

BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY



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BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY

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PREFACE

This issue of *Bristol Ornithology* has a distinctly local flavour. The main papers deal with a study of breeding birds at Milton Hill, Weston-super-Mare, a review of waterfowl at Blagdon Lake, and detailed notes on the Long-billed Dowitchers which appeared at Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes. Issue Number 12 was also local in character and it is perhaps timely to remind people that our policy is to encourage Club members to produce serious papers on ornithological subjects be they local, national, or indeed international.

Keith Vinicombe's Review of 1979 is interesting in enabling us to see the effect of the year's appalling weather on the birds in Avon. The effect of the weather on the bird-watchers is not described! Our thanks to all those who kept the reports flowing despite rain and snow and postal charges. Once again we have an interesting selection of shorter notes. They are always of interest and certainly provide a way for a new contributor to put his toe into the water. Notes can be submitted to the editorial committee at any time during the year. The greater the number of people contributing the greater is the value of the eventual publication.

I know that many hours of work have been given to this edition of *Bristol Ornithology*. The Club's thanks are due to the editorial committee, contributors and illustrators for maintaining the usual high standard.

Don Walter.

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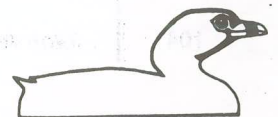
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A REVIEW OF 1979

by Keith Vinicombe

The area from which observations have been drawn covers the county of Avon and Somerset south to the area of Bridgwater and east to the Wiltshire border. The sphere of influence of the club obviously decreases the further one moves away from Bristol, so in 1978 it was decided to exclude records from south Gloucestershire as these were too incomplete and too inconsistent to be of any real value. This year, for similar reasons, I have excluded the south Somerset Levels as this area is covered almost exclusively by observers based in south Somerset. The area covered is therefore considered to be the area regularly visited by club members, with a typical preponderance of records south of Bristol. Some 222 species were recorded in the area during the year.

The four reservoirs at Barrow Gurney, Blagdon, Chew Valley and Cheddar are, for convenience, frequently lumped as the 'Mendip reservoirs' (Durleigh generally being treated separately). The birds are generally listed according to the new Voous (1977) sequence, but unrelated species (such as various seabirds) are sometimes treated together when it has proved more convenient to do so. The year is split into its usual seasonal divisions, but in the bird world such divisions often become blurred, so the categorisation of at least some records may be to some extent arbitrary. Not all rarities have, as yet, been accepted by the *British Birds* Rarities Committee; where a decision remains outstanding, I have used my own discretion regarding their inclusion. Innovations this year include the provision of a simple sketch map (Fig. 1) in order to give readers from outside the area some indication of the whereabouts of localities which we locals take for granted. The main events, such as the *BB* rarities, local rarities and unusual influxes (which tend to give the year a special character or flavour all of its own) are indicated in bold type. In a review of this nature, one is constantly caught between providing an accurate, factual and 'scientific' account and a readable, easily digestible narrative to satisfy both the expert and the novice. By falling between the two, one inevitably fails to fulfil either approach. It therefore becomes difficult to please everyone, so I hope the reader will bear this in mind when ploughing through the ensuing pages!

I am extremely grateful to Paul Chadwick, Ken Hall, Chris Newman, Robin Prytherch, Brian Rabbitts and Nigel & Laurel Tucker for their meticulous criticism of an earlier draft. I would also like to thank David Ballance, Andy Davis, John McGeogh, Roy Smith and especially, Paul Chadwick, for the provision of some additional information and Anita Roberts for typing most of the original manuscript.

The first winter period

The 1978/79 winter was undoubtedly the most interesting for many years, giving many observers their first taste of a winter dominated by cold weather — a direct contrast to the mild winters of the previous decade. It was in fact the coldest winter since 1962/63. Wintry showers prevailed throughout January with snow being particularly heavy on 4th, 5th and 23rd. With frosts frequent and often severe, the reservoirs were frozen for long periods and this resulted in low numbers of many waterbirds, offset by several unusual cold weather influxes and higher numbers on the coast and rivers. Chew Valley and Blagdon in particular were badly affected, with many birds moving temporarily to Barrow Gurney or Cheddar Reservoirs which were, on the whole, less severely affected. The cold weather persisted into February, especially in the middle two weeks, when there were cold easterly winds and snow, producing an exceptional national influx of Red-necked Grebes, associated with similar movements of various divers and sea ducks. Warmer weather eventually arrived from 22nd, with some sunny spring-like days, but March continued cold with above average rainfall and some sleet and snow associated with north-west or north-east winds; there were south-west gales at the end of the month.

Single Red-throated Divers were recorded at Cheddar Reservoir, 15-16 January, Royal Portbury Dock, 2-5 February and Durleigh Reservoir, 25 February to 3 March, when found dead. By an unusual contrast, the only Great Northern Divers were singles at Royal Portbury Dock from 4-5 February and at Steart about the same time.

Little Grebes were present in typically low winter numbers, with no count exceeding six. Great Crested Grebes were frozen out of Chew Valley Lake, where numbers declined to only three on 28 January; many moved to Barrow Gurney Reservoirs, where 64 were seen on 3 January and to Cheddar, where 113 were present on 5th. The most exciting event of the first winter period was an unprecedented influx of **Red-necked Grebes**, enabling local observers to become familiar with a species which is normally very rare in our area. The first was one at Chew, 17 February to 4 March, followed by one at Barrow Gurney, 21 February to 31 March, one at Blagdon Lake, 23 February to



Red-necked Grebe

26 April, with two, 25 February to 10 April and one at Durleigh on 25 February. Single Slavonian Grebes were seen at Litton Reservoir and Chew, but most unusual was one right in the very centre of Bristol, between Redcliffe Bridge and Bristol Bridge, from 29 January to 2 February (one or two Little and Great Crested Grebes appeared in Bristol Docks in the same period). A small hard weather passage of Cormorants was noted and the Chew birds moved temporarily to Barrow Gurney, where there was a remarkable count of 55 on 6 January. At Chew, a Bittern haunted the reeds of Herriotts Pool from 7 January to 17 March, with two from 25 February to 3 March. Less typical was one at Barrow on 20-21 January.

Bewick's Swans and White-fronted Geese were quick to respond to the severe weather that set in during the last few days of 1978 and there were widespread reports of flocks passing over the area, especially in the first few days of January. Up to 57 Bewick's were seen at Durleigh, while three were unusual visitors to Eastville Park Lake on 11 January. About 1500 **White-fronts** were seen in the area during January, mostly passing over, presumably to or from Slimbridge. The largest grounded flocks were seen at the Axe Estuary (up to 100), Chew (up to 89), Northwick Warth (57) and Steart (up to 400). Three Bean Geese were also seen at Steart on 6 January. Brent Geese were widespread with high counts of 39 in the Severn Beach area on 21 January and 37 at Steart on 17 March (perhaps the same flock); up to four were also seen at Royal Portbury Dock and six at the Axe Estuary, while a late bird was seen in the Littleton/Northwick Warth area from 16-29 April. Four feral Greylag Geese were seen at Cheddar on 17 February and at Chew, feral geese included up to four Greylags, 61 Canadas and 11 Barnacles. A Barnacle Goose was also seen in the Aust/Northwick area in April and May. It has now become impossible to claim wild Barnacle Geese in our area and this species seems destined to be added to the ever increasing list of breeding feral wildfowl emanating from Slimbridge.

Duck numbers on the reservoirs were generally low, particularly at Blagdon and Chew, though Barrow Gurney, Cheddar and Durleigh experienced some influxes, while small numbers appeared at many atypical localities too numerous to mention. Many species however, were numerous on the coast. There was an impressive influx of **Wigeon**, with probably 13000 in the area in January, followed by a sharp decline in February. About 10000 were estimated at Steart in mid January and on the north Avon coast, numbers built up to about 1550 a month later. Inland flocks included 1000 at Durleigh, but the Blagdon and Chew flocks reached only 550 and 785 respectively.

The highest January count of Teal was 510 at Cheddar, though 170 at Royal Portbury Dock was a notable coastal count. At least 1800 were present in the area in January but there was an increase in February to at least 2200, when there were 680 at Chew and 930 at Blagdon. Inland Mallard numbers were low, with about 1400 on the Mendip reservoirs in January and February, but further south there was a good count of 1050 at Durleigh on 21 January. Many moved to the coast as up to 2200 were seen at Steart in January and 450 at Royal Portbury Dock in early February. Pintail reached 63 at Steart and about 50 on the Mendip reservoirs, but Shoveler were scarce with January maxima of 155 at Cheddar and 150 at Chew. Pochard included up to 43 on the River Avon at Saltford and 120 at Royal Portbury Dock, but the maximum reservoir counts involved maybe 300-400 on the Mendip reservoirs and 240 at Durleigh. The only reasonably large Tufted Duck count was 460 at Cheddar on 7 January (only 185 at Chew and 45 at Blagdon in the same period) but up to 240 were seen at Barrow Gurney

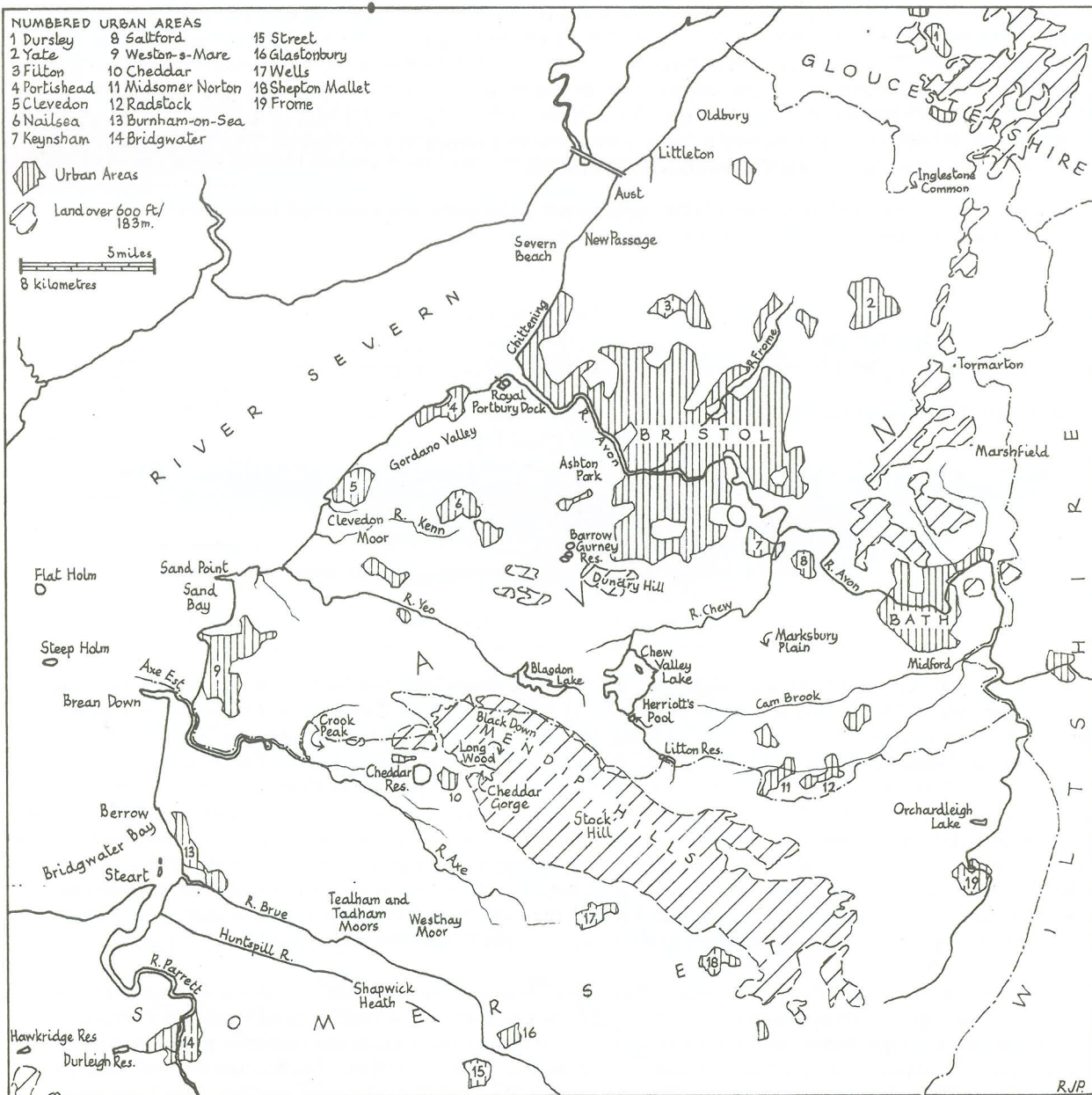
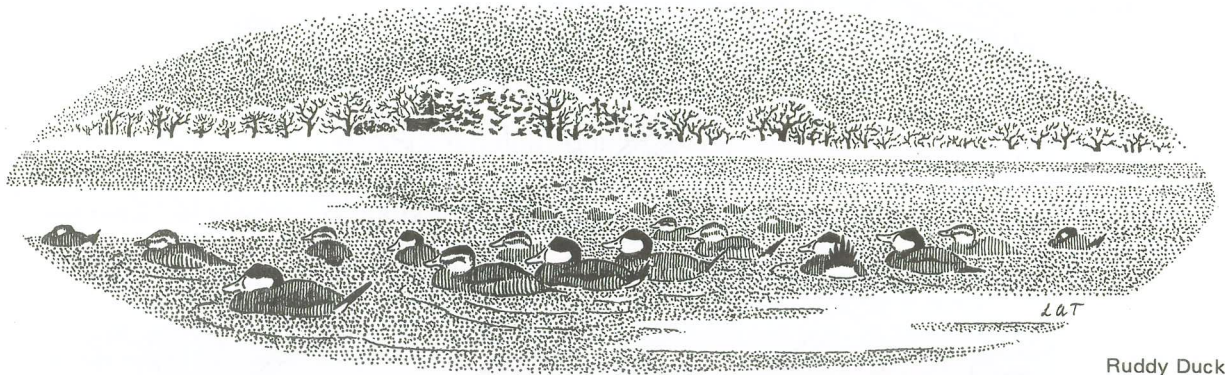


Fig. 1. Map of area covered by the review of the year, showing main sites of ornithological interest.

and 95 on the River Avon at Saltford, from 28 January to 18 February. About 110 Goldeneye were present on the Mendip reservoirs in February, with 67 at Chew, though Cheddar had 44 in early January. Smew were widespread, with much movement between the reservoirs, but about seven were probably present in February, with one 'brownhead' as late as 25 April. A pair of Smew flying up the Axe Estuary on 3 January were rather unusual, as was one seen at Steart on 17 February. Three **Red-breasted Mergansers** were seen in January, but a larger influx in February involved a total of 11 birds at Blagdon, Cheddar and Durleigh between 11 February and 21 March. There was also an impressive influx of **Goosanders** with a record 160 in the area on 13 January. Again there was much movement around the reservoirs, with maxima of 44 at Cheddar, 79 at Blagdon and 81 at Chew. Up to two remained at Cheddar until the late date of 6 May. It was especially interesting to see how the Ruddy Ducks would react to a harsh winter, particularly with Blagdon and Chew being badly frozen. There were only seven at Chew on 7 January, with many moving to Barrow Gurney where numbers reached at least 160 on 27th. In February, Cheddar became more popular with a maximum of 206 on 25th, but birds frequently returned to Blagdon and Chew during intermittent thaws. Three unusual coastal records involved one off Royal Portbury Dock, two off Aust and two off Clevedon during January, while one was also seen on the River Avon at Saltford in February. Many obviously left the area with birds being recorded all along the south coast from Kent to the Isles of Scilly and west into South Wales. By March however, many seemed to have returned, with a record 317 at Chew on 11th being similar to the estimated area total of 323 during the previous three months.



Ruddy Ducks

Sea ducks, apart from the mergansers, involved five Scaup (plus two escaped birds), two Eider at Clevedon on 7 January and one inland at Barrow Gurney on 16 February and 40 Common Scoter, including a male at Chew on 17 February and 30 at Steart the following day. The now expected crop of American wildfowl involved a male **American Wigeon** at Chew (from 1978) until 20 January, single male **Green-winged Teal** *A. c. carolinensis* at Cheddar on 17 January and at Durleigh on 18 February and a male **Ring-necked Duck** at Cheddar from 27-29 January. Very low numbers of Coot were recorded with January maxima of only 240 at Cheddar and 255 at Chew though about 1000 were present on the Mendip reservoirs in February. There was obviously a large exodus from the area (maybe involving as many as 2000 birds); one bird, ringed as a pullus at Chew on 11 August 1978, was recovered at Arcangues, St. Jean-de-Luz, south-west France on 11 January 1979, indicating the full extent of the movement. The albino, seen in the area since 1972, was also amongst the birds that left — it has not been seen since; also, a number of coastal reports included birds at such unlikely places as Brean Down and Clevedon!

Another notable event was a large influx of **Hen Harriers**, with perhaps 14 individuals reported at nine localities, including up to three regularly roosting in the reeds at Barrow, the last being seen on 6 April. About ten Merlins and perhaps eight Peregrines were present, with both species recorded at the reservoirs as well as the more typical coastal localities. A large influx of **Short-eared Owls** was noted, with about 34 reported from 17 localities including up to 12 at Steart in January; up to five stayed into May, the last being seen on 13th. Two Long-eared Owls were present at Barrow on 3 February, one remaining until 17 March.

Regular coastal waders included about 220 Oystercatchers, 200 Ringed Plovers (one was at Barrow Gurney on 22 February), 400 Grey Plovers (at Steart) and perhaps 120 Bar-tailed Godwits. Dunlin undoubtedly exceeded 20000, while there was a notable count of 1000 Curlew at Steart in February. Scarcer coastal waders included Avocets at the Axe Estuary on 1 January and at Steart until 13 April (with two on 20 March), four Purple Sandpipers at Severn Beach on 21 February and up to four Spotted Redshanks and two Greenshanks at various localities in Bridgwater Bay.

Inland waders were severely affected by the cold, with all species thin on the ground, especially in January. Golden Plover were scarce, although 500 were seen on Tealham/Tadham Moors in February. A large cold weather movement of Lapwings included 5000 + at Berrow on 1 January and 750 per hour moving south at the Axe Estuary on 4th. Lapwings were scarce in the second half of January (though on the coast, 3500 were recorded at Steart) but, like Golden Plover, they were more numerous in February when 1000 were seen on Clevedon Moor and 2500 + on Tealham/Tadham. Few Snipe were seen, while inland Dunlin were also scarce after early January when 170 were present at Chew; there were, however, 450 on Tealham/Tadham on 22 February when milder weather set in. About 12 Ruff and 12 Green Sandpipers were reported, while single Common Sandpipers occurred at Chew on 8 January and at Sea Mills on 20 March. Less typical inland waders were single Knot at Cheddar and Chew in late February and a Spotted Redshank on Tealham Moor in January and February.

