



Surf Scoter at Blue Anchor

Chris Gladman and Julian Thomas on a long-awaited first for Somerset

JT: In issue 15 of *The Bittern* I listed Surf Scoter as one of the most likely next new additions to the Somerset List: not the most outlandish of predictions, but it was a huge surprise that it came true so soon. On 15 November CG discovered a lone scoter on the sea off his local patch, which runs from Blue Anchor to Dunster Beach, and posted a photo of it (right) on Twitter that evening. It quickly became clear that it was indeed the first (and eagerly anticipated) Surf Scoter for Somerset. I'll let Chris take up the story.



CG: When I first saw the scoter it was perhaps closer to Dunster Beach than Blue Anchor, straight out from where the canalised River Avill meets the sea. There are better photos of it than this one, but it is the first one ever taken in the county. It was overcast and raining at the time, and the photo is heavily cropped. The bird itself was clearly either a Velvet Scoter or a Surf Scoter - I considered both at the time, but with no books to hand I thought that the shape and small size of the bill favoured Velvet. I hadn't noticed any white in the wings but that is not always obvious with Velvet on the sea. My partner Kim (also a birder) said it was Surf on looking at the photo when I got home alongside photos online, with the black cap and head shape being diagnostic features of Surf. Velvet Scoter is a rare enough bird in the county in its own right, and I don't think I could believe my luck!

After comments on Twitter and discussions on the phone with Brian Gibbs and JT it seemed that it was indeed a Surf Scoter. The head pattern and the smallish bill indicate that it was a juvenile female; this became even clearer when comparing photos online of a juvenile male off Co. Durham a few days later.

To the relief of several avid county listers (JT included), the bird was still present and showing well the next morning, offshore from the Driftwood Café at the western end of Blue Anchor seafront, where it could often be found over subsequent days. It stayed for 11 days in total, although it was sometimes rather distant, partly dependent on the state of the tide, and could be difficult to pick out, particularly if the sea was choppy. Many people came to see it, and most went away having done so, though some had to make do with distant views. Overall, I saw it twice more from Blue Anchor, distantly, and three times from Dunster Beach, including observing it diving in the surf a few times. Present until dusk on 25 November, it could not be found on 26th or subsequently.

JT: Surf Scoter is one of the commoner transatlantic vagrants to Britain, recorded annually in small numbers. It is fairly regularly seen off the south coast of both Devon and Dorset, though returning birds often cloud the picture. However, it is very rare in the Bristol Channel (there are no Avon records, for instance), with the nearest previous one being off Ilfracombe in early 1992. A great find, and a thoroughly deserved reward for CG's persistence in watching his patch.

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Welcome

Hello again!

Later this year marks the 40th anniversary of the first appearance of the bird for which Somerset is most famous in national birding circles: the Wallcreeper which spent two winters near Cheddar in the late 1970s. A large chunk of this issue is given over to reproducing the article documenting this occurrence, originally published in the Bristol Ornithological Club's journal *Bristol Ornithology* in 1978. It is a fascinating and detailed account which will evoke fond memories for those who saw it and deep envy for those, like me, who didn't. It is also a fine example of the 'lost art' of detailed observation and note-taking, providing intriguing insights into the bird's behaviour and pointers as to how perhaps to find another one. Well worth a read.



Our cover story is a rather more recent rarity, indeed what will surely soon formally become the latest addition to the Somerset list. As a counterbalance to the rarity focus of the other articles, however, there is also the sixth contribution from the seemingly indefatigable Mike Trubridge, this time a thorough and very interesting update on his ongoing surveys of a small local nature reserve, and how these results have been able to be used to inform the management of the reserve. Proof once again that the actions of individuals and small groups can produce positive results for birds and other wildlife at a local scale.

There is also the usual mixture of news and features, including Secretary Rob Grimmond on the SOS desert island and bird-related events going on in the county over the next few months.

Since the last issue of *The Bittern* we have also launched the new website (via which most of you will have accessed this issue). The launch went smoothly, with remarkably few teething troubles, and feedback on the new look and new messageboards has been very good so far, so we hope it will fulfil expectations and be a comprehensive resource for all Somerset birdwatchers, old and new. We will be adding new content on a regular basis (including more guides to good birding sites across the county to help you make the most of your free time) so please take the time to explore the site and let us know what you think.

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News

Crowdfunder for new hide at Shapwick Heath meets target

In November last year, Simon Clarke, senior reserves manager in our area for Natural England, launched an ambitious crowdfunding project to raise money to create a new tower hide at Shapwick Heath, south of the main path and relatively close to the car park, overlooking Meare Heath and the 70-Acre reedbed. SOS donated £500 towards the project, and the generosity of many other donors means that by the 8 December deadline Natural England had not just reached their initial target but also the 'stretch target' of £17,000, which means that the hide will also have the planned viewing platform/seating area around its base. It is planned to build the hide over the winter, with an opening date in April.



Artist's impression of the new tower hide. (Don't take background/orientation literally.)

Somerset birder wins two Patchwork Challenge 2015 categories

Patchwork Challenge, as some may already know, is an annual national competition started by Birdguides in 2012. It's intended to tap into and encourage the increasing trend for enthusiastically working a local patch and finding your own birds ('just like in the old days', I hear some say, correctly). Several Somerset birders enjoyed taking part in 2015, but Tom Raven's results were so good that he won both the Inland and Comparative categories (the latter measures the number of species recorded as a percentage of what would be expected). Mind you, having Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall as your patch helps, though what propelled him to the very top was the quality of his finds - Hudsonian Godwit (below left; pic by James Packer) and Dusky Warbler (below right; pic by Rob Laughton), among others. Well done Tom!



