



# The Bittern

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The newsletter of the Somerset Ornithological Society

## More Little Bitterns!

**Julian Thomas** on the latest success at Ham Wall

We've all followed the saga in recent years of the pair of Little Bitterns at Ham Wall, and this year it was made all the more possible to enjoy it by the RSPB taking the decision to release the news of the birds' return during the breeding season. This attracted birders from far and wide, and while the decision to publicise the birds initially attracted some negative comment, it seems the presence of so many well-behaved observers has acted as an extra volunteer wardening presence, to the benefit of the birds. As was hoped, there have been virtually no reports of birders going where they shouldn't, let alone any more nefarious behaviour.



James Packer

This year, the regular male arrived in mid May, called for about three weeks, then went quiet. As in previous years, it was hoped that this was once again a sign that a female was present and that a breeding attempt was being made, though it was a long while before a female was even seen. Assiduous watching and recording of sightings by the dedicated team of monitors, a mixture of RSPB staff and volunteers, appears to have proved that there were two nesting attempts again this year. Even better, more detailed data seems to have proved that (as was suspected last year) two pairs were involved.

The first nest failed, possibly due to predation. The suspected culprit was a mink that was seen regularly in the area at the time - despite continued attempts to eradicate them from the Avalon Marshes there are still a few around. Better news was to come, though, when it became clear that another nest was active in the Walton Heath reedbed. The behaviour of the adults changed markedly around 29 June, with the frequency of flight sightings increasing from one or two a day to about twenty, strongly suggesting that they were feeding young. This continued for the next few weeks, delighting many visitors, though views were often fleeting and distant, and several would-be observers admitted to me that their main feeling on seeing one of the birds in flight, after often long periods of waiting, was more relief than anything else!

To the joy of the monitors, the first sighting of a juvenile duly followed in early August. Notably, though, there were also three males present for part of the summer, the third presumably being unmated - all three, including the one attending the successful nest, were heard 'barking' together at least once.

This is the fourth year running that a pair has attempted to breed, with success in three of those years, two more fledged juveniles this year following on from five last year. That two pairs attempted to breed this year, with at least one other bird present, is highly significant. We will probably never really know whether, as is suspected, the extra birds are some of the previous years' young returning to their natal area. Or, as Little Bitterns have been known to migrate in flocks, the original pair could have picked up some unrelated followers at some point on their journey north. Whatever is the truth of that, it seems that what might have been just a flash in the pan (as was the case with the Cattle Egrets a few years ago) is now a genuine attempt by the species to colonise the Avalon Marshes.

# Contents

More Little Bitterns!	1
Welcome	2
WWT Steart Marshes: current situation Autumn 2013	3
News in brief	4
Bramwell bulletin	5
Chasing butterflies	7
Blasts from the distant past	9
Spotlight on...Marsh Harrier	11
Desert Island Birds	13
Walks and talks	14

## Welcome

Hello again! After the rather sombre tone of the last issue of The Bittern, it is great to report yet more rare heron breeding success from the Avalon Marshes in this one. Marsh Harriers seem to have done well too. The picture is more mixed from around the country, with some significant successes alongside some losses due both to the spring weather and, sadly, human intervention. Thankfully, human intervention in the fortunes of wildlife in our county has often been positive in recent years (see the update on the new Steart Marshes reserve opposite) - as long as you're not a badger (sigh!).

Some interesting articles for you to read and enjoy (I hope) this issue too. Mike Trubridge continues his occasional series from the edge of the Levels, this time with curious goings-on in one of his owl boxes, as well as his continuing Rook survey (more local surveys from other contributors would be equally welcome!) Brian Hill takes up butterflying, following on from last issue's article, I take a look at some old and surprising records on the Somerset list, and Jeff Hazell shines the spotlight on another of our wetland speciality birds, the Marsh Harrier.

At the recent meeting of the General Committee we discussed various options for updating and improving the Society's website. Most visitors don't really get beyond the messageboard, and perhaps that is partly because some of the other pages are badly in need of revision. Much energy and spare time is currently fully occupied in producing the annual report Somerset Birds and the Somerset Atlas (see the update on the latter on page ##), but you may see some developments come next spring. Watch this space!



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# WWT Steart Marshes: current situation Autumn 2013

Tim McGrath, WWT Project Manager, and Dick Best, SOS, report

Following the delays in construction of the creeks and embankments, due to the long period of record-breaking rain last summer, more favourable conditions this summer have allowed construction to continue apace. By July the lagoons and the creek system in the inter-tidal area had been completed, all the new flood defence embankments finished, covered with top soil and drilled with grass seed. There then followed a long period of dry hot weather, which slowed down germination and the establishment of a sward, which is needed to reduce the risk of erosion to the embankments once the breach has been made. At the same time work on the extensive freshwater wetland north of Stockland Bristol and the transitional (brackish water) area south of the pylon line near Comwich was nearing completion.

As construction work had continued throughout the breeding season regular surveys were performed ahead of the heavy plant to prevent destruction of nests and minimise disturbance of breeding birds. These surveys were made by professional ecologists assisted by a small team of local volunteers. Ground nesting birds were deterred from nesting on the footprints of the creeks by a combination of grass mowing and the use of passive bird scarers. When nesting sites were identified, the surrounding areas were marked, cordoned off and the work reviewed. Within the marsh breeding was confirmed by Little Ringed Plovers and Lapwings, with several breeding attempts being made by Oystercatchers. Breeding was also confirmed by one pair of Yellow Wagtails, with another set consisting of a male and two females, plus many pairs of commoner species, especially Skylarks and Reed Buntings.

