



Late spring spells trouble for migrants

Julian Thomas reports

None of us will forget in a hurry the long period of bitterly cold northeasterly winds in March and early April - unpleasant for us, but unsurprisingly it had a more serious effect on our birdlife.

The reason for the cold weather was that the North Atlantic jetstream had shifted far to the south of its usual position, leaving us at the mercy of polar air coming down from the north. Meanwhile the jetstream, which acts like a conveyor belt for weather systems, was delivering them to Spain instead, producing unusually cold and wet conditions there. Many of our early migrants, their urge to push north driven by changes in day length not temperature, had already had to run the gauntlet of poor weather in the Mediterranean region, and arrived on our shores tired and hungry, only to find no insects and freezing temperatures.

The wet conditions last summer drastically reduced both insect breeding success and the autumn berry and seed crop, with the result that there was little enough food left to sustain wintering birds by March. Newly-arrived Chiffchaffs were noted in many places desperately foraging on the ground, as Redpolls had already resorted to doing.

There were some bonuses for birders, as tired migrants lingered trying to build up depleted energy reserves rather than further draining them flying into a strong headwind. There were much larger numbers than usual of Ring Ouzels, for instance, and many on Mendip sites in particular put in protracted stays. Stone Curlew was another species which turned up at coastal sites in unusual numbers (though sadly not one was found in Somerset), but it was with this species in particular that the darker side of these events was also noted - at least eight were found dead from starvation at breeding sites in Norfolk and on Salisbury Plain. More must surely have died unnoticed, and there were other victims too - various reports of Sand Martins being picked up dead, for instance.

In mid April good weather returned and migrants flooded in, albeit in many cases two to three weeks later than usual. Blackcaps, Whitethroats and Redstarts appeared in good numbers, but some others seemed slow to arrive. SOS members (including County Recorder Brian Gibbs) holidaying in northern Spain in early May reported large numbers of northbound migrants still lingering that far south. The weather there was still wetter and cooler than usual, but it has also long been known that sandstorms in the Sahara can delay, and take a heavy toll on, birds attempting to make that arduous crossing, so weather in northern Africa may also have played its part.

Throughout May Spotted Flycatchers were largely notable by their absence, but then over 1000 arrived at Portland Bill on 1 June alone. Late, then, rather than not coming at all, but will this affect their chances of breeding success? What the lasting effects of this spring may be are not yet known. It seems, though, that changing weather patterns, attributable to global climate change, are not just having an effect on the breeding success of birds in Somerset; this year at least they are affecting our migrant breeders' success in reaching us in the first place.



James Packer

Chiffchaff

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Welcome

Hello again! When I first starting planning this latest issue I didn't intend it to be as serious as it has become. But another spring of poor weather, the threat of ash dieback to our woodlands (and their birds), and the landmark (if sometimes grim) State of Nature report make for a sombre mood amongst birdwatchers and conservationists in general, and it would be remiss of me not to reflect those issues in these pages. Coverage of the Society AGM and changes to our Rules are not the stuff of high excitement either, but important information for members as we seek to modernise the Society without doing so too radically. And it also seemed timely to draw members' attention to a particularly good pair of submissions on a county rarity, to illustrate what SOSRC is looking for, in the hope that others may follow suit.

But there are lighter shades here too - to counter the gloomier parts of State of Nature, we in Somerset are home to some of the great conservation success stories of recent years. And Bruce Taylor does his best to lighten the mood, not only with his enthusiasm in Desert Island Birds, but also a lively piece on one of our hidden gems, the fabulous Firecrest.

We have already had an excellent spring for rarities, so here's hoping for more consistently good weather as the summer progresses and a good breeding season, not just for the birds but also the plants and insects so many of them depend on at various times during the year.



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Ash dieback and other nasties: what we can do to help

Many of our birds rely to a greater or lesser extent on woodland, so it is disturbing to read recent press reports about a number of new present and possible threats to our native trees, of which ash dieback is the most pressing concern.

Ash dieback is caused by a fungus (*Chalara fraxinea*) - infected ash trees show leaf loss and a characteristic dying back of the crown, and often the result is the eventual death of the tree. It is potentially a very serious threat, and the possible effects on our landscape have been likened to those of Dutch elm disease in the 1970s. It has already affected large numbers of ash trees in continental Europe, particularly Denmark. Ash trees are a significant or dominant component of many Somerset woods, so the effects on our woodland birds could be equally devastating. It arrived in Britain last year in saplings imported for sale in garden centres and has now been recorded in several different areas of the country - there are up to 490 reported cases, though none have been confirmed yet in Somerset. The symptoms are dark patches on the leaves which spread to produce brown patches and splits on twigs and branches and wilting leaves above the cankerous area. The potentially good news is that despite the fungus responsible only being identified in 2011, scientists have already unravelled its genetic code, opening up possible avenues for combatting it.

In May researchers from the Open Air Laboratories (Opal) citizen science project, together with the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) and Forest Research, started their annual tree health survey, which runs from May to September each year. This year, however, as well as their usual monitoring activities they are asking members of the public to identify any signs of their 'six most unwanted' pests and diseases which threaten trees (see panel below).

Joan Webber, principal pathologist at Forest Research, said: 'Input from across Great Britain will help us to develop a comprehensive picture of tree health and contribute to the database of information that we are building.'

There are a number of other possible threats, including sweet chestnut blight, spruce bark beetle, plane wilt, pine pitch canker, and zigzag elm sawfly, but for now the focus is on the six threats below. You can download or request your free survey pack, including tree identification guide, field notebook, field guide and 'six most unwanted' card from OPALexplorenature.org.

Six most unwanted

1. Asian longhorn beetle (*Anoplophora glabripennis*)
Not yet established in the UK, but has occurred. Shiny and black with long antennae as an adult, its larvae tunnel through trunks and branches and comprise a threat to a wide range of broad-leaved trees.
2. Citrus longhorn beetle (*Anoplophora chinensis*)
Similar to the Asian longhorn beetle, and poses a similarly major threat. Not yet recorded in the wild in the UK.
3. Chalara dieback of ash (*Chalara fraxinea*)
As described above.
4. Emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*)
Its burrowing larvae are another threat to ash trees, thinning and yellowing foliage and causing fissures in the bark. Not yet recorded in the UK, but accidental introduction a possibility.
5. Oak processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*)
First found in oak trees imported from continental Europe in London in 2006 and still largely restricted to the London area, but spreading. It gets its name from the nose-to-tail processions by the caterpillars when seeking food, and it is the caterpillars that can strip trees bare.
6. Pine processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*)
Closely related to the previous species and just as damaging; the caterpillars form white silken clumps near the tops of pine trees, and like the caterpillars of the previous species they are covered in toxic hairs that can lead to skin irritation and allergic reactions. Not yet recorded in the UK, but spreading through northern France.

State of Nature report

It will not come as a great surprise to anyone who watches wildlife regularly (be it birds or other aspects of natural history), but our nature is in trouble. That is the conclusion of the State of Nature report launched on 22 May by Sir David Attenborough, and compiled by a coalition of leading conservation and research organisations including BTO, RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts (including SWT). It is a stock-take of our native species (animals, plants and fungi) - the first of its kind in the UK - and the report reveals that 60% of the species studied have declined over recent decades. More than one in ten of all the species assessed are under threat of disappearing. Farmland, woodland, lowland grassland and heathland, upland, fresh water and wetland, coastal, and marine species are all under threat, including in Somerset. There is a huge amount of detail in the report, but for us birdwatchers one chilling fact stands out - the UK has lost 44 million breeding birds since the late 1960s! Locally SWT notes breeding species lost in the last 20 years including Curlews from Exmoor, Whinchats from the Levels, and Corn Bunting, Red Grouse and Ring Ouzel from the county entirely.

But there also some areas of hope - in a local context the various habitat creation and restoration schemes reported on in previous issues of *The Bittern* are major positive steps. On their website SWT mention Otters and Large Blue butterflies in particular, but also Bitterns on the Avalon Marshes, Avocets in the Parrett Estuary, and the Great Crane Project. To those success stories we might also add the return of Marsh Harriers, colonisation of the Avalon Marshes by Bearded Tits, and the various rare herons that have set up home in Somerset in recent years.

Despite these positives, though, this report serves as a reminder to us all that nature needs our help and we can all do our bit to save it. Its authors are calling on people to support conservation charities and take action for wildlife. Dr Mark Eaton, a lead author on the report and a Senior Conservation Scientist for RSPB, said: 'This report reveals that the UK's nature is in trouble - overall we are losing wildlife at an alarming rate. Reliable data on these species goes back just 50 years, at most, but we know that there has been a historical pattern of loss in the UK going back even further. Threats including sweeping habitat loss, changes to the way we manage our countryside, and the more recent impact of climate change, have had a major impact on our wildlife, and they are not going away.'

Simon Nash, Somerset Wildlife Trust's Chief Executive said: 'None of this work would have been possible without the army of volunteer wildlife enthusiasts who spend their spare time surveying species and recording their findings. Our knowledge of nature in the UK would be significantly poorer without these unsung heroes, and that knowledge is the most essential tool that conservationists have. It is time for us to take action to save nature and we are calling on people to give their support. We can all do something for nature, whether it is volunteering on a nature reserve, surveying species, making wildlife-friendly gardens, supporting campaigns or by becoming a member of a conservation charity.'

Preaching to the converted in terms of most if not all SOS members, one suspects, but a timely reminder all the same. For more information on the report see the SWT website www.somersetwildlife.trust.org/state_of_nature.html or contact Beth Jerrett on 01823 652413 or email: beth.jerrett@somersetwildlife.org

News in brief

Great White Egrets in British Birds

The Great White Egrets at Shapwick Heath were of course the big success story of last year. In the May issue of *British Birds* there is an interesting paper charting the rise and rise of this species' fortunes in Britain, from very rare vagrant to permanent resident. Even better, there is also a full and detailed account of the events at Shapwick last year, written by Kevin Anderson, Simon Clarke and Roger Lucken. Those of you who attended any of Kevin's talks over the winter will recognise many of the details, but it's still a fascinating read. We don't do ads in *The Bittern* (though never say never), but can thoroughly recommend BB for the serious birder/ornithologist - see www.britishbirds.co.uk for details.

Controversy reigns over granting of Buzzard control licences

In the same week as the publication of the State of Nature report, and almost exactly a year after Defra shelved controversial plans to license various control methods to reduce perceived threats to reared Pheasants from Buzzards, it emerged that Natural England had in fact issued licences to destroy Buzzard nests in two locations, one each in Northumberland and Cornwall. Conservation groups and many individuals reacted with outrage at this news, which was branded a 'betrayal' and 'buzzard barbarism' by Mike Pratt, Northumberland Wildlife Trust chief executive. Other comments naturally focused on the interests of a commercially-reared introduced species being apparently put ahead of one of our native birds.

Natural England reacted quickly and published a statement giving limited details about the Northumberland licence in particular. One part of the statement reads: 'A restricted licence authorising the removal of a total of four buzzard nests was issued ... with the licence operating over a strictly defined timescale to reduce the risk of eggs being present. A total of four nests were removed and no further control activity has been authorised. The buzzard population in the locality remains particularly high and concentrated and we are confident that the local conservation status will not be adversely impacted by the destruction of this small number of nests. Natural England always advocates non-lethal control to resolve conflicts with wildlife - particularly protected species - but in order to adequately integrate the needs of people and the natural environment, it is sometimes justified to use more radical measures to resolve problems, where those measures do not harm the conservation status of the species.'

While SOS has no official policy on this, many SOS members will no doubt have their own opinions.

Sources:

Journal Live http://www.journallive.co.uk/north-east-news/todays-news//tm_headline=outrage-over-licence-to-destroy-northumberland-buzzards-nests%26method=full%26objectid=33380837%26siteid=61634-name_page.html#ixzz2UWnbDyh

Natural England <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/wildlife/species/buzzardlicence.aspx>

Cranes nest at Slimbridge

As most will probably know by now, the Great Crane Project has seen its first hint of success as a pair of reintroduced birds has nested. Sadly for us, the birds chose to go back home to Slimbridge rather than stay here in Somerset, and even more unfortunately it appears the egg was not viable and the pair have abandoned the nest. Still very good news for the project, though.

2VP

Every now and again a birding site hits a purple patch, but it's quite rare for one small area of a reserve to suddenly spring to prominence. But that's exactly what happened this spring with the second viewing platform at Ham Wall, or '2VP' as it was quickly dubbed on social media.

It's been there for years, of course, and has had its occasional moments before, but for most it is just too far from the car park to bother with. That all changed with the Pied-billed Grebe, and the influx of visitors to see that turned up a number of other quality birds unusual for the site, including Black-winged Stilt (2), Avocet (5), Wood Sandpiper (2), Pectoral Sandpiper, Water Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Black Tern, Little Gull, Black-necked Grebe, Ferruginous Duck, Ring-necked Duck and Scaup. Not a bad haul, never mind the more usual denizens like Marsh Harrier and Bittern. Once again, the instigation of a specific management plan for a specific part of the reserve by the Ham Wall wardens has already brought dividends, and promises more.

Society News

Annual General Meeting report

Brian Hill

Minutes of the meeting will be presented to the 2014 AGM and this brief report is intended to inform those who were unable to attend in 2013.

A total of 42 members, an increase on 2012, attended the AGM at Ruishton Village Hall on April 18th. The Secretary was unable to attend so the minutes for 2012 were unavailable and will be presented next year.

Jeff Hazell raised a matter arising. As promised, he had investigated the possibility of a club weekend to Norfolk but the estimated cost of £400.00 per person was considered prohibitive and we will not be proceeding with this.

The audited accounts were presented to the meeting and were accepted. Although the Society's finances are healthy, it will be necessary to raise subscriptions in the near future to maintain this position. It was recognised that the current amount of £10.00, which has prevailed for several years, is very modest. The meeting moved to approve an increase of £4.00 per annum to take effect in 2014. This amount is still below that of most other county societies.

Membership now stands at 460. The website has proved an invaluable tool for recruiting new members, although direct contact at field meetings, which like all our meetings are open to everyone, plays an important part. In response to a question from the floor, it was stated that we intended to continue making The Bittern available to all website visitors as it does much to promote the Society. Thanks were expressed to Julian Thomas for producing our magazine to such a high standard.

Brief reports were given on SOS meetings. Field meetings are flourishing and attendance often exceeds 25, necessitating two leaders. Venues appear to be popular and good birds are usually seen. In contrast attendance at indoor meetings appears to be declining, but it is possible inclement weather and competition from television and other attractions had an effect in 2012. An extra field meeting, in association with Sedgemoor District Council, has been arranged for 1000 on Sunday 26 May at Apex Park in Burnham on Sea. This will be open to all members of the public and will be led by Nigel Cottle and Brian Gibbs. Members were reminded of the need to be punctual at the Nightingale meeting on May 17th, and that the winter meeting at West Sedgemoor will be restricted to an attendance of 20.

The President in his address said that, after 8 years in office, he would be standing down. Roger Dickey had agreed to assume the role but would not be available until the autumn of 2013. The meeting agreed that Brian Hill, who had expressed a willingness, would remain in post until then.

All other Officers of the Society were re-elected. Stephen Moss and Bruce Taylor were elected to the General Committee, and Stephen will continue to arrange indoor meetings.

Proposed rule changes circulated in advance of the AGM were passed by the meeting with minor amendments to ensure clarity. The amended rules are published in full [see below]. The most important change improves and simplifies the conditions and subscription requirements for associate membership which now replaces family membership. An additional rule, as a safeguard, covers the process for winding up the Society, should this ever become necessary.

The meeting closed at 2040, and was followed by an interesting illustrated talk by James Packer, which focused on the historical aspect of birds in the county. There was lively discussion about which birds may return to Somerset, with species such as White-tailed Eagle mooted as a likely future candidate.

Proceedings closed shortly before 2200.

Revised Society Rules

As noted in the AGM report, various changes were made at that meeting to update the Society's Rules. Here are the revised Rules in full.

SOMERSET ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY RULES

1. NAME

The Society shall be called "The Somerset Ornithological Society"

2. OBJECTS

The objects of the Society shall be:

- a. To further the study of birds.
- b. To assist in their preservation.

3. MEMBERSHIP

The Society shall consist of Ordinary Members, Junior Members below the age of 18, and such Honorary Life Members as may be elected at an Annual General Meeting of the Society in recognition of outstanding work for the Society.

4. SUBSCRIPTION

The annual subscription is payable on the 1st of January. Its amount shall be determined by the General Committee from time to time. Not less than 6 months notice of any increase in subscription shall be given to Members. The husband, wife or partner of an Ordinary Member, and children under 18, may become Associates without extra charge but will not receive a separate copy of each Society publication.

5. MANAGEMENT

Each Annual General Meeting of the Society shall elect a President, one or more Vice-Presidents, one or more Secretaries, a Treasurer, Recorder and Assistant Recorder. These shall be termed the Officers of the Society and shall be eligible for re-election.

The General Committee shall consist of these Officers, with up to four other Members. Members who are not Officers shall serve for a maximum of four years, unless subsequently appointed as Officers, and shall not be eligible for re-election for a period of one year. Names of candidates as Officers or Committee Members must be submitted to the Secretary at least 14 days prior to the Meeting. The Committee may fill any casual vacancy which occurs, but any replacement must be subject to election at the next Annual General Meeting.

6. PROTECTION

In pursuance of Section b. of Rule 2, it is the declared policy of the Society actively to further the effective protection of birds in the County, and to observe the law on the subject. Any member who, being reported to have acted in a manner seriously prejudicial to the declared policy or to the general interest of the Society, fails in the opinion of a two-thirds majority of those present at a meeting (after due announcement on the agenda) to give a satisfactory explanation of his or her conduct, shall cease to be a member of the Society.

7. MEETINGS

Meetings shall be held not less than twice a year.

8. REPORTS

The Committee shall each year appoint an Editorial Committee to consist of the Recorder and at least three other Members, who shall prepare the Annual Report, Somerset Birds.

The Annual General Meeting shall elect the Chairman and Members of the Somerset Ornithological Society Rarities Committee (SOSRC) in accordance with 3 of the SOSRC constitution. The first election will take place at the 2010 AGM and thence every two years.

9. CHANGES IN RULES

Changes in these rules may be proposed at an Annual General Meeting, or at any regular Indoor Meeting, provided that at least 14 days notice be given to all Members of any motion to this effect. A two-thirds majority of Members present will be required.

10. DISSOLUTION OF THE SOCIETY

The Society may only be wound up by a vote in favour by two-thirds of the members present at a properly constituted Annual General Meeting or Extraordinary General Meeting. If the Society is dissolved, any assets remaining after settlement of all its known debts and liabilities shall be disposed of by donation to a charitable organisation chosen by a majority of the members present at the said meeting.

From the SOSRC files:

Temminck's Stints at Meare Heath

James Packer and Julian Thomas

Temminck's Stint is a scarce but annual passage migrant nationally, but rather rarer in our area. The remarkable overwintering bird at Stockland Reach, Steart, gave everyone a chance to catch up with this diminutive wader in Somerset, but prior to the two birds which are the subject of this article, the only previous 21st-century records were in May 2002 at Catcott Lows and September 2006 at Meare Heath. So not a mega-vagrant, but still rare enough to require full documentation before any record can be accepted.

Two fine spring adults graced the drained lagoon at Meare Heath on 23rd-24th May 2012, and will appear in this year's *Somerset Birds*. Our main motivation for publishing details of the record here is to showcase the very good and thorough submissions sent in by two of the finders, Andy Mears and Robert Kelsh, both diligent, experienced, and well-travelled observers. Their submissions are reproduced in full below, as they were received except for some very minor editing for typos. We've also included the composite image submitted [see page 9] while none of these are great photos, when taken together they form an adequate photographic record of the birds.

We don't necessarily expect this level of detail in every case, and (as is evident when reading the descriptions) these particular birds were seen by a number of other experienced observers over the course of their stay. However, for species such as Temminck's Stint which are sometimes subtle and difficult to identify and describe with certainty these descriptions should be the standard to which we hope others will aspire when submitting claims of county rarities to the Somerset Ornithological Society Rarities Committee (SOSRC). It makes it so much easier for us to give your good find the recognition it deserves.

Robert Kelsh:

Temminck's Stint, two adult summer, 23rd May 2012, Shapwick Heath

On the evening of the 23rd May 2012 I was birding at Shapwick Heath with Andy Mears and Hamish Spencer. At c. 17:45, Andy Mears found two small waders that he immediately suspected to be 2 Temminck's Stints on the small island close to the near side of the drained lagoon. He called Hamish and me over and we immediately got onto the 2 tiny dull, grey-brown waders, feeding unobtrusively on the island, at the edge of a small pool within it. We spent the next 15 mins watching them in excellent evening light (sun behind us) before they disappeared out of sight by moving too close to see! Meanwhile, we all rapidly agreed with the identification, seeing all the key features (leg colour, size, bill structure, body structure, unobtrusive jizz; uppers and unders pattern); Andy contacted several others, including Julian Thomas, who put the news out. Later, c. 19:15?, once Julian and c. 15 others had arrived, the birds came back into view where watched again for c. 20 mins, before we left. I took a description during these two observation periods, supplemented by some dreadful quality record shots obtained by digiscoping using a Leica Apo-televid scope with 20-60x zoom lens and a Panasonic Lumix GH2 with 45 mm macro lens; the problem was having to have the tripod fully extended, in a strong Westerly breeze!

Description:

Two tiny waders (seen side by side frequently, and clearly same species), utterly dwarfed by Mallard and Black-tailed Godwit. In second view, nearby Pied Wagtail was surprisingly similar in size! Legs medium-sized in proportion, but usually obscured when walking through the short vegetation on the island! General impression was of a tiny, but strikingly elongated

“Two tiny waders (seen side by side frequently, and clearly same species), utterly dwarfed by Mallard and Black-tailed Godwit”

(long primaries and tail) wader, with short, slightly decurved bill, and clearly yellow-green legs (seen repeatedly in each set of views).

Behaviour typical - feeding v unobtrusively within vegetated island, sometimes using edge of small pool, but usually milling about inside through the vegetation itself. Hunched posture, body held horizontal to ground, head down, accentuating elongated shape.

Uppers dull grey-brown, but with pale whitish supercilium reasonably distinct before and behind eye. Uppers, wings and breast all rather homogeneous in colour, dull grey-brown. Rest of unders cleanish white, rather well-demarcated from smeared breast. Due to slightly drooped general posture of wing, a small slightly pointed notch of white projected up sides of flanks in front of wing (vaguely reminiscent of Common Sandpiper). Only distinct markings on uppers were series of expanded dark centres to row of upper scapulars, with a few on longest lower scapulars. Tail normally obscured fully by long primaries, but on one occasion one bird performed full vigorous 'rolling preen' movement, during which white outer tail feathers clearly seen.

Legs greenish-yellow, medium length; eye dark; bill dark, perhaps slightly paler at base? It is worth noting that the mud in the lagoon is a dull grey-brown, and hence the leg colour noted was clearly not artifactual.

Appearance of both birds similar, but one had more dark-centred scapulars than the other, and one probably had slightly less distinct face-pattern. All major features detectable in digiscoped images which may well show both birds - see attached composite.

Optics - Leica 8x32 HD; Apo-televid 78 scope.

Previous experience - I have some, but not extensive experience of this species (e.g. Temminck's at both Chew and Blagdon Lakes in last 10 years, also several others in East Anglia and more abroad). I have lots of experience of all the regular UK and European waders.

Andy Mears:

At about 1745hrs in bright evening sunshine and breezy conditions, I noticed 2 small waders on the shallow island in Meare Heath drained lagoon approx 60 or 70m distance from the canal footpath. They were in crouched, furtive posture and immediately drew attention by their tiny size. Scoped with 20-60x Swarovski 80mm, they were obviously stints and pretty certainly Temminck's! I pointed them out to Hamish Spencer immediately and we'd soon noticed dull but clearly yellow legs, plain mud-brown upperparts with a few neat black/dark upper scapulars, very short, dark,



Robert Kelsh

Temminck's Stints, Meare Heath

slightly decurved bills, and smoky-brown breasts. I ran 50m to get Robert Kelsh who was photographing inverts. He quickly got onto them and we all watched the stints as I rang out the news. Over the next 30 mins, we also noted that one of the birds had heavier dark scaps forming a very neat row of increasingly sized dark spots, perhaps comprising 6 feathers going from front to back. At least one of the birds also had a single, distinct, large, dark lower scap as well and both had one or two other seemingly random small, dark scaps. The birds had faint but distinct pale supercilia, surprisingly so we thought. Their wings were noticeably long for stints giving an elongated rear end and the primaries were largely cloaked by the dull-brown tertials. They used the whole of the island to feed and rarely ventured to the water's edge. They usually moved slowly through short ground vegetation that effectively obscured their bellies and legs, and occasionally moved into areas of taller weeds (about 20cm) in which they all but disappeared. When they stood more erect for brief moments or crossed a more open patch, the leg colour was obvious as were snowy white bellies. A couple of times they flew short distances when chased by Redshank but I saw no additional features at these times. Robert saw white outer tail feathers clearly when one bird stretched or postured in a certain way.

In addition, it's worth noting that we had the Collins guide with us throughout because Hamish carries it while birding in the UK as he is just visiting from New Zealand. As well as the photos, Robert also took excellent notes on the spot and made a few nice sketches. I notice that Robert had the legs as yellow-green / greenish-yellow and that could be partly due to our different scopes, which are well known for transmitting subtle colours differently.

Spotlight on... Firecrest

Bruce Taylor on one of Somerset's hidden gems

Ask British birders to name their favourite bird and a surprisingly large number will say the Firecrest, *Regulus ignicapilla*. It gets its name from the male's fiery orange stripe down the centre of its crown, which combined with its bold white supercilium and fine black eye-stripe gives it a striking appearance. The Firecrest shares the title of Britain's smallest bird with its close relation, the Goldcrest, weighing a mere 6 grams, but its belly is paler and much cleaner-looking, and its back has a brighter, fresher green tone. Add to this a small bronze patch on the side of the neck and you start to see what makes this gem of a bird so popular.



Roger Musgrove

Firecrest singing in a Somerset wood

It is a relatively new member of Britain's avifauna.

Over recent decades, milder winters have allowed the species to winter further north in Europe and thus expand its breeding range northwards; it was first found breeding in Britain in the New Forest in 1962. Firecrest is a Schedule 1 species and its conservation status is amber listed owing to its small British population, believed to be in the region of 600 pairs, the majority of which are found in the south-east. By the mid-eighties it had started to breed in Somerset: the number of territories fluctuates from year to year but the overall trend has been upwards and today the breeding population is likely to be well in excess of 25 pairs. Occasional wintering birds (probably of separate origin) may be encountered almost anywhere in Somerset, but during the breeding season the majority of records come from plantations in the east of the county.

Firecrests are closely, but not exclusively, linked to coniferous woodland. In east Somerset the majority of territories are found in tall, open stands of firs and Norway spruce, with a few broad-leaved trees among them. Very densely planted, dark stands are less favoured. A few are also found in pure broad-leaved woodland where the presence of holly may be significant. To find Firecrests in summer, you need keen hearing and familiarity with their song and call. The call is lower-pitched than Goldcrest with a more ringing quality, whilst the song is a crescendo of high-pitched ringing notes. If you've never heard a Firecrest singing, it's worth listening to a recording online at www.xeno-canto.org/species/Regulus-ignicapilla before heading for the woods to begin your search.

Firecrests arrive back on their territories at any time from mid March until early May, and the peak time to listen for them singing is mid May to early July. They sing most frequently during the early morning, but continue to sing at less regular intervals throughout the day. As with many species, they are most vocal during calm sunny weather and during these conditions their song is audible from a range of around 100 metres.

Both Firecrest and Goldcrest will occasionally mimic each other's song with varying degrees of success; this is probably an attempt to defend a territory against both species when the two are present in the same woodland. An interesting difference occurs in the posture of these two species when they sing and display. Goldcrests tend to sing downwards or outwards thus showing off their golden crest, whilst Firecrests tend to hold their head and bill high enabling them to show off not only their fiery crest but also their stunning facial markings. Well, if you've got it, flaunt it!

There is every chance that summering Firecrests are being overlooked elsewhere in Somerset, so in the lean birding period after the spring migration has come to a halt, why not pay a visit to your local conifer plantation and have a listen? You just might find yourself a Firecrest: a real jewel in the crown of Somerset's woodland.

Summer butterflies on the Levels

Julian Thomas on another way to augment your birding

Like last issue's article on dragonflies, this is an attempt to introduce birdwatchers to another group of brilliant insects which can add interest to a day's birding. As such, I have restricted the scope of this article to butterflies which can be seen on and near reserves or other areas which SOS members are likely to be visiting anyway.

June is the month to see one of our rarest butterflies, the Large Blue. It became extinct in Britain in 1979, but after much effort the species was successfully reintroduced at a number of sites in the south-west. Most of these remain secret, but the one openly-acknowledged site is the National Trust reserve of Collard Hill, near Street, only a few miles away from the Avalon Marshes reserves. On sunny days the butterflies can be seen anywhere along the steep, south-facing slope overlooking Compton Dundon. Plenty of other butterflies should be out and active too - Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Large Skipper, Common Blue, and Red Admiral are just some of those you should see. Like all butterflies, Large Blues prefer warm, sunny days with little or no wind, but unlike many on some days it can actually get too warm for them, and they hide away resting up during the heat of the day before coming out again late in the afternoon. I have seen them a number of times still active after 5pm, when most butterfly activity has ceased for the day.

Fritillaries are some of our most attractive butterflies, with upperwings mostly orange patterned with black, and at Priddy Mineries (opposite Stockhill) late May and early June sees Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries out over the grasslands near the Waldegrave Pool.

Move into July and Shapwick Heath comes into its own. The path at the western end of the main reserve following the course of the Neolithic Sweet Track is the best, with likely sightings including Purple Hairstreaks flitting around high in the oak trees and the large and spectacular Silver-washed Fritillary flying fast along the rides. Look out for the mating dance of the latter, where the female flies straight and level while the male does forward circles round her - never to be forgotten! White Admiral is the key target species, though, and can often be found in this area, along the track to Noah's Hide and in Meare Heath wood, floating gently through sunlit glades. Look for them (and other species) on or near patches of dog roses and honeysuckle.

Diversity of butterflies drops in August with many species having gone through their emergence period, but the familiar nymphalids such as Small Tortoiseshell and Comma are out in numbers, and some species are only just coming out. One late and often difficult to observe species is Brown Hairstreak - its highest density in Somerset is in the south, but there's a regular site on the Polden Hills not far from the Avalon Marshes at Walton Hill. Here you have the advantage of looking at eye-level at the canopies of the Ash trees further down the slope in front of the car park. You need to be aware of the possibility of confusion with day-flying Vapourer moths, but reasonable views are possible.



Large Blue



Silver-washed Fritillary



White Admiral

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 Bruce Taylor.



How and when did you get into birdwatching?

It was 1979. I was a nine-year-old growing up on my parents' dairy farm near Holcombe. For some reason I had a fascination with things that could fly: to start with it was hot air balloons, then planes. Anyway, my dad employed a couple of farm workers and after school and during holidays I'd 'help' them, or more precisely hang around and pester them. One of these guys (we'll call him Dave) was into birds and was always pointing out different species around the farm. I suppose it rubbed off on me. I started to notice birds everywhere and I wanted to know what they were. The following Christmas, I received my first bird book and I'd spend ages flicking through the pages putting ticks next to the birds I'd encountered whilst eyeing up the ones I'd yet to see. And that was it: my life had changed course and my fate was sealed. I'd become a birdwatcher. I blame Dave (and so do my family!)

What is your favourite birding memory?

Maybe the most significant moment was during my mid-teens. I was in my bedroom doing my homework when I heard a Black-headed Gull screaming blue murder outside. Rushing to the window, I saw what was causing the commotion. A Great Skua was tumbling through the air in pursuit of the gull. That fine early autumn evening in east Somerset, I recognised for the first time that anything can turn up anywhere, a revelation that has driven my birding for the subsequent thirty years.

But my favourite birding memory is more difficult as there are so many to choose from. It could be finally finding my first Caspian Gull at Torr, or watching Barn Owl chicks take their first flights from one of my nest boxes, or the moment when one thousand birders broke into a spontaneous round of applause on a housing estate in Kent when the Golden-winged Warbler finally showed itself. However, being on an island during a massive fall of Waxwings is probably my favourite. They were everywhere! The look on Kathy's face when a flock almost landed on her was priceless.

Where was your favourite birding trip?

In 2010, to celebrate reaching 40, I took a break from work and spent 6 weeks birding on the Isle of Barra in the Hebrides during the autumn. It was an absolute luxury to have so much time. We birded dawn to dusk each day and had many fantastic experiences. Thousands of Pink-feet streaming in off the Atlantic, a White-tailed Eagle soaring up the cliff and over our heads perhaps only 10 metres away, Otters fishing in clear water just below the jetty we were on, and being woken at 2am by the sound of migrating Barnacle Geese over the cottage.

Then there was the adrenalin rush of a major rarity arriving on the island and the subsequent close views of the Hermit Thrush, and perhaps best of all, the very strong feeling that we might bump into another big rarity at any moment around the next corner.

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

I work as Estate Manager for an outdoor activity centre and although it's a busy and demanding job, I couldn't help but notice Bee-eater, Great White Egret, Glaucous, Iceland and Med Gulls, Marsh Harrier, Hawfinch, Woodlark and Yellow-browed Warbler whilst working there. Come to think about it, I never really stop watching birds even if I'm not officially birding. When Kathy and I go out for a drink with friends I'll always encourage the group to sit in the beer garden rather than in the pub just in case something flies over. When we visit family, I'll always grab the chair with the view out into the garden... so what do I do when I'm not bird watching? I sleep I suppose!

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

East Somerset. There's a good range of habitats and some great birding sites, most of which are underwatched. I particularly enjoy birding at Cary Marsh, a site I've been closely involved with since its creation 7 years ago. It's deeply satisfying to watch new species colonise the reserve as the wetland starts to mature. I spend a lot of time at Torr Reservoir of course, especially when large numbers of gulls are roosting there.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

1. Barn Owl. One of my earliest memories is of being dragged out of bed late one summer's evening by my sister to watch the ghostly white form of a Barn Owl drifting around in the dusk outside my bedroom window. I'm still awestruck every time I see one of these beautiful birds.
2. Tree Sparrow. I've always had a soft spot for Tree Sparrows since finding my first ones along a country lane whilst walking to catch the school bus in my early teens. They would still have been fairly common in those days. Sadly they're all but gone from Somerset today.
3. Long-tailed Tit. Even though they're very common I still can't resist watching them whenever I get the chance. They're highly sociable with heaps of character. They don't look like strong fliers, yet last autumn several flocks arrived on Barra during our stay. It seems incredible that these family flocks were able to cross miles of open ocean in poor weather and still stay together.
4. Firecrest. It's got it all: black eye-stripe, white supercilium, those crown stripes, the clean-looking belly, the bright green mantle: gorgeous! Often hard to see well, but always worth the wait.
5. Any gull species. I get a kick out of finding rarities and I realised a few years ago that the best chance of finding rare birds near my home in east Somerset was to get into gulls. So I got myself a copy of the Malling Olsen and Larsson book, said goodbye to my friends and set off for Torr Res (via the pig slurry fields at Wyke Champflower and the local landfill site!) I spend roughly 500 hours a year looking at gulls locally and have so far found 15 species including Bonaparte's and Franklin's. So give me a gull species on my desert island, preferably a great big flock of them, and I'll be happy.

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

I love being on remote islands. Being cast away on an island would bring benefits: for instance, if there were no other birders there, I'd never have to worry about missing something they'd seen! The book would have to be the definitive field guide for the region, and as I'm on an island, it would have to include rare vagrants.

The luxury item? It would have to be Kathy, of course!

Walks and talks

Here is what's coming up in our area over the summer. As it's the quiet time for bird-related events in Somerset, we've cast the net a little wider this time to include a few events that wouldn't normally be covered here, but that you might be interested in. All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some provided by other conservation organisations (RSPB, Natural England and Somerset Wildlife Trust).

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.



June			
9	Walk	SWT	Combe Hill Woods to Collard Down. 1030-1500. Leader: Barrie Widden (01935 421071). Meet in Combe Hill Woods car park, ST503331. Bring a packed lunch. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Free.
10	Walk	SWT	Coastal Wildlife Walk. 1030-1500. Nigel Phillips leads this circular walk from East Quantoxhead to Kilve and back. Meet at car park at East Quantoxhead (ST137435, TA5 1EJ, next to the village pond, close to the church). Bring a picnic lunch and sensible footwear. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Donations.
12	Walk	SOS	Stockhill, Mendip. Starts 2100. Leader: Jeff Hazell. Meet at the Forestry Commission car park at ST549513. Focus: Nightjars.
14	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Dazzling dragonflies.' 1330-1600. Explore the reserve with a warden in search of beautiful dragonflies and damselflies. Donations. Phone 01458 860494 to book. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). www.rspb.org.uk/hamwall
16	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Evening stroll on the marshes.' 1830-2130. Join the wardens to enjoy the wildlife on a summer's evening. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by soup, cookies and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.00 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
21	Walk	SWT	Nightjars at night. 2100-2230. Trinity Hill, Devon (nr Lyme Regis). Meet in parking area off main road (SY308959). Leader: Roger Fox (01935 862041). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Free.
23	Walk	SWT	Ashpriors Common. 1030-1230. Informal nature walk around the common. Meet at main car park (ST155288). No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Free.
23	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Evening stroll on the marshes.' 1830-2130. As 16 June.

25	Walk	SWT	Nightjars. 2030-2130. Leader: Nige Milbourne. Meet at Stockhill car park (ST 549513). Dress warmly and a torch may be useful. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
29	Family event	RSPB	Wonderful Wetlands. 1000-1600. A day of discovery and family fun at the Willows and Wetlands Centre, Stoke St Gregory (ST 337269, TA3 6HY), in partnership with them and The Great Crane Project. Free entry and lots of activities. Also RSPB wildlife trailer rides (adults £3, children free). Further information: visit www.englishwillowbaskets.co.uk or phone 01823 490249; or see www.rspb.org.uk/westsedgemoor .
30	Walk	SWT	Barn Owl Prowl. 1930-2100. Leader: Chris Sperring. Meet at car park, Willows and Wetlands Centre, Stoke St Gregory (ST 337269, TA3 6HY). Free but booking required: phone 01823 652400 or email rosie.withill@somersetwildlife.org . Torch useful. Unsuitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.

July

4	Talk	SWT	Wildlife on the shores of the Somerset coast. 1930-2130. Nigel Phillips gives an illustrated talk about the varied wildlife that can be found on our shores. United Reform Church Hall, West St, Somerton, TA11 7PS. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £3.00.
7	Walk	SWT	Barn Owl Prowl. 1930-2130. Leader: Chris Sperring. Meet at car park, Chancellor's Farm, Priddy (ST522523, BA5 3DD). Free but booking required: phone 01823 652400 or email rosie.withill@somersetwildlife.org . Torch useful. Unsuitable for wheelchair users/ limited mobility.
14	Walk	SWT	Barn Owl Prowl. 1930-2130. Leader: Chris Sperring. Meet at Westhay Moor NNR car park (ST457437). Free but booking required: phone 01823 652400 or email rosie.withill@somersetwildlife.org . Torch useful. Unsuitable for wheelchair users/ limited mobility.
17	Walk	SWT	Black Hole Marsh, Seaton, Devon. 1400-1600. SWT Ilminster/Chard group trip led by Martin Weston to this recently created East Devon DC reserve by the Axe Estuary. Meet at car park signposted off the Colyford to Seaton road, through the cemetery (SY249915, EX12 2DQ). No dogs. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Donations.
20	Walk	SWT	Nightjar Walk - Staple Plain. 2000-2230. Short walk on the Quantocks led by Roger Lucken to look for Nightjars and other crepuscular/ nocturnal wildlife. Meet at Staple Plain car park, ST 117 411. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
28	Walk	SWT	Bishopswood Meadows. 1030-1230. Informal walk through species- rich limestone and marshy meadows beside the river Yarty. Open access via lane off road at ST252129. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Wear sensible shoes. No dogs. Free.
30	Family event	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Go wild Tuesdays.' 1400-1600. Different activity each week including birds, pond dipping and mini-beasts. Children accompanied by adults, please - £3 to £5 family donation suggested. Park at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX) and meet at first viewing platform pond dipping area. Also on 6, 13, 20, 27 August.

August

3	Walk	SWT	Scrubland Butterflies. 13:00 - 15:00. A walk at Hinkley Point nature reserve to look for scrubland specialist butterflies. Leader: Dick Best. Meet at Hinkley C Station car park (ST208457). Booking essential: phone Roger Lucken on 01278 684430 or email lucken655@btinternet.com. Not suitable for wheelchair users/ limited mobility. Adults £2, Children free.
8	Walk	SWT	Lower Chelmsine, Blackdowns. 1430-1630. Visit to this private nature reserve which includes 10 ha of broadleaved woodland. From Lowton crossroads (TA21 9LW) turn west and Lower Chelmsine is the cottage on the right (c. ½ mile). Car parking in field, ST191185. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Donations.
6	Family event	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Go wild Tuesdays.' 1400-1600. As 30 July.
13	Family event	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Go wild Tuesdays.' 1400-1600. As 30 July.
20	Family event	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Go wild Tuesdays.' 1400-1600. As 30 July.
27	Family event	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Go wild Tuesdays.' 1400-1600. As 30 July.

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