Patchwork Challenge 2016 has of course already started, but it's not too late to enter: for details, see <http://patchworkchallenge.blogspot.co.uk/> or @patchbirding on Twitter.

BTO surveys

Eve Tigwell, BTO representative for Somerset, reports

House Martin survey: All I can confirm at the moment is that people will be able to select their own sites and will be asked to watch those nests throughout the season to determine occupancy and, if possible, success rates. Full details will be on the BTO and SOS websites sometime in February.

NEWS III: The survey finished at the end of January - my grateful thanks to all those who took part. We had volunteers for all the sectors along Somerset's coast: I think that's a first! I don't know yet whether or not everyone has been able to access all the sectors, and some are pretty challenging, but data has been submitted for several sectors and is looking very interesting. As volunteers were asked to survey inland as well as out towards the sea, there are some very useful data on flocks of terrestrial species, as well as waders and seabirds. There will be a full report once all the data have been submitted.

Bittern numbers rise again, but static in Somerset

The recently published Bittern Monitoring Report 2015 makes for interesting reading. Nationally, numbers increased again from 141 booming males at 62 sites in 2014 to 156 at 71 sites in 2015. Somerset remains the number one county for Bitterns, thanks to the closely co-ordinated approach taken by Natural England, Somerset Wildlife Trust, and the RSPB in the Avalon Marshes. The rapid increase of recent years that propelled us into that position has stalled, however, with 44-45 boomers in 2015 compared to 45-49 in 2014. This was only to be expected at some point, though - presumably the Avalon Marshes are now effectively 'full', as we know birds are using or prospecting other sites away from the core area.

Nationally the increase is largely due to further increases in the Cambridgeshire Fens and a welcome recovery in the coastal reedbeds in Suffolk that were inundated with saltwater in December 2013.

The minimum number of booming males located within regions in England between 2002 and 2015 (the maximum booming numbers are shown in brackets). Table 2 from the Bittern Monitoring Report 2015, reproduced with permission granted by the report's author, Simon Wotton, RSPB Senior Conservation Scientist (Species Monitoring and Research).

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Somerset	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	3	14	25	29	33	45	44
	(1)						(3)	(5)	(17)	(28)	(34)	(35)	(49)	(45)
Suffolk	14	18	19	20	20	20	24	28	26	25	25	25	21	32
Coast	(19)	(19)	(20)	(24)	(29)	(25)	(27)	(31)	(29)	(30)	(27)	(27)	(22)	(35)
The Fens	0	3	2	4	2	6	12	12	14	15	15	16	22	25
			(3)		(3)		(13)	(14)	(16)	(19)	(17)	(21)	(24)	(30)
Norfolk	10	12	17	8	10	10	21	19	17	20	13	19	18	21
Broads	(11)	(15)	(22)		(12)	(17)	(25)	(23)	(20)	(25)	(15)	(19)	(20)	(22)
NE England	2	5	9	9	7	9	8	6	6	9	10	13	16	13
		(8)	(10)	(12)	(9)		(9)	(8)	(8)	(10)	(15)	(19)	(18)	(15)
SE England	2	2	3	0	1	1	2	4	4	4	5	3	7	7
		(3)	(4)	(2)	(2)	(2)		(5)	(5)	(5)	(7)	(4)		(8)
North Norfolk	0	0	2	3	3	3	4	5	5	3	3	3	4	7
			(3)		(4)				(6)	(4)	(5)	(4)		(8)
Midlands	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	3	5	1	3
								(2)	(1)	(3)			(2)	(7)
NW England	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	2
					(2)	(3)		(3)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(3)		
E England	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	3	1
		(1)					(1)	(2)	(1)					(2)
Wales	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
				(1)	(1)			(2)	(1)		(1)		(1)	
SW England	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
				(2)	(1)						(1)			(1)
Scotland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
										(2)				
UK	31	43	55	46	44	51	75	82	87	104	106	120	140	156
TOTAL	(37)	(52)	(65)	(57)	(63)	(65)	(87)	(100)	(106)	(128)	(129)	(139)	(153)	(176)

Devon Atlas launched



On 29 January the Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society published the new Devon Bird Atlas, at a very well-attended launch at Stover Country Park near Newton Abbot.

At £40 (+ £7.99 p+p) it is quite expensive, but it is a large (500pp approx.) and very well-produced book, packed with photos, maps and information (as well as a foreword by HRH Prince Charles), so it is very much worth the cost if you spend any time birding in Devon. Many Somerset birdwatchers will have done so, particularly around the Exe estuary and the increasingly impressive Seaton Wetlands reserves, and contributed records to this Atlas during the six years of fieldwork, but there is much more to discover in this large and varied county.

To order a copy go to www.devonbirds.org/shop or send your name, address and a cheque to Devon Bird Atlas, Pendragon, Cornworthy, Totnes, Devon TQ9 7ES.

The Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks

Another new book of more direct interest for Somerset birdwatchers is due to be published in mid-March: the second edition of *The Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks*, written by David Ballance, Brian Gibbs, and Roger Butcher. The authors between them probably have more experience of the birds of these two upland areas of the county than anyone else alive, so it promises to follow on from the first edition in being an interesting and authoritative account. At around 260 pages, it will feature 32 colour photographs (selected by Exmoor resident birder and photographer John Rivoire, whose own work also featured in the Somerset Atlas) and artwork by Tom Raven (including the cover painting, right) and Brian Slade.



The price is £15.00; to reserve a copy send a cheque made out to D.K. Ballance to Flat 2, Dunboyne, Bratton Lane, Minehead TA24 8SQ.

