



The Bittern

Issue 2
June 2012

The newsletter of the Somerset Ornithological Society

Great White Egrets breed in Somerset!

Julian Thomas reports

A pair of Great White Egrets (*Ardea alba*) have nested at Shapwick Heath, the first-ever confirmed breeding record in Britain.

Given the numbers of Great White Egrets which have graced the Avalon Marshes reserves in recent years, it was long anticipated that a breeding attempt would be made. On 16 April, Natural England volunteer and SOS member Martin Sage noticed one carrying what appeared to be nest material to a site in the reedbeds on Noah's Lake. Natural England hastily arranged a meeting and an action plan was formed, with advice from Mark Thomas, head of the RSPB species protection unit. A small band of volunteers, drawn from Natural England, the RSPB and SOS, began monitoring the site 24 hours a day, in sometimes appalling weather conditions, and all deserve our thanks.

All the signs indicated that the adults were incubating eggs, but no one dared to take the fairly drastic measures required to check out the nest site - the risk of disturbance was just too great. At last, though, it seemed clear from changes in the behaviour of the adults that at least one egg was now a chick. From the start the general feeling was a wish to share this unique event with as many people as possible once the time was right, so Natural England put the next part of the plan into action and on 22 May announced the brilliant news, described as 'hugely exciting' by Simon Clarke, reserve manager. The birds have since featured both in the national press and on BBC's Springwatch.

At the time of writing (in late May) we still don't know how many chicks there are - the normal clutch size is 3-5 eggs according to BWP, which also gives the fledging period as about 6 weeks, so we may have to wait a little while yet. As Simon says, at the moment it is a question of crossing everything and hoping. RSPB and Natural England have set up a recorded information line giving updates on progress and details on visiting the reserve to view the birds - phone 07866 554142.

Great White Egret used to be a very rare bird in Britain, and was only added to the Somerset list 20 years ago, when one visited Durleigh Reservoir in July 1992. In recent years, though, the number of British records has shot up in response to rapid increases in populations in continental Europe. One of the pair currently nesting at Shapwick, thought to be the female, is a colour-ringed bird which was ringed as a nestling on 6 May 2009 at Besné, Loire Atlantique, France. That autumn and winter she visited Lancashire, Gloucestershire, South Wales, and Catcott Lows, before arriving in April 2010 at Shapwick Heath, where she has been based almost continuously since.

Great White Egret is now the sixth species of heron to have bred in the county in the last decade. As Tony Whitehead of the RSPB says about the Avalon Marshes, 'The really exciting thing is now predicting what's going to turn up next - it's the sort of place where anything's possible.'



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Welcome

Many thanks for the overwhelmingly positive response to the first issue of *The Bittern* - though not everything worked exactly as hoped, overall I was very pleased with the result, and even more pleased that other people were too. I hope you agree that issue 2 is equally well-packed with information and features of interest to Somerset birdwatchers.

In Society news, Brian Hill explains why we are very likely to stay being Somerset Ornithological Society, and also the reasons for awarding the George Young Award this year. Mike Trubridge assures me that he doesn't intend 'Bramwell bulletin' to feature in every issue, though more of his birding anecdotes and local survey results will no doubt appear from time to time. One new feature this time ('Spotlight on') will also be an occasional one, but I hope whenever it appears you enjoy learning a little more about some of our less well-known birds.

No doubt what the big news of the year so far is, though, and inevitably it is our front page story this issue. Following hot on the heels of Britain's first-ever breeding pairs of Cattle Egrets in 2008, and only the second-ever confirmed breeding by Little Bitterns in 2010, we can now claim another British first with a pair of Great White Egrets breeding at Shapwick Heath. Glossy Ibis next, perhaps?

With the Avalon Marshes maturing magnificently, the Bittern population booming in more ways than one, more rare breeding birds adopting us, and both restoration projects and large-scale developments likely to provide more and better habitat than before, it is a really exciting time to be a Somerset birder. Long may it continue!



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News in brief

Exmoor's peat bogs surveyed by unmanned aircraft

Researchers from Exeter University have used a radio-controlled drone aircraft to capture very detailed pictures of some of Exmoor's peat bogs as part of a planned restoration project. The research team for the Exmoor Mires Project, a collaboration between the University and South West Water, will use the images to assess the patterns of different plant species currently living in these rare ecosystems, so they can compare this with the results of further aerial surveys conducted after restoration work due to take place later this year. The aims of the restoration project are to 're-wet' the blanket bogs so they retain more water, reduce the need for and cost of water treatment, and restore rare plant and invertebrate communities. If successful, increased invertebrate food supplies should also help Exmoor's birds, especially Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Wheatears, Whinchats and Reed Buntings.

More details can be found in the news section of Exeter University's website: www.exeter.ac.uk/news/research/title_195193_en.html

Would you like to help Barn Owls in your parish?

