



Two more new breeding species for Somerset

Julian Thomas reports

As if the brilliant news of Great White Egrets choosing our county for the first breeding attempt in Britain (and the second - see page 3) wasn't enough, the breeding list for the county has risen by a further two species this summer.

A notable influx of Black-winged Stilts occurred nationally this spring, and with the last twitchable Somerset bird being as long ago as 1980 at Steart, most county listers were cursing their luck as birds turned up in Avon, Dorset, Devon, and even Gwent, but seemed to be avoiding us. So when Rog Musgrove found a single bird on the unusual summer floods on Curry Moor in the afternoon of 2 June, the twitch was on. As observers gathered, however, it not only became clear that there were in fact three birds present, but also that something far more amazing was happening! Two of the birds were seen mating - remarkable enough - then both rose into the air to mob a passing Carrion Crow, only for the male to return to his previous spot and promptly sit down. Not only that, he soon after stood up, gently prodded around underneath him, and sat down again in the same spot - surely he was sitting on a nest!

Careful watching that evening and the next morning confirmed it, with several change-overs being noted, and the RSPB were promptly informed. A tense few days ensued, with a few SOS members keeping an eye on the birds while RSPB staff consulted landowners, farmers and the Environment Agency, and put in place arrangements for 24-hour monitoring of the site. All in vain, however - in worsening weather, the birds, though still present, stopped sitting - less than a week after the nest was discovered, it had been deserted. A member of RSPB staff, under licence, visited the nest site on 9 June and found four eggs still present but stone cold. The birds had left by the next day. There have been a number of previous breeding attempts in Britain by Black-winged Stilts, most of which have also sadly ended in failure, but this is the first in Somerset.

The desertion was a great shame, but the attempt may have been doomed anyway. The remaining floodwater was hypoxic (lacking in oxygen) and much had already been pumped off the site by the Environment Agency. Even if the floodwater had remained it is doubtful there would have been enough food available on site to feed any potential chicks. As it was the flooding turned the moor into a sterile, foul smelling wasteland, leaving local farmers with no summer grazing or forage for their cattle and causing them heavy losses.

Brian Hill, SOS President said, 'We sympathise very much with local farmers and landowners for whom the flooding in the Curry Moor area this spring has been devastating, and we hope the land recovers quickly. But we are also pleased and proud that a pair of Black-winged Stilts attempted to breed in our county, and it is a shame that yet another bout of appalling weather seems to have driven them off. It would have been another great coup for Somerset if the stilts had been successful, but it was not to be. Many thanks, though, to the farmers and landowners of Curry Moor who reacted so positively and sympathetically to the news of the attempt despite the difficult circumstances.'



James Packer

Black-winged Stilt

Continued page 3

Contents

Two more new breeding species for Somerset	1
Welcome	2
News in brief	3
Somerset Atlas update	4
Devon Atlas	4
Autumn migration	5
Where shall I go birding today?	7
The Somerset Levels - twinned with the Camargue?	8
Which kite?	10
Desert Island Birds	12
Swifts in Westbury-sub-Mendip	14
Walks and talks	15

Welcome

What a summer! Or should that be 'What summer?' Overall it has been pretty awful for wildlife. Commoner breeding birds struggled badly with the weather, and several species of butterfly and dragonfly took a big hit too. Some migrant birds seem to have been either late in arriving or in lower numbers than in recent years, or both. The weather also played havoc with the last fieldwork season for the county Atlas, though perseverance by many observers did reap dividends in the end.

On a much more positive note, we've added no less than three species to the list of Somerset breeders, though as our cover story relates, one of these attempts unfortunately ended in failure. A new species, Iberian Chiffchaff, was also added to the county list (pending acceptance by BBRC) and lingered plenty long enough for everyone interested to have an opportunity to see and hear it. A full write-up will no doubt, and entirely properly, appear in next year's annual report.

But now we look forward into the autumn that is already underway. Paul Bowyer has spent much of the last decade studying migration and the factors which affect it, mostly on Brean Down. He has kindly agreed to share his findings with us: this time around it is (appropriately) autumn migration, but we can also look forward to another article on the different influences on migration in spring. Fascinating as a subject in itself, and including principles which are applicable to more than just that single site, it will hopefully also help all of us (including me) to make the most of our birding days.

All of the regular features that you've come to know and hopefully love are here too, and plenty more are in the pipeline, but if there are subjects not yet covered that you'd like to see, please let me know.



Julian Thomas, Editor

Email: julian.thomas@somersetbirds.net

Phone/text: 07764165417

Meanwhile, however, a pair of Avocets had quietly set up home at Steart. A close relative of the stilts, but not as rare of course - nonetheless this too was a first breeding attempt for the county, and the birds were anxiously monitored by Dick Best and a few others, while other visitors' restraint in not publicising them was much appreciated by all. The horrid weather in early June was a big worry here too, but thankfully they came through it, though perhaps not totally unscathed - a few days later than expected, a single chick was seen, though no more emerged. 'Archie', as the chick became known (though there was no way of telling whether 'he' wasn't in fact a she), was led away out into the estuary by the anxious parents. For a while the only evidence of Archie's survival was the continuing very aggressive behaviour of the adults, driving off all who came near them. Then at last we had a confirmed sighting of an adult and a well-grown, fully-fledged juvenile seen along Stockland Reach. Where the stilts had failed, the Avocets had succeeded!