Ham Wall

As those who have visited the reserve recently will know, the work on the bridge over the main drain just east of the car park continues - a combination of bad weather and hibernating Adders has interfered with the schedule - so for the time being the access continues to be along the path along from the north side of the road bridge. Keep an eye on the Ham Wall blog for announcements, and don't forget to wear stout boots or preferably wellingtons when visiting, as the path is currently very muddy.

The wet weather also presented another problem in January, in that the path to the new Avalon Hide became so muddy and slippery that the wardens decided they had to close it temporarily. Some very hard-working volunteers have pulled out the stops to lay down rubber matting (see photo, right), and the hide is now open again, which is good news for all of us.



The Cheddar Wallcreeper revisited

This famous bird must surely be the most celebrated vagrant which has ever visited Somerset. Here we reproduce an article chronicling the event, written by **Brian Rabbitts** and **Keith Vinicombe**, which originally appeared in *Bristol Ornithology* in 1978.

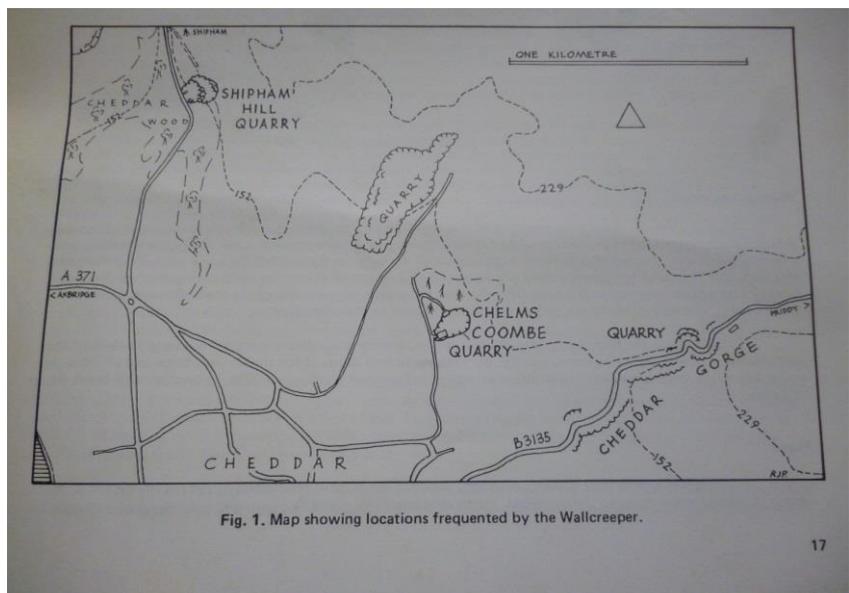
Wallcreeper wintering in Somerset

Introduction

Sometime in early November 1976, W. G. Watts, a fitter employed by the Central Electricity Generating Board at the Tower Testing Station, Chelms Coombe Quarry, Cheddar, Somerset, observed a Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* climbing the side of a wooden building high on the north face of the quarry. Few people saw it on this occasion, although it remained in the area until the first week of April 1977. However, in early November 1977 it reappeared and by the end of February 1978 the news had leaked out, with the result that large numbers of people watched it in the following weeks before it left on 9 April. It seems probable that it returned to its Alpine breeding area during the intervening summer. This was only the eighth ever recorded in Britain, although one has been seen since, at Hastings, Sussex, 6-10 April 1977, though this could conceivably have been the Cheddar bird stopping off on its way south. The statement that Wallcreepers are not migrants (*Brit. Birds* 63 (1970): 167) has since been challenged, with some evidence of movement (*Brit. Birds* 63 (1970): 393-394; 64 (1971): 236-237, 378; 65 (1972): 36-37; 66 (1973): 281-282) and these records support the idea that they should be given the status of partial migrants. A factor against others being discovered in this country is the initial difficulty of location in a type of habitat which is rarely visited by most birdwatchers. The following is the result of over twenty hours of observation by us during the period 16 January to 9 April 1978.

Habitat

The quarry at Chelms Coombe faces south-west with steep rock faces around all but this corner, with the highest point being perhaps 60 metres. These rock faces at first appear virtually sheer, but in fact consist of well quarried broken rock and numerous small ledges, many with vegetation. Large pylons and cranes dominate the scene; cables run down the rock faces at intervals and engineering debris is much in evidence. There are various buildings at each end, with offices and testing rooms on the cliff top at the west side. The Wallcreeper was also seen in a small disused quarry at The Perch, between Cheddar and Shipham. Although the walls here are high and sheer, the rock is also well broken and basically similar to Chelms Coombe, but more recently exposed. Some vegetation grows on the ledges of the north and south faces. Cheddar Gorge was also visited, and this contains large areas of sheer rock, but there are numerous clefts and less vertical areas and in one part there is a small disused quarry. Due perhaps to the immensity of this location, the Wallcreeper was seen here less frequently. The extremes of its territory were just over two kilometres apart (see Fig. 1).

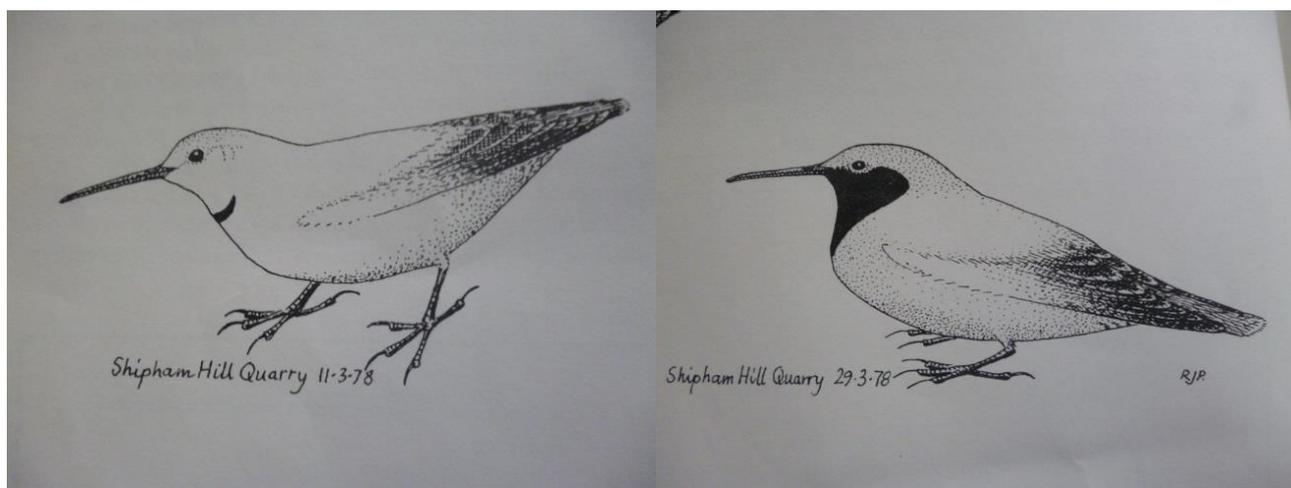


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Plumage and moult

Most of the plumage characteristics of this attractive bird corresponded with those described in the available literature, but the following additional points were also noted: underparts very much darker than the very pale grey upperparts with the darkest area being in the centre of the belly; at the bend of the wing was a small elongated area (probably the alula), not always visible and appearing pink in certain lights; the undertail coverts had a row of three or four whitish crescents down each side with the centre dark; on each side of the black throat was a small whitish patch, not very conspicuous, with one being more obvious than the other.

On 4 March the first signs of moult were seen with some black flecking on the sides and bottom of the white throat, this area appearing rather scruffy. By 11th about two thirds of the throat were black and on 24th just one or two white spots remained. The Wallcreeper was in full summer plumage on 27th, having the large black throat of a male.



Flight

In flight it looked very striking, with long rounded wings, brilliant flashes of red mainly on the wing coverts, and large white spots on the primaries. Flight characteristics could be compared with those of a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* or at other times a huge butterfly. Even when viewed at long range the rather swooping action was very distinctive. On several occasions the bird left the rock face with an incredibly erratic flight, twisting and turning back and forth.

Behaviour

The Wallcreeper was usually present at Chelms Coombe during the early morning, occasionally staying all day. After the initial feeding period it would fly out towards Cheddar Gorge and, later during its stay, towards the quarry at The Perch. It usually reappeared in Chelms Coombe in the evening though we found that its routine was rather erratic. However, it is thought that strength and direction of the wind was the most influential factor.

The bird generally fed while on ledges, slopes and broken rock, tending to avoid sheer, smooth faces. It would occasionally creep up sheer rock but once it was seen to slip while half way up a small vertical slab, although it soon regained its position. Feeding at various heights, from close to the ground in the quarries to over 90 metres in the Gorge, it seemed to show no preference for sunny spots though it mainly avoided wind-swept areas. The bird moved sideways or upwards when feeding, although it would often flit down a short way at times, while upon reaching a certain height it would drop down to a lower level to resume feeding in a different area. It moved around on the rock with a hop rather like a Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, frequently flitting up to pounce on insects or to inspect small cracks and holes. The tail and wings were not used for support but the wings were constantly flicked. This was obviously a voluntary action as it would cease in the presence of a predator, when resting or when preening. The purpose of the movement

appeared to be to flash the white primary spots rather than the red on the wing coverts which usually remained mostly obscured by the grey scapular feathers. The reasons for this action were not clear, but the vivid movement may have been a feeding technique to stimulate insects into short movements to enable easier visual detection. Every nook and cranny in any one area would be searched methodically and occasionally it would squeeze into larger openings and disappear for several seconds. Small caves in the rock faces were sometimes visited. On 24 February it was seen hopping around inside one at Chelms Coombe, even hanging upside-down from the roof, while it often stood in the entrance waiting to pounce on food items. On several occasions the Wallcreeper was seen on a large crane, hopping along horizontal steel girders or fluttering about on the side, searching the cracks.

The location of food seemed to be entirely visual. It would crane its neck and stretch, peering intently into crevices, and often stood with its head lowered below the level of its body, or stretched out horizontally along the rock in a most peculiar position. It often waited, looking intently around before pouncing on something. Food was picked with the tip of the bill from the rock surface or from cracks, and once from the base of a small plant. Its feeding rate increased with the greater abundance of insect life in late spring, prior to migration. On 8 April for example, the bird was seen on a favoured damp area, feeding more frequently than usual, picking up items every second or so and barely flicking its wings at all. Only once was it seen to probe into earth though it occasionally did some excavating into loose earth and amongst small stones. In the latter instance the bill was opened and it attempted to get under a larger stone and also pecked at another. Large or hard prey was often held or manipulated in the bill before swallowing. On 9 February it took a caterpillar some 45mm long and spent several minutes apparently softening it by hitting it against a rock before swallowing it whole. This behaviour was again noted on 29 March with a very small but obviously hard grub, and on 1 April with another caterpillar. Other caterpillars were swallowed instantly. Persistent bill-wiping was frequently observed on rocks and once on a cable. Flycatching was seen several times, the bird flying out up to several metres from the rock with an awkward butterfly-like action. It once leapt off the rock backwards to snap at an insect, practically looping-the-loop before returning.

Food appeared to be mainly small insects and spiders, although most of the items taken were practically invisible. Larger grubs and caterpillars, however, were not infrequently eaten. Butterflies or moths were also taken; on 4 March the bird caught what was possibly a Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae* and it spent some time dealing with this in order to remove the wings; on 26th a small pale moth and on 8 April two creamy-brown ones were swallowed whole. On 11 March it regurgitated a small pellet.

Short spells (usually five to ten minutes) were occasionally spent preening. Comfort movements such as bill-wiping, head-scratching and wing-stretching were all fairly frequent. On one occasion the Wallcreeper rubbed its neck and then the side of its head on a stone. On the east face at Chelms Coombe is a wet area beneath a small cave with a pool. On 12 March it appeared to bathe in the trickle of water running down the face and its wings were flicked open more fully. On 27th, it bathed for over five minutes, making numerous movements into the water and back onto a rock at the cave entrance. It then used its bill very little for preening but fluffed out its body feathers and shook. On moving away it remained in one position for some five minutes to dry. Similarly on 24 February it sat on the rock to dry but did not preen. Sunbathing was not observed.

Noise levels at Chelms Coombe were often high, with the building and dismantling of pylons, but more especially when generators and drills were in operation. All of this provoked little reaction from the Wallcreeper although if suddenly surprised it would fly to another part of the rock face.

Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* and Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* frequently passed overhead and its reactions to these were always the same, immediately ceasing all activity and keeping perfectly still except for the occasional agitated skyward glance. Tending to remain still for some time after, the Wallcreeper was then extremely difficult to pick out from the background. Once when a Buzzard *Buteo buteo* came over, being noisily mobbed by a Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, the Wallcreeper became very excited, flicking its wings in an exaggerated manner before flying and landing on a lower rock still agitatedly flicking its wings. On another occasion, when two Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* flew over calling excitedly, it quickly left the rock

face but soon returned. When the same thing happened a few moments later, flight was quicker and more evasive.

On 3 March at 1715 hours GMT, the Wallcreeper entered a small hole over two thirds of the way up the cliffs on the east side of Cheddar Gorge to roost. It was again noted going to roost just before 1745 hours on 12th in a small hole in the east face at Chelms Coombe. P. Webber (verbally) had observed this on several previous evenings. From 14th to 27th it was seen on several dates during the evening to leave Chelms Coombe and fly towards Cheddar Gorge.

Song

The Wallcreeper was first heard singing on 24 March and then frequently while feeding as well as perched. There were four distinct songs, but two main ones, which tended to be given in spells of perhaps 10-15 minutes before switching to the other, although occasionally alternated. The first was vaguely chat-like with a rather throaty whistling quality. Renditions of this were variously written but included 'Chewee cheweeooo' (rising on the 'wee' and falling on the 'ooo'), 'Wee woo weeo' and 'Pu pu piu'. The second was a rather slow, clear and piping succession of three whistles then a falling note, the first part of which rose slightly: 'Oo oo oo eoooo' or 'Pu pu pu piu'. This was strongly reminiscent of a Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, especially the last longer note. Both other songs were similar to the first with one being shorter, perhaps rather weaker, and rather high and squeaky in tone: 'Ticky-teu sip'. The last, given least frequently, was a whistly 'Wooo ... wiooo' with a throaty, remarkably Starling-like noise in the middle. On 26 March and 1 April it was seen in flight in a series of wide, fast circles which may possibly have been some kind of display.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the management of the Tower Testing Station in allowing access and in particular to P. Webber, who gave up much valuable time in giving advice and supervising the vast army of birdwatchers that descended there. Ken Hall and Robin Prytherch provided additional information. Robin Prytherch also drew the map and the illustration.



A montage of videograbs of a Wallcreeper in the Spanish Pyrenees in March 2003 (Paul Bowyer)

[To which I would like to add my particular thanks to Brian Rabbitts for giving permission to reproduce this article and for loaning me his own precious reprint copy from which I have retyped the article and taken the photographs of Robin Prytherch's illustrations reproduced here.]

There has only been one further British record - one seen briefly on the Isle of Wight on 16 October 1985. So the next twitchable one will be very popular. - Ed.]

Bramwell bulletin

The sixth instalment of the occasional series by Mike Trubridge

In issue 11 of *The Bittern*, I gave details of a CBC (Common Bird Census) of Eastfield Nature Reserve, a small site of 7.6ha located to the south-east of High Ham, owned by Somerset County Council and managed by South Somerset Council, with advice and assistance from Butterfly Conservation. This summer I carried out a fourth survey of the site and here are my results:

Breeding birds at Eastfield 2012-15

Species	2012 pairs	2013 pairs	2014 pairs	2015 pairs
Woodpigeon	8	8	5	6
Tawny Owl	1	?1	1	
Green Woodpecker	1			
G S Woodpecker	1	1	1	
Magpie	1			
Great Tit	7	1	3	1
Blue Tit	3	2	3	3
Wren	12	9	9	7
Song Thrush	1		1	
Blackbird	6	6	6	5
Robin	8	5	8	4
Blackcap	7	5	8	8
Lesser Whitethroat			1	
Chiffchaff	10	5	10	7
Goldcrest				1
Dunnock	5	2	3	4
Chaffinch	8	3	6	5
Total species	15	11	14	11
Total pairs	79	47	65	51

Whilst there was a slight decline in both the range of species breeding and the number of birds breeding when compared with the previous year, neither of these declines are worrying. However, the big fall in numbers between 2012 and 2013 is statistically significant, as mentioned in issue 11. At the time of writing my previous bulletin I did not have the BTO's regional figures for comparison, but these were published shortly afterwards. In September 2014 the BTO published its latest population trends of the UK's breeding birds (Harris, S.J., Risely, K., Massimino, D., Newson, S.E., Eaton, M.A., Musgrove, A.J., Noble, D.G., Procter, D. and Baillie, S.R. 2014. *The Breeding Bird Survey 2013*. BTO Research Report 658. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford). This contains population trends for 2012-13 across the country, while further information available online (www.bto.org/bbs/graphs) provides regional breakdowns for these trends.

