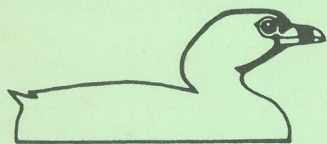


BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY



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BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

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PREFACE

As a glance at the previous page will show, the contents of this issue of *Bristol Ornithology* are more varied than usual. Reflecting what can be done locally, Graham Sims has contributed a summary of results gathered from his study of breeding birds in Ashton Court Wood, undertaken as part of the BTO's countrywide Common Birds Census. Despite a high degree of disturbance the area maintains a good and varied bird population. It would be interesting to receive similar accounts from other BTO surveys, so that the local as opposed to national interest could be expanded, thus increasing the value of the observations.

By way of contrast, we include two papers and a note concerning local rarities. Despite the unsettled weather, 1977 was a year remarkable for the breeding of two pairs of Hoopoes in our area, the history of one being given by Brian Slade while John Eley provides details of the second. Equally unexpected was the discovery of a Wallcreeper spending at least two winters in the Cheddar area. This species is normally very difficult even to locate in its mountainous breeding haunts, and the detailed observations made by Keith Vinicombe and Brian Rabbitts are therefore of especial interest.

It has always been *Bristol Ornithology* policy to include photographic plates whenever possible, not only to illustrate the text, as for Jeffery Boswall's paper on the little known San Benito Islands, but also as a medium for local bird photographers to publish their work. The two studies of Black Terns taken by Brian Thomas, in addition to being outstanding portraits in themselves, are ideal for outlining the plumage characteristics of what can often be a rather difficult species.

Finally, this seems a good opportunity to thank Robin Prytherch, Brian Slade and Philip Baber for the illustrations they have provided for the annual Review. The Editors would be pleased to receive similar line drawings from Club members for future reports — with around 220 species occurring annually there are certainly plenty to choose from.

Ken Hall.

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A REVIEW OF 1977

by Brian Rabbitts

This review remains similar to all previous ones and it presents most of the general trends and other interesting ornithological observations in the county of Avon, parts of Gloucestershire (to Frampton-on-Severn and bounded by the River Severn and Cotswold Hills) and Somerset to within some 30 miles from Bristol. The bulk of the information comes from the 144 contributors to our monthly reports *Bird News* with additional notes kindly supplied by J. Breeds, A.H. Davis, D.E. Paull and R.G. Thomas. A disproportionate amount of the data available however comes from several favoured localities with vast areas (especially north of Severn Beach) being only occasionally reported from. One area exceptionally well covered was the Somerset Levels with a survey by P.D. Round (a joint Wessex Water Authority and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds project) giving useful information on the bird-life of this rapidly changing and threatened habitat. Although access has improved at one important site, Steart, the new facilities provided will doubtless cause further problems and power-boating continues. Under the constitution of the Club we do not publish a systematic list and the Bristol Naturalists' Society are now the only society publishing such a list for Avon.

Reservoirs, often referred to collectively, signifies those at Barrow Gurney, Blagdon, Cheddar, Chew Valley Lake (CVL) and Durleigh; Slimbridge means either the Wildfowl Trust or the adjacent river bank and estuary (New Grounds) while the levels refer both to the peat-moors and heaths in Somerset and to the moors which lie to the south of the Polden Hills. Where the channel has been mentioned this term has been extended to include not only the Bristol Channel from the Bridgwater Bay area but also the River Severn to Frampton-on-Severn. Some of the wildfowl and wader counts mentioned for Steart include numbers from elsewhere in the Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve. 228 species occurred during the year (excluding obvious escapes) and records of rare birds (apart from one or two exceptions) rejected by or not submitted to the British Birds Rarities Committee have been excluded. When computing totals, especially of the scarcer passage waders, generally minimum numbers have been used. These have been arrived at by adding up the highest monthly figures in each locality. However for some species (e.g. terns) at coastal sites where obviously different birds are involved from day to day the total for the month has been used.

The first winter period

January provided a typical wintry start to the year but it became milder from the 17th with south or west winds and occasional rain. Excellent numbers of some species were present although there were few hard weather movements. The weather continued to be unsettled in February and it was rather wet. However any flood water on the levels reduced rapidly in the spring. For almost the first three weeks of March it was very mild with winds from the south and some migrants started to arrive exceptionally early (see Spring migration). Cold northerly winds from the 20th effectively stopped much further movement as the weather reverted to a recently normal pattern.

A Red-throated Diver at Orchardleigh on 15 January was more unusual as it was away from the reservoirs. Counts of Great Crested Grebe at CVL reached 87 but then declined to only 33 by the end of March. Cormorants here numbered 89 on 10 January while a Bittern was present for most of this period. The largest concentration of Mute Swans (100) was on Southlake Moor. Bewick's Swans included 300 at Slimbridge in January, 141 at CVL (a record count) while on the levels over 200 were present in February (the proportion of immatures here declined from 25.5% in December 1976 to 12.8% at the end of January); small groups were moving in the channel and some 40 roosted regularly at Cheddar. 4000 White-fronted Geese was the maximum count at Slimbridge while other geese here included five Bean, a Pink-foot and two Lesser White-fronts; 34 White-fronts were at Steart together with a Bean and Brent.

Some counts of commoner wildfowl at Steart in January included 592 Shelduck, 3100 Wigeon (1400 at Slimbridge) and 2500 Mallard. Excellent numbers of Pochard included 1425 at Blagdon and 3100 at CVL in January while most Tufted Duck (618) were here at the end of the month. Other duck included up to 70 Gadwall on the reservoirs; 400 Pintail at Slimbridge in January and 200 on the levels in the first week of March; 100 Shoveler here at the same time (generally numbers were low); some 40 Goldeneye at Cheddar and CVL; 30 Goosander at the last locality (to 17 April) and 120 Ruddy Duck on 9 January with 209 at Blagdon on 5 February. An interesting study of this species on these reservoirs is given in *Brit. Birds* 70 (1977):137–146. Scarcer species were American Wigeon at Cheddar (from October 1976) to 21 February and at CVL on 2 April; three Ring-necked Ducks at CVL from December 1976 (four on 6 February) with singles to 12 March and on the levels 5–8 April; another, a drake, which was trapped and ringed at Slimbridge in March was shot in May near Angmagssalik, south-east Greenland — a remarkable recovery (*Ringers' Bulletin* 5(1):12); Ferruginous Duck at Durleigh (again from the previous year); a total of six Scaup at Cheddar; three Eider in Woodspring Bay on 4 January, perhaps the same that had been present off Sand Point since March 1976; a wintering Long-tailed Duck at Cheddar, last observed on 13 April; eight Common Scoter at Berrow on 23 February and four Smew at CVL (one to 24 April).

Common Scoter



One or two Hen Harriers ('ring-tails') were on Mendip and there was a male on the levels to mid-March. Merlins, present at seven localities, included up to three at Steart while Peregrines were regular here (also at Berrow, Brean Down and three places on the levels). Up to three (generally single) Water Rails were reported from some usual habitats. Coot at Cheddar were under 1000 by mid-January with just over this figure at CVL about the same time; a count of 120 was made at one flooded area on the levels mid-March and a partial albino (from 1972) was at Blagdon in February. Of the waders Ringed Plover numbered 50 at Severn Beach in February while most Golden Plover (750) occurred on Tealham/Tadham Moors and Grey Plover (220) at Steart, both in the previous month. Lapping number included a total of 16830 on three moors during February. Knot (no count over 80) continued their decline (since 1972); this may partly be explained by the lack of one major food item (the bivalve *Macoma balthica*) and the majority of the wintering population occur on the other side of the channel (P.N. Ferns, 1977, *Wading Birds of the Severn Estuary*). Dunlin numbers indicated 26000 in January (14000 at Steart) with perhaps as many in February; over the entire area of the levels there were about 4000, such a number being dependent on flooding and only happening recently (since 1974). There was a concentration of 3500 Snipe at Kings Moor on 3 March and 1400 Curlew at Steart in January. Over-wintering and other scarcer waders were Avocet at Steart; only two Sanderling; four Purple Sandpipers; 85–90 Ruff on the levels late January–early February and some 50 at Southlake Moor on 8 March; 29 Jack Snipe (last reported on 24 April); Woodcock at four localities in January; 11 Black-tailed Godwits (see also Spring migration); 63 Bar-tailed Godwits at Steart; three Spotted Redshank here with two singles elsewhere; a Greenshank at Southlake Moor on 26/27 February; 18 Green Sandpipers and Common Sandpipers at Blagdon and Sea Mills. A Grey Phalarope was at North Moor on 4 March. A Little Auk was found at Burnham on 16 January.

Gull roost counts included 5500 Black-headed and 113 Lesser Black-backed near Avonmouth but little information from inland sites. An Iceland Gull was identified at Severn Beach on 5 March, this being a species which requires exceptional care to avoid the possibilities of confusion with aberrant or hybrid individuals of this and other gulls (see, e.g. *Brit. Birds* 71 (1978):80–82; while more recently (12 May 1978) a gull at the Axe Estuary was probably a leucistic Herring Gull although it could easily have been mistaken for a Glaucous or Iceland). The largest flock of Stock Doves was 500 at Chittinging and 100 Collared Doves were at one roost in January. Up to three Short-eared Owls occurred at Steart with two (perhaps the same individuals) at Berrow to 10 April. Passerines included six Water Pipits *A.s. spinoletta* at CVL and away from the reservoirs one was seen again at Tealham Moor. One roost of Pied Wagtails contained 500 birds at the beginning of February. A Dipper at Cheddar Gorge was unusual as it was away from favoured sites in the area. There was only one Black Redstart but Stonechats were well distributed on the levels and at the reservoirs. Fieldfares were plentiful in February including over 2000 at Tealham/Tadham Moors (unlike the previous year none were reported after mid-April) while numbers of Redwing had declined following some excellent counts in January (5000 near Muchelney). Once again it was a good year for overwintering Blackcaps with 24 in January and 16 in February, with yellow-berried holly *Ilex aquifolium* noted as a food item extra to those recorded in a recent investigation (*Bird Study* 25 (1978):60–61). 11 Chiffchaffs were seen in the same two months. Six Bearded Tits were at CVL on 9 January while Willow Tits appeared in areas away from



Willow Tit

their usual breeding sites. A flock of 30 Magpies emphasized the current high population level for this species and a Hooded Crow *C.c. cornix* near Bristol (two in May) finally disappeared at the beginning of September. 110 Tree Sparrows at Severn Beach was the largest concentration reported while both Brambling and Siskin, in common with many other parts of the country, were scarce. Record numbers of Twite occurred at Portishead (38 with the last count being 35 on 2 April) and near Weston-super-Mare (27). Nine Crossbills at Stock Hill in January included one in song, Hawfinches (up to three) were seen at regular haunts, there were two Snow Buntings at Berrow on 7 February but only three Cirl Buntings were reported (two near Clevedon and one near Barrow Gurney).

Spring migration

An anticyclone in mid-Atlantic became established in early April and the resultant cold airstream meant most migrants were late in arriving. From the 19th winds were mainly from the south-west but it was still rather cool. A high pressure area to the west returned again in May and the first half was rather unsettled. The second part however was much warmer with some strong north-east winds; a noticeable movement of some species took place from the 22nd. Although the early days of June were sunny and warm the rest of the month was unsettled and cool with frequent rain; strong north-west winds at the end of the first week brought good numbers of sea-birds into the channel.

A diver (not specifically identified) was off Brean Down on 23 April and a Slavonian Grebe at CVL on the 17th. The usual small number of Fulmars appeared in the channel from this month, Manx Shearwaters included 126 off Sand Point on 21 May with 125 the following day and four Gannets were seen. It was a good spring for unusual herons with a Squacco (now a very rare visitor to Britain) at Weston-super-Mare on 1 June and Purple at CVL on 23 April and Godney Moor on 24 May. A Ruddy Shelduck at Steart on 9 April (seen again on 3 July) is mentioned although with so many unusual wildfowl escaping from captivity it was probably not a genuine vagrant. A Red-crested Pochard at Blagdon and CVL 21–29 April was also perhaps an escape. Garganey were reported from 8 March with most (11) on the levels five days later. The peak count of Tufted Duck at CVL was 355 on 29 April (610 last year). Other diving duck included two Scaup at the reservoirs and one at Huntspill in April; 16 Eider flew up river on 7 May with eight down on the following day when five were off Brean Down (before 1971 this species was a rare visitor but now appears frequently) and 60 Common Scoter off Brean Down on 23 April was not surprising when one considers the large numbers that occur off the Welsh coast (see, e.g. *Glamorgan Bird Report, 1968*); there was one inland (at Cheddar 26 March–2 April). Birds-of-prey in May included two Marsh Harriers at CVL (1st and 16th) and a Peregrine at Steart on the 2nd. The first Hobby was reported on 27 April.

The maximum count of Ringed Plover was 140 at Severn Beach in mid-May, 200 Golden Plover were at Tealham Moor and 400 at West Sedgemoor in the first week of April with at least 10% in breeding dress (showing characteristics of the northern form *P.a. altifrons*) and Grey Plover numbered 110 at Steart in the same month (one inland at CVL on 29 May). Sanderling reached 74 at Berrow mid-May (five at CVL), 21 on 5 June (four at Cheddar on the 3rd) and a small inland passage of Dunlin included up to 30 at the reservoirs. The main movement of Black-tailed Godwits occurred 10–13 March (up to 79 on the levels) with 18–22 at two coastal sites in April and 10 over Cheddar on 26 May. 70 Bar-tailed Godwits were at Steart in April while Whimbrel at the roost here reached 1800 at the beginning of the following month. It would seem probable that there is a considerable turn-over of birds while some remain to roost near their feeding areas on the levels. During the survey maximum counts at each location gave a total of 1128 of which 408 occurred on various parts of King's Sedgemoor. An interesting movement north was observed at Berrow and Brean Down in May 1978 with 322 on the 9th and 450 the following day; perhaps flying to a roost at Collister Pill, Gwent. From these figures a considerable proportion of the Icelandic population must pass through the area. Common Sandpipers arrived from 10 April with most at Cheddar (maximum of 24 on 23 May) while Turnstone after reaching 200 at Severn Beach on 10 May did not exceed 10 after the 18th. Scarcer waders included two Avocets at Steart in May and June; five Little Ringed Plover (singles 26/27 May); up to three Purple Sandpipers at Severn Beach to the end of the first week of May; three Ruff at Steart in April and four in May; six Spotted Redshank; seven Greenshank (four 22/23 May); 13 Green Sandpipers in April and Wood Sandpiper at Berrow on 22 May. A Buff-breasted Sandpiper occurred at Slimbridge on 9/10 May.

Six Arctic Skuas were in the channel 22/23 April with singles on 7 May, 5 June and the 12th and three Great Skuas on the 6th. Two Mediterranean Gulls were identified at St George's Wharf on 1 May and some 12 Little Gulls occurred in the area. 160 Kittiwakes moved up channel off Brean Down on 23 April to be followed by 185 in May (largest flock 65 off Sand Point) and 40 in June (off Aust on the 6th); the first and last weather motivated movements. Common/Arctic Terns (240) passed through to mid-June with most (206) in May (including 78 on the 26th). Other terns concerned eight Sandwich in April, Little at St George's Wharf on the 24th and at CVL on 15 May and 47 Black with 36 of these on 26/27th. Single auks off Brean Down on 23/24 April were probably Razorbills.

A movement of 15 Collared Doves at Brean Down on 20 April was eclipsed by counts at Berrow of 57 on 15 May (south in one hour) and 18 on the 22nd (south in three hours). 63 Turtle Doves to north-east at Cheddar on the 24th is worthy of mention as diurnal movement of this species appears to be unusual. Summer visitors to arrive in March, mainly during the favourable weather, were Sand Martin and Wheatear on the 6th; Hoopoe 10th; Chiffchaff 12th (including 12 at CVL and as for Blackcap difficult to distinguish from over-wintering birds); House Martin 13th; Swallow 20th; Ring Ouzel and Willow Warbler 26th. The cool spring however meant most species were late in reaching their breeding areas. Swifts (first on 24 April) largely concentrated over the reservoirs (3000 at CVL on 11 May) in order to find sufficient food. The weather conditions also helped to produce huge numbers of Sand Martins (2000), Swallows (2000) and House Martins (1000) here on 29 April with similar estimates again for Swallows (3 May) and House Martins (7th). Late movements of Sand Martins took place at Cheddar with 200 on 26 May and 20 on 15 June. Tree Pipits included 20 at Brean Down on 20 April, Yellow Wagtails (48) here on the

same day, 75 White Wagtails *M.a. alba* passed through (45 at CVL on the 23rd) and small numbers of Redpoll at coastal stations. Scarcer species included two Hoopoes in April and three in May; Woodlark at Shapwick on 27 March; one Blue-headed Wagtail *M.f. flava*; Black Redstart at Brean Down in April; six Ring Ouzels; 10 Pied Flycatchers (more than usual); Golden Oriole at Leigh Woods on 22 May; Red-backed Shrike on Mendip on the 28th

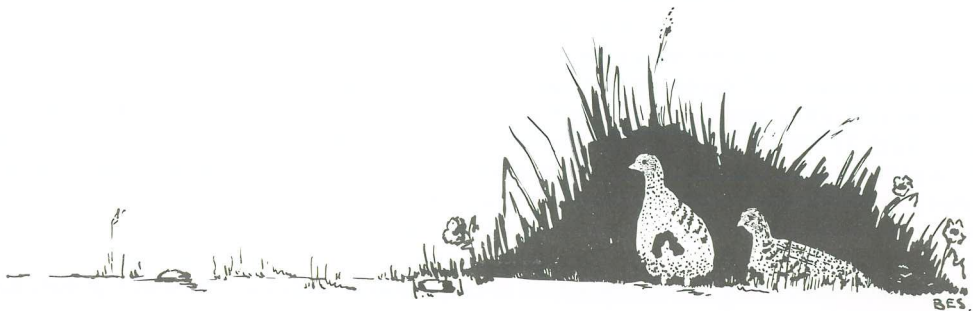
Red-backed Shrike



was a welcome sighting as they have almost ceased to exist as a breeding bird in England (see *Bird Study* 20 (1973): 103–110) and a Lesser Grey Shrike near Meare on 1 June. This rarity occupies much of the same range (south Europe and south-west Asia) as the Squacco Heron (see above). A Corn Bunting at CVL on 18 May was unusual.

Breeding species (selected)

A count of Great Crested Grebe at CVL in August showed 52 young from 33 broods (apparently many earlier ones did not survive). Cormorants were carrying nesting material at Steart in February and they must surely breed inland at CVL before long (if allowed to do so). Although only 16 pairs of Mute Swans (nests or broods) were located on the levels another 112 (presumably non-breeders and failed breeders) were scattered over the area. Shelduck bred at CVL while coastal observations included an exceptionally early brood on 8 May and 45 young (seven broods) at two sites in June. Other breeding duck at CVL were Gadwall (74 young on 16 August), Mallard with 270 young in 43 broods (423 pairs on the levels — perhaps an overestimate as males counted in determining this number), Pochard (a brood of four) and Tufted Duck (85 young in 18 broods). Teal bred on the levels while Garganey were present in May and June. Goshawks occurred outside the area but this is a species to look out for as 1976 was the best year to date for breeding success in the United Kingdom (*Brit. Birds* 71 (1978):17). Some other birds-of-prey included 18 pairs of Kestrels within Bristol and Hobbies in at least 10 potential breeding areas. Red-legged Partridge were noted at five places, Grey Partridge at 13 (May–September), Quail in the Marshfield area (up



Grey Partridge

to three) with singles at Ashton Park, Shapwick and Stanton Prior and Corncrakes at Catcott Heath and Tadham Moor in July. A pair of Little Ringed Plover bred near Bath and although the first record for Avon and Somerset was not unexpected in view of the large increase of summering birds in Britain during the last decade (see *Brit. Birds* 68 (1975):359–368). Perhaps two or three pairs of Ringed Plover bred at Steart. Of the other waders the survey of the levels revealed 387 pairs of Lapwing, 231 pairs of Snipe, 57 pairs of Curlew and 51 pairs of Redshank. Their distribution showed strong association with damp areas; West Sedgemoor (water table probably within 20cm of surface on lower lying areas) supported a total of 141 breeding pairs (see also below). Rooftop nesting by large gulls in the British Isles has increased greatly in recent years (*Bird Study* 24 (1977):89–104) and 102 pairs (Herring or Lesser Black-backed) nested in Bristol (*Bristol Naturalists' Society Bulletin*).

Very early breeding activity included juvenile Blackbirds leaving the nest on 26 March. Although the effects of Dutch Elm Disease on birds which use these trees as nesting sites has still to be studied, certainly during spring 1978 more Rooks were using electricity pylons. Turtle Doves appeared to be reasonably well distributed (at 14 sites in June), Barn Owls were only reported from four places in May and June and Nightjars at Shapwick Heath. The Nature Reserve here is becoming isolated as the extraction of peat continues. Unfortunately this is happening on many of the peat bogs with the result that a stable ecological community which took hundreds of years to become established is ended; the proposed Avalon Lakes will be little compensation for this destruction. One of the highlights of the summer was the successful breeding of Hoopoes at Berrow and Midsomer Norton (see pages 21–22 and 35–36).



Hoopoe

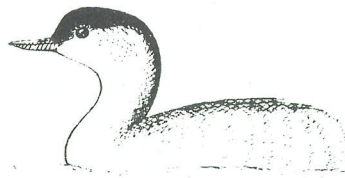
Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were seen at nine places (May–July) while the clearing of drain holes at Somerdale, Keynsham benefited the Sand Martin colony with 25 pairs being present in May. Of 231 pairs of Yellow Wagtails on the levels 55 (23.8%) occurred on King's Sedgemoor. A census carried out on two equal areas of the levels, improved farmland at Witcombe Bottom (28 pairs of seven species) and a relatively unimproved area on West Sedgemoor (107 pairs of 10 species), showed well the effects of drainage and different agricultural methods on the bird community. Nightingales (up to seven at Shapwick) were well reported in May (some perhaps on passage), of 153 pairs of Whinchat on the levels 59 (38.6%) occurred on King's Sedgemoor and Stonechats bred successfully at four places (two on Mendip). Despite a count of 13 Grasshopper Warblers at Brean Down on 30 April there was no increase in numbers (fairly low since 1973) remaining for the breeding season. Apart from the Hoopoes another surprise was the discovery of a singing Savi's Warbler (later two) at one site in May. After a disappointing summer in 1975 there was something of a return to former numbers in the United Kingdom the following year with 10 singing males at eight sites (*Brit. Birds* 71 (1978):26). Sedge Warblers on the levels (415 pairs) partly reflected different conditions after a drought last year. A small influx of Reed Warblers near Cheddar on 15 June was very late while several more mimetic birds were initially identified as Marsh Warblers (see *Brit. Birds* 58 (1965):473–478). Lesser Whitethroats appeared well distributed in May (many could have been migrants) and Whitethroat numbers generally showed an increase on last year. Several breeding records of Redpoll indicated that this species has now become established in the area, Crossbills possibly bred while Hawfinches did so at Leigh Woods. Only two Cirl Buntings were located.

Other summer observations

Sea-birds in the channel included 13 Fulmar off Berrow on 5 June, 493 Manx Shearwaters at the same time with 832 on the following day and 1000 between New Passage and the Severn Bridge; smaller numbers continued to be reported later. These flights involve a movement of some 100 miles (165 km) from their breeding areas but are not unusual; the farthest distance that a known breeding bird (feeding young) has been recovered was at some 230 miles (380 km) while it has been shown that females from south Irish Sea colonies (prior to forming the egg) spend a fortnight or so in the Bay of Biscay (*Bird Study* 23 (1976):295–299). 17 Gannets occurred in June and 80 in July (61 in the first three days with perhaps some duplication) and a Shag was at Severn Beach on the 2nd. Counts of Shelduck at Steart included 3000 and 3900 in these two months with 1800 Mallard in the first. Other duck included a Pintail at CVL on 10 July, Common Scoter here on 25 June (15 in the channel during this month and 22 in July) while a Goldeneye at Cheddar 8–12 June was perhaps a late migrant. Of the waders in June (it is difficult of course to separate summering and passage birds) Oystercatcher reached 210 at Steart (one inland at CVL on the 2nd), a Golden Plover was seen on the 18th (another on 17 July was injured), four Grey Plover, four Knot and a Bar-tailed Godwit on the 19th while the occasional Green and Common Sandpiper was still present in the area. Great Skuas were off Brean Down on 19 July (two) and Severn Beach on the 21st. Up to four Little Gulls (immatures) spent most of June at CVL. A Caspian Tern was identified at Steart 16/17 July (one at Frampton on the 9th last year) while other terns concerned five Sandwich off Berrow on 5 June and two at CVL on 3 July, up to 10 Common/Arctic and four Black. In addition to the breeding birds Hoopoes were seen at Keynsham on 27 June and Winscombe on 12 July. Two or three Crossbills occurred during this month.

Autumn migration

For the first part of July (to the 11th) it was very warm but cloudy and cool to the end. During August fine spells alternated with periods of rain; a deep depression with associated front crossed the country on the 24th. The unsettled weather continued into September and from the 12th winds were mainly north-easterly as an anti-cyclone developed; when this moved away there were some gales from the south-east. Strong west winds occurred in the last few days and to 11 October low pressure over the Atlantic and associated frontal systems dominated. A south airstream over the country (13–21st) brought warm conditions with some fog. Fresh south-west winds reached gale force in the last two days.



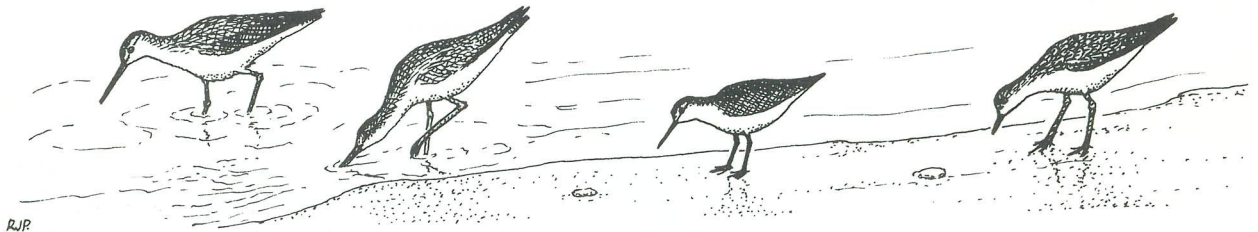
Black-necked Grebe

There was a count of 54 Little Grebe at CVL in October, Great Crested Grebe here numbered 490 on 16 August (up to 440 for remainder of this period) and a Black-necked Grebe occurred on the 26th (to 5 September). A Fulmar was in the channel on 29 August with two Gannets on the 24th and 31 October (one found dead on the 11th). 41 Grey Herons were at CVL on the 20th (a large count). 78 Shelduck flew north at Berrow during the evening of 16 July, no doubt departing to the Continental moulting grounds. Although this migration is well known (see *Brit. Birds* 59 (1966):141–147) few observations appear to have been made in recent years. Wigeon arrived at Cheddar on 16 August; after a count of 255 Gadwall at CVL on the same day numbers declined as the population moved to other reservoirs and Mallard reached 1900 at Steart. Movement of Garganey commenced from 21 July (most at CVL with up to 13 in August) to 6 November (very late) and counts of Shoveler here peaked at 460 in October. Diving duck included three Red-crested Pochard from 6 August (two to the end of the year), very large moulting flocks of Tufted Duck at CVL (670 on the 16th) and five Common Scoter (three inland). Unusual raptors were Honey Buzzard at Brean Down on 23 October and Marsh Harriers at Steart on 15 August and CVL on 20

October. Merlins (present from 4 September) occurred at six localities in the next month, Hobbies continued to be reported (to 23 September) and Peregrines appeared regularly at three coastal sites and at Cheddar and CVL. A Spotted Crake was seen at this last locality 11–13 September while the Coot population reached 1315 on 16 August.

Of the commoner waders 265 Oystercatcher at Berrow on 15 September was the highest count and inland 37 in flight over Cheddar on 6 August (30 at CVL on 25 August, 1973). Peak numbers of Ringed Plover were reached in September (1200 at Steart and 37 at the reservoirs), Knot (88) in the same month at Berrow and Sanderling (203) here on 31 July. Black-tailed Godwits numbered 2200 at Steart; it is thought that as much as 40% of the total Icelandic race *L.l. islandica* passing through Britain in July and August does so in the Bridgwater Bay area (Ferns 1977). 200/250 Bar-tailed Godwits here in August was higher than counts in recent years, Redshank included 1250–1450 (August–October) while 230 Turnstone at New Passage in September were no doubt the population from Severn Beach. Other passage waders included 10 Little Ringed Plover 29 July–8 October; 30 Little Stints 31 July–29 October; 40 Curlew Sandpipers 30 July–26 October (most in August including four over Steep Holm). 43 Ruff (22 in August); Spotted Redshanks (44) with 25 in September (15 at Steart); 108 Greenshanks 5 July–3

Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper and Ruff

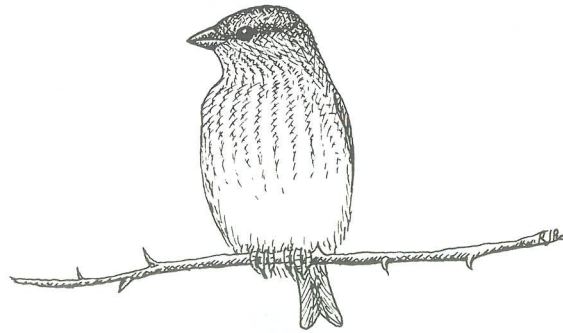


November (52 in August and 36 in September); Green Sandpipers (180) from the first week of July with 79 in August (up to 26 at CVL and 18 at Portbury) and 25 Wood Sandpipers (21 July–14 October) including five at Sand Bay on 17 August and six St George's Wharf on 4 September. Rarer waders were Avocets at Steart (August to December but not September when perhaps the same individual was at Berrow on the 25th) and Yeo Estuary on 26 October, Dotterel at Crook Peak 15–17 September and Temminck's Stint at CVL 23/24th. Nearctic waders were well represented with a Baird's Sandpiper at Steart 2/3 August, Pectoral Sandpiper at CVL on the 11th, Buff-breasted Sandpipers at Cheddar (9/10 October and 2–7 November), two Long-billed Dowitchers at CVL on 30 September (later at Blagdon to January 1978) and another (or Short-billed) at Aust on 16 October.

A Grey Phalarope occurred at CVL on 13 September. Only seven Little Gulls passed through (all except one here) 7 August–2 October. Passage of Common/Arctic Terns (102 with 62 Common and four Arctic being specifically identified) commenced on 13 July (eight at Cheddar) to 2 November. Black Terns (152) from 17 July to the late date of 13 November were mainly in August (104) with 63 15–17th and 18 on the 24th. Other terns concerned 16 Sandwich (four at CVL and 11 in the channel last week of September), 13 Little (eight at Steart in the same month and one at CVL on 23 October) and an immature White-winged Black at CVL 25–28 September. A Guillemot was off Berrow on 2 October.

A Long-eared Owl was heard at Inglestone Common on 18 September and a Nightjar was trapped on Steep Holm on 26 August. Seven Kingfishers at CVL on 13 September suggested an influx while a Wryneck which had been found at Yate on the 1st unfortunately died soon after. Woodlarks flew over Berrow on 29 October and Sand Point on the same day (conceivably the same individual). Other scarce passage birds were Nightingale at Weston-super-Mare on 12 September, five Ring Ouzels (four in this month), four Aquatic Warblers (trapped at CVL on 3 August and three at Steart 15/16th), Dartford Warbler at Brean Down 12–22 October (three reports received for the area in 1978 but following severe weather conditions in February there may have been a decline in numbers) and four Pied Flycatchers. Apart from the Aquatic Warblers other rarities concerned Red-rumped Swallow at New Passage on 16 September and Scarlet Rosefinch at Brean Down 14–18 October; although only the second record

Scarlet Rosefinch



for Avon and Somerset Scarlet Rosefinches have been extending their range (see, e.g. *Brit. Birds* 70(1977):219); 25 were recorded in Great Britain in 1976 (*Brit. Birds* 70(1977):441). Late migrants were Swifts on 20 October and the 23rd, Yellow Wagtail (two) and Whinchat on the 29th and Swallow on 27 November. Some notable counts of Wheatear were made 21–28 August (45 on the last date) while 20 Whitethroats at Brean Down was another interesting number about the same time (25th). Visible migration in October included 200 Swallows east at Brean Down on the 4th and the maximum count of Chaffinches (727) was made on the 23rd (596 west and 131 south). Smaller numbers of other species included Coal Tit (up to eight), Jay (10 over Brean Down on the 3rd), Brambling (maximum of 13), Siskin (counts of 17 and 25 at two coastal sites on the 16th) and Tree Sparrow (30 south-west at New Passage on the 29th).

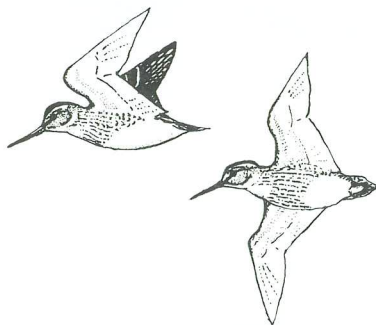
The second winter period

Disturbed weather conditions 1–25 November with gale force winds and heavy rain; winds were mainly south-west to the 11th and then north-west gale force which resulted in some interesting sea-bird records. It was colder in the last week. For the first three weeks of December it was mild with winds mainly from the south-east. South-west gales affected the south and west coasts on the 23rd and it became colder from the 27th.

This was a good period for Great Northern Divers (from 4 November) with up to three at CVL and singles at Barrow Gurney and Cheddar. The usual reduction in the numbers of Great Crested Grebe at CVL took place, 350 on 17 November to 110 on 14 December and only 35 on the 28th. A Slavonian Grebe was at Cheddar on 18 October and later on two other reservoirs and Royal Portbury Dock (probably only two or three birds involved) and a Black-necked Grebe was at CVL on 3 December. The gales brought a Storm Petrel to CVL on 13 November and Leach's Petrels on the same day at New Passage, St. George's Wharf, Severn Beach (found dead) and Steart; another was at Cheddar on the 12th. Shags also appeared about the same time (one remained near Clevedon into 1978). Small herds of Mute Swans included 55 at Cheddar but seven died in 1978 due possibly to lead poisoning. The first Bewick's Swan was seen on 20 October and then maximum counts were 280 at Slimbridge and 242 on the levels with the usual amount of movement between sites. White-fronted Geese at Slimbridge in this period peaked at 2300. Other geese (ignoring possible escapes) were three or four Bean (a good winter for this species in the area with a record of eight flying over Tealham/Tadham Moors on 23 February 1978), two Pink-feet and two Brent. Shelduck reached 2900 at Steart in November and Mallard 2500 while Teal included 2000 at CVL on 26 October. A Green-winged Teal *A.c. carolinensis* was identified here on 17 November (to 26 January 1978). Counts of other surface feeding duck at Cheddar included 216 Gadwall and 88 Pintail (from 22 August). Some diving duck present were very small flocks of Pochard (highest 325); Long-tailed Duck at Barrow Gurney 25 October–13 November; Common Scoter off Berrow on 28 December; Velvet Scoter off Brean Down on the 17th; up to 42 Goldeneye at CVL; three Smew here (first on 29 October); two or three Red-breasted Mergansers in November (one remained to 4 March 1978); 64 Goosanders (a record count) at CVL on 14 December and Ruddy Duck numbers indicated 240 in November and 202 (at Blagdon) in December.

The first Hen Harrier was seen on 21 November and then came records from three coastal sites with two birds at Steart (all 'ring-tails' and perhaps only two individuals involved). A Goshawk was identified at Wotton-under-Edge on 27 November while Merlins and Peregrines were reported from five places. The highest count of Coot was made at Cheddar on 13 December (2475) and a partial albino was again present. Turning now to waders there were some 1000 Golden Plover on Tealham/Tadham Moors from mid-December, 170 Grey Plover at Steart and a total of 33000 Lapwing on three moors on the 18th. Dunlin at Steart reached 14000 in November and 10500 in December (up to 80 inland), most Curlew (1070) were here and Black-tailed Godwits (104) at Durleigh (70 to 11 December). Scarcer wintering waders were two Little Stints; four Purple Sandpipers at Sand Point and two at Severn

Jack Snipe



Beach; 64 Ruff (25 and 26 on the levels in December); 33 Jack Snipe (first on 26 August); five Woodcock; four Spotted Redshank; 19 Green Sandpipers in November and 11 in December and seven and four Common Sandpipers in the same months.

A Grey Phalarope was at Cheddar 16–20 November and a Great Skua off Sand Point on the 3rd. Gull roost counts included 25000 Black-headed, 15000 Common and 750 Lesser Black-backed at CVL in December; these show huge increases on estimates made in 1968/69 (*Somerset Birds 1968*) and 1973 (*Bird Study 24 (1977): 86*). Other gulls here included a Mediterranean on 4 November (seen again 20–27 December), Little on the 12th (two at Cheddar 12–17th and one at Steart on 13 December), Glaucous on 11 December while some five Kittiwakes were also present 13–22 November (another off Sand Point on the 15th). One or two Short-eared Owls turned up at three coastal sites from 24 October. A Shore Lark was seen at Severn Beach 5/6 November. Rock Pipits in October included five at Cheddar and Water Pipits (up to six) at CVL in December. Six Black Redstarts occurred, the arrival of Stonechats on the levels took place in October, Fieldfares (first on 29 August) were fairly scarce until later in December (1000 on Tealham/Tadham Moors) while Redwing (from 23 September) with some good influxes appeared well distributed. Over-wintering warblers were 16 Blackcaps (November and December) and 12 Chiffchaffs (December) with one or two showing some characteristics of the race *P.c. tristis*. There was a small irruption of Bearded Tits with two or three at two coastal sites from 23 October and later at CVL and Chilton Trinity. Remarkably a Wallcreeper spent a second consecutive winter near Cheddar (see pages 17–20). A Great Grey Shrike was at Stock Hill on 6 November; it probably quickly passed through as no subsequent reports were made in the area. Brambling occurred but in very low numbers (no count exceeded 10), Siskins included three groups of 30–60 in December, Twite (following record numbers in the first winter period) reached 30 at St. George's Wharf and 20 at Clevedon (40 at Portishead in 1978) and flocks of Redpoll did not go beyond 25. Lapland Buntings passed through in October (from the 20th) with two at Cheddar (unusual inland) and singles on the coast; two or three later to the end of the year with a record count of 14 at Steart in 1978 (well represented in other parts of the country during the winter). Eight Snow Buntings were seen (one inland at CVL on 17 November) and three Cirl Buntings were reported.

A BREEDING BIRD SURVEY OF ASHTON COURT WOOD, AVON

by Graham M. Sims

Introduction

Breeding bird density surveys have not been widely applied to mixed deciduous/coniferous woodlands. Simms (1971) has identified the need for more material on such woodlands.

Ashton Court Wood (Pill Grove), Avon, stands on a south-east facing slope comprising 106 acres (43ha). It is bounded by roads on two sides and by open parkland on the others (Fig. 1). The upper ground is of hard limestone, and the lower, bands of soft limestone shales, sandstone and millstone grit with a veneer of dolomitic conglomerate in one area. The soil on the lower slopes is of a more acidic nature.

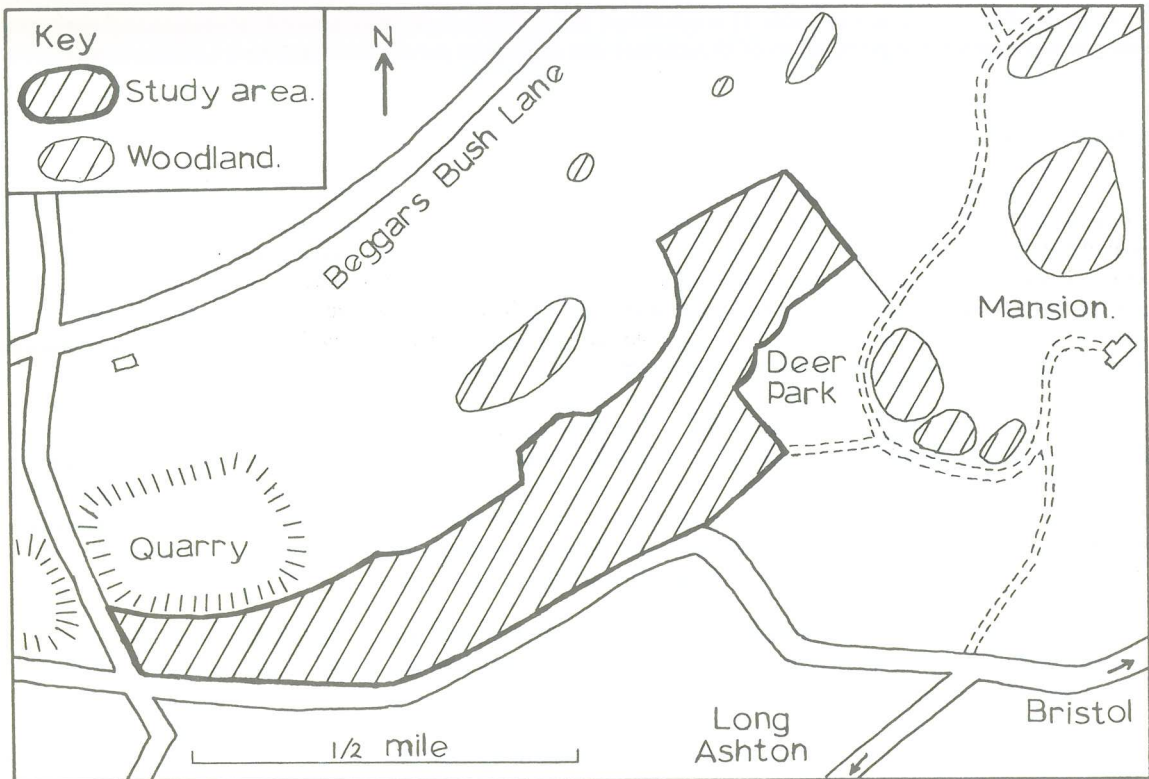


Fig. 1. Map of Ashton Court Estate showing study area.

The history of the woodland is well documented (Batty *et al* 1971), there being major plantings in the last century. Dominant trees are Beech *Fagus sylvatica*, Oak *Quercus robur*, and Corsican Pine *Pinus nigra* var. *maritima*. Also present in good numbers are Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*. Conifers planted along paths are Wellingtonia *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* and Atlas Cedars *Cedrus atlantica*. European Larch *Larix decidua* are mainly in a few stands. At least twelve other tree species are scattered throughout the wood. The lower storey is absent in many parts of the wood, but where it is found it is dominated by Elder *Sambucus nigra* or young Sycamore, and on acidic soils by rhododendrons.

The ground flora is absent beneath Beech and Larch, and richest amongst the original ancient Oak woodland. Important plants are Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, Bluebell *Endymion non-scriptus*, Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica* and Bramble *Rubus* spp. Hart's Tongue Fern *Phyllitis scolopendrium* covers rocky outcrops. There is an area of about two acres of Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* scrub and also an area of about six acres of open scrubby ground with Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*, Elder, Hawthorn, and broadleaf saplings. Within this zone is a small round pond.

In 1974–75 the whole Ashton Court Estate was the subject of a bird survey for the British Trust for Ornithology's Sites Register, conducted by the present author.

Methods

The BTO Common Bird Census method (see Williamson and Homes 1964) was used to survey the breeding birds of the wood. Between 28 March and 16 July 1977, 18 visits were made with a total of 40 hours being spent on the survey. Visits were made between 05.00 and 10.00 and 19.00 and 22.00 hours. Species maps were compiled at a scale of 25 inches to the mile, and from these the estimated number of breeding pairs was obtained. Wood-pigeons (scientific names given in Table 1) are difficult to count because of ill-defined territories and their extended breeding season. Hence the population of this species was estimated purely from counts of singing males.

Results and discussion

Table 1 gives the estimated number of breeding pairs within the wood. It shows that the total number of species was 29 and that 220 pairs bred. This gives a density of 416 birds (208 pairs) per 100 acres. Simms (1971) has estimated that 500 birds per 100 acres might be the British average for mixed woodlands. It is thought that the density in Ashton Court Wood is lower than might be expected, owing to the absence of a lower storey and ground flora in parts of the wood and to the considerable amount of disturbance by the general public. Evidence that a rich woodland habitat lends itself to higher bird densities has recently been shown by Parsons (1976) who surveyed a small private mixed wood in Somerset. He found densities of over 500 birds in only 30 acres.

Table 1 and Fig. 2 show that Robin, Blackbird and Wren are co-dominant. This accords well with the published results from the BTO Common Bird Census for 1975–76 (Batten and Marchant 1977). Although the Wren has declined a little in the last couple of years, it is still one of the commonest woodland birds following a series of large increases between 1964 and 1975. The rather low numbers of breeding Goldcrests (10 pairs) was surprising in view of the many coniferous trees in the wood. The recent national decline (see Batten and Marchant 1977) in Goldcrests, after many years of high densities, may account for this.

Hollom (1971) indicates that the Jackdaw is a bird of cliff, quarry, ruins, park and open woodland. The exceptionally high density of this species in Ashton Court Wood is attributed to the nine acres of ancient Oak, which provide an abundance of nesting holes.

Other species recorded, but for which breeding was not proven were Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*, and Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*. Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* occasionally visited the small wallow pond. A Buzzard *Buteo buteo* was seen over the wood on one occasion, and Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* regularly hunted in the more open parts and along the margins. A spring passage of Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* was noted. For a week, two males of the latter species held territory and sang, but could not attract mates. In previous years Rooks *Corvus frugilegus* have bred in Elms *Ulmus procera* in the north-east part of the wood. The death of these trees has resulted in a shift of the Rooks to the main colony in the Summerhouse Plantation on another part of the estate. The nesting area formerly used by the Rooks is now a mixed Corvid roost for Carrion Crows, Jackdaws and Rook. It is hoped that studies on the roost will be continued.

Although species maps could rarely be correlated with a vegetation map, it was noted that breeding density was lower in the large pine stands and in areas of young regenerating deciduous trees, and especially high in areas of ancient Oak and where there is a lower storey of rhododendrons.

Table 1 Numbers of pairs, densities per 100 acres and relative abundance of breeding birds in Ashton Court Wood, Avon in 1977.

	Number of breeding pairs	Density	Relative abundance (%)
Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	28	26.4	12.7
Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	27	25.5	12.3
Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	25	23.6	11.4
Blue Tit <i>Parus caeruleus</i>	18	17.0	8.2
Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	16	15.1	7.3
Jackdaw <i>Corvus monedula</i>	14	13.2	6.4
Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>	13	12.7	6.1
Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>	10	9.4	4.5
Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	10	9.4	4.5
Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>	9	8.5	4.1
Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i>	7	6.6	3.2
Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	6	5.7	2.7
Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	4	3.8	1.8
Willow Warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilis</i>	4	3.8	1.8
Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	3	2.8	1.4
Marsh Tit <i>Parus palustris</i>	3	2.8	1.4
Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	2.8	1.4
Dunnock <i>Prunella modularis</i>	3	2.8	1.4
Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	3	2.8	1.4
Great Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	1.9	0.9
Nuthatch <i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	1.9	0.9
Coal Tit <i>Parus ater</i>	2	1.9	0.9
Stock Dove <i>Columba oenas</i>	2	1.9	0.9
Treecreeper <i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1	0.9	0.4
Little Owl <i>Athene noctua</i>	1	0.9	0.4
Tawny Owl <i>Strix aluco</i>	1	0.9	0.4
Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>	1	0.9	0.4
Carrion Crow <i>Corvus corone</i>	1	0.9	0.4
Long-tailed Tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	1	0.9	0.4
TOTALS:	220	208	

Conclusions

Whilst mixed woods are able to produce a greater diversity of species and higher densities of birds than pure coniferous or pure deciduous woodland, in Ashton Court Wood this has been negated by a poor lower storey and ground flora and an associated high degree of disturbance by the public. It is criss-crossed by a number of footpaths used by ramblers and horse-riders, as well as naturalists following the official Nature Trail. Many other tracks have been worn through the undergrowth by visitors to the estate. Easy public access inevitably results in some damage to wildlife. Nestbox schemes that have been used in other woods to enrich the bird life, have not been used, as yet, in Ashton Court. The area of ancient Oak woodland should be highly valued and carefully conserved, not only for its birds, but also for its richness in plants, fungi, insects and mammals. All visitors to the estate would enhance the wood's beauty by closely following the code of behaviour given in the Nature Trail Guide.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Mr T.J. Sims for his helpful comments on this manuscript and in preparing diagrams.

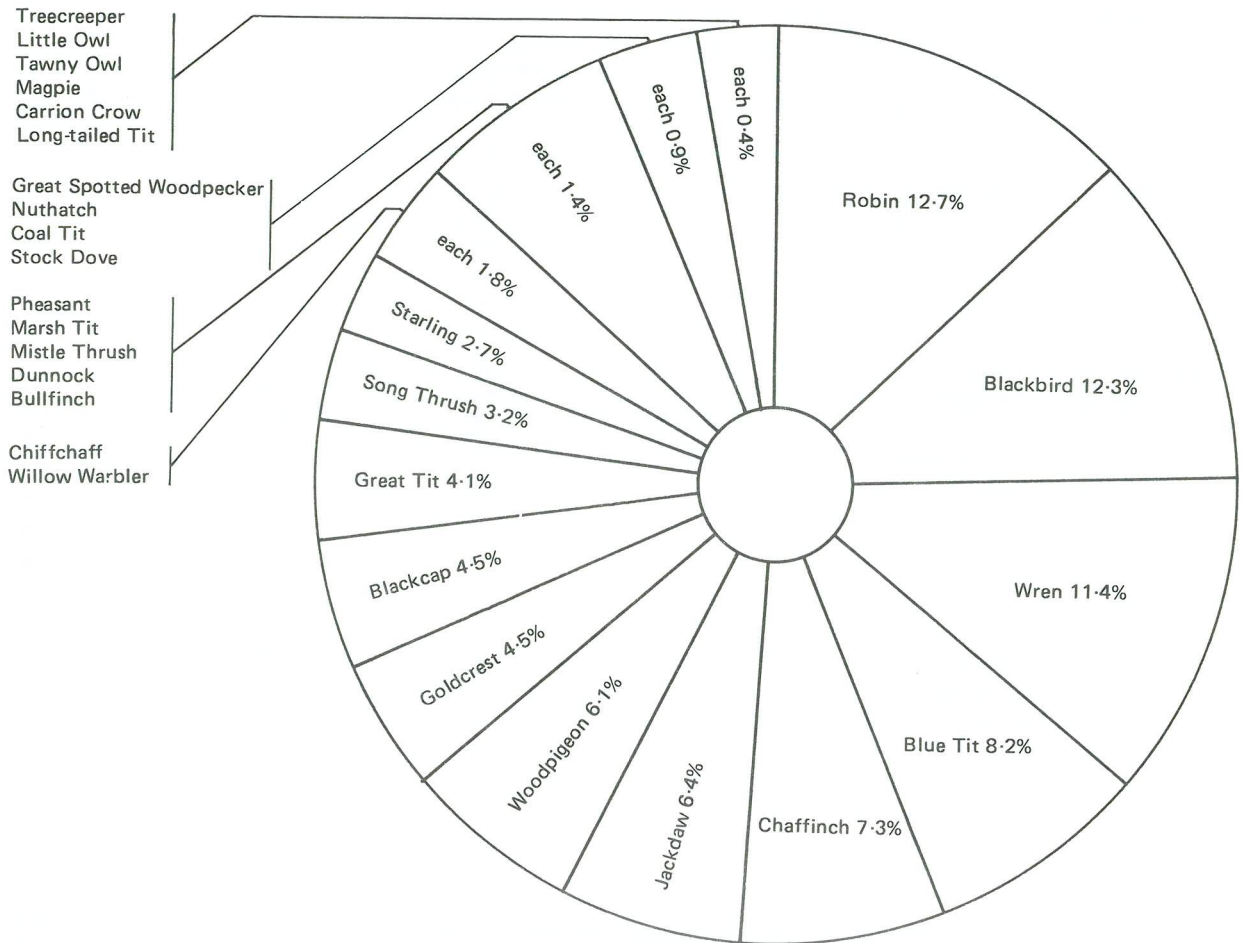


Fig. 2. Breeding bird community in Ashton Court Wood.

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WALLCREEPER WINTERING IN SOMERSET

by Brian Rabbitts and K.E. Vinicombe

Introduction

Sometime in early November 1976, W.G. Watts, a fitter employed by the Central Electricity Generating Board at the Tower Testing Station, Chelms Coombe Quarry, Cheddar, Somerset, observed a Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* climbing the side of a wooden building high on the north face of the quarry. Few people saw it on this occasion although it remained in the area until the first week of April 1977. However, in early November 1977 it reappeared and by the end of February 1978 the news had leaked out with the result that large numbers of people watched it in the following weeks before it left on 9 April. It seems probable that it returned to its Alpine breeding area during the intervening summer. This was only the eighth ever recorded in Britain although one has been seen since, at Hastings, Sussex, 6–10 April 1977, though this could conceivably have been the Cheddar bird stopping off on its way south. The statement that Wallcreepers are not migrants (*Brit. Birds* 63(1970): 167) has since been challenged with some evidence of movement (*Brit. Birds* 63(1970): 393–394; 64(1971): 236–237, 378; 65(1972): 36–37; 66(1973): 281–282) and these records support the idea that they should be given the status of partial migrants. A factor against others being discovered in this country is the initial difficulty of location in a type of habitat which is rarely visited by most birdwatchers. The following is the result of over twenty hours of observation by us during the period 16 January to 9 April 1978.

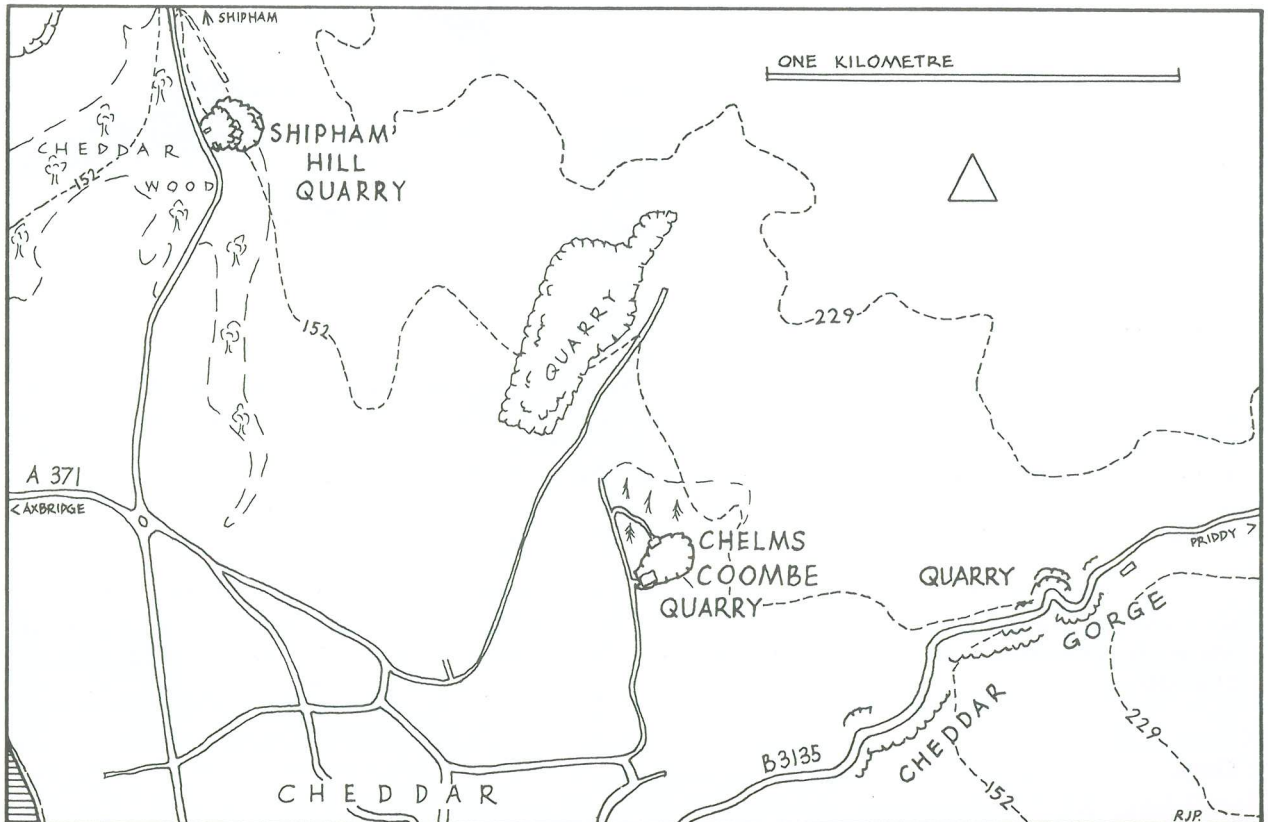
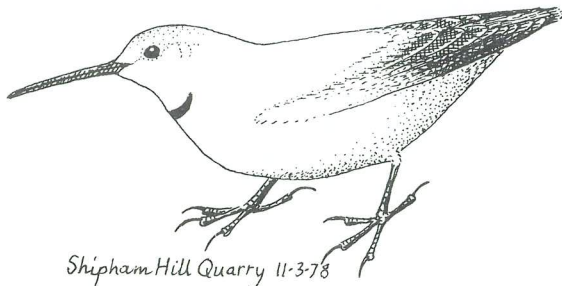


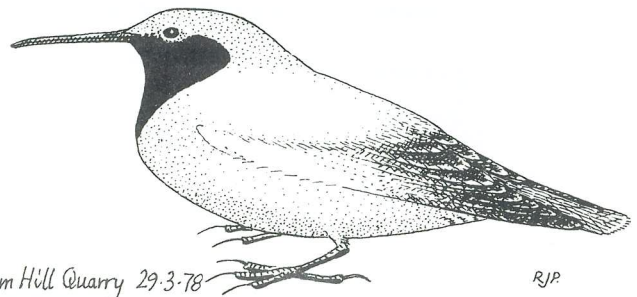
Fig. 1. Map showing locations frequented by the Wallcreeper.

Habitat

The quarry at Chelms Coombe faces south-west with steep rock faces around all but this corner, with the highest point being perhaps 60 metres. These rock faces at first sight appear virtually sheer but in fact consist of well quarried broken rock and numerous small ledges, many with vegetation. Large pylons and cranes dominate the scene; cables run down the rock faces at intervals and engineering debris is much in evidence. There are various buildings at each end, with offices and testing rooms on the cliff top at the west side. The Wallcreeper was also seen in a small disused quarry at The Perch, between Cheddar and Shipham. Although the walls here are high and sheer, the rock is also well broken and basically similar to Chelms Coombe, but more recently exposed. Some vegetation grows on the ledges of the north and south faces. Cheddar Gorge was also visited and this contains large areas of sheer rock, but there are numerous clefts and less vertical areas and in one part there is a small disused quarry. Due perhaps to the immensity of this locality the Wallcreeper was seen here less frequently. The extremes of its territory were just over two kilometres apart (see Fig. 1).



Shipham Hill Quarry 11.3.78



Shipham Hill Quarry 29.3.78

RJP

Plumage and moult

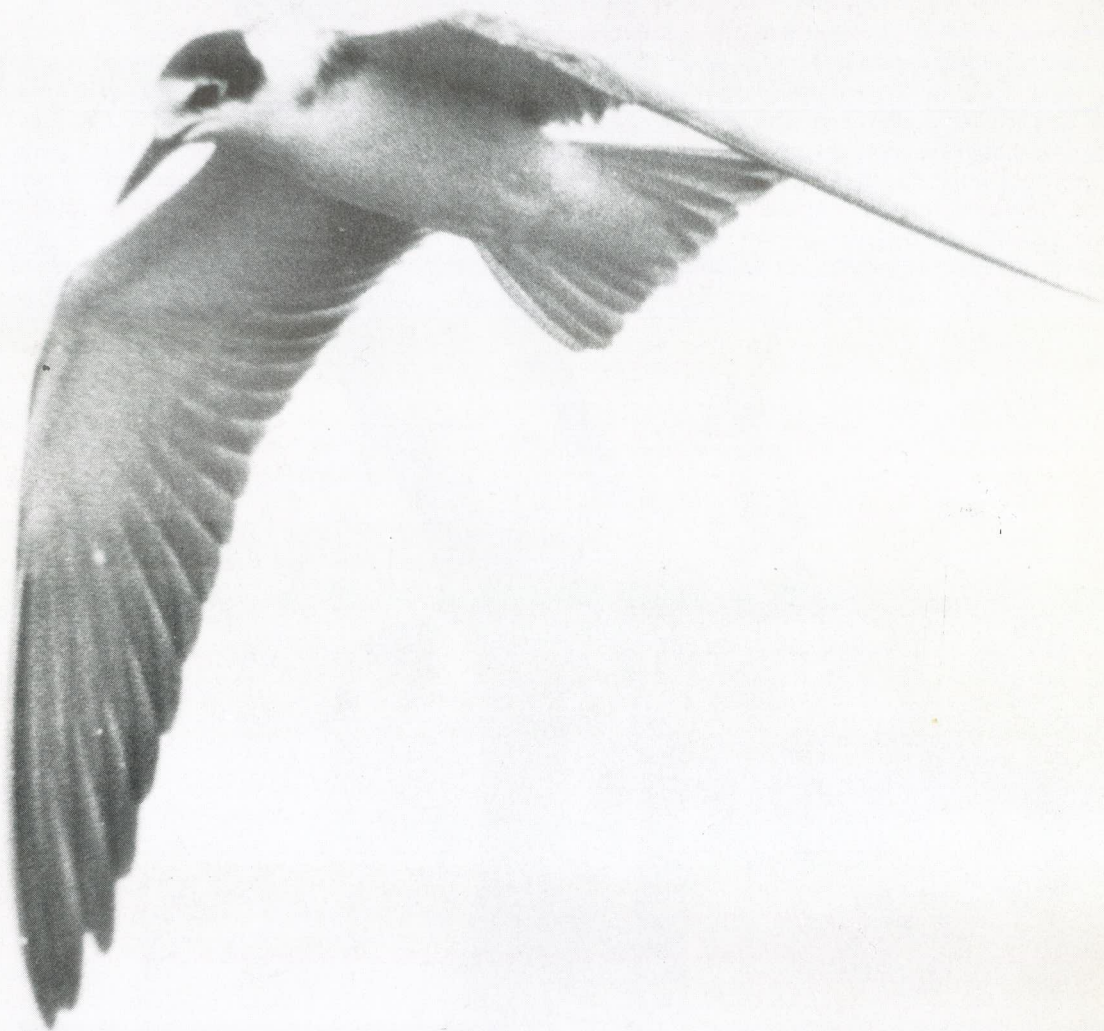
Most of the plumage characteristics of this attractive bird corresponded with those described in the available literature, but the following additional points were also noted: underparts very much darker than the very pale grey upperparts with the darkest area being in the centre of the belly; at the bend of the wing was a small elongated area (probably the alula) not always visible and appearing pink in certain lights; the undertail coverts had a row of three or four whitish crescents down each side with the centre dark; on each side of the black throat was a small whitish patch, not very conspicuous, with one being more obvious than the other.

On 4 March the first signs of moult were seen with some black flecking on the sides and bottom of the white throat, this area appearing rather scruffy. By 11th about two thirds of the throat were black and on 24th just one or two white spots remained. The Wallcreeper was in full summer plumage on 27th, having the large black throat of a male.

Flight

In flight it looked very striking, with long rounded wings, brilliant flashes of red mainly on the wing coverts, and large white spots on the primaries. Flight characteristics could be compared with those of a Hoopoe





Plates 1 and 2. Over and above: Black Terns *Chlidonias niger*; Albufera, Menorca, September 1976. These photographs taken by Brian Thomas show the birds in autumn plumage at the time of the year when they are also regular visitors to our area. The main identification features shown are a dark shoulder mark, dark leading edge to wings and greyish rump and tail. A full account of the examination of the plumages of marsh terns can be found in *Brit. Birds* 53(1960): 243–252. In plate 2 the dark shoulder patches can be seen. These marks could however occur on immature Whiskered Terns *C. hybridus* (*Brit. Birds* 62(1969): 33), but they disappear as the juvenile ages so it is unlikely that any occurring in Britain would show them. In any event there are many other points to separate these two species. Another identification problem could occur with birds in 'portlandica' type plumage. This is considered to be the normal dress of terns during the period of immaturity when the vast majority remain on or near their wintering grounds, at least during their first summer (*Brit. Birds* 64(1971): 19–22). In most years there is also a small spring passage, mainly at the reservoirs, and since the majority are in breeding plumage no problems are posed.

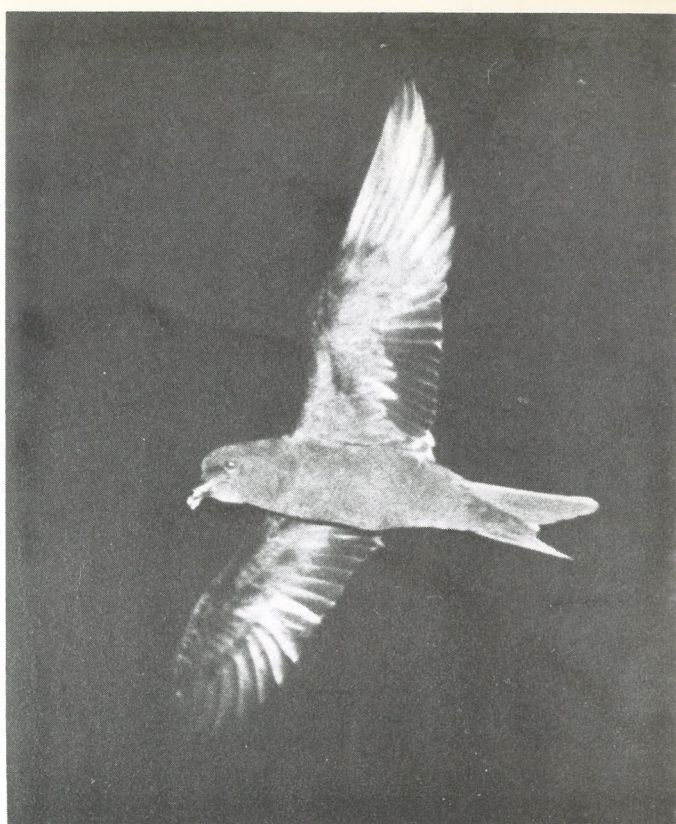


Plate 3. Three rarely photographed birds. Above left, the Least Storm-petrel *Halocyptena microsoma*; above right, the Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa chapmani* which in this race has no white on rump. Below, the Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis sanctorum*. The first species is the world's smallest seabird and breeds only at San Benito and on islands in the Gulf of California. The two last are races endemic to the San Benito Islands.

(Photos: Jeffery Boswall)

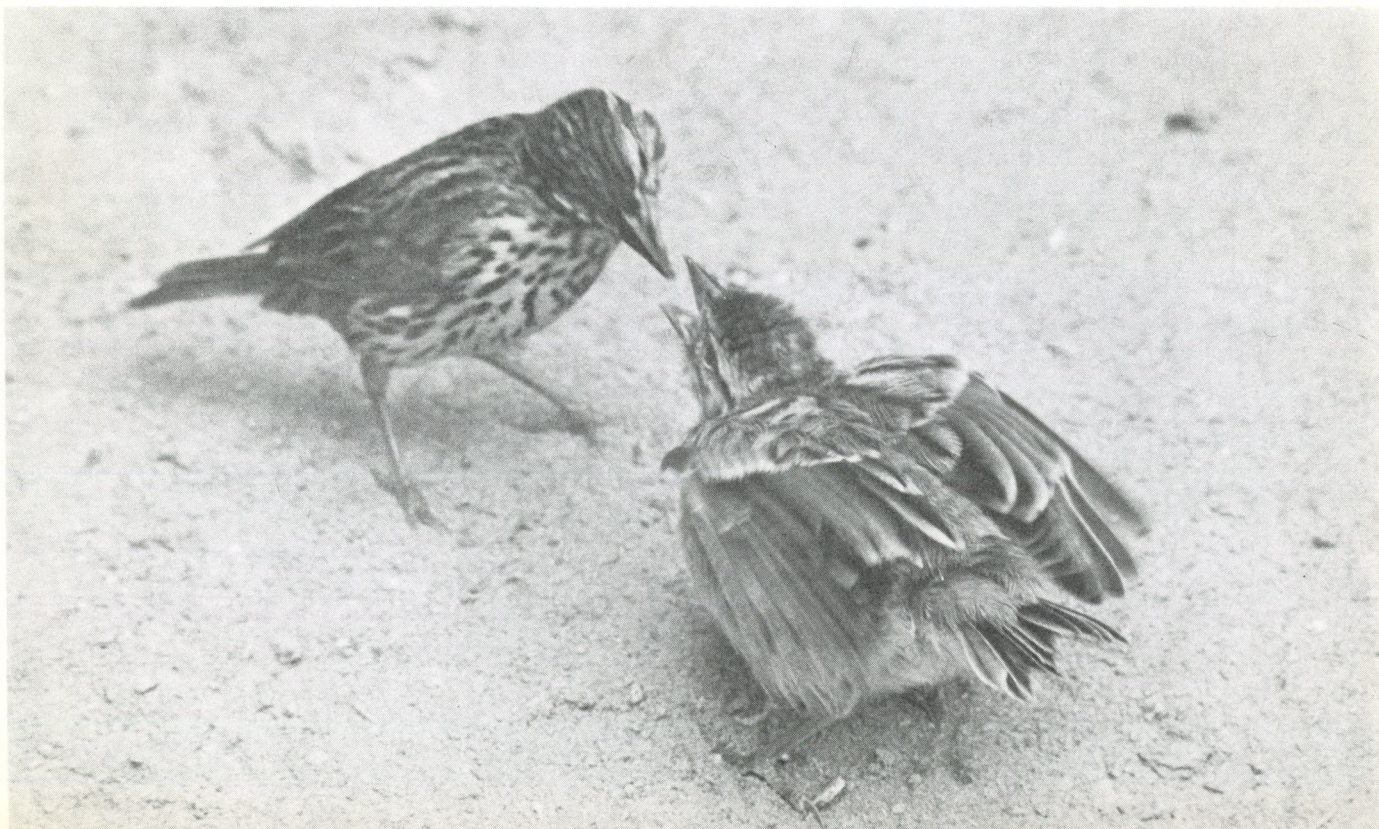




Plate 4. Above, a general view of West San Benito with Middle and East islands beyond. Below a typical West San Benito habitat. Seven species of nocturnal seabird nest (underground) on the slopes (three storm-petrels, a shear-water, two murrelets and an auklet), as does (above ground) a diurnal gull and two passerines. The inflorescence of the Century Plant *Agave shawii* is visited by a hummingbird and a sparrow. The sea-girt rock holds the nests of an oystercatcher, a heron and the Osprey.
(Photos: Jeffery Boswall)



Upupa epops or at other times a huge butterfly. Even when viewed at long range the rather swooping action was very distinctive. On several occasions the bird left the rock face with an incredibly erratic flight, twisting and turning back and forth.

Behaviour

The Wallcreeper was usually present at Chelms Coombe during the early morning, occasionally staying all day. After the initial feeding period it would fly out towards Cheddar Gorge and, later during its stay, towards the quarry at The Perch. It usually reappeared at Chelms Coombe in the evening though we found that its routine was rather erratic. However, it is thought that strength and direction of the wind was the most influential factor.

The bird generally fed while on ledges, slopes and broken rock, tending to avoid sheer, smooth faces. It would occasionally creep up sheer rock but once it was seen to slip while half way up a small vertical slab, although it soon regained its position. Feeding at various heights, from close to the ground in the quarries, to over 90 metres in the Gorge, it seemed to show no preference for sunny spots though it mainly avoided wind-swept areas. The bird moved sideways or upwards when feeding, although it would often flit down a short way at times, while upon reaching a certain height it would drop down to a lower level to resume feeding in a different area. It moved around on the rock with a hop rather like a Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, frequently flitting up to pounce on insects or to inspect small cracks and holes. The tail and wings were not used for support but the wings were constantly flicked. This was obviously a voluntary action as it would cease in the presence of a predator, when resting or when preening. The purpose of the movement appeared to be to flash the white primary spots rather than the red on the wing coverts which usually remained mostly obscured by the grey scapular feathers. The reasons for this action were not clear, but the vivid movement may have been a feeding technique to stimulate insects into short movements to enable easier visual detection. Every nook and cranny in any one area would be searched methodically and occasionally it would squeeze into larger openings and disappear for several seconds. Small caves in the rock faces were sometimes visited. On 24 February it was seen hopping about inside one at Chelms Coombe, even hanging upside-down from the roof, while it often stood in the entrance waiting to pounce on food items. On several occasions the Wallcreeper was seen on a large crane, hopping along horizontal steel girders or fluttering about on the side, searching the cracks.

The location of food seemed to be entirely visual. It would crane its neck and stretch, peering intently into crevices and often stood with its head lowered below the level of its body, or stretched out horizontally along the rock in a most peculiar position. It often waited, looking intently around before pouncing on something. Food was picked with the tip of the bill from the rock surface or from cracks, and once from the base of a small plant. Its feeding rate increased with the greater abundance of insect life in late spring, prior to migration. On 8 April for example, the bird was seen on a favoured damp area, feeding more frequently than usual, picking up items every second or so and barely flicking its wings at all. Only once was it seen to probe into earth although it occasionally did some excavating into loose earth and amongst small stones. In the latter instance the bill was opened and it attempted to get under a larger stone and also pecked at another. Large or hard prey was often held or manipulated in the bill before swallowing. On 9 February it took a caterpillar some 45mm long and spent several minutes apparently softening it by hitting it against a rock before swallowing it whole. This behaviour was again noted on 29 March with a very small but obviously hard grub, and on 1 April with another caterpillar. Other caterpillars were swallowed instantly. Persistent bill-wiping was frequently observed on rocks and once on a cable. Flycatching was seen several times, the bird flying out up to several metres from the rock with an awkward butterfly-like action. It once leapt off the rock backwards to snap at an insect, practically looping-the-loop before returning.

Food appeared to be mainly small insects and spiders although most of the items taken were practically invisible. Larger grubs and caterpillars however, were not infrequently eaten. Butterflies or moths were also taken; on 4 March the bird caught what was possibly a Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae* and it spent some time dealing with this in order to remove the wings; on 26th a small pale moth and on 8 April two creamy-brown ones were swallowed whole. On 11 March it regurgitated a small pellet.

Short spells (usually five to ten minutes) were occasionally spent preening. Comfort movements such as bill-wiping, head-scratching and wing-stretching were all fairly frequent. On one occasion the Wallcreeper rubbed its

neck and then the side of its head on a stone. On the east face at Chelms Coombe is a wet area beneath a small cave with a pool. On 12 March it appeared to bathe in the trickle of water running down the face and its wings were flicked open more fully. On 27th, it bathed for over five minutes, making numerous movements into the water and back onto a rock at the cave entrance. It then used its bill very little for preening but fluffed out its body feathers and shook. On moving away it remained in one position for some five minutes to dry. Similarly on 24 February it sat on the rock to dry but did not preen. Sun-bathing was not observed.

Noise levels at Chelms Coombe were often high, with the building and dismantling of pylons, but more especially when generators and drills were in operation. All of this provoked little reaction from the Wallcreeper although if suddenly surprised it would fly to another part of the rock face.

Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* and Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* frequently passed overhead and its reactions to these were always the same, immediately ceasing all activity and keeping perfectly still except for the occasional agitated skyward glance. Tending to remain still for some time after, the Wallcreeper was then extremely difficult to pick out from the background. Once when a Buzzard *Buteo buteo* came over, being noisily mobbed by a Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, the Wallcreeper became very excited, flicking its wings in an exaggerated manner before flying and landing on a lower rock still agitatedly flicking its wings. On another occasion, when two Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* flew over calling excitedly, it quickly left the rock face but soon returned. When the same thing happened a few moments later, flight was quicker and more evasive.

On 3 March at 17.15 hours GMT, the Wallcreeper entered a small hole over two-thirds of the way up the cliffs on the east side of Cheddar Gorge to roost. It was again noted going to roost just before 17.45 hours on 12th in a small hole on the east face at Chelms Coombe. P. Webber (*verbally*) had observed this on several previous evenings. From 14th to 27th it was seen on several dates during the evening to leave Chelms Coombe and fly towards Cheddar Gorge.

Song

The Wallcreeper was first heard singing on 24 March and then frequently while feeding as well as perched. There were four distinct songs, but two main ones which tended to be given in spells of perhaps 10–15 minutes before switching to the other, although occasionally alternated. The first was vaguely chat-like with a rather throaty whistling quality. Renditions of this were variously written but included 'Chewee cheweeooo' (rising on the 'wee' and falling on the 'ooo'), 'Wee woo weoo' and 'Pu pu piu'. The second was a rather slow, clear and piping succession of three whistles then a falling note, the first part of which rose slightly: 'Oo oo oo eeooo' or 'Pu pu piu'. This was strongly reminiscent of a Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, especially the last longer note. Both other songs were similar to the first with one being shorter, perhaps rather weaker, and rather high and squeaky in tone: 'Ticky-teu sip'. The last, given least frequently, was a whistly 'Wooo ... wiooo' with a throaty, remarkably Starling-like noise in the middle. On 26 March and 1 April it was seen in flight in a series of wide, fast circles which may possibly have been some kind of display.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the management of the Tower Testing Station in allowing access and in particular to P. Webber, who gave up much valuable time in giving advice and supervising the vast army of birdwatchers that descended there. Ken Hall and Robin Prytherch provided additional information. Robin Prytherch also drew the map and the illustration.

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HOOPOES BREEDING IN SOMERSET

by B.E. Slade

Introduction

During the spring of 1977 an influx of Hoopoes *Upupa epops* occurred with several being reported from Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. One was seen in Somerset on 10 March and more followed in April and May. On 21 May one was observed at Berrow, then it and another individual, its mate, were seen on several dates throughout the summer. The following account is made from my observations on this pair which successfully reared one young. They were watched on 33 days at varying times between 05.30 and 21.30 hours but mainly in the early morning and evening.

After the initial sighting the birds proved to be very elusive. On 13 July at 18.30 hours one flew over carrying food in its bill, this being the first indication of breeding. On the 15th the pair were seen together for the first time but from the 21st to the end of this month few sightings were made. It was thought that alternative feeding areas such as manure heaps at nearby farms were being used. For the first week of August regular observations were made of one or two birds. On the 10th at 08.00 hours the female was seen accompanied by a juvenile, their behaviour strongly suggesting that it had just fledged. All three were seen regularly to the 31st when the adults left. The juvenile remained until 13 September. (See also page 35 for a breeding record in Avon — Eds.)

General behaviour

After the young bird had fledged the pair were far more approachable and could be watched at distances down to five metres. They were not seen to associate with other species but did react to alarm notes. On one occasion a flock of Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* mobbed a Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and the female and juvenile flew away from the area in which they were feeding. The Hoopoes seemed to react more to the presence of Magpies *Pica pica* and frequently jumped into the air when one flew near. This may have been a reaction to the sudden flashes of black and white recalling their own appearance in flight. Once when an adult was feeding close to a family of Magpies its crest was continuously being expanded and contracted. On 20 August the female jumped about one metre into the air when a Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* suddenly flew past. Swallows *Hirundo rustica* were the only birds that occasionally mobbed the Hoopoes: on 1 August one was pursued as it flew into the nest area with food; on the 20th an adult was dived at as it fed and on the 31st one was vigorously mobbed by some 40 causing it to fly much higher than usual and to show more evasive action. Generally the Hoopoes flew below 15 metres and frequently passed between the higher sand-dunes. On 10 August the female was observed dust-bathing.

When the young Hoopoe was first seen it kept very close to the female in flight. They spent about 15 minutes in one area before returning to the nesting site. At 17.00 hours the same day they were located again when the young bird flew down from a hedge and was fed by the female. This was some distance away from where they were first seen. The juvenile spent most of the time squatting on the ground while the parents walked around gathering food. It would stretch its neck forward to receive this and occasionally tip its head onto one side. This behaviour continued until 25 August when the juvenile was taking more food for itself and was more active. On this date it made several approaches to an adult which was feeding nearby and although the adult appeared reluctant to give food its persistence was rewarded on three occasions. When the juvenile ran forward its crest was sometimes raised. Three days later I saw the young bird on its own for the first time, the adults being together about 80 metres away and out of sight.

It was not until 11 August that any calls were noticed. For several days after a cat-like 'kaoow' was heard, mainly at close range, as the birds flew by. On the first date this note drew my attention to the male which was about to perch on a Common Elder *Sambucus nigra* with food in its bill. It then began the 'hoo-hoo-hoo' song but this was rather subdued and was probably being used as an alarm (Gooders 1969–71).

Feeding behaviour

The birds travelled up to half a mile from the nest-site to feed. They were only seen perched on three occasions in the vicinity of the nest, each time due to the presence of people nearby. At first the Hoopoes were always found feeding in areas of relatively bare ground; even when disturbed from grassy patches the exact feeding spot lacked vegetation. After the juvenile had fledged they spent most of the time on the adjacent golfcourse. The only food items identified were Earthworms *Lumbricus terrestris*. When feeding at one favourite spot food consisted of what could only have been the larvae of various insects, some being up to three-quarters the length of a Hoopoe's bill. When feeding the juvenile the golfcourse was alive with Grasshoppers *Orthopera* but none were seen to be eaten.

Nest site

The nest site was believed to be in the corner of an 'L'-shaped area of tall trees which consisted mainly of dead or dying English Elms *Ulmus procera*. A large garden with spacious lawns and areas of fruit trees, shrubs and ornamental trees was on one side and farmland on another. After the Hoopoes had departed an examination of the suspected site revealed five suitable nesting holes which were between five and fifteen metres high. Other species in the area included Stock Dove *Columba oenas*, Woodpigeon *C. palumbus*, Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*, Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* and Rook *C. frugilegus*.



Breeding status

There is only one previous breeding record for Somerset when a pair laid eggs in an apple tree at Badgworth in 1931 but deserted. One to three birds were seen in the Bath area during the summer of 1927 (Palmer and Ballance 1968). Elsewhere in the British Isles it has been described as an occasional breeding bird, mainly in south coast counties, with an average of one or two pairs each decade but four in the 1950s (British Ornithologists' Union 1971).

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THE BIRDS OF THE SAN BENITO ISLANDS, LOWER CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

by Jeffery Boswall

Plates 3—4

Introduction

I was resident on West San Benito Island ($115^{\circ}37'W$, $28^{\circ}19'N$) off the Pacific coast of Lower California, Mexico, (see fig. 1), from 23 May to 14 June 1975. My purpose was to make a wildlife film for the BBC (Boswall and Fisher 1976). Comparatively little time was devoted to ornithology; in particular, little bird work was done at night. Nevertheless, my residence is probably the longest to date of any ornithologist (R.C. Banks, pers.comm.); few other scientists seem to have stayed more than a day or so. The ornithological references to this archipelago are fragmentary and scattered, but those up to 1927 were summarised by Grinnell (1928). No previous paper has been devoted to the birds of the islands; this contribution tries to bring together all published information.

Griscom (1950) thought our knowledge Mexican birds was then approximately equal to what ornithologists knew about the birds of the United States in 1875. A 75-year discrepancy probably applies equally well today. Furthermore Jehl (1974) has recently deplored the fact that Middle American pelagic seabirds have received even less attention than the land birds and a few large, conspicuous coastal seabirds. "For ornithologists" he concludes, "the lure of the tropics seems not to have extended far seaward of the sandy beaches." The rock-bound San Benito Islands lie well out in the California Current and are home to many pelagic seabirds.



Fig. 1. Map to show the location of the San Benito Islands.

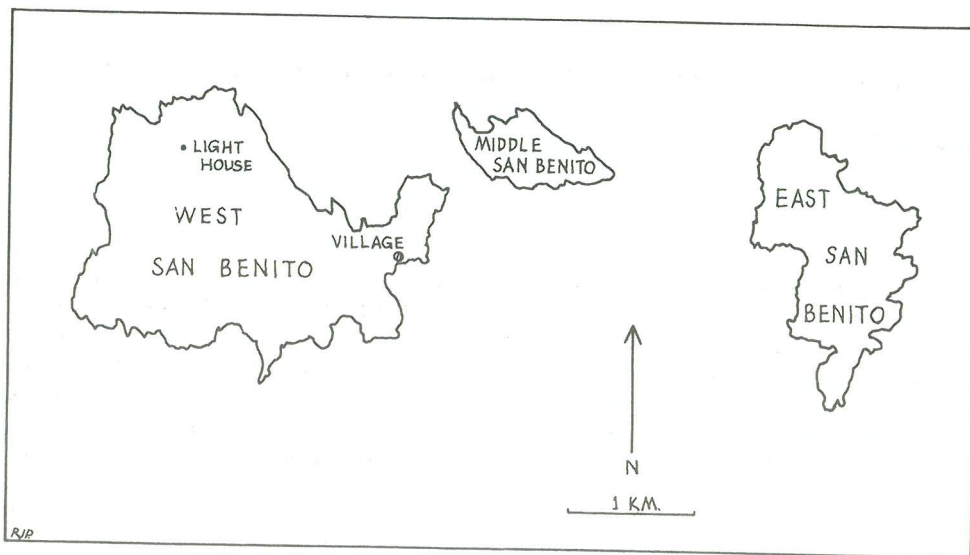


Fig. 2. Map of the San Benito Islands.

West San Benito is the outermost of three small islands (fig. 2) that lie about 30 km west of the much larger island of Cedros. It is about 3.2km by about 2.3km, covers about 402ha, has 13km of shore line, and rises to 201m above the sea. For the most part the island is hilly, though to the east, facing Middle San Benito, there is a flat promontory. The coast is almost entirely rock-bound. Middle San Benito, a smaller island (1.4 by 0.6km, 50ha, 4.5km of shoreline, and rising to 25m), was visited on 9 and 10 June. I was unable to visit East San Benito (2.3 by 1.3km, 150ha, 8.5km of shoreline and rising to 128m).

The San Benito Islands have considerable fog but little rain. There are no precipitation figures, but an 8-year record from the somewhat similar south end of Cedros Island (see fig. 1) gives an annual mean of 65mm. Owing to the fog, lichens are abundant; but vegetation generally is sparse and desertic. Only 40 native species of flowering plant are known, plus four Mediterranean weeds (Reid V. Moran, *in litt.*).

At the time of my visit to West San Benito there were only two lighthouse keepers (one with a wife and two small children) living in the seasonal fishing village of improvised houses. This village is occupied each year, usually from September to early May, by abalone divers (some with families) and some other fishermen. Their residence has some effect on the bird life; for example, gulls' eggs and nestling Ospreys are eaten.

The only domestic animals present were four dogs, nine donkeys and one goat. The lighthouse keepers said there were no rats or cats. Earlier authors, however, e.g. Anthony (1925) attributed the decline of certain birds to the presence of feral cats. I saw no evidence of them, nor did Jehl (1970) in 1969 or 1970.

During my three week stay, 29 bird species were identified. Of these, nine were migrants (five shore-birds and four land birds) and one a casual visitor (an egret). Seventeen species I saw were already known or believed to breed (or have bred) on one or more of the three San Benitos. To these must be added four nesters reported by Grinnell (1928) that I did not see: Xantus' Murrelet *Endomychura hypoleuca*, the Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, the Burrowing Owl *Speotyto cunicularia*, and the McGregor House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus mcgregori*. Further, Jehl and Bond (1975) have recently shown that Craveri's Murrelet *Endomychura craveri* also occurs on the San Benitos in the breeding season, though I did not observe this species either. Two of the species I found nesting in 1975 had not previously been proved to do so: the Yellow-crowned Night Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*, and the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. The heron was regarded by Grinnell (1928) as only a casual visitor to the islands. Just how and when the House Sparrow reached West San Benito is not known but it is likely to have been very recently (J. Jehl, pers. comm.). In 1925 the species, "a recent invader across the United States' border" had got no further south than about 30°S in Lower California (Grinnell 1928).

Thus 24 species are known to breed or to have bred on the San Benito Islands. Of these four are sub-specifically endemic (American Ornithologists' Union 1957, 1973): Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa chapmani*, Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus tenuirostris*, Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis sanctorum*, and the McGregor House Finch which is now extinct (Jehl 1970).

Besides the three endemic passerines just mentioned there are only five other native breeding land birds: Peregrine Falcon, Burrowing Owl, Costa's Hummingbird *Calypte costae*, Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* and Raven *Corvus corax*. The remaining fifteen native breeders are all seabirds or "sea-side" birds and include a shearwater, three storm-petrels (including the one endemic mentioned above), a pelican, a cormorant, a heron, the Osprey, two oystercatchers, two gulls, and three alcids.

Besides the twenty-three native and one introduced nesting species, a total of seventeen visitors have been recorded. Thus the grand total for the islands is forty-one bird species.

The systematic list

In the following list nomenclature and sequence follow the check-list of the A.O.U. (1957), its supplement (A.O.U. 1973), and Peterson and Chalif (1973).

MANX SHEARWATER *Puffinus puffinus*. While journeying to and from the island, I saw many at sea. At night, on the island, birds were occasionally seen in flight and on the ground. They were also sometimes heard calling in flight. Birds were seen in seven large cavities under or alongside sizeable boulders, in three of which large downy chicks were visible. It is probable that the species breeds on the island in much larger numbers than these meagre observations suggest. One bird of this species was found dead entangled among spines of Cholla Cactus *Opuntia prolifera*. Apart from this, only one other shearwater corpse was found.

LEAST STORM-PETREL *Halocyptena microsoma*. The Least Storm-petrel was one of three species of storm-petrel present on the island. Live storm-petrels were seen at night in flight only when it was possible to illuminate a considerable area with the aid of a 275 watt lamp. This light revealed far more birds than an ordinary torch, a point that future workers should bear in mind. In fact, I found myself in a veritable snow-storm of storm-petrels! It was a most exciting experience as hundreds of birds of three species filled the illuminated sector, often coming very close or even blundering into me. Viewed from below by a strong light, the various storm-petrels appeared white and brown rather than blackish. The different species were not easy to distinguish, but the impression was that, in decreasing order of commonness, the storm-petrels were: Leach's, Least, and Black Storm-petrels *Oceanodroma melania*. The diamond-shaped tail, small size and steadier flight of the Least Storm-petrel made it the easiest species to differentiate.

Many Least Storm-petrels were picked up from the ground, from among rocks, or taken from burrows. Birds were heard calling only from among rocks. This species must have been present on the island in hundreds, probably thousands, but this is nothing more than a guess. Ten live birds had wing chords averaging 119.4mm (range 114–124mm), and weighed an average of 20.6gm (range 19–23gm). Warham (1977) gives 20 ± 1 gm as the weight of this species. No eggs or chicks were seen, but the species is known to nest (Grinnell 1928).

LEACH'S STORM-PETREL *Oceanodroma leucorhoa chapmani*. For relative numbers see under Least Storm-petrel. No particular effort was made to investigate burrows of this endemic race, but one opened up on 28 May contained two adults and one egg (42.8 x 33.9mm, 26gm). Numbers of birds were found sitting at or just outside burrow entrances at night. After dark on the evening of 28 May, I walked the length of the island from the lighthouse to the fishing village. All the way there was a loud continuous cacophony of Leach's Storm-petrel cries, as birds flew round me and sometimes into me. A 180° sweep with a small torch would always show 50–70 birds. There must surely have been hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions, of Leach's Storm-petrels present.

Also at night some birds had found their way through holes in the glass surrounding the light of the lighthouse. Those that could not find their way back out (presumably most, if not all) died of starvation. Forty dead

storm-petrels examined were all of this species. The wing chords of twelve averaged 152.4mm (range 148–156mm). Ten live birds had wing chords averaging 150.3mm (range 142–156mm); they weighed an average 36.8gm (range 32–44gm). Scores of birds of this species were found dead, entangled among Cholla Cactus.

ASHY STORM-PETREL *Oceanodroma nomochroa*. One taken on board a vessel off the San Benitos on April 1911 (Townsend 1923).

BLACK STORM-PETREL *Oceanodroma melania*. For relative numbers see under Least Storm-petrel. A few birds of this species were picked up from the ground and two were taken from a burrow. By day two birds were found dead among Cholla Cactus. At a guess the Black Storm-petrel was present on the island in hundreds of thousands. The wing chords of ten live birds averaged 171.9mm (range 162–182mm); their weights averaged 60.9gm (range 58–67gm). No eggs or chicks were found but the species is known to nest (Grinnell 1928).

BROWN PELICAN *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Up to 70 birds together were seen daily in flight, the large majority being sub-adult. Brown Pelicans were only occasionally seen resting on the sea, and never seen to plunge-dive. The lighthouse keepers assured us that this species does not nest on West San Benito. Brown Pelicans do, however, nest on East San Benito (Jehl 1973).

BRANDT'S CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*. Birds were seen daily in small numbers, and were said by the lighthouse keepers to nest on East San Benito.

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON *Nyctanassa violacea*. Up to four adults were seen together. On 2 June, D. MacIver climbed to two occupied nests on a steep offshore rock; he put one bird off an empty nest; the other held three eggs. This is the first record of nesting on the San Benitos, and represents a small northward extension of the breeding range in Baja California (Palmer 1962).

SNOWY EGRET *Egretta thula*. One was seen on Middle San Benito on 9 June. This bird was no doubt a casual visitor from mainland Baja California where Snowy Egrets nest (Palmer 1962).

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*. Ospreys were an almost hourly sight. At least ten or twelve birds were present. Almost every rock pinnacle was capped by a nest or the remains of a nest, but only one was occupied among the twelve or fifteen inspected. On 24 May this nest held two young about two-thirds grown and one dead chick about half-grown. On 2 June both these young were seen in flight in the company of their presumed parents, but on subsequent days they were back on the nest. The fishermen are said to eat and relish young Ospreys. This may account for my finding only one occupied nest; alternatively young may have already fledged from other nests before my arrival. Kenyon (1974) thought man the most important enemy of the Osprey in Lower California.

AMERICAN KESTREL *Falco sparverius*. One recorded 9 March 1911 (Townsend 1923).

PEREGRINE FALCON *Falco peregrinus*. None was seen. This species was formerly known to nest (Grinnell 1928). Kaeding (1905) found the species "common" and took fresh eggs in 1897 on 13 March. This date would mean the fledging of young Peregrines at about the time of my arrival on the island, but I saw none of any age.

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus palliatus*. A sprinkling of birds was seen round the coast, some displaying in calling parties of up to five. A nest with one egg was found on 30 May; it still had only one on 6 June. This species and the next are known to hybridise in Lower California (Kenyon 1949).

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus bachmani*. An empty scrape found on 3 June held one egg at 10.30 hours on 6 June and two eggs four hours later. This species was seen only in the vicinity of this nest and there may have been only one individual.

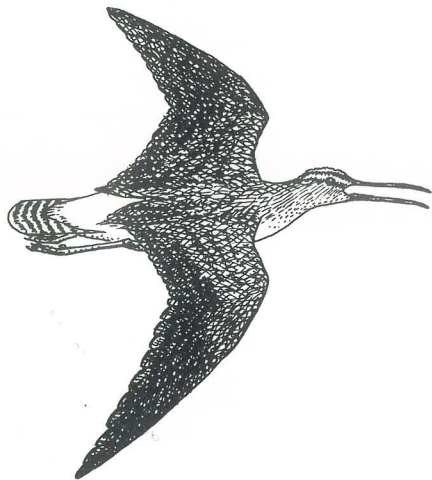
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER *Pluvialis squatarola*. One was seen on 24 May. Another bird on Middle San Benito on 9 June was not in summer plumage.

WILLET *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*. One was seen on Middle San Benito on 9 June.

RUDDY TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*. Three were seen on Middle San Benito on 9 June.

WANDERING TATTLER *Heteroscelus incanus*. One was seen on 6 June, and another on Middle San Benito on 9 June.

WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*. One was identified on 6 June.



RJP

HEERMANN'S GULL *Larus heermanni*. A colony with sixteen nests was found on Middle San Benito on 9 June. Four nests were empty, four contained a single egg and the remainder contained eggs and/or small chicks. At least 30 adults were present. This is only the second locality on the Pacific side of Lower California where this species has been found nesting. Grinnell (1928) gave San Roque Island as the only breeding ground definitely reported from the west coast of Lower California. The San Benito colony was first discovered by Jehl (1976) in May 1971 when there were nine nests with eggs. In June 1974 he found several empty scrapes but only two nests each with a young chick.

WESTERN GULL *Larus occidentalis*. The breeding population is certainly to be numbered in hundreds, possibly in one or two thousands of pairs. These gulls were not nesting in strict colonies, but were well spaced out, nests being 50 or 100 metres apart. Besides an uncounted number of nests from which young may have hatched and moved, twenty-five nests with eggs and/or chicks were found between 24 May and 6 June. Of these, one contained 1 egg; ten, 2 eggs; ten, 3 eggs; one, 1 chick; two, 3 chicks; and one, 1 egg and 2 chicks. Occasional sightings of sub-adults are probably all referable to the presence of no more than three individuals believed to be in their first, second and third years respectively. These gulls were often present among the assemblies of female California Sea Lions *Zalophus californianus*; they consumed the excreta of recently born pups and fought over the afterbirth. Two pellets almost certainly brought up by these gulls, were largely composed of the remains of a storm-petrel, most likely a Leach's. The gulls also scavenged at the fishing village. One was seen to take an egg from the nest of another Western Gull. Gulls' eggs are taken for food by the lighthouse keepers and fishermen, and a few hundreds are also exported.

THAYER'S GULL *Larus thayeri*. Recorded as a casual visitor (A.O.U. 1957). A minimum of 25 Thayer's Gulls were seen among 5000 gulls on 18 January; two on 31 January and three on 16 March 1971 (Devillers and others 1971).

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL *Larus glaucescens*. Up to 20 have been recorded in winter (Devillers and others 1971).

GLAUCOUS GULL *Larus hyperboreus*. A second(?) -year bird was seen on 18 and 31 January and 16 March 1971 (Devillers and others 1971).

MEW GULL *Larus canus*. A first-winter bird was seen on 31 January 1971 (Devillers and others 1971).

ROYAL TERN *Thalasseus maximus*. Anthony (1900) saw one or two birds of this species in late July.

XANTUS' MURRELET *Endomychura hypoleuca*. No birds of either race, *E.h. hypoleuca* or *E.h. scrippsi* were identified by me, though small alcids seen in flight at night could have been Xantus' Murrelets. According to Jehl and Bond (1975) the extent to which these two well-marked subspecies interbreed on the San Benitos needs further enquiry to decide whether two species require recognition.

CRAVERI'S MURRELET *Endomychura craveri*. No birds of this species were identified though small alcids seen in flight by me at night could have been these. Jehl and Bond (1975) have shown that birds do occur on the San Benitos during the nesting season. I have assumed this species nests.

CASSIN'S AUKLET *Ptychoramphus aleuticus*. Very small, long-dead nestlings and a number of adults were found killed by becoming entangled in Cholla. A few live adults were seen at night. The size of the nesting population is unknown to me; it is likely to be hundreds and could easily be thousands of pairs. Dead adults and chicks, though not numerous, were widely distributed round the coast in burrowed areas accompanied by Cholla. On 11 June, two fully feathered chicks, about three-quarters adult size, with a little down clinging to the neck and flanks, were taken from burrows. In 1932, van Rossem (1939) found eggs on 2 February on West San Benito. On 18 April 1963, Banks (1964) found an adult and a nearly fully grown young bird in a burrow on West San Benito.

BURROWING OWL *Speotyto cunicularia*. I saw none, though Grinnell (1928) says the species is resident on most of the islands and quotes McGregor as having recorded it from the San Benitos. I have assumed this species nested and may still do so.

MOURNING DOVE *Zenaida macroura*. Single birds seen on three dates (latest 5 June) were no doubt late migrant stragglers.

COSTA'S HUMMINGBIRD *Calypte costae*. A pair of hummers, presumably of this species, the only one previously recorded from the San Benitos (Grinnell 1928), were seen on 25 May at the yellow inflorescence of a tall (2m) Century Plant *Agave shawii*. The female appears in our film (Boswall and Fisher 1976). I have assumed this species nests.

HORNED LARK *Eremophila alpestris*. Horned Larks were present on the flat areas of the island. A family party of four was seen on 11 June. The species was described by van Rossem (1943) as resident.



COMMON RAVEN *Corvus corax*. Two birds were seen together on most days. I have assumed this species nests on the islands.

ROCK WREN *Salpinctes obsoletus tenuirostris*. Singing individuals of this endemic race were heard in two or three localities. The subspecies was described by van Rossem (1943).

WILSON'S WARBLER *Wilsonia pusilla*. One long-dead male migrant was found on 25 May.

HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*. Up to two pairs were observed by the fishing village, though the species was not strictly occupying the little village itself, where the Savannah Sparrow was undoubtedly dominant. Instead the House Sparrow had four nests in crevices in a natural cliff to one side. Copulation was seen on 13 June and nest-building the next day. This is the first record of this species on the San Benito Islands.

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD *Euphagus cyanocephalus*. A male was seen on three dates (latest, 7 June) near the fishing camp, a late migrant straggler.

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK *Pheucticus melanocephalus*. One male seen on 25 May was no doubt a late migrant straggler.

SAVANNAH SPARROW *Passerculus sandwichensis sanctorum*. This endemic race is the commonest land bird on the island; it is also the most widespread bird, being present in a surprising variety of habitats. Firstly it was found, as perhaps to be expected, on the ground among the sparse island vegetation, presumably seeking seeds and invertebrates. Several birds were seen visiting the large yellow inflorescence of the Century Plant, no doubt in search of flies. These sparrows also foraged along the strand among a variety of debris including cast-up piles of brown kelp. They ventured to perch on very small pieces of floating kelp and on floating driftwood. Rocks well below the high water mark were regularly searched, the birds nimbly avoiding swelling waves. Two or three times, they clung to vertical faces of algae-covered rock.

The birds were also attracted by the flies associated with numerous Northern Elephant Seals *Mirounga angustirostris* flopped out on the beach. These flies they would capture by walking or running both around the sleeping seals, and across their bodies — much to the irritation of some seals who would rear up on feeling the tiny passerine toes among their fur. Using a distinctive and unusual action, these sparrows also raked over the loose dry earth of the elephant seal hauling grounds. A bird would hop backwards dragging its toes so as to rake over the top-most soil and on pausing have its head ready in a very suitable position to spot and capture exposed invertebrate prey. This rare and possibly previously unrecorded method of food-finding is depicted in our film (Boswall and Fisher 1976); and by a coincidence, we observed and filmed similar behaviour by a Rufous-naped Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis* in South America (see Boswall and Fisher 1974).

Lastly the birds were attendant on man and his activities in the fishing village, being much more in evidence than the House Sparrows. The Savannah Sparrows ventured inside our shack to inspect shelves five metres from the door. They were "into everything", causing one expedition member to remark "Some people have mice, we have sparrows". They would eat items of both vegetable and animal origin, feeding themselves and their fledged young within 0.5 metre of a seated human. Sometimes they would get under one's feet in a way that made one wary of treading on them. I am unfamiliar with the behaviour of mainland Savannah Sparrows, but it seems likely that these island birds form a good example of the "general tendency for land birds on islands to have broader habitats and feeding stations" (Lack 1969). The tameness of this species everywhere was remarkable.

There was noticeable individual variation in the plumage of adults, for example, some having a yellowish eyestripe, some not. The insistent calls of fledged young I heard everywhere as the parents collected food for them. The young were a little smaller, decidedly greyer and less boldly marked. Many of the adults were in heavy moult, some having no tail feathers at all. Song was heard daily. One bird weighed 21.0gm.

MCGREGOR HOUSE FINCH *Carpodacus mexicanus mcgregori*. None was seen, confirming the conclusion by Jehl (1970) that this endemic race is extinct. The last record was in 1938.

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OBSERVATIONS ON WILSON'S STORM-PETRELS IN EUROPEAN WATERS

by Bernard King

In late July 1973 I was included in the crew of sixteen as a 'supernumerary' on *M.V. Goram*, a 1600 ton cargo ship due to sail from Penzance to the Mediterranean. My time was therefore my own and meant that I could study seabirds at my leisure. As we drew away from the small dock at Penzance I little imagined what hazards and excitements lay ahead. Nevertheless, it was one of these misfortunes that gave me the rare opportunity of hearing Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* at night, an experience probably given to few in European waters. Subsequently Wilson's Storm-petrels were seen well close to the ship.

The first real excitement — an alarming one at that — occurred on 31 July with the onset of poor weather in the Bay of Biscay. About two hours before dusk the ship's engines suddenly failed and incredibly within half an hour or so the generator also ceased to function. Thus we started to drift precariously without power of any kind, the only means of communicating with the outside World being our sporadic distress flares. Towards midnight, and still at the mercy of the elements, I learned from one of the crew, who with some difficulty had managed to attach storm lamps fore and aft, that he had seen in the poor light from the lamps shadowy objects which he felt must have been birds flitting about. They were, he told me, calling with high pitched cries, the like of which were previously unknown to him though he had been many times in the Bay of Biscay in late summer and autumn. Nevertheless, in spite of my keenness for sea-birds I was not prepared to visit the bows, which meant a risky climb over cargo stowed on the beam decks, but instead kept to the lee of the very strong gusts and rain on the upper deck so that I could listen out for the noises he had mentioned. There, I too could hear on occasions sustained querulous sounds; they reminded me of a large gathering of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* fussing around prior to roosting. Sometimes the cries were very near, then suddenly some distance away, and then just as suddenly the sounds were around the ship once again. Later I moved to the lower deck to listen but though I was there for much of the remaining darkness the birds had obviously moved away and were not heard again. Had the ship been under normal power I doubt whether I, or my informant, would have heard the calls above the drone of the engines.

Even though I had had no previous experience of Wilson's Storm-petrels I felt confident that the birds heard were indeed of this species. Both Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* and Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* are species with which I am familiar; they do not cry as I have described, nor, I understand, does the Madeiran Storm-petrel *O. castro*. Furthermore, Witherby (1940) states B.B. Roberts who considered that Wilson's Storm-petrels calling sounded like the querulous chattering of House Sparrows; a likeness which I had noted on the night. In Palmer (1962) Wilson's Storm-petrel is described as generally silent but give just audible peepings which become more excited and rapid when birds are at a food supply. No doubt the petrels I heard were also feeding.

So *M.V. Goram* having drifted for well over eighteen hours did at last gain a slight response from its reluctant machinery and we eventually limped into la Corunna, northern Spain. We stayed there for four days for repairs and then ventured to sea again late in the day on 5 August. Next morning was brilliantly sunny with a strong breeze as we passed south along the coast of Portugal. It was between 40°24'N, 9°27'W and 40°7'N, 9°27'W (13 nautical miles west of Aviero and 3 n.m. west of Figuera) that splendid views were obtained of Wilson's Storm-petrels, when some sixty or more were seen within this range. To ensure an uninterrupted view I soon stationed myself in the elevated 'monkey' deck which thus allowed an overall expanse of more than 180°. The storm-petrels at times came very close to the ship, adopting a swift mode of flight; in fact more powerful than either Storm Petrels or Leach's Storm-petrels. Their side-on sweeps and glides were fascinating to watch under such excellent light conditions with only moderately choppy seas. In this way they covered considerable distances in a matter of a few seconds as they criss-crossed one another, sometimes being on the port side and then quickly flying on the starboard beam within the wide angle of the ship's wake. Usually they flew only a little above the surface but less often rose up to a few metres above the sea.

In the sunlight these storm-petrels appeared very dark and robust in body; wings rather thick set with rounded tips. Those which I observed were in immaculate plumage, at some angles even revealing body gloss, and

therefore probably adults, which are just completing their moult (Cramp and Simmons, 1977). Leach's are lighter, sooty brown with a light but smudgy bar on the upper wing coverts, whereas the smaller Storm Petrels may reveal a white but almost indiscernible thin wing bar. Contrasting from both of these, Wilson's showed well defined median and greater coverts of the upper wing distinctly sooty black-brown and outwardly finged with whitish, forming a pronounced band on the wing which could be seen on the birds well away from the ship under such good light conditions.

The diagnostic long-legged appearance and coloured webs of Wilson's Storm-petrel are over-emphasised as field characters in some of the ornithological literature, particularly so in regard to the webs. Of the Wilson's Storm-petrels I observed not one revealed clearly their webbed feet — they are in fact dull or blackish with only the centre portion yellow or ochreous. When these storm-petrels trail their legs in flight then it can be seen that they are decidedly long legged. More often, however, they retain them close to the body, when the feet extend no more than two or three centimetres beyond the central tail feathers, and are thus very difficult to discern. In the opinion of Stephen E. Chapman (*in litt.*), an authority on sea-birds of the Atlantic, the long legs of Wilson's Storm-petrels have to be seen under good visibility from approximately thirty metres or less. For some interesting notes on the identification of storm-petrels see *Sea Swallow* (1966) 18:64–71.

I made only one other sighting of Wilson's Storm-petrel when a single was observed in the western Mediterranean on 8 August at 36°22'N, 3°32'W. Thus, all the birds I saw were on the edge of their normal range in the north-west Atlantic (they are extremely rare in British waters). Wilson's Storm-petrel is one of the most plentiful sea-birds in the World and they leave their breeding grounds in Antarctica to spend the austral winter in the Indian and north Atlantic Oceans. They tend to avoid central oceanic tracts, keeping to offshore and even inshore waters; often following ships closely (Cramp and Simmons, 1977).

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NOTES

Feeding behaviour of gulls in association with seal and Sun Fish

At Sennen Cove, Cornwall on 10 February 1974 I observed in flight a Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* in company with 20 Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla*. Their attention was focused on a Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus* which every so often brought large fish to the surface during a 25-minute feeding period. The seal could be seen munching its prey, dropping many scraps into the sea, and it was these floating pieces which caused the gulls to swoop to the surface and contest aggressively for them.

In contrast I witnessed a rather different form of behaviour from this at St Ives Bay, Cornwall on 12 September 1975. Here seven immature Herring Gulls *L. argentatus* were swimming close to a large Sun Fish *Mola mola* which now and again, in typical fashion, came very close to the surface exposing its dorsal fin. This large and round-shaped creature allowed the gulls occasionally to prod its fin from which they appeared to be picking off edible items. The Sun Fish sometimes sank beneath the water, but was still discernible, and soon rose again, allowing the association to continue.

It is well known that gulls are opportunists and become involved in feeding associations with other birds and animals. For instance, Robert Angles in the summer of 1963 in the Lizard peninsula, Cornwall observed Herring Gulls, a Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*, and a Great Black-backed Gull, as well as a Razorbill *Alca torda*, a Guillemot *Uria aalge* and Gannets *Sula bassana* in feeding association with Basking Sharks *Cetorhinus maximus* (see *Brit. Birds* 59 (1966): 433–434).

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Winter feeding association between immature Black-headed Gulls

From my office window overlooking areas of grassland on the outskirts of Bath, Somerset (now Avon) flocks of gulls were to be seen for many years during the winter months. I particularly remember one very cold day in the second week of November 1953 observing two immature Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* nearby. One of these fed on scraps which on occasions were put out for the birds, and my curiosity was aroused when I found it was being followed by another wherever it went. Giving plaintive soliciting cries this bird assumed a hump-backed appearance, with head lowered and thrust forward, and wings slightly drooping. This begging was rewarded in two instances when I watched bread being offered by the first bird and immediately taken and swallowed by the trailing immature. However, the performance continued unabated until eventually after some fifteen minutes all the gulls were disturbed; this interesting feeding association was not repeated to my knowledge. The whole episode was unique as far as I was concerned, and though I have searched through an extensive ornithological library at my disposal and other material elsewhere, I have been unable to locate any similar behaviour where immature gulls were solely involved.

Bernard King



Spoonbill, Black-headed Gulls and Little Tern in feeding and aggressive association

Very heavy rain during February 1954 which continued sporadically well into May helped to increase the flooding of the newly created Chew Valley Lake, Somerset (now in Avon) from 130 to 510 acres (E.G. Wright *in litt.*). There was also a considerable area of wet and muddy ground with shallow pools. On 2 May, following heavy rain storms, I was in the area of Denny Farm (now Denny Island) when I obtained fleeting glimpses of a bird which at first I thought was a Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*. However when I peered over a bank I could see that it was an adult Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* feeding in the shallows and being pestered by some 12 Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* which hovered and stooped above. The Spoonbill searched for food in a typical manner by sweeping its bill from side to side through the water. In order to combat the aggressive behaviour of the gulls it would point its open bill towards them, occasionally making some high pitched but weak rasping noises. This mobbing behaviour continued intermittently for one hour until the gulls departed at the onset of a heavy rain storm.

A Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* was present at the same time and appeared unconcerned at what was happening nearby. It repeatedly dived into the water near the Spoonbill and was persistent in keeping to the same area as used by its companion. The Spoonbill by its feeding movements undoubtedly caused small fish to be disturbed thus enabling the tern to secure its prey more easily. The Little Tern also departed at the start of the rain storm. I can find no reference to feeding associations between these two species although E.P.R. Poorter (*in litt.*) informs me that this behaviour involving Spoonbills with Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*, Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* and Black-headed Gulls is not unusual. However, he has not heard high pitched noises from threatening Spoonbills, their calls usually being harsher.

Bernard King



An aberrant North American Ruddy Duck

From late December 1973 to early February 1974 in Florida, USA, I sometimes visited the small Lake Davis situated in a fairly busy district on the outskirts of Orlando. The counts I made of Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis* rose to a peak of well over 300 birds of which males were well in preponderance. However, the most conspicuous member of the flock was a female with the whole of its head and neck completely white; otherwise it was normally plumaged. On inquiry of resident ornithologists I was informed that it had been seen on the lake for many years during the winter, but curiously not elsewhere on the numerous waters in the district.

Frank C. Bellrose, the author of *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* (1976, revised edn.) has informed me (*in litt.*) that he knows of no records of aberrant Ruddy Ducks remotely similar to the one at Lake Davis. R.S. Palmer in *Handbook of North American Birds* 3(1976): 503 mentions a record of an aberrant Ruddy Duck: 'A mostly black (melanistic) female was collected in early June'.

Bernard King

Movements of Collared Doves

In recent years and especially in 1977 I have noticed several small movements of Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* at Berrow, Somerset. Very little appears to have been published concerning such movements. The area in which my observations were made is probably between 400 metres to 800 metres from their nearest breeding sites. Although I have recorded all sightings of Collared Doves since 1974 the directions were omitted from the early records. However no bird has ever been seen grounded in the area and probably 90% were flying south.

As can be seen from Table 1 the majority of the birds appear in the spring with a secondary peak in September and October. The records for May 1977 are detailed fully. On the 1st 28 flew south; on the 14th two moved south; the following day 57 in the same direction (including a juvenile) and on the 22nd 18 flew south and two north. The weather was fine and sunny on all days although the wind varied between south (fresh) on the 15th and north-east (light to moderate) on the 22nd.

Some earlier ringing recoveries of birds from the Avonmouth area in the 1960's indicate that Collared Doves do fly south over the area. Three birds were recovered in Devon, one in Cornwall and one some 640 km west-south-west at sea (*Brit. Birds* 59 (1966): 468,469; 60:(1967): 454; 61 (1968): 503). I hope that this incomplete study will prompt others to record movements and directions of Collared Doves.

Table 1. Summary of Collared Dove movements at Berrow.

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Yearly Totals
1974						4			8				12
1975	1		3	7	5	2			2	6			26
1976		2			13		2		1	2	2		22
1977				5	107	3	4	7	1	9			136
Monthly Totals	1	2	3	12	125	9	6	7	12	17	2	0	

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(Observations at Brean Down show that the Collared Dove is a regular migrant in small numbers (up to 15) especially in April and May. However they appear to be far more of a diurnal migrant than the Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*. It may be of interest to record that 63 of this species flew north-east at Cheddar Reservoir, Somerset on 24 May 1977, the same month as the large movement of Collared Doves at Berrow — Eds.)

Hoopoes breeding in Avon

On 9 June 1977 following a message from the RSPCA reporting parakeets (Psittacidae) nesting near Midsomer Norton, Avon, I arrived at the location and very soon saw a Hoopoe *Upupa epops*. It was carrying food to a hole approximately three metres up in a large dead Walnut *Juglans regia*. During the next ten minutes the Hoopoe (or its mate) made two further visits with food. Because breeding Hoopoes are specially protected under Schedule 1 of the Protection of Birds Acts 1954—1967 I did not examine the nest at this time. The Walnut was in a large mature garden of about four hectares (ten acres) which consisted of a number of large lawns with herbaceous borders and scattered trees most of which were Beech *Fagus sylvatica* with a few Horse Chestnuts *Aesculus hippocastanum* and dead Elms *Ulmus* sp. Although the garden was situated in Avon part of its edge formed the county boundary, and the Hoopoes flew into Somerset to feed.

I made only two further visits, on 20 June when I ringed three nestlings and on 10 July, after the expected fledging date, when I examined the nest and found one dead nestling. Since the land owner requested privacy no observations were possible before or after ringing, but he said that he and his family had seen a number of birds, with possibly a maximum of four. This is the first breeding record for Avon. (See page 21 for breeding record in Somerset — Eds.)

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CLUB ACTIVITIES, 1977

An important event occurred at the end of the year when a very successful sponsored tally hunt took place in December, raising an outstanding total of £637.45, 70% of which was donated to the RSPB's Save a Place for Birds Appeal, the remainder going to Club funds. We were again involved in discussions with the Severn Estuary Conservation Group, and gave advice on the draft of their booklet describing the importance of the estuary.

Membership during the year averaged out at about 540. We were asked to help in finding a new leader for the local YOC Group, and eventually handed over responsibility for this to the Bristol RSPB Members' Group. Once again, a joint Film Show was held with the RSPB in the Colston Hall in February.

Field Meetings

A weekend trip to Minsmere in May, a dawn chorus at Inglestone Common, and a trip to Steep Holm featured among our regular field meetings, which also included a visit to the Chemical Defence Establishment's relatively undisturbed Porton Ranges.

The Summer Social took place on Exmoor where dawn was observed by several keen members who later were joined by others at a local pub. Other field meetings were held on a regular basis and included two autumn migration watches and visits to the local reservoirs as well as to more distant venues. Several members again participated in the continuing Bristol Channel Seabird Survey.

Indoor Meetings

These were again located at St Mary Redcliffe and Temple School Hall and comprised the following:

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 13.1.77 | —Birds of the mid-Somerset Levels — John McGeoch |
| 10.2.77 | —Members' Evening |
| 10.3.77 | —Feeding Ecology of Waders — Dr J. Goss-Custard |
| 15.9.77 | —Birds of Ascension Island — Robin Prytherch |
| 13.10.77 | — Feeding Behaviour of Birds — Dr Janet Kear |
| 10.11.77 | — Current Methods in Bird Photography — Mr & Mrs J.B. Bottomley |
| 15.12.77 | — A.G.M. and Christmas Social |

Publications

Bristol Ornithology 9 appeared in the Spring, while *Bird News* continued to be published at monthly intervals. During the year a circular was sent to all members containing detailed instructions on the submission of records for *Bird News*.

Wendy Dickson *Honorary Secretary*

