



A new premier birding site for Somerset?

Julian Thomas reports

Members may well have seen recent news reports that Bristol Water has chosen a site for a new reservoir, directly south of the existing Cheddar Reservoir (see map). It's still a long way off - Bristol Water have promised a full consultation process before a planning application is submitted, though no date has yet been set, and even if planning permission is granted the new reservoir may not be completed until 2022. It is a potentially exciting prospect for Somerset's birders, though. The



current reservoir's reputation as a site for significant numbers of wintering waterfowl is well-known, with over 2,000 Coots spending every winter there, for instance. It has an enviable track record of attracting rare and scarce birds, too, and there can be few SOS members who have not spent at least some time there. The planned new reservoir would have the potential to become at least as good.

Jeremy Williams, a spokesman for Bristol Water, said, "We are very aware of the existing reservoir's environmental importance and keen to ensure that we enhance rather than damage the local wildlife value in anything we do in the area." Their vision statement also recognises the conservation potential of the new project, stating that, "We will ensure the new reservoir becomes even more important for biodiversity than the existing one, and will also become an SSSI. We will enhance our biodiversity management system for the existing SSSI and determine whether there are any additional measures we can take to enhance the existing site for wildlife."

Roger Halsey, SOS member and WeBS counter for Cheddar Reservoir commented, "The existing reservoir is an extremely well-used amenity by all sorts of groups - birders, fishermen, cyclists, walkers, sailors - and sometimes these groups have conflicting interests. In particular, sailing activity on winter weekends (and to a lesser extent on summer evenings) has a seriously detrimental effect on wildfowl - many of the diving ducks in particular are flushed off the reservoir. The new reservoir would therefore create an excellent opportunity to segregate the interest groups for the benefit of all. The logical thing would be to retain the sailing on the existing, and to create the best possible wildlife habitat on the new reservoir."

"SOS should embrace the scheme and play an active role in the consultation process, to get the best possible outcome from a wildlife perspective. The existing reservoir suffers from the lack of any emergent or perimeter vegetation, or any muddy margins. Possibly both problems could easily be addressed in the new reservoir by leaving a few small islands. They would develop muddy margins as the water level receded in the summer and autumn. There will be some loss of existing habitat to the south of the existing reservoir. However, in the round, I believe that the new reservoir creates an opportunity to significantly enhance the wildlife benefit of the area."

It seems likely that SOS (and Roger) will get involved in the consultation process. We'll keep you informed of developments.

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Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of the new SOS newsletter, The Bittern. The society is in the middle of a programme of change, described so eloquently by our President, Brian Hill, in the last-ever edition of Bird Notes. Deciding whether or not to change our name will take some time, but it is important that we take the time to get that decision right. However, we can press ahead with many of the changes and The Bittern is one of those.

I hope that this issue will be representative of what you can come to expect over future quarterly issues - a mix of topical news stories and updates, reports on SOS activities, practical bird conservation tips, local surveys, and magazine features such as 'Desert Island Birds'. Also in this issue is the first of a series unashamedly aimed at beginner birdwatchers, or birders new to Somerset, giving pointers as to where and when to go birding. Each issue will also list events coming up - all SOS ones, and a selected list organised by other conservation bodies - furthering our declared aim to forge closer ties with those organisations, for the benefit of the birds and birdwatchers of Somerset.

I hope you like the new format, which will no doubt develop over future issues. Please let me (or any other committee member) know any ways in which you think it can be improved - your feedback is not only important, but vital. We already have a number of ideas for the contents of future issues, but I am always very much open to new ideas for articles - my contact details are in the above panel.



Photo - Stephen Johnson

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Cary Marsh bird forage crop

An update from Bruce Taylor

As was reported in the last-ever issue of Bird Notes, SOS has funded this winter's bird forage crop at Cary Marsh Nature Reserve, near Castle Cary. The crop, consisting of mustard, fodder radish, millet and quinoa, was aimed at providing a food source for farmland seed-eating birds through the winter months.

So how did it do? Despite the early summer drought, the crop established well and by July, the first avian benefits were being seen: the mustard and radish came into flower, attracting large numbers of invertebrates which in turn attracted numerous family parties of Whitethroats, Reed Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers. The seed crop itself finally ripened in late October and numbers of finches and buntings then started to increase. By the end of October, up to 120 Linnets, 200 Goldfinches and 80 Greenfinches were feeding on the crop. Due to the exceptionally mild late autumn and early winter, activity did not peak until the first hard frosts of mid-December. This cold weather brought with it a sudden increase in bird numbers: the enormous flock of birds included 450 Linnets, 200 Chaffinches, 15 Reed Buntings, 50 Yellowhammers, 100 Greenfinches and at least 4 Tree Sparrows.

An unexpected bonus from the scheme came in the form of two Hen Harriers, which were seen quartering the crop throughout November. Hen Harriers are virtually unknown in the east of the county, so this was quite a coup! Barn Owls too have been regularly seen hunting over the crop.

At the time of writing (February), the seed heads in the crop are becoming depleted, as would be expected, so a supplementary feeding station has been established near to the hide, to see the birds' food needs through to the spring.

Illegal killing of raptors: An e-petition

Dave Northover reports

An e-petition on the Downing Street website is attempting to introduce vicarious liability for the illegal killing of raptors in England and Wales. This would mean that where birds of prey are killed by gamekeepers, the owners or tenants of the land would be held legally responsible and subject to the same penalties as those who did the killing. While persecution of raptors is not a major problem in Somerset, it is in other parts, and Hen Harriers in particular are at serious risk of extinction as a breeding species in England as a result.