By using the data for South West England, it is now possible to see how the dramatic bird declines experienced at Eastfield between 2012 and 2013 compare with the regional trend. Of particular relevance are the declines in birds associated with scrub, a habitat at Eastfield that suffered considerable damage during this period by a combination of further winter scrub removal and a very late grazing regime in the spring/summer of 2013, when sheep were present on the site until 14 June. The latter meant that birds which often nest on the ground or very close to it, such as Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Robin and Wren, were simply unable to find suitable cover for their nest sites.

Changes in numbers of scrub-nesting birds at Eastfield 2012-13

Species	2012 pairs	2013 pairs	Change	SW England change
Wren	12	9	-33%	-2%
Robin	8	5	-60%	+6%
Blackcap	7	5	-40%	-16%
Chiffchaff	10	5	-100%	-33%
Dunnock	5	2	-150%	-12%

This table shows quite conclusively that the large declines recorded at Eastfield are very different when compared with the trends for South West England and would tend to confirm the suggestion that the loss of scrub habitat and the late grazing regime in 2013 were responsible for the declines noted. Furthermore, the increase in breeding numbers recorded the following year for four of the above five species (Wren numbers stayed the same) was probably due to the fact that no more scrub was removed and no sheep grazing took place after 8 March 2014. Since then further discussions have taken place with South Somerset Council concerning the inappropriate grazing regime and hopefully this has now been rectified. During 2015 no sheep were on site after 10 April and grazing did not recommence until 6 November, when 27 cows were introduced. If this arrangement continues, then it should ensure that the populations of scrub-associated bird species are not adversely affected.



Eastfield Nature Reserve
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At the same time this will also benefit the reserve's flora, which has suffered badly due to summer sheep grazing. Orchids in particular were seriously hit in 2011 and 2013, when none were seen in flower, with only a very few in the intervening year. However, in 2014 four orchid species were noted - hundreds of pyramidal orchids, three common spotted orchids, two bee orchids and 10 green-winged orchids. This was the first time that the latter had been seen at Eastfield for a number of years. 2015 was also good for orchids, with bee orchids increasing to five, although green-winged decreased to six and common spotted to just one. Then, in

September, autumn lady's tresses were seen for the very first time. Five orchid species in such a small area is most uncommon and I do not know of a similar location.

Eastfield reserve may be a small site but it is important that a suitable grazing regime is established to benefit all the wildlife. It may have taken four years to get there, but I think we have finally made it after a bit of a struggle. Once again, though, this highlights the importance of citizen science - without the figures showing the severe declines in breeding birds and orchid numbers, it would have been difficult to convince the Council that it was vital to keep stock off from April to October.

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 SOS Secretary **Rob Grimmond**.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

When I was young, a friend introduced me to egg collecting, though I didn't stick to it for long. My grandfathers made a huge contribution. My maternal grandfather used to take me on walks and pointed out the species we saw. My paternal grandfather in Scotland also took me around the countryside. Bugling Whooper Swans and calling Redshanks at Aberlady Bay left a life-long impression on me. A Redshank's call always takes me back there.

What is your favourite birding memory?

There are so many, including seabirds on London reservoirs after the 1987 Great Storm, a fabulous Scilly pelagic in 1988, Plains-wanderer in Australia, Little Penguins walking across my feet in Tasmania, finding Diademed Sandpiper-plover in Chile, my first Andean Condors and Harpy Eagle in South America, Kiwi and eye-to-eye Wandering Albatrosses in New Zealand, Jocotoco Antpitta coming for worms in Ecuador, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper and 18 species of *Phylloscopus* warbler in Thailand. Impossible to choose!

Where was your favourite birding trip?

I've had many great trips but two weeks in the Falklands is yet to be surpassed. The wildlife is incredibly tame and there are few people around. An incredible experience, with five species of penguin, tens of thousands of Black-browed Albatrosses and other seabirds, and close contact with one of the world's rarest raptors, Striated Caracara (not to mention Elephant Seal and Orca).

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

My other great passion is moth trapping. I'm also keen on butterflies and dragonflies (indeed most things that fly). Away from wildlife, I'm involved in many other things - including helping maintain an allotment, the Parish Council, chairing two committees, webmaster for two websites (including the SOS), and giving bird and wildlife talks. It's a good job I no longer work for a living!

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

I enjoy my birding trips abroad, which give me the chance to spend a concentrated amount of time birding. At home, most of my birding is in or within a range of 10 miles of my parish in South Somerset, on the edge of the Blackdown Hills. My house list (birds seen in or from the garden) has 75 species, including Little Egret, Goshawk, Red Kite, Hen Harrier, Hobby, Peregrine, Sedge Warbler, Black Redstart, Wheatear, Grey Wagtail, and Hawfinch. Places like the Avalon Marshes are wonderful to visit but there's nothing like a local patch, usually with a lot fewer people!



Rob with a few new friends on the Falklands

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

This is just about impossible so I've taken the liberty of having two lists, one for home and another for abroad. [OK, that's cheating, Rob, but I'll let you off because I can't fault any of your choices! - Ed.]

Home list:

Peregrine: The supreme aerial predator.

Raven: What a voice it has, so easy to pick up.

Wren: A charismatic little bird, which is probably more numerous than people in the autumn!

House Martin: A charmer and great traveller, which we've had nesting at home.

Long-tailed Tit: A delightful ball of feathers which goes for safety in numbers.

Away list:

Torrent Duck: Incredibly hardy bird of wild, rough and remote Andean rivers; just see the ducklings battling the elements!

Gentoo Penguin: A penguin is a must. I've been lucky enough to see 11 species, so choice wasn't easy, but in the end Gentoo pipped King. It's a delight to see males choosing pebbles for their nest in the hope of impressing their mate.

Black-browed Albatross: Edges out Wandering because I've been privileged to spend time at their biggest breeding site, surrounded by thousands of birds.

Andean Hillstar: I had to choose a hummer. Perhaps even more difficult than choosing a penguin, because there are so many colourful and charismatic species. In the end I've chosen this one because of its incredible life at altitude, where it goes into torpor overnight.

Yellow-browed Warbler: There are so many passerines I could choose. I decided on this one, which I've seen on its breeding and wintering grounds as well as in the UK, because I love *Phylloscopus* warblers and this to me symbolises that group.

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

Since it's a tropical desert island, I suspect there won't be many land birds and seabirds are likely to be low in numbers. So I'll forsake bird guides and go for Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which I can re-read at leisure in my luxury item hammock.

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 February-April 2016. Most are specifically bird-related and in Somerset, but also included are some general wildlife walks and talks with bird interest.

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.



February

4	Talk	RSPB	What is the Real Wild? 1930. Chris Sperring MBE will be looking at our attitude to wild animals (including birds!) and how we manage our landscapes. He will query whether we overmanage habitat to fit the comfort of our eyes rather than what nature really needs. He also questions if it is right to create habitats that favour a few species at the expense of the many as well as the pressure being brought to bear on wildlife with increasing urbanisation. So what is the real wild? St Paul's Church Hall, Walliscote Road, Weston-super-Mare, BS23 1EF. Price: £3.
6	Walk	SOS	Carymoor. 0930. Leaders: Chris Griffin and Roger Dickey. Focus: marsh and farmland birds. Meet at Carymoor Environmental Centre (ST617311, BA7 7NR); access via Dimmer landfill site, off B3153 west of Castle Cary.
7	Walk	SWT	Catcott Lows. 1330-1530. Leader: Don Hurrell. A visit to see the wintering wildfowl. Meet at ST400415. £1.
9	Walk	SWT	Stear Marshes. 1000-1200. Alys Laver, Acting Site Manager, will lead a walk round the reserve explaining how the marshes work with particular focus on birdlife which should be particularly interesting at this time of year. Meet at reserve car park (ST252442). Toilets available in car park. Disabled access to most areas. Adult SWT members £2, non-members £3, children free.
13	Walk	RSPB	Big Wetland Duck Watch. 1000-1200. In the winter tens of thousands of ducks and waders visit the fields of West Sedgemoor. Join RSPB guides for a rare opportunity to witness this wildlife spectacle, with the chance also of seeing the Somerset Cranes. Adults: £5 non-RSPB member/£4 member; children £3 (ages 5-17) / free (under 5). Payable on the day, but booking essential. Directions will be provided on booking. West Sedgemoor office - tel.: 07774 620879, email: west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk.
14	Walk	SWT	Catcott Lows. 1000-1200. Leader: Mick Ridgard. Walk will incorporate the new hide and boardwalk. Meet at car park (ST401418). Stout footwear required. No dogs allowed. Not suitable for wheelchairs or limited ability. Adults £2.50, children £1.00.
14	Walk	RSPB	Cheddar Reservoir. 1000-1230. Leader: Trevor Best (01278 782587 or 07788 581593). A walk looking for wildfowl on the reservoir and wintering birds in the surrounding fields. Meet in the car park on the Cheddar side of the reservoir (ST446535). Free.
18	Talk	RSPB	Iceland - Wildlife & Wild Lands. 1930. An illustrated talk presented by renowned wildlife artist Mike Langman, showing the best that this magical island can offer through the seasons. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster, TA19 0QH. Price: Crewkerne RSPB group members £2.50, non members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
20	Walk	RSPB	Catcott Lows SWT and Greylake RSPB reserves. 1030. A morning visit to the new tower hide hoping to see a good range of wildfowl and a variety of raptors. Then an afternoon visit to Greylake including, weather permitting, a walk around the reed bed area as well as visiting the hides. Meet in the SWT car park at Catcott Lows (ST401418, TA7 8NQ). Free.
24	Talk	SWT	Meet the Barn Owl Expert. 1930. You can find out more about Somerset's brilliant Barn Owls from broadcaster and naturalist Chris Sperring MBE, the Hawk & Owl Trust's Conservation Officer for the South West. The ticket price of £10 includes the talk, plus tea or coffee, and homemade cake. Glastonbury Town Hall, Magdalene St, Glastonbury, BA6 9EL. Booking essential - see SWT website (www.somersetwildlife.org) for details.

March

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| 1 | Talk | SWT | Born to Bird. 2000-2130. Teenage world birder, conservationist and blogger Mya-Rose Craig (aka Birdgirl), accompanied by mum Helena, talks about being born into a birding family and finding her own path to becoming a world birder, her birding in Britain and of her desire to inspire young people to become interested in birds, wildlife and conservation. Meet at Caryford Community Hall, Ansford, Castle Cary, BA7 7JJ (ST643330). Tea and coffee served from 7.30pm. Adults £2.50, children free. |
| 3 | Talk | RSPB | Birds of North Somerset 1976-2016*. 1930. Ed Drewitt, local naturalist and regular speaker, will be exploring the highs and lows of birds in North Somerset and the surrounding area over the past 40 years. During that time we may have lost certain species, but we have gained a lot more, from Peregrines to Great Egrets. St Paul's Church Hall. Walliscote Road, Weston-super-Mare BS23 1EF. Price: £3. |
| 5 | Walk | SWT | Harridge Woods. 1000-1200. Eve Tigwell will lead a walk round a major SWT reserve on East Mendip. Come and see what renovation of a woodland can achieve for wildlife. Entrance to Harridge Woods ST648484. Not suitable for wheelchairs or limited ability. Adults £2.50, children £1.00. |
| 12 | Walk | RSPB | What's that Bird? 1000-1200. Ham Wall. Come along and learn how to identify some of the birds that call Ham Wall their home during the winter. Please bring waterproofs, wear warm clothing and stout footwear or wellingtons. Meet at Ham Wall car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Price: £5 per adult / £3 per child. Booking essential: telephone 01458 860494, email ham.wall@rspb.org.uk. |
| 12 | Event | SOS | Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks. 1230. Joint meeting with Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society launching the new edition of this book by David Ballance and Brian Gibbs. Church House, Crowcombe TA4 4AR. |
| 15 | Talk | SWT | Born to Bird. 2000-2130. Teenage world birder, conservationist and blogger Mya-Rose Craig (aka Birdgirl), accompanied by mum Helena, talks about being born into a birding family and finding her own path to becoming a world birder, her birding in Britain and of her desire to inspire young people to become interested in birds, wildlife and conservation. Cheddar Catholic Church Hall, Tweentown, Cheddar, BS27 3HU. Off Upper North St beyond church. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.50. |
| 17 | Talk | SWT | Meet the Barn Owl Expert. 1930. You can find out more about Somerset's brilliant Barn Owls from broadcaster and naturalist Chris Sperring MBE, the Hawk & Owl Trust's Conservation Officer for the South West. The ticket price of £10 includes the talk, tea/coffee, and homemade cake. Horton Village Hall, Broadway Hill, Horton, near Ilminster, TA19 9QR. Booking essential - see SWT website (www.somersetwildlife.org) for details. |
| 17 | Talk | RSPB | A Wildlife and Cultural Journey through China. 1930. A photographic talk presented by Lynn & Steve Osborne, who will describe their recent trip to Sichuan and the Tibetan Plateau. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster, TA19 0QH. Price: Crewkerne RSPB group members £2.50, non members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free. |
| 20 | Walk | SWT | The Levels in Winter. 1000-1200. A walk round Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath reserves for wintering wildlife and early spring migrants. Bitterns possible. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Adults £2.50, children £1.00. |
| 20 | Walk | RSPB | Stearth Marshes. 1030. A circular walk of 2-3 miles in the morning, taking advantage of a number of hides on the way and possibly, weather permitting, visits to other local sites in the afternoon. Meet in the main reserve car park (ST270458, TA5 2PU). Free. |

24 Talk SOS **Inglorious - bye bye to driven grouse shooting?** 1930. Conservation campaigner Mark Avery gives a talk on the controversial links between grouse shooting and illegal raptor persecution in our uplands. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).

April

6 Talk SWT **Berrow Dunes.** 1930-2130. Bob Corns (an SWT Trustee) has known the dunes here for decades and will look in depth at this ever-changing coastal system. Shapwick Village Hall (TA7 9NJ, ST 418384). Adults £2.50, children free.

14 Talk SOS **Annual General Meeting, followed by Exmoor Birds.** 1930. After the Society's AGM there will be a talk by past SOS President David Ballance, who has been watching birds on Exmoor for over 70 years. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).

16 Walk RSPB **Mr Boombastic.** 0600-0900. With over forty male booming Bitterns recorded last year, the Avalon Marshes is one of the best places in the country to find this shy and elusive bird. Join an early morning walk to listen to the eerie booming of the Bitterns as they look for a mate. Stout footwear or wellingtons recommended. Meet at Ham Wall car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Price: £5 per adult / £3 per child. Booking essential: telephone 01458 860494, email ham.wall@rspb.org.uk.

19 Walk RSPB **Sand Point.** 1000-1230. Leader: Trevor Best (01278 782587 or 07788 581593). Looking for migrants and other species present. Meet in National Trust car park at the end of Sand Bay road (ST330660). Free.

21 Talk RSPB **Sri Lanka.** 1930. David Smallshire, all-round naturalist and tour leader, will give an illustrated talk on this island nation, a tropical paradise for birds and other wildlife, with a wide range of habitat types and many endemic species. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster, TA19 0QH. Price: Crewkerne RSPB group members £2.50, non members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.

21 Talk SWT **Meet the Barn Owl Expert.** 1930. You can find out more about Somerset's brilliant Barn Owls from broadcaster and naturalist Chris Sperring MBE, the Hawk & Owl Trust's Conservation Officer for the South West. The ticket price of £10 includes the talk and a wildlife walk round Langford Heathfield SWT reserve, plus tea or coffee, and homemade cake. Langford Budville Village Hall, Ritherdons Lane, Langford Budville, TA21 ORL. Booking essential - see SWT website (www.somersetwildlife.org) for details.

23 Walk SOS **Brean Down.** 0815. Leaders: Julian Thomas and Brian Hill. Focus: spring migrants. Meet at bird garden car park (fee payable: £4 all day) (ST297587, TA8 2RS). Note early start. Duration probably c.4 hours: bring a drink/snack.

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