Black-headed Gulls were also affected by the weather; 2000 roosting at Royal Portbury Dock on 8 January had increased to 9000-12000 by 25th, during the freezing conditions. Most of these had obviously moved from Chew, where only 8400 were counted on 4 February. Common Gulls on the other hand, remained faithful to Chew, with 12800 on 4 February; numbers declined to 100 by 2 April. A thousand Commons also roosted at Cheddar in February, along with 75 Lesser Black-backed. At Chew, other gulls on 4 February involved 150 Lesser Black-backed, only 35 Herrings and two Great Black-backed, while at Portbury, 2500 Herring Gulls were counted in late January. With increased scrutiny of gull flocks, Mediterranean Gulls are, as expected, now proving to be regular visitors to the area. Up to two adults were regularly seen at Chew until 31 March (maybe involving up to four individuals), while others were seen at Barrow Gurney on 6 January and in a field at Stoke Gifford on 18 March.

Typical cold weather movements of Skylarks included 600 flying south at Berrow on 23 January, while earlier in the month at least 500 had been grounded at Royal Portbury Dock. The two Shore Larks from 1978 remained at Berrow until 28 March. About 17 Water Pipits *A. s. spinoletta* included up to eight at Chew and an unusual coastal record at Steart on 29 March. A large Pied Wagtail *M. a. yarrellii* roost in Nelson Street, Bristol, contained up to 400 in late January, no doubt benefitting from the extra warmth and shelter in the centre of the city. Stonechats were rather few but three Black Redstarts were reported. A thousand Fieldfares were noted at Abbots Leigh on 6 January, but otherwise this species and Redwing were scarce. **Blackcaps** were numerous, if not even common, in many suburban gardens; about 61 'apparent individuals' were recorded in January, 85 in February and 69 in March, but no doubt the increase this winter was to some extent more apparent than real as birds became more conspicuous in gardens during the cold weather (see *Bristol Orn.* 12 (1979):63-66, for a detailed examination by R L Bland of records in this and previous winters). Chiffchaffs on the other hand, involved only ten individuals, while the only Firecrests were up to three at Berrow in January and February. Bearded Tits involved



Firecrest

up to ten at Berrow, two near Bridgwater and one at Chew. Only three Ravens were seen, though commoner corvids included 242 Carrion Crows *C. c. corone* at Berrow and 1000 Jackdaws roosting at Chew. Bramblings were widespread and fairly numerous, with up to 150 at Severn Beach and 250 in Sand Bay. Redpolls and Siskins however, were generally scarce, although an increase in Siskins in March included up to 80 at Saltford. Twite seem to be consolidating their newly gained status of regular winter visitor, although with movement up and down the coast it is difficult to obtain an overall impression of numbers but at least 60 were present during February. Localities and maxima were: Clevedon (20), Portishead (38), Royal Portbury Dock (34), Sand Bay (20), Severn Beach (two) and Steart (seven), while inland, birds were seen at or near Chew Valley Lake on 28 January (two) and 24 February (one). Hawfinches were reported at their usual localities but singles at Chew on 5 February and 31 March were very unusual, no doubt reflecting the small and largely unreported eruption of the previous autumn. No Cirl Buntings or Snow Buntings were seen, but Lapland Buntings involved singles at Brean, Royal Portbury Dock and Steart in January, with three at the latter locality on 29 March. As a final point, it is obviously relevant to note an apparent decline in several resident species caused by the severe weather. Although there were probably enough lapses in the cold to prevent massive mortalities, some insectivorous residents were undoubtedly adversely affected. It will be interesting to see the results of the 1979 Common Bird Census, which will no doubt show that such species as Wren, Goldcrest and Long-tailed Tit have failed to maintain their huge population levels of the previous decade.

Spring migration

Weather during the first part of April was wet and cold, dominated by northerly winds, though Easter was the warmest since 1949. Winds again became north or north-west later in April with heavy showers and normal or below normal temperatures. The end of the month, although drier, was still dominated by cold north-west or north-east winds. May continued the gloomy saga, being mainly wet and cool. After a warmer spell in mid month the cold, showery weather returned, culminating in widespread flooding at the end of the month. As a result of the cool spring, migration was unexceptional; many migrants, although arriving on time, did not occur in bulk until well into May.

Single unidentified divers were seen at Brean Down on 1 and 29 April. Twenty-five Manx Shearwaters and two Gannets off Royal Portbury Dock on 8 March were not only early, but also the only ones of the spring! The only Arctic Skua was at Sand Point on 28 April, while Great Skuas involved two at Berrow on 13 April and one at Sand Point on 29th. Kittiwakes were unusually numerous inland: eight were seen at Cheddar on 16 March, followed by one or two on 27th and 28th; at Chew, one on 17 March was followed by four on 21-22 April and one on 25 May. On the coast, 200 were seen at Aust in early March, while peak counts at Brean Down involved 40 on 28 March, 48 on 6 April and 120 on 19th, thereby tying in well with the records from the reservoirs. Two unidentified auks off Brean Down on 1 April were the only ones reported, concluding a poor spring for seabirds and reflecting, perhaps, more a lack of coverage than a lack of birds. (Terns, incidentally, are discussed below).

Migrant Slavonian Grebes were seen at Royal Portbury Dock on 8 April and at Blagdon Lake on 14th, while a Black-necked Grebe on 13 April was a typical spring visitor to Chew. The only continental rarity was a **Purple Heron** on Westhay Moor on 16-17 April. Four Greylag Geese were at Shapwick on 14 May, while turning to dabbling ducks, 112 Gadwall at Chew in early April indicated a normal summer population of 50-60 pairs; a pair of Garganey was also present here in April and May (an early female on 11 March may perhaps have wintered locally). The now expected spring passage of Red-crested Pochards involved females at Blagdon on 11 and 30 March, Chew from 21-29 April, Cheddar on 6-7 May and a male at Chew on 20-21 May. A male **Ring-necked Duck** at Cheddar on 8-9 May was the second of the year at this locality. Meanwhile, the peak spring count of Tufted Ducks (430 at Chew on 21 April) was rather disappointing. Sea ducks involved nine Eider at Berrow on 14 April, followed by one off Brean Down on 25th; Common Scoter included 16 at Brean Down on 1 April, one inland at Chew on 2nd and seven at Berrow on 14th.

A **Red Kite** was seen at Brean Down on 18 March and three female or immature Marsh Harriers involved birds at Chew on 19 May, Cheddar on 2 June and Westhay Moor the following day. The first Hobbies were two at Sand Point on 6 May and a Peregrine remained at Steart into May. A Long-eared Owl at Chew from 21 April to 2 May was only the second or third record for the lake, but it was followed by (presumably) another at a different part of the lake on 19 May.

Coastal wader passage included 130 Ringed Plovers at Severn Beach and 250 with 70 Sanderling at Berrow, all on 12 May. Up to five Purple Sandpipers frequented Severn Beach in April, while two were also present at Royal Portbury Dock on 9th. The Steart Island Whimbrel roost failed to reach its normal levels, maximum counts being at Berrow (250), Brue Estuary (357), Pawlett Hill (304), Tealham/Tadham Moors (64) and West Huntspill (424), all between 23 April and 12 May. Four hundred Turnstones were counted at Severn Beach on 26 April. 'Coastal' waders inland included a Knot at Cheddar on 21 April, five Sanderling at Cheddar and Chew, 5-14 May, 15 Dunlin at Backwell Pond on 2 May and a high spring count of 52 at Cheddar on 12th; a Turnstone also appeared at Cheddar on 20 March. 'Fresh' water waders in April and May involved seven Little Ringed Plovers, a Ruff, maybe as many as ten Spotted Redshanks, two Greenshanks and eight Green Sandpipers. Common Sandpipers included a peak of 28 at Cheddar on 3 May. The rarest wader of the spring was undoubtedly a **Red-necked Phalarope** found at Backwell Pond on 26 May, only the second spring record for Avon.

At least 30 Little Gulls appeared after an early immature at Cheddar on 4 March. Thereafter, records were widely spread until 29 May, with maxima as follows: Brean Down (one, 28 March), Cheddar (eight, 15 April), Chew (seven, 5 May) and Oldbury-on-Severn (nine, 28 May). Passage of Common and/or Arctic Terns was unexceptional apart from a notable influx of 150 'Commics' at Chew on 1 May. Observers still persist in lumping (and confusing!) these two species, despite a spate of excellent identification papers in *British Birds* (see especially Hume & Grant 67 (1974):133-136). As usual, tern passage persisted well into June, so a **Roseate Tern** at Berrow on 10th and 11th is best treated as a spring migrant. Little Terns appeared at Berrow on 14 April, Brue Estuary and Cheddar (three) on 1 May and at Sand Point and Steart (three) on 7th. No Sandwich Terns were seen however. The first Black Tern was at Burnham-on-Sea on 16 April, but it was three weeks before the next on 7 May, which was then followed by a large influx on 13th, with 39 at Cheddar and 76 at Chew, birds gradually accumulating during the day. One at Chew on 2 June was the last reported.

A coastal movement of Collared Doves in April was again reported, with a maximum of 13 at Sand Point on 29th (see *Bristol Orn.* 11 (1978): 35 and 12 (1979): 57 for further information on these movements). A Nightjar was picked up exhausted at Keynsham on 15 May (later recovered), while five Hoopoes involved birds



Hoopoe

at Uphill on 13-14 April, two in Blaise Woods on 19th, with one until 30th, one at Chew on 14 May and another at Sand Point on 4 June. Earlier in the spring, Sand Point produced a Wryneck on 14 April. Not a single Swift was reported before 2 May, and large numbers did not really appear until the end of the month; a maximum of 10000 was recorded at Chew on 2 June.

Rock Pipits *A. s. petrosus* were seen inland at Cheddar on 2nd, 17th and 25 March and another bird on 16th and 17th showed characters of the Scandinavian race *A.s. littoralis*; the maximum passage of Tree Pipits was 22 at Sand Point on 5 May. A moderate passage of Yellow Wagtails *M.f. flavissima* occurred on 1-2 May (several counts of 20-35), while on 26 April a bird at Cheddar showed characters of *M.f. iberiae*, colloquially known as Spanish Wagtail. A Blue-headed Wagtail *M.f. flava* was at the same locality on 1-3 June. White Wagtails *M.a. alba* were widespread with the largest passage (counts of up to 12), like that of the Yellow Wagtails, in late April/early May. Hirundines were not numerous until the end of April, while at Chew, the maximum counts were 500 Swallows on 2 and 23 May and 500 House Martins on 25th. At Cheddar, 50 Sand Martins on 28 May was a high count so late in the spring. Three Black Redstarts were seen at the end of March, while 30 Stonechats at Brean Down on 18th included a flock of 20 migrants which had presumably departed during the cold spell. A Ring Ouzel was also at Brean on 18 March, and about 16 were recorded between 5-16 April including seven on

Bleaddon Hill on 13th. A male **Marsh Warbler** at Chew on 19-20 May was a long overdue but very welcome addition to the Chew list. At least three migrant Wood Warblers were recorded between 5-13 May, as well as six Pied Flycatchers in the same period. A Firecrest was seen at Steart on 31 March, while two months later, a female **Golden Oriole** was unfortunately found dead at Tockington on 31 May. Finally, a Cirl Bunting at Sand Point on 6 May can perhaps best be included as a spring migrant.

Selected breeding species

June continued the miserable summer weather, being dominated by rain, below average temperatures and south-west winds. The end of the month became drier and July was mainly warm and dry, though cooler, wetter weather again returned at the end of the month.

Water levels at Chew remained high well into August, so it was a good breeding season. About 262 broods were recorded: Little Grebe (c.21), Great Crested Grebe (49), Mute Swan (three), Canada Goose (six), Shelduck (one), Gadwall (29 – a record), Mallard (56), Shoveler (one), Pochard (four), Tufted Duck (24) and Coot (68). Garganey (one pair) and Ruddy Ducks (about three pairs) were also present but apparently failed to breed. Two pairs of Teal were seen at Shapwick during May and a family party of five Garganey on Tealham and Westhay Moors in August undoubtedly indicated local breeding. A male Ruddy Duck was seen at Durleigh in June.

At least 112 pairs of Grey Herons were recorded in the area (70 in Avon). Hobbies were reported from about five areas during the breeding season. Red-legged Partridges were at eleven localities during the year compared with Grey Partridges at 26. Up to eleven Quail were heard at Marshfield and a single at Stanton Prior. Both Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers bred at Royal Portbury Dock and a pair of Oystercatchers was also present. Two Woodcock were seen at Shapwick in June. Barn Owls were seen at 30 localities during the year, though it is depressing to report that only one Nightjar was recorded during the summer (at Shapwick Heath – this locality incidentally, has been totally devalued by extensive peat excavation). Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were noted at 26 localities in 1979 while Dippers were seen at seven. Turning to passerine summer migrants, the only definite breeding Sand Martins were at Somerdale (11 pairs); Nightingales at six places involved about 29 singing males (including 12 at Inglestone Common); Redstarts were seen at Black Rock (Mendip) and Ashton Park; Grasshopper Warblers were again scarce (15 localities) though it is pleasing to report singing male Marsh Warblers at two sites in the area; at least 13 singing Wood Warblers were noted at seven places. About nine pairs of Stonechats were recorded at seven places; Willow Tits remain scarce with records in 1979 from Long Wood (Mendip), Orchardleigh, Stock Hill and Westhay Moor. It is also pleasing to report that Bearded Tits bred in the area for the first time ever. No breeding Ravens were seen. Three Redpolls at Black Down (Mendip) on 12 July may indicate local breeding; Hawfinches were seen at seven spots, with breeding proved again in Leigh Woods. Singing males or pairs of Cirl Buntings were reported at Draycott and at three places in the Cheddar area, where a party of up to eleven from August to November included several juveniles.



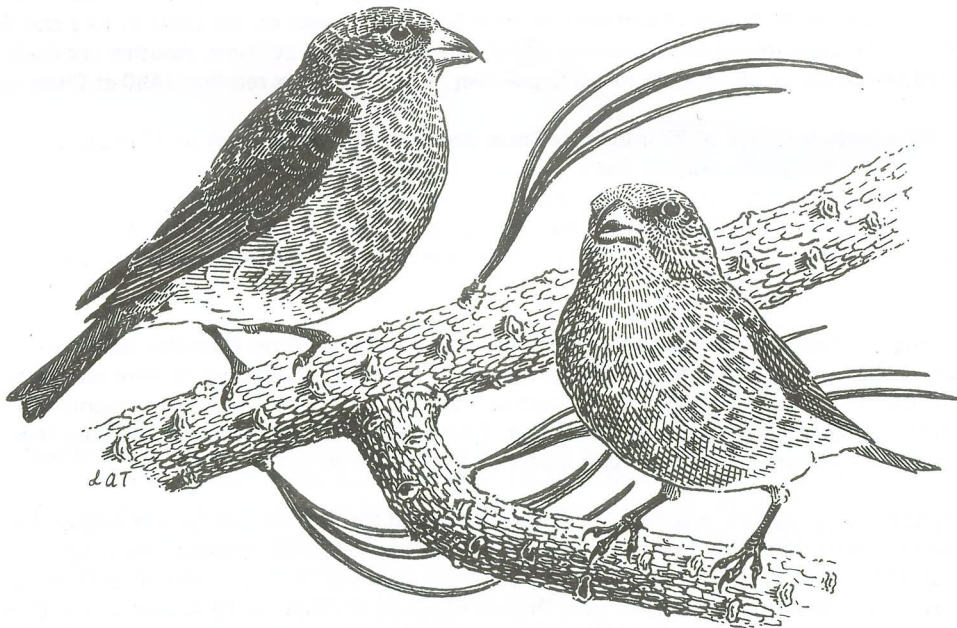
Cirl Bunting

Other mid summer observations

Small numbers of Fulmars were seen as usual, but Manx Shearwaters included 396 off Brean Down on 15 June, 90 on 30th and 500+ on 7 July; 165-183 were also seen off Sand Point on three dates in June and July. Gannets reached a maximum on 9 July, when 90 were seen off Brean Down. Other mid summer seabirds involved single Great Skuas at Brean on 15 June and 7 July and up to 20 Kittiwakes there in the same period.

A feral Barnacle Goose was at Cheddar on 3-4 June and presumably the same bird was also seen off Sand Point on the latter date. Wigeon summered at Chew (two) and Cheddar (one), though nine at the former locality on 14 July were obviously early migrants. A Peregrine at Royal Portbury Dock on 27 June was an encouraging summer sighting. Summer waders included early Spotted Redshanks at Chew (one) and Steart (five) in late June, while six Black-tailed Godwits at Chew on 27 June were also unusual. Thirteen Crossbills appeared at Stock Hill from 16 June onwards.

Crossbills



Late summer moult gatherings and the autumn migration

August, needless to say, continued unsettled, with above average rainfall, below average temperatures and severe gales in mid month. Warmer weather at the end of the month continued into September, which was mainly dry, warm and sunny, though mid month was unsettled. October continued calm, with low rainfall, above average temperatures and overnight fog, particularly in the first two weeks.

Two Black-throated Divers appeared at Cheddar on 23 October, one remaining until 28th. Little Grebes at Chew reached 66 on 30 September, but the maximum count of moulting Great Crested Grebes (246 in mid August) was low, only 59% of the maximum 1978 count. Rarer grebes involved single Red-neckeds at Chew on 6 October and 23 November, a Slavonian here from 27 October to 19 November and a minimum of four Black-neckeds between 15 August and 17 November at Chew (two), Blagdon (three) and Cheddar (one).

Chew and Blagdon are particularly important for moulting wildfowl, offering food and safety during the vulnerable flightless period. At Chew in August, Mute Swans reached 104 and Canada Geese 86, while up to eight Greylags were present from 27 June to 30 September. Moulting Shelducks reached 930 at Berrow on 8 July and 2000 at Steart on 15 September (no doubt involving the same birds). A **Ruddy Shelduck** was amongst them

from 24 June to 21 August (being seen at Berrow on 8 July) though it is difficult to be certain that it was a genuinely wild bird. At Chew, 305 Gadwall in mid August no doubt reflected the record breeding season, but Mallard numbers (max. 940 in September) were disappointing. Up to 2000 Mallard were present at Steart in August and September and 1400 at Durleigh on 3 September may have been associated with these. Up to a dozen Garganey were seen at Chew in August and a female at Cheddar from 2-8 December continued a recent spate of late records in the area. The maximum count of Shoveler (235 at Chew in early September) was rather disappointing. An eclipse male Red-crested Pochard appeared at Cheddar on 17 August and was joined by two more males from 29 October to 11 November with the last on 9 December. Up to 165 Pochard at Chew in late June illustrates how early moulting males arrive, while later in the autumn, the highest count at Cheddar was 550 on 23 October. Up to 610 Tufted Ducks moulted at Chew and amongst them were a flightless male Scaup, a presumed Ferruginous x Tufted hybrid and a Ferruginous x Pochard, all in early September. A different Ferruginous x Pochard hybrid was seen at Barrow Gurney in late August and early September. It seems likely that Ferruginous Duck hybrids originate in eastern Europe and inherit the Pochard's tendency to migrate westward in autumn; they therefore appear in Britain more frequently than the genuine article, which inherently moves to winter quarters south of the breeding range. Later Scaup included three at the Axe Estuary, one at Chew and one at Durleigh in late October. A Goldeneye appeared at Chew as early as 26 August. Fourteen Common Scoter were seen on the coast in July and August, while in the former month the usual inland birds involved one at Cheddar and ten at Chew. Another sea duck was an early Red-breasted Merganser at Cheddar from 2-5 September. Moulting Coots reached 1460 at Chew on 12 August.

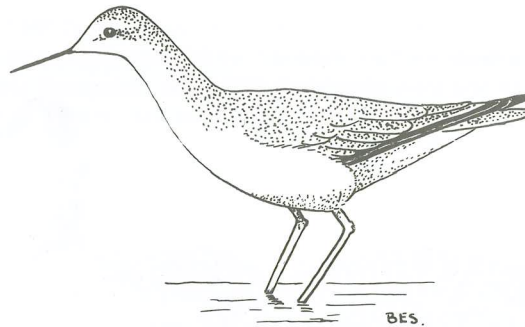
An unprecedented flock of 22 immature **Shags** was seen off Brean Down on 17 August, while in the following month seabirds included a Gannet found exhausted inland at West Harptree on 20th and a Leach's Petrel at Steart two days later. Two Arctic Skuas were at Steart in early September, while singles were seen inland at Chew on 24 August and at Cheddar on 15 September. Four Great Skuas appeared at Steart on 9 August. Inland Kittiwakes were seen at Cheddar (found dead) and at Chew (one or two) in mid August with a later bird on 10 November.

Five migrant Hen Harriers were seen on the coast and at Black Down (Mendip) between 18 October and 17 November and an Osprey was seen at New Passage on 27 October. Single Merlins were seen at five places in September and October, while a late Hobby was seen at Wells on 15 October. Peregrines meanwhile, occurred at six localities from 11 August, with up to two at Steart. Four Short-eared Owls were seen on the coast in the last week of October and a Long-eared was a rarer visitor to Sand Point on 27th.

Common coastal waders included 110 Oystercatchers at the Axe Estuary in late August and up to 300 at Berrow and at Steart in the following two months, while inland records included nine at Chew on 19 August, followed by 11 on 24th. Over 1100 Ringed Plovers were seen on the coast in August and 50 at Durleigh on 1 September was by far the largest inland count. Grey Plovers occurred at Chew on 19 August and at Cheddar on 23 October. A Sanderling also visited Chew on 22 July, while the peak coastal count was a week later when 181 were present at Berrow. Knot reached 120 at Steart on 22 September (one was at Chew from 21st-23rd), and the highest inland count of Dunlin was 50 at Durleigh on 1 September. The maximum count of Black-tailed Godwits at Steart was low (650 on 20 August), continuing the downward trend shown in 1978. There were however, up to 1200 Curlew at Steart in September and October, and 21 flew west over Cheddar on 9 October; autumn Whimbrel included 60 near Charterhouse on 21 July. A high total of 1500 Redshanks was present at Royal Portbury Dock on 30 July and 1000 were counted at Steart ten days later. A maximum of five Turnstones were seen at Chew on 12 August.

Large counts of Lapwings (800-3000) came from seven localities from late July onwards. Other typical inland waders, however, occurred in unexceptional numbers due to a large extent to fairly high late summer water levels at the reservoirs. Little Ringed Plovers involved maxima of three at Cheddar, four at Chew, two at Durleigh and singles at Barrow Gurney and Berrow between 22 July and 4 October. Little Stints reached a peak rather late, from 7-8 October, when there were 13 at Chew and eight at Steart, while a poor passage of Curlew Sandpipers included up to four at Chew, Durleigh and Steart in September; a late bird was present at Chew on 11 November. Up to 14 Ruff were at Chew and 11 at Durleigh in September. Maximum numbers of Spotted Redshanks occurred at Steart (25 on 11 August) and at Chew (25 on 12 September), while Greenshanks reached 18 at Steart in July and 30 at Chew and 15 at the Yeo Estuary in early September. Over 40 Common Sandpipers were counted between

Avonmouth and Hotwells on 14 July, while the maximum reservoir count was 28 at Chew on 26 August. Fourteen Green Sandpipers were seen at Woodspring Bay on 8 August and 16 were at Chew four days later. Wood Sandpipers were very scarce, with perhaps as few as six and certainly no more than ten (up to four at Steart and singles at Uphill Beach and at Chew, 3 August to 9 September). Rarer Palearctic waders involved a Dotterel at Middle Hope, 24-26 August and a juvenile **Red-necked Phalarope** at Durleigh, 16-19 August. (Grey Phalaropes, incidentally, were conspicuous by their absence during the autumn). Nearctic waders recorded were an early **Pectoral Sandpiper** at Steart on 28-29 July and another at the Axe Estuary, 24-25 September. The July individual was probably a juvenile, therefore indicating a very early trans-Atlantic crossing. Meanwhile, there was a whole spate of **Wilson's Phalaropes** at Chew, with an immature, 20-21 September, an adult with traces of summer plumage on 26th and (presumably) another immature, 29th to 4 October.



Wilson's Phalarope

Mediterranean Gulls continued to be recorded, with an adult at Durleigh on 18 August, a first-winter at Berrow on 6 October and an adult at the Axe Estuary on 13-14 October. About 20 Little Gulls from 13 August to 3 November included a maximum of ten juveniles at Chew on 24 August. About 21 Sandwich Terns included eight at Brean Down on 25 August and one inland at Chew on 17 August followed by three on 30 September. About 14 Little Terns included 11 at Steart on 5 August. Black Tern passage, like that of many of the inland waders, was poor, with the most being up to 14 at Chew on several dates in August. The now expected **White-winged Black Terns** duly appeared, with two juveniles at Chew from 7-10 September.

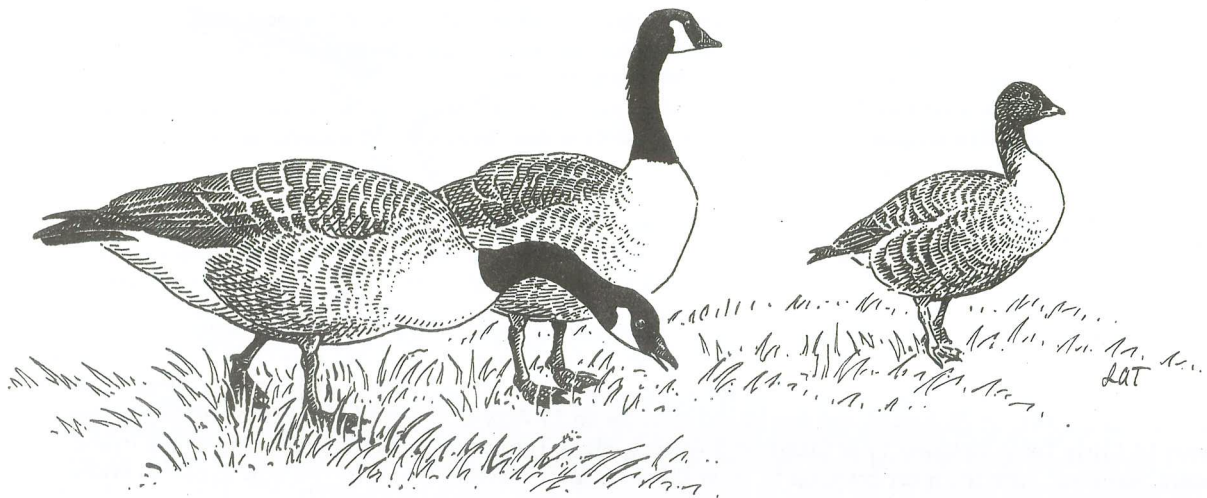
Belated Swifts were seen at Saltford on 30 September and at Clevedon on 6 October. A whole series of migrant Woodlarks occurred in October, with one at Berrow on 6th, one at Brean Down on 8th, three on 13th and one on 14th and two at Portbury Wharf on 21st. Roosting Swallows reached 800 at Chew in early August and 2000 at Berrow a month later, while late birds included four in November with the last on 10th. A **Richard's Pipit** on Steep Holm on 17 September was one of the rarest passerines of the autumn. Inland Rock Pipits *A. s. petrosus* appeared at Chew on 30 September (two) and at Cheddar, 28-29 October. A **Bluethroat** was trapped at Steart in September but the only Black Redstart was one at Clevedon on 28 October, while migrant Redstarts included a male found dead in Redcliffe Street, Bristol on 24 September. A late Whinchat lingered at Sand Point on 20 October and one or two Ring Ouzels were seen at Brean Down in mid October. Migrant Redwings included 700 on Tealham/Tadham Moors on 28 October, only a minute fraction of the thousands of nocturnal migrants that pass over the area at this time of year. Two **Aquatic Warblers** were trapped at Steart on 17 August and 25 September and a **Melodious Warbler** was seen in Sand Bay on 29 September. A Firecrest was present at Brean Down on 3 October; only two Pied Flycatchers were seen (early August); a Nuthatch was an unusual migrant at Sand Point on 6 October; a Great Grey Shrike was at Clevedon on 28th and a Hooded Crow *C. c. cornix* was seen at Royal Portbury Dock on 24th. The largest autumn movement of Chaffinches involved 1880 flying east at Portishead on 21 October. Single Lapland Buntings appeared at Brean Down on 8th and 16 October, while two Snow Buntings were seen at the Axe Estuary, 29-30 October, with one remaining until 7 November.

Second winter period

November was generally mild with occasional gales and heavy rain, though there was a heavy frost in mid month. December continued mild, again with rain and strong south-west winds, though it became colder just before Christmas, with snow on 21st and 22nd. Heavy rain continued on 26th with widespread flooding, though the end of the year was cold and dry.

An unidentified diver was at Steart on 25 November but three Great Northern occurred in December at Blagdon, 2nd to 23 January 1980, at Cheddar, 9th to 1 January 1980 and at Barrow Gurney, 16-29th. Two immature Shags were rare visitors to Chew on 2-3 December, with one until 11th (eventually found dead on 15th). Another immature at Cheddar from 17-19th was also later found dead. Twenty-one Grey Herons at Keynsham on 8 December was a high count away from the more usual localities. Mute Swan herds included up to 50 at Bristol Bridge and 59 on Tealham/Tadham Moors, while Bewick's (widespread from 23 October) reached 30 at Cheddar in late October and 42 at Durleigh two months later. A Pink-footed Goose that arrived at Chew on 22 November

Pink-footed and Canada Geese



attached itself to the feral Canada Geese and remained with them well into 1980. Two presumed Barnacle x Snow Goose hybrids appeared at Chew on 3 November, staying into 1980, and two Greylags put in a brief appearance on 30 December. Two (presumably) feral Barnacle Geese were recorded at Cheddar on 28 October. A Brent Goose flew north at Berrow on 17 November and three were seen at Steart in the same month, while two at Chew on 8 December constituted only the third record for the lake; another at Steart on 22-23rd was ringed on both legs, maybe indicating a captive origin. On the reservoirs, wildfowl numbers were, on the whole, unexceptional, though on the coast Wigeon reached 2000 at Steart in late December. The highest count of Teal was 600 at Durleigh on 23 December, though 180 on Tealham/Tadham Moors on 29th seemed a good count for this locality; about 2000 were probably present in the area in December. At Chew, 480 Shoveler on 15th was quite a good count, the highest one of the year in fact. Chew turned up a real bonus on 18 November: a **Blue-winged Teal**, surprisingly the first Avon record of this American counterpart of the Garganey. Pochard numbers were low, with a mid November maximum of 300 at Cheddar. Seven Scaup were seen in November and December, including up to five at Barrow Gurney in the latter month; (in addition, at least three escaped birds continued to haunt Bristol Docks during the same period). A notable influx of Long-tailed Ducks occurred from 24 October, with three at Cheddar, three at Chew and one at Barrow Gurney (four remained into 1980). The only Common Scoter was one at Clevedon on 10 November. The veteran eclipse male Smew arrived 'on time' at Chew on 25 October, staying here as usual until

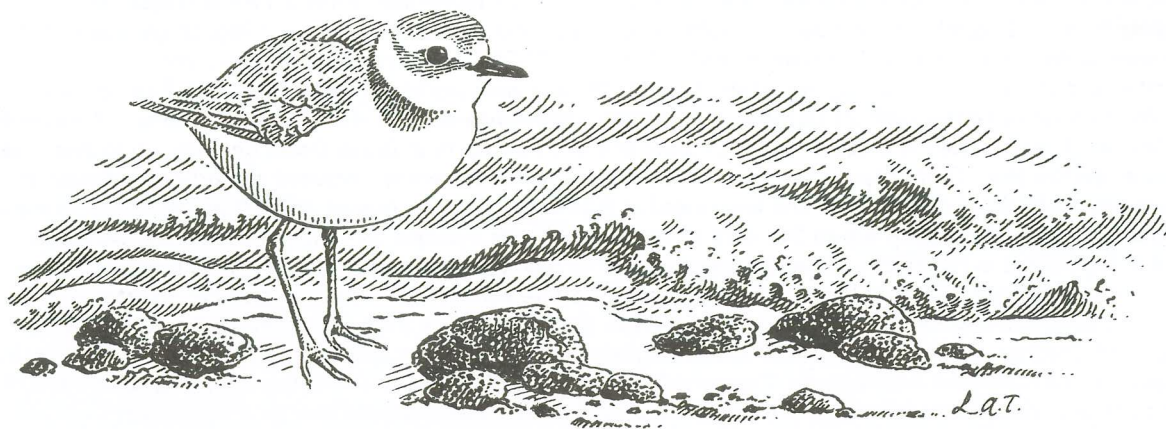
December when it visited Cheddar on 1st and returned to Blagdon on 26th. It was joined by a female (probably also a veteran of previous winters) on 10 November, staying into the New Year. Single Red-breasted Mergansers occurred at Sand Bay and Clevedon at the end of December, while 38 Goosanders were at Chew by mid month. Ruddy Ducks meanwhile, reached 220 at Chew on 1 December and 100 at Blagdon two weeks later. Coots reached 2350 at Cheddar in early November but, as in the previous winter, numbers declined the following month when only 870 were counted.

Merlins were at three localities compared with Peregrines at no less than ten, with two at Steart and up to three at Brean Down. Only four coastal Short-eared Owls seemed a poor total after their relative abundance earlier in the year.

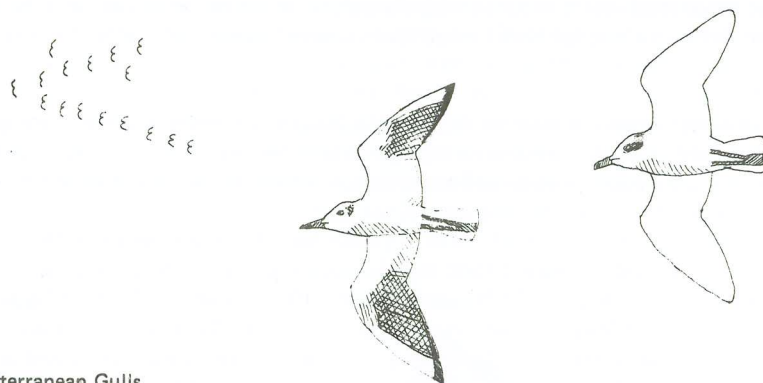
About 400 Oystercatchers were seen on the coast in November, while there was a high count of 500 Grey Plovers at Steart on 1st, with 300 still present on 22 December; one was also seen inland at Chew on 13th of that month. Purple Sandpipers were again present at Severn Beach, where three were seen in December, while one at Chew on 11th was only the second record for the lake. Knot seemed unusually numerous, with up to 450 at Steart on 6 November, followed by a high count of 1000 in December, the first time since 1972 that counts of Knot in our area have reached this level. At least 17000 Dunlin were reported in November and December, while the highest inland counts were 116 at Chew on 24 November and 110 on Tealham/Tadham Moors on 30 December. Curlew again hit the thousand mark at Steart in early November, while 600 Redshanks were also estimated later in the month. Up to ten Curlews that wintered at Chew were unusual. Scarcer waders recorded on the coast included two Avocets at Steart on 28 October, with, predictably, one staying the winter; up to six Spotted Redshanks and a Little Stint were also seen there in December, as was a Grey Phalarope on 9th.

Inland, flocks of Golden Plover were widespread with up to 350 at the Axe Estuary, 95 at Chew, 230 at Clevedon, 130 at Marksbury and 950 on Tealham/Tadham Moors. Large flocks of Lapwings also occurred with up to 1500 on the Axe Estuary, 2000 at Chew, 1000 at Steart and 6000 on Tealham/Tadham. Wintering Little Stints included up to three at Chew from 25 November through December. Maximum November counts of Snipe involved 80 on the Axe and 154 on Tealham/Tadham Moors while Jack Snipe were, as usual, widely scattered in small numbers. About eleven December Green Sandpipers compared with two Commons at Clevedon and Sea Mills. Having resigned oneself to the comparative mediocrity of early winter birding, imagine the surprise when, out of the blue, Chew turns up a second record for Britain! It came in the shape of a **Greater Sand Plover**, a southern Asiatic bird which winters on the shores of the Indian Ocean. It was discovered on 17 November, and remained until 10 February 1980 providing a record similar to the first for Britain in West Sussex the previous winter. With the subsequent discovery of the Blue-winged Teal and a Red-throated Pipit (see below), the end of the year was dominated by an uncharacteristic flurry of local activity, with Chew becoming something of a hot-spot for hundreds of birders from all over Britain (even attracting people from as far away as Edinburgh!).

Greater Sand Plover



A series of coordinated autumn and winter gull roost counts at Chew Valley Lake revealed numbers rising from 243 in early July, to 19300 in late September and nearly 31000 in late December. About 14450 Black-headed had arrived by September, with 17650 in December. Common Gulls on the other hand, appeared much later, with only 50 in September but 11750 in December. Herring Gulls were not particularly abundant (max. of 700 in December), but particularly impressive was a count of 4200 Lesser Black-backed Gulls on 30 September, illustrating the large passage through the area at this time of year; numbers had fallen by 90% in late December.



Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls

Scarcer gulls here included adult Mediterraneans on 17th and 30 December (different birds) and a Yellow-legged Herring Gull corresponding to R. A. Hume's 'Type D' variety (see *Brit. Birds* 71 (1978): 338-345), possibly *L. a. michahellis* (the Mediterranean race), on 17 December. This was the fourth recorded in Avon since 1978, and with *michahellis* spreading north in the Bay of Biscay, it seems likely that this is the race involved, descriptions fitting less well with Scandinavian and other northern races (see *Brit. Birds* 72 (1979): 389-392 and 73 (1980): 113-158 for further information on these races). A second-winter Mediterranean Gull was also seen at Cheddar on 17 December (making a total of 10-12 seen in our area in 1979, all but two being inland). After strong south-west gales a Kittiwake was found dead at Cheddar on 12th, two were seen at Steart on 15th and another was found dead at Sand Bay on 21st. Unusually large numbers of **Little Auks** occurred in south-west England and other areas in November and December; one found injured (later died) in a Cheddar garden on 6 November and another found moribund at Tockington on 17 December were, however, the only ones reported in our area.

It is good to record two Kingfishers in the centre of Bristol, at Bristol Bridge, in mid November, one of several interesting records here during the year. A Shore Lark appeared at Berrow from 14 December into 1980 (possibly one of the previous winter's) and one (perhaps the same bird) was also seen at Steart about the same time. At Chew, an unseasonal **Red-throated Pipit** raised a few eyebrows on 16 December; one must suggest, however, that this species would be recorded more frequently if more observers were familiar with its rather unobtrusive call. Nine Water Pipits *A. s. spinoletta* were also recorded here on 24 November, while a Yellow Wagtail *M. f. flavissima* from 15 December to mid January 1980 recalled a similar record in December 1968. Single Black Redstarts were at Wells Cathedral on 3 November and at Steart on 22-23 December. Blackcaps involved nine in November and at least nine in December, while three Chiffchaffs were reported in each month. A Firecrest was at Sand Point on various dates from 21 October to 5 January 1980, while another was at Brean Down on 17 November. Five Bearded Tits were seen at Blagdon on 14 October and one flew north at Brean Down on 18th; up to seven were present at Berrow from October to December, while nine at Chew in November included one originally ringed at Walberswick, Suffolk, in August 1977 and two ringed at Rochester, Kent, in August 1979. Bramblings (up to eight), Redpolls (up to 25) and Siskins (up to 24) were all scarce, but Twite included up to ten at Hallen and Clevedon and 14 at Portishead in November. Crossbills continued to be seen with seven at Stock Hill and a single at Abbots Leigh in mid November. Single Lapland Buntings were at the Axe Estuary on 7 November and at Steart on 23 December; three Snow Buntings also occurred at Steart in December, while a few Cirl Buntings continued to be seen around Cheddar. Finally, we conclude this year's review with, perhaps, a species of the future: the Ring-necked Parakeet may soon demand admission to 'Category C' of the British List and it is with mixed feelings that I end this year's summary with reports of single birds at Berrow on 5 September and at Sand Bay on 1 December.

BREEDING BIRDS OF MILTON HILL, WESTON-SUPER-MARE: A CONTINUING SURVEY

by John Barber

Introduction

Since 1972 I have carried out an annual Common Birds Census on 30 acres (12 hectares) of Milton Hill, Weston-super-Mare, as part of the British Trust for Ornithology's monitoring scheme begun ten years earlier. This is a small area compared with many of the 200 sites providing details for the 1977/78 census, the latest to be published (Marchant and Hyde 1980), but for several reasons – land ownership, the amount of time available, and the nature of the site itself, much of it covered by impenetrable scrub – the acreage is as much as can be managed.

Milton Hill is the most easterly section of the hill running from the Bristol Channel at the northern end of Weston seafront to Worle, some three miles to the east. At the point covered by the census the carboniferous limestone ridge is cut by a shallow but fairly steep-sided valley, and the southern arm of hillside thus formed ends abruptly in a vertical 15 metre cliff face beneath which a market garden and buildings once stood (see Fig. 1). The area lies between the 60 and 80 metre contours, and is bordered at its extreme northern end by Worlebury Hill Road and Worlebury Golf Course. A small and long unused quarry is at the extreme south-western corner, while former market garden land awaiting housing development flanks the short western side. New housing development has taken over all along the southern boundary and along part of the eastern side of the census area as well, though fortunately with only minor incursions onto the site itself.

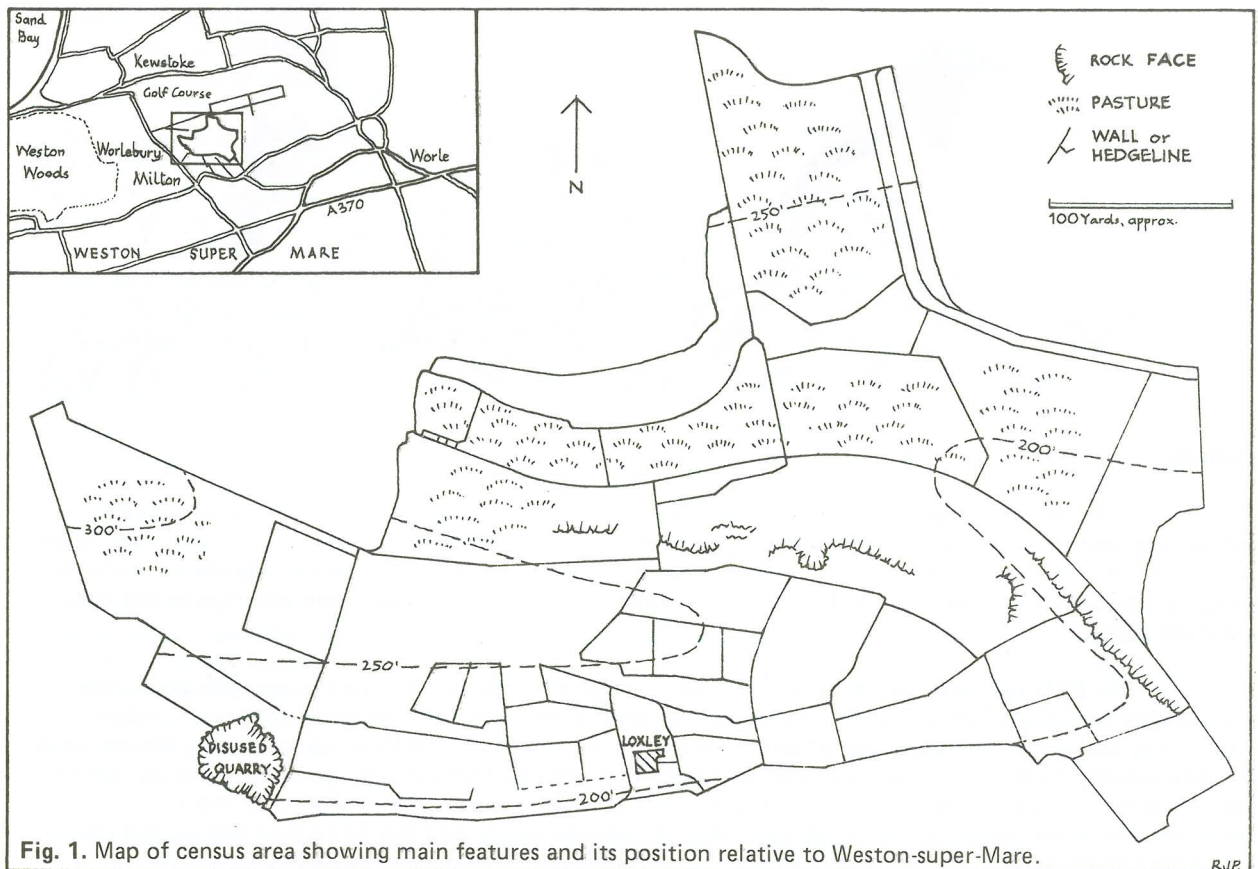


Fig. 1. Map of census area showing main features and its position relative to Weston-super-Mare.

R.J.P.

Until after the last war the southern slope of the census area was divided into small fields of irregular shape, surrounded by stone walls, and used mainly for grazing. For the last thirty years these have been deserted and -- aided no doubt by the arrival of myxomatosis and the virtual disappearance of the Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* -- have since become almost completely overgrown with scrub. Bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and Elder *Sambucus nigra* predominate, with some Privet *Ligustrum vulgare* and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. Throughout the census area Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* is the dominant tree, though no specimen is yet fully grown. Whitebeam *Sorbus aria* grow in some numbers at the eastern end of the southern spur, with Oak *Quercus robur* and Holm Oak *Quercus ilex*, none higher than three metres, growing in a still fairly open area near the western end. These have almost certainly been planted by Jays* burying acorns taken from nearby Weston Woods. Four small fields on the slopes of the valley are used for grazing by stables situated to the east of the census area. The northern-most corner is edged with a tall 'hedge' of Lawson Cypress *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* reaching about 10 metres in height while the disused quarry had a border of Elm *Ulmus procera* until this was obliterated by Dutch Elm Disease. A few skeletons and living suckers remain. Elsewhere Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* could present a problem in years to come, the few semi-mature trees on the site already laying down considerable numbers of seedlings around them.

Ground cover beneath the scrub is almost entirely Ivy *Hedera helix*, and this plant also covers many of the Hawthorn and Elder bushes. Flowers are typical of limestone, and are varied. Common Rock Rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, Birdsfoot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, three species of orchid *Orchis* sp, and Common Flax *Linum usitatissimum*, are among the more abundant.



Methods

The Common Birds Census provides an index which shows the fluctuations of numbers of different species from year to year on a continuing basis. It is important to remember that it does not purport to give actual populations of birds. Latest figures show that 59 species are being monitored by the census, with data for a further ten being combined with that obtained from the Waterways Bird Survey to provide meaningful figures (Marchant and Hyde 1980).

The BTO standard method of censusing (Williams and Homes 1964) is used to ascertain the number of birds holding territory. Visits, averaging 20 and totalling some 50 hours or more are made each season, usually in the morning but with an occasional late afternoon or evening visit. Because of difficulties in plotting, Woodpigeons *Columba palumbus* and House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* are omitted from the CBC. The plot holds perhaps six pairs of the former, while large numbers of the latter use it for feeding. So do Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, a species that is censused while feeding young on the nest. With no old trees on the area this bird has to rely on roof nesting and at the time of writing there are only three sites in one bungalow which can be, and are, used.

* Scientific names of birds are given in Table 1.

Results and discussion

Table 1 gives the estimated number of territories held within the area each year. Data for 1976 were inadvertently destroyed after a full season's census was carried out. Throughout the period 33 species have held territory, two thirds of that number each year. Four species have held single territories for one year only, while another, Cirl Bunting, disappeared after being present throughout 1972-73. The number of territories has fluctuated from year to year, with a peak of 236 in 1975 and a 'low' of 173 in 1979. Comparisons between this last year and 1978 show a marked decrease in the numbers of territory-holding Blackbirds (35-26), Robins (23-17) and Dunnocks (26-20), an indication of the severe effect of the 1978/79 winter on these species. Wrens also dropped in number of territories from 16 to 12, but this species was much more seriously affected in 1977 when singing birds dropped from 27 to 11. This fall was almost certainly entirely due to four days and nights of very heavy frost in February 1977 which would have deprived the bird of its insect food. The change in territory distribution is shown in Fig. 2.

Table 1. Number of territories, 1972-75, 1977-79

Species	Year —	72	73	74	75	77	78	79
Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		*	1	1	1	1		
Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		1						
Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		4	3	5	6	3	6	6
Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i>		1	1	1	1		1	1
Green Woodpecker <i>Picus viridis</i>		2	2	2	2	2	1	2
Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		25	23	26	27	11	16	12
Dunnock <i>Prunella modularis</i>		27	24	24	33	30	26	20
Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		18	15	15	20	20	23	17
Nightingale <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>						1		
Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>		26	19	28	31	30	35	26
Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i>		5	4	5	6	4	4	4
Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		*	*	*	1	1	2	2
Lesser Whitethroat <i>Sylvia curruca</i>		2	1	2	3	2	2	1
Whitethroat <i>Sylvia communis</i>		4	3	2	3	3	1	*
Garden Warbler <i>Sylvia borin</i>				*		*		1
Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		10	10	6	6	7	7	6
Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		11	10	9	6	7	6	6
Willow Warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		16	11	14	11	9	11	8
Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>		*	1	4	9	3	2	1
Long-tailed Tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		1	1	2	2	2	1	1
Coal Tit <i>Parus ater</i>		2	1	1	2	1	3	1
Blue Tit <i>Parus caeruleus</i>		9	11	15	16	16	12	15
Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>		8	6	11	10	13	10	11
Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		3	1	2	2	1	2	2
Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>		3	5	7	8	7	6	6
Carrion Crow <i>Corvus corone</i>		1	*	1	1	2	1	2
† Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		1	1	3	2	4	3	3
Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i>						*	*	1
Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		11	6	9	10	8	8	8
Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i>		9	7	9	8	8	7	5
Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		*	3	*	*	2	1	*
Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		11	5	6	8	6	6	4
Cirl Bunting <i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	1					

* One or more birds present during census, but on less than three occasions.

† Number of nests.

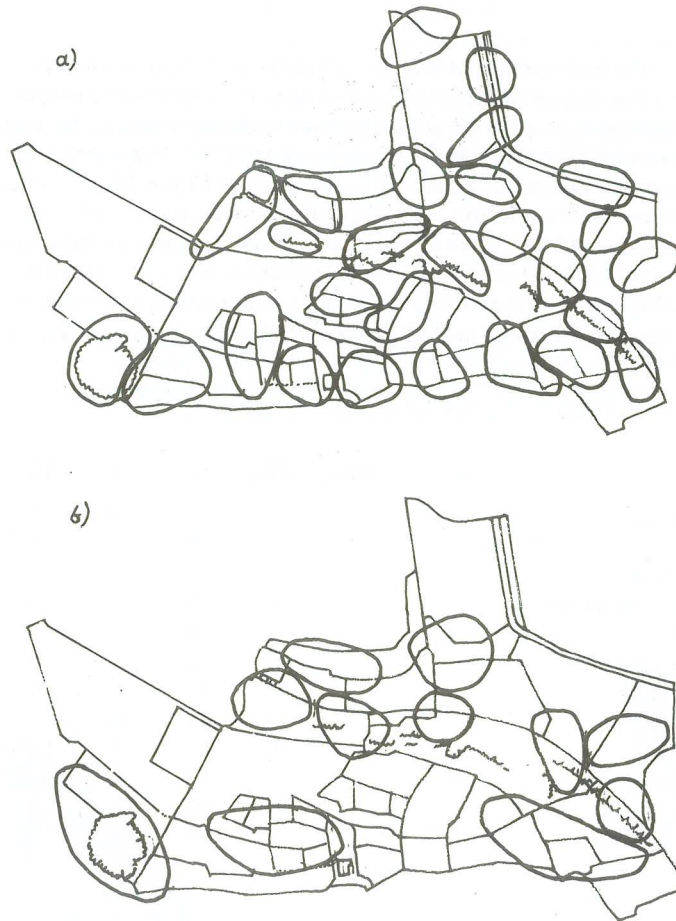


Figure 2. Territories held by Wrens in (a) 1975 and (b) 1977, demonstrating the sudden drop resulting from four days and nights of heavy frost in February 1977. (Note that the 1976 distribution map, inadvertently lost, was very similar to that of 1975).

Another small insect-dependent species, the Goldcrest, plummeted from a peak of nine territorial birds in 1975 to three in 1977, and was left with only a tenuous hold on the census area in 1979. The Goldcrest, after increasing rapidly for several years, is again in decline nationally (Marchant and Hyde 1980). With only a handful of conifers, the study area is an unlikely one for this species except during times of expansion when preferred sites are already occupied. Most of the territories were held in areas where Hawthorn and Elder were virtually covered by Ivy. Blackbird, Dunnock and Robin, with Wren until its sudden decrease, have been the co-dominant species, with Blue and Great Tit also well represented. The two most common tits, Blue and Great, were unaffected by the 1978/79 winter, while throughout the years the Coal Tit has shown the fluctuations normal for this species. Of the four finches which breed, the table shows a marked decline in Bullfinch numbers and lesser falls in the numbers of Chaffinches and Greenfinches having territories in the area. Goldfinches have bred only intermittently.

Of the summer migrants, the Willow Warbler has held most territories but this species, together with Blackcap and Chiffchaff, has declined during the years of the census. The increase detected nationally in the Chiffchaff population (Marchant and Hyde 1980) has yet to be reflected at Milton Hill. Table 1 shows how that other warbler, the Whitethroat, has continued to decline within the area, despite the availability of suitable habitat. In 1979 one singing male was heard on just one occasion. This decrease is a reflection of the national trend as shown by the CBC since the 'crash' year of 1969.

The census area is not large enough to wholly contain the territories of the two raptors, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel, which in some or all years have hunted over it. Green Woodpecker, Carrion Crow and Jay also include it as part of their territories. The high density of Magpies is achieved only by the availability of a large area of open space and gardens within easy reach in which the paired birds forage.

Situated as it is between two notable headlands for migrants, Brean Down and Sand Point, it is only to be expected that there should be some evidence of migration through the census area. Over the years Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*, Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* and Redpoll *Carduelis flammea* have all been recorded.

Assuming males holding territories do in fact have mates, yearly totals for breeding species in the area would range between 346 (1979) to 472 (1975) birds for the 30 acres, excluding breeding Woodpigeons. This is a considerably higher figure than the 500 birds per 100 acres which Simms (1971) estimated might be the British average for mixed woodlands but is still not as high as the number Parsons (1976) found when he surveyed a small, privately owned wood at the other end of the old county of Somerset. Densities there were of more than 500 birds in 30 acres. Sims (1978) found a density of 416 birds per 100 acres during a survey of Ashton Court Wood, Avon.

At Milton Hill the absence of old trees undoubtedly leads to a restricted species list. Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* and Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, both present in nearby Weston Woods, have not been found here. Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* and Little Owl *Athene noctua*, though hunting during the winter months, are also absent. Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* normally only fly over and Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*, an occasional visitor, has yet to take up residence. One other factor could have an affect on numbers of birds within the census area. That is disturbance following the arrival of an urban environment on the southern boundary. Many more children now use the area for play, some teenagers shoot airguns there, and the domestic cat *Felis catus* is much more a danger to bird life than it was in 1972.

Conclusion

While eight seasons is a very short period in which to chart with any certainty fluctuations of species, it is long enough to show trends, particularly sudden changes brought about by extremes of weather. The survey has shown that this area of Milton Hill has a considerably higher-than-average density of breeding birds even if the regenerating scrubland does not maintain the numbers to be found in privately owned mixed woodland with mature trees in another part of the old county of Somerset. Areas such as this, on the edge of a town, are subject to disturbance but are becoming increasingly valuable as development of all sorts and modern farming methods deprive our birds of their habitat.

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A REVIEW OF SOME WATERFOWL AT BLAGDON LAKE, 1971 - 1980

by A. H. Davis

This paper sets out to give a brief summary of the numbers of regular species of wildfowl at Blagdon Lake, Avon, during the nine 'seasons' from September 1971 to March 1980, and to compare these with results from fourteen 'seasons', 1948 - 1962, covered by Atkinson-Willes (1963). Counts are mainly my own but gaps have been filled by K. E. Vinicombe and others.

In both periods birds were counted at monthly intervals from September to March inclusive, and by taking the average of the three highest monthly counts in each season a figure representing the regular population was produced (see Table 1). This figure is designed to indicate the population one might expect to find when the largest numbers of a species are present. A second figure, the maximum population, is simply the highest count during that period. Comparison is sometimes made with a similar review of wildfowl numbers at nearby Chew Valley Lake, Avon, by Vinicombe (1976), when he compared numbers during 1954-62 with 1967-1975. This paper follows his format very closely.

During the recent survey period trout fishermen caused considerable disturbance during the September and October counts. Birds seemed to move mainly to Chew Valley Lake, e.g. on 17 September 1977, 630 Tufted Ducks were present during the morning but fishing disturbance caused the vast majority to move to Chew where 700 were counted in the afternoon. Often dabbling ducks, mainly Mallard, Shoveler and Gadwall, were disturbed by boats using the Ubley end and flocks flew off in the direction of Chew. During other months, November to March, there was little disturbance but occasionally the lake received birds from other waters, mainly Pochard, probably disturbed from Cheddar Reservoir by sailing activities. Birds disturbed at Cheddar have been seen circling off in a northerly direction and although the precise direction of arrival at Blagdon is more difficult to pin down, birds have been seen flighting in from the south.

CANADA GOOSE *Branta canadensis*. Individuals very occasionally wander from the large population at Chew. The maximum number recorded during 1971-80 was eleven on 4th and 11 September 1976.

MUTE SWAN *Cygnus olor*. Recent figures suggest that a decrease has taken place. The late summer/early autumn gathering of moulting individuals and birds of the year has apparently become smaller in the past few years, while the Chew herd seems to be increasing slightly, perhaps suggesting that part of the Blagdