



Collared Pratincole wows at Ham Wall

Julian Thomas on another county first (well, maybe)



At about 6pm on 10 July a pratincole sp. was found at Ham Wall, off the second viewing platform, by an unknown couple apparently making their first-ever visit to the reserve! Happily, they mentioned it to another couple of birders who quickly spread the word. It was soon confirmed as a Collared Pratincole, and showed well in flight and occasionally on the ground over the course of that evening to a small crowd of the keenest county listers. Many more birdwatchers saw the bird over the following three days. Mostly seen in flight hawking for insects over the lagoon, it was often relatively distant, but sometimes it came much closer, to the delight of the lucky observers; many photographs were taken, including this great shot (left) by Tim White. Usually it was hidden out of view when on the ground, leading to a frustrating wait for some, but occasionally it chose a spot where it could be seen, as in Dave Helliars photo below. It was still present near dusk on the 13th, but not on the 14th, nor since.

'Pratincole' is derived from Latin and means 'meadow dweller', which fits, as various pratincole species often nest and feed in fields, usually near wetlands, though some prefer rocky rivers. More evocative, though, and highly apt for these graceful aerial waders, is the old English name of 'swallow plover'.

Collared Pratincoles are just about annual vagrants to Britain from southern Europe, but the sole previous Somerset record is very old (though the closely related Black-winged Pratincole has been recorded twice, in 1957 and 1968). Dated only as sometime prior to 1858, the location is also rather vaguely given as 'North Mendips, near Weston-super-Mare', so it is not certain that the bird was recorded within the current county boundaries; it could just as easily have been in what is now Avon. So the Ham Wall bird could well in fact be a first for the present-day county. Whatever the truth of that, its four-day stay made quite a lot of birders very happy.



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Welcome

Hello again!

Apologies that this issue of *The Bittern* is both rather late and a little shorter than usual. No travel to foreign climes to use as an excuse this time, just plain old-fashioned sheer volume of work. As other members who are self-employed will know, you've got to put the hours in when the work is there, and sometimes it leaves little time for other things.

No apologies necessary, I hope, about featuring the latest rarity to visit the Avalon Marshes as the cover story. A real stunner, it may also be (as the article reveals) a Somerset first. Also in this issue, and illustrating the more serious side of the birdwatching coin, are Mike Trubridge's update on his local Rook surveys, and on our desert island is Tony Parsons, ringer and absolute stalwart of SOS, who among his many other valuable contributions to the Society has spent over 40 years diligently monitoring bird populations in the Crewkerne area. I hope readers will also find a short photo article on Marsh and Willow Tits useful.



Recent weeks have seen a dramatic period of political upheaval following the vote to leave the European Union. Amongst all the other issues (on which the personal views of SOS members will no doubt cover a wide spectrum), the environment was rarely mentioned. Yet much of the law regarding the welfare of our environment and our birds comes from the EU. What will replace those laws post-Brexit is not at all clear, but the omens are not great: George Eustice, Minister of State at Defra and a Leave campaigner, said that 'the Birds and Habitats Directives would go. A lot of the national directives they instructed us to put in place would stay. But the directives' framework is so rigid that it is spirit-crushing' (*The Guardian*, 30 May). Many conservationists fear a weakening of protections for our wildlife. On the other hand, new farm subsidy policies to replace the Common Agricultural Policy may be an opportunity to find new ways to both benefit wildlife and adequately compensate farmers. Time will tell, but it is worth keeping a close eye on developments, and speaking up for birds and other wildlife as best (and as often) as we can.

I'll get off my soapbox now. In the meantime, the summer is wearing away, the breeding season is nearly over, and autumn migration will soon be upon us. Enjoy your birding!

Julian Thomas, Editor Email: julian.thomas@somersetbirding.org.uk Phone/text: 07764165417

News

Changes at 2016 AGM

The 2016 AGM was held at Ruishton Village Hall on 14th April. Alongside the more usual business such as reports from the Treasurer and other officers, a series of rule changes were passed. The most significant changes were to create the role of Chairman to head the committee running the Society, and to make the role of President a largely honorary one, a public face for the Society, among other things. This brings the Society's structure in line with most other similar organisations. Roger Dickey resigned as President and has now assumed the role of Chairman; his first task in that role was a pleasurable one - to announce that Stephen Moss (right), broadcaster, producer, author, and until recently our Indoor Meetings Secretary, has accepted the position of President. Stephen will be a huge benefit to us in this role.



Alongside these changes the role of the Vice-Presidents was effectively abolished, and the distinguished members currently occupying those positions were awarded Honorary Life Memberships. Other notable changes are Brian Hill becoming Indoor Meetings Secretary, Alison Everett as Field Meetings Secretary, and the creation of a new post of Surveys Secretary, ably filled by a new member of the Committee with plenty of experience in this particular area, Simon Breeze.

Please see the website for the revised list of Committee contacts and the revised Rules. The latter will also appear in the annual report as per usual.

Kingfisher and Little Owl survey

Simon's first task has been to make a start on the planned programme of follow-up surveys after the publication of the Somerset Atlas. The first of these is investigating the abundance and distribution of two well-known but declining birds seen throughout Somerset: the Kingfisher and Little Owl. The survey aims to build a detailed picture from targeted and casual observational records into possible causes for decline, including climatic effects, habitat degradation, and food resource depletion. The survey has already started and is planned to run until 2019, with a review after one year.



Both species are ideal choices for a public survey: they can easily be missed by traditional surveys in areas infrequently visited by birders, but, being readily identifiable by the general public, local residents may know of their presence. Both are also good indicators of the health of their chosen habitats. Kingfisher is a Schedule 1 species, but given the habitat, the risk of disturbance to nest sites is considered to be low. Casual observations are encouraged, with as much detail as possible please on location, date, number, habitat, weather conditions, behaviour observed, and any obvious habitat management and changes in the immediate surroundings.

Full details are on the website at <http://somersetbirding.org.uk/surveys>. Survey forms can be downloaded there and completed forms sent to sos.surveys@somersetbirding.org.uk. Paper forms are available at a number of nature reserves around the county, and completed forms can be placed in collection boxes in particular hides or handed in to participating visitor centres.

We are also hoping to launch a small conservation fund to assist landowners and land managers contributing towards the survey that wish to enhance areas for the target species, including habitat management and provision of artificial nest sites/nest boxes.

New tower hide at Shapwick Heath opened

Julian Thomas reports on the opening of the latest new facility for birders

The new tower hide at Shapwick Heath was officially opened on 28 April, by Dr Andy Clements, Director of the BTO and board member for Natural England (pictured right cutting the ribbon), at a ceremony attended by c. 40 people, including Roger Dickey (Chairman), Eve Tigwell (BTO representative), and myself representing SOS. Dr Clements said, 'Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve and the surrounding Avalon Marshes are one of England's great wildlife success stories. I'm delighted to open this stunning new tower hide. It will provide greater opportunities for people to see the world class birdlife and enjoy sweeping views across the Somerset Levels.'



Designed by Shattock Associates of Bridgwater and made by I.S.A. Carpentry of Glastonbury, from locally sourced materials, the hide, situated about 300m west of the Ashcott Corner car park, was built thanks to donations from many supporters of the reserve (including SOS, and no doubt plenty of SOS members individually too) during a 'crowdfunding' campaign in December 2015 which raised over £17,000. Simon Clarke, Senior Reserve Manager for Natural England (pictured left with the newly unveiled signboard for the hide, created by local artist Steve Edwards) said, 'The public support we received in December was phenomenal and very humbling. It's provided us with the funds to create an incredible new hide that will really enhance the experience for all visitors to the reserve and allow them to enjoy a very special wetland. I'd like to thank everyone that has donated to the project, the really hard work of the contractors who've built the hide, and all those who have made this possible.'

I was amongst the first to try the hide out, and I was impressed. It's light and airy, and the rope pulleys used to open the hide flaps are both simple and effective. One side overlooks Meare Heath and the extra elevation not only allows a better view across the reedbeds, but gives a new perspective on the lagoon/scrape, including views of the area at the very front of it where passage waders can sometimes hide. The other side gives a new and fresh view over 70 Acre, which from ground level looks like mostly uniform *Phragmites* reedbed - it was a revelation to see the true extent of the stands of reedmace there. I suspect this hide will become a favourite spot not just for wader aficionados, but also for those looking for Bearded Tit, among others. It was rather fitting, though, that one of the first birds seen from the new hide was a Great White Egret.



We then retired to the Avalon Marshes Centre for tea and very tasty homemade cakes provided by Amy of EcoBites Café - thoroughly recommended!

Bramwell bulletin

The seventh instalment of the occasional series by Mike Trubridge

In previous issues of *The Bittern*, I have described a rookery survey that I have carried out in an area of 12.56 sq. km to the north of Langport since 2011. I have now completed a sixth survey and the results are given below. This survey in 2016 was carried out between 15 March and 10 April of all rookeries in and around the villages of Henley, High Ham, Low Ham, Pitney and Park.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Occupied nests	234	206	236	296	295	355
Total nests	302	320	309	345	326	392
Occupancy rate	77.5%	64.4%	76.4%	85.8%	90.5%	90.6
Mean number of occupied nests per rookery	15.6	10.3	16.9	22.8	22.7	23.7
Mean number of all nests per rookery	20.1	16.0	22.1	26.5	25.1	26.1
Rookeries per sq. km.	1.2	1.6	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.2
Occupied nests per sq. km.	18.6	16.4	18.8	23.6	23.5	28.3
Total nests per sq. km.	24.0	25.5	24.6	27.5	26.0	31.2
Number of occupied rookeries	15	19	14	13	13	15
Number of new rookeries	n/a	5	0	0	0	2
Number of abandoned rookeries	n/a	1	4	1	0	0
Survey period	19/3 - 6/4	14/3 - 31/3	11/3 - 15/4	7/3 - 14/4	11/3 - 5/4	15/3 - 10/4

2016 was a rather unusual year for the Rooks, with two weather-related factors affecting their breeding period. First of all the winter of 2015/16 was generally very mild and in England and Wales it turned out to be the warmest winter on record. This meant that the Rooks started breeding earlier than usual and the first eggs hatched out by the end of March. Secondly, severe winds in the spring resulted in many nests being damaged or destroyed completely. The first of these gales occurred on the night of 27/28 March, when Storm Katie hit the UK. England received the brunt of this storm and along the south coast wind speeds exceeded 100 mph. The more exposed rookeries were badly hit, none more so than the large one in Poplar Wood. Prior to Storm Katie there were 42 nests at this site, afterwards there were just 25. More strong winds on 10 April accounted for two more nests in this wood. Other locations were also affected by these gales, but not so seriously. Many of the birds who lost their nests rebuilt them, resulting in the unusual situation of some Rooks feeding young at the beginning of April while others were only just beginning to build their nests again.

Once again there was a significant increase in the number of Rook nests in the study area. Since the survey began in 2011 there has been an increase of 52%, from 234 occupied nests to 355. This increase bucks the trend for both England and the South West of England, both of which have seen declining populations from 2000 to 2014, the latest year that figures are available for. From 2010 to 2014 the numbers of Rooks in the South West fell by an average of 10% per year. Just why the Rooks in my study area are outperforming those in the region and in England is not clear, although it is likely to be related to farming practices. My area is characterised by low intensity farming with very low levels of pesticides being used on the mainly pastoral fields, resulting in a plentiful food supply available to the Rooks. Together with an abundance of potential nest sites in the many trees and overgrown hedges, this area would appear to provide prime real estate for Rooks.

The rookery at Hillview Farm, which conveniently is only 100 m away from my conservatory, where I can watch the birds in comfort, has seen a dramatic increase in its size since it first appeared in 2012. Interestingly another rookery just 400m away on Bramwells Farm has declined sharply during the same period, which suggests that birds may be deserting one site in favour of another, although of course it is

impossible to prove this. The Hillview Farm rookery is in a more sheltered situation, which may explain the migration. It began in a large ash tree, but this year for the first time the birds have spilled out into the adjacent hedge and a second ash tree. It will be very interesting to see what happens next year.

Name	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Hillview Farm	0/0	2/2	4/4	9/9	16/16	27/28
Bramwells Farm	9/12	6/9	6/11	9/9	6/6	1/1

(Occupied/unoccupied nests)

Photospot: Marsh and Willow Tits

Marsh and Willow Tits must be one of the most difficult pairs of resident species to separate, and this is not helped by the facts that neither is particularly common, and the names of both are (at least in a British context) misleading. A quick glance at the maps in the Somerset Atlas shows that Marsh Tit, while widespread across the county, is largely absent from the wetlands of the Levels, and in fact prefers drier woodlands mostly above 50m above sea level. Likewise, Willow Tit appears to have no affinity for willows, and used to occur in some of the same woods as Marsh Tit. Sadly it is now very rare in Somerset, but there remains some hope that there may be a small population clinging on somewhere.

Gary Thoburn's photographs below show most of the classic plumage and structural differences covered in all field guides, but the plumage characters in particular cannot always be relied upon. Some Marsh Tits can show a quite prominent pale wing panel, and the apparent glossiness of the cap or extent of the bib can vary with light, position of the bird etc. (e.g. in these photos the bib looks more extensive on the Marsh Tit). The big-headed, bull-necked appearance of the Willow Tit is a more constant feature, though, and shows clearly here in a direct comparison.



Marsh Tit

Willow Tit

A new and apparently reliable bare part feature has been described in recent years (see *British Birds* 102 (November 2009):604-616) and is also visible in the left-hand photo. Marsh Tit usually shows a small grey patch near the base of the upper mandible of the otherwise all-black bill, while Willow Tit apparently never does.

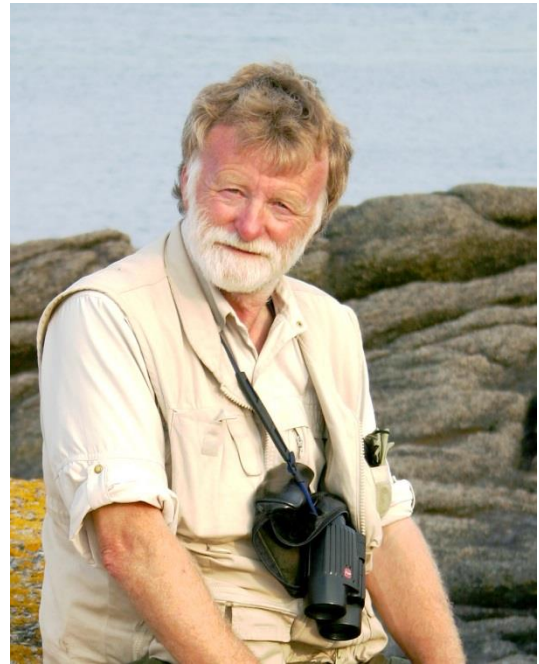
Of course they don't always pose so handily in the field, and call is still the easiest way to be sure. Like most tits they are both often quite vocal and have a varied repertoire. Marsh Tit's most regular call is a sharp 'pitchoo', like a sudden sneeze, never given by Willow; beware, though - some Blue Tits can give a similar call, though not quite so explosive. The diagnostic call of Willow Tit is very different: a nasal, buzzy scold, often repeated ('tchay, tchay, tchay'), which is never given by Marsh Tit, though again caution is needed, as some Great and Blue Tits make a 'tchay' call too, but without the same qualities.

Desert Island Birds

Based loosely on the famous radio show, each issue we will feature a prominent (or not so prominent) Somerset birder. This issue's castaway is a man who over the years has done pretty much everything in Somerset birding, **Tony Parsons**.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

I was born in Lewisham, South London in 1939. My father was working on building airfields in Norfolk and knew that war was imminent so he evacuated my mother and myself in the August. We went first to a cottage in Wiltshire, then to a caravan on a farm in North Devon then, eventually, to a small manor house in Catcott. The house belonged to a Major in the Indian Army and we moved in as soon as he went back to India. We had extensive gardens, outbuildings and orchards and it was a wonderful playground (not least because playing with the village children was frowned upon!) By the time I was three I had a small collection of



birds' eggs, a mummified bat, water beetles, and tadpoles and I was hooked. After the War, we went back to London, then to Kent where I spent most of my spare time wandering woods and rural lanes. I obtained a scholarship to a public school in London where I studied particularly Botany, Zoology, Chemistry, Physics and Latin. My biology teacher set me on the right path. When I told him that I wanted to be a naturalist (remember that this was in the mid-1950s) he said that I would be poor for the rest of my life and that I should become a veterinary surgeon and study natural history in my spare time. He was right, of course, and as a result of being a vet, dealing particularly with exotic and wild animals and birds, this has enabled me to handle over 800 species of bird which, together with those which I've ringed, is about 10% of the world's birds.

What is your favourite birding memory?

Difficult because there are so many but one of the most memorable was in the Gambia when, standing alongside a mist net in a glade in the forest. I was watching, through binos, an African Palm Swift flying high overhead. It appeared larger and larger in my field of view until it went out of focus as it dived into the net some five feet away from me. A similar incident occurred when I was checking a 60 foot net on the main path on Steep Holm and flushed a Nightjar at a distance of about three feet, which just dropped into the bottom shelf of the net. (These make up for the days when I only catch one Blue Tit.) One of my most comical experiences was trying to photograph a Lammergeier in the mountains in Spain by lying in the road pretending to be dead. After about 15 minutes, a Spanish carter stopped on his way past. Three words were exchanged: he "Inglés?", me "Si", he "Aah". I got my photos.

Where was your favourite birding trip?

It has to be Costa Rica - I would recommend it to anyone, particularly if you go with Journey Latin America, who are absolutely brilliant. The whole experience was superb (even though I'd already seen a lot of the migratory species in Canada). Costa Rica has possibly the best biodiversity in the world with about 25% of the country being nature reserves. The trip also involved white-water rafting and flying around the country in small planes, landing on beaches on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. At night, I even managed to watch a vampire bat feeding on a horse in the huge Corcovado forest and the breeding migration of thousands of land crabs down the mountain to the Pacific. The only drawbacks came from the USA where I had to change planes and was made to fill in an immigration form in Spanish because they

didn't have any English ones left, then, on the way back, was left stranded in Miami because their plane broke down! (You can now get a direct flight to San José.)

What do you do when you're not watching birds?

When I'm not actually watching or ringing birds I have the management of my SSSI, the maintenance of the house and also of the printing premises which take up a fair bit of time, but I also do a great deal with invertebrates. I've been keeping a database of these for an area of almost 150 square kilometres around Crewkerne for the past 40 years and now have 6,080 species recorded here. I spent 35 years as a Trustee and Chairman of the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust (Steep Holm) where I also ran a ringing station. I wrote two books about the island, one on the invertebrates and the other an annotated flora, and produced Natural History Reports covering every one of those years. I have also spent many years studying aspects of early history, archaeology, and palaeontology, and spent 14 years researching *The Environment of Crewkerne during the Anglo-Saxon Period* which I published in 2014 for our museum to sell. I'm presently working on a history of the birds of the Crewkerne area, but that will take a while to complete.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

I enjoy watching birds anywhere - I'm afraid I'm not much of a twitcher. I've seen many of the vagrant foreigners on trips abroad but, here, I tend to wait for them to come to me. It's surprising what can turn up on a three-acre reserve only 100 yards from the centre of the town - here I've ringed Marsh Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Firecrest, Snipe and Jack Snipe, Nightingale, Tree Pipit, Dipper, and 75 Kingfishers so far. A few weeks ago, again standing by a mist net, I was amazed to see a beautiful drake Mandarin, travelling at a considerable speed, end up in the net just a few feet away! So far, I've recorded 94 species and ringed over 17,000 of 73 species at this site alone, so the answer is 'Millwater'.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Not all of these will be happy with a desert island!

Red-headed Quelea: Probably the most numerous bird I will ever see - a pre-roost flock of several million in Senegal.

Ruff: Also in Senegal - some two million migrants from Europe on the Grand Lac in the north of the country.

Manx Shearwater: Ringing adults on the cliffs on Lundy at night while listening to them calling all around.

Reed Bunting: In 1985 I had the largest roost at Millwater ever recorded in Somerset and spent many happy evenings ringing them.

House Sparrow: Back in the 1980s we could have more than 100 at a time at multiple feeding stations in the garden. They still come every day but now the maximum is nearer 30.

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

For my book, I'm cheating slightly because it's actually four volumes (but they are very small). It's *American Ornithology* by Alexander Wilson and Charles Lucien Bonaparte (who was a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte), published in 1831. About 50 years ago, I managed to acquire Stanley Lewis's copy for the then exorbitant price of six guineas and I've never seen another copy (Stanley Lewis wrote *The Breeding Birds of Somerset and their Eggs*). I still find some of the accounts almost impossible to comprehend. Under the Passenger Pigeon, Audubon tried to count migrating flocks for a day in 1813 when riding between the Ohio river and Louisville - 55 miles. In 21 minutes, 163 flocks passed over and they continued for three days. He attempted to assess the number of birds, mathematically, based on an average flock width of one mile and arrived at an estimate of 1.15 billion pigeons. This was probably an underestimate because the flocks were much wider than a mile!

My luxury item? I've spent several years of my life camping, sleeping rough, or in native huts, etc. in desert, forest, and marsh, and the one thing I've missed on so many occasions is a really good pillow!

Walks and talks

Here are details of all SOS indoor and field meetings and a selection of events organised by the RSPB and Somerset Wildlife Trust in July-September 2016. As ever, summer is a quiet time and more events with a more general wildlife focus are included.

All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some provided by other conservation organisations. We try to include either a grid reference or a postcode (for satnav users) for the meeting points. Charges and booking details are given where known for non-SOS events, but please check with the organisers.



July

27	Walk	RSPB	Shapwick Heath. 1000-1300. Leader: Don Hurrell. Meet in the car park at the Avalon Marshes Centre (ST426415, BA6 9TT). Main focus butterflies and dragonflies, bird sightings a bonus. Level walking which is partly soft underfoot. Free.
28	Family event	RSPB	Minibeast safari at Greylake. 1100-1230. A morning bug hunt to find out what is lurking in the undergrowth. Meet in Greylake RSPB car park (ST399346) on the A361 between Othery and Greinton. £3 per child. No booking required. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Sun hat, suncream and a drink recommended.
30	Event	RSPB	Binocular and Telescope Day at Ham Wall. 1000-1600. Time for a new pair of binoculars? Drop in to Ham Wall reserve car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX) to meet experts for advice and information. You are welcome to try before you buy.

August

9	Family event	RSPB	Minibeast safari at Greylake. 1100-1230. A morning bug hunt to find out what is lurking in the undergrowth. Meet in Greylake RSPB car park (ST399346) on the A361 between Othery and Greinton. £3 per child. No booking required. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Sun hat, suncream and a drink recommended.
10	Walk	RSPB	Hérons Green, Chew Valley Lake. Meet at 1900 in the lay-by at Herons Green on the road from Chew Stoke to West Harptree (ST555595). This is a social occasion mixed with a bit of bird watching. Free.
10	Walk	RSPB	Nature by night at Ham Wall. 2000-2200. Dusk is a magical time to visit Ham Wall. Come and explore the reed beds as it starts to get dark and look out for the creatures that wake up then - frogs, bats, moths, even owls. Meet at Ham Wall reserve car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Price: £6 adult, £3 child. Booking essential.
27	Event	RSPB	Binocular and Telescope Day at Ham Wall. 1000-1600. Time for a new pair of binoculars? Drop in to Ham Wall reserve car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX) to meet experts for advice and information. You are welcome to try before you buy.

September

3	Walk	RSPB	Wildlife by canoe at Ham Wall. Have you ever thought what Ham Wall would look like if you were an otter? Now here's your chance to find out. Join a qualified instructor and an expert wildlife guide for this opportunity to experience this amazing nature reserve by canoe! No experience needed. One hour group tours between 1000 and 1600. Price: £15 adult / £10 child (6yrs+). Booking essential. Book online at https://naturebycanoeathamwall.eventbrite.co.uk
4	Walk	RSPB	Wildlife by canoe. As 3rd.
10	Walk	SOS	Avalon Marshes. Leaders: Alison Everett and Jeff Hazell. Focus: reedbed and wetland birds. Meet at 0930 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). New members are especially welcome.
15	Talk	RSPB	My Antarctic Adventure. 1930. South Somerset local group AGM, followed by this illustrated talk by Chris Harper. Chris had the privilege of enjoying two trips on HMS Endurance during his time in the Royal Navy, which took him to the mainland of Antarctica, South Georgia, Tristan da Cunha, and St. Helena, with close-up views of fascinating birds and other wildlife. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster TA19 0QH. Price: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.

As there's some free space, what better way to fill it than with some lovely intimate shots (taken earlier this summer at Ham Wall by Chris Griffin) of a Water Rail and its chick? All together now... 'Ahh!'



Image credits: Tim White (p.1 top), Dave Helliard (p.1 bottom), Joe Stockwell (p.2), Stephen Moss (p. 3 top), Mike Trubridge (p. 3 bottom), Julian Thomas (all on p.4), Gary Thoburn (both on p. 6), Pat Parsons (p.7), Brian Hill (p.9), Chris Griffin (p. 10).

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