Rob Grimmond on an important local conservation initiative

The Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Hawk and Owl Trust are working together to erect new Barn Owl nest boxes in Somerset over three years. Ideally every one of Somerset's 335 parishes will have at least one box. Since up to 80% of Barn Owls nest in artificial boxes, the project will help ensure the species remains part of our countryside for many years to come. The first box will be free to landowners. If you go to [www.somersetwildlife.org/hres/Parish list1.pdf](http://www.somersetwildlife.org/hres/Parish%20list1.pdf), you can see which parishes have obtained or have ordered a nest box.

If you would like a nest box for your parish or think you can help in any way, please contact SWT or the Hawk and Owl Trust direct. More information is set out on each organisation's website - at www.somersetwildlife.org/barnowls.html and www.hawkandowl.org/About_us/newssections/ShapwickNews/SCBOPlaunch12

Once you have your box, you will need to put it up in a suitable site yourself - see Bruce Taylor's article on Barn Owl boxes in the last issue of *The Bittern* for much useful advice.

Dartford Warblers recovering

As you will all know, our Dartford Warblers took a dreadful hammering in the two recent cold winters, and there were fears that they would not survive the second one in particular. Some of those fears have been realised, as we seem to have lost them completely from Mendip. They clung on around Exmoor, though, chiefly on the lower hills and nearer the coast, and a good summer last year followed by a much milder winter has helped survival rates.

Brian Gibbs, our Recorder, has put a lot of time in over the past few months trying to track down surviving birds, and combining his records with those of others he estimates at least 10 pairs going into this summer, with the distinct possibility that more will be found; a singing male found recently proves they have not disappeared entirely from the Quantocks, for instance. It's well down on the 121 Somerset territories recorded in the national survey in 2006, but offers some hope for the future of this charming little bird.

Controversial Buzzard management plans dropped

Plans by Defra to research methods of managing Buzzard populations near Pheasant shoots, including removing adult birds (into captivity in some cases) and destroying nests, have been abandoned following an outcry by conservation organisations and members of the public. New plans will be drawn up, so watch this space...

Society news

Name change referendum

Brian Hill

A total of 288 members returned the voting paper mailed early this year and of these, 101 voted in favour of changing the name of the Society to Somerset Bird Club and 187 voted against doing so, a majority against of 86.

On the face of it this seems a clear vote for rejection, but analysing the comments made showed things were not that straightforward. A significant number of members had no strong feelings either way, and because of this opted for the status quo. Many did not, in fact, object to change but were unpersuaded by the new title. This is not surprising since the Committee itself debated fiercely before settling on Somerset Bird Club. The matter will be an agenda item at our next General Committee meeting and we thank you for your responses.

In a long-standing Society such as ours there will always be a small yet vociferous hard core implacably opposed to change whatever the motive behind it and it is gratifying that the vast majority of the members were able to see both points of view and come to a reasoned decision. We, as a Committee, are also grateful that so many of you took the time to pass on a great number of constructive comments that will help us in progressing our aims.

One small yet significant bonus, and one that was entirely unforeseen, is that our new logo (right), which has been favourably received, goes particularly well with our current title. There was general agreement that the Goldeneye had had its day, but it was rather harsh of the lady, whose name I did not take, who told me at the AGM she was 'glad that stupid duck had gone'. Clearly she had no knowledge of its illustrious history!



Somerset
ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A new logo is one small step along the way of increasing our appeal to all with an interest in Somerset Birds, whatever their level of expertise. We hope you are seeing, and will continue to see, evidence of improvement in the number and range of field meetings, and at the more prominent presence we seek to project at natural history events throughout the county.

Once again thanks.

Last push for the Atlas

As we're now into the final season of fieldwork for the County Atlas, this is the last and final call for extra effort to help get us over the line with as much data as possible. Some might be glad that it's nearly all over, others will miss the extra purpose to their birding, but all can still contribute. The County Atlas pages on our website show which tetrads need the most help, but there are many more where improvements could be made - you might be able to add a species or upgrade its breeding evidence even in well-recorded tetrads.

We still need more records of owls, in particular, and we need more and better breeding evidence for species like Woodpigeon, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Treecreeper, and Jay. If you're walking through a wood and at least three Blackcaps are singing, for example, then you can record that as 'T' for territory, which might upgrade its status from possible to probable breeding. Check whether your local tetrads have had breeding confirmed for common species such as Dunnock, Wren, Robin, and Blackbird, and go out and confirm them if not - an adult with a beakful of food is usually enough. And as we move later into the summer, look out for Spotted Flycatchers feeding young, or your local House Martin colony, which might not have been recorded yet. Happy searching!

George Young Award 2012

Brian Hill

Editors of both the Somerset and BTO Atlas will tell you that any contribution you make is valuable, and so it is. Many SOS members have spent time in the field recording breeding and wintering species to create the massive database needed to complete both these projects. In terms of time spent and records tendered many of these records have been significant, but none more so than those of Andy Grinter, who has supplied a phenomenal 20,000-plus individual records, a total that continues to rise.

Long-established members of the SOS will remember George Young, who died in 1989, as a skilled and dedicated ornithologist, and a cornerstone of the Society. At the time it was decided to inaugurate an award in George's memory. This was a book prize and a silver cup and the award was intended to recognise special achievements in furthering the objectives of the Society. An early winner was a young Bruce Taylor, now a Committee member.

A few years ago, lack of suitable candidates led to the award being placed in abeyance, and it was with some pleasure that the Committee decided unanimously at the winter meeting to bring the Award out of retirement and recognise Andy's magnificent achievement. The presentation took place at the end of the Annual General Meeting in March after the main business was completed. It brought a fitting end to the evening.

Andy himself said, 'This award came completely out of the blue as I didn't realise a trophy was to be awarded for Atlas work. To be asked if I would accept the award was an easy reply... Yes of course, I'd be honoured! I have to say though that an award would have been unnecessary as it has been so enjoyable and easily self-motivated.'

'You soon realise when you get out the OS maps how big a county Somerset is and what a mammoth task this project has been. I'm very proud to have been involved and eagerly await publication of what should be a very interesting book. Many thanks to all of the SOS committee for nominating me for this award; it does feel good to be recognised for it.'

And to date, Andy shows no sign of slowing down....



Andy Grinter receives the award from President Brian Hill

Butterfly Conservation membership offer

Even members who don't have a particular interest in butterflies will probably be aware of the charity Butterfly Conservation - they manage a number of reserves in Somerset which also provide excellent habitat for birds, most notably Thurlbear Quarrylands. This year they are running a special membership offer, where you get your first year's membership absolutely free. All you have to do to get the various member benefits (newsletters, magazines etc.) is to set up a direct debit, and you won't be charged anything through it without warning, so you get the chance to cancel if you wish before any money changes hands. Sounds tempting!

For more details see www.butterfly-conservation.org, phone 01929 400209, or write to: Butterfly Conservation, Manor Yard, East Lulworth, Wareham, Dorset BH20 5QP.

Stear development update

Julian Thomas reports

Plans for a major flood defence and habitat creation development on the Steart peninsula were set out some time ago, and discussed previously in *Bird Notes* by our own Dick Best, himself a Steart resident. Then, on 8 March, just as the first issue of *The Bittern* was finalised, the Environment Agency (EA) and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) announced that planning permission had been granted for what the news release calls 'one of the UK's largest areas of new wetland habitat'.

This innovative cooperation between EA and WWT will not only protect the homes and farmland of the Steart peninsula from inundation on spring tides as sea levels rise, and maintain access to the existing nature reserve, but will also create great new wildlife habitats in an area already famous for large numbers of waders and wildfowl, winter raptors, and even the odd rarity - American Golden Plover and Wilson's Phalarope are just two of the rare waders to have visited the area.

Over the next two years 400 hectares on the east side of the Steart peninsula will be turned into wildlife-rich habitats, part of a plan to create up to 600 hectares of wetland habitat in the Severn Estuary over the next 20 years to compensate for the loss of existing saltmarsh and mudflats through rising sea levels and the construction of new coastal flood defences. A new channel will be cut back from the Parrett Estuary along Stockland Reach near the southern end of the existing saltmarsh then south towards Marsh Farm, and it is envisaged that high tides and run-off will gradually cut further creeks and current pasture and arable fields will turn into saltmarsh and freshwater wetland (see image above). Birds won't be the only beneficiaries of the creation of these internationally important habitats - it is envisaged that the new wetland will provide homes for other threatened species such as Water Voles and Great Crested Newts.

'This exciting project offers an excellent opportunity to improve flood protection for the people who live and work on the Steart Peninsula while at the same time create internationally important intertidal habitats that will turn this stretch of the Somerset coastline into a haven for wildlife,' said Nick Gupta for the Environment Agency.

Though the site will be owned by EA, it will be managed by WWT. 'We're developing a dynamic new



approach to land management at Steart and aim to show how it can be used to create similar wetland habitats elsewhere,' said WWT Chief Executive, Martin Spray. 'Sea level rise is affecting both wildlife and local communities as it squeezes wetlands along our coast. But thanks to the Environment Agency, we have this opportunity to create a productive and useful landscape that will help us face these challenges and bring benefits for people and wildlife,' he continued.

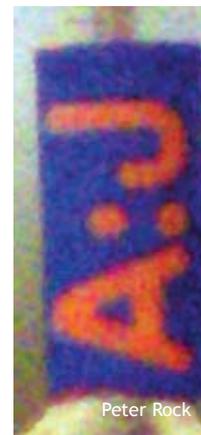
Dick Best has naturally been keeping a very close eye on events and commented, 'We [the residents] have been included in discussions every step of the way and although this is a habitat creation scheme, some issues are an absolute priority to us - the safety of our homes now and into the future, the access to the village and the preservation of the tranquillity of the peninsula. The creation of this threatened habitat is to be welcomed and I look forward eagerly to seeing the results. I hope that when eventually the scheme is up and running other coastal villages facing the same challenges will be reassured by our experience.'