Two large lagoons have been formed from borrow pits in the area that will be inter-tidal once the breach is made in the existing Parrett embankment. These lagoons have filled with rain and ground water and have at times held large numbers of gulls, including on occasions Mediterranean Gulls, and in the spring small parties of Little Gulls and Arctic Terns. In early autumn, especially at times of high tide in Bridgwater Bay, these lagoons have been used by small groups of Dunlin and Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank and, on one occasion, a passing pair of Avocet.

In the autumn of 2014 the breach will be constructed in the Parrett Banks; over 250ha of the reserve will become open to the tide and saltmarsh habitat will begin to slowly develop. However from November 2013 parts of the site will open as the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust take on management of 500ha of the Steart peninsula. And from the new car park at Stert Drove visitors will be able to safely access some parts of the reserve including circular walks and new viewing areas and watch as the site develops into a landscape-scale coastal wetland.

WWT have launched a new website where more information about the site can be found (<http://steart.wwt.org.uk/>) or you can receive immediate news of the reserve's wildlife by following WWTSteart on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/WWTSteart>).



# News in brief

## More success for Great White Egrets

After the blaze of publicity last year, this summer two pairs of Great White Egrets decided to nest again on the Avalon Marshes, but this time both nest sites were well away from the public gaze. Two young fledged from the first nest, but the second one was some way behind, and it wasn't until mid August that three young flew from that nest. Those three are seen a few days prior to fledging in Andrew Kirby's great photo (right). A third pair was suspected, but not proven - perhaps they were just practising. Maybe next year!



## Mixed fortunes for breeding birds elsewhere

Most South Somerset birders in particular also visit Dorset on a regular basis, so it was devastating news that all the birds in the regular Common Tern colony at Lodmoor in Weymouth suddenly deserted overnight on 13 June, for reasons which are still not understood. Better news, though, from the Fleet, where the Little Terns did well this year, fledging 30 young, though the awful news still reverberates that one of the country's largest colonies at Crimdon, Co. Durham, was raided by egg collectors in June and all the eggs taken, many close to hatching.

Back in Dorset, Marsh Harriers not only bred again in the Weymouth area this year, but also one pair fledged young in Poole Harbour for the first time ever. Though the populations are still tiny and separated by some distance, it means that the birds on the Avalon Marshes (where 13 young fledged from 4 nests this year) are not quite such an isolated outlying population as they were a few years ago.

In mid August came the news that not a single Hen Harrier chick was raised in England this year, for the first time in nearly 50 years - only two pairs were known to attempt breeding this year and both failed. Persecution is not the only cause (as the Countryside Alliance was quick to assert) but it is a major factor in some areas of northern England (and Scotland). Calls for legislation to introduce vicarious liability, so that landowners are legally responsible for the actions of their gamekeepers, have once again grown louder. Most frustratingly, one pair (which failed due to natural causes) was on a more enlightened estate that was prepared to trial diversionary feeding to minimise predation of grouse chicks but still retain the harriers. Happily we still have some stable breeding populations elsewhere in the UK, though most now seem to be on islands, such as the Orkney archipelago and the Isle of Man.

## County Atlas update

Work continues on the Somerset *Atlas* - the summer has been spent collecting in extra data from the SOS records database and elsewhere, soliciting suitable photographs from SOS members to illustrate it, and writing and editing sections of the text. The whole process has taken a little longer than hoped for, though. Partly because of this, and particularly because the publication date for the national *Atlas* has been put back to the autumn (we don't want to clash with that, for a number of reasons), the *Atlas* sub-committee has decided to put back publication from late autumn this year to early spring next year. We're confident that we should be able to meet this new timescale, though.

Sponsorship of individual species has proved very successful, and has so far raised over £3600, a significant proportion of the production costs. This is brilliant, and many thanks to all who have sponsored a species: it means that it is likely that the Society will not have to call too deeply on our reserves to fund the publication of the *Atlas*.

Keep an eye on the website and the next issue of *The Bittern* for further details.

# Bramwell bulletin

A nestbox mystery and more local survey data - another in the occasional series from **Mike Trubridge**

In September 2010 I moved to a quiet rural location in central Somerset, as described in issue 1 of *The Bittern*. On my very first night I was delighted to hear Little Owls calling around the house, a species that I had not encountered for many years. They were present all winter and the following summer I managed to locate two breeding pairs in the vicinity. Quite clearly the surrounding habitat of low intensity pasture, small fields bisected by many hedges which are often allowed to grow very tall, old apple orchards and small copses was very suitable for Little Owls. So in the autumn of 2011 I constructed five Little Owl nest boxes using the design described by Bob Sheppard in the BTO's Nest Record News No.25 and erected them in the surrounding area. One of them is quite close to my house and I was able to see that it was very quickly taken over by a pair of Little Owls. Throughout the winter I frequently noticed that one or other of the birds would sit on the box for many hours during the day, sometimes joined by its companion. Quite clearly they were very interested in the box and had claimed it for themselves. I was really excited about this and looked forward to watching them during the forthcoming breeding season.