If 100,000 signatures can be obtained by November the issue will have to be debated in Parliament. So far just over 7,000 signatures have been obtained - there is still some way to go. You can add your support to the petition by going to: epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/23089. It is very easy and quick and you will get a response to say that your entry has been counted.

Nightingale survey

BTO is planning to conduct a national Nightingale survey this summer. We are right at the western edge of the Nightingale's range, so it is important that coverage is as complete as possible. We have priority tetrads where Nightingales have been recorded previously, some secondary tetrads for checking, and all casual records will be gratefully received.

Contact Eve Tigwell (01373 451630, or email eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk) for details.

Garden Bird Conference

The joint BTO/SOS conference in November was a roaring success, reports Brian Hill

When Tim Harrison telephoned me from the BTO last summer to ask whether the SOS would be willing to co-host a Garden Bird Conference later in the year I immediately agreed. Tim asked at the time how many members I thought may attend the event and, plucking a figure out of the air, I said that somewhere in the region of 120 could be expected. As soon as I replaced the phone I began fretting about this, noting that 50 is a good attendance for most of our Indoor Meetings. I consoled myself with the thought that 'Garden Birds' is probably the most popular theme we could have, but still worried almost up to the last minute whether or not the attendance would justify the considerable expense invested by the BTO.

As the doors opened at Richard Huish College in Taunton on Saturday 19 November it quickly became clear my fears were unfounded. Some 200 delegates filled the Conference Room, many SOS members, most local BTO members, and several members of both. It was good too to see Somerset Wildlife Trust represented. This was a mix that could hardly fail, and it was particularly good that, if not all present were experts, all were keenly interested in the welfare of garden species.

Tim, whose remit is running Garden Birdwatch for the BTO, opened the Conference by exploring the whole subject, and explaining why monitoring garden birds is so important. Speakers Eve Tigwell and Penny Richards followed up this theme by examining which birds feature most in British gardens, and how garden management can help these species. David Ballance gave some background to County Atlases in general, and Lou Pickersgill widened the garden theme by focusing on other wildlife found in our gardens, particularly bats. Richard Bland examined the complex issues surrounding the decline of the House Sparrow.

More lightheartedly, Dominic Couzens gave us some little-known information on the darker side of some garden birds, including the cuddly-looking Long-tailed Tit. The final speaker was our committee member and well-known author Stephen Moss, who spoke evocatively about his new garden patch in the heart of Somerset.

There were a number of static exhibitions, including one by SOS which featured a range of excellent photographs provided by Tom Raven and Eve Tigwell. Throughout the day, the stand was manned by committee members Jeff Hazell, Brian Gibbs, James Packer and Ash Warne, ably assisted by Kay Hazell and Jill Hill. It was most gratifying to be able to sign up a number of new members from those visiting the stand



Jeff Hazell, David Ballance, Brian Hill, Eve Tigwell, Brian Gibbs and Ash Warne at the SOS stall at the conference

There was general agreement that the day had been an overwhelming success, so much so that there is likely to be another joint conference, with a different but relevant Somerset theme later this year. Keep alert for details when available. Tim and his BTO team deserve great credit for providing the bulk of the organisation, and thanks to all garden birdwatchers, members, and SOS committee for working so hard to make it the great occasion it was.

The BTO / Somerset Ornithological Society Atlas

Eve Tigwell gives us the latest update

Wintering Birds

As the final winter recording season comes to a close, a big “thank you and well done” to everyone who has contributed records to this amazing project. You have visited every tetrad within the county boundary of Somerset (and those which fall even partly within), and recorded all the wintering birds using those tetrads. The majority of tetrads have records for at least 26 species, although the maximum is over 70 species! A great reflection of the range of habitats we have in the county. Please make sure you enter your data promptly: it will be much appreciated.

“Calculations from previous years suggest that each tetrad should contain at least 35 species of bird in the breeding season”

The BTO has been, and will continue to, analysing your records to produce maps and information about the distribution of the birds in Somerset and throughout the UK and Ireland. Data from other BTO surveys (BBS, ringing, WeBS, etc.) will continue to be up-loaded for our county Atlas. Some of this analysis is available on the BTO website, so do keep checking to see how it’s all looking. The national Atlas will be published in 2013, with a very special pre-publication offer, and the Somerset Atlas will follow thereafter.

Breeding Season

In choosing to carry out fieldwork for an extra year, SOS is trying to ensure that all tetrads in the county are covered for both seasons. We’ve done so well for winter, but we now need a big effort to cover all the remaining tetrads for the breeding season. This is more challenging, as it’s not just recording which species are present, but also upgrading the existing breeding codes to “confirmed” wherever possible.

Calculations from previous years suggest that each tetrad should contain at least 35 species of bird in the breeding season, so a simple record of those extra species not already on the list are present will be very useful.

It’s vitally important that breeding codes are also recorded: ideally at the highest possible level. Looking out for evidence of breeding will mean that the SOS Atlas will provide a far clearer picture of which birds breed in our county: something we’d all like to know. So, please record the correct code: they’re listed at the end of this article. Also if you’ve seen a bird, a pair, or heard it singing in a previous breeding season (maybe in one of “your” tetrads) it would be great if you make a return visit this year to check if they are actually breeding.

March Records: although March is outwith the main recording times, there are quite a few early-breeders that can be recorded - just because it’s March doesn’t mean that your records won’t be used - they will! So please do submit your records for all those Rooks, Ravens, Crossbills, etc. that are already breeding.