While construction work to create the new wetlands and flood defences is due officially to start this summer, preliminary work has been evident for some months now, with the main site compound being between Marsh Farm and Stockland Bristol. Once construction has been completed, this area will become a visitors' car park, with information and toilet facilities - yes, public toilets nearer to Steart than Bridgwater or Nether Stowey! Just one more benefit of this scheme, among many.

Urban gulls and the Bristol colour-ringing scheme

Peter Rock explains, and asks for our help

It might seem like forever, but it's only 32 years since I started colour-ringing the nestlings of the Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Bristol. Back in 1980 there were about 100 pairs breeding in the city. Nowadays there are more than 2,500 pairs. It's the same kind of story in a great many towns and cities throughout UK and Ireland. Urban gulls have certainly made their mark - and not just here. They breed on rooftops from the north of Norway to the south of Morocco, around the Mediterranean, around the Great Lakes of USA and Canada, down the coast of California and in Australia. Ultimately, urban gulls will take over the World!



Bristol Scheme colour-rings are very large (37mm tall) and show a two letter code, some showing a colon (:) or plus sign (+) between the letters. Rings change colour every year, but are always on the right tarsus (metal left) and read from bottom to top. Bristol Scheme colour-rings are very easy to locate in gull flocks and can be read at distances up to 300m with a telescope.

“Nowadays there are more than 2,500 pairs. It's the same kind of story in a great many towns and cities throughout UK and Ireland. Urban gulls have certainly made their mark”

Since 2001 the Bristol Scheme has widened to include several other urban colonies in order to understand more about recruitment. It is now clear that Bristol Scheme gulls breed in almost all urban colonies in the Severn Estuary region and have also been recorded breeding well beyond (e.g. London, Falmouth, Birmingham, etc.)

Herring Gulls were highly sedentary at the beginning of the study with only the occasional bird moving more than 100km, but now many do. In only the last nine years six have been recorded in northern Spain.

By contrast, the highly migratory Lesser Black-backed Gulls have increasingly been dispensing with migration in favour of staying here in the gloom of a British winter instead of enjoying sardines and sunshine in southern latitudes. Curiously, urban Lesser Black-backs are dispensing at about twice the rate of rural (wild) gulls. Global warming? Well, maybe...

So, here's the main reason for this short piece - my dataset still contains too few records from Somerset. Apart from the North Somerset reservoirs (Barrow Gurney, Chew Valley Lake, Blagdon Lake), Torr Reservoir, and some isolated records from the coast (many thanks to all these observers, by the way), it appears that many Bristol Scheme birds are clever enough to avoid detection despite breeding in Somerset's several urban colonies!

I would very much like to encourage Somerset birders to point telescopes at large gulls wherever you may be, but records from the colonies, for me, are the most interesting. Of course, I'll send you the life histories of the birds you see. I'd be delighted to receive a surge in records of Bristol Scheme birds, but if you see other rings, please do send me details and I'll assign them for you.

I wish you good gulling!

pete.rock@blueyonder.co.uk

It's not all about the bird: Notes from a birding "widow"

Kathy Kelly explains (while Bruce Taylor looks on nervously)

"Well, she laments, sir... Her husband goes this morning a-birding"

The Merry Wives of Windsor, William Shakespeare, act 3, scene 5.

It took a while to get used to the reactions when people heard I was Bruce's partner. "Oh, you poor woman!" gushed one lady at whose house we were having coffee. "I don't know how you put up with it, all those hours out in the cold. I couldn't stand it!" Another time, we went into a café while on holiday in Scotland. "I've seen you about," said the waitress. "You were waiting in your car the other day, reading a book. You're a bird widow, aren't you?"

The comments, mostly from women, rather took me aback. They seemed to think I was enduring enormous hardship even to agree to go birding, which as an activity seems an unfathomable mystery to non-birders.

The amazement and pity made wonder afresh for myself. Why was I doing this? I'd never showed any previous interest in smelly landfill sites, nor in sewage works for that matter, but here I was, getting up without the merest hint of a lie-in to hover shiftily on their margins. He really knows how to show a girl a good time, I thought mutinously, as the rain trickled down my neck and my hairdo got ruinously flattened inside a woolly hat.

I'm not too bad at waking up in the dead of night, but reading maps in a moving car in the dark isn't my forte... On 'holiday', trying to find the right spot for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse at dawn in a godforsaken corner of France did try my patience, and his, to its limits. Then there was the bleak day before Christmas when an Acrocephalus warbler strayed momentarily into our vision and we spent another hour waiting in vain for it to reappear and allow itself to be identified. My feet were so painfully cold by the end of the hour that I could no longer stand on them, so I sat on the ice and snow for preference. All those hours spent standing and waiting, hoping that it's going to be worthwhile. And it's easy enough for men to disappear briefly behind a tree, returning refreshed, but more of a problem for women to find a place to retire discreetly, especially with all those binoculars around.

"In a relatively short time, I've amassed knowledge I didn't even know was there to be gleaned. Now I understand what a treat it is to watch Tree Sparrows and hunting Barn Owls near our home"

When I first went out birding with Bruce, I didn't even have my own bins. I was surprised at how few female birders I saw. If there was a birding couple, it seemed always to be the man who had the plan and the woman who was tagging along: I still don't know any men who go along as support for their birding partners. The women I met seemed to be responsible for all the non-optics-related essentials: food and drink, spare clothing, and - oh, almost forgot - their children. They appeared ready to leave rather sooner than some of the diehards, and could sometimes be heard quelling complaints from the kids, or complaining themselves, about cold, hunger, lateness or boredom.

Sure, I still see mine as a supporting role, and I have been known to moan a bit myself as the fifth hour of our vigil at a freezing reservoir creeps by. But to my own astonishment, I've discovered that this birding lark is curiously addictive. When I was among the group who saw the White-throated Sparrow in Hampshire first, and all the other people on the far side of the bushes hadn't, including my avid partner, I was completely jubilant. It was obvious that for the survival of our relationship there'd be no going home until he saw it too, and I could completely understand how gutted he'd feel until then. Luckily for all concerned, he did finally see it!

If I'm walking over a bridge in town, I catch myself gazing down at the gulls. Who knows when there might be a white-winger bobbing about among them? And I'm not sure I could be trusted to leave the communication cord untouched if something exciting catches my eye from the train on my commute to work...

In a relatively short time, I've amassed knowledge I didn't even know was there to be gleaned. Now I understand what a treat it is to watch Tree Sparrows and hunting Barn Owls near our home. I've learned that a Franklin's Gull doesn't appear out of the gloom every winter's afternoon, nor does a Hermit Thrush invariably bounce out of the bushes as soon as you start pishing. I've realised that Alpine Swifts aren't above every Somerset hilltop, and that even if you've made the effort to be in a hide five miles from home at four thirty in the morning, only rarely does a Purple Heron drop to the water's edge just feet away. Nevertheless, I've found just how rewarding a bit of patience can be, and never regret those pre-dawn sorties when most people are still dreaming of their Sunday brunch. If you don't go, I know now, you might miss something. And learning to be a birding widow means appreciating just what that means. When I watched a Yellowthroat in Gwent flying straight towards me, its tiny bill wide open as it called, my mouth was open equally wide, partly in shock and partly in awe at the perfection of the moment. How could I ever lie in bed and miss something like that?

Where shall I go birding today?

June

Spring migration is almost over, but there are still chances to find your own goodie - Golden Oriole, Honey Buzzard, and Red-backed Shrike are all slim chances, but possible, and could turn up anywhere. Perhaps more likely is hearing a Quail calling from unimproved grassland or a cereal crop. Checking the waders at Wall Common might produce a surprise Little Stint.

Bitterns on the Avalon Marshes should be feeding young by now, and are at their most active and visible. Still, warm nights in June are perfect for seeing and hearing Nightjars - try Staple Hill in the Blackdowns, Staple Plain in the Quantocks, Stockhill on Mendip, or Webber's Post on Exmoor.

July

The midsummer doldrums, but plenty of time to find those last few breeding records for the Atlas (sorry, couldn't resist the plug). Waders start moving south again, so sites like Wall Common and Durleigh Reservoir are worth a visit - Green and Common Sandpipers are the most likely at this time, but there are chances of a number of other species too.

Midsummer storms can produce some good seawatching off Minehead, Porlock Weir, or Burnham-on-Sea (over high tide) - there are a few recent July records of Storm Petrel, for instance. Wandering terns are also possible - Noah's Lake has a good recent track record, or try the coast between Steart and Hinkley Point.

August

We think of August as being summer, but for many birds it is the start of autumn migration. Waders predominate, and Steart and Meare Heath are worth a visit or two - Curlew Sandpiper and Wood Sandpiper are just two of the species you might see. Some passerine migrants start moving back through too - Yellow Wagtails, Wheatears and Redstarts are all likely, and if you're really lucky an Aquatic Warbler might appear in the reedbeds at Steart.

It's a good month for Spotted Crakes - Greylake and Meare Heath are likely spots. Don't forget seawatching, in the right conditions - skuas might get blown up the Bristol Channel or come overland from the North Sea.

Bramwell bulletin

Another set of musings and local survey results from Mike Trubridge

One of the great things about birdwatching is that you never quite know what might turn up next - you should always be prepared to expect the unexpected. However, when I was given my two BBS squares for the summer of 2011 neither of them looked as though they would turn up anything unusual. They were both a mixture of arable and pasture fields divided by hedges, a few small woods and copses, some old orchards and a small village. Thus it was that on 26 April I parked my car on the roadside and set off on a bright spring morning across a couple of fields to the start of the first transect, not expecting anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly, halfway across the first field, I stopped dead in my tracks - I could clearly hear the song of a Hoopoe coming from a nearby piece of woodland!

This immediately presented me with a dilemma - should I carry out my BBS transect as originally planned, or should I go off to the woodland to find the Hoopoe? Eventually devotion to duty got the better of me and I carried on to the start of the transect, all the time fervently hoping that the bird would still be there when I finished. Just under two hours later I was back where I started and was delighted to hear that the Hoopoe was still singing. So I set off to investigate. After struggling under a barbed wire fence and through some undergrowth I found something that completely changed the situation - an aviary! Certainly not what I was expecting!! Quite clearly this Hoopoe was a captive bird. Nonetheless I was intrigued, and I just had to go to speak to the owner of the aviary. I found him in his garden and as soon as I started to explain that I was a birdwatcher and had heard a....., he interrupted me and finished off my sentence with 'singing Hoopoe'. He went on to explain that he had a number of captive birds in his aviary and invited me to have a look at some of them. Not only did he have a variety of songbirds but also several wader species, including a pair of Avocets. This was quite a surprise!

Following on from the 2011 Rook survey that I reported on in the first edition of *The Bittern*, I carried out a Buzzard survey in much the same area around High Ham, Low Ham, Henley, Pitney, Park, Beer and Aller. The total size of this study area was 28.26 sq km, and within this plot I was able to locate 11 Buzzard territories. This means that the average territory size was 257 hectares. According to the *New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988-1991* the densest populations of Buzzards occur in the south west

peninsula of England, in Wales and in parts of north and west Scotland. It also says, 'Numbers are greater where farm sizes are relatively small, with mainly pasture, abundant hedgerows and small woods (often on steep escarpments) and a high frequency of small ungrazed steep slopes of grassland and scrub. Such areas tend to sustain numerous small rodents and rabbits, the principal prey of most Buzzard populations.' This description could easily have been written about my study area, the only difference being that there are a number of small settlements on my site. It is probably the presence of these settlements that accounts for the density in my study area being somewhat lower than other hotspots in the country. So for instance the average size territory on Dartmoor is 140 hectares, in the New Forest it is 185 hectares, while up on Speyside it is 200 hectares. Nonetheless it is pleasing to report that there appears to be a healthy Buzzard population in this small part of Somerset.

The Rook survey was repeated in the spring of 2012. Every rookery was visited at least twice, while some of the larger and more difficult rookeries received up to five visits. Analysing the results shows that there was an increase in the overall number of nests, but a decrease in the number of occupied nests. The occupancy rate had declined from 77% to 64%, but I do not think that this is a true reflection of events. The extremely warm and sunny weather towards the end of March resulted in record high temperatures across the country for this time of year. The production of flowers and leaves on the trees was much earlier than normal, and consequently the survey had to finish on 31 March - earlier than I would have liked - simply because I was no longer able to see what was going on in the treetops. On this date many of the Rooks had not settled down to incubate and in fact there was still a great deal of nest building going on. I am sure that the recorded occupancy rate of 64% is considerably lower than reality and should be regarded with a certain amount of caution.

It is interesting to note that there were five new rookeries within the study area, accounting for 13 new nests, while one small rookery of 3 nests was apparently abandoned. One of these new sites was in an ash tree close to my house, which meant that I was able to observe what was going on every day. Initially one pair of Rooks took over an old crows' nest in the tree, but there was a lot of squabbling amongst a number of birds for this nest. Eventually a second pair built another nest

close by in the same tree, but this was not completed until well into the second half of April, long after the survey finished. I wonder how many other late nests appeared in my study area like this one and were simply not recorded.

Quite a few Rook nests had been blown out of the trees during the winter, while many others had been

considerably reduced in size. But it is not just the weather that can have an effect on our rookeries - at one of the larger sites in a row of old willow trees that had not been pollarded for many years, 18 out of the 19 trees were cut back to the stumps during the winter. This accounted for about 35 nests and made quite an impact on the birds at that site.

Location	Grid Ref.	Tree species	Total occupied nests	Total nests
Hillview Farm	ST433298	Ash	2	2
Bramwells Farm	ST433300	Ash	6 (9)	9 (12)
Yew Tree Farm	ST431299	Ash, oak	30 (32)	47 (43)
Stewart Bridge	ST453309	Pollarded willows	2	3
Decoy Farm, west	ST449309	Oak	17 (16)	24 (20)
Decoy Farm, east	ST452307	Pollarded willows*, oak	6* (24)	7* (38)
Decoy Farm, Badger Wood	ST451305	Oak, ash	21 (31)	41 (37)
White House Farm	ST425324	Willow	0 (3)	0 (3)
Stout	ST438310	Ash	2 (6)	4 (6)
Ball's Farm	ST427322	Willow, birch	12 (7)	20 (9)
Heaven's Gate	ST427322	Ash	20 (17)	26 (21)
Henley Farm	ST429324	Willow	0	4
Henley Bridge	ST418293	Ash	1 (2)	2 (3)
Hayes Farm	ST436323	Ash	3	3
Petty's Cottage	ST437322	Ash	7 (5)	8 (12)
Poplar Farm	ST437321	Ash	7 (7)	9 (9)
Wishel Farm	ST443316	Willow, ash	28 (30)	41 (32)
Poplar Wood	ST444303	Poplar	28 (18)	40 (18)
Rose Farm Cottage	ST418293	Ash, oak	13 (27)	26 (39)
Rifle Range	ST423292	Ash	1	1
TOTAL	20 (15)		206 (234)	320 (302)

* 18 of the 19 willows were pollarded during the winter, destroying approximately 35 nests

Figures in brackets are for 2011

New rookeries are shown in italics

- Survey area = 12.56 sq km
- 1.59 rookeries per sq km (1.19)
- 16.40 occupied nests per sq km (18.63)
- 25.48 nests per sq km (24.04)
- 64% of nests occupied (77%)
- Colony range of occupied nests 0 - 30, average 10.3 (3 - 32, average 15.6)
- Colony range of total nests 1 - 47, average 16.0 (3 -43, average 20.1)

Desert Island Birds

Based loosely on the famous radio show, each issue we will feature a prominent (or not so prominent) Somerset birder. Our second castaway is SOS President Brian Hill, pictured here holding a bag full of baby Tengmalm's Owls on a visit to Sweden.



How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Like most other males of my generation it was through the childhood delinquency of egg-collecting (as detailed in a *Bird Notes* confession some years ago). Again, like most, I came to love the hobby and this phase quickly passed with little damage. Interest waned for a long period during my twenties as family responsibilities took precedence but returned with vigour in the late 1970s and continues to dominate my leisure time.

What is your favourite birding memory?

There are so many, but most centre on seabirds, which I've watched the world over. Seeing an exceptional passage of skuas in optimum conditions off the Western Isles in late May a few years ago with our former Recorder Brian Rabbitts takes some beating: Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas close enough to touch (well almost!)

Where was your favourite birding trip?

My greatest enthusiasm is for Palearctic species, Western mostly, which includes us. I love Scandinavia, particularly Sweden, but have the fondest memories of eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria, not so much for the speciality species, but for the large number of species now so scarce here, like Corn Bunting and Skylark, yet still very common there. Let's hope agriculture in that region changes slowly and sensitively.

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

Suffer with other Somerset County Cricket Club fans! I love the sport and though I was useless as a player I did umpire for a period. I did some magazine writing for a while, including for *Birdwatch* in its early days, and *Somerset Magazine* but found this too time consuming. I admire those like Stephen Moss who manage to combine writing with a host of other activities. I'd also like to say I'm good at DIY but couldn't keep a straight face.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

I've enrolled as a BTO Nest Recorder this year for the first time and am hooked on it, a fascinating hobby within a hobby and one that makes a real contribution to bird conservation. This tends to keep me within a few miles of the house (in Creech St Michael), but that's no problem as I rarely leave Somerset these days and having never kept any lists, have none to maintain or increase.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Very difficult because all birds are beautiful (well maybe not Bald Ibis but I've not seen that!) - however, here goes.

Wryneck: Perfect proof you can get a beautiful bird in a combination of brown, grey and black. Rare though they are you can, with luck, see Wrynecks annually and they can turn up just about anywhere.

Red-backed Shrike: Perhaps our saddest loss as a breeding species, but you don't have to go far into Europe to see them, though they are declining there too. It's memorable to see one in relentless pursuit of a hapless bumblebee.

Yellow-browed Warbler: I've been lucky enough to see this tiny super-active *Phylloscopus* in its taiga breeding grounds. Despite this, it evokes east coast autumn sycamores for me. It should really be in SE Asia, but there are winter records from the Gambia and Azores as well as scores for western Europe. No-one really knows what's happening.

Great Grey Owl: One of the few truly majestic birds, and breathtaking when you first encounter it. All owls are great but this superb beast takes the prize.

Bee-eater: OK you don't need bright colours (see Wryneck above) but it certainly helps. Only a beekeeper could dislike it, but most don't begrudge it a few workers. It is, anyway, just as fond of dragonflies. Often a 'heard only' record as they fly high overhead, but beware the Starling which can do a pretty good Bee-eater!

What book and luxury item would you take with you?

BTO Field Guide to Monitoring Nests by Ferguson-Lees, Castell and Leach (see above). It's a super book of its type and I dip into it daily. As for luxury, a ginormous bottle of Glenmorangie. After all there is more to life than birds, isn't there?



We're on Facebook!

I know some members will mentally switch off at the mention of Facebook (or any other web-based social networking platforms), but it is one more useful way in which we can publicise news items and events, and to make the Society more attractive and accessible to a new generation of birdwatchers. So if you do 'do Facebook', find us at www.facebook.com/pages/Somerset-Ornithological-Society, and 'like' us.

Spotlight on: Cetti's Warbler

Julian Thomas introduces the first in an occasional series highlighting some of Somerset's lesser-known birds

The loud, explosive, staccato song of Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia cetti*) is a very familiar sound in Somerset's wetlands, but how well do we really know the species? It turns out that it is quite an odd bird in many ways. Unusually amongst our warblers it is almost exclusively resident and quite sedentary, though some do disperse in autumn. Though tied to wetlands, it is not strictly a reedbed bird, and bushes and tangles are at least as important in terms of habitat requirements as reeds. Recent DNA studies which led to the break-up of the warbler family (Sylviidae) as we traditionally understood it now mean that Cetti's Warbler is not only the sole European representative of its genus, but of a whole family of (mainly Asian) bush-warblers, Cettiidae.

It gets its name from Francesco Cetti, an 18th-century Italian Jesuit priest, mathematician and zoologist who spent several years living in Sardinia and writing about its wildlife, but never saw the bird. It was subsequently found and collected on Sardinia by Alberto della Marmora, and named by Temminck in 1820 in Cetti's honour, some forty-two years after his death.

Cetti's Warbler is a very recent addition to the British avifauna, relatively speaking, the first confirmed breeding record being in Kent in 1973. Its tendency to disperse helped it to spread rapidly and colonise suitable habitats across southern England, which stood it in good stead when the original populations in the south-east were almost completely wiped out by a succession of cold winters in the early 1980s. Happily, birds from surviving populations spread again rapidly, not only regaining lost ground, but also expanding into the Midlands and Wales. In 2008 there were estimated to be 2257 singing males in Britain, 270 of those being in Somerset (second only to Kent with 388). The two recent cold winters initially appeared to have hit them hard, but they have either survived better than we thought or bounced back more vigorously than we could have expected (or perhaps a bit of both), and our core population seems to be in good health.

Often heard, it is a notoriously difficult bird to see (though not quite as hard as some make out). The Avalon Marshes reserves are some of the best places in the country to see them, and in April and May, males defending territories and chasing females can make it easier, though they rarely stay out in the open for long. In truth you can get good views at any time of year, but it does take patience and a degree of luck.

“It gets its name from Francesco Cetti, an 18th-century Italian Jesuit priest, mathematician and zoologist who spent several years living in Sardinia and writing about its wildlife, but never saw the bird.”

When you do get a good view, you see just how different they are from our other wetland warblers, both in colouration and shape - some older field guides really do not do this understated bird justice. The upperparts are a rich mahogany brown, and it is largely grey below, though paler on the throat, lower breast and belly. The long, full, rounded tail is a good pointer to the identity of the brown bird flitting rapidly along the edge of the reeds and disappearing into a bramble clump or willow. It gives a very different impression from the *Acrocephalus* warblers that share the same habitat, and in reality the most usual confusion species on such a view is Dunnock!

If you're really keen to see one, then it's useful to know one of their quirky habits - the males almost always move position just after singing, which is initially infuriating, but offers a chance of tracking them once you know to watch for the movement. Patience is the key - one will eventually pop out in front of you, though it might not be today. A good view, though, is worth the wait.



Walks and talks

It's the quiet time of year for bird-related events, what with summer holidays and the attention of conservation organisations (and even some birders) turning to butterflies, dragonflies, plants etc. Still, here is what's coming up in our area over the next three months - included are all SOS field meetings and a selection of events organised by RSPB, Natural England and Somerset Wildlife Trust. We'll try to include both a grid reference and the nearest 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.

June			
2/3	Walks	SWT	Avalon 24. More than 30 guided walks over a 24-hour period, covering all aspects of natural history. Call Kevin Anderson on 01458 860736 or email avalon24@beardsimon.plus.com for further details.
3	Family event	Joint	Avalon Marshes Open Day. 1030-1500, a day of family fun based at the Avalon Marshes Centre (ST426414, BA6 9TT). RSPB/NE/Hawk and Owl Trust/SWT. Entry free.
8	Family event	SWT	Family Barn Owl box building. 1000-1200 and 1300-1500, Simonsbath House Outdoor Centre, Exmoor (SS772393, TA24 7SH). Places limited so book on 01643 831382 or enquiries@shoc.info
12	Walk	SOS	Ham Wall. Evening walk looking for Bitterns and Barn Owls, led by an RSPB warden. Meet at 1900 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX).
15	Walk	SWT	Exmoor Mires Project. 1030-1330. Walk explaining this project and its beneficial effects on biodiversity, led by Lee Bray and Morag Angus. Roadside parking approx. 1.5km NW of Kinsford Gate at SS725376.
17	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'An evening stroll on the marshes.' 1830-2130. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, hot drinks and cookies at Meare Manor (included in price). £6.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
24	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Another evening stroll on the marshes. 1830-2130. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, hot drinks and cookies at Meare Manor (included in price). £6.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
27	Walk	SWT	Castle Neroche. Evening walk round this ancient hill fort 1800-2100, with optional follow-on visit to Staple Hill for Nightjars. Meet in car park (ST272156, TA20 3JZ). Contact Lou Pickersgill 01935 862468 for further details.

July			
4	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Another evening stroll on the marshes. 1830-2130. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, hot drinks and cookies at Meare Manor (included in price). £6.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.

August			
19	Walk	SWT	Asham Woods, near Nunney, leader Christine Macarthur. Focus: resident birds, flora and fauna. Meet at 1430. Park in the layby along Somers Hill (ST711463, BA11 3LY). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, Children £1.

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