During March 2012 the birds disappeared and I put this down to the fact that they were now incubating their eggs. Admittedly this was quite early in the season for Little Owls to breed, but perhaps not surprising given the extremely warm, dry and settled weather that the country experienced at this time. On 11 April I inspected the box for the first time, expecting to find a Little Owl inside sitting on its clutch. Imagine my surprise when instead I discovered that the entire box had been completely filled by the nest of another bird (see photo right).



It was impossible to actually inspect the contents of the nest because the construction continued above the height of the door. However I did note that there was a scolding House Sparrow and an alarming Great Tit nearby, which simply added to my confusion. Clearly this was not a Great Tit's nest and I have never seen a House Sparrow build such a large and tidy construction, so just what was going on here?

During the next couple of months I inspected the nest box on several occasions but was unable to work out what was happening. I never disturbed a bird in the box, although of course I was unable to see if there was a tight sitter inside. Usually there was either a House Sparrow or a Great Tit in the vicinity, sometimes both. By the middle of June there was no bird activity nearby, so on the 20th I removed the box from the tree and took it down for a close inspection. Having unscrewed the roof I was then able at last to see inside to try and find out what had been going on.

I discovered initially what appears to be the nest of a Great Tit. However, when I carefully removed it, underneath I discovered the original nest construction, which presumably was built by the House Sparrows (see photos below).



So I can only assume that the House Sparrows managed to evict the Little Owls but were then usurped by the Great Tits. Neither nest showed any signs of being successful, which is not particularly surprising because I expect that the birds were too busy fighting each other to be able to get down to the serious business of breeding. Whilst it is probably not uncommon for Great Tits to take over a House Sparrow nest - they are after all quite feisty characters - it is perhaps rather surprising that the sparrows managed to kick out the Little Owls. During the next five months I only saw/heard the owls on two occasions, so it certainly looked as though they had moved on. Hopefully they will return in due course and in an attempt to deter the sparrows from using the Little Owl box again, I constructed a triple decker House Sparrow nest box for their use.

So what happened in 2013? Well, for the first four months of the year a pair of Little Owls again took over the nest box and again I had high hopes that they would breed. But they suddenly disappeared towards the end of April and were not seen or heard again. As for the nest box, nothing used it this year and even the sparrow triple decker was empty.

Also in that first issue of *The Bittern*, I described a rookery survey that I carried out in the surrounding area. This survey was repeated the following summer and the results also appeared in *The Bittern*. I have now completed a third survey and the results are very interesting. This survey was carried out between 11 March and 15 April of all rookeries in and around the villages of Henley, High Ham, Low Ham, Pitney, and Park and produced the following results:

	2011	2012	2013
Occupied nests	234	206	236
Total nests	302	320	309
Occupancy rate	77.5%	64.4%	76.4%
Mean number of occupied nests per rookery	15.6	10.3	16.9
Mean number of all nests per rookery	20.1	16.0	22.1
Rookeries per sq. km.	1.2	1.6	1.1
Occupied nests per sq. km.	18.6	16.4	18.8
Total nests per sq. km.	24.0	25.5	24.6
Number of occupied rookeries	15	19	14
Number of new rookeries	n/a	5	0
Number of abandoned rookeries	n/a	1	4
Survey period	19/3 - 6/4	14/3 - 31/3	11/3 - 15/4

The main feature of the 2013 survey was the incredibly late spring. Although the survey started on a similar date to the previous two years, it continued into the middle of April and could in fact have gone on longer at some locations. The leaf canopy was very late in developing and, unlike 2012 when the nests were obscured by the end of March, everything was 3-4 weeks later in 2013. This meant that more of the later nests were clearly visible, while in 2012 it is very likely that some of these were missed.

The other feature of 2013 was the high winds experienced during the spring, mainly from the east, which had a major effect on the rook nests. It was very obvious that a number of them were simply blown out of the trees before egg laying could commence (and quite likely later on as well). One pair in the Hillview Farm rookery had several attempts at nest building before they finally gave up, each one being completely blown away.

In fact the winter of 2012/13 was particularly windy at times and this resulted in many nests being totally destroyed. At the largest rookery, Yew Tree Farm, all but one of the 47 nests from the previous year had disappeared by the time the birds started nest building at the beginning of the year.

# Chasing butterflies

Brian Hill extols the virtues of a new passion

Like most active birders I've always taken an interest in other aspects of natural history and can identify most British mammals and many common insects. I'm much more shaky on botany, which has always surprised me since plants stay still. And unlike many birders I've shied away from some of the more challenging groups such as dragonflies, wonderful insects but ones that can look very alike and rarely sit still long enough to consult a field guide. Moths too are, I suspect, pretty well beyond me. The thought of examining the contents of a moth trap, as a small knot of Somerset birders do daily, fills me with both wonder and awareness of my own ignorance in equal measure. Not so butterflies.

As what has been one of the best butterfly summers for years draws to a close I'm left wondering why it's taken me so long to get going. Chasing butterflies has much going for it. For one thing, there are not that many species to worry about, around sixty if you don't count rare vagrants, and with good planning and a certain amount of luck it is possible to see all of them in one summer as Patrick Barkham proved in his excellent book *The Butterfly Isles* (Granta Press 2010), which I strongly recommend even if butterflies don't grab you. One of our better known butterflying birders, Roger Musgrove, had already clocked up 49 species before August was out, most of these seen within a few hours' drive.