James Packer

Black-winged Stilt on nest, Curry Moor

While the attempt by the Black-winged Stilts was only ever likely to be an opportunistic one-off, even if successful, we can hope to perhaps look back in future years to this first pair of Avocets as being the start of a successful colonisation.

News in brief

More Great White Egrets

No sooner had we had the great news that three young had fledged from the first-ever Great White Egret nest in Britain (see the last issue of *The Bittern*) than we got the equally brilliant news from Shapwick Heath that another pair were building a nest and incubating eggs. The same security considerations applied, so 'nest 2', as it became known, presented the watchers with a problem - how do you maintain public viewing to allow people to enjoy a unique event, but keep quiet from them that it is no longer unique? Especially when sharp-eyed visitors could see 'nest 2' from the watch point overlooking 'nest 1'? The band of volunteers did another sterling job, and soon enough the parents at nest 2 were seen feeding two chicks. Sadly one died when quite large, from unknown causes, but the other goes from strength to strength and has recently fledged.

And then there are those Little Bitterns

After consultation with the RSPB we can also announce that the Little Bitterns bred again successfully this year at Ham Wall, after last year's presumed failure. The birds were particularly elusive this year, with even those few monitoring them getting only rare and fleeting glimpses, but in late July a juvenile was seen in flight with the adult male. They seem now to be regular members of Somerset's avifauna. Apologies to members for not being able to spread the news more widely while the birds are present, but I am sure you all understand the reasons why.

Somerset Atlas update

Some will be devastated, some truly thankful, but the fieldwork period for the Somerset Atlas is finally over. So no more exhortations to greater efforts to find those breeding Dunnocks! But what we would ask is that you go through your notebooks and pick out any records that you think we might not know about, or note down that chance conversation with a friend or neighbour who gets owls or Spotted Flycatchers (for instance) in their garden, and either enter the data on the BTO Atlas website or let Eve Tigwell, Rob Grimmond or Julian Thomas know so we can do so.

The Atlas website is open at least until mid-November, so there's a bit of time yet to add those last few records. After that we will be going full-bore to create 'the book'. Currently the aim is to publish in the late autumn of next year, but we will keep members fully informed of when they can expect to see the results of so much hard work, and how they may be able to help see that dream be realised.

As of 15 August this year, a total of 666 observers had at least one Somerset record against their name on the BTO Atlas website, and of course many had submitted plenty more than that - there are even a few out west who have channelled records through David Ballance and whose names do not appear on the website (though they will, along with all others, in the final book). Once again many thanks to one and all. Just for fun, though, here are the Top 10 Somerset Atlasers.

Name	Number of records
Andy Grinter	22203
Chris Dale	19018
David Ballance	15175
Julian Thomas	13535
John Rivoire	10671
D W Bodley	8567
Denise Wawman	6128
Brian Gibbs	5736
John Hansford	5331
David Wall	4694

Meanwhile, for these and many other Atlasers facing having to go 'cold turkey'...

Devon Atlas

Steve Waite, County Recorder for the DBWPS, enlists our aid

Now that the fieldwork for the Somerset Atlas is complete I'm sure there are many surveyors reading this wondering 'What am I supposed to do now?' Well, all those now redundant notebooks can be opened again - because your neighbour needs help.

The Devon Atlas still has one year of fieldwork left (we were slow off the starting blocks compared with you guys!), with a full winter and summer season of surveying to go. We welcome all roving records of course, but it's the remaining Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) that we really need to focus our efforts on. Although 93% of Devon's tetrads are either allocated or complete, there are still some big gaps. Several of these unallocated tetrads are in mid or east Devon within spitting distance of the Somerset/Devon border.

For example, in grid square 'SS' there are tetrads up for grabs east of South Molton, just over the border from Dulverton, and on a few parts of Exmoor. And if you are prepared to travel a little further, plenty of areas in mid Devon still need a surveyor. So we ask you to dust off your binoculars, sharpen that pencil, and get those wellies back on for some more Atlas fun!

If you can help, then please email: recorder@devonbirds.org or get in touch with the Atlas team via the 'Contact Us' page at www.devonatlas.co.uk. The website is also the place to find out more information about the Devon Atlas including the very latest news on which tetrads need a surveyor.

Autumn migration

Paul Bowyer gives us the low-down

It's late summer and spring is a distant memory, daylight hours are already noticeably shrinking and once again it's time to start looking for those autumn migrants. This season tends to be longer than spring and sees birds taking a more casual attitude in their flight to the wintering grounds. In spring it's all about getting to the breeding grounds first for the best territories, but now it's about rounding up the kids and finding some good restaurants for a good feed up in preparation for a flight to some winter sun.