As before the breeding season will run from the beginning of April to the end of July.

Remember: visits to tetrads from now on do not have to be timed (TTVs), so spend as long or as short a time you want to find those target species and up those breeding codes! Please enter your records as Roving Records (top right-hand button on the BTO Atlas website Data Home page) or through BirdTrack.

Once again, thank you so much for all your hard work and good luck for the coming season - we’ll have a wonderful Atlas at the end of all this!

Atlas breeding codes

Non-breeding	
F	Flying over
M	Species observed but suspected to be still on Migration (including species that have bred earlier and are now moving south)
U	Species observed but suspected to be sUmmering non-breeder
Possible Breeding	
H	Species observed in breeding season in suitable nesting Habitat
S	Singing male present (or breeding calls heard) in breeding season in suitable breeding habitat
Probable Breeding	
P	Pair observed in suitable nesting habitat in breeding season
T	Permanent Territory presumed through registration of territorial behaviour (song, etc.) on at least two different days a week or more apart at the same place or many individuals on one day (remember two or more singing males on one visit to a tetrad count as T)
D	Courtship and Display (judged to be in or near potential breeding habitat; be cautious with wildfowl)
N	Visiting probable Nest site
A	Agitated behaviour or anxiety calls from adults, suggesting probable presence of nest or young nearby
I	Brood patch on adult examined in the hand, suggesting Incubation
B	Nest Building or excavating nest-hole
Confirmed Breeding	
DD	Distraction-Display or injury feigning
UN	Used Nest or eggshells found (occupied or laid within period of survey)
FL	Recently FLedged young (nidicolous species) or downy young (nidifugous species). Careful consideration should be given to the likely provenance of any fledged juvenile capable of significant geographical movement - they may be Migrants. Evidence of dependency on adults (e.g. feeding) is helpful. Be cautious, even if the record comes from suitable habitat.
ON	Adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating Occupied Nest (including high nests or nest holes, the contents of which can not be seen) or adults seen incubating
FF	Adult carrying Faecal sac or Food for young
NE	Nest containing Eggs
NY	Nest with Young seen or heard

Barn Owl boxes: How to build them and where to put them

Bruce Taylor explains

Over the years, many former Barn Owl nest sites have been lost. Old farm buildings have been turned into barn conversions, while modern steel-framed agricultural structures lack suitable dark ledges or cavities for nesting. Fine old trees with hollowed-out holes in their limbs have been felled, some due to health and safety paranoia, others because they were getting in the way of ever-larger farm machinery.

One of the ways in which we can compensate for these losses and therefore help Barn Owls is to provide them with nest boxes. These boxes are large, but are relatively straightforward to make. The type of box you make will depend on the location it's intended for: either an indoor box to put in a barn or an outdoor box to put in a tree.

Both types of box are made from 9 or 12 mm external FSC Approved plywood. A box made from 9mm ply is obviously lighter and therefore easier to install, however a 12mm ply box is going to be more robust and last longer. The sections of the box are held together with 5cm x 2.5cm tanalised wood battens using rust-resistant screws. Figures 1 and 2 show the design and dimensions for an indoor and outdoor box respectively. These should be used as a rough guide; remember that a nest box is just a simulation of a natural tree cavity or suchlike, so don't get hung up on millimetre perfection!



Photo - James Packer

What is very important though, is the safety of any future tenants. Make sure that there are no sharp edges or screw tips poking through the wood. The outdoor box must be rainproof, so the roof should be covered with good quality roofing felt. The boxes should be treated with an environmentally-friendly wood preservative: from my own experience I would advise against basing this part of the process on the kitchen table, as it won't win any favours from the other occupants of the house! All boxes should have seven or eight 2cm diameter drainage holes drilled through the floor to help keep the nesting area dry. Several similar sized holes should also be made in the sides of the box to increase ventilation.