Butterfly watching has a lot going for it. In many ways it is easier than birding. For one thing several of the most sought-after species live in specifically defined habitat, and frequently in quite small geographical areas, as often as not carefully managed reserves. This does much to narrow the search, but does nothing to diminish the excitement of seeing a new butterfly for the first time. It soon becomes apparent though that this masks a sad truth. Many species of butterfly, some once very common in the British countryside, are now just hanging on with no guarantee of long-term survival, despite the heroic efforts of conservation groups, principal of which is Butterfly Conservation, an organisation which fully deserves support.

This year's burgeoning interest was sparked by one of our most threatened butterflies, the delicate and attractive Heath Fritillary. I'd been told something of its history, and its very specific habitat requirements. I'd been told too that colonies were generally small, widely scattered and probably less than forty in number. We are lucky to have them in Somerset (they only occur in Britain on Exmoor and in Kent, and are specially protected by law), and I quickly resolved to seek it out. Butterfly watchers I've come to know well were extremely helpful with advice and tactics but my first visit drew a blank.

Others, equally unsuccessful, followed but this only made me more determined and the pleasure obtained when I eventually did see this super butterfly equalled any birding experience.

The next step was a decent field guide and, like the birder, butterfly watchers ('butterfliers?') are well-served. Phone apps are all the rage now, and there are some very good ones around but I've got on best with Richard Lewington's *Pocket Guide to the Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland* (British Wildlife Publishing 2003). For the beginner it has the big advantage of being small, robust and portable and, most importantly, it restricts itself to species you are likely to see. It is full of interesting facts too.

I've also found a camera indispensable. Not only do you gain great satisfaction in building your own butterfly photo collection, it is an extremely useful and often essential identification tool. Bridge cameras have made life very much easier for non-photographers like me, and though results will never match those of a serious operator, they are almost always at least acceptable. It's worth noting though that all the frustrations of bird photography are present in capturing butterflies, sometimes more so. Close focussing



Heath Fritillary

binoculars are very handy, and most high quality and high price-tag optics are suitable, though I've found a pair of Eden 8x42, retailing at £129.00 on-line, absolutely ideal.

A final piece of advice is get to know some good butterfly people and never be afraid to ask (true of birding too). We have some excellent birder/butterfliers in Somerset, and I've benefited from the experience of people such as Roger, Brian Gibbs and Nigel Cottle who have been extremely supportive although, I suspect, mildly amused by my late development. Twitter is a wonderful medium, both for birds and butterflies and for getting opinions on tricky identification.

## **“For some it is the blues, but it did not take me long to take a real shine to the skippers, a primitive group of butterflies many compare to moths”**

So how has this summer gone? Surprisingly, and perhaps, ironically the most common and widespread group gave me the most trouble initially. I'd barely given Large and Small Whites a second glance, let alone Green-veined but these soon became manageable, as did Wood White, which when I eventually saw it, lived up to its description of a 'flying bow-tie'. I knew from the literature that blues and hairstreaks can be challenging, and so it proved, and among the highlights of the season was seeing Silver-studded Blue and three of the hairstreaks, White-lettered, Brown and Purple.

I've found that many butterfly watchers are similar to birders in having a favourite group. For some it is the blues, but it did not take me long to take a real shine to the skippers, a primitive group of butterflies many compare to moths. To me they seem to epitomise warm summer afternoons and grassy fields, both of which seem in short supply these days. Nor are they easy, even for the experts. For example, the Essex Skipper, which I have not knowingly seen yet, is best identified by the colour of its antenna tips, challenging to say the least. I've discovered behavioural differences too: the local but common Lulworth Skipper is busy but easy to watch, whereas the scarce Silver-spotted rarely seems to settle for long and can launch itself like a jump-jet and fly some distance, usually just before you press the shutter!

Anything really special? There certainly was. Purple Emperor is one of the most sought after species, as magnificent as its name suggests. It has a reputation for being difficult to see well, and some enthusiasts have never seen one. In mid-July news broke that Purple Emperors were showing exceptionally well at a known stronghold in Northamptonshire, and in some numbers. We paid a visit on 17 July and were overwhelmed by the experience of seeing some fifty or so of these glorious butterflies, many on the ground literally within touching distance. Roger even had one land on his camera as he attempted to photograph it. Something like that stays long in the memory.



Purple Emperor

As the season ends my own butterfly list stands at a personally pleasing 42, which means there will be others to seek next year. By an accident of nature as birding becomes quieter in mid-summer, butterflying takes off, so to speak, so you can switch seamlessly from one to the other, not that they are mutually exclusive anyway. To prove this, if proof were needed, while craning my neck one day to watch a Purple Hairstreak high in an oak tree I saw a Hobby dash past.

So it's brilliant. Don't wait as long as I did. Go for it!

# Blasts from the distant past

Julian Thomas looks at some Somerset birds very much overdue for a return visit

The British List includes some eight species in Category B, which means that they have not been recorded in an apparently wild state since before 1950 (the other categories which comprise the list are Category A - species which have been occurred naturally since 1950, including most of our regular breeding and wintering birds - and Category C, which includes naturalised introduced species such as Little Owl and Red-legged Partridge). We don't have separate categories within the Somerset list, but there are 16 rare species which fit the same criterion as Category B, including some birds which it is surprising to find have occurred in our county at all. Any one of these would be very much welcomed by today's Somerset listers if they turned up again, but for now we can only look back at the record books and hope...

## 1. American Bittern

The only county records are one near Long Sutton in the winter of 1898 and one found long dead at Catcott on 26 May 1928. We've had pretty much every European heron species turn up on the Avalon Marshes in recent years, so it's about time for an American one, and we've certainly got plenty enough suitable habitat for this, the direct transatlantic equivalent of our own Bittern. The main problem might be finding it!

## 2. White-tailed Eagle

There have been about a dozen Somerset records, but most pre-date the First World War, and the last was shot at Steart on 1 December 1945. It's another species associated with wetlands, in continental Europe at least, so what price a wandering youngster causing pandemonium among the wildfowl as it drifts low over the Levels one winter soon?

## 3. Egyptian Vulture

One of only two currently accepted British records, an immature was shot while attending a sheep carcass at Kilve in October 1825. A bit of a long shot for a repeat, and there is the spectre of escapes these days too. There appears to be no truth in the story I was once told that the Kilve bird was executed by locals fearful that it was an evil spirit.

## 4. Gyr Falcon

The only Somerset record was of a white phase bird near Watchet on 20 February 1926; it was found injured and died in care the next day. Global warming may seem to be working against a repeat showing, but increasingly variable winter weather may yet provide some lucky observer in the hills or on the coast with the shock of their lives.

## 5. Little Crake

Another wetland species which must be on the cards for a repeat - Gloucestershire, Cornwall and Devon have all hosted twitchable individuals in the last 15 years. Both previous Somerset records were in the 19th century on what is now the Avalon Marshes, and it would be short odds that the next will be there too.

## 6. Baillon's Crake

All five previous records were between 1870 and 1912. Somerset apparently missed out on the mini-invasion of calling birds in 2012, driven by severe drought conditions in the Mediterranean, so the centenary went by unmarked, but with our wetlands surely we have a chance of another visitation? Given the spread of the previous records, from Axbridge to Minehead, an unassuming ditch or rhyne somewhere might be just as likely a site as the Avalon Marshes.

## 7. Little Bustard

All three records, on King's Sedge Moor c. 1872, Drayton in October 1894 and Isle Abbotts in December 1914, were of shot birds. It has if anything got rarer nationally, so hoping for a live record anytime soon might be in vain, but you never know.

## 8. Great Bustard

Recent birds from the reintroduction scheme notwithstanding, there is only one accepted record, and it must be one of the best ones ever - seen from a train at Shapwick Heath on 22 September 1870! Shapwick would have looked very different then, and the railway line is now of course the main track through the reserve. There hasn't been a truly wild record nationally since 1987, so our best course might be to hope that the reintroduction scheme succeeds.

#### 9. Cream-coloured Courser

One of the most elegant birds on the British List, there is just one Somerset record, a bird that graced Minehead golf course on 24-27 September 1941. With only three records nationally in the last 30 years, it's another long shot, but they're usually twitchable when they turn up at all.

#### 10. Collared Pratincole

The sole Somerset record is vague in both date and place - prior to 1858 and somewhere on the North Mendips, so it may not even have been within the post-1974 county boundary. Black-winged Pratincole has turned up twice, both more recently (Stear, 15 June 1957, and Ilchester, 8 September 1968), plus another in North Somerset in June 1988, and has been more frequent nationally in recent decades, so may be a better bet. Spring birds usually arrive alone, but autumn birds are often with Lapwings, which may be the key to finding another pratincole of any species.

#### 11. Upland Sandpiper

A bird shot near Combwich prior to 1847 and found for sale in Taunton market is the only Somerset record, though there have been more recent near-misses - a long-stayer near Clevedon in November 2005, and a bird flying over Burnham one night calling, heard but not seen by Andy Slade, was thought likely to be this species.

#### 12. Ivory Gull

An adult of this Arctic species shot near Bridgwater around 1839 is the only record. One came as close as the South Wales coast in January 1998, so a repeat, while unlikely, is not out of the question.

#### 13. Pallas's Sandgrouse

Now a monster rarity, with the famous Shetland bird of 1990 being virtually the only modern record nationally, it appears on many a county list by virtue of the massive irruption of 1888, which also accounts for the vast majority of Somerset records. Including shot birds, about 40 were recorded, half of them at Norton St Philip. Rather closer to the top of the wish list than to the top of the list of predictions for a repeat.

#### 14. Yellow-billed Cuckoo

The only fully accepted record is of one shot at Pylle, near Shepton Mallet, on 6 October 1901, though another record from Shepton Mallet in November 1899 may be valid, but overlooked. We don't do well for American landbirds, with only this species and Dark-eyed Junco ever having been recorded, so no-one should hold their breath waiting.

#### 15. Alpine Accentor

As with so many of the old records, this (the only one) was shot, in the Deanery garden in Wells in 1833. An odd place for one - given the species' habitat preferences, if another should ever turn up, Brean Down or one of the Mendip quarries would seem favourite.

#### 16. White's Thrush

A real birder's bird, and one mostly closely associated in Britain in recent decades with Scottish islands in late autumn (early autumn records elsewhere seem almost invariably to turn out to be juvenile Mistle Thrushes). Strange then, that many county lists feature old records of birds shot in the winter, and Somerset is no exception. In our case it was at Hestercombe, near Taunton, on 7 January 1870. A real skulker, this is one to find yourself, as it may be difficult to refind once it has dived into a thicket.

There would have been a 17th species listed here, but in spring 2012, during a breeding wader survey on West Sedgemoor, Dave Chown found the first Great Snipe in Somerset since one on 3 April 1949 at Cheddar clay-pits. Dave's bird wasn't remotely twitchable - access would not have been granted due to the inevitable disturbance even if it had lingered - but it gives us all hope that some at least of these 'raves from the grave' could turn up in the county again.

If you want to learn more about these and other more recent Somerset rarity records, as well as much more information on the historical fortunes of our commoner birds, look no further than *A History of the Birds of Somerset* by our own David Ballance (2006, Isabelline Books, Penryn).

# Spotlight on...Marsh Harrier

Jeff Hazell on one of Somerset's most spectacular raptors.

Any British birder who has had the privilege of watching the breeding display of a pair of Marsh Harriers over their selected reedbed haunt would probably admit that this is well up there among their better birding moments. In his nuptial display, the male rises upward attaining a height of several hundred feet before plummeting downwards in a series of spectacular dives, during which he twists vigorously from side-to-side, or spins through a full 360 degrees, these irregular movements displaying the contrasting grey and brown of his wings to the full. At the completion of his dive he throws up and mounts again, to repeat the performance, sometimes after some further aerobatics which may include looping-the-loop at the apex of his fast steep upward climb. Not only is this display readily visible, but the loud rushing sound of air through his wings is audible from some considerable distance. When a female is present then mutual display may be performed, during which the high soaring male dives at his mate and she rolls over to present her talons, a symbolic gesture that will later be used for real during the many food passes as their breeding season continues.

**“Marsh Harrier is the largest of the British harriers, slightly larger and with narrower and longer wings and tail than a Common Buzzard”**

The Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, or Western Marsh Harrier as it is often known to differentiate it from the Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus*, is one of 16 species of harrier worldwide. Outside of Scotland, where the Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus* is considerably more widespread, it is currently the UK's least rare of the three species of breeding harrier, with, according to the BTO, an estimated summer population of 404 females in the period 2005-2009. The UK population was extinct by 1900 and then slowly recovered to 15 birds by 1958 before plunging to just one breeding pair, at the RSPB Minsmere reserve, in 1971, the result of increasing use of some pesticides and other pollutants. In the forty years since then it has shown a remarkable increase, and Somerset benefitted, somewhat tenuously, with the first successfully breeding of a pair on the Avalon Marshes in 1986. During the following years there was successful breeding in all but five, up to and including 1999, then, following a nine year gap, successful breeding again occurred in 2009, as it has in every year since, with four successfully fledged broods being recorded this year.

The Marsh Harrier breeds locally throughout much of Western Europe, where formerly it was much more common, and is still fairly common in Eastern Europe. The estimated European population is between 53,000 and 80,000 pairs (BTO birdFacts). Drainage of marshes is thought to be the main cause of population reduction, although in parts of Eastern Europe it is very well represented, and in Hungary it is believed to be making serious inroads into grassland steppe breeding habitat, once the domain of the Montagu's Harrier *C. pygargus*, leading to this species' decline. The majority of Marsh Harriers in northern and eastern Europe are summer breeding visitors, wintering in Africa, although some are resident in areas with a relatively mild winter climate, and this would seem to include some of our small population in Somerset, which is augmented by passage birds at appropriate times of the year.

Marsh Harrier is the largest of the British harriers, slightly larger and with narrower and longer wings and tail than a Common Buzzard; the female being noticeably larger than the male. Unlike the Buzzard, which holds its complete wing upwards, both forming a distinctive 'V' shape when soaring, this harrier only holds its inner-wing (the arm) raised, the outer wing (the hand) being held more-or-less horizontally. Although they do fly at some height, especially when moving over a distance, they are often to be seen quartering low over reedbeds or adjoining arable fields, when their light weight and resulting low wing loading allows them to almost dawdle into a stiff breeze as they hunt for prey.

Recent field guides, and I would recommend *A Field Guide to the Raptors of Europe, The Middle East, and North Africa*, by William S. Clarke, show that males and females gradually move through a series of moults from juvenile/1st-winter to adult plumage, and that typical males can sometimes be aged as 2nd-winter, 3rd-winter

or adult by the amount of pale-grey showing across the secondaries and primary bases of their upper-wing and by the amount of grey in their upper-tail; while the strength of a dark trailing under-wing edge or its absence is also a good indication of these ages. Juveniles, especially when recently fledged, appear mostly a dark, blackish-brown with a coppery-tinged, cream or ochre-coloured area on the head, variable in size, either as a distinctive cap (sometimes referred to as a copper head) often combined with a similarly coloured upper-throat patch, or as only a small area restricted to the nape. Some completely lack these markings and have heads that are the same dark colour as the rest of the bird, while by contrast some also show prominent creamy-yellow patches along the leading edge of their inner upper wing-coverts (shoulders), a feature often attributed in field guides to adult females. Adult females can appear similar to juveniles, although their head and throat patches are generally paler, more of a creamy-white, and many show a paler, more rufous-brown tail, especially when fanned.



Male Marsh Harrier

Very recently, long standing traditional methods of ageing and sexing Marsh Harriers in the field have been shown to be potentially flawed, especially when it comes to males: Plumage Variability in Marsh Harriers by Jean-François Blanc et al. *British Birds* 106 - March 2013 - P145 to 158.

**“So the next time you venture out on the Avalon Marshes try to age any Marsh Harrier that you are lucky enough to see”**

To read this important paper, copy and paste the following URL into your internet browser: [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/236029230\\_Plumage\\_variability\\_in\\_Marsh\\_Harriers](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/236029230_Plumage_variability_in_Marsh_Harriers)

Then, on screen, move down the RH panel and under Dataset, opposite the blue title ‘Plumage variability in Marsh Harriers’ click on View. This will appear as a pdf file that you can download to your computer, but you will need Adobe Reader to view it.

So the next time you venture out on the Avalon Marshes try to age any Marsh Harrier that you are lucky enough to see. It might seem a little daunting at first, but I’m sure that you will soon start to get the hang of it, although don’t expect to age every bird you see; I can’t. Sometimes I just enjoy the privilege of watching this superb, mostly slow-flying, hunter of marsh and fen.

# Desert Island Birds

This issue's castaway is David Ballance, former SOS President and now a Vice-President; inveterate traveller of the world's oceans (usually on cargo ships), and also author of many books, including the most recent county avifauna, *A History of the Birds of Somerset*.



## How and when did you get into birdwatching?

There was no Damascus-road vision. If you want specific moments:

- Bullfinches on our delphiniums in a Letchworth garden, c. 1938;
- Dunlin on Porlock Marsh (very tame and still in summer plumage, in a creek at the west end), September 1938 (aetatis meae IV); [I'm not classically trained, but I think this means David was four years old at the time - Ed.]
- Cormorant on a post off Porlock Weir, 1940.

## What is your favourite birding memory?

Hard to sort out, but how about Abbott's Booby, viewed from the forepeak of MV Teignbank, December 1999, off the south coast of Java: a big bird sitting on a distant log, looking like a Great Black-backed Gull with a long bill. As we approached over the calm sea, it became obvious that we would actually hit the log. Almost too late, the bird woke up to the same impending disaster, launched into the air, and became the GT version of a Gannet, with narrow, elegant wings - a Concorde among ordinary subsonic sulids. There are only about 2,000 of them, and they breed on Christmas Island, on palms.

## Where was your favourite birding trip?

Again, difficult. Perhaps driving across Europe to Greece, August/September 1960, with three friends. Birds included both pelicans, all four European vultures, Rollers, Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, Spur-winged Plover, and Little Crake; and Shore Larks on Parnassus, which we climbed. The return journey included Ptarmigan on the Grossglockner, the highest mountain in Austria!

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

Apart from ordinary domestic tasks, I write about bird books: when the Somerset Atlas work has finished, I must return to the Third Supplement of my *Birds in Counties*, which is the ultimately boring work on the local bibliography of British (and Irish and Manx) ornithology. But I am also interested in history and architecture, and have visited most churches in West and South Somerset.

## Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

That's easy: Exmoor. These days I do little east of the Quantocks.

## What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Presumably this island has a wide variety of habitats, including an enormous mountain? Cruising above, a Lammergeier; in the forest, one of the large Toucans, to amuse me, and a Rufous-throated Solitaire, to serenade me at dawn; and on the river a Torrent Duck and some Dippers.

## Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

May I assume, like BBC celebrities, the Bible and Shakespeare? After those, the *Collected Poems of Tennyson*.

Luxuries are tricky, because we can't presuppose an electricity supply or an infinite stock of batteries. And binoculars are perhaps understood, as they were around my neck when I was washed ashore from a container ship? So we had better have a case of dry Madeira (Sercial), which I could perhaps spin out until I am rescued.

# Walks and talks

Here is what's coming up in our area over the next three months. All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some provided by other conservation organisations (RSPB, Natural England and Somerset Wildlife Trust).

We try to include either a grid reference or a postcode (for satnav users) for the meeting points, often both. Charges and booking details are given where known for non-SOS events, but please check with the organisers.

September			
10	Talk	SWT	Great White Egrets. 19:30 - 21:30. Illustrated talk by Kevin Anderson about the first nesting Great White Egrets at Shapwick. Meeting at St George's Catholic School, The Mount, Taunton, TA1 3NR. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £3.
14	Walk	SOS	Meare Heath. Starts 0930. Leaders: Alison Everett and Jeff Hazell, both Levels residents. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Focus: reedbed birds and passage waders.
21	Walk	SWT	Ebbor Gorge. 10:00 - 12:00. Walk with Les Cloutman through this remote gorge, full of wild nature, signs of our ancestors and prehistoric creatures from the ice age. A stiff climb through the gorge, can be wet. Meet Ebbor Gorge car park, ST521484. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
22	Walk	SWT	Circular Walk Kilmersdon to Radstock. 10:00 - 12:30. A circular walk taking in Jack & Jill Hill and disused railway line Radstock to Kilmersdon. Late summer flowers and birds. Leader Jim Rosser. Some steep hill walking. Park in Kilmersdon ST697523. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1.
22	Walk	SWT	River Tone. 10:30 - 12:30. Informal walk alongside the river, starting at the Park and Ride, Silk Mills. Park on slip road. Share knowledge about river edge habitats and wildlife. Wear sensible shoes. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. No charge.
24	Talk	SWT	Our Local Reserves and the Old Peat Workings. 19:30 - 21:00. An illustrated talk by David Leach about SWT Nature Reserves and the old peat workings. Wells Museum (admission by side entrance) off Cathedral Green, Wells BA5 2UE. Doors open 19.00 for 19.30 start. Tea /coffee and biscuits served in the interval. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. SWT members £2.50, non members £3.

## October

2	Walk	SWT	Owl Prowl. 19:00 - 21:00. A walk around Shapwick Heath to look for owls, led by Chris Sperring from the Hawk and Owl Trust. Meet at Avalon Marshes Centre, ST425414. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
6	Family event	RSPB / NE	Autumn Wild Day Out in the Marshes. 1000-1530. A day of children's activities linked to the winter season. Come and join the RSPB and Natural England for competitions, quizzes, trailer rides and much more. Meet at Avalon Marshes Centre, Shapwick Rd, Westhay (BA6 9TT). Free entry. No booking required. For details contact 01458 860736 or see <a href="http://www.rspb.org.uk/hamwall">www.rspb.org.uk/hamwall</a> .
6	Walk	SWT	Winscombe Wander. 14:00 - 16:00. A walk around some of the footpaths near Winscombe. Parking in public car park behind the Woodborough Public House, Sandford Road, Winscombe, ST 420 572. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £1.
15	Talk	SWT	The Avalon Marshes. 19:30 - 21:30. Simon Clarke will talk about the wildlife to be found in the Avalon Marshes. Cheddar Catholic Church Hall, Tweentown, Cheddar, BS27 3HU. Off Upper North St beyond church. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.
17	Talk	SOS	Birds of West Somerset: Exmoor and Quantocks. Starts 1930. Brian Gibbs, County Recorder, gives an illustrated talk about these upland areas of the county that he knows so well. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).

## November

3	Walk	SWT	River Yeo, Cheddar. 13:30 - 15:30. Vic Matthews will lead a walk along the River Yeo near Cheddar. Meet in the car park at the bottom of Sharpham Road BS27 3DR (ST 447534). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £1.
6	Talk	SWT	The effects of flooding on agriculture and wildlife in the levels. 19:30 - 21:30. Talk by Catherine Mowat, Brue Valley Advisory Officer of SWT examining the impact of the severe and prolonged flooding during 2012 on the Somerset levels and what strategies might be employed to reduce the negative impacts in the future. Shapwick Village Hall, Station Rd, Shapwick TA7 9NJ. Refreshments will be available. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
10	Walk	RSPB	Winter wetland safari. 1400-1700. RSPB Ham Wall. A walk to see the excellent selection of wildfowl and other wildlife that spends the winter months at Ham Wall. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, homemade cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.

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17	Event	RSPB	Optics Day and Nature Walks. 1100-1500. RSPB Greylake - meet at reserve car park (ST399346, TA7 9BP). A chance to test drive a great range of binoculars and telescopes, and afterwards, or before, join RSPB staff on a nature walk around the reserve. Free event. No booking required. For further details call 01392 879438 or visit <a href="http://www.rspb.org.uk/greylake">www.rspb.org.uk/greylake</a>
17	Walk	SWT	Nunney Brook & Hills Walk. 14:30 - 17:00. A riverine walk led by Tony House looking for wildlife including otter, dipper, kingfisher and birds of prey. Park in Nunney car park, ST737456. Wear stout footwear, muddy paths and a small hill climb - not too steep. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1.
20	Walk	RSPB	Birdwatching for beginners. 0900-1200. RSPB Ham Wall. Come and learn how to identify the fantastic winter wildlife on the reserve. The wardens will take you through all the steps for wildlife identification as well as providing background information about the species seen. No previous experience required. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, homemade cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
21	Talk	SOS	Two illustrated talks - starts 1930. First Eve Tigwell, regional BTO representative, on Farmland Birds, a BTO update, then Jeff Hazell's talk entitled Levels Birder about his encounters with the special birds of the Levels. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).
24	Walk	RSPB	Birdwatching for beginners. 0900-1200. RSPB Ham Wall. Come and learn how to identify the fantastic winter wildlife on the reserve. The wardens will take you through all the steps for wildlife identification as well as providing background information about the species seen. No previous experience required. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, homemade cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
24	Walk	SWT	Boon's Copse. 10:30 - 12:30. Informal walk in Boon's Copse, near West Hatch; monitoring nest boxes and cleaning them ready for next year's breeding season. Park at ST282197, entrance to north-west through field. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. No charge.
28	Talk	SWT	Bird Nest Watching - 3 weeks up a tree & 3 days in a farmyard. 19:30 - 21:00. An illustrated talk by Tony House telling the stories of a Kestrel nest and a Spotted Flycatcher nest. Meet at St Catherine's Church Hall, Park Road, Frome, BA11 1EU (ST774478). Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1.

On behalf of Somerset Ornithological Society - [www.somersetbirds.net](http://www.somersetbirds.net)

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