For the hardcore migration watchers autumn begins in June where an overlap in spring and autumn migration takes place. For me Black-headed Gulls are the first signs of autumn migration when numbers start building up around our shorelines. Ringing recoveries suggest the first ones are British breeders, followed by birds from the Baltic, some of which end up spending the winter in Somerset year after year. Around the same time or soon after, we see the first waders returning and then July is upon us. From here on birds can arrive on our shores from any direction. Wood Sandpipers filtering down from Scandinavia arrive in the east, and are quickly followed by a Mexican wave of sightings as they head westwards through the country. Falls on the east coast are a great way of predicting migrant activity. Some of these birds head west towards Wales and Ireland, but a little wind tweak in our favour will soon have them filtering down through Somerset off the Welsh coast. There is a definite path of migration between Lavernock Point, Flat Holm and Brean Down. Perhaps the most spectacular species to use this route is the Swallow. From late August into September the numbers taking this route are huge. On 17 September 2011 I counted 10,000 birds migrating through late morning but over the course of that day there would have been far more. Regular visits consistently produce sample counts of 1,000 to 1,200 an hour all heading south-east towards the Somerset Levels.

Weather watching takes up a big part of a migrant watcher's time, and with good reason, as it has a direct effect on the birds. The effects of the weather on our doorstep can be traced as far away as the ocean currents in the Pacific and to the stratosphere, 33,000 feet in the air. But for the immediate effects, just checking wind strength and direction, and temperature, can tell us a lot about what birds we are going to see on any given day and where to go birding.



Wheatear

Winds with a southerly bias in early autumn still see birds heading north into Britain. Melodious Warbler and Aquatic Warbler are two well-known Continental species that have reached Somerset in August and September. In September and October high pressure building in central Europe creating a warm southerly airflow into the UK is virtually guaranteed to bring some special birds into Somerset. This occurrence was particularly noticeable during the special autumn of 2001, when rare birds were cropping up all along the south coast. From the east, Dusky Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Siberian Stonechat, Barred Warbler, and Richard's Pipit were just a few of the first to arrive, and then along came a superb male Sardinian Warbler to Somerset's very own Brean Down. This trend of northward migration can continue right up until December. The most memorable December influx of recent years is undoubtedly the Cattle Egret invasion of 2008. These birds had made the journey across the Bay of Biscay to reach Britain, eventually being recorded throughout the south-west including Somerset.

The autumn of 2009 was a big year for American birds and many twitchers will remember the Sandhill Crane and Blackburnian Warbler turning up in September along with plenty of the more regular arrivals. Towards the end of September a light northerly wind saw many of these birds start heading south. It was a bit of a lottery as to where they were going to drop in but drop in they did. I had the fortune of arriving at Weston Sewage Works late morning one day when a Blue-winged Teal had stopped off. The days before saw American Golden Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper

“Knowing that birds can take their time when flying to the wintering grounds I’ve taken up the idea of setting up feeding stations along some of these migration routes”

and Long-billed Dowitcher reported further upriver.

Somerset is a great place to observe visible migration and there doesn't have to be an influx from overseas to witness 'vismig' as there will be plenty of British breeders on the move. Many will be static waiting for the right conditions and as soon as the wind swings in their favour it's off and away. Passerines are designed to fly into headwinds so bearing this in mind it should be quite easy to find some visible migration during September and October along our coasts. Burnham and Berrow are ideal places to observe fly-over migrants in southerly winds as birds filter down off the Mendips and the Severn Estuary. A northerly to easterly wind sees birds heading upriver along all of the Somerset coast and northwesterly winds bring the birds in off the Welsh coast via Brean Down. It's worth noting that moderate to strong winds will keep the birds at lower levels and thus in visible and audible range; get lighter winds and they will fly much higher up and, to make matters worse, those particular flight paths will be abandoned in favour of movements on a broad front. This often happens when high pressure builds over the UK. Light winds and the disappearance of cloud usually equal quiet birding, so when this happens it's often a waiting game for the wind to pick up or the arrival of fronts from an approaching low pressure system to turn things around.

Knowing that birds can take their time when flying to the wintering grounds I've taken up the idea of setting up feeding stations along some of these migration routes. Throwing down some seed slightly off the beaten track can be a very good way of revealing some birds that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. One year I had 200+ finches and buntings coming to a feeding station.

The latest craze in America is leaving a microphone recording all night and analysing the sound files in the morning. It's a great way of finding out what migrant activity has been going on in the night while we sleep. Pop your head out the door in October and it is not long before you hear a Redwing calling, but put a microphone out all night and you get so much more. I've not been

doing it that long but I've had Common Sandpiper, Curlew, Blackbird, godwits, almost constant gull passage and Whimbrel, many of which are new additions to the garden list. I use the Blue Snowball USB digital microphone connected to my laptop. There are two sources of American software that can analyse the data or you can just play it back. The software, available to download at <http://www.oldbird.org/tseep.htm>, will pull out the bird calls from your audio files, or if you can't get it working you can download Audacity to record and playback at 1x, 2x or even 4x speed.

Sometimes there is a lot of migrant activity by night with no evidence that any has taken place the next day. This was the case on 7 October 2010. A tip off came from Dutch birders at 8pm about a big movement towards the UK. The message read: 'On the different radar screens here in Holland mass departure into western direction just took off. Not only in the north of the Netherlands, but also in Belgium birds are heading for the UK. Densities are really extreme now at take off and with those easterlies at low altitudes (SE at ~750m and S/SSW higher up) birds will be soon arriving in UK (~3 hour flight).' The next morning there was nothing; it was a day like any other. All in the space of one night a huge arrival of birds had taken place and a huge departure. Had it not been for the



James Packer

Yellow Wagtail

Dutch radar no-one would have been any the wiser. As you can see from the message the birds were travelling at an altitude of 750m (over 2,400 feet) and this just serves to highlight just how high these birds fly. When you are looking for migration you should be spending a lot of your time looking up. This is something many do not do and I am sometimes guilty of it myself.

A lot of understanding of migration comes from watching common birds, as they are the predominant ones in the sky. If it's the rarer bird you are looking for then observing the common migrants are a good indicator. When rarities are turning up in the southern counties and you see Swallows heading north in September then it's a fairly good bet that you're standing in the right place at the right time. All you

have to do then is find that bird!

And finally some notes on weather. For us humans travelling from A to B it is all about the surface under our feet, whereas a bird's transport medium is the air. Just as we experience different terrains underfoot, birds will experience different aerial conditions too. Broadly speaking the geography of the Earth's surface, the ocean currents and the 'Coriolis effect' are responsible for the creation of our pressure systems and the divide between land and sea creates the ridges and troughs in the air that produce our frontal systems. All these conditions will affect a bird's journey to the wintering grounds. By understanding weather and 'birds and forward flight' you'll have some degree of insight into a migrant bird's life.

Where shall I go birding today?

Autumn migration has to be one of the most exciting times for any birdwatcher - you just never know what you might see next, and it doesn't have to be a major rarity to light up a birding day. There are plenty of options - the key is to watch the weather and pick the right option for the day in hand. Easy! (Yeah, right!)

September

Our summer visitors are leaving us in droves, but they can put on some great shows as they go. Check out Stolford, Dunster Beach and Huntspill Sea Wall for good numbers of Wheatears, Yellow Wagtails, Skylarks, pipits, hirundines and the like. Wrynecks can turn up anywhere along the coast, and regularly in gardens inland too.

Wall Common and the Brue estuary are good bets for Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints among other passage waders. Inland, Meare Heath will be the best wader spot if water levels allow.

September is the best month for seawatching if conditions are right, though it is unpredictable. Strong northwesterlies can bring Leach's Petrels and Grey Phalaropes close in off Burnham over high tide. All four skua species are possible and last year we also had a good influx of Sabine's Gulls.

October

The stream of passerine migrants slows as many birds have already departed, but this is the rarity-hunter's favourite month. Coastal sites will usually offer the best rewards - Brean Down has some top-class October rarities to its name. Lilstock is just one place that has hosted an increasingly regular rarity, the hyperactive Yellow-browed Warbler. For passage Ring Ouzels and Firecrests try the path up to Hurlstone Point late in the month.

Visible migration along the coast from Brean Down to Huntspill can be very rewarding, though it helps immensely to know the calls as birds belt overhead - Brambling, Twite, Hawfinch, Woodlark and Lapland Bunting are all possible.

Inland, the arrival of ducks and waders might bring in something interesting too. Try Greylake or Steart for a returning Hen Harrier or Short-eared Owl.

November

It's not quite winter yet, though winter thrushes should arrive in numbers. Black Redstarts could appear anywhere - Brean Down Cove and Stolford are regular haunts. Rare visitors from further east often appear late, too - our only Pallas's Warbler and several Richard's Pipits have been found in this month.

Wildfowl on the Levels and wader flocks around the Parrett Estuary start to increase rapidly and offer some spectacular sights. As does the Starling roost in the Avalon Marshes which should also attract raptors.

Seawatchers' minds turn to divers and the hope of a storm-blown Little Auk or perhaps a Velvet Scoter or two. Try Minehead or Porlock Weir, or for seaduck, Hinkley Point.

This is the best month for Snow Buntings along the coast - Stolford and Dunster Beach both have a good track record.

The Somerset Levels - twinned with the Camargue?

John Hansford travels away, but feels strangely at home

Back in mid May 2012 I was lucky enough to spend some time in the Camargue, the largest area of wetland in Europe. Covering over 900km² and cut off from the ocean by sandbars, the area is south of the town of Arles and the reed-covered marshes and lakes (étangs) which comprise a third of the delta habitat are part of the two outfalls of the River Rhône.

Working in Street and having quick access to the Somerset Levels and Moors (but not between 7am and 4pm Mon to Fri!) really got me thinking about similarities between our own habitat here in Somerset and that of the Camargue. The Levels and Moors cover 650km² and it is thought that the name Somerset may have originated whereby due to flooding the land could only be utilised in the summer months.

Agricultural use is important in both areas and additionally for salt extraction in the the Camargue region and peat workings here. Some of these former peat workings, thanks to excellent long-term management plans and the willingness of volunteers, have helped to maximise the potential for nature of an ever-increasing area of the Levels. Make the effort if you can to seek out some old photographs of the Shapwick Heath area.

The proposed habitat creation in the Steart peninsula will add further to the vibrant wetland available within the County and what great timing for Avocets to breed for the first time in Somerset. I saw Avocets, Little Terns, Common Terns and Whiskered Terns in the Camargue. Common Terns have previously nested on the Levels and Ham Wall currently has some tern rafts installed and available for use. Perhaps once the Steart peninsula work is complete then Little Terns might attempt to breed in this area.

Around 10 years ago I bought a second-hand Birds of Europe guide, published in 1990 and containing the distribution maps of resident European birds. More recently I purchased the latest Collins Field Guide. I decided to use both guides to construct a list of birds that I would like to see whilst in the Camargue.

In 1990 to see a Great White Egret, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, or Little Bittern would certainly have involved either joining a rare UK twitch or journeying to Europe. These days I am able to watch nesting Little Egrets on my way to work, and the other three species have been doing their bit to get a foothold on the Somerset Levels. I remember going to twitch a Great White Egret at Westhay, but now it is unusual not to see one on a visit to the Ham Wall/Meare Heath areas. The remarkable success of the Great Bittern has helped make the Levels probably the best place in the UK to watch this species. Marsh Harriers now seem to be truly established on the Levels.

Knowing what the past two decades has brought with them then what could the next two decades bring along? Purple Herons perhaps, especially as a pair have already nested in the UK, Night Herons, Squacco Herons or possibly White Storks? Given the long-staying group this summer would it be worth installing a couple of artificial nest sites on the Levels?

Glossy Ibis seem to be somewhat irruptive these days and whilst common in the Camargue they are becoming increasingly regular in the UK. Will the breeding Spoonbills from the east of the country migrate westwards and attempt to breed here?



John Hansford

Great White Egret at Greylake looking into the camera as if to ask “What is it?”



John Hansford

White Stork with young, the Camargue, May 2012

Black-winged Stilts were a Camargue specialty that I particularly desired to observe in the wild. I was certain that this was one species that I would probably not get to see locally. No chance of three turning up and a pair attempting to breed on the Levels while I was away! It seems that with climate change if the habitat is available then birds will find it.

Think of the northerly movement in range of Cetti's Warblers; maybe Fan-tailed Warblers will one descend upon Somerset and breed? I believe that they are expanding their range. Maybe Savi's Warblers will also become a regular sound of Somerset birding hotspots?

Mediterranean and Yellow-legged Gulls are plentiful in the South of France and recently 25 Med Gulls were enjoyed in the flooded fields near Templecombe. Yellow-legged Gulls have been a feature of the Torr Reservoir gull roost for many years now.

Last year there was a Great Reed Warbler on King's Sedge Moor. The early morning sight and sound of this little gem in the Camargue made the rise before dawn well worthwhile.

Of course, regular Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Melodious Warblers, Sardinian Warblers, Kentish Plovers, Golden Orioles (one was resident in the tree above our tent and quite obliging) and the legendary Flamingos with Black Kites galore make the Camargue a very special place. Corn Bunting and Turtle Dove, so sadly lost to God's own county, also add to the delights of the the Camargue region.



John Hansford

Glossy Ibis, Catcott Lows

Comparing the Camargue with the Somerset Levels and Moors opened my eyes to truly appreciate what a special place Somerset is for birding. With our eldest about to start school then I may not get back to the Camargue in Spring for many years but thankfully I already reside in a wonderful county to enjoy the passion of bird watching. I think that the Levels and Moors could really be twinned with the Camargue.

Which kite?

James Packer, Chair of the SOS Rarities Committee, illustrates an ID pitfall

On the afternoon of 23 May 2012 Dave Horlick was working his local patch at Walton Common in the Gordano Valley, North Somerset, when a bird of prey suddenly came into view. Dave immediately realised that it was not a Buzzard, but what was it? The bird's size, structure and flight action suggested a kite. Red Kite seemed the most likely option, but there were features that suggested otherwise. Where was the tail fork, for instance - the spread tail looked square-ended. Surely that makes it a Black Kite? The bird was also clearly in wing moult, which Dave knew might affect how it looked quite radically. Luckily he had a camera with him and he managed to rattle off a good sequence of photos in the time the bird was on view, including a comparison shot with one of the local Buzzards that came to investigate it.

Dave identified the bird as a Red Kite, but circulated his photos that evening to other Avon birders to canvass their opinion. The photos were also posted on the ID forum on BirdForum (see <http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=230989>). The debate was lively, with opinions in favour of both species, but eventually the consensus was reached that it was indeed a **Red Kite**.

A full treatment of the differences between the two species, and at various ages, is beyond the scope of this article; there are many books and online articles which cover these. Suffice it to say that structural features at first glance do favour Black Kite, but the lack of tail fork, relatively short-winged appearance, and even the number of visible fingered primaries are all explicable by the bird's rather abraded plumage and active moult. Perhaps the most telling plumage feature in favour of Red is the white patches on the under-primaries - pale on a Black Kite, but never as white as on this bird. The active primary moult makes these patches less obvious than they would usually be. Individual variation can make some Black Kites look noticeably rufous in parts, while dull light can rob a Red Kite of plumage tones which would otherwise be obvious. Structure becomes the next best pointer, but individuals like the Walton Common bird show that even structural features may be misleading if you are dealing with a bird in abraded plumage, or one in a sub-adult plumage not often shown well in field guides.

Up until 2006 records of Black Kite were assessed by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC), but they have now decided that the species is too frequent a visitor to warrant assessment at national level - a decision greeted with groans from county rarities committees all over the country. During its BBRC days, Black Kite enjoyed the dubious distinction of having the highest rejection rate of any species on the British List (69%),



Dave Horlick

rivalled only by Great Snipe. This is unsurprising given that most reported sightings are of birds flying over, observed for only a few minutes at best, and in differing light conditions. Even when correctly identified, it is also a species which is particularly difficult to describe well to the exclusion of all others, given that in plumage terms it is a duller version of the most likely (and commoner) confusion species.

Many birders have visited southern Europe or other areas of the world where Black Kites are common birds. In many continental countries, it is easy to quickly learn the structural features which separate the two *Milvus* kites, and to apply them with a pretty high degree of accuracy in identifying even distant birds. With an abundance of kites, if you get one or two wrong it doesn't really matter. Sooner or later, you're likely to get closer views which will give you an opportunity to reappraise your ID.

In a British context, though, the situation is quite different. Nationally, Black Kite is an annual vagrant with maybe 20 or more records a year, but there are only four accepted Somerset records, though no doubt more have occurred. In Somerset Red Kite is observed with increasing regularity, but usually only as a flyover. It is critical that SOSRC applies more stringent criteria for acceptance of a Black Kite than virtually any other species. We cannot accept any claim of this species without a full written description of the bird as observed, including detailed notes on the observation conditions, such as the direction of light and weather conditions, the bird's plumage, state of moult, flight action etc. The Walton Common bird offers a salutary lesson that by no means all kites are easily assigned to species, no matter how experienced the observer.

Dave Horlick is to be congratulated on photographing this bird and bringing it to the attention of us all. You would be forgiven for not identifying it correctly at first glance, but it does serve as a reminder that if you think you've found a Black Kite, please take lots of detailed notes and photos if possible, and write as detailed and honest a description as you possibly can!



Dave Horlick



James Packer

Red Kite



James Packer

Black Kite

Desert Island Birds

Based loosely on the famous radio show, each issue we will feature a prominent (or not so prominent) Somerset birder. This issue's castaway is County Recorder Brian Gibbs.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Like Brian Hill, it started with egg-collecting as a boy at primary school but that phase passed quite quickly. I don't suppose, however, many will have joined a village drama group, as I did with a friend, because we knew the performance was going to be in a hall adjacent to where a pair of Mute Swans would be nesting and it would be the only way we could get near to the nest. The attempt failed but I have to say the swan didn't take kindly to two small boys dressed as elves in green tights trying to approach the small island where the nest was situated!



What is your favourite birding memory?

There have been plenty, but one that comes readily to mind is whilst carrying out a survey of Quantock birds for the AONB. I was at Bicknoller Post when a male Montagu's Harrier drifted by, only for it to disappear and then come back from a completely different direction. This happened a couple of times before I realised that it wasn't one but two birds, both full adult males, and I was then privileged to watch them both for the best part of an hour hunting over the hills - magic. Luckily they stayed around and others were able to see at least one and occasionally the two together.

Where was your favourite birding trip?

There have been a number, but all centred on Lundy over various years. There is always the feeling that you are going to find 'something around the next corner' and it did happen a number of times. I was fortunate enough to see and find many good birds over the years before it became very expensive to stay for a week. Many regulars deserted the island for this reason - one group of ringers worked out it was cheaper to ring for two weeks in Senegal than stay on Lundy!

What do you do when you are not watching birds?

Usually working on the Report as it occupied most evenings from January through to April when I was working and then again July and August before it went to the printers. Since I have been retired it gives more time to work on it on wet days - there have been plenty this year. I do enjoy walking on both the Quantocks and Exmoor even when I'm not birding. Another passion has always been rugby union; I played for Wiveliscombe in my younger days and I now follow the Six Nations and other international matches when they are televised.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

I don't think it will come as a surprise to those who know me when I say Hurlstone Point - you never know what is going to fly by or turn up. I started going there for two reasons: firstly, I love seawatching, and secondly, looking back over past reports I was amazed at how few records there were for common species like Razorbill, a situation now redressed. Hurlstone is closely followed by the Quantocks - again it is surprising how few records are actually submitted in a year from here and the birds with one or two exceptions are just as good as Exmoor. Outside Somerset it has to be Strumble Head in Pembrokeshire just for the sheer number of seabirds that pass by there. Further afield, Lesbos takes some beating, again for the variety and numbers of migrants passing through.

What are your five desert island birds and why?

1. The first is very easy; it has to be Redstart. There is no more attractive bird to herald the arrival of spring migrants, a season I look forward to every year, and it is by far my number one bird.
2. I'm going to be greedy here and say anything small and black-and-white such as Pied Flycatchers or Black-and-White Warblers. Not sure what it is but I find birds of this colour combination fascinating to watch feeding in the canopy.
3. Dartford Warbler has to feature in this list because I have watched their rise and fall since they became established as a Somerset resident (and hopefully will see their subsequent recovery). They finally made it into the parish of Crowcombe, the village where I grew up, in 2009 - it will be interesting to see how long it will be before they return.
4. Has to be a seabird and the Ancient Murrelet fits the bill. A bird I had scarcely heard of, and when it turned up on Lundy, where I had been staying only a couple of weeks before, I had to see it. This involved, along with others from Devon, chartering a small fishing boat from Ilfracombe, landing on Lundy in the mist, making our way to the other side of the island and then, as the light improved, finding this bird sat on the sea in the cove below. It turned up again the next year; we were staying on Lundy at the time and I was able to watch it most mornings over the week, at times with only me present.
5. The final bird has to be Capercaillie. Even before I was back into birding, I was with friends when we landed a small inflatable boat on one of the islands on a loch in the Scottish highlands and set off to explore it. We had not gone far when this enormous bird flew up and frightened the life out of us - my first experience of a 'Caper'. It wasn't to be till some years later that I saw a male 'strutting his stuff' in front of the hide at Loch Garten and I could finally say I had seen one properly.

What book and luxury item would you take with you?

At the risk of being extremely boring it would have to be a decent telescope and whatever book was available of the seabirds of the area where I was marooned. What an opportunity to seawatch! A bit like being at Hurlstone every day and probably seeing about as much or, probably more apt, as little!

Swifts in Westbury-sub-Mendip

Peter Bright, resident of Westbury-sub-Mendip and SOS member, has sent in some details about the breeding success of the Swifts that nest under his roof. Each year he has two pairs nest with him ('South' and 'North'), which he has monitored since 2006 with the aid of cameras installed in the nest sites. This seems like just the kind of local study that we try to encourage, on a species that both interests so many members and is in decline for possibly more than one reason, so I thought I would share his results with you.

Year	Nest	First arrival	First egg	No. of eggs	First hatching	No. of chicks	Fledged	Last adults
2006	S	2/5	23/5	1	-	0	0	8/6
	N	2/5	12/5	3	31/5	3	3	20/7
2007	S	8-10/5	31/5	3	11/6	3	1	31/7
	N	23/4	21/5	2	10/6	2	0	27/6
2008	S	4/5	15/5	3	10/6	2	2	26/7
	N	4/5	13/6	2	4/7	2	1	20/8
2009	S	4/5	16/5	3	5/6	2	2	2/8
	N	6/5	25/5	2	14/6	2	2	4/8
2010	S	30/4	13/5	3	3/6	3	3	After 19/7
	N	15/5	22/5	3	10/6	3	0	After 19/7
2011	S	2/5	?	2	-	0	0	26/7
	N	5/5	17/5	3	6/6	3	2	26/7
2012	S	4/5	18/5	3	8/6	2	2	21/7
	N	10/5	29/5	1	-	0	0	15/7

Mixed fortunes, certainly, with 5 out of 14 nesting attempts failing completely, including two where all eggs hatched successfully but the chicks died in the nest. On the other hand, the 9 successful attempts fledged 18 young - an average of 2.00 per successful nest, though only 1.29 per attempt. This kind of hard data is invaluable in helping us to judge how accurate our impressions of population trends really are.

It is tempting to speculate on the reasons for success and failure. For instance, it seems likely that the pair in the North nest this year may have decided to cut their losses and abandon their attempt early because of the very poor weather in early June; the other pair, that much further forward and having already invested that much more, decided to carry on, ultimately successfully.

Keep up the good work, Peter!

Walks and talks

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. All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some provided by the other conservation organisations.

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

(And OK, I know Blagdon Lake isn't technically in our area, but Nigel set up the original SOS website, so I think we owe him a plug or two, and they will be interesting.)

September			
12	Talk	SWT	Barn Owls and Boxes. Chris Sperring talks about the natural history of the species and the Community Barn Owl Project. 1900-2100. West Somerset Community College, Bircham Road Minehead, TA24 6AY. Admission free but booking essential - phone 01823 652400.
15	Walk	SOS	Shapwick Heath. Newer members especially are invited to join leader Jeff Hazell to look for resident and migrant birds in this wonderful wetland. Meet at 0930 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST450397, BA6 9SX).
16	Walk	SWT	Blagdon Lake Birds. Focus: Wildfowl and waders. Leader: honorary bird warden Nigel Milbourne. Meet at 1400 at Fishing Lodge car park near dam (ST507595, BS40 7TD) - park in access lane or Blagdon village and walk. Not suitable for wheelchairs/limited mobility. £2
23	Walk	SWT	Woodland Walk at Witham Park. Meet at 1000 in Deerwood Commons car park south of Gare Hill (ST772390). Not suitable for wheelchairs/ limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1. No dogs.
23	Walk	SWT	Chard Reservoir. Focus: migrant and resident birds. Leader: Barrie Widden. Meet at 1030 in reserve car park (ST337093, TA20 1HN). Not suitable for wheelchairs/limited mobility. Free.
30	Family event	RSPB/NE	An Autumn Wild Day Out. 1000-1300. Avalon Marshes Centre, Shapwick Heath (ST426414, BA6 9TT). A day of children's wildlife-based activities. For further details phone 01458 860736 or email anna.graham@rspb.org . Free entry.

October			
3	Talk	SWT	Wildlife along the Somerset Coast. Nigel Phillips describes the wild coastal inhabitants in this illustrated talk. Starts 1945. Shapwick Village Hall, Shapwick, ST418384. Parking available. Admission £2. Also dates in Yeovil and Frome - contact SWT for details.
19	Talk	SOS	Birding, twitching, photography - a delicate balance! James Packer explains how you can strike that difficult balance, illustrated with some of his excellent photographs. Starts 1930. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton (ST268270, TA3 5JE).
20	Walk	SOS	Stearth. Focus: waders, wildfowl and migrant passerines. Leaders: Dick Best and Brian Gibbs. Meet at 0930 at NE car park (ST275459).
23	Talk	SWT	Farmland Birds - Where are they going? Eve Tigwell talks about farmland birds, their preferred habitat, their status and modern farming methods. 1930-2100. Wells Museum, Cathedral Green BA5 2UE. Doors open 1900. SWT members £2.50, non members £3.

27	Walk	RSPB	Autumn in the Woods. RSPB West Sedge Moor, 1030-1330. Learn to identify birds in Swell Wood and then back to Dewlands Farm for a cup of tea and a session building your own bird feeder. £2 per person, £5 per family. For further details contact 01458 252805 or email west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk.
31	Family event	SWT	Family Halloween Owl Prowl. Join Chris Sperring 1600-1800 to learn about owls and how to identify them. Scary Halloween costumes positively encouraged. Meet at Westhay Moor car park (ST456437, BA6 9TX). Children must be accompanied by an adult and please bring a torch. Free but booking required - phone 01823 652400.
31	Walk	SWT	Owls on the Somerset Levels. Chris Sperring leads another walk, 1900-2100, aimed at adults, to learn about and find owls. Meet at Westhay Moor car park (ST456437, BA6 9TX). Please bring a torch. Free but booking required - phone 01823 652400.

November

6	Talk	SWT	Seeing Woodpeckers through the Trees. Danny Alder, Dorset CC ecologist, on woodland birds, especially woodpeckers. Starts 2000 at Caryford Community Hall, Ansford, Castle Cary BA7 7JJ (ST643330). Coffee served from 1930, non members welcome, £2 admission.
7	Walk	RSPB	Winter wetland safari. RSPB Ham Wall, 1330-1630. Wildfowl and other wildlife. Followed by soup, homemade cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £6.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
14	Walk	RSPB	Winter wetland safari. Details as above.
15	Talk	SOS	New Zealand's birds and their conservation. David Reid gives an illustrated talk on this fascinating country, its birds, and the challenges they have faced. Starts 1930. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton (ST268270, TA3 5JE).
18	Walk	SWT	Birds at Steart. Led by Roger Lucken. Meet 0900 at NE car park (ST275459). £2.
18	Walk	RSPB	Birdwatching for beginners. RSPB Greylake, 1000-1130. £2 RSPB members, £4 non-members, under 18s free of charge. Booking essential. Call 07774 620879 or email west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk.
20	Talk	SWT	The Wildlife of Blagdon Lake. An illustrated talk by honorary bird warden Nigel Milbourne, 2000-2200. Park opposite St Andrews Church, next to venue by Church House, Cheddar BS27 3AA. £2 admission.
21	Walk	RSPB	Bird watching for beginners. RSPB Ham Wall, 0900-1200. Leaders: reserve wardens. The walk is followed by delicious soup, homemade cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
25	Walk	SWT	Thurlbear Wood Wildlife Walk. 1030-1230. Small parking area by entrance to wood at ST273213.
25	Walk	SWT	Birds at Greylake reserve. Leader Clive Hawkins. Meet at 1030 in the RSPB reserve car park (ST399346, TA7 9BP). Free.
28	Walk	RSPB	Birdwatching for beginners. Details as 21 Nov above.

On behalf of Somerset Ornithological Society - www.somersetbirds.net

Produced by Sterna Word Services - www.sterna.co.uk

Designed and typeset by Notion Graphics - www.notiongraphics.co.uk



Somerset
ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY