



# The Bittern

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The newsletter of the Somerset Ornithological Society

## SOS has a new President

Roger Dickey introduces himself and sets out his vision for the future

It may sound a little strange, and they may be the sentiments of one or two others, but I was rather saddened when Brian Hill asked me to take over from him as President of the Somerset Ornithological Society. I have always thought that Brian has done a superb job at the helm. His knowledge of Somerset birds and, as importantly, those that take an interest in them, is deeply entrenched and on many occasions, when I have been on the Committee and off, I have listened to his wise judgment and witnessed levels of tact to which I yet aspire. I look forward to more of the same from his new position as Vice President.



Chris Dickey

Despite having served on the Committee as Indoor Meetings Secretary I have met only a small proportion of our membership and it is therefore about time, now that Brian has handed over to me, that I declared who and what I am and where I think we are all going. With an AGM coming up in April, there is an opportunity to contribute ideas and help the current committee to grow the Society. We have some exceptional people within our membership and I look forward to hearing some fresh views.

Many of you will know that I have lived in Somerset for a few years now, having run a smallholding in Keinton Mandeville before moving to Somerton 6 years ago. I arrived in Somerset to Grey Partridge, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Lesser Whitethroats and Willow Warblers aplenty and the odd Great Bustard in the winter. Yes of course we have seen 'new' birds arrive, although most of these have been on the Levels, but my old farmland haunts are much quieter now. This worries me because I don't see a reversal in fortunes under current national policies. Even my garden in Somerton grows quieter (when the Starlings are away) as every piece of spare land is developed; front gardens around me are laid to tarmac; new houses are left without room for bushes or trees. If this is progress, we should insist on shaping it and not just watch, and this is where I stand now.

My background, again as some of you will know, is military, having spent 43 years in the Army. During those years I have had the privilege of being able to watch birds in some pretty spectacular settings in some remote corners of the globe. My birding has been rudely interrupted in a couple of those places but Her Majesty did not give me binoculars with graticules in order to watch Striated Caracaras all day. Neither were flying hours allocated to me to watch for illegal immigrants on the Hong Kong/Shenzhen border ever intended for me to count Dalmatian Pelicans and Black-faced Spoonbills in the Mai Po marshes. And so, of course, I didn't...too often. In all these places I have tried to encourage soldiers to take an interest in their environment and a great many do. They just don't talk about it too loudly in the NAAFI. This particular crusade has ended with me chairing the Army Ornithological Society (AOS) where the only way I can recruit young soldiers is to promise to give them birdwatching with a difference. It's odd how the suggestion of a long walk into the survey area, whether it is in rain-lashed mountains or on barren volcanic ash actually serves as an inducement. For the last 20 years I and the AOS have been surveying seabirds on behalf of the Ascension Island Government and in concert with RSPB, as well as running projects in West Africa and Cyprus, and nearer to home on Cape Wrath and on the Defence Estate.

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## Welcome

Hello again! And a warm welcome to our new President, Roger Dickey, as well as heartfelt thanks to the outgoing President, Brian Hill, who I know I'm not alone in thinking did an excellent job over several years. Roger sets out his vision in these pages - he is not exactly new to the Society, but we on the Committee are already seeing the fresh drive he is bringing to the role, carrying on the programme of refreshing and modernising the Society that started under Brian's watchful eye.

Some may be surprised that this issue of *The Bittern* does not lead with the floods that have hit the Southern Levels so badly in recent weeks, but given the amount of coverage and comment in the national and local media (some rather more sensible and accurate than others, it has to be said), there seemed little more to say from a 'news' standpoint. More useful, then, to report on the Vision for the future agreed by a Task Force representing all of the interests on the Levels - see pages 4 and 5. So far coverage has understandably centred on the human misery inflicted by the floods, in which a few unlucky SOS members have shared. Invidious to mention one and not others, perhaps, but having been to Ash Warne's lovely home in Moorland for meetings when he was on the Committee, it was a shock to see photos of it inundated. With the water levels dropping as I write this, we can only hope that everyone affected gets the chance soon to start the long process of cleaning up and getting their disrupted lives back to normal.

The next thought is what effect the floods will have had on the wildlife of the area. Many small mammals must have been caught out and drowned, with possible knock-on effects on the likes of Barn Owls and Kestrels (like they need another pressure!) What the land will look like when the floods recede and how quickly it recovers may also affect the breeding success of waders, Skylarks and Yellow Wagtails. We will have to wait and see what the summer brings. In the meantime I hope you enjoy another set of interesting articles in this issue, and the imminent arrival of spring.



