



## Three County Firsts in a Week!

Julian Thomas reports

May this year was generally quiet for rare migrants, but then June arrived and it all went a bit mad. Regularly we watch from Somerset with envious eyes as other areas rack up the rarities, but this time we got to join in, and how: three new species for the county list were recorded in an extraordinary week. The rarest nationally, and longest-staying, was the middle of the three. I'll let the finder take up the story...

### River Warbler, Ham Wall

Dave Hughes

My birding day at Ham Wall on 4 June 2021 started off quietly. I wanted to try and add Eurasian Bittern to my year list - little did I know what was in store for me later on. Having spoken to one of the RSPB wardens I was told not many were flying at present, and my spirits slumped a little. However, some 20 minutes later and bittern was in the bag for 2021 so I decided to walk on and visit Avalon Hide to get good views of Western Marsh Harrier.

It was on the return journey from the hide, as I rejoined the grassy track back to the car park, that I heard a bird song which was unusual - though not alien to me, having been to see the Stoke Ferry River Warbler in 1989. Excitement kicked in. I still needed a good view of the bird to confirm my identification, though.

It didn't take long until, to my delight, I picked up the bird, which was facing me and showing its mottled upper breast. Another birder with two young kids was 50 metres away and they were recording the bird, though they didn't know the identity. Said birder approached me and agreed that it was definitely a River Warbler.

I then walked back to the car park to inform the wardens that they would be getting a lot of birders over the next few hours! After that, I returned to the warbler and watched it on and off until about 4 pm. The adrenaline was still pumping as I walked back, passing many birding friends who were going to see the River Warbler.

I have been birding for 43 years and found Aquatic Warbler on Portland and Lesser Yellowlegs at Pennington Marshes, but this day will stay with me forever. It also gives me great encouragement to try and find another rarity one day.

[Dave's account of his amazing find first appeared on *BirdGuides.com*, and we thank them and Dave for permission to reproduce it here.]



River Warbler

James Packer

The River Warbler was undoubtedly the one of the three that provided the most joy to the most observers, but was perhaps the least unexpected (Dave Nevitt and I had been joking about finding one there for weeks, though not seriously thinking it would happen). The ones that came before and after it were proper shocks, though, and rather trickier to catch up with. Their finders were also a perfect illustration of the true breadth of birding: the first was found by a local birder putting the hours in doing a BBS survey, and the third by one of the nation's top twitchers (and a bird-finder extraordinaire) on a day out.

## Blyth's Reed Warbler, Langport

### Pete Akers

On 2 June 2021 I was carrying out the second visit to my BTO Breeding Bird Survey square, located just to the west of Langport. The site has a nice mix of habitats and touches the edge of the Somerset Levels. Over the years I have increasingly enjoyed bird surveys here, where a familiarity with the bird community makes finding a new species for the site, even a common one, an exciting moment.

Not long after starting, at 06:30 am, I heard a distant snatch of song which caused me to think of Marsh Warbler? But no ... the moment was fleeting and among the cacophony of closer bird song I dismissed it as an aberration and gave it no further thought. Two hours later, with the survey complete, I was ambling back to my car and I remembered the snatch of song from earlier. I was now much closer to where it had come from and before getting to the car I stopped to listen. Almost immediately and to my surprise I heard it ... an unfamiliar song, coming from a hedge alongside the track and beside a damp hay meadow. This was definitely something interesting and needed closer attention!

I moved closer and the bird continued singing loud and clear, but it was deep within the hedge and I couldn't see it. I really didn't recognise the song but it was clearly something unusual and I suspected a rare *Acrocephalus* warbler. The date and habitat were good for Marsh Warbler but I am familiar with their song, having worked on a small breeding colony in Kent in the early 2000s and having heard many on day trips to France when I lived in Kent. This song was different, less frenetic and intense and not full of mimicry; it was slower paced with measured often repeated melodic ringing notes such as 'hoo-ee hoo-ee' and a characteristic triple 'whee-ee-hoo'. These repeated whistling phrases recalled Song Thrush and were interspersed with harsher staccato notes, trills, and guttural churring. It was quite unlike the pedestrian chuntering of Reed Warbler. I began to think, by a combination of probability and elimination, that it must be a Blyth's Reed Warbler, but my previous experience of that species was a poorly seen autumn individual in Kazakhstan, some twenty odd years earlier, so definitely of no help here!

Over the next few minutes the bird sang more or less continuously and I managed two brief views of it when it appeared in song at the edge of the hedge just a few metres from me. It sang in typical *Acrocephalus* fashion with a wide open gape and upward pointing bill, puffed out throat feathers, and a slightly raised crown. Plumage wise I could see it was a uniformly plain 'Acro' with a pale supercilium, most prominent before the eye. I remembered something about Blyth's having a bulging supercilium before the eye, so this made sense. But who was going to believe this record! A barely seen Blyth's Reed Warbler in some random inland bit of Somerset? I needed help and for someone else to see it, so I texted Dave Chown and he soon phoned me back. Whilst talking to Dave I held my phone up to the singing bird for him to hear it 'live', but he wasn't really getting it, so he set out from home to join me. I had my camera and was trying (unsuccessfully) to video the bird and when Dave phoned I forgot to switch it off, so I obtained about ten minutes of video, with the camera dangling from my wrist, of close-ups of my jumper, shaky upside down vegetation, and blackness, but nonetheless it did capture good audio of the bird singing as well as Dave and I discussing the bird's identity!

Over the next 30 minutes or so the bird continued to sing frequently and I got some more good sound recordings - the bird being just a couple of metres away at times but deep in cover and resolutely not showing itself. An hour passed before Dave arrived, by which time I hadn't heard it for a while but by then I was sure of the bird's identity so I posted a message on a local WhatsApp birding group to say I had found a singing Blyth's Reed Warbler, and from there the news went out further. Dave and I remained on site

until mid-afternoon but unfortunately we never saw or heard it during that time, my last record of it singing being about 10:00 am.

That evening a number of birders visited the site and heard the bird again but it had now moved to a small sallow copse nearby where seeing it was likely to be even more difficult than earlier and as far as I know it was not seen well.

I was surprised to learn this was the first record of Blyth's Reed Warbler for Somerset, but as they are expanding their range it is perhaps just a matter of time before they become more frequent visitors. In the meantime it just goes to show that rare birds do turn up in the most unexpected places - it just takes a random moment for a lucky birder to encounter one.

## Rustic Bunting, Ham Wall

Chris Heard

Monday 7 June was a hot and humid day in the South-east, and birding my local patch was surprisingly unproductive. So, the following day, I joined Allan Stewart and Lee Evans on a trip to the West Country. Our first stop was Ham Wall RSPB reserve and by mid-morning we'd already had superb views of the River Warbler. We then decided to wander further east along the main track and were rewarded with flight views of a Bittern and a vocalising Cuckoo, but not much else. Just after we'd turned to head back my pager 'mega-alerted' me to a sighting of a Sulphur-bellied Warbler on Lundy - a species which I'd seen previously in the Western Himalayas and which I knew had been recorded just once before in Europe! It was while we were discussing this (and how we might get there that day), that I noticed what looked like a bunting on the track ahead of us.

As I raised my binoculars ABS said 'What's that on the path?' and I was able to reply immediately (and in an emphatic tone!) 'Rustic Bunting on the track in front of us'. LGRE was on a phone-call at the time, so he was the last to get on it, but it seemed unafraid and we all enjoyed excellent views as it shuffled about on the gravel. I hurriedly took some 'phone-scope photos but then, after just three minutes, it flew off to our left (obstructing trees made it impossible to see where it landed). We waited for another c.10 minutes, in case it came back, but we were all rather elated - by this totally unexpected sighting as well as the 'mega' news. Some other birders came towards us but they seemed unimpressed by our news, even when I showed them the photos on my phone...



Rustic Bunting (male)

Chris Heard



Another group were more excited (by this time LGRE had put our news out on the RBA pager) but we now had no idea where the bunting had got to. As we moved away, ABS said that 'It will probably show well for everyone else today'. But, conscious of the vast area of inaccessible habitat, I replied that 'Actually, this is just the sort of bird that is never seen again...' Which proved to be prophetic.

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## Welcome

Hello again!

It's been a very long time since the last issue of *The Bittern*, and I can only apologise to members for that. A lot has changed in that time, of course, and we are only now starting to get back to something like what used to be normality.

Your Committee had already been considering the future of *The Bittern*, how well it served you as members and how best to keep it fresh and relevant, before the pandemic turned the world upside down. While we recognise that it might have been better in terms of keeping in touch with members if we had been able to keep the newsletter ticking over during what has been a difficult time for all, it did not prove possible for a number of reasons. We have taken the opportunity, however, afforded by the hiatus we have all felt to a greater or lesser degree to consider how best to move the newsletter forward, and I hope you like this, the result.

With the relaxation of restrictions we are now making plans for the future. Field meetings are now back on the agenda, though it may take a little longer before we can consider indoor gatherings, and it may indeed even be the case that we continue with at least some virtual meetings if the demand and interest are there. We have all learned so much over the last 18 months about what is possible, and even preferable for many (though perhaps not all), so there need not be too much of a rush back to simply doing what we did before.

Though more destinations are opening up, foreign travel remains largely problematic for the moment (my own trip to Kazakhstan, where the pic above was taken, was only in 2018, yet feels like it happened in another lifetime). But there are plenty of great birding and wildlife experiences to be had in the UK, and we are blessed here in Somerset to have some of the best of them, with opportunities either to meet safely in groups or find quiet spots to bird alone, whichever you feel is best for you.

Enjoy your birding, wherever it may be.





# SOS Membership Survey 2021

## Membership Secretary Dick Best reports

Each year the total number of members of the Somerset Ornithological Society remains around 500 and we felt that, within the catchment area, there could be the potential to increase membership. A larger membership could lead to an increase in activities which would raise the Society's profile and help promote ornithology within Somerset.

Most information we have on the recruitment of new members is anecdotal so, to gain some real evidence, we conducted a survey of newly joined members earlier in the year asking how they became aware of the Society and what encouraged them to join.

The survey took the form of a fairly simple online questionnaire, designed using the popular *SurveyMonkey* tool. This was sent by email to a list of 65 members, all of whom had joined the Society within the last two years.

The survey consisted of six questions in which the respondents were asked to choose replies from a list of headings. We received 22 replies to the survey, a 34% response rate, which is regarded as an unusually high rate of return. The following are the questions, together with the percentage of the total responses to each heading within that question.

1. Where did you find information about the Society, its aims and its activities?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| <input type="radio"/> On the Somerset Birds (SOS) website | 58% |
| <input type="radio"/> Google                              | 15% |
| <input type="radio"/> A copy of the Somerset Bird Report  | 15% |
| <input type="radio"/> From a friend                       | 37% |

2. What made you decide to join SOS?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| <input type="radio"/> Talks                           | 33% |
| <input type="radio"/> Field meetings (guided walks)   | 50% |
| <input type="radio"/> A copy of <i>Somerset Birds</i> | 78% |
| <input type="radio"/> Other                           | 0%  |

3. Did you find application for membership a straightforward process?

- |                           |     |
|---------------------------|-----|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes | 84% |
| <input type="radio"/> No  | 16% |

4. To which other national or local natural history societies do you belong?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| <input type="radio"/> RSPB                          | 58% |
| <input type="radio"/> Woodland Trust                | 10% |
| <input type="radio"/> Plantlife                     | 0%  |
| <input type="radio"/> National Trust                | 58% |
| <input type="radio"/> British Trust for Ornithology | 52% |
| <input type="radio"/> Somerset Wildlife Trust       | 42% |
| <input type="radio"/> Other                         | 5%  |

5. Which of the following would best describe your level of interest?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| ○ General naturalist, with an interest in birds             | 32% |
| ○ General interest in all aspects of birdlife               | 42% |
| ○ An actively committed birder                              | 42% |
| ○ Specialised interest, e.g. bird art, photography, ringing | 21% |
| ○ Field survey work and data collection                     | 26% |

6. In which of the following activities have you already participated, or, in which would you intend to participate when the world returns to 'normal'?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| ○ Submission of bird records to the County Recorder | 64% |
| ○ Biannual Members' Day                             | 14% |
| ○ Virtual talks                                     | 21% |
| ○ Field meetings                                    | 57% |
| ○ Surveys   | 36% |

Some headline findings from the survey:

- It would seem, from responses to Question 1, that most new recruits obtain information about the Society from the Society's website or from personal contacts. Encouraging new members might come from an imaginative programme advertising the value of involvement in the Society's activities. Attractive notices detailing the Society could be displayed at sites likely to be visited by potential recruits, such as local reserves, National Trust sites, libraries, and museums. Question 4 shows that new applicants are also members of a wide range of national and local organisations. Nearly 50% of respondents are Somerset Wildlife Trust and RSPB members, and working more closely with these local groups might further promote activities of the SOS.
- The responses to Question 2 clearly show that the annual Bird Report is the most popular and respected activity of the Society, and might well be the reason for the large number of members from outside the County - in 2020, 23% of the membership were out-of-county members.
- The popularity of the various activities of the Society was telling in replies to Question 6, where 'Submitting records', 'Attending field meetings' and 'Survey work' were way out in the lead, whereas 'Virtual talks' and 'Members' Days' attracted less support.
- It would appear that newly recruited members tend to be active birders, with over 50% of responses to Question 4 showing membership of the BTO. Collecting and collating data from field work is an important part of the Society's activities in monitoring Somerset's avifauna and providing essential support for the conservation of a dwindling biodiversity.

# Watching Birds in... The Forest of Dean

Dan Watson gives us an insight into the best birding spots in the area he now calls home

The Forest of Dean offers some of the best forest birding opportunities in the UK, with a reasonable chance of encountering interesting mammals, set in some beautiful remnants of old-growth deciduous woodland. Tricky species such as Hawfinch, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and Goshawk can all be encountered at any time of the year with luck, whilst the forests echo with the songs of Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, and Redstart amongst commoner species in the spring. The forest is less than 1.5hrs from Taunton and makes for a great day's birding between November and July.

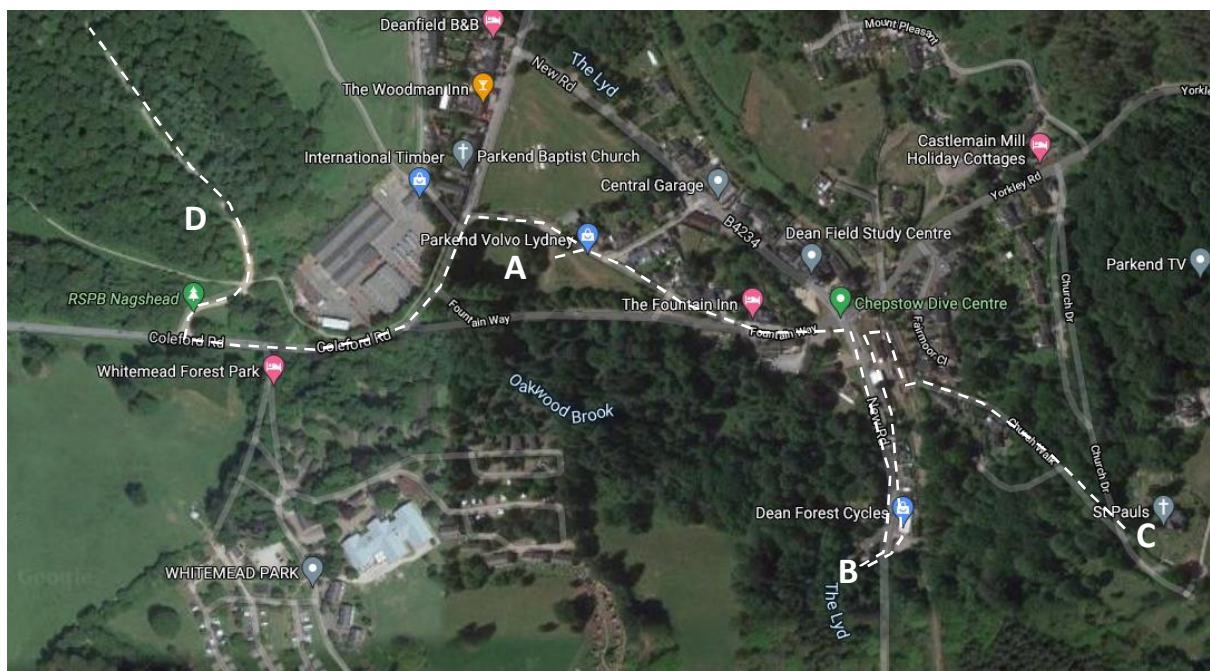
## Parkend

This delightful village deep in the heart of the forest is an excellent starting point, with a range of commoner species, as well as several more unusual inhabitants. Park by the cricket pitch off Crown Lane (SO 61411 07942, nearest postcode GL15 4JE) and keep an eye under the yew trees immediately to the west (A) – this area is excellent for finches in winter and offers a reasonable chance of Hawfinch with patience. *Tip – stay in your car to enjoy the best views and avoid disturbance.*

Continue down Crown Lane, keeping an eye and ear open for species such as Nuthatch (and Hawfinch overhead), then turn right onto New Road. Continue down the road approximately 100m then turn right opposite the bike shop to access the River Lyd. There is a small bridge over the river here (SO 61656 07650), and with patience both Dipper and Grey Wagtail can be encountered (B).

Head back towards the village along New Road, before cutting through the railway station and crossing the footbridge onto Church Walk. Follow the track up to the church (SO 61951 07663) and explore the surrounding woodland. This is another great area for Hawfinch, with Marsh Tit also possible in this area (C).

The nearby RSPB Nagshead reserve is worth exploring, and is home to Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, and Redstart amongst other commoner species in the spring and summer, whilst February and March offer opportunities to encounter Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Hawfinch. The access track to the reserve can be good for Wild Boar, whilst recently there have been a number of Pine Marten sightings, presumably from the reintroduction programme nearby. Car parking is at SO 60672 08462.



## Crabtree Hill

This area provides interest throughout the year and contains a range of habitats to explore. There are several parking locations along Speech House Road, but the easiest is Speech House Car Park (SO 62385 12460, nearest postcode GL16 7EL). From the car park, walk east along the track, turning left by a house in the woodland. The garden here (A) is worth checking, as Firecrest breeds nearby, and is often found in the holly bushes here in winter. Carry on to the left along the main track until you reach an obvious crossroads. Continue straight along this track for approximately 500m, then follow the track round to the right, which brings you into the more open environs of Crabtree Hill.

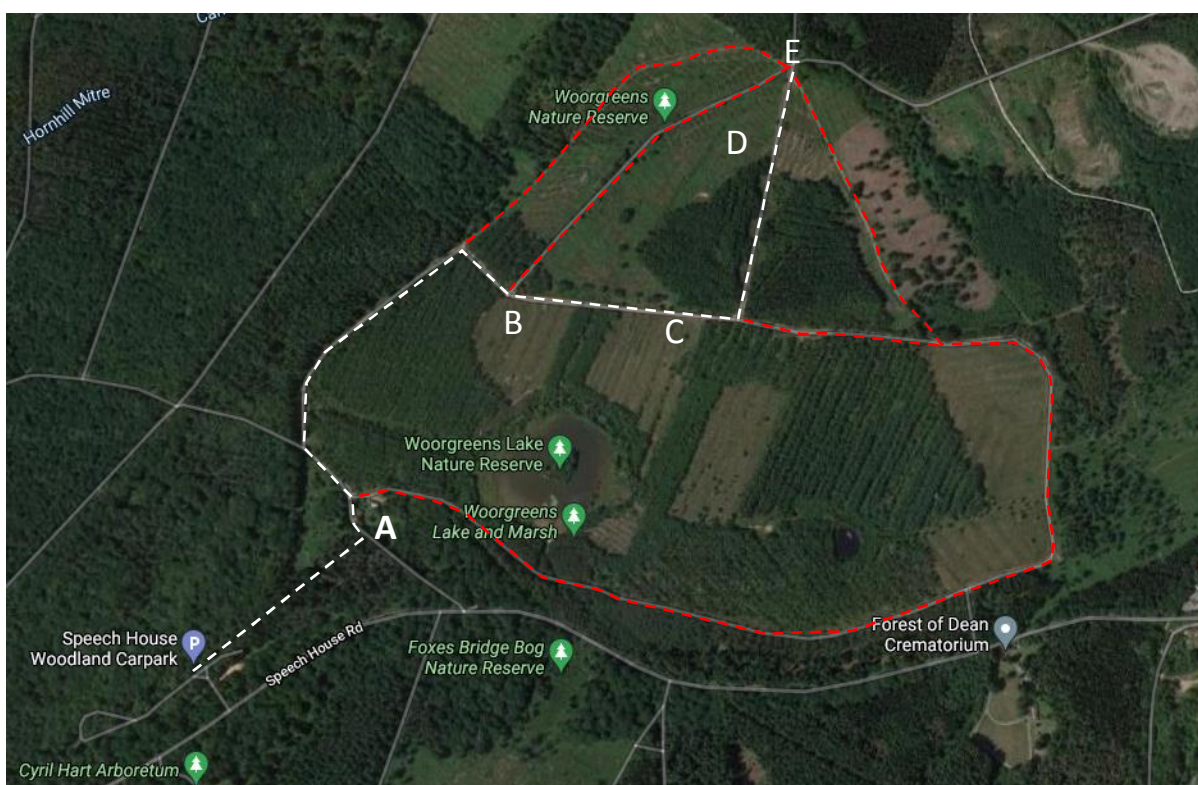
The first clearing to the south (B) holds several Tree Pipit territories in spring, whilst the row of alder trees here can be good for Siskin and Redpoll in winter. Stonechat is present throughout the year, whilst any passing raptor should be checked for Goshawk. There are two small ponds at the very southern end of the clearing which can be excellent for dragonflies, with Black Darter of particular note.

Continuing along the main track (C), more Tree Pipit territories can be encountered, whilst Redstart can be encountered during the spring, with the occasional bird holding territory. Wild Boar can be encountered anywhere along the route, and contrary to popular belief, are unlikely to cause any concern.

The track curves to the left along an old concrete track, with a gentle ascent to Crabtree Hill (D). This area is good for Stonechat, Linnet, Tree Pipit, and various warblers, whilst in winter Great Grey Shrike has become a regular fixture. *Tip – stick to the main path to avoid disturbance.* During the early summer period, a dusk visit to this area is recommended, as several Nightjar breed, along with the occasional roding Woodcock and reeling Grasshopper Warbler.

At the top of the hill (E), there are great views to the south over the heath and the forest beyond. Time spent scanning this area could produce Goshawk (fairly regular December–April), Crossbill, Siskin, Redpoll, and also Goosander which winter on nearby Woorgreens Lake.

From here it is possible to continue to either the right or left along various circular trails (outlined in red) which provide further opportunities for woodland and heathland species. Marsh Tit is possible in this area, whilst Hawfinch may be observed flying between woodland blocks. Wood Warbler does occur in spring, though it is unusual, whilst Dartford Warbler and Woodlark have been recorded in the area on a handful of occasions.





## New Fancy View

This site is arguably one of the best in the country for Goshawk, with sightings almost guaranteed between mid-February and mid-April. The views over the forest from this former mining spoil heap are stunning, particularly in autumn when the leaves begin to turn.

There is a large car park at SO 62740 09554 (nearest postcode GL15 4HR), and from here a (fairly steep) access track to the viewpoint. The view looks north-northeast towards Cinderford, and the light is excellent throughout. *Tip – bright, sunny mornings with less than 50% cloud cover and a F1–F3 breeze are the optimum conditions for displaying Goshawk.* Other species in the area include Crossbill and Siskin, with several Wood Warbler territories audible in spring. Hawfinch is occasionally seen, whilst other raptors include Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine, Hobby, and Red Kite. The old railway sleepers around the viewpoint should be checked carefully for Adder and Common Lizard.



## Other sites

**Cannop Ponds** (GL15 4JS) can be worth a visit, with Wild Boar possible anywhere along the access track, or even in the car park. There is a feeding station (SO 60979 10859) which can attract a variety of species, including Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Brambling, and Bullfinch. The ponds (lakes really) can be attractive to wildfowl in winter, with Tufted Duck and Goosander most likely, though occasional Teal, Wigeon, and Goldeneye may be seen. Mandarin is present throughout. During the winter the bridge by the car park (SO 60952 10753) offers a good chance to see Dipper and Grey Wagtail.

**Spruce Ride** (GL16 7EJ) is another great area to explore. There is a long, straight track that takes you into the forest south of Speech House, allowing you to access Speech House Lake (good for finches and Mandarin) and the mixed woodland in the area. There are various tracks to explore, and the woodland here is home to Wood Warbler, Firecrest, Goshawk, Hawfinch, and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. A particularly productive area is the left-hand track at the very end of the ride, where a small pond and stream are located within some deciduous woodland (SO 63539 10828).

**Brierley Woods** (GL17 9DL) can provide some excellent birding and is often quieter than the above locations. Access is via the Forestry Commission track opposite the petrol station, and there are numerous tracks to explore. The main trail leads up onto a ridge (SO627146) with far reaching views to the south over the forest. Birds in this area include Spotted Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, Redstart, Goshawk, and Woodcock, whilst Hawfinch and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker may also be encountered.

(All maps here created using Google Maps: Map data ©2021 Google)

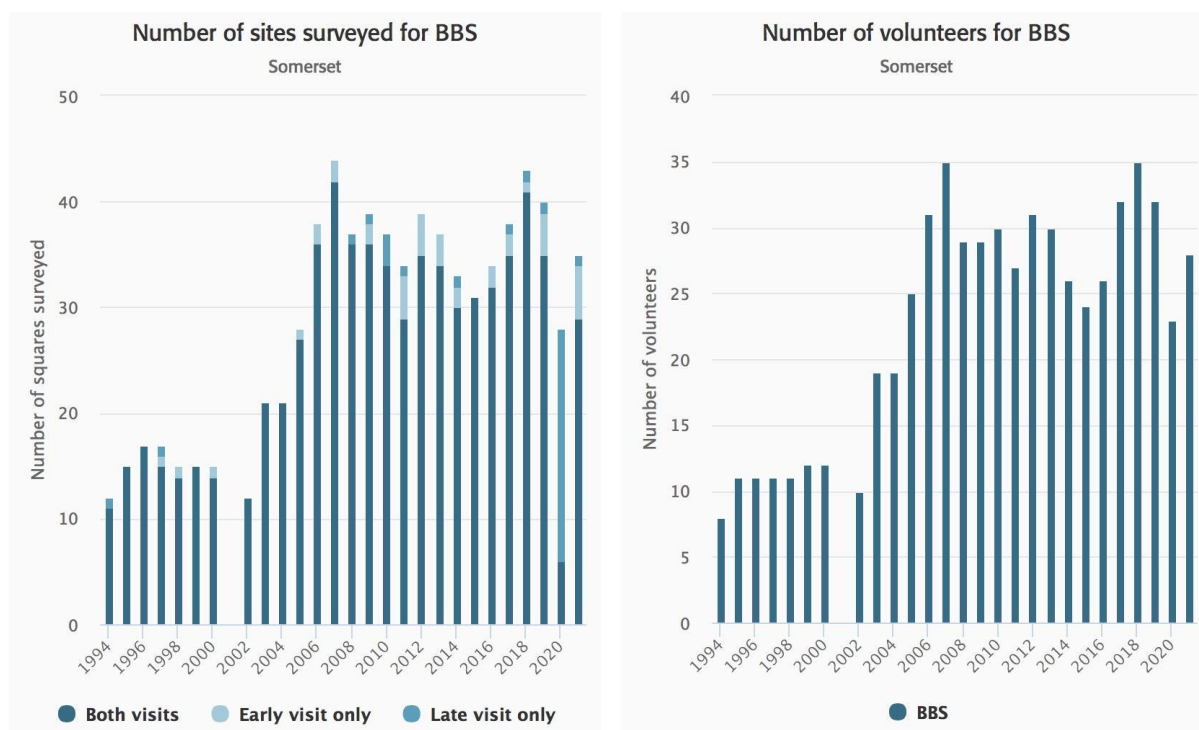
# Surveys Report

BTO Representative **Eve Tigwell** summarises the results of recent survey efforts in the county

## BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)

The breeding bird survey season in Somerset has finished for 2021; the data are being submitted for verification and then analysis. It's looking a much better season than 2020, when the majority of visits were categorised as Late due to most people being under lockdown during the Early weeks. The gaps show up clearly in the bar chart. Fortunately, the BTO's data-crunchers are able to work around these gaps in the data and the full reports on trends will continue.

Of the BBS squares (88) available in Somerset, 68% have been allocated. So far, this year surveyors have walked 126.4 km on their BBS squares and WBBS stretches. This is 67% of the greatest distance for a Little Owl ringing recovery; Dorset to Herefordshire in one year! To date we've received data for 60% of allocated squares for Early visits and 53% for Late visits; a full update will follow later in the year.



There are no big surprises in these data. Woodpigeon remains the most widespread and most numerous species, being recorded in 100% of the BBS squares. House Sparrow doesn't make it into the 'most widespread' table, but is 6th in the 'most numerous' table; a reflection of the number of farms and suburban areas included in BBS.

### Most widespread species for BBS

Somerset in 2021

Species	Squares	Percentage of all squares surveyed	Individuals
Woodpigeon	36	100%	652
Blackbird	36	100%	423
Carriion Crow	35	97%	431
Wren	34	94%	377
Robin	33	92%	318
Chaffinch	33	92%	194
Great Tit	33	92%	188
Blue Tit	32	89%	259
Chiffchaff	31	86%	184
Magpie	31	86%	110

### Most numerous species for BBS

Somerset in 2021

Species	Individuals	Squares	Percentage of all squares surveyed
Woodpigeon	652	36	100%
Jackdaw	470	28	78%
Rook	444	20	56%
Carriion Crow	431	35	97%
Blackbird	423	36	100%
House Sparrow	395	27	75%
Wren	377	34	94%
Robin	318	33	92%
Blue Tit	259	32	89%
Goldfinch	258	30	83%

BBS isn't intended to provide records of rarities; some of which may not be breeding in the squares where they are recorded. The range for 2021 is, nevertheless, impressive.

### Rarest species for BBS

Somerset in 2021

Species	Squares	Percentage of all squares surveyed	Individuals
Lapwing	1	3%	1
Sabine's Gull	1	3%	1
Barn Owl	1	3%	1
Hobby	1	3%	1
Grasshopper Warbler	1	3%	1
Pied Flycatcher	1	3%	1
Whinchat	1	3%	1
Dipper	1	3%	1
Yellow Wagtail	1	3%	1
Grey Partridge	1	3%	2

## BTO Waterways Breeding Bird Survey (WBBS)

Of the six WBBS stretches available in Somerset, 50% have been allocated. Data are currently only available for just one stretch, where the surveyor walked 4.0 km. This is 9% of the UK climate-change-induced average northern range shift for 80 bird species from 1994 to 2009. Not surprisingly, Mallard tops the table with 19 individuals recorded, with Mute Swan not far behind. WBBS surveyors record all the birds on their stretch of river, so non-waterways species also appear quite high up in the tables.

### Most widespread species for WBBS

Somerset in 2021

Species	Stretches	Percentage of all stretches surveyed	Individuals
Mallard	1	100%	19
Mute Swan	1	100%	17
Herring Gull	1	100%	12
Rook	1	100%	12
Carriion Crow	1	100%	10
Linnet	1	100%	10
Tufted Duck	1	100%	9
Skylark	1	100%	6
Swallow	1	100%	6
Blackbird	1	100%	6

## BTO Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS)

WeBS was originally conceived as a survey of wintering wetland birds (October to March), with a year that runs from July to June; nowadays many sites are surveyed all year round. The main focus of sites is the Somerset Levels and Moors; other freshwater sites include several reservoirs, farm ponds, and even some urban sites. The bulk of species recorded are closely linked to their wetland habitat, but the online data-entry system allows a wide range of other species to be recorded. Data on the breeding status of birds can be submitted in BirdTrack, with the two computer systems talking to each other as necessary. All data are valuable!

From 1960 to 2021, 112 locations and 127 species have been recorded under WeBS. In individual years there are fewer sites and fewer species recorded, but the totals are still impressive. There was a drop in the number of locations that could be reached during the lockdowns, but are not far from pre-pandemic levels:

In 2018-2019:  
60 locations  
64 species

In 2019-2020:  
55 locations  
68 species

In 2020-2021:  
57 locations  
72 species

The main additions to the species list in the last decades have included Little Egret, Great White Egret, and now Cattle Egret. Numbers of the latter in the main winter roost are well over 100, with all three species being recorded as breeding successfully in increasing numbers.

## BTO Heronries Census

There are 19 known Heronries in Somerset; data have been received for nine of these in 2021. The majority are relatively small sites, with the exception of RSPB Swell Wood, which can hold over 100 apparently occupied Heron nests (AON), along with small numbers of Little Egret nests. A full report will appear in *Somerset Birds* later in the year.

## Rookeries

Somerset is a well-wooded county with plenty of livestock farms. However, records of Rookeries are few and far between, as can be seen from the reports in Somerset Birds. A system for allocating sites and submitting data has been produced by the BTO, which has been successfully personalised for Cornwall. If all goes well, we're hoping to start running this more formal type of survey for Rookeries in Somerset, starting in 2022. More information will be circulated as soon as it becomes available. Start making a list of your local Rookeries, ready for the survey!

# Somerset's Breeding Great White Egrets

Rob Grimmond reports on success and dispersal of one of our star birds

## Breeding

For Somerset birders, it's difficult to believe that Great White Egret was not recorded in the county till 1992, where a bird was seen at Durleigh Reservoir in July of that year. In the following fifteen years birds began to be seen on the Avalon Marshes and at various other sites. From 2007, they were recorded annually and breeding was confirmed for the first time in 2012 (after possible breeding two years earlier).

From 2012 to 2015, small numbers of young were fledged. Since then, numbers have increased considerably, so that there is now a healthy core breeding, as well as year-round, population on the Avalon Marshes. The following table sets out details of breeding success.

Year	Successful nests/pairs	Fledged young
2012	2	5
2013	2	5
2014	2	5
2015	1	2
2016	5	15
2017	7	16
2018	6	19
2019	13	31
2020	14	34

## Colour-ringing

In 2016 a colour-ringing project was started on the Avalon Marshes, when three juveniles were ringed on the nest. In 2017 and 2018 a further two juveniles were ringed. No ringing was carried out in 2019 or 2020 but this year, 2021, eight birds were ringed. Red rings with a white three letter code were placed on the left tibia of the bird. Codes used so far are:

AAA	AAH	AAM	AAT	AAW
AAC	AAJ	AAP	AAU	AAX
AAF	AAL	AAR	AAV	ABA



## Re-sightings of Somerset birds

Unsurprisingly, most of the Somerset birds have been re-sighted and there have been numerous sightings within the county. For example, AAC, one of the birds ringed in the first year, has been reported regularly from the Avalon Marshes in following years, and indeed nested in 2018 when he fledged three young.

There have also been several records of Somerset-ringed birds outside of the county.

AAH - a female, ringed in May 2017, was re-sighted between July and October that year at Dungeness in Kent, but has not subsequently been reported;

AAJ - a male, ringed with AAH, was reported from Sandwich Bay in Kent in July and August 2017 and, like AAH, has not been reported subsequently;

AAL and AAM - these two 2018 birds have also been wanderers. The former was recorded at Slimbridge in July that year, then Frampton and Coventry two months later. AAM was seen at Titchfield Haven in Hampshire in August 2018 but was back in the county at Durleigh Reservoir by September.



Sightings of this year's birds have been coming in as they fledge and disperse, with AAR reported from Newtown in Powys, AAT reported from RSPB Conwy in North Wales, AAU reported from Stocks Reservoir in Lancashire, and AAW from Ramsholt in Suffolk. AAP has yet to be re-sighted and AAX and ABA are yet to fledge at time of writing.

In the early years of the colour-ringing project there were many local reports of some of the birds. Sighting have been fewer in the last few

years, perhaps because the novelty of reporting them has worn off. One of the first birds, AAA, has not been reported since 2016. There have been no reports of any colour-ringed birds on the website forum since 2018. ***Records are still important though, so we would urge any sightings of the Somerset birds to be reported to the Project Coordinator Alison Morgan at [alison.morgan@rspb.org.uk](mailto:alison.morgan@rspb.org.uk).***

## Other colour-ringing projects

Quite remarkably, there are some 35 Great White Egret colour-ringing projects in Europe, from Spain to Finland, Croatia to the Netherlands, and from Belarus to France. Some of their birds have been reported in the UK, even Somerset. In 2014 and 2015, two French birds were seen at Meare Heath and, in 2019, another French bird was seen at Westhay in September. Overall around twelve French ringed birds have been reported in the UK, including one of the first breeding pair at Shapwick Heath in 2012 and, later and independently, one of its siblings.

At least two birds from Belarus have been recorded in the UK. The first was on Skye in 2017 and the second in September 2020 in North Yorkshire, then presumably the same bird near Bawdrip in Somerset in November 2020.

If you come across a colour-ringed Great White Egret that isn't listed above, we encourage you to go to the European Colour-ring Birding website at <https://cr-birding.org/colourprojects> and type 'Great Egret' in the English species name search bar. You should then get the list of all projects in Europe.

Please keep the reports coming in!

# News from the Ringing Team

Trainee ringer and team member **Lara Winsloe** gives us an update

Advancing out into the pre-dawn mists of rural Somerset, armed with pliers, a modified broom handle, an assortment of cotton bags, nets, and other semi-technical paraphernalia is the stuff of nightmares to most non-morning people. Copious quantities of coffee, along with a hefty bacon sandwich make it slightly less awful, but only just. The freezing temperatures which characterise winter and early-spring ringing have thankfully given way to the rather balmy climes of late, and it is with a sigh of relief that we've bid goodbye to frostbitten fingers and toes.

Throughout the various lockdowns here in England, our particular ringing team has managed to keep plugging away at most of the regular sites in southern Somerset, with some 600 new birds ringed in total this year. Most of these have been in the form of common garden birds - a mixture of tits, Robins, House Sparrows, Dunnocks, Wrens, finches, and Blackbirds. We're also happy to report several migrants too - Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps continue to be regular visitors to the nets, and we're now seeing the return of the hirundines, a welcome sight to any birder.

The six sites we ring regularly provide a broad scope of habitats, helping us build a more comprehensive picture of population sizes which are to be found in this county. Langport Sewage Works, as an active sewage site, is dotted with fir trees, mixed wildflower crop, and bordered by farmland. The water here is kept constantly moving and, provided you can stand the smell (it's amazing how quickly one acclimates), the slightly warmer ambient temperature creates abundant insect life, perfect for hirundines, wagtails, and a host of other insectivorous birds. At the time of writing, a ringing session just this morning brought us two juvenile Pied Wagtails.

Next is Carymoor Environmental Centre, a fantastic habitat for birds: mixed scrub and mature hedges; nearby farmland and patches of mixed woodland, coupled with relatively little human disturbance, allows for a variety of species to thrive. We were thrilled to ring an adult and juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker there last month, along with a rather beautiful adult Jay. In all, 17 species have been ringed at this site in 2021, a total of 71 individuals and 15 recaptured birds.

Two garden sites are also on our list - one in an urban area of Somerton, the other in a rural village outside of Frome, both of which offer plenty of tits, Starlings, Goldfinches, House Sparrows, Siskins, and the occasional Redpoll. Jackdaws and Woodpigeons have been ringed when found opportunistically nesting in the garage and larger bird boxes. From these two sites, 83 individuals have been ringed, across 22 species.

Our penultimate site is a small patch of young woodland on about half an acre of land on the periphery of town. This has been perhaps the most rewarding, as many birds flock in from neighbouring farmland, and the mixture of native trees provides a great source of food. In fact, of the 600 birds ringed in 2021, 206 of those were ringed here, including 43 Goldfinches, 17 Chaffinches, and an astonishing 71 Greenfinches! These numbers are extremely heartening, given the decline in Greenfinch numbers in recent years.

Lastly, Merryfield airbase lying northwest of Ilminster has continued to demonstrate the benefits of mixed habitats for birdlife. An active RNAS site, much of the land is given over to grassland, but outside of the runways, dense patches of mature scrub and established mature trees provide the perfect cover for juvenile birds as well as roosting spots for



Nightingale

Roger Dickey

adults. For several years, Merryfield has been known as one of the few places in Somerset which Nightingales frequent, and as such, an ongoing colour ringing project for this species takes place each year April through to July. This year, we were fortunate enough to identify 8 singing males, recapturing one from last May, and ringing a brand-new bird, much to our delight. The diversity of vegetation has attracted numerous other species, including Garden Warbler, Bullfinches (of which 10 new birds were ringed this year alone), Whitethroat, and Blackcaps.



Tawny Owl chicks, Merryfield

Roger Dickey

Merryfield has also been a fabulous spot for nesting owls. This year, we have ringed three Tawny Owlets and four Barn Owlets. The behavioural difference between the two broods was extreme - the Tawnies appeared very bright eyed and bushy tailed, with one youngster making a break for it into a nearby hedge as we reached into the box! In contrast, the Barn Owlets were quite content to sit in a neat little row whilst we ringed and measured them, with one quite literally dozing off on the author's lap whilst being fitted with their ring. A further four Barn Owlets, stars of Somerset Wildlife Trust, were ringed in the Blackdown Hills - readers may have caught them on TV last month!

Finally, a special project under Forestry England studying nesting Pied Flycatchers in the Quantocks AONB has experienced great success this spring. These beautiful birds build the most exquisite nests, laying between 4 and 7 bright duck-egg blue eggs. Out of 22 nest boxes in a singlecombe, 5 adults were ringed, along with an amazing 53 pulli (hatchlings)! Special thanks go to the Quantocks AONB ranger team for facilitating this project.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is currently re-opening training opportunities for aspiring ringers in line with the relaxation of national restrictions. Should any reader be interested, or indeed know anyone who would enjoy the opportunity of getting up close and personal with the many fantastic birds here in Somerset, in addition to having the chance to contribute to a worthwhile national conservation cause, please do visit the ringing pages at [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org).

## GPS Tag Rescue: the Journey of an e-Bird

### The story of a Curlew as told by Dick Best

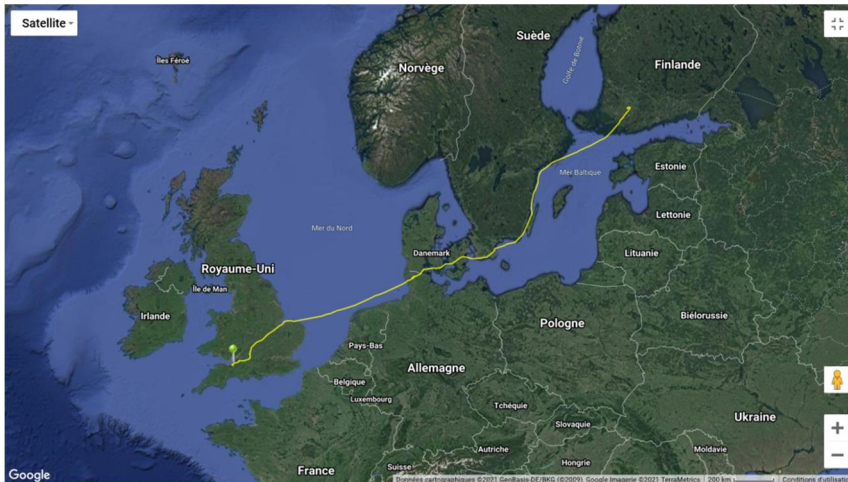
In early March of this year the WWT office in Steart received, via the BTO, a request for help to retrieve a telemetry tag that had become detached from a bird on the Steart peninsula. The tag had been fitted to a Eurasian Curlew in Finland in the summer of 2020 as part of a study by a French team led by Professeur Frédéric Jiguet of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris.

Such tags are small transmitters that regularly relay their position to satellites in the GPS network and are ideal for tracking movement and, as in this case, frequently used in research projects to track bird migration. The tags are less than 6 cm long, weighing around 10 g, and when used on birds are usually attached to the back of the bird with a light harness around the body or glued to a feather on the mantle. The tags are designed to fall off the bird when the



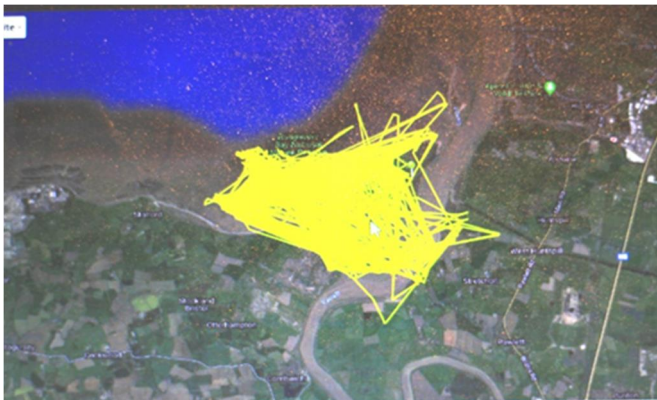


attachment degrades and breaks or, if glued to feathers, when the bird moults. The tags used in this study transmitted their location every two hours and could be traced to a location of several square metres (although, using current technology, the accuracy can be reduced to 30cm!).



This tag had been placed on a bird captured on its breeding ground close to Koski in southern Finland. Once it left its breeding ground, its pathway to Steart could be followed, almost in real time, across the Baltic and the North Sea to England and Steart (see map, left). Once in Steart it clearly settled and through the winter it remained in a relatively small area based on Steart peninsula, moving to feed no further than Bridgwater Bay mud

flats and Pawlett Hams (see map, below). However, one day in February all transmissions came from one spot - either the bird had died or the tag had become detached.



The recovery of the lost tag was a frustrating but eventually successful operation. We roughly knew the location of the tag from its transmissions but the coordinates we had were not precise and often erratic. They indicated a challenging area of several metres squared that was covered in mud and grass tussocks at the base of the flood defence embankment and on a well-trodden cattle track to a water tank. Our GPS devices were not accurate and visual inspection with raking the ground was useless. Success came with a metal detector borrowed from WWT; after a

series of trial attempts we managed to get a good signal in a wet, muddy patch and with a little raking over the soil the tag appeared - result! The tag was returned to Paris in good working order and will be re-used this summer. It is worth noting the expense involved in these studies; the tags are worth at least £1,000 - perhaps we should have held it for ransom!

We have subsequently heard that in 2020 a German team had placed GPS tags on German-bred Curlews and recorded one bird wintering on the north side of the Bristol Channel/Severn Estuary, indicating a possible Baltic source of some local wintering Curlews.

If you have any comments or feedback, or suggestions for subjects for us to cover in future newsletters (or you would like to write an article yourself), please contact the Editor or any Committee member. (Editor's contact details are on p. 5.)



**Somerset**  
ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

[www.somersetbirding.org.uk](http://www.somersetbirding.org.uk)