of **Fieldfares** was between 6000-8000 roosting at a Wisbech site on Jan 5th, and **Redwings** peaked at Elm with 600 on Jan 31st and 500 at Wicken Fen on Jan 5th.

**Cetti's Warblers** were at 9 sites during the period, with 6 at Fen Drayton Lakes and 4 at Wicken Fen – hopefully the cold spell won't have taken too much of a toll on this explosive songster. The two other wintering warbler species (**Blackcap** and **Chiffchaff**) were only reported as 1-2 birds at just a handful of sites, although 7 were ringed in a Hauxton garden. The highest count of **Goldcrests** was 8 around Grafham Water on Jan 8th. A single **Firecrest** was in an urban Cambridge location from Jan 31st to Feb 1st. **Bearded Tits** were seen at Ouse Fen (2 on Jan 23rd), Kingfishers Bridge (2 on Feb 15th and 27th), Grafham Water (on Feb 20th) and Wicken Fen (on Feb 20th and 22nd). **Marsh Tits** were seen at a number of locations, with peaks of 7 at Holland Wood and 6 at Upton Wood, and an impressive 20 **Coal Tits** were at Upton Wood on Jan 18th.

An over-wintering **Great Grey Shrike** usually helps to pass the colder winter days, and one was a nice surprise at the Countryside

Restoration Trust site at Barton from Jan 2nd to Feb 28th at least. Sadly, **House Sparrows** were reported from just 3 sites (peak count of 53 in Melbourn) – clearly, despite its rapid decline throughout the UK, observers still see this as a common species; all counts are welcome. **Tree Sparrows** were seen at 10 widespread sites, with double-figure counts at Leighton Bromswold (25), Ouse Washes visitor's centre (35) and Catworth (12); many others were seen at garden feeders. **Chaffinches** reached a high of 170 at Melbourn on New Year's Day, and by far the best count of **Brambling** was 70 at Maxey GP on Jan 9th, with 10 at Southorpe on Feb 22nd being the only other double-figure record (all the others involved 1-3 birds). The biggest charm of **European Goldfinches** was 105 at Colne on Jan 25th, and an impressive 55 were seen on a garden feeding station at Elm on Jan 31st. **Common Linnet** flocks too made it into 3-figure counts at Melbourn (110) and Ouse Fen (105). It's been a good winter for **Eurasian Siskins**, with many small flocks being seen all over the county – the best count was a massive 450 at Ferry Meadows CP on Feb 25th (a new county record). Nationally, it's been a good winter too for **Redpolls** (of various forms and species – depending on where your opinion lies!). Cambridgeshire was graced with small groups in many areas, including 80 at Bainton GP on Jan 4th and 45 at Bevil's Wood on Jan 18th. However, mobile flocks are not always readily pinned-down to race, and on Jan 6th it became apparent that there were some 60 **Mealy Redpolls** present at Bainton GP, easily out-numbering **Lesser Redpolls** (although in other areas of the county, Lesser Redpolls remained the more common form – or perhaps this was the assumption being made about birds seen too briefly to identifying specifically!). Two diligent observers also made the skilful discovery of **Arctic Redpolls** (both considered to be of the *exilipes* race, and often associated with influxes of **Mealy Redpolls**). The first was at Bainton GP amongst the large number of **Mealy Redpolls** on Jan 6th, and the other was found at the "Arctic-roll" hot-spot of Woodwalton Fen on Jan 9th (also in the company of 11 **Mealy Redpolls**). Other Mealy Redpolls included 25 at Great Shelford on Jan 7th, and 1-2 birds at Grafham Water, Wicken Fen, Newnham and Dry Drayton. The only **Common Crossbill** report came from Bevil's Wood on Jan 18th.

Winter flocks of buntings included 240+ **Yellowhammers** at Heydon on Jan 16th, 100 at Melbourn on Jan 23rd and 78 at Comberton on Jan 18th. **Reed Buntings** were again noted roosting in impressive numbers at Fowlmere NR, with 880 on Jan 28th and 300 around Melbourn on Jan 1st. The biggest of British buntings, the **Corn Bunting**, was noted at 13 sites, with flocks of 100 at Haslingfield on Feb 16th, and 80 at Fowlmere during the latter half of January, 60 at Coveney on Feb 1<sup>st</sup>, and 60 at Woodwalton Fen on 15th.

A selection of escapees included **Black Swan** and **Wood Duck** in Cambridge, the usual **Ross's Goose** around Waterbeach and Wicken Fen throughout, a **Hooded Merganser** at Great Chesterford on Jan 15th, female **Common Eider** at Comberton on Feb 6th (noted to be missing primaries), a **Crested Duck** still around St. Ives, a **Greater Flamingo** at Ouse Fen on Feb 1st (latter seen in Norfolk and previously seen in Bedfordshire), a **Harris Hawk** at Kingfishers Bridge from Jan 18th to 31st, and the **Trumpeter Swan** still at Burwell Lode on Feb 12th. Hybrids included a presumed **Tufted Duck x Common Pochard** at Grafham Water on Jan 2nd and the drake

**Baikal Teal-type** (considered probably Baikal Teal x Chestnut Teal by Joern Lehmhus) at Cambourne on Jan 18th and then at Milton CP on Jan 19th and Feb 3rd to 20th.

*The Recent Reports were compiled and written by Mark Hawkes, assisted by Doug Radford.*

**Contributors:** Colin Addington, Jake Allsop, Jacqui Ann, Louise Bacon, Richard Bayldon, Rowena Baxter, Malcolm Busby, Steve Brown, James Cadbury, Michael Crosby, Roger Coey, Steve Cooper, Robin Cox, Mike Foley, John Harding, Dean Harlow, Mark Hawkes, Peter Herkenrath, Graham Hiron, David Hollin, Jonathan Hook, Bob Humphreys, Andrew Knight, Colin Kirtland, John Le Gassick, Vince Lea, John Lindsell, Tony Mallyon, Owen & Monica Marks, Dave Millard, Mark Missin, Darren Oakley-Martin, Roger Orbell, Robert Pople, Michael Price, Doug Radford, Mike Redshaw, Tony Roberts, Stephen Roughley, Nigel Russell, Ian Seamark, Clive Sinclair, Nigel Sprowell, John Slack, Chris Thorne, P M Warrington, John Wells and Mick Whitehouse. Also, selective records were taken from the CBC website.

Thanks to the contributors to the CBC database Jan-Feb 2011



## Birding the "Ely10"

*Duncan Poyser*

The gothic cathedral, the ship of the fen, makes the ancient market town of Ely something special. Nudging that bit closer towards the heavens in a sky already pressing the land to impossible flatness, this monolithic construction marks the centre of the Ely10. Within 10 miles of this point, the kind of folk who want to can savour some of the finest birding experiences in Britain.

I have worked local patches for 25 years from the Ings and Headlands of Yorkshire to the Capes and Straths of Northern Scotland, the silt filled harbours of New Zealand to concrete lined London reservoirs. Each patch has offered opportunities to experience the land and seasons with intimacy, awe and expectation. My very favourite patches have offered rich experiential rewards, elements of wilderness and the potential to dream of what the future may bring. The Ely10 delivers all of these in abundance.

Spoilt for choice, I found it hard to focus on one specific patch when I settled in Ely and as a result I often visit several local sites within a birding session. Uncharitably I used to call this "fatbirding" as there's lots of checking of smaller areas, easily accessible areas of habitat and little in the way of sustained aerobic exercise. Recently I was fortunate to be invited to join a friend visiting one of the few living legends of UK birding, DIM Wallace, and we were treated to a "fatbirding" tour around his Staffordshire patch, I have since taken to using his more romantic notion of a "safari" and my trips now feel that bit more decadent and a little less lazy.

I have not as yet drawn the perfect circle on a map although I do use an old, mud stained shoe lace, calibrated and cut to length, on the odd occasion when I need to clarify whether a site is in or out of the 10. Sweeping the shoe lace like a second hand over the map the Ely10 stretches out to the dark

fens of Chatteris, Welney, Shippea Hill, Brandon Creek, clipping the chalky soils south of Isleham, the parkland of Chippenham and Exning and back across the flatlands of Reach, Waterbeach, Cottenham, Willingham and Earith. The Fen folk would call this area *hoooge* and it is certainly large enough to offer endless discovery and rich enough to satisfy almost all of my birding needs.

The great 19<sup>th</sup> Century nature man and existentialist Henry David Thoreau believed "*A man's interest in a single bluebird is worth more than a complete but dry list of the fauna and flora of a town*". Fostering this ideal I try my best to steer clear of lists but there is a remnant twitcher embedded in the recesses of my psyche that craves the collection. Event birding, the discovery, identification and subsequent collection of rare and scarce birds sightings by the masses certainly typifies the interests of the last three generations of amateur field ornithologists, and here follows my own grubby little list of delicious moments from just five years residency in the Ely10.

Black-necked Grebe, Goshawk, Rough-legged Buzzard, Pallid Harrier, Honey Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, Osprey, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, Night Heron, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Purple Heron, White Stork, Common Crane, Spotted Crake, Squacco Heron, Bean Goose, American Wigeon, Long-tailed Duck, Wilson's Phalarope, Pectoral Sandpiper, Dotterel, American Golden Plover, Stone Curlew, Collared Pratincole, Temminck's Stint, White-winged Black Tern, Caspian Tern, Great Skua, Laughing Gull, Iceland Gull, Glaucous Gull, Barred Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Firecrest, Bluethroat, Great Grey Shrike, Raven, Golden Oriole, Waxwing, Ring Ouzel, Black Redstart and Lapland Bunting.

Some of these birds I stumbled upon myself, some I worked hard for, but most I saw thanks to birders with keen eyes, ears and honed fieldcraft willing to share their discoveries. I would like to thank them now for finding these birds that I have enjoyed so much.

The beauty of birding any restricted area is that every sighting has its local context. Such a highlight came when BTO atlas work revealed a couple of hidden acres of woodland where both Marsh Tit and Nuthatch were vocal. Despite ever increasing sightings and expanding range I am yet to latch eyes upon a Red Kite in the 10; it has become a quiet obsession imagining this first encounter. OCD levels of skywatching have produced a few very, very distant birds that "*must have been.....*" but not the definitive, a bird that allows itself to be drunk in and held as a moment burned in memory, an entirety of location, light, plumage, shape and form. Pessimism, or experience, tells me my first good Ely10 Red Kite is most likely to be a brief but adequate view from a moving car, on my way to work with drizzle imminent but I always dream of that low drifting wanderer over the garden one glorious spring morning.

So what of these claims of the finest birding experiences in Britain? There is no coastline so the heady stink and clamour of the seabird metropolis is out, as is the swirling smoke clouds of estuarine waders. Ancient woodland there is not and rolling upland only when blurring your eyes at the horizon and turning the clouds into snow-capped munros. The experiences I speak of are subtler, and less likely to be found on a reserve information board. They are subjective and unique to the fens because it is always there. The Fen, a character of its own, omnipresent, hung in suspended animation, quietly battling, immersed in its own wet memories, secure in the knowledge that eventually, beyond the scope of any living generation it will re-drench, quench it's thirst and become untamed once again. I love it; others do not, although few are ambivalent to the big skies and linear challenges.

The closest to holding the essence of birding the fen is to imagine or, if you are lucky enough, remember, the feeling on a still May dawn. The sun is pinking the eastern horizon; a layer of smudgy mist hangs a few feet above the ground. Above the trembling vibrance of a Wren solo and the meandering sweetness of Blackcap chorus, the Poplar leaves rattle just a little, the Woodpigeons coo a gentle throbbing lullaby, and in sublime, snatched seconds the fluid honey of Golden Oriole song drips from the trees.

I feel it still in the electrified evenings along the Ouse where the Grasshopper Warblers join the crickets in percussing the flight of the hunting Barn Owls and Marsh Harriers, while distantly a Bittern booms an occasional bass. In the winter it's in the cacophonous trumpeting of wild swans, excitable whistles of Wigeon and giggling Godwits; and in spring the same floodlands reverberate to the rolling displays of Lapwing, incessant Redshank, and juddering Snipe. Out on the arable it's the Yellow Wagtails canary-like amongst the winter wheat, a Wheatear perpendicular to the soil, Corn Buntings jangling their tune beneath the Skylarks to accompany my religious scouring of furrow for the striped crown of migrant Dotterel.

To quote Thoreau again: "*Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing it's not fish they are after*". Whatever it is that I'm after by birding the Ely10, I'm very glad that I've found it.

# Ring-billed Gull in St. Neots

Stuart Elsom

The weather in the days between Christmas and New Year had been incredibly cold and the area around Barford Pocket Park in St. Neots where we regularly walk our dog was frozen. This was not a bad thing, as regular visits had produced sightings of up to three Bitterns in the reeds and a previous chance meeting with my old chum Richard Bashford a few days beforehand had resulted in a Cetti's Warbler scolding us from the very same reedbed. That day, the 2nd January, I'd hoped to get some shots of one of the Bitterns, but they were not playing ball. However, I had my camera with me, and that proved an excellent decision in the few minutes that followed.

Whilst walking back from the park mid afternoon, I was drawn to some frenzied gull activity on the lake by the marina; the cause for the excitement was a resident who'd thoughtfully thrown some food scraps over their balcony and out onto the ice for the birds. The flock totalled about 55 birds, mainly Black-headed but with about seven Common Gulls also present.

Whilst watching the birds I noticed that one had a heavier bill, with an apparent well-defined blackish ring. Knowing the pitfalls that well marked second-winter (in particular male) Common Gulls can cause, I decided to pay closer attention and tried comparing it with the nearby Common Gulls. Over the next five minutes I photographed the bird as it chased back and forth and occasionally entered the melee on the ice. Zooming in on the back of the camera I noted that it had marginally paler mantle and wings than Common Gull and that the bill was indeed 'ringed', and apparently broader and less tapering than Common Gull. As fanciful and daft as it seemed I was starting to think Ring-billed but something was not quite right.

Over the past 15 years I have been very fortunate to have seen thousands of Ring-billed Gulls whilst leading tours to various parts of North America, but two features I knew well from my experience of the species were not visible on this bird and this concerned me. There was no doubting the age as a second-winter due to the amount of black in the primaries and primary coverts, but this bird did not exhibit a pale iris and it had a wholly white tail. My previous field experience told me that at the very least it should show some retained black immature feathering in the tail band and certainly a pale eye. Well after a few more minutes this dilemma became academic as the bird flew off with the other gulls and was lost to view.

We were due out by 5pm so we got changed and went out – the mystery gull bugging me all evening. As soon as I got home I emailed a selection of the images to some respected gull experts, effectively asking their opinion on a bird which I thought showed some good characters of Ring-billed. A couple of nights later I received confirmation that my bird was indeed a second-winter Ring-billed Gull with my colleague from Sunbird, Killian Mullarney, putting my mind at rest regarding the two apparent anomalies, as follows: *"In my opinion, this looks absolutely fine for a 2w Ring-billed, a significant minority of which do not have any dark traces in the tail and many of which are still dark-eyed at this stage in their development"*.

Whilst still awaiting responses on the bird's ID I visited the area the following day and there was no sign of the bird. I later learned that a probable 2w Ring-billed had been seen in Bedfordshire but was not confirmed due to the distance and brevity of observation - maybe my bird? We will never know for sure.

I am very grateful for the detailed information I have received back from my knowledgeable colleagues in Cambs, namely Steve Cooper, Richard Patient and Dick Newell, all of whom concurred with Killian's statement. Steve also emailed me a scanned copy of a bird he'd photographed at the Hayle, Cornwall in October 1985 which showed a dark (brownish) iris and a wholly white tail.

This bird represents the fourth record for Cambs. Previous records were at Grafham in October 1991, Godmanchester in January 2003, and Landbeach in October of the same year. I missed the first Cambs record as I was on Scilly for two weeks and once back home I had a choice; the fifth Desert Warbler for the UK in Yorkshire or a Ring-billed Gull at Grafham - hmmm. Now, some 20 years later, I know I made the right choice that autumn day!

## From the Chairman

*Peter Herkenrath*

This is the first Bulletin solely produced by Mike Foley, who has taken over from Duncan Poyser as Bulletin Editor. I am very grateful for Duncan's hard and efficient work, which has included a well-received change to the format of the bimonthly bird report. My thanks go to Mike for volunteering for this position - I wish him all the best with this important work for the Club.

We have just had the Annual General Meeting which has concluded my first year as Chairman of the Club. I have found the Club in good health, with an actively engaged membership. I have met many members and have learned about many activities for the Club that take place in the background, away from any spotlight. I am grateful to everyone who helps the Club in whatever way.

A collection at the end of the talk by Christoph Zöckler following the AGM resulted in £120 for the conservation of Spoon-billed Sandpiper, an impressive amount, which will support the efforts to save this critically endangered species from extinction.

The Annual Report 2009 is out now and by the time you are reading this you will have had the chance to enjoy it. I have heard many good words about it and I would like to thank and congratulate everyone who was involved with its production and distribution, including the Editor John Clark, authors, proof readers, artists and those who oversee the production and distribution. This year we are implementing some measures that will hopefully lead to an earlier publication of the 2010 Annual Report, while maintaining the high quality.

Besides all the ongoing activities, the Club's top priority project is the conclusion of the field work for the atlas and the publication of the Cambridgeshire atlas (Page 9). But we are also looking into new areas.

Council has recently discussed closer collaboration with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), which was established in 1969 by a group of forward thinking farmers who were concerned about the dramatic loss of habitat and wildlife as a result of the ever increasing intensification of farming methods. FWAG is a registered charity, operating throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It assists farmers and other people who manage the countryside by providing environmental management expertise, so food produced in the UK can be grown profitably at the same time as improving our countryside and the native wildlife which can be sustained and protected for future generations to enjoy. Council is exploring ways for the Club to work closely with FWAG, and for its members to establish close working relationships with individual farmers. In due course we shall, hopefully, be seeking volunteers to take a long-term interest in the bird life on their local farms by recording the bird populations associated with inevitable agricultural changes. Watch this space!

At the time of writing (mid March), we are in the middle of the transition between winter and spring. I saw a flock of Waxwings in Cambridge today and have seen many Fieldfares over the last days. But the first Sand Martins and singing Chiffchaffs have already been reported, and I look forward to warmer days and more migratory birds returning from their winter quarters. I hope to meet many members of the Club at our forthcoming meetings, workshops and atlas days (page 10).

### **Oursi bird counts – Report to the Cambridgeshire Bird Club**

As reported earlier, the local Site Support Group supported by Fondation des Amis de la Nature (NATURAMA, BirdLife partner organisation in Burkina Faso) has undertaken bird counts at Lake Oursi in the very north of Burkina Faso, the former Upper Volta. For the period December 2009 to June 2010, this work has been supported by the Cambridgeshire Bird Club. We have received a comprehensive report from NATURAMA about this survey work. Surveys have been undertaken on a monthly basis, with 13 transects covering the lake and the surrounding drylands. The five counts between November 2009 and March 2010 resulted in a total of 265,546 individuals counted in 53 species, including 20 species of wader. For details please see Bulletin 409. During the April count, 50 species were observed with a total of 64,974 individuals. The most numerous species were Fulvous

Whistling-Duck (9033 individuals), Garganey (7138), Cattle Egret (7000), White-faced Whistling Duck (6550), Black-tailed Godwit (5494), Ruff (5221), Purple Gallinule (4961) and Spur-winged Goose (3104).

The survey work in 2009 and 2010 has allowed for an improved understanding of where the priority sites for birds are located in the area. The Site Support Group, which also runs a programme of environmental education focused in particular on school children, will continue the survey work. A copy of the report to the CBC (in French) is available from Peter Herkenrath (see last page for contact details). Please see also the Oursi Partnership blog on our website. BTO and RSPB also work with the Oursi Site Support Group on research on Palearctic migrants; see <http://www.bto.org/support-us/current-appeals/out-africa/projects> for details.

## **Cambridge Conservation Forum Summer Symposium**

The Cambridge Conservation Forum (CCF), of which the Club is a member, will hold its Summer Symposium on Thursday 23rd June at the Judge Business School in Trumpington Street in Cambridge. The symposium will debate what the government's localism agenda might mean for conservation management and nature reserves, share ideas and current good practice around implementing visions and habitat management planning illustrated by case studies, and discuss ways of rising to the challenge of involving/being led by local people. The Club will be represented by a presentation on our atlas work. Club members are welcome to attend. More information at <http://www.cambridgeconservationforum.org.uk> or from Peter Herkenrath.

## **From the Research Committee**

### **Atlas Update Spring 2011**

Thank you for all the efforts over the past few months - winter fieldwork is now finished. It looks like there are only five or six tetrads across the county (out of 950!) which have had NO "winter period" birds at all recorded in them. This is an amazing result and thank you, one and all. Whilst not every tetrad was visited as a timed tetrad visit (TTV) for abundance mapping protocols, the minimum required for this has been achieved, so abundance maps can be produced both nationally by the BTO and locally by us when we come to produce the Atlas.

Before I go on to supply a few details of ways to get involved in the summer, I will briefly mention the Club's records. All the records which you provide to the Club will hopefully also be of use to the atlas. The way we will use these is to work through species by species, separately for winter and summer, and add any data from the Club's records, from 2007 to now, with any holes in the data within the atlas. This will be quite a time consuming process and is definitely a job for more than one person.

The final summer of fieldwork is now ahead of us. There are tetrads which were allocated in the winter which have not been allocated yet for the summer, because some of our volunteers are not always available in the summer too. So, there is always the opportunity to take on one of these part-finished tetrads. The other really big way you can help is by looking for breeding evidence. About 40% of the total species records submitted have no breeding evidence beyond 'possible breeder' assigned to them. It is not difficult to get evidence of confirmed breeding for many species – look for a sparrow disappearing under the corner of a house roof, a great tit entering a box, or a blackbird collecting worms. This sort of information is really important, and you can either submit your record via the BTO atlas website, or submit your record to the club with breeding evidence in the comments field.

The other participatory activities for the summer are repeats of the very effective TTV days held in the winter – it would be useful if those of you who attased this winter (you know who you are!) could volunteer now to cover the same tetrads. Anyone else who wants to spend a morning out with one or more others covering a block of tetrads for an hour in each would be welcome to join in. With help from others, I did about 15 – 20 tetrads to which I have no particular attachment – anyone can do them! The dates we have set for this are May 22nd and June 19th. As timed visits need to be done in

the morning, the afternoon can be used to gather breeding evidence or other species in neighbouring squares if you still have some energy. Please get in touch with Louise if you want to participate in these timed tetrad days. Also, why not join in for one final roving day on 17th July – a chance to add a few last species to those squares still with poor coverage or poor breeding evidence lists. Get in touch with Louise Bacon (see back page) or by email on [cambsbirdatlas@btinternet.com](mailto:cambsbirdatlas@btinternet.com)

The Bird Club is now planning the publication of the county atlas. It hopes to include the maps from the Atlases done 20 years ago as a comparative package with the new data being collected at the moment. Anyone interested in helping with writing species accounts (help and guidance available!) should also get in touch.

## **Rookery Survey**

Last spring we ran a rookery survey. We know we have not published anything about the results of this survey as yet – we apologise for this, and hope to produce a summary later this year, with information on how we hope to take that particular work further.

If anyone wishes to join the research committee, we are on the look-out for someone to join us – we meet informally about three times a year, to plan survey work and prepare results from surveys for the clubs publications. Please get in touch with Louise Bacon or Peter Herkenrath if you think you may have something to offer, especially in the post-atlas phase.

*Louise Bacon*

## **From the County Recorder**

Please consider this the final call for all 2010 records. Please forward them, preferably using the CBC Records spreadsheet, by the end of April.

A number of description species still remain outstanding; a list of which can be found here <http://cambridgebirdclub.org.uk/Records/WIP2010.xls>. If you can help provide a written description for any of these records then please contact me. Regrettably, without a formal submission, these records will not appear in the forth-coming annual report.

*Mark Hawkes*

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2011**

### **OUTDOOR MEETINGS**

#### **Dunkirk Avocets Project Friday 10th June evening (To be confirmed)**

In April 2007 a 3ha scrape was created and flooded in farmland at the hamlet of Dunkirk, near Pymore, Cambridgeshire. Within weeks, islands in the scrape were occupied by breeding waders, including avocets. Tony Martin, owner and manager of this project, will host a visit to the site for CBC members. **BOOKING IS ESSENTIAL** for this evening event. For further details and to book, contact Vicki Harley (see back page for contact details).

#### **Farmland Visits**

Over the spring and summer we are planning to revisit some of the farms that we visited after the CBC Farming and Bird Conservation Conference. Full details will be announced at indoor meetings and appear on the Club website and in future bulletins.

For further details and to book, contact Vicki Harley (see back page for contact details).

## **Woodland – birds morning Sunday 17th April at 07.00am**

If you want to learn more about woodland birds and their elusive ways, such as learning to recognise Marsh Tit song, Treecreeper song and call etc., then Louise Bacon is leading a small-group walk in a special wood at 07.00am on April 17th. If you wish to attend, you need to book a place directly with Louise (see back page for contact details) – numbers are limited to around 12 – and you will then find out where we are going (it will be south-west Cambs...).

## **Birdsong workshop Saturday 14th May at 06.30am at RSPB Fowlmere NR**

As in previous years, the Club is organising a birdsong workshop at Fowlmere Nature Reserve in collaboration with the RSPB. The aim is to help interested birdwatchers to learn how to identify various songbirds by sound. Members and non-members of the Club and the RSPB are welcome. There is no formal charge, but a donation in the reserve collecting box would be appreciated. Meet at 06.30am on Saturday 14th May 2011 in the car park at Fowlmere NR (directions and reserve information can be found at <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves> –click on “F” in the A to Z and scroll to Fowlmere). Please bring binoculars, a pen and paper. The workshop will take place regardless of the weather and is expected to last approximately 4 hours. As numbers will be limited, it is essential to register with Peter Herkenrath (see contact details on back page).

## **“Open Farm Sunday” – an event at a Barway farm 12th June, 10am – 3pm**

Open Farm Sunday is an annual event that gives everyone the chance to meet the farmers who grow our food and care for the countryside. Organised by LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming). G's (the Shropshire family) will be opening Hainey Farm in Barway as part of the nationwide event. Further details are on the CBC website – <http://www.cambridgebirdclub.org.uk/images/HaineyFarm.jpg>.

## **INDOOR MEETINGS**

### **Friday 13th May, Cottenham Village College Falklands, South Georgia and Antarctica Research Cruises by Hugh Venables**

Hugh Venables has been an oceanographer with the British Antarctic Survey for four years, following a PhD at the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton and a maths degree from Cambridge. He has spent almost a year at sea since 2004 on research cruises and volunteering on cetacean and seabird surveys.

Although paid to be a physicist, the decision to go into oceanography was not independent of Hugh's love of seabirds and growing interest in cetaceans and photography. He will follow along research cruise tracks, showing the wildlife encountered at sea and on the Falklands, South Georgia and Antarctic Peninsula. He will also discuss, briefly, some of the issues around the science being carried out on the trips and with associated satellite data.

### **From the Membership Secretary**

We welcome the following new members – Mark Grooms of Ely, Tim Moore of Cambridge, Albert Percival of Hauxton and Ken Smith of Buckden.

*Bruce Martin*

## CLUB CONTACTS

### **Chairman**

#### **Peter Herkenrath**

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

### **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

### **Cambridgeshire Bird Report Editor**

#### **John Clark**

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

### **Indoor Meetings Secretary**

#### **Vicki Harley**

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

### **Bulletin Editor**

#### **Mike Foley**

141 Shelford Road, Trumpington,  
Cambridge, CB2 9ND  
Tel: 01223 561217  
Email: cbcbulletin@cambridgebirdclub.org.uk

### **Other Council Members**

#### **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**

Chris Quy  
5 Guyatt Court  
Burwell, Cambridge, CB25 0DP  
Tel: 01638 743204  
webmaster@cambridgebirdclub.org.uk

### **Ringling Secretary**

#### **Michael Holdsworth**

4(a) Cavendish Avenue, Cambridge, CB1 7US  
Tel: 01223 476643  
Email: m.holdsworth@ntlworld.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 May 7th 2011**

**Please send records by post to: Mike Foley by May 7th 2011**

**Next Bulletin due out early June 2011, covering Mar/Apr 2011**

# GOOD BIRDING!