**Julian Thomas, Editor**

**Email: [julian.thomas@somersetbirds.net](mailto:julian.thomas@somersetbirds.net)**

**Phone/text: 07764165417**

## SOS has a new President continued....

In recent years I've managed to find a little more time for myself and have escaped gardening duties by becoming a ringer. I know this isn't a pursuit to everyone's liking but I have always been fascinated by plumage; it's complexity yet similarity within species that hold the secret to age and sex, and often a bird's recent history. Time spent ringing impinges horribly on 'hide-time', but it's not all staring at mist nets at some ungodly time in the morning (actually quite a lot of it is). My colour ringing project with Nightingales on Merryfield Airfield near Ilton was instigated to determine whether Nightingales, in their two discrete colonies, remained faithful to the sites where they were hatched, or did they go looking for mates elsewhere? There are few places left, even on the Levels at times, where one can escape the bustle and spend the mornings engrossed on a favourite hobby, but completely surrounded by singing Nightingales. Ringing at Cape Wrath is a different matter, involving seaborne landings on cliffs and stacks before getting up close and personal with Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins and Fulmars, or midnight ringing of Storm Petrels after calling them off the sea. Back in Somerset, though, and amongst other sites, I'm planning to work more closely with Carymoor Environmental Trust, ringing and surveying birds on this unique and evolving project.

Having recently left the Army, I should have plenty of time to spare but of course that will never happen for a number of reasons. My interest in wildlife has broadened considerably from the singular study of birds and the next 12 months is dedicated to courses on ecology at Exeter where I shall concentrate on protected and invasive species. Linked to this study, working with RNAS Merryfield and Carymoor should provide interesting contrasts in approaches to habitat management. As I have recently taken over as Chairman of Somerset Wildlife Trust's Heart of the Levels Group, understanding what makes our SWT reserves special and, in particular, encouraging greater outside interest in them will be high on my priorities. Finally, in terms of external commitments, I have been voted back onto the Council of the British Trust for Ornithology as Chairman of the Regional Network Committee which provides the governance to volunteer and survey work across the UK. With the BTO reworking their strategy post-Atlas this year it should keep me off the streets for a while.

So, money on the table, where do I think we should be going as a Society? I intimated earlier that we have some very talented and keen birders (amateur and professional) among our ranks and I would like to see them supported as best we possibly can. This will mean continuing with the high standard of presenters at our indoor meetings, giving us the kind of talks that will allow us to raise our game a little. Similarly outdoor meetings should provide variety and explore one or two of our less well-known corners of the county. Our guides on these walks do a great job and very much deserve our gratitude. The Society needs to grow in numbers and diversity of interests in order to survive. Publicity is crucial to this but, like so many organisations, we are not very good at it and need to sell the Society much better. Part of that involves a major revamp of the website. Currently it does enough to keep members informed and allow bird information to be circulated quickly but it is inward looking and is not going to help us with a recruitment drive. We may be forced to put our hands in our pockets to solve this but so be it. During the BTO and county Atlas work (more below) a huge number of volunteers helped to collect data and did it superbly. Such talent can't be wasted and we are looking at ways that volunteers can continue to collect data for specific projects. Only for consideration at the moment but this could, for example, focus on single species in specific areas or broader surveys in more remote parts of the county or even of reserves. Partnerships with organisations that study other taxa such as butterfly, mammal or botany groups should not be ruled out. Probably best to stop there or be accused of selling my soul to the devil.

My final point concerns the county bird Atlas. We have never produced one before and we are going to get this first one right. Your input has been exceptional and the end is in sight with the Atlas committee, genuinely, working flat-out to meet the summer deadline. Please don't distract them!

If the waters ever recede I can only wish you happy Somerset birding for 2014, and, if not before, I'm looking forward to seeing as many of you as possible at our AGM in Ruishton Village Hall on Thursday 3 April.

# News

## New 'Vision' for flood-hit Levels

A 'Vision' of what the Somerset Levels and Moors might look like in 2030, intended to guide water and land management policies over the years ahead, has been agreed by a Task Force set up last year. The Task Force includes representatives of farming and conservation interests, local authorities and Government agencies. It was set up at the suggestion of former Defra environment minister, Richard Benyon, in the wake of the floods of 2012/13, which coincided with the ending of many of the conservation agreements which have protected the area for the past 28 years. An initial consultation exercise was carried out last summer, then a draft produced, which was sent to every parish council in the Levels and Moors, and to all members of the Somerset Water Management Partnership, which represents a very wide cross-section of organisations, local authorities and interests, for comment. The final version of the Vision was agreed at a meeting of the Task Force on 31 January. The full text is reproduced on the next page.

Acting Chairman of the Task Force, Anthony Gibson, said that agreement on the Vision was a crucial first step in tackling the Levels' problems.

'We now know where we want to go, and that ought to give a very clear sense of direction not only to the 20-year action plan for reducing the flood risk, on which we are just embarking, but all the other policies which impinge on this very special, but very threatened area.'

'The really encouraging thing is the degree of consensus which the Vision represents. We all want the Levels' landscape to remain the green grid-iron of withies, rhynes, meadows and droves that we know and love; we all want it to continue to be farmed productively, but in ways that enhance the nature conservation interest; we all want the water to be managed, so that the flood risk is reduced; we all want an even richer mix of wildlife than we've got already; and we all want a thriving local economy, built around the Levels' special qualities.'

'For the first time, all of the organisations and interests in the Levels and Moors are speaking with a single voice in saying "this is how we want the area to be". The combination of the Vision and the 20 year action plan to deal with flooding does give us a priceless opportunity to get things right, for the Levels, its people, its farmers and its wildlife.'

Agreement on the Vision has been welcomed by both farming and conservation interests.

For the NFU, South West Regional Director, Mel Squires, said: 'Farmers are at the heart of the Levels' future, and will welcome this clear, positive statement of what we are all trying to achieve. True partnership with them must be the way forward, and we will continue to represent their interests with this collaborative action which will be necessary to turn the vision into reality.'

For the RSPB, South West Regional Director, Tony Richardson, said: 'This new and exciting vision recognises the quality of the Somerset Levels' natural environment and places it as central to a better future for people, the economy of the area and of course nature. The RSPB agrees wholeheartedly and calls on others to join in a big push for this better way forward.'

Having agreed the Vision, the Task Force's next challenge is to put in place the actions necessary to bring it to fruition. Some of that – like dredging the rivers or a tailor-made agri-environment scheme – will be top down; but a lot of it will be bottom up – creating frameworks to enable local communities to shape their own destinies.

## A Vision for the Somerset Levels and Moors in 2030

We see the Somerset Levels and Moors in 2030 as a thriving, nature-rich wetland landscape, with grassland farming taking place on the majority of the land. The impact of extreme weather events is being reduced by land and water management in both the upper catchments and the flood plain and by greater community resilience.

- The landscape remains one of open pasture land divided by a matrix of ditches and rhynes, often bordered by willow trees. Extensively managed wet grassland dominates the scene with the majority of the area in agriculture in 2010 still being farmed in 2030.
- The floodplains are managed to accommodate winter flooding whilst reducing flood risk elsewhere. These flood events are widely recognised as part of the special character of the Levels and Moors.
- The frequency and duration of severe flooding has been reduced, with a commensurate reduction in the flood risk to homes, businesses and major roads in the area.
- During the summer months there is an adequate supply and circulation of high quality irrigation water to meet the needs of the farmers and wildlife in the wetlands. On the low-lying peat moors, water levels have been adopted which conserve peat soils and avoid the loss of carbon to the atmosphere. Water quality has improved and meets all EU requirements.
- The Levels and Moors are regarded as one of the great natural spectacles in the UK and Europe with a mix of diverse and valuable habitats. Previously fragmented habitats such as fen and flower-rich meadows have been re-connected and are widely distributed. In the north of the area over 1,600 ha are managed as reed-bed, open water and bog. Elsewhere the populations of breeding waders exceed 800 pairs. Each winter the wetlands attract large numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders regularly exceeding 130,000 birds. Wetland species such as Crane, Bittern and pollinator populations flourish.
- Optimum use is being made of the agricultural potential of the Levels and Moors, particularly on the higher land, whilst unsustainable farming practices have been adapted or replaced to secure a robust, sustainable base to the local economy
- New businesses, including those based on 'green tourism', have developed, meeting the needs of local people and visitors alike, while brands based on the area's special qualities are helping farmers to add value to the meat, milk and other goods and services that they produce.
- The internationally important archaeological and historic heritage of the area is protected from threats to its survival and is justly celebrated, providing a draw to visitors and a source of pride and identity to local communities.
- Farmers and landowners are rewarded financially for the public benefits and ecosystem services they provide by their land management including flood risk management, coastal management, carbon storage and the natural environment.

Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force January 31, 2014

## Stearth Marshes reserve opens

The latest news from **Tim McGrath**, Project Manager, is that the first part of the new WWT Stearth Marshes reserve is now open. It's a deliberately low-key opening, providing local visitors with a chance to use the new parking facilities and explore the south eastern part of the reserve from this end of the site. The main car park on Stert Drove opened on 28 February, and the toilet facilities there will be open soon, once minor works are completed. We'll keep you updated on the major flood defence aspect of the scheme, including the intended breach of the Parrett bank, and further access details as they become available.

# Twenty years of Somerset seawatching

Brian Gibbs charts the rise and rise of another aspect of our hobby

In 1993 a few hardy souls started watching the sea off the West Somerset coast on a regular basis; before this it had been covered very infrequently. Hurlstone Point is the favoured watch point although in stormy and wet conditions we retreat to the Culvercliff area of Minehead.

A look back through the old *Somerset Birds* as recently as 1989 gave only two records of Razorbill for the whole year and up to three Guillemots, slightly more Gannets and five counts of over 100 Manx Shearwaters, the highest being 425. The presence of Red-throated Divers off this section of coast in winter was just beginning to be documented.

Over the last 20 years we now have a far better understanding of what occurs along the West Somerset coast and how frequently. I'll attempt here to give a very broad overview of the species likely to be encountered off Hurlstone Point and how regularly.

There have been regular sightings of Brent Geese, both Dark- and Light-bellied, and there are a few records of grey geese, with the highlight being a party of six Greenland White-fronted Geese in February 2013. Numbers of duck passing, apart from Common Scoter, are small with single-figure records of most of the species more commonly found on the Levels. Common Scoter are by far the commonest sea duck with records from all months - far scarcer are Velvet Scoter, Eider, Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser with perhaps one of these species being reported annually.

Red-throated Divers are present from mid-November through to late January with a definite peak towards the middle of December - the highest number recorded so far was 204 off Minehead on 2 December last year. Both Black-throated and Great Northern Divers occur annually in small numbers - outside of the winter period, diver records in autumn and spring are sparse and usually of the last two species. The reason for the increase at this time of year coincides with the arrival of Herrings and Sprats in this section of the Bristol Channel - it would be interesting to find out how far up the Channel they range, with only a few records from Bridgwater Bay in comparison with further west.

Fulmars are regular between March and early September and can be seen virtually on every visit. The only Somerset breeding colony is just inside the county boundary at Glenthorne. Manx Shearwaters first appear in numbers in mid-May and peak through June, dropping away to very few by the end of August. The maximum count each year is usually in the region of 3,500 to 4,500. Most come up the Channel to feed in early morning and the vast majority have returned west by 9am. Strangely the highest counts seem to be associated with settled conditions and a light SE wind, although the most were 7,089 on a brisk misty north-westerly on 11 June 1998. In late summer and autumn records are likely to be juveniles that have fledged on Lundy and the Welsh islands. Balearic Shearwaters are scarce and not seen annually with, not surprisingly, late August being the most likely time to see one. Single Sooty Shearwaters were seen in 1993, 94, 95 and 97 but not since off Hurlstone, though there are more recent records from Porlock Weir and even Burnham-on-Sea. There are single records of both Cory's and Great Shearwaters in the last 20 years, and a record of Little Shearwater is pending with the BBRC at the moment. Both of the latter are only the second record for the county for their respective species, though there are a few more recent records of Cory's from around Minehead Bay.



Storm Petrels are seen most years and the chances of seeing one from Minehead is greater than from Hurlstone; Leach's Petrels are far scarcer in this section of the Somerset coast and are seen more frequently around Bridgwater Bay. The presence of Gannets almost reflects that of Fulmars with birds seen on most days during the summer - numbers are generally around 20 to 30, but at times over 100 have been recorded. Shags have been found to be regular in the period from late July to early September with most appearing to be dispersing juveniles. Grebes are extremely rare along the West Somerset coast with only a handful of records of Great Crested.

Skua passage in August and September is one part of the year that is eagerly anticipated but in the last couple of years has been a disappointment, to put it mildly. Northerly or north-easterly winds along the North Sea coast result in skuas passing overland and exiting the Bristol Channel - they have been watched descending from height and then continuing west at sea level. Arctics and Greats are the commonest species with annual records of Pomarines and slightly less of Long-tailed. The spring passage evident further up the Channel (and particularly good around Bridgwater Bay in spring 2013) is not something that is noted from this far west, although there are odd records of all four species at other times of the year.

One thing that has been highlighted during this period is the number of Razorbills and Guillemots that use this section of the Channel in summer when feeding young, with daily counts of 50 for both species not uncommon. There are also large numbers in November and December, possibly for the same reason as Red-throated Divers are present. Puffins are seen most years on one or two occasions, normally during the summer, but seven on 12 October 2012 was exceptional. Little Auks are far scarcer and there is just one recent record of Black Guillemot.

Sabine's Gulls are less than annual although there is a good chance of finding at least one at some point from late August through to October. Kittiwakes are seen most months and are one of the species most affected by weather conditions - large numbers can pass back west after a stormy period. There has been a recent increase in the number of Mediterranean Gulls being seen which just reflects what is being seen in other parts of the county. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls have both been recorded but remain very much a rarity from here. Tern passage is light - Sandwich Terns are most frequent with occasional records of the other commoner species, although one distant view of what was either a Bridled or a Sooty is one of the most frustrating moments from many hours spent gazing out over the Channel.

