

# CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB

Bulletin No. 422



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

## Welcome to the May / June 2012 Edition

Writing these notes in hot August sunshine it is easy to put the miserable breeding season to the back of my mind. A quick look through the notebooks as we start to prepare our nest monitoring data for the BTO Nest Record Scheme brings it all back however. Fortunately there were some highlights to go with the disasters, and it is important to record all the ups and downs with equal rigour and hope for a return to the productive conditions that we have seen in the previous two springs. This is another rather delayed issue of the club bulletin, with a lot of pressure on the members who contribute to running the club being the main cause, with a large burden of work on relatively few people – we are preparing the next annual report as well as starting work on the Atlas. Anyone who can help by taking over compiling the systematic report for future bulletins will be most appreciated. It's quite a nice privilege to see the two months of bird records in detail ahead of anyone else, and selecting the highlights for the bulletin article. With several volunteers involved, duties only come around once a year or so.

The cover illustration is aimed to remind you all of the conference coming up on raptors, to be held at Cottenham Village College on September 29<sup>th</sup>, followed by field trips to county raptor sites, with an autumn raptor watch the week before.

*From the Bulletin Editor*



*Kestrel by Graham Easy*

## RECENT BIRD REPORTS May / June 2012

These are unchecked reports rather than confirmed records, sourced from sightings received by our County Recorder or reported on the 'What's About?' page on the CBC website.

The less said about the weather during the period the better. May was unsettled but nothing compared to June; constant Atlantic fronts resulted in low temperatures, wind and, as if we needed reminding, rain, rain and more rain! Such volumes of water are disastrous for breeding birds with hundreds of nests being washed away by the complete flooding on the Ouse Washes where the flood water reached up to 2m in depth. The Nene Washes also suffered badly.

No report of the usual summer build up of non-breeding **Mute Swans** was into three figures, although counts of 96 and 95 came from the Ouse Washes (Earith) and Fen Drayton Lakes respectively. A pair of **Whooper Swans** remained on the Nene Washes into mid May. **Greylag Geese** continue to flourish; for example counts of 237 at Hinchinbrooke GP including 54 young and at Fen Drayton Lakes the June WeBS revealed 386, as well as 120 **Canada Geese**. It would be interesting to know what effect such numbers have on lake-side habitat and other nesting birds. **Egyptian Geese** bred at Fen Drayton Lakes and Earith GP and were reported from 12 additional sites throughout the period. **Mandarin Ducks** continued to be reported from Wimpole Park and 3 were also noted at Hauxton Pits in June. Small numbers of **Wigeon**, **Teal** and **Pintail** are always reported during May /June but rarely does any confirmed breeding get reported. These species represent some of our rarest breeding species, so reports of any broods would be very welcome. The peak count of **Garganey** was 7 on the Ouse Washes at Earith on May 19<sup>th</sup> including 6 males, and the drake **Red-crested Pochard** remained at Paxton Pits to May 5<sup>th</sup>. The inland sea that was the Ouse Washes attracted 3 **Common Scoters** on May 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, increasing to 4 (two pairs) on the 10<sup>th</sup>. The confirmed breeding of a single pair of **Ruddy Ducks** may perhaps be the last ever to breed in the county?

A survey of the parish of Melbourn revealed a noteworthy 21 pairs of **Grey Partridge**. The first **Quail** flew over Whittlesey on the 10<sup>th</sup> with other May records coming from just 5 other sites, but the only June records came

from Melbourn where up to 3 were calling during the month.

**Bitterns** were regularly seen or heard at 5 sites and double figure counts of **Little Egrets** on both the Nene and Ouse Washes hopefully indicate breeding birds. Two pairs of **Great Egrets** have successfully bred in the UK this year and with May records from Fen Drayton Lakes, Isleham and Nene Washes how long before this species is added to the list of species breeding in Cambs? Two **Spoonbills** at Ouse Fen on May 19<sup>th</sup> were later seen flying up the Ouse Washes, another was noted at Ouse Fen on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Two pairs of **Black-necked Grebes** held territories but as yet were not confirmed to breed, and an unseasonal **European Shag** was reported from Bradley Fen on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

A **European Honey Buzzard** received the usual attention of Carrion Crows as it drifted over Wicken Fen on May 18<sup>th</sup>, while another raptor rarity, a **Black Kite**, was noted moving south over Sutton on May 30<sup>th</sup>. Many reports of **Red Kites** came from far and wide but few referred to breeding birds. Late **Hen Harriers** were noted at Witcham GP on May 2<sup>nd</sup> and perhaps the same bird on the Nene Washes on May 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> and there were 4 reports of **Montagu's Harrier** during the period. Intriguingly a bird matching the over-wintering **Pallid x Hen Harrier** was seen at Stuntney and later over Ely BF on May 7<sup>th</sup>. In the parish of Melbourn 3 out of a total of 5 **Common Buzzard** territories fledged two young each, a good example of how successful this species has become. An **Osprey** noted over Chesterton High Street on May 12<sup>th</sup> was a nice surprise for the observer. **Red-footed Falcons** were seen by a lucky few with a report of a female over Wisbech on May 23<sup>rd</sup> followed by a male over Ouse Fen on May 27<sup>th</sup>. There was also a late report of a single at Colne Fen GP on June 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>. The last **Merlin** was noted at Ouse Washes (Earith) on May 4<sup>th</sup>. At Wicken Fen **Hobbies** peaked at 24 during May but at Fen Drayton Lakes and Paxton Pits, both traditional sites for Hobbies to gather, numbers remained low compared to previous years. **Peregrines** bred successfully at 3 sites fledging a total of 7 young.

Reports of **Water Rails** during the period poorly reflect the true status of our breeding population, something this species has in common with many of our breeding birds. A singing **Spotted Crake** at Wicken Fen from June 26<sup>th</sup> was the first there since the 1980s; singing birds were also heard on the Nene Washes. When a species that has not been recorded in the county since 1858 turns up singing on the Nene Washes during June one can only imagine the shock for the wardens carrying out census work, truly a very memorable moment. **Baillon's Crake** was added to the British list when a bird trapped on ice at Melbourn (Cambs) in January 1823 became the first documented record. Breeding also occurred in Cambs in 1858 but it remains unknown whether this recent male, part of a mini influx into Britain of 8 singing birds, attracted a mate. The **Corncrake** project on the Nene Washes suffered from the high water levels with only 6 singing males recorded this year. A small token consolation was that the 3 crake species could sometimes be heard singing at the same time. Up to 14 **Common Cranes** could be seen around the Nene Washes during May with 2 pairs successfully fledging young.

Of 16 sites that held **Oystercatchers** during the period only two reported young. More excitement in the county arrived on the May 3<sup>rd</sup> in the form of a **Black-winged Stilt**. It was seen on and off at Paxton Pits up to the 24<sup>th</sup> but also visited Ouse Fen where it joined 2 more for the day! This species attempted to breed on the Nene Washes in 1983 but failed when their eggs were taken by a predator. Sadly at Upton Fen (Norfolk) a breeding pair were also reported to have failed. Many of our breeding washland waders, notably **Lapwing**, **Common Snipe** and **Redshank**, lost their nests to the rising flood water, and elsewhere **Little** and **Ringed Plovers** seem to have fared badly. Against the trend, Lapwings bred successfully at Fowlmere RSPB reserve for the first time, fledging one young. A male **Ruff** on the Cam Washes was seen to display to a Reeve on May 29<sup>th</sup>; when did this last happen in the county? A **Stone Curlew** was noted at Kingfishers Bridge on May 16<sup>th</sup> and the only record of **Dotterels** this spring was of 6 birds that briefly touched down at Foxton for only 2 hours on May 12<sup>th</sup>. **Grey Plovers** were noted at 5 sites and **Red Knots** were at Maxey Pits, Ouse Washes and Woodwalton Fen on May

3<sup>rd</sup>. **Sanderlings** passed through 4 sites on May 10<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> and two **Temminck's Stints** were on the Ouse Washes on May 3<sup>rd</sup>; elsewhere singles were noted at Beeby's Pit on May 15<sup>th</sup> and Paxton Pits on May 27<sup>th</sup>. Records of **Curlew Sandpipers** came from Paxton Pits on May 4<sup>th</sup> and Nene washes on May 6<sup>th</sup>, and the highest count of **Dunlins** was of 23 at Beeby's Pit on May 19<sup>th</sup>. **Woodcocks** were noted roding at Chippenham, Wicken and Woodwalton Fens. Early May saw a good passage of **Bar-tailed Godwits** through the county with peak numbers noted on May 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> and smaller numbers being noted on May 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>, allowing observers plenty of time to admire the stunning summer males. The largest count of 112 passed through Witcham GP with notable flocks of 44 noted over Buckden and the Ouse Washes. The largest count for **Whimbrels** was 15 on the Nene Washes on May 5<sup>th</sup>, and June records of **Curlews** came from Fen Drayton Lakes, Little Shelford, Nene Washes and Ouse Fen. The Bury Fen / Earith Washes area attracted up to 5 **Spotted Redshanks** on May 1<sup>st</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> and good numbers of **Greenshanks** were to be found at Paxton Pits (10) and the Nene Washes (15) during May. **Green Sandpipers** returned to the county from June 15<sup>th</sup> and **Wood Sandpipers** were noted at 5 sites including 3 on the Nene Washes on May 27<sup>th</sup>; a single bird was also heard calling there on June 13<sup>th</sup>. A high count of 9 **Turnstones** made the Nene Washes look even more like a coastal area on May 15<sup>th</sup>.

An adult **Pomarine Skua** with full tail spoons must have been a magnificent sight as it flew over Paxton Pits on May 1<sup>st</sup> and a dark phase **Arctic Skua** flew north up the Ouse Washes on May 26<sup>th</sup>. **Mediterranean Gulls** are still not taking a strong foothold in the county, reflected by only 3 records received. The only **Little Gull** for the period was noted at Fen Drayton Lakes on May 4<sup>th</sup>. A count of 427 fledged young came from the large **Black-headed Gull** colony at Kingfishers Bridge and the latest **Common Gull** was on the Ouse Washes on May 20<sup>th</sup>. The regular influx of non-breeding large gulls into the county resulted in counts of 1000+ **Lesser Black-backed** and up to 34 **Yellow-legged Gulls** at Milton Tip in both May and June. A **Caspian Gull** was picked out from swirling masses at the same site on May 30<sup>th</sup> with a 2cy and 3cy there on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. A late **Iceland Gull** was at

Bradley Fen on May 6<sup>th</sup> and a single **Kittiwake** flew over Ferry Meadows CP on May 19<sup>th</sup>. Obviously unsettled by the weather, 150+ **Common Terns** built up at Paxton Pits in early May and a good passage of **Arctic Terns** occurred on May 2<sup>nd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> with 44 at Ferry Meadows on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. In May, single **Little Terns** were noted at Paxton Pits on the 13<sup>th</sup> and Grafham Water on the 21<sup>st</sup> while **Black Tern** numbers were low with 10 at Fen Drayton Lakes on May 27<sup>th</sup> (the only double figure count).

Such is the high profile and decrease in numbers of **Turtle Doves**, many observers responded by sending their sightings to the club with 80 records received from 38 sites! The same can be said for **Cuckoo** with records received from 60 sites! The weather was tough on **Barn Owls** with high mortality noted in many broods. Calling young **Long-eared Owls** were reported from only one site. Following on from the excellent numbers of **Short-eared Owls** in the county this winter many birds lingered on into May and June, hopefully resulting in a few breeding pairs? A **European Nightjar** was reported flying past Coton Garden Centre on May 16<sup>th</sup>. Records of **Kingfishers** were few and far between, obviously badly affected by the cold winter and high water levels. A typically brief **European Bee-eater** flew over Knapwell on May 17<sup>th</sup>; if only one would hang around for a while! A **Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker** at Sutton Gault was a surprise on May 7<sup>th</sup>; elsewhere reports came from only 2 other sites.

Following a single brief **Golden Oriole** at Stow-cum-Quy fen on May 12<sup>th</sup>, three were seen at separate locations 1 week later - see article on p 7. **Common Ravens** continue to get reported, but breeding has yet to be confirmed in the county. The only records of **Goldcrests** came from Elm (3+) and Melbourn (9), and single **Firecrests** were noted at Murrow, Crown Lakes GP and Ouse Fen. At St Ives the average number of **Blue Tits** fledging from nest boxes was 6, suggesting that passerines too struggled during the monsoon weather. **Bearded Tits** continued to be reported from Kingfishers Bridge and Wicken Fen. Arable fields around the parish of Melbourn held at least 112 **Skylark** territories. Early May saw **Swallows** still moving through the county with several flocks reaching unusually high numbers such

as the 250 at Sutton Gault on May 6<sup>th</sup>. These flocks are always worth closer inspection and as if to prove the point the attractive **Red-rumped Swallow** was found at 3 sites. The first appeared at Grafham Water on May 7<sup>th</sup> and looked a little unwell at times during its 6 day stay. The other records came from Ferry Meadows CP on May 10<sup>th</sup> and Wicken Fen on May 11<sup>th</sup>. A very pleasing 81 records of **Cetti's Warblers** were received adding up to at least 40 singing birds around the county. Worryingly by way of contrast the total of singing **Grasshopper Warblers** reported was just 16. A **Marsh Warbler** was reported from Bradley Fen on May 27<sup>th</sup> and quite extraordinarily an **Icterine Warbler** sang its heart out for most of the day on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, frequenting gardens along Montgomery Road Cambridge. In the parish of Melbourn, singing **Blackcaps** out-numbered **Garden Warblers** 32-1 and **Common Whitethroats** out-numbered **Lesser Whitethroats** 29-5. Was it a bad year for the later arriving species or did they just not bother singing in the rain? Mixed singing **Willow Warblers** were noted at Fowlmere NR and Hinxton.

A **Ring Ouzel** was noted at Mare Way on May 6<sup>th</sup> and the last **Fieldfares** were at Caldecote on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The most numerous species recorded in a survey of breeding birds around Melbourn was **Blackbirds** with 115 territories. Depressingly the number of **Song Thrush** territories was only 18. **Spotted Flycatchers** were back in the county from May 7<sup>th</sup> with records received from 26 sites, many of which reported breeding birds. At Paxton Pits, which is usually a stronghold for **Nightingales**, only 6 were reported; this site normally has double figures. Castor Hanglands now seems to be the new capital where up to 15 singing birds were noted. Grafham Water also had 8 singing birds. A male **White-spotted Bluethroat** was seen very briefly at Ouse Fen on June 15<sup>th</sup> and the only record of **Common Redstart** was a female at Fowlmere NR on May 13<sup>th</sup>. Always a favourite, **Whinchats** filtered through the county in the first half of May with reports from 12 sites, and there was a good passage of **Wheatears** during the first two weeks of May with peak counts coming from Bury (11), Foxton (9) and Ouse Fen (10). **Dunnocks** are sometimes said to be on the decline but 60 territories noted around Melbourn seems healthy enough. **House Sparrows** too seem to have a good

population in the same village with at least 70 pairs noted. Very few **Tree Sparrow** records were received.

Passage **Yellow Wagtails** built up to 35 at Ferry Meadows on May 1<sup>st</sup> and breeding birds are now very much a familiar sight amongst arable fields; for example, 10 territories were logged on a farm survey at Stapleford in June. **Grey Wagtails** were confirmed breeding at Milton and Shepreth, but otherwise records for this species were scarce; again the high water levels must have badly affected this species. A **Siskin** flew over Colne on May 30<sup>th</sup> and a pair were noted moving south at Elm on

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June 25<sup>th</sup>. At Woodwalton Fen 15 **Lesser Redpolls** were seen on May 5<sup>th</sup> and garden birds were noted at Landbeach and Ely though no breeding behaviour was reported. Several flocks of post-breeding **Common Crossbills** passed through the county from mid-May into June, the largest flock being 25 over Great Abington on June 21<sup>st</sup>. It could be suggested that the chalkland arable land in the south of the county should be recognised as a nationally important area for **Corn Buntings** as the parish of Melbourn alone held 57 territorial males alone this year!

S Jennings, Richard Jones, Sarah Kendall, Colin Kirtland, Charlie Kitchen, J Knightbridge, Andrew Knights, J Lanfear, Jim Lawrence, Vince Lea, P Lee, Martin Lester, B Liggett, John Lindsell, Chris Lines, Steve Lister, Tony Lowe, Andrew Maddocks, Tony Mallyon, Monica Marks, Owen Marks, Bruce Martin, Paul Mason, N Mckenna, Duncan McNiven, Matthew Mellor, Giles Merritt, Mark Missin, B Mitchell, J Mole, K Mueller, David Nation, Dick Newell, S Noble, M O'Leary, David Orchard, J Page, R Page, Dave Palmer, Chris Park, John Parslow, Rob Partridge, Gavin Paterson, Richard Patient, Pam Peacock, Mark Peck, M Pittaway, N Pleasance, Andy Plumb, Alan Pool, Rob Pople, Duncan Poyser, G Rankin, Gareth Rees, N Renwick, Chris Rider, Duncan Ritchie, Paul&Lynne Roberts, Tony Roberts, J Robertson, D Robinson, Matthew Rodgers, Sue Rogers, K Rome, Kathleen Rosewarne, Tony Rowe, M Rushton, Michael Hoare, Ralph Sargeant, John Saunders, Ann Scott, Rodney Self, Nick Senior, Stuart Sharp, Gordon Shaw, A Shelford, Clive Sinclair, Bob Smith, Jonathan Smith, R Smith, M Southwood, Claire Spottiswoode, Nigel Spowell, I Stachnicki, Brian Stone, Bernie Talbot, Andrew Taylor, Jonathon Taylor, Paul Taylor, A Thomas, Richard Thomas, V Thompson, Andrew Tongue, Graham Tucker, Hugh Venables, George Walthew, Mark Ward, Matt Webb, Mike Weedon, Jamie Wells, John Wells, Peter Wells, G Williams, Nigel Willits, Mike Wilson, Julian Young, Christoph Zöckler. Also, records were taken from the CBC website and Cambirds, with special thanks to Tony Roberts. And thanks to all other contributors to the CBC database.

### **Bailion's Crake**

The chance of adding Bailion's Crake to a county list would doubtless attract a great deal of attention and members may feel aggrieved to learn of one in the county after the event. However the bird that was discovered on the Nene Washes was in far too sensitive a site to accommodate a twitch. This is an important wader breeding site, with limited access opportunities in the remote parts of the reserve, and the bird was heard calling after dark. It was decided that by the time the bulletin is published there would be no chance of disturbance, and it would be extremely unlikely that any visiting birders would locate it, should it recommence singing.

## From the Chairman

While I am writing this, the weather is the subject number one of conversation. I am not sure whether I have seen as much rain in my 15 years of residence in Cambridge as in the past weeks and months. Flooding has brought severe damage to many properties and our breeding birds have been heavily impacted as well. Several reserves report that the breeding success of ground-nesting birds has been disastrous. Once again, those species that are not doing well anyway have been hit the hardest, with our declining waders such as Lapwing and Snipe and insectivorous birds in the forefront. Many of these species have suffered from habitat loss for many decades so the impact of poor weather events is particularly concerning. It is well known that with the changing climate, periods of extreme weather become more frequent, so the prospect for declining species is in most cases not good. This year the Club is visiting several of the most important sites for birds and biodiversity in the county. In June, we went to Portholme Meadow near Godmanchester, a hidden gem that many birdwatchers might have never visited. It is the largest remaining unimproved lowland hay meadows in England. On the day of our visit it was not raining (for a change!) but the winds were very strong so we didn't see many birds. However, we were impressed by the colourful flora and what we learned about the successes and challenges to managing such a site. Following our now biennial conference, which this year will be held on the subject of raptors, we will visit two key reserves of the county on 30 September, the Nene Washes and Ouse Fen, again learning about the birds and the management of the sites. This will follow the main conference on 29 September at Cottenham Village College. You will have received a programme and booking form with the last Bulletin and the announcement is repeated in this Bulletin and can also be found on our website. I hope to welcome many members and non-members to the conference, which promises to provide an up-to-date overview of how our raptors are doing in Cambridgeshire and countrywide.

I regularly venture out to Fen Drayton Lakes, where the RSPB have done an impressive job in improving the habitats for waders, wildfowl and many species of songbird. I would like to extend my thanks to three of the Fen Drayton reserve staff, Andy Cotton, Jacqui Miller and Neil Renwick, who after several years of serving the management of the site are leaving to new pastures. They have been very supportive to the work of the Club and will be missed. We wish them well for the future.

The Club will be represented, together with other conservation organisations, at the Fenland Country Fair at Stow-cum-Quy on the August bank holiday weekend on 25, 26 and 27 August. Please come along and find us. As every year, we also had a stand in June at the Conversazione organised by the Cambridge Natural History Society at the Cambridge University Zoological Museum. Our attractive new leaflet has helped us a lot to present the Club. Please let me know if you are able to distribute copies of the leaflet and raise interest in the Club.

In order to provide support to the work of our County Recorder, we are looking for a person to manage the Club's database. You don't need to be knowledgeable about birds but should have some understanding of databases and Excel. Please get in touch with me if you think you can help.

I wish all our members happy autumn birding!

*Peter Herkenrath*

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## A day in the garden

I freely admit it: my overgrown and rather untidy suburban garden would make a keen gardener wince, or at least feel smug. The lawn is full of moss and weeds, the trees and shrubs, many of which were purloined from the wild as seedlings years ago, are rambling and untrimmed. They include a rhododendron from Sandringham (don't tell the Queen!) and a tamarisk which I planted to

remind me of holidays in the Camargue, of dusty tracks and shimmering lagoons lined with their feathery, pink foliage, the haunt in spring of migrant flycatchers, warblers, Golden Orioles and Bee-eaters. One can but dream! This semi-wilderness, together with a couple of even more untidy neighbouring gardens, has attracted some interesting visitors over the years, including a briefly perching Wheatear, a few Waxwings, and a Reed Warbler which sang from the same bush two years in succession. It is certainly no Garden of Earthly Delights: the Hoopoe, Hooded Crow and Redstart depicted by Hieronymus Bosch have never occurred, nor any of his fantastically grotesque creatures, but I do have naked ladies! They emerge every autumn to delight the eye with their slender, delicate beauty.

Deciding to add some colour for the summer by putting up some hanging baskets, I was working in the garden on May 24th when I heard directly overhead what I momentarily thought was a subsong from one of the local breeding Blackcaps. It was however far too varied and was interspersed with some characteristic "deederoid" and harsh "seea seea" notes. Surely not an Icterine Warbler? That would be too much to hope for! Peering up through the branches I saw a large warbler with a long bill and bright yellow underparts. I rushed inside for my binoculars but when I returned the bird had moved. I then brought out an old tape recorder and the appropriate tape, which stimulated the bird to sing and to appear briefly in full view. At close range I could see the long pinkish-orange bill, yellowish-green upperparts with pale fringes to the secondaries forming a prominent wing panel, blue-grey legs and from below the short under-tail coverts of a typical hippolais. It was indeed an Icterine Warbler! And in my garden! The eighth warbler species recorded here. I phoned a few friends who duly arrived but by now the bird, although still singing intermittently, was spending more time in nearby gardens. It did however emerge briefly later in the afternoon and was seen by two lucky visitors. One additional advantage of spending time outside and of having extra eyes on the alert was the sighting of two different Buzzards overhead.

The next day the bird had gone. It set me wondering how many rare passerines must go undetected in gardens? The sole Cambs records of Black-throated Thrush, Scarlet Rosefinch and Black-headed Bunting, the latter only a mile from here, were all in gardens! Maybe we should all spend more time outside. I shall certainly be keeping an eye open next May! After all, I do have a tamarisk and the German for Moustached Warbler is Tamariskensanger. Now that would be a real coup, to restore the species to the Cambs and British lists!

*Colin Kirtland*

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## **A golden dawn**

The 19<sup>th</sup> May proved a good day to be out for three of our members, when three separate passage Golden Orioles were independently heard across the county. Ed.

### **Hardwick Wood**

The tetrad that I had been allotted for the National Nightingale Survey - TL35N - contains the recently created Toft Wood (where Nightingale had been recorded in 2011) and all but the extreme northern tip of Hardwick Wood. The poor spring weather had meant that my second early morning visit to this tetrad had been delayed to the end of the extended period within which the two diurnal visits should take place. The walk through Toft Wood had drawn a blank for Nightingale. I entered Hardwick Wood through the gate at the south-east corner and had followed the path anticlockwise around the wood, returning via the bridleway and footpath on the outside of the wood (drawing a blank on Nightingale in the process). It was when returning along the southern edge of the wood that I started hearing at regular intervals, groups of 2-3 fluting calls. I re-entered the wood at the south east corner and followed the path that led off in to the centre of the wood. Although the fluting calls persisted for around 30 minutes I was unable to locate the bird high up in the canopy. Having

heard Golden Oriole in the Fens as well as abroad and having Blackbird, Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush calling around the wood for comparison I was content that it was a Golden Oriole that I heard. Maybe next time I want to hear a Nightingale locally, the BTO should organise a Golden Oriole survey!

Roger Buisson

### **River Mel, Meldreth**

It was a mixture of chance and coincidence that allowed me to make contact with the Golden Oriole on the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> May 2012. I had not heard of any orioles passing through the county on the previous day to galvanise me into a walk deliberately to search for one, and the area I did cover has no poplar stands and being in South Cambs, is not a traditional location to find these birds. For a few years now, Doug Radford the manager of RSPB Fowlmere NR, has been leading an early morning walk for members of the Melwood Conservation Group to experience birds along part of the River Mel, at Meldreth, where the volunteers have developed a local nature reserve. Doug was unable to lead it in 2011, and I accepted the role, which consisted of pointing out birds to the members, and identifying the various calls and songs. In May this year, Doug was again away at the time, at the other side of Russia monitoring amongst other interesting birds, Spoon-billed Sandpipers. So it was pure chance that I was invited for a second time to lead the group at Meldreth. We met in the usual place where I gave an update on various bird activities that I thought they would find interesting. We then proceeded slowly up the river along the path. As we approached the disused mill we were fortunate this year to find a Grey Wagtail perched on the roof affording such good views that we lingered. We then entered a large meadow and were nearly half-way along when we encountered a dog-walker who wanted to describe the location of a Stock Dove nest further along the river. We then stopped for further period while I discussed corvid predators and how some small nesting birds 'escape' predation by using particular habitats.

So we were ambling along the river footpath, at about 09:00, next to a fairly high stand of trees bordering the opposite bank, when a loud but mellow and fluty song with frequent bursts of yodelling came from within the small wood. We had about a minutes' worth of song. I was straining to see the songster, but it was too deep within the stand. We had not yet reached the nature reserve, and with some chagrin on my part, we resumed the walk. Needless to say, after the group had disbanded, I returned to the spot but the bird was neither heard again, nor seen. If we had passed by a few minutes on either side of the time it did sing, I doubt that we would have found it, hence the part of chance paid. Later that day, I copied a file of typical song from <http://www.xeno-canto.org/europe/> and sent this to the group leader to forward to the members, as a memento of the encounter.

*Mike Foley*

### **Waresley/Gransden Wood**

On 19/5/12 I was in Waresley/Gransden Wood carrying out a survey for the Wildlife Trusts' Boulder Clay Ecology Group. At about 8am I heard a bird calling from high up in the ash canopy. The calls were a mixture of harsh calls and brief song notes which I identified as a Golden Oriole. Some of the calls I later identified as being the so-called cat calls. I listened to the bird for several minutes during which time it moved a short distance through the canopy without me being able to see it and then became silent. The bird was not relocated subsequently.

I was doubly fortunate since while surveying in Hardwick Wood also for the Boulder Clay Ecology Group I had previously heard and seen a Golden Oriole on 29/5/09 which was accepted by the rarities committee.

Clive Sinclair

## Hungary vs. England

Much of my birding is spent in farmland; as such, my routine birds through the season are Skylarks, finches, Yellowhammers, Whitethroats, and, on a good day treats such as Yellow Wagtail or occasional Corn Buntings. Whilst I am well aware of the large declines in numbers of several of our birds of the wider countryside, as I have come to think of them, they are still out there and widespread, if rarely abundant, when the effort is put in. I do quite a lot of surveys for farmers who are keen to know what wildlife they have because they appreciate it and want to do more – whilst this does get me on to more farmland than a walk on public footpaths or permissive tracks would, the latter would still produce a reasonable list of farmland species which are in decline. Living surrounded by farmland, the daily cycle commute or just going for a walk means that these are the species with which I have become familiar. Four years of atlas fieldwork has also taken me to other bits of farmland in widely differing landscapes in the county, but there are still birds out there using this intensively managed and altered landscape. This summer, one block of utterly conventional farmland on the heavy clay of the south-west of the county surprised me by the number of Yellow Wagtails which I found when the weather allowed me the chance to get out. Adjacent to one of my BBS squares for the BTO (on which I think I have barely recorded a Yellow Wagtail in 18 years), the neighbouring land seemed much more to their liking. To me, there appears little difference, but there must be something. Such encounters always feel like a treat compared to the birds seen in villages through which I pass regularly, where the diversity seems very uninspiring.

The thing which got me thinking of the diversity we have in our farmland, limited and under pressure though it may be, is my contact over the last three years with a project in the west of Hungary. Having just come back from a physical week of meadow restoration, seeing excellent birds, I got thinking about the sort of birds I HADN'T been seeing. The village (actually two settlements spread up a valley about 2½ miles long) is mostly gardens, meadows and trees. The meadows would traditionally have been cut for a hay crop, but there is no need any more as so few people left keep any livestock that the effort would be to no avail. Golden-rod, a garden plant familiar to some, has become a real invader, swamping the native vegetation in damp or dry meadows, reducing the rich grasslands to a monoculture. Mowing keeps it in check, but any meadows no longer cut are essentially free of birds or butterflies. The farmed land beyond the valley, on the edge of national park, is cereal, maize, etc., and is intensive and consequently does not have huge biodiversity, but it does have a few, very limited birds. I was struck by the fact that there do not appear to be many birds, though, and it felt like our arable farmland has more biodiversity. The most diverse areas, however, are the settlements – houses, often even recently renovated ones, still have sparrows (both sorts) nesting in them, and standard garden birds include Black Redstart, Red-backed Shrike, Wryneck, Nuthatch, Turtle Dove, Hawfinch amongst others. Brand new houses, or those converted to nicely tidy holiday homes probably do suffer, but the birds still have plenty of options. During the week I did not see or hear a single Skylark, which I didn't really think about at the time, but it is obvious to me now I have returned.

I think my recent trip has shown me that, although we think of other parts of Europe as having far better birds than us, our view may be altered by the fact that we often visit reserves or other wildlife-rich areas, and that, in fact, there are many pressures on farmland birds across Europe – I reckon we do OK compared to other countries on that, but that the birdlife around houses and villages is what we really miss compared to some of our European counterparts.

*Louise Bacon*

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## From the Research Committee

We are well underway to publish the county breeding and wintering atlas in spring 2013. Fundraising has commenced in earnest, with a substantial grant from the Cambridgeshire and

Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership alongside other sources. We are awaiting the atlas data from the BTO, which should arrive in August. Then the team of writers can start putting together the book which I hope many of you will be keen to acquire. With this in mind, the next Bulletin will have a pre-order slip in it, giving those keenies amongst you the opportunity to purchase in advance at a reduced price. We hope it will be worth waiting for, and thank you to everyone who is, or has been, involved in the fieldwork or production.

*Louise Bacon*

## **From the County Recorder**

There are times when one can become curious about the past history of a species in our county – Baillon's Crake comes to mind – or where a Starling roost of up to 250,000 occurred close to Cambridge City in 1972 (the answer is Fulbourn Fen); or when did Curlews last breed (a good question, and texts in the various books on this need to be read carefully – there was reported breeding in 1950, and a displaying pair in 1987 in the Peterborough area). With some chagrin, we have just discovered that a pair of Curlews nested in 2010 but a few hundred metres outwith Cambridgeshire (in Northants - source: the RAF).

Armed with the excellent books, *The Birds of Cambridgeshire* (Peter Bircham, 1989); *The Birds of Huntingdon and Peterborough* (John S Clark, 1996); and *The Birds of Cambridgeshire Checklist 2000* (Cambridge Bird Club, 2000); and with more recent records, I am happy to help with queries by email from Club Members, but answers would necessarily need to be brief, and should not involve birds or sites of a confidential nature.

*Mike Foley* (see details on back page)

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## **COUNTRYSIDE & ENVIRONMENT COURSE**

The College of Animal Welfare offers a full-time Level 2 Diploma course in Countryside & Environment starting in September. The course is located in the heart of the Cambridgeshire fens and includes the following tasks: river management, monitoring animal populations, responsibly managing land in a sustainable way, and researching and conducting ecological surveys. Please visit [www.caw.ac.uk](http://www.caw.ac.uk) or call 01480 422060 for more information.

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

**Note:** Evening meetings at Cottenham Village College will now take place in the Tony Cooper Suite on the first floor of the new 6<sup>th</sup> form block at the back of the college. A plan of the college is available on the meetings page of the Club website. As before doors open at 7.30pm for 8pm.

### **Friday 14th September, Tony Cooper Suite, Cottenham Village College**

#### **The Decline of the Urban House Sparrow and Potential Conservation Fixes by Will Peach**

Will Peach will summarise the findings of research efforts to understand the causes of population declines amongst urban and rural house sparrows, and discuss potential conservation solutions. He has worked for RSPB research dept for 12 years and now leads a team developing conservation solutions for farmland birds. Before that he worked at BTO for 9 years

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 10.00 – 12.00. Raptor Watch**

Like our previous Spring raptor days, we hope some of you will be interested in setting up a watch point for 1 or 2 hours for a co-ordinated count which may illustrate local breeding success or migration. Anyone can join in. Let Louise Bacon (Research Committee – details back page) know in advance so we can put sites on the website. You can repeat sites studied in the spring or pick a new

place. We would like to show results at the conference the following week. For more information please contact Louise.

### **Last weekend in September CBC/BTO/RSPB Conference:**

Raptors: Conservation and Ecology, see last bulletin or the club website for details.

The conference will be held at Cottenham Village College on Saturday Sept 29<sup>th</sup>, with field visits the following day to RSPB Nene Washes and Ouse Fen Reserves. Do please book as early as you can with Vicki Harley (details on back page) so that the appropriate size room can be arranged.

### **Friday 12th October, Tony Cooper Suite, Cottenham Village College Talks by Gabrielle Davidson, and Samantha Lee**

**Cognition in Crows** Gabrielle Davidson is studying the social cognition of Jackdaws and other members of the crow family at the University of Cambridge. Her research takes place in Madingley, both in large aviaries of Rooks and Jackdaws and a field site run by the Cambridge Jackdaw Project where 140 nest boxes have been set up to monitor wild Jackdaws. Gabrielle's talk will tell us why the corvids are thought to be so intelligent, the questions we ask about their cognition and how we begin to answer them using experimental and observational studies.

**Wintering Wildfowl on the Ouse Washes Ramsar Site** Samantha Lee is the public engagement officer at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Welney Wetland Centre. Her main role is to increase awareness of the ongoing and vital conservation of Whooper and Bewick's swans and engaging visitors in the wetland wildlife at Welney and across WWT. Her talk will cover the reasons why the Ouse Washes is an internationally important wetland, concentrating in particular on the wintering wildfowl and also the threats to the site and how sudden changes in its dynamics can have huge effects on the wildlife.

### **Joint CBC and Cambridgeshire Mammal Group indoor meeting on 30 October**

We will have an additional indoor meeting on Tuesday 30 October, 7.30pm for 8pm, Tony Cooper Suite, at Cottenham Village College, jointly with the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group. Richard Thomas of TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, and a member of the Club, will give a talk on the international trade in wildlife, in particular birds and mammals. Please mark in your diary.

*Vicki Harley*

### **RSPB CAMBRIDGE LOCAL GROUP – FIELD TRIPS / INDOOR MEETINGS**

Indoor meetings – at St John's Community (Church) Hall, Hills Road, Cambridge, 7.15 pm for a 7.30 pm start.

Wednesday, September 19th: Spitzbergen, by Ian Rowlands. St John's, Hills Road. 7.30pm

#### Field trips

Saturday, Sept 8th: Cavenham Heath. Meet at 5pm

Sunday, Sept 16th: Landguard Point & Trimley Marshes. Meet Landguard Point car park 10am

For more details and bookings, please see <http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/cambridge/events> or call Andrew Camps, 01638 741018.

### **WILD BIRD FOOD**

Members of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club can buy wild bird food at a 10% discount from Rectory Farm, Landbeach, CB24 6DA (on the A10 1.5 km N of the A14). Just show your most recent Bulletin or Annual Report as proof of membership. Just one more benefit of joining CBC.

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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: Mike Foley by September 7th 2012, and send records by post to Mike Foley by September 5th.**

**Next Bulletin due out late September / early October 2012, covering July / August 2012.**

# GOOD BIRDING!