



# The Bittern

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The newsletter of the Somerset Ornithological Society

## Pied-billed Grebe draws the crowds

Julian Thomas reports

Just before 6.30pm on Friday 15 February I received a phone call from an excited-sounding Steve Miller, saying that he had that afternoon been watching a Pied-billed Grebe from the second viewing platform at Ham Wall RSPB. He was the only one there when the bird appeared late in the afternoon, and though he was joined shortly afterwards by two Bristol area birders, none of them had any phone numbers with them to contact other birders - Steve eventually found my number by looking in a back issue of *The Bittern*!

His description of a small grebe with a white eye-ring, a black throat, and a black band on the bill left no doubt whatsoever about the identity of the bird (see photo), though strangely the national bird information services seemed unconvinced.

Steve is a regular and committed local RSPB volunteer - you are most likely to have come across his Geordie accent and easy smile in the hide at Greylake. That afternoon he chose at the last minute to go instead to Ham Wall in the hope of checking out Great White Egrets and was about to give up at the second platform and walk back when he heard a call he didn't recognise. Happily, the source of the call soon swam into view, and the rest, as they say, is history. The stroke of luck that led to Steve finding such a good bird is a fitting reward for all the hours he has freely given to help Somerset's birds (and birders).

A tense group (including seemingly about half of the SOS committee) gathered early the next morning and stared into the fog - suddenly, at about 8.35am, there it was! It has a habit of disappearing into the reeds for long periods at times, but regularly shows well and has attracted a steady stream of admirers, both local and from further afield. It's great once again to note the very positive comments about the area from visiting birders, so this rarity has given another chance for the brilliant Avalon Marshes to be showcased to a wider national audience.

Pied-billed Grebe is a common species in North America, but always seems a slightly unlikely transatlantic vagrant - nonetheless the Ham Wall bird is the 40th British record. Several have been very long stayers, and there's even a breeding record, as one at Stithians Reservoir in Cornwall in 1994 paired with a Little Grebe and raised three hybrid young.

The first ever European record was also in Somerset (as it then was) - a bird found on Blagdon Lake on 22 December 1963, then seen intermittently both there and at Chew Valley Lake over a number of years until it was last seen at the latter site on 5 July 1968. It is this famous bird which is responsible for the species being the emblem of the Bristol Ornithological Club. With no records in between, and Chew and Blagdon now irretrievably lost to the Avon bird recording area, the Ham Wall bird is (slightly bizarrely, and nearly 50 years on) the second individual of this species to receive the accolade of being the 'first for Somerset'.



Tim Taylor, WildImaging

Pied-billed Grebe, Ham Wall

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## Welcome

The weather has played havoc with us again this winter, with flooding around the turn of the year closing roads and even making parts of some reserves difficult to access. Despite the knifing easterly winds that continue as I write this, though, we've not had long periods of snow and freezing temperatures and cold-sensitive species such as the Dartford Warbler featured in our Spotlight article this issue have come through pretty well so far.

No doubt what the star bird of the winter is, and it features in our cover story this issue. A very honourable mention, though, to the flocks of Hawfinches which have been giving great views and so much pleasure in Bruton and especially Norton sub Hamdon - look out for more on this enigmatic species in this year's annual report.

With lighter evenings and warmer days not too far away we can look forward to the joys of watching spring migrants, and Paul Bowyer's article, the companion to his on autumn migration in issue 3, should help us to enjoy the spectacle of spring migration all the more. As spring moves to summer, you might want to enhance a birdwatching day out by taking a look at those other winged wonders, the dragonflies and damselflies that often inhabit the same habitats - I hope my article entuses some of you to do so. John Hansford reveals another little-known but worthwhile birding area in the underwatched east, and we also feature reports on some interesting developments in improving visitor facilities on the Avalon Marshes. Many thanks to the reserve staff who took the time to write these among all their other duties - yet more proof of the closer relationship SOS is building with the conservation organisations from whose efforts our hobby benefits so much.



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# News in brief

## Developments at Ham Wall

Steve Hughes (RSPB Reserve Warden)

Work has been progressing on improving the visitor facilities at the reserve. We now have planning permission for an exciting new development at Ashcott Corner that will provide increased car parking capacity, toilets, and a new wetland area. Work will start this coming August and we hope these improvements will help solve the parking issue that has developed over the last few years and provide a basic level of facilities for visitors.

Work has also been underway designing two new viewing structures, one for the north of the reserve, and one for Walton Heath. Both proposed structures are raised to give better views across the top of the reedbed and open water. Planning applications for these will be submitted shortly. All of the visitor facilities projects are supported by the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The reedbed rejuvenation project - the area in front of the second platform that has been the subject of some experimental reedbed management work for the last few years - has now been re-wetted. Over the next few years reedbed should start to re-establish across the area. In the meantime the area has become very popular with wintering duck and waders, a good number of Water Pipits, and, rather famously, a Pied-billed Grebe.

The final piece of restoration work at Ham Wall is underway just to the east of Street Heath, and weather permitting will be completed before the spring. We have also got to the bottom of the flooded paths in Loxton's Marsh and have been carrying out some works to stop this happening again. Water levels are slowly coming down, and hopefully we will be able to get the paths open again for the summer.

## Shapwick Heath and the new Avalon Marshes Centre

Simon Clarke (Senior Reserves Manager, Natural England)

Proposals for the new Avalon Marshes Centre are progressing well. The consultation process funded by LARC (Local Action for Rural Communities) came to an end in December with the display of the final outline plans. These propose the construction of a new building to house many of the functions currently scattered around the site, as well as new visitor facilities, in a position set back from the road and backing on to the work compound area. This will open up the rest of the site, including the former Peat Moors Centre, for greater public and educational use, including at least two archaeological reconstructions. The next stage is to develop the plans in sufficient detail that they can be submitted for planning permission and as a basis for submitting funding applications. This work, led by Somerset Wildlife Trust but funded principally by Natural England, should be completed by the end of March. If you have any questions or queries about the new centre then please contact David Evans, Avalon Marshes Centre Development Officer on 01458 860556.

Meanwhile, work continues on upgrading the peat-based footpaths, and vital scrub management and ditch maintenance work has taken place on Canada Farm. Over the next couple of months we hope to conduct essential maintenance and repairs to the bridge at Meare Heath. We will also soon be installing some new interpretation boards at Canada Farm.

A whole range of species monitoring work will be taking place this year including work on rare beetles, Great Crested Newt and Bittern. If you would be interested in getting involved in these projects please contact Simon Clarke on 01458 860120 or email [simon.clarke@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:simon.clarke@naturalengland.org.uk).

## You can fool some of the birds, some of the time

Singing uses a lot of energy. Fit and healthy male songbirds are thought to be able to sustain a high song rate for longer, making them more attractive to females. Researchers at the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus, working with scientists from the Université de Bourgogne in France, have shown that some male songbirds use their song to dupe females they have just met by pretending they are in excellent physical condition. Working with captive Zebra Finches, they discovered that males in poor condition could 'cheat' and vary their song to give a false impression to stranger females. Fascinatingly, however, the same males did not even try to fool those females who already knew them.

Dr Sasha Dall, of the University of Exeter, said: 'Every man wants to cast himself in a favourable light when he meets an attractive female, and we have shown that birds are no different. But just like many humans, it seems Zebra Finch males are unable to dupe females who know them well enough. When the birds were in an established relationship, the female could tell the true condition of a male by his song, and judge whether he would make a good father for her next brood.'

More on this story can be found at: [www.exeter.ac.uk/research/newsandevents/news/title\\_251100\\_en.html](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/newsandevents/news/title_251100_en.html)

## Well, someone has to love Feral Pigeons...

An Exeter University zoology student is inviting members of the public to get involved in his project to record the national pigeon population. Adam Rogers, who studies at the University's Cornwall Campus, has appeared on BBC Winterwatch leading a project to investigate plumage trends found in the once-domesticated birds. When domestic animals return to the wild and breed, future generations usually take on their natural dull colour, yet urban pigeons have retained their brightness and variety of plumage. He also hopes that his research will reveal how pigeons are adapting to human influences, including whether breeding habits are changing in towns where feeding bans have been imposed.

Adam wants as many people as possible to spend a few minutes counting the number of pigeons with different plumage patterns in their local high street. Participants can then report their sightings on the Feral Pigeon Project website ([www.feralpigeon.com](http://www.feralpigeon.com)), which is where to go for more information and details of how to get involved. It also contains a handy guide to pigeon colours. Adam added: 'You don't need to be a pigeon expert to get involved, as the various types are easy to tell apart.'



## Update on Cheddar Reservoir Two

Jeremy Williams of Bristol Water has provided an update on this scheme, which featured in issue 1 of The Bittern. The first phase of public consultation was conducted in February (as publicised on the SOS Facebook page), and a second phase of consultation is planned for the summer. Feedback from the consultations will be made available in the autumn, and the planning application is due to be submitted in winter 2013/14. More information and updates can be found at [www.cheddar-reservoir-two.co.uk](http://www.cheddar-reservoir-two.co.uk) or for enquiries email [enquiries@cheddar-reservoir-two.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@cheddar-reservoir-two.co.uk) or call 0800 169 6507 (Freephone, during office hours).

## Woodcock survey

This year BTO are conducting a Woodcock survey in April-June. There are a number of high priority 1km squares to be surveyed, and any other records are welcome, especially of birds displaying ('roding'). Data can be entered online or by paper form. If you would like to help, please see the BTO website ([www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)) or contact Eve Tigwell for details - [eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk](mailto:eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk) or 01373 451630.

# Spring migration

Paul Bowyer reveals more migration secrets

Last autumn I wrote about autumn migration, and as it happened it turned out to be a very good season with many thousands of birds passing through Somerset on certain key dates. In October alone I recorded 56,145 birds migrating over my patch at Sand Point and Brean Down. I even had one good day in September when 7,000 Swallows flew east over Weston-super-Mare in a 2 hour period logged from the comfort of my bedroom. For now, though, our attention is on spring and this article will be a little bit more focused on identifying those key days when migrants are likely to occur by using some of my experiences from last year's spring observations.



Tim Taylor, WildImaging

Swallows and Sand Martin

Spring starts at different times for different people - some may consider the auk and gull movements in January/February the beginning whilst others are waiting for the first Wheatears. Last year my migration watch started on 1 March when I was hoping to coincide with the first weather patterns that are likely to produce the first early migrants. Temperatures can be quite low still at this time of year so it's on the wind direction that I focus my attention. As with autumn, northerly biased winds start drawing the birds up from the south and heading along the Somerset coast. I intercept the birds as they head over the east end of Brean Down. Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtails and all the common finches can be seen passing overhead. Last spring my best Meadow Pipit count was on 8 March when 760 were accompanied by 35 Pied Wagtails, all heading north into a 7.5mph NNW wind. The Meadow Pipit numbers tend to fade out by early April but the finch numbers continue throughout April and into May. Stonechats are early migrants and double figures are often recorded in March.

By early to mid-March people are already starting to look for their first Wheatears and Sand Martins. In 2012 records were thin on the ground during this period compared to 2011 when a warm southerly airflow brought a good number to the county on 12 March. It's the arrival of warm air from the south that is my first tip for predicting migrant arrivals. Looking at the surface pressure chart for 21 March 2012 you can see that high pressure was sat over the UK before moving out into the North Sea on 22nd creating a southerly airflow. I expected to see birds on the 22nd but my predictions are often a day early and that morning there was nothing. What I realised was that the warm air takes time to be brought up from the south; it wasn't until the evening of the 22nd that temperatures started to rise by 2 degrees from the wind swing and by a further 3 degrees when the warm air had reached Britain.

I remember feeling a significant temperature rise whilst walking the dog that evening and by the next morning it was quite apparent there had been a fall because a number of Chiffchaffs were singing in several neighbours' gardens. I decided to have a look at Brean that morning and discovered a small fall of 30 Chiffchaffs on the Down. Leading up to this fall I could see on the weather charts troughs developing over the south-east coast of Spain producing a series of fronts that moved north in the UK hitting Somerset around midnight. I find that fronts moving up from Europe regularly produce migrant arrivals so keeping any eye on these and temperatures gives very useful bird arrival signs. I often check good historical birding days with associated surface pressure charts to get familiar with favourable weather patterns. The best source of archive surface pressure data I have found so far is here:

<http://www.wetterzentrale.de/topkarten/tkfaxbraar.htm>

NB When examining surface pressure charts it's worth bearing in mind that the wind direction over the earth's surface can differ by as much as 30 degrees to the isobars over land and 10 degrees over sea.

My next tip for seeing migrant falls involves some local forecasting. From around mid-April to the month's end a north-easterly wind coupled with a warm front or occlusion seems to be guaranteed to produce falls. This I find interesting; if you happen to turn up at Brean Down in a north-easterly wind in the second half of April when there is low cloud producing poor visibility the chances are you will be in for a good day. Last year the fall occurred on

Saturday 14 April when 14 Redstarts, 3 Pied Flycatchers and 100 Willow Warblers were counted. It rained the whole morning but despite this the birds were arriving from the south, working over the Down and moving north the whole time. It would seem sensible to assume that birds were grounded by the cloud and rain, but no - these birds were actually moving through. The weather cleared up around lunch time and suddenly numbers started to dwindle.

I can't say for sure why this event occurs but perhaps one idea may be that there is more going on over our heads than we realise and it takes some cloud and rain to bring them down to ground level. The band of rain on 14 April had come down from the north so the birds coming up from the south would have met the rain and presumably altered their flight plans.

So we now know that low cloud and visibility can potentially produce birds whether it is travelling in the same direction or in the opposite direction. Having learnt this I decided to take time off work to coincide with all the rainy days in the spring of 2012 where the winds produced headwind or tailwind conditions and it seemed to be productive. As you'd expect birding in these conditions meant getting soaked on a regular basis but the results were by and large quite good. Occasionally it didn't go unnoticed that although I was often out on the right day other patches were getting the falls whilst I was not. This happened on 25 April when Slimbridge recorded 100's of terns and waders moving through but none were seen to pass Brean or even Severnside for that matter. It's not always about getting the weather right - some of the falls can be quite localised when you're looking for migrants affected by cloud/rain.

May Day 2012 was forecast to be wet due to a warm front moving up from the south. Perfect conditions I thought, but the Down was quiet with only a handful of migrants in the bushes. By mid-morning I decided enough was enough and made my way back to the car. I made one last scan across the fields before packing my stuff in the car and noticed a few Swallows heading north-east towards the Axe Estuary. The total quickly reached 260. I wondered if the birds had been moving all the time but cutting off Brean altogether, but once the rain started up again the passage dried up. I walked to Brean Cove and counted 15 Wheatear so decided to hang around for a bit longer as it seemed there were indeed birds about to turn up.



Pied Flycatcher

Once the rain cleared the Swallow passage started again, this time very intensely. A bit later on they started moving in two directions; north-east as well as north-west across the beach and out to sea over Brean Down where at one stage I counted 600 in the air in one sweep of the bins. Tree Pipits, Yellow Wagtails and Goldfinches were also moving, as were House Martins and Sand Martins with the Swallows, although Swifts were in short supply. Totals for Brean Down during that brief 20 minute period included 6,500 Swallows, 8 Tree Pipits and 14 flava wagtails. I may have spent 4 hours in heavy rain seeing nothing but the 20 minutes of birding that followed made the whole morning worthwhile. Some birds fly ahead of a front, some get caught up in a front and that morning I actually witnessed birds moving on the back edge of the front. Initially the birds were flying at ground level right on the back edge of the rain front but as time went on they flew higher and higher until passage stopped completely about 20 minutes after the rain had stopped when I could see hundreds of Swallows hawking over nearby fields along the coast road.

Of course it's not always about bad weather; 30 April was a fine sunny day with a force 3 south-east wind. Birds had been moving throughout the morning and the afternoon was no different. Strong winds not only provide good energy saving conditions, but also allow birds to migrate at optimum altitude which is viewable to the observer at ground level. I often find that wind speeds around 9/10mph or more are enough to get birds flying at lower altitudes.

Regular field observations seem to be the best way of acquiring knowledge about migrant forecasting and compounding this over a number of years gives a great deal of knowledge as well as being able to witness some spectacular local migration, so my final tip to guarantee you results and ensure you are out on the best day of spring is simply to get out birding every day.

# Birding in the Mells area

John Hansford reveals another interesting birdwatching area in the east

Mells is situated in the east of the county, approximately three miles to the west of Frome. The local habitat contains a fine mixture of open farmland, hedgerows and woodland with the Mells Stream flowing to the south of the village. A lot of local farmland is owned and managed by the Mells Park Estate which manages the land as sympathetically as they can.

Mid- April to mid-May is a great time to take a walk along the cycle path, starting at Conduit Bridge and walking in either direction. The more energetic may desire of parking near the post office in Mells and walking up the lane, approaching Mells Down on foot. The fields and hedgerows tend to hold good numbers of Yellowhammers and Common Whitethroats. A few pairs of Lapwings not only breed here but over the wider area in this part of the county. Bullfinches, Skylarks, Linnets, Garden Warblers and Blackcaps aplenty can also be found. Red-legged Partridges are never too far away. Stock Doves and Jays should also be encountered.

## “Recently Kestrels have nested in a tree on the lawn and Barn Owls in a box on the side of the estate house”

Nightingales and Lesser Whitethroats are also a strong possibility and were present last year. The calls of Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers will add to the flavour of spring. Marsh Tits are normally found to the east of Conduit Bridge. Song Thrushes and Mistle Thrushes also breed here. All five owl species have been recorded with Barn, Little and Tawny Owls seen regularly. With suitable habitat in the area it is possible that Long-eared Owl might breed; any Short-eared Owls will be winter visitors. Look skywards - any raptor species is possible from Red Kites to Hobbies, Peregrines and Sparrowhawks. Ravens are never too far away.

Parking is available near Conduit Bridge and additional sensible parking can be done on roadside verges to the south of the Bridge. Mells post office has an excellent café attached to it, serving a splendid range of food for those that may wish to make a day of it.

To explore the Mells Stream and woodland, parking in the village of Mells would be most advisable. A footpath can be picked up approximately 300m to the east of the village from the road that leads to Great Elm. Here the stream closely follows the path of the river for roughly 1.5 miles until it reaches Great Elm. The river holds Dippers, Grey Wagtails and Kingfisher with all three woodpeckers being a possibility in the woodland. Siskins have been around for the last two summers (no breeding proven), Goldcrests will be singing and the chance to hear Firecrest cannot be ruled out. Look out for Grey Herons fishing in the river. A visit in late May would enhance the observer's chances of seeing Spotted Flycatchers which are attracted to woodlands with smaller streams running through them. There is still a very strong population of Spotted Flycatchers that breed in this part of the world.

Between Coleford and Mells lies the Mells Park Estate house where a deal to release Nelson Mandela was partly brokered during talks held there 21-24 August 1988. The most convenient way to reach the viewing point is via the Vobster Inn car park. Follow the footpath up to the field and then turn right and walk over a 5-yard long 'bridge'. The views alone across the Estate grounds make the visit worthwhile. Several species of raptor breed here. Recently Kestrels have nested in a tree on the lawn and Barn Owls in a box on the side of the estate house.

The arboretum has attracted Hawfinches and Crossbills. Tufted Ducks breed here but failed last year due to the higher than normal water levels. Grey Herons probably still breed somewhere in Melcombe Wood. Spotted Flycatchers are another speciality. During winter, private combs on the Estate provide a fine refuge for Dippers.

Nearby at Vobster, the Quarry and some fishing ponds from time to time contain wintering waterfowl such as Wigeon, Gadwall and Mute Swans. Someone I know once had a Kingfisher fly in and perch on the end of his fishing rod! The Edneys farm area has also played host to Tree Sparrows.

If anyone requires further information then please feel free to email me: [johnhansford@childintime.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:johnhansford@childintime.fsnet.co.uk)

# Spotlight on... Dartford Warbler

Brian Gibbs reviews the history and recent fortunes of this charming species

The Dartford Warbler (*Sylvia undata*) is an essentially Mediterranean species: it was first described from the south of France, but the British subspecies was described from Dartford Heath, near London, hence the English name. Globally it is 'Near Threatened', one step down from facing extinction, and the British population crashed from around 460 pairs in 1960-61 to just 11 pairs after the severe winters of 1961/62 and 62/63. Between 1970 and 1995 the national population showed a very marked increase, no doubt helped by a succession of mild winters.



Somerset has had a confirmed breeding population of Dartford Warblers since 1991 when a pair were discovered feeding young on the Quantocks, although they may have been present since 1989. Colonisation of the Mendips followed in 1993, and then Exmoor and finally the Blackdowns. The population increased, eventually peaking at between 160 to 170 singing males/pairs in 2008, the majority of these on Exmoor. The Somerset birds are unique in that all breeding areas are probably above 300m, even being recorded breeding just below Dunkery Beacon and the 500m contour.

After the severe winters of 2008/09 and 09/10 the number of birds in the following summer had dropped dramatically: just one singing on the Quantocks, probably no more than five pairs on Exmoor, and no records from the Mendips or Blackdowns. The situation in 2012 showed a slight improvement with one bird on the Mendips (on one day only); one singing on the Quantocks (but no sign of a female); and on Exmoor at least nine males/pairs centred on the hills surrounding Minehead, although there were a few records from the Dunkery Hill area.

Nearly always in areas with a mixture of heather and gorse, they can be extremely secretive but are on occasions easy to see; displaying males are not hard to track down. The song although similar to Common Whitethroat is scratchier and less scolding and can be delivered from the tops of small shrubs or within gorse bushes; they are not persistent singers and certainly favour sunny, calm days. You are more likely to become aware of their presence by the harsh 'tuc' call which can become rapid repetition if alarmed.

They have on average two broods a year and on the Mendips one pair was recorded having a third brood well into September. Given a good survival rate for the young they can recover quite quickly from a decline; there were at least five juveniles together in August last year well away from any adults.

One tip if looking for this species, particularly outside the breeding season, is to watch closely any Stonechats moving in suitable habitat - the chances are that a Dartford will be very close. It has been suggested that it is actually the Stonechat that takes advantage of the warbler flushing insects from within for them to pounce on from their elevated position above the gorse, but I seem to see the reverse happening. In Suffolk in 1992 a Dartford that arrived at Dunwich Heath associated with a pair of Stonechats to the extent that in the summer it fed their young both in and out of the nest!

Our Dartford Warblers have survived yet another cold winter: I found at least five birds in the area to the west of Minehead on 19 February; there had been seven on 5 January before the snow arrived. They possibly survive better in this area near the coast because of the relative mildness of the winter compared to the colder higher ground of the Quantocks and Exmoor.

It would be extremely helpful that if you come across any Dartfords in the coming year that you could record each one, ideally with a six-figure map reference, to enable us to get a better picture of how this species is actually doing. With March and April coming now is the time to go out and listen for Dartfords, but remember it is a Schedule 1 Rare Breeding Bird.

# Dragonflies of Somerset

Julian Thomas on some other flying marvels

OK, so SOS is and will always be about birds, and for some members I know that is the start and end of their interest. But I also know that there are plenty of members who like to enjoy all the other wildlife out there too. Birds will always be my main passion, but I'm fascinated by pretty much anything that flies, and amongst all of the flying insects what better than the dashing, dazzling dragonflies? Perfectly adapted predators, their basic body shape evolved some 300 million years ago, and they haven't changed a lot since apart from in size. Like all insects, dragonflies and damselflies breathe relatively passively through pores in their abdomens rather than through lungs, but the much richer, denser atmosphere of the Carboniferous period allowed for dragonflies with wingspans over 2 feet across!

With our mild southern climate and plenty of suitable habitat, we are particularly blessed, and a good proportion of the British dragonfly and damselfly species call Somerset home. The wetlands of the Avalon Marshes are a key area, unsurprisingly for insects that spend their larval stages in water, and you can see several attractive and interesting species while birdwatching at Shapwick Heath.



**Hairy Dragonfly**

One of the first to emerge in May is the Hairy Dragonfly, one of the smaller hawkers species, but still a sizeable dragonfly. It is a major food source for the large numbers of migrant Hobbies that occur over the Avalon Marshes during those few weeks, and their staging is timed to take advantage of the temporary abundance of this and other early-emerging species

such as Four-spotted Chaser and Large Red Damselfly. The track down to Noah's Hide is a particularly good area to see all of these, as well as several closely-related small damselflies that are essentially small electric-blue and black rods hovering around over water and low vegetation - Azure, Common Blue, and Common Bluetail Damselflies are the commonest.

Rather easier to identify is the Red-eyed Damselfly, which favours perching on the water lily leaves in the main drain once they appear. In June, Black-tailed Skimmers often make themselves obvious by resting on the main gravel path, while blood-red male Ruddy Darters and our largest species, the green and blue Emperor, also appear.



**Red-eyed Damselfly**

In high summer other impressive species emerge, including the inquisitive Southern Hawker, which at times will approach and hover only a few feet in front of you, and a personal favourite, the Brown Hawker, almost the size of an Emperor and with brown-suffused wings, making identification rather easier as it whizzes past you. The related Migrant Hawker is rather smaller and emerges later, often lingering into October, when only it and the aptly-named Common Darter are still flying.

Another great place for dragonflies which can easily be combined with birding is the Waldegrave Pool on Mendip - it's the pool opposite Stockhill plantation, about 100 yards or so north of the car park entrance. So while you're checking out the area for Crossbills, Tree Pipits and the like, why not take a look? As might be expected, this upland peaty pool holds a different

selection of species from the Avalon Marshes, and the Waldegrave Pool has the distinction of being the only place in Somerset you can see the metallic-green Downy Emerald (May-June). Later in the summer it also holds populations of Common Hawker (scarce in our area, belying its name - it's much commoner further north) and the attractive Black Darter.

There are plenty of other species to discover in other places too. Two of the best-looking are the Banded and Beautiful Demoiselles, which favour small rivers and streams with plenty of bankside vegetation right across the lowland areas of the county (both can be seen on the Tone at French Weir/Long Meadow near

Taunton town centre, for instance). The females are bright green and pretty enough, but the males are gorgeous little creatures, as you can see from more of Gary Thoburn's stunning photos. The male Beautiful Demoiselle is a rich metallic bottle-green all over, including the wings, which shifts to a deep blue if the light catches it from a different angle. The male Banded is similar, but the wings are partly clear with large dark patches towards the tips (hence the name). Beautiful emerges in late May and both are on the wing throughout June and July. Go and see them for yourself, and decide which is your favourite - it's not easy!



**Banded Demoiselle**



**Beautiful Demoiselle**

If I've whetted your appetite sufficiently, there are a couple of good field guides on the market, either of which will tell you all you need to know:

Field Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Great Britain and Ireland, by Steve Brooks and Richard Lewington, British Wildlife Publishing.

Britain's Dragonflies: A Field Guide to the Damselflies and Dragonflies of Britain and Ireland, by Dave Smallshire and Andy Swash, WILDGuides.

# 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 Levels birder and SOS membership secretary/treasurer Jeff Hazell.



## How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Like many children in the post-war late '40s, when rationing was still in place and toys were in short supply, I kept and swapped a collection of bird's eggs and cigarette cards - especially those concerned with natural history. Eventually, with encouragement from my school biology teacher, I started recording on 'green cards' for the BTO's nest record scheme; then with 4x magnification opera glasses, given me by an uncle, and a scrounged stuffed Jay - to bring mobbing birds in close - I started watching the birds in earnest. At 13 years of age, with money saved from an early-morning paperboy round, I became the proud owner of a pair of proper prismatic 8x25 binoculars and then, as they say, I never looked back. I found out that a near neighbour, a MBOU, was a licensed bird-ringer and he took me under his wing, training me to get my 'C' ringing licence. This led to me joining a ringing group where I became involved in the building of one of the very few inland Heligoland traps in the Country.

## What is your favourite birding memory?

There are several: like initially not believing my own eyes when finding a pale-phase Booted Eagle in February 2000 at Meare Heath, the co-finding of a Sora (Rail) on the Isles of Scilly during my annual autumn birding holidays there from 1972 to 1993, and seeing my first big rarity, a Lesser Grey Shrike, that I watched catching insects from the perimeter fence of Perryoaks Sewage Farm, adjacent to Heathrow Airport, in October 1957. But perhaps the one that really sticks out, for the huge amount of enjoyment it gave me as a young birder, was secretly watching a pair of Red-backed Shrikes feeding their two recently fledged juveniles on Ruislip Common in Southwest Middlesex in the early '50s, one of their last breeding successes in my part of the London recording area.

## What was your favourite birding trip?

To Canada, where it must have been good because my wife and I went there on six different birding holidays, exploring in a rented self-drive motorhome from Point Pelee on the Great Lakes in the east, right across the Prairie Provinces, to Vancouver Island in the west - a truly magnificent country, where in spring the brightly plumaged North American wood warblers are quite breathtaking and we even had the good fortune to discover and watch a she Timberwolf together with her two cubs.

## What do you do when you are not watching birds?

If the truth be known, I probably mope, because if I can't get out into the countryside for a couple of days I begin to feel somehow deprived. I do enjoy watching cricket, but these days it's generally an armchair seat in front of the television. I played quite a bit, especially for EMI Electronics (aka HMV) company team - how I miss the 'turtling' song of Turtle Doves in the elms around their Hayes ground, sadly both long gone - and have had the privilege of visiting the famous Long Room at Lords when England were playing the all-conquering West Indies. I also played in goal at senior amateur level, and enjoy watching football. I spend some time (too much, my wife would say) on my computer processing the digital wildlife photos I've taken, and perhaps uploading them to my Levels-birder website. Also, which probably sums up my obsessive behaviour, I rarely retire without reading part of what ever bird book is currently on my bedside cabinet.

## Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

Almost anywhere in Somerset, but mostly on the Avalon Marshes - a special place for wetland wildlife - that can be magical at times, particularly Meare Heath lagoon, when drained to attract passage waders, I've spent many a happy hour here on one of the observation seats.

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

1. The Hobby - my favourite British bird. Who cannot admire the almost indolent way they easily snatch dragonflies on the wing?
2. Any shrike, and while South Africa's Gorgeous Bush Shrike lives up to its name, I much prefer the more subtle tones of a male Red-backed looking altogether very spruce in his contrasting chestnut mantle, pale, blue-grey head and black eye-mask.
3. And then there's that most magnificent of northern owls, the Great Grey - any encounter with one is truly memorable, especially when it slowly turns its head to look at you with staring yellow eyes and revealing its many annular facial rings.
4. A brightly coloured hummingbird, one of nature's jewels, but not one of the 100+ that I've been lucky enough to see, it would have to be a lifer, a new bird, either a Crimson Topaz or a Fiery Topaz, both of which I've drooled over in my South American field guides.
5. And, because it is a desert island, my final choice would be Magnificent Frigatebird, that aerial pirate-of-the-Caribbean, not one, but many, in a large flock, lazily wheeling overhead, just as I remember them as I lay in the shade of a palm tree on a white sandy beach on the only uninhabited desert island that I've ever visited, off the coast of Venezuela.



Great Grey Owl

## What book and luxury item would you take with you?

As a digital camera would be out of the question, unless an everlasting battery was invented, then it would have to be a field guide to the birds of the region and a decent pair of binoculars to help identify them; although after a time, I must admit, I would probably develop a strong hankering for a bottle of 'The Balvenie' my favourite single-malt whisky and might, just might, consider a swap, if that was at all possible!

# Walks and talks

Here is what's coming up in our area over the next three months - lots going on during the busy spring period. Included are all SOS field and indoor meetings and a selection of events organised by RSPB, Natural England and Somerset Wildlife Trust: those selected for inclusion mostly have at least some bird interest, or are family-oriented - check with those organisations for other planned events in which you might be interested. 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.

March			
3	Walk	SWT	Westhay NNR. 1100-1300. Leader: Clive Hawkins (01935 428261). A walk looking for winter waders and ducks and perhaps an Otter. Meet in the car park at ST456437. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. No charge.
3	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Birdwatching for beginners.' 1400-1700. The reserve wardens will take you through all the steps for bird identification as well as providing background information about the species seen. No previous experience required. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £6.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
5	Talk	SWT	Wildlife Highlights in Botswana. Starts 2000. Wildlife experiences of Botswana with Stephanie Tyler who spent five years working with Birdlife Botswana. Caryford Community Hall, Ansford, Castle Cary, BA7 7JJ (ST643330). Non-members welcome, coffee served from 7.30pm. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.00. Children free.
10	Walk	SWT	Beacon Batch (Mendip). 1400-1600. Vic Matthews will lead a walk of just under 6 miles from Charterhouse to Beacon Batch returning via part of SWT's nature reserve at Longwood and through Velvet Bottom. The car park is down the lane next to the Charterhouse Activity Centre, ST505557 (BS40 7XR). £1 per person. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
12	Talk	SWT	Wildlife on the Somerset Levels. 1930-2130. Nigel Phillips gives an informative talk on wildlife on the levels. St Georges Catholic School, The Mount, Taunton TA1 3NR. £3. Plenty of parking available. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
12	Film show	GCP	Great Crane Project. Film double bill: 'Born to Fly', showing the epic journey of Cranes from the Arctic to southern Europe, and 'Return of the Cranes' a new short film about reintroducing Cranes to the Somerset Levels and Moors. Starts at 1930 at the Great Bow Wharf, Langport. Adults £3.00, children free. Pay on the door, but booking advisable: <a href="http://www.langportcommunitycinema.co.uk">www.langportcommunitycinema.co.uk</a>
17	Walk	SWT	Postlebury Woods. 1000-1230. Jim Rosser leads a walk around these ancient woods looking for early spring flowers and birds. Park in Witham Friary car park, ST744409. Adults £2.50; children £1.00. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
20	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Birdwatching for beginners.' 1400-1700. As 3 March.

21	Talk	SOS	Britain's Birds of Prey: from persecution to tourist attraction. Starts 1930. Speaker: Rob Lambert. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).
23	Family event	SWT/RSPB	Heron Watch. Starts 1400. Watch group event at Swell Wood. Meet in car park (ST361238, TA3 6PX).
26	Talk	SWT	Wildlife along the Somerset Coast. 1930-2100. Nigel Phillips talks about the many thousands of wintering birds found along the coast, and the rock pools that are full of marine life. Wells Museum, Cathedral Green, BA5 2UE. Members £2.50, non-members £3.00. Doors open at 1900. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
27	Talk	SWT	Great Bustards. 1930-2100. An illustrated talk by Dave Waters on the work carried out by the Great Bustard Reintroduction Project. Park in Frome Rugby Club car park, Gypsy Lane, Frome ST789496. Adults £2.50; children £1.00. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
29 - 1 Apr	Event	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Herons Above'. 1000-1600 daily. Come and meet one of the RSPB wardens and learn about the herons and other woodland creatures. And take a stroll and enjoy the spring flowers. Meet in car park (ST361238, TA3 6PX). Free, no booking required. Also on 6/7 and 13/14 April.

### April

6/7	Event	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Herons Above'. 1000-1600 daily. As 29 March-1 April.
7	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Birdwatching for beginners.' 0830-1130. The reserve wardens will take you through all the steps for bird identification as well as providing background information about the species seen. No previous experience required. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by filled jacket potato and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
13/14	Event	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Herons Above'. 1000-1600 daily. As 29 March-1 April.
14	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic' dawn chorus. 0600-0900. Enjoy the sights and sounds of the reserve at this time of day, including booming Bitterns. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by breakfast rolls and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
17	Walk	SWT	Spring in Yeovil Country Park. 1800-2000. A guided evening walk with Roger Fox listening for spring birdsong. Meet at the Goldenstones car park (should be free after 1800) at ST554154. No charge. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Contact Roger Fox on 01935 862041.
18	Talk	SOS	SOS AGM, followed by Somerset Themes: a selection of Somerset scenes and bird photos, by James Packer. Starts 1930. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).
19/20	Walk	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Evening moorland wildlife'. 1900-2100 both days. Meet in car park (ST361238, TA3 6PX). Bring a torch, insect repellent and stout footwear. RSPB members £2, non-members £5, U18 free. Booking essential - swell.wood@rspb.org.uk or 07774 620879.
26/27	Walk	RSPB	Swell Wood. 'Evening moorland wildlife'. 1900-2100. As 19/20 April.

27	Walk	SOS	Brean Down. Leader: Julian Thomas. Meet at 0815 in the (fee pay) car park at ST290590 (TA8 2RS). A full morning looking for spring migrants - bring a snack and a drink, and stout footwear.
28	Walk	SWT	Wildlife on the Somerset Levels. 1000-1400. Nigel Phillips leads a walk from the Avalon Marshes Centre, Shapwick Road, Westhay, BA6 9TT. £2. Bring a picnic lunch and stout footwear. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
28	Walk	SWT	Hardington Moor NNR. 1100-1400. A guided stroll around the reserve. Meet at the reserve entrance ST517139 along Ridge Lane, where parking should be available in the field. No charge. Bring a picnic lunch to eat in the meadows. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Contact Jane Winwood on 01935 862012.

## May

5	Walk	RSPB	Swell Wood. 0630-0830. Dawn Chorus. Meet Swell Wood car park (ST361238, TA3 6PX). Spring sounds at Swell Wood on International Dawn Chorus day. Help from a warden to identify one song from another. Then retire to a local pub for a full English breakfast (£10 payable in advance). Booking essential: 07774 620879 or email <a href="mailto:swell.wood@rspb.org.uk">swell.wood@rspb.org.uk</a>
5	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic' dawn chorus. 0600-0900. As 14 April.
7	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Warbler workout. Join the wardens to learn to identify the different warbler species that visit the reserve by song. No previous experience required. Donations. Call 01458 806494 for details.
9	Event	RSPB	Ham Wall. Bitterns in hot pursuit. Drop in between 1000 and 1500 to join the wardens watch the Bitterns perform their exciting aerial courtship chases. Free .For details ring 01458 860494.
10	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Cuckoo quest. 1000-1200. Join the wardens to search for, and learn more about, this enigmatic species. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Donations. Call 01458 806494 for details.
11	Walk	SOS	Alfred's Tower. Leader: Bruce Taylor. Meet at 0900 in the car park at ST745352. A morning looking for woodland birds in the shadow of this impressive folly right on the Wiltshire border.
11	Family event	RSPB	Greylake. 1400-1700. Spring Spectacular. Pond dipping, wildlife detective trail, quizzes. Family fun, bring a picnic in the sun.
14	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Warbler workout. As 7 May.
16	Event	RSPB	Ham Wall. Bitterns in hot pursuit. As 9 May.
17	Walk	SOS	RNAS Merryfield. Leader: Roger Dickey. Meet at 2000 prompt north of Ilton at ST351185. An evening walk for Nightingales at one of their South Somerset strongholds. Because of special access arrangements, latecomers will not be admitted - please be punctual.
19	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic' dawn chorus. 0600-0900. As 14 April, but on International Dawn Chorus Day.
21	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Warbler workout. As 7 May.
23	Event	RSPB	Ham Wall. Bitterns in hot pursuit. As 9 May.
24	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Cuckoo quest. 1000-1200. As 10 May.

25	Walk	SOS	Haddon Hill. Leaders: Brian Gibbs and Brian Hill. Meet at 0900 at the car park at SS969285. A morning looking for woodland and upland birds in the Brendon Hills.
26	Family event	NE/ RSPB/ SWT/ HOT/ BC	Avalon Marshes Open Day. A day of family fun - displays, puppet shows, sheep shearing and other children's activities. A chance to meet members of the organisations that participate in the running of the Avalon Marshes reserves. Joint event between Natural England, RSPB, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Hawk & Owl Trust and Butterfly Conservation.
28	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. Warbler workout. As 7 May.
30	Event	RSPB	Ham Wall. Bitterns in hot pursuit. As 9 May.

## Photo contributors

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