A number of other unusual species have been recorded whilst watching from Hurlstone Point and include Spoonbills, Marsh and Hen Harriers, Osprey and Short-eared Owls migrating across from South Wales. The most recent, unexpected addition to the Hurlstone list was a redhead Smew on 25 January this year.



# Monthly record keeping

**Martin Sage** on a way of both adding enjoyment to your birding and helping to monitor local bird populations

For the past 10 years I have kept a spreadsheet showing my records of each bird species seen or heard by me in each month in UK. How sad is that! For the past 9 years I have managed to reach 100 in each month apart from one month when we were only in the country for 1 day! What these records show is the increase and decrease in certain species in the places that I visit regularly - mainly the Levels, the Poldens, the coast from the Huntspill to Brean and the local reservoirs. As it only includes my own sightings, it is a very imperfect survey compared to WeBS or the Atlas but it still highlights the changes in a few key species.

## Bittern

It is appropriate to start with the bird that gives this newsletter its name. In the last 10 years, my records show 4, 3, 1, 4, 6, 8, 12, 11, 11 and 12 months with a Bittern record. The missing ones in 2011 and 2012 are probably down to luck as they have been ever-present in the area since 2009. In the earlier years they were mainly seen in winter but I did see one in May in 2004 and the first June record was in 2007.

## Great White Egret

This iconic species was a UK life first for me in 2003 when one turned up in Westhay Moor. The next single record was in 2007 followed by 4 months in 2008, 8 in 2009, 9 in 2010 and 12 in the last 3 years. I now take it for granted that I will see one every time I visit Ham Wall or Shapwick Heath and it is often one of the first 10 birds I record on the first day of each month.

## Whooper Swan

This species seems to be more regular in recent years and a family group has been seen in Shapwick or nearby on several occasions. However, my records show 2, 3, 2, 3, 6, 4, 6, 5, 4, 5 in terms of numbers of months recorded, so they have been fairly consistently seen over the 10-year period.

## Marsh Harrier

When I first arrived in Westhay in 2000, most Marsh Harrier sightings were in the non-breeding months. Since 2008 however, a year-round population has developed and breeding success has increased. I now expect to see at least one on any walk on the Levels and on some occasions it is possible to see as many as six individuals in one day. Over the Avalon Marshes they are probably the most common raptor after Buzzard.

## Little Owl

This is a very local species that can be seen frequently if you know where one spends the daylight hours. During 2012 I had one in the paddock below my house and I recorded it in most months of that year. Even so I was well down on 2006 when I recorded Little Owl in all 12 months. In 2013 I recorded them just twice, once north of Wedmore and the second time on a visit to Brean Down! In common with other owl species, the flooding of the moors in 2012 and now in early 2014 has probably depleted the population of small rodents that they feed on so they have either perished or more likely moved to higher ground.

A monthly record may seem excessive to some of you, but it can give us new information about some species at a very local level and I enjoy the challenge of keeping it going.



# Book review: The BTO Atlas

Stephen Moss

More than 40 years ago, as a teenage birder, I remember handing over the princely sum of £3.60 to W.H. Smith's, and in return receiving John Parslow's *Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland*. In 1973, when this Poyser book was published, it was rightly hailed as a ground-breaking work - the first to attempt to show the ups and down of our avifauna across the whole of the British Isles.

Yet just three years later, Parslow's book was effectively rendered obsolete by the first BTO *Atlas* - a book that changed the face of ornithology and birding in Britain and Ireland. For the first time ever, we could see the distribution of the 220 or so species breeding in Britain, in a snapshot of their status taken from 1968 to 1972.

Since then, we have had the *Winter Atlas*, *Migration Atlas*, *European Atlas* and a second *Breeding Atlas*, so that our shelves now groan under the combined weight of these huge volumes. And now, at last, the Big One: the *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, combining breeding and wintering records into one huge doorstop of a volume.

And what a book! The sheer numbers are, quite simply, overwhelming: 720 pages containing hundreds of maps, detailing almost 20 million records and covering just short of 300 species - records collected by amateur birders, including many members of the SOS and other Somerset birders, in what is surely the most ambitious citizen science project attempted anywhere in the world.

National trends have been widely discussed elsewhere, so I won't dwell on them. But I must mention some of things that strike me as new and important; things past surveys were not able to reveal, or if they did, not quite so clearly.

The first of these is the extraordinary preponderance of non-native species at large in the UK; by which I mean non-native species not (yet) on the official British List. So as well as the familiar parakeets and exotic pheasants, we have Harris's Hawk from North America, Muscovy Duck from South America, Black Swan from Australia and Indian Peafowl - aka Peacock - from Asia.

Some birders might cavil at their inclusion, but we have learned our lesson from the days when we tended to ignore alien species until they had become fully established. This meant that for species such as the Ring-necked Parakeet we have only a hazy understanding of how it spread in those early days, before it was awarded official status. Better to include these species - however bizarre it may seem - so that we can track their progress over the coming decades.

Another surprise - and not a welcome one - is what appears to be a northwards and westwards shift in the distribution of many species, including Willow Tit, Wood Warbler, Lesser Redpoll and Whinchat. This may be due to climate change, habitat loss, or a combination of these and other factors. Certainly we in Somerset have noticed the rapid decline of many of our summer visitors, which now are either absent or have retreated to the uplands, or simply pass through in spring and autumn without stopping off to breed.

Overall, woodland and farmland species, and migrant songbirds, appear to be doing better in the north and west of Britain, while raptors are increasing towards the south and east, and wetland species are doing well across the board - the former because of reduced persecution and the latter through habitat creation, such as our own Avalon Marshes scheme.

These patterns are shown in the maps for individual species, but also in the collective analyses in the introductory sections of the *Atlas* - sections that are crucial to our understanding of the wider trends revealed by this massive survey.

There are other surprises, too. We might like to think that the rarest breeding birds in Britain are right on our doorstep: the Little Bittern and Great White Egret, with one and two pairs respectively. But they are rivalled by a rather less glamorous species: the Yellow-legged Gull, with only one confirmed breeding pair, in Dorset.

With the first *Atlas*, and subsequent ones, it was fairly easy to understand both distribution and change, partly because the maps were fairly simple. With this latest tome, you need to work harder to understand the maps - partly because they show a much greater degree of subtlety. But persistence is well worthwhile, as you can dig out far more relevant information than from previous surveys.

This book, and the various county atlases that have piggy-backed off the national survey - including of course our own eagerly awaited Somerset Atlas - are a testament to the British love of birds, and our willingness to endure long hours in the field to discover what is happening to them.

At a time when Britain's birds are under pressure as never before, this is possibly the most important bird book you will ever own. Over the coming decades, it will serve as a baseline for us to monitor detailed trends and changes, not just across the whole of Britain and Ireland but locally too. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

# 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 SOS Committee member and BTO representative for Somerset **Eve Tigwell**.



How and when did you get into birdwatching?

The when is quite difficult, because I've always been into it for as long as I can remember! Certainly I can recall walking up a hill when I was about 18 months old chattering to my older brother about some birds. I got into it rather gradually after that: my father was a very keen birdwatcher, but didn't think it a good hobby for a girl, so that probably put me off until I went to school and then university. From there it's just taken off (or is that 'over?')

What is your favourite birding memory?

Oh so many! Sitting on the edge of Traigh Iar on North Uist with the tide pushing a whole host of waders nearly to my feet; or the same location watching the gulls chasing a Golden Eagle. Bateleur Eagles in Botswana; a Red Kite in my back garden; Bitterns at Westhay, etc. Take your pick!

Where was your favourite birding trip?

That would have to be camping in Botswana: great country, lovely people and fantastic birds that actually sit still to be photographed.

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

Organise bird surveys for the BTO, conservation work for Somerset Wildlife Trust, walking, painting, writing; and there's that thing called work too.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

That could be my back garden: excellent birds and I don't have to go anywhere! Seriously though, it would have to be the Somerset Levels.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

**Raven:** Intelligent, resilient and always having fun.

**Curlew:** Evocative of sea and moor (and, should be, damp farmland).

**Lapwing:** Our countryside should be full of them; why are we failing?

**Firecrest:** Tiny and tough - and my latest garden bird.

**Barn Owl:** Should also be everywhere - just add rough grassland and a box!

As to a book and luxury item, the book would be the BTO Atlas (of course!), so much to read and ponder upon. I don't think binoculars are going to be much use, but a telescope would - all those sea birds (depending on the island).

# Walks and talks

Here is what's coming up in our area over the next three months. 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.



Brian Hill

March			
6	Talk	RSPB	<b>Wildlife of St Lucia. Starts 1930.</b> A talk by wildlife expert Ed Drewitt about the birds and other wildlife of this Caribbean island. St Paul's Church Hall, Walliscote Road, Weston-super-Mare BS23 1SF. Price: £2.50 local RSPB group members, £3 non-members/national RSPB members.
8	Walk	RSPB	<b>Women's Wildlife Tour.</b> 1400-1530. Swell Wood RSPB. Celebrate International Women's Day with the RSPB and discover spring wildlife on the reserve. Booking is essential. £3.00 payable on the day. Meet in car park (ST361238, TA3 6PX).
9	Walk	SWT	<b>Cheddar Wood.</b> 1400-1600. Leader: Vic Matthews. Meet at the entrance to the reservoir car parks at Sharpham Road, Cheddar (BS27 3DR, ST449534). Quite strenuous and very steep in places. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £1.00.
13	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ashcott Corner. Starts 1000.</b> Leader: Ady Gough. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Free.
18	Talk	SWT	<b>Birding the Land of the Summer People.</b> 1930-2130. An illustrated talk by James Packer on the birds of Somerset. Cheddar Catholic Church Hall, Tweentown, Cheddar BS27 3HU. Off Upper North St beyond church. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.00.
19	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> '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). £7.00 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
19	Talk	SWT	<b>Ham Hill Country Park.</b> Starts 1930. An illustrated talk by Country Park Rangers Jonathan Marshman and Paul McNeill. St. John's Church Rooms, Church Path, Yeovil, BA20 1HE (ST556160). Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.00.
22	Walk	RSPB	<b>Catcott Lows.</b> Starts 1000. A visit to this SWT reserve led by Faith Blackmore. Meet at car park at ST400418. Free.
23	Walk	SWT	<b>Swell Wood.</b> 1030-1230. Informal walk at Swell Wood RSPB to enjoy herons, bird song and spring flowers. Meet at car park at ST361238. Car share from Tangier car park, Castle Street, Taunton TA1 4AY at 0945. Stout footwear advised. No dogs. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.

23	Walk	SWT	<b>Great Breach Wood.</b> Starts 1100. Spring interest walk led by David Lester and Phil Wright. Extensive woodland with a rich scrub understory. Meet in car park (ST502325). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility.
27	Talk	SOS	<b>The Jewel Hunter.</b> Starts 1930. Chris Goodie gives an illustrated talk on his mission to see all the world's pittas (a stunning family, sometimes known as 'jewel birds') in a single year. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton (nr Taunton) TA3 5JE (ST268270).
27	Talk	SWT	<b>The Wildlife of Blagdon Lake.</b> 1930-2130. An illustrated talk by Nigel Milbourne. St Catherine's Church Hall, Park Road, Frome, BA11 1EU (ST774478). Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1.00.
28	Talk	RSPB	<b>From Crested Screamers to Spoon-billed Sandpipers.</b> Starts 1930. An illustrated talk by Bill Francis. Trull Memorial Hall, Taunton TA3 7JZ. Free.

### April

2	Talk	SWT	<b>Bird ringing.</b> 1930-2130. Experienced ringer Matt Prior will explain the how, where, and when of bird ringing, and will look at the contribution made by ringing to the study of bird populations and movements. Shapwick Village Hall, Shapwick TA7 9NJ. Refreshments available. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.00.
3	Event	SOS	<b>AGM.</b> Starts 1930. Followed by a Quiz covering birds and general knowledge. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton (nr Taunton) TA3 5JE (ST268270).
6	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> '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 filled jacket potato and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Booking essential, contact Meare Manor 01458 860449.
6	Walk	SWT	<b>Loxley Wood.</b> 1400-1600. Leader: Ged Keele. Park by reserve entrance on the minor road to Shapwick village, just off A39 on the Polden ridge (ST408375). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £1.00.
8	Walk	SWT	<b>Avalon Young Wardens.</b> 1000-1500. Giving Nature a Home with the RSPB. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX).
8	Walk	RSPB	<b>Chew Valley Lake.</b> Starts 1000. Led by John Connolly. Park off road at ST571581. Free.
13	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> 'Mr Boombastic dawn chorus.' 0600-0900. Enjoy the early morning sights and sounds of the reserve, including booming Bitterns. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Followed by filled rolls and hot drinks at Meare Manor (included in price). £7.50 per person. Phone 01458 860449 to book (booking essential). Bring waterproofs, warm clothing and stout shoes.
15	Talk	SWT	<b>The Somerset Coast.</b> 1930-2130. Nigel Phillips will talk about the wildlife and ecology of the Somerset coast. Cheddar Catholic Church Hall, Tweentown, Cheddar BS27 3HU. Off Upper North St beyond church. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £2.00.
17	Talk	RSPB	<b>The Barn Owl Trust - Restoring the Balance.</b> Starts 1930. An illustrated talk by David Ramsden, RSPB Head of Conservation, about Barn Owl identification and conservation. Millennium Hall, Seavington (nr Ilminster) TA19 0QH. Local RSPB group members £2.50, non-members/national RSPB members £3.50, under 18s free.

24	Talk	SWT	<b>Wildlife on the Somerset Levels.</b> 1930-2100. Nigel Phillips gives an informative talk on why the Levels are like they are and what plants and animals are found there. St Catherine's Church Hall, Park Road, Frome, BA11 1EU (ST774478). Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children £1.00.
25	Talk	SWT	<b>Conservation of the Somerset Levels and Moors.</b> 1930-2100. Talk by Steve Parker of Natural England. Parish Hall, North Street, Ilminster TA19 0DG (ST361147). Parking at roadside or West Street car park. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2, children free.
26	Walk	SOS	<b>Brean Down.</b> Join leaders Julian Thomas and Alison Everett for a morning searching for newly-arrived spring migrants. Meet at 0815 at Brean Down NT car park (ST295588, TA8 2RS) (fee payable).
27	Family event	NE/ SWT/ HOT/ RSPB	<b>Shapwick Heath.</b> 'A wild day out in springtime.' 1000-1530. Children's environmental activities going on all day at the Avalon Marshes Centre including trailer rides over the reserve, puzzles, artwork, trails and much more. This is an Avalon Marshes Partnership event. Free - no booking necessary.
27	Walk	RSPB	<b>Horner Wood.</b> 1000. Leader: John Tolfree. Meet at car park (SS897455, TA24 8HY). Free.
30	Walk	RSPB	<b>River Yeo, Cheddar.</b> Starts 0930. Leader: Rosina Robinson. A flat riverbank walk, muddy in places, looking for migrants and river residents. Meet at Cheddar Reservoir car park off Sharpham Road, Cheddar (ST446535). Free.

### May

1	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> 'Bitterns in hot pursuit.' 1000-1500. Drop in between 10am to 3pm every Thursday in May to join the wardens and watch the bitterns take to the air to perform their exciting aerial courtship chases. Meet at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). Free.
4	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> 'Mr Boombastic dawn chorus.' 0600-0900. As 13 April.
6	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> 'Warbler workout.' 1000-1200. Join the wardens on Tuesdays in May and learn to identify the different warbler species that visit the reserve at this time of year by their individual songs. No previous experience required. Contact reserve office for details (01458 860494 or ham.wall@rspb.co.uk). Free, but donations welcome.
7	Walk	RSPB	<b>Stolford.</b> 1000. Led by Ady Gough. Meet at car park at ST232459.
8	Walk	RSPB	<b>Ham Wall.</b> 'Bitterns in hot pursuit.' 1000-1500. As 1 May.
11	Event	NE/ HOT	<b>Shapwick Heath.</b> 'Birds of Prey Day.' 1000-1600. Led by Chris Sperring OBE. During the morning learn about raptors before spending the afternoon on site to see some of our resident and migratory species. £20.00, maximum of 15 places. Proceeds to the conservation work of the Hawk and Owl Trust and Natural England within the Avalon Marshes. Booking essential. Contact: simon.clarke@naturalengland.org.uk or 01458 860120

13	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Warbler workout.' 1000-1200. As 6 May.
15	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Bitterns in hot pursuit.' 1000-1500. As 1 May.
15	Talk	RSPB	<b>Saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.</b> Starts 1930. A showing of this film produced by WWT about their project to save one of the world's most unusual and endangered waders. Millennium Hall, Seavington (nr Ilminster) TA19 0QH. Local RSPB group members £2.50, non-members/national RSPB members £3.50, under 18s free.
17	Walk	RSPB	<b>Hodder's Combe, Quantocks.</b> Meet at 1030 at NT car park at ST155411 for this all day walk looking for spring migrants. Bring a packed lunch. Free.
18	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Mr Boombastic dawn chorus.' 0600-0900. As 13 April.
20	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Warbler workout.' 1000-1200. As 6 May.
22	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Bitterns in hot pursuit.' 1000-1500. As 1 May.
24	Walk	SOS	<b>Holford.</b> Join leaders Brian Gibbs and Brian Hill for a morning looking for spring migrants and other woodland birds in the wonderful Quantock combes. Meet at 0930 at the NT car park at ST155411.
24	Event	NE/ SWT/ HOT/ RSPB	<b>The Avalon 24.</b> 1200-1200 on 25th. Back again for its fourth year: 24 hours of walks and talks across the Avalon Marshes reserves. Contact <a href="mailto:simon.beard@hawkandowltrust.org">simon.beard@hawkandowltrust.org</a> or telephone 07919095705.
25	Family event	NE/ SWT/ HOT/ RSPB	<b>Avalon Marshes Open Day.</b> 1000-1600. Displays and activities showcasing the work of different conservation groups involved on the reserves. Activities for children and trailer rides onto the reserves throughout the day. This is an Avalon Marshes Partnership event. Free - no booking necessary.
27	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Warbler workout.' 1000-1200. As 6 May.
29	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 'Bitterns in hot pursuit.' 1000-1500. As 1 May.

On behalf of Somerset Ornithological Society - [www.somersetbirds.net](http://www.somersetbirds.net)

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