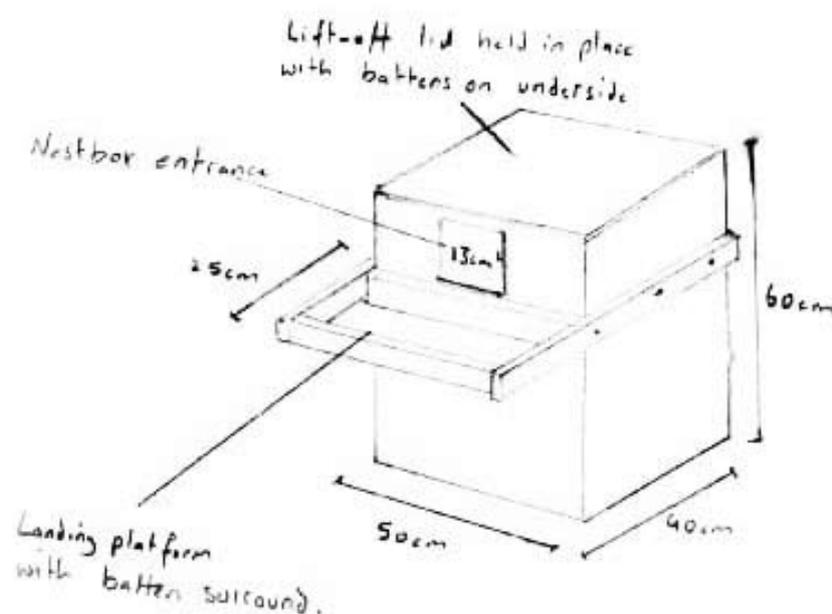


Fig. 1 - Indoor box plan

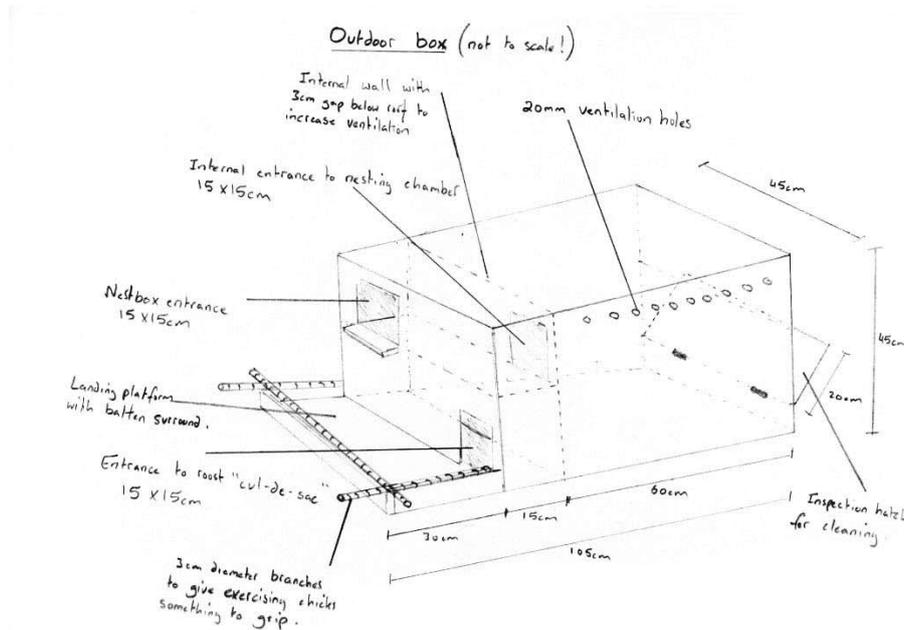


Fig. 2 - Outdoor box plan

Nest boxes will need cleaning out from time to time during the winter months, outside of the breeding season. The indoor box has a detachable roof for this purpose, while the outdoor box has an inspection hatch at the rear, which can be secured with a bolt and hinges or cable ties. I prefer the latter because it helps to prevent interference and disturbance from curious passers-by. Since the Barn Owl is a Schedule 1 species, nest boxes should only be disturbed during the breeding season by licence holders.

Choosing the right location to put the box is critical. You need to make it easy for the owl to find, so ideally the box should be in or very near to good quality Barn Owl habitat, i.e. rough grassland, perhaps with ditches and hedgerows where there will be a large population of rodents. Avoid locations within a kilometre of major roads as collision with vehicles is a major cause of Barn Owl fatality.

For indoor boxes, choose a building which has a couple of easy access points for the owl and check that these won't be blocked after harvest time if hay or straw bales are stored there. Position the box high up, on or next to a beam, so that the box entrance is clearly visible to the owl when it enters the building and make sure that predators such as cats can't gain access to it.

Outdoor boxes should be placed in a tree at least 3 metres from the ground. Select a mature lone tree, preferably one with rough bark. Oaks are perfect! Avoid trees with ivy as it will quickly grow over and hide the box. The box should be positioned in the body of the tree or on a major branch close to the trunk,

so that owlets have easy access onto limbs. It should face somewhere between north-east and south-east, thereby sheltering the entrance from the prevailing weather. The entrance to the box must be clearly visible to the approaching owl so a little pruning may be necessary to ensure a clear and easy flight path. The box should be slightly tilted towards the entrance to allow rainwater to run off rather than back into the nesting chamber. Bear in mind that the owl box will have to withstand the worst of storms so it is vital that it is robustly attached. I usually construct a platform using thick timber as a level base around the branch on which the box is sited. Screw the box to this, making sure the drainage holes are still effective.

If the nest box is correctly sited, then sooner or later there is a good chance that a Barn Owl will move in. This may, of course, take a long time, but when it happens, it is deeply rewarding. All your hard work will have finally paid off!



Photo - Bruce Taylor

Outdoor owl box in a suitable location

Cranes on the Somerset Levels and Moors

An update from project co-ordinator Damon Bridge

The Great Crane Project - the partnership conservation project that is part way through re-introducing a sustainable, resident breeding population of Common Cranes to help secure the future of the species in the UK - is now entering its third year, with two releases of cranes now complete and a flock of 34 birds out on the Moors.

18 of the original release of 21 birds in 2010 are alive and well, and living free on the Levels and Moors. This founding flock was supplemented in the autumn of 2011 by the release of a further 17 birds. The releases have gone very smoothly indeed, with losses of birds much lower than predicted. On average only 60% of young cranes return to breed the following year - so at around 90% survival it looks like the Levels and Moors is providing a good home to the birds. However, the success of the project will only be known once the birds start breeding and producing young - and it will only really be measurable sometime in the 2020's. The project has set a target of achieving 20 breeding pairs across the Levels and Moors by 2025.



Shortly after the first release in 2010, one bird was taken back into captivity for its own welfare, then in November one flew into low wires near Stoke St. Gregory and was killed, and another one disappeared - cause of death unknown. However, since November 2010 the remaining 18 have continued to thrive and increase their home range. They roost at night as a group, in shallow water and have used various sites on Aller moor, West Sedgemoor and Southlake Moor. Feeding has largely been in pasture on insects and sub-surface invertebrates, but they have also made use of wheat and maize stubbles along the Stoke St. Gregory ridge, as well as feeding in un-harvested crops of barley and maize provided for them by the landowner on Aller Moor.

Introducing the 'new' batch of cranes in Autumn 2011 was an interesting exercise, as cranes need to establish a very well-defined hierarchy and there was a lot of fighting, bullying and general intimidation until the groups found their place in the pecking order. They have remained largely in one group since the late autumn, but with the onset of spring have recently been seen to break into smaller groups, with lots of bugling, and dancing. There are no pairs forming yet, and it may well still be too early this year (first breeding is normally seen from the age of three) but there has certainly been an increase in activity. This has also been noted by local residents who are starting to hear the amazing calls drifting across the moors in the morning.

“18 of the original release of 21 birds in 2010 are alive and well, and living free on the Levels and Moors”

In November 2011 a group of six unringed wild-hatched cranes turned up in Somerset. Around the same time there were large influxes into Cornwall and the Republic of Ireland - it was a remarkable year for migrant cranes in the UK in general. The following day one 'wild' bird remained with our founding flock and is still there now as I write in February 2012. It is easy to spot - as it doesn't have any rings. All released birds are ringed with a Black Blue Black colour ring combination on the left leg. This is the UK code in case any of the birds wander in future on to the continent. The right leg has a three colour combination unique to each bird - but we have used Red as the bottom ring for all 2010 birds and White for all 2011 birds. This year's (2012) releases will have a Blue ring at the bottom of the right leg's combination.

Last year, one crane left the new group in September and two weeks later turned up in Kent. We have no idea why it left the flock in such a pioneering fashion - but it is possible it became caught in strong winds and got 'lost' - or perhaps it was just anti-social and wanted to be alone. This bird has not been seen since mid September.

The onset of winter saw one crane become isolated from the group, probably as a result of picking up coccidiosis from the unringed wild-hatched crane. This disease is found naturally in the wild and the released birds do need to become exposed to it as part of their becoming wild birds. The bird was found having been partly eaten and partially buried by a large predator - almost undoubtedly a fox, We don't know for sure if it was killed by the fox, but it is highly probable that it was weak and alone and was therefore easy prey.

The 'wild' unringed crane (of course they are all wild now!) seems to be an integral member of the group, and is spending the majority of its time with the younger 2011 release birds. We think this bird is probably the same age as our older birds (i.e. hatched in Spring 2010) as it is developing a red crown having first arrived with a very dark, fully feathered head. We do not know if it will stay around in the Spring or feel the urge to migrate back to where it came from.



You can find out more and follow the progress of this unique project at:

www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk

www.facebook.com/thegreatcraneproject

and follow us on www.twitter.com/thecraneproject

Where shall I go birding today?

Ideas to liven up your birdwatching over the coming months - no guarantees, but worth a thought...

March

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are at their most conspicuous, calling and in leafless trees. Try Bin Combe in the Quantocks or anywhere in the Horner Wood complex for the best chances.

Early migrants are on the move - coastal sites such as Stolford may host early Wheatears, and look for passage Ring Ouzels in upland areas. Sand Martins and even Swallows may appear over reservoirs or Shapwick Heath.

Wildfowl and gulls are on the move too, particularly later in the month - Cheddar Reservoir has a good track record for producing Little Gulls, perhaps an Iceland or Glaucous Gull in the roost, and scarcer diving duck and grebes. Catcott Lows is the top spot for a chance of a fine drake Garganey.

April

Passerine migrants pour in from the second week onwards. An influx of Red Kites has featured in recent springs, but it's pot luck whether you find one.

The reedbeds of the Avalon Marshes come alive with the sound of Reed and Sedge Warblers, and the resident Cetti's Warblers are at their most active and visible. The wader scrape at Meare Heath could produce a Little Ringed Plover or early Wood Sandpiper.

On Exmoor, newly-arrived Grasshopper Warblers are often unusually visible reeling from the heather. Try Horner Wood for singing Redstarts, Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers.

Coastal sites like Brean Down, Steart or Lilstock should produce migrants in overcast conditions, perhaps including a rarity.

May

Anything can happen anywhere in May, so keep a close eye on the website messageboard for the latest news, but remember that spring migrants often move on quickly. Coastal sites like Brean Down offer the best opportunities for finding your own.

Waders at Steart should include Whimbrels, and possibly a Little Stint or Curlew Sandpiper.

Shapwick Heath will host big numbers of Hobbies, while feeding flights should make Bitterns more visible later in the month, and checking the Meare Heath wader scrape should continue to reap rewards.

Finally, check your local churchyard or copse for Spotted Flycatcher - you might get a nice surprise!

Bramwell bulletin

An eventful start to birding in Somerset for newcomer Mike Trubridge

Some people only move house once or twice in their lifetime, others are perpetually on the move and never seem to settle down. I certainly fit into the latter category because so far in my life I have had a total of 28 different addresses and lived in 19 different counties in the UK. The great thing about moving so often is that you are constantly encountering new habitats and bird species as you move around the country. Despite the plethora of books and other publications on the subject, you never quite know what to expect on moving into a new area, even if only travelling a short distance. Thus it was that at the beginning of September 2010, my wife and I moved some 40 miles north from west Dorset to the tiny hamlet of Bramwell in South Somerset (between Low Ham and High Ham, just north of Langport). My only previous experience of Somerset was as a schoolboy on a weekend camping trip to the county in the mid 1960s, so I had little to go on. Even as the removal men were unloading the van, I noticed a flock of eight Ravens circling overhead, not quite what I was expecting as a welcoming party. And that first night I heard Little Owls calling around the house, again a species I was not anticipating to find here so quickly. A good start to the garden tick list nonetheless.

“I was surprised to find Green Sandpipers and Kingfishers at several locations”

Even before we had left Dorset, I had been in touch with Eve Tigwell to claim some squares for the last year of the Breeding Atlas. By good chance there were eight available tetrads close to Bramwell, so I immediately signed up for all of them. Not long after arriving in Somerset, I was also able to put my name down for two BBS squares in the nearby Polden Hills, together with a WeBS sector near Long Sutton. I have discovered many times in the past that by helping out with various BTO surveys, you end up seeing parts of the countryside that otherwise you are unlikely to visit, a great way to get to know the area. So in October I started counting waders and wildfowl, and in November the Atlas work began. Not knowing quite what to expect, every day was interesting and different. I was surprised to find Green Sandpipers and Kingfishers at several locations, a hunting Barn Owl was the first I've seen for many years, and both Starlings and corvids were extremely numerous. A couple of Whooper Swans followed by a small herd of Bewick's Swans were unexpected, a total of eight different Blackcaps in gardens and orchards was impressive, but the most amazing sight of all was a Grey Wagtail feeding on peanuts from a bird feeder in someone's back garden during the spell of extremely cold and wintry weather in December. All the time I was hoping to catch up with the Waxwings that were spreading across the country and eventually I was successful - four turned up in a small orchard just around the corner from my house, but frustratingly they avoided my garden tick list.

At about the same time as I was beginning all this bird survey work, the 2009 edition of Somerset Birds was published. This was extremely helpful because I could now begin to establish the relevance of some of the bird records I was coming up with. I cannot over emphasize the importance of county bird reports to newcomers like myself, they really are a wealth of information.

With the winter Atlas fieldwork finishing at the end of February and the summer fieldwork and BBS not beginning until April, there was a lull in bird recording during the month of March. However, during the winter I was impressed by the number of rooks and rookeries in the area, so I decided to carry out a small survey of this species around my home. Between March 19 and April 6 I was able to locate a total of 15 rookeries in my study area, in and around the villages of Henley, High Ham, Low Ham, Pitney and Park. All colonies were visited at least once during this period and counts were undertaken of all occupied and unoccupied rook nests.

I don't know how these figures compare with other parts of Somerset, but they are not as impressive as those achieved in Aberdeenshire, which is generally recognized to be the rook capital of the UK. It is estimated that there are about 30,000 birds in that county, with a density of about 27 occupied nests per square kilometre and some rookeries exceeding 2,000 pairs. I intend to continue to monitor the birds in my study area but I very much doubt if they will be able to compete with these figures!

The highest counts were then used to establish overall totals (see table on next page).

Name	Grid Ref.	Tree species	Total occupied nests	Total nests
Bramwells Farm	ST433300	Ash	9	12
Yew Tree Farm	ST431299	Ash, oak	32	43
Decoy Farm, west	ST449309	Oak	16	20
Decoy Farm, east	ST452307	Willow, pollarded	24	38
Decoy Farm, Badger Wood	ST451305	Oak, ash	31	37
White House Farm	ST425324	Willow	3	3
Stout	ST438310	Ash	6	6
Ball's Farm	ST427322	Willow, birch	7	9
Heaven's Gate	ST427322	Ash	17	21
Henley Bridge	ST418293	Ash	2	3
Petty's Cottage	ST437322	Ash	5	12
Poplar Farm	ST437321	Ash	7	9
Wishel Farm	ST443316	Willow, ash	30	32
Poplar Wood	ST444303	Poplar	18	18
Rose Farm Cottage	ST418293	Ash, oak	27	39
TOTAL	15		234	302

- Survey area = 12.56 sq km
- 24.04 nests per sq km
- 77% of nests occupied
- 1.19 rookeries per sq km
- Colony range of occupied nests 3 - 32, average 15.6
- Colony range of total nests 3 - 43, average 20.1
- 18.63 occupied nests per sq km

One of the great things about moving into a new area is trying to predict what bird species might turn up in a particular area. I quickly noticed that behind my house there is a small hill partially covered by trees and an area of dense scrub land. The latter appeared to me to be an ideal habitat for Nightingales, especially when I discovered that there are several small ponds along the spring line halfway up the hill. There is strong evidence that Nightingales like to have stagnant pools in their territories. Therefore I was absolutely delighted to hear not one but two nightingales singing from the scrub on the night of April 28. What's more, I could clearly hear them from my house (and even from my bed!), thus adding an excellent addition to my house list. Talking of which, I have maintained house/garden lists for many years and have some quite impressive totals and species. Just to clarify things, a bird appears on my list if I either see or hear it from either the house or the garden. So far in just over eight months in Somerset I have managed 57 species, not bad going. Probably the best bird to date was the Red Kite that flew over my house at breakfast time on April 7, causing me to choke on my cornflakes! However, I am not even halfway to my best ever house list, which is the 119 species I recorded in Suffolk. Included in that total were goodies such as Firecrest, Hawfinch, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole and Spotted Crake. Altogether I have now recorded 144 species on all my house lists, a total which could be a lot higher if I ever manage to live somewhere with a view over the sea.

So now [last summer, when this article was written - Ed.] I am well underway into the second round of visits for the Atlas fieldwork and have also been busy trying to locate nests for the BTO's Nest Record Scheme, another project which I help with. And who knows what I might turn up next? Maybe a Spotted Crake on the levels, or a Quail in the hay meadows or an over-flying Crane to add to my house list. And then perhaps it will be time to move on again to a new county.....a different habitat.....and yet another house list!

The Richardson's Cackling Goose at Torr Reservoir

Another intriguing find by Bruce Taylor

Over the past few years Torr Reservoir near East Cranmore has had a growing flock of Canada Geese during the post-breeding and winter period. These birds clearly move between this site, Blagdon Lake and Chew Valley Lake, often bringing with them varying proportions of the local feral Barnacle Goose population. In early 2011, the European White-fronted Goose, which has previously been seen at Blagdon and Chew, turned up with the Canadas at Torr, where it remained for several weeks.

With this in mind, I was particularly interested to hear that Nigel Milbourne had found an unringed and fully-winged Richardson's Cackling Goose, *Branta hutchinsii hutchinsii* with the Canada flock at Blagdon on 1 November 2011. When it moved to Chew a couple of days later, I had a feeling that sooner or later it would make its way to Torr, where the Canada flock was growing daily. Sure enough, on 12 November, whilst scanning through the goose flock grazing on the banks at Torr, I noticed a much smaller white-cheeked goose asleep among 300 of its larger relations.

The Richardson's was somewhat dwarfed by the Canadas, being slightly smaller than Barnacle Goose. The steep forehead accentuated a square looking head, which together with its small stubby bill and diminutive size gave this goose a rather 'cute' look. Above the dusky breast was a thin white collar. The call was higher pitched and more squeaky than Canada Goose.

Geese like the company of other geese. If there are none of the same species around, they will join geese of other species. Over many hours of observation, it was interesting to note that the Richardson's was not readily accepted by the Canadas and was regularly harassed by them. When several Barnacle Geese joined

the flock, the Richardson's would often feed close to them and nearly always flew in their company rather than with the Canadas.

Richardson's Cackling Goose is a North American species, split from Canada Goose by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2004 [and by BOU in 2009, though no records have been accepted yet - Ed.]. It breeds in Arctic Canada and winters in the southern United States, primarily from Texas to Mexico. A few regularly turn up in North-west Scotland and Ireland with flocks of wild Barnacle Geese from Greenland. There seems to be an opinion among some that such birds are wild, yet any others that turn up elsewhere in the country must be escapees. This seems rather short-sighted. Firstly, a Richardson's is already off course by the time it meets its carrier flock of Barnacles in Greenland. Therefore, assuming there has been some displacement amongst migrating Richardson's, is it not likely that other lost birds will cross the North Atlantic on their own? American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Green-winged Teal all do this and have occurred in Somerset in recent years. So why shouldn't Richardson's Cackling Goose? They are of course kept in captivity, so there is potential for escapees, though extremely few seem to have been reported.

The autumn of 2011 brought exceptional numbers of North American species to western Europe. This winter has been a good one for Richardson's Cacklers with at least nine wintering in Scotland and Ireland. Add to this the fact that another was found just over the Bristol Channel in Gwent a few days after the Somerset bird arrived. This individual also kept company with Canadas, and the same flock also held a Greenland White-fronted Goose!

Whether the Somerset Richardson's Cackling Goose is wild or not may never be proven, though I have spent hours watching it preen, just in case it should drop a feather which I could retrieve for analysis. However, the constant stream of birders from Somerset and far beyond who have visited Torr to see this bird has shown that there is a strong feeling in parts of the birding community that it may be worth the benefit of the doubt.

As I write this, in early February, the Richardson's is still present at Torr among 280 Canadas and 12 Barnacles. It will be interesting to see what happens in the early spring!



Photo - Bruce Taylor

Desert Island Birds

Based loosely on the famous radio show, each issue we will feature a prominent (or not so prominent) Somerset birder. Our first castaway is writer, broadcaster, and SOS Committee member Stephen Moss.



How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Before I can remember! According to family legend my mum took me down to the River Thames to feed the ducks when I was three years old. I asked her what the 'funny black ducks' were; she didn't know, but when we got home I looked them up in the Observer's Book of Birds. They were, of course, Coots. I've never looked back...

What is your favourite birding memory?

There are so many, it's almost impossible to pick just one; but if I had to choose it would be a day off during the filming of Big Cat Diary, when my wife-to-be Suzanne and I enjoyed an unforgettable day's birding in Africa's Masai Mara.

Where was your favourite birding trip?

Without question, when I led a BBC Wildlife holiday to Trinidad and Tobago. A fantastic group (including Suzanne!), a fabulous place, and some truly wonderful birds.

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

Work and family! I'm one of those very lucky people who have managed to turn my hobby into my job. Having left the BBC Natural History Unit last summer I am now mainly writing books and articles - in an office in the garden where I can watch birds through the window. With five children (two grown-up and three youngsters) I also have my work cut out on the domestic front. The good news is that they really enjoy watching wildlife too.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

No question - the Somerset Levels. I find the place truly magical - its history, landscape and of course the birds and other wildlife. From Otters to orchids and Lapwings to Large Blues, there is just so much to see.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

How can you make me choose from 10,000 species?! I'm going to cheat and choose five that shaped my birding life and five I have yet to see...

1. Coot - my first bird and the one that started it all off...
2. Great Crested Grebe - I still remember finding one on the local gravel pits when I was eight years old.
3. Little Egret - my first rarity, on Brownsea Island in August 1970 when I was ten. What a dazzler!
4. Buff-breasted Sandpiper - memories of backing on to the golf course on St Mary's in a force nine gale with my mum... she never really got into birding, but still took me out of school for a fortnight on Scilly.
5. Red Kite - the bird we drove halfway around Wales to find in 1975. They may now be two-a-penny (in the Chilterns, at least) but I still love them.

And the five I have yet to see...

1. Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, because it looks so supremely elegant...
2. Steller's Sea Eagle - the big daddy of birds of prey...
3. Shoebill - worth going all the way to Africa just to see it...
4. Japanese Crested Ibis - because back in the 1960s, the PG Tips collector's cards said it was the rarest bird in the world...
5. And finally... all the 7500 plus species of bird I have yet to catch up with, and probably never will!

My book would have to be Handbook of the Birds of the World - all 16 volumes. And my luxury item? A pair of binoculars, of course!

Stephen Moss's latest book, **Wild Hares and Hummingbirds (Square Peg, £14.99)**, describes a year in the life (and wildlife!) of his home village on the Somerset Levels.

Walks and talks

What's coming up in our area over the next three months - included are all SOS field and indoor meetings and a selection of events organised by RSPB and Somerset Wildlife Trust. We'll try to include both a grid reference and the postcode (for satnav users) for the meeting points, but can't guarantee that.

All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some events provided by the other conservation organisations. SOS morning field meetings usually last about three hours (evening ones about two hours). Wear stout footwear.

March			
12	Talk	SWT	Community Barn Owl Project by Chris Sperring. 1830-2000 at the Hobhouse Theatre, Bruton School for Girls, Bruton BA10 0NT. Free but space limited - to book email enquiries@somersetwildlife.org or phone 01823 652400.
13	Talk	SWT	Cranes on the Levels by Damon Bridge. 1930-2130 at St George's Catholic School, The Mount, Taunton TA1 3NR. £3, refreshments available.
15	Talk	SOS	AGM, followed by Owls of Despair by Jeff Hazell. Highs and lows searching for owls in Finland. Starts at 1930 at Ruishton Village Hall (ST268270, TA3 5JE).
20	Talk	SWT	Bristol Water and the future for Mendip Water by Paul Hodge. 2000-2200 at Cheddar Catholic Church Hall, Tweentown, Cheddar BS27 3HU (off Upper North St beyond church). £2.
21	Talk	SWT	Ham Hill Country Park by the CP Team. 1930-2130 at St John's Church Rooms, Yeovil BA20 1HE (opposite the west entrance to the church).
25	Walk	SWT	Yeovil Ninesprings Country Park, leader Clive Hawkins. Meet at 1100 at Goldenstones Leisure car park (free Sundays) (ST554154, BA20 1QZ).
31	Walk	SWT	Cranes on the Levels, leader Damon Bridge. 1000-1200. Meet at Greylake RSPB reserve car park (ST399346, TA7 9BP).
31	Walk	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Herons Above'. Join a warden on a weekend walk to experience the sights and sounds of the south west's largest heronry and learn some of the woodland birdsongs. Meet in car park (ST361239, TA3 6PX). Free, no booking required. Also on April 1, 7, 8, 14 and 15.

April

1	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Birdwatching for beginners'. 0830-1130. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by filled jacket potato and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
15	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic' dawn chorus. 0600-0900. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by breakfast rolls and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
19	Talk	SOS	Penguin Paradise by Rob Grimmond. A wildlife journey around the Falklands. Starts 1930 at Ruishton Village Hall (ST268270, TA3 5JE).
20	Walk	RSPB	West Sedgemoor. 'Evening moorland wildlife'. 1900-2100. Meet in Swell Wood car park (ST361239, TA3 6PX). Torch essential. Insect repellent recommended. RSPB members £2/ non-members £5, U18 free. Booking essential - west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk or 07774 620879. Also on April 21.
21	Walk	SOS	Brean Down, leader Julian Thomas. Focus: Spring migrants. Meet at 0815 at car park (fee payable) (ST297586, TA8 2RS). Bring snack/drink.
29	Walk	SWT	Shapwick Heath/Ham Wall, leader Tony House. Meet 1400 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Adults £2, children £1. No dogs.

May

5	Walk	SWT/ SOS	Bird Bonanza at Ham Hill Country Park. Family event focusing on learning bird songs. 0930-1130. Meet in car park (ST478169). Free, but booking essential - contact Jesse Emery (01823 652415 or jesse.emery@somersetwildlife.org)
6	Walk	RSPB	Swell Wood. International Dawn Chorus Day. 0630-0830. Meet in Swell Wood Car Park (TA3 6PX). RSPB members £2/non-members £5, U18 free. Booking essential - 07774 620879 or swell.wood@rspb.org.uk.
10	Walk	SOS	Meare Heath, leader tbc. Focus: Summer migrants, Bitterns. Meet at 1900 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). No dogs.
12	Walk	SOS	Charterhouse, leader John Hansford. Focus: Upland birds. Meet at 0930 at ST502558 (BS40 7XS).
12	Walk	RSPB	Greylake. Evening wildlife stroll. 2000-2230. Meet at reserve car park (ST399346). Torch essential. Insect repellent recommended. £5 per person. Booking essential - 07774 620879 or greylake@rspb.org.uk.
19	Walk	SOS/ SWT	Hankridge Farm, leaders Rob Grimmond and Brian Hill. Family event as part of Taunton Wildlife Week. Meet at 0900 at the Odeon car park (ST253256, TA1 2LP).
20	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic' dawn chorus. 0600-0900. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by breakfast rolls and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
22	Walk	SOS	Stockhill, leader Martin Sage. Focus: Nightjars. Meet 1930 at car park (ST548514).
26	Walk	SOS	Holford, leader Brian Gibbs. Focus: Woodland birds. Meet at 0900 at car park (ST154411).

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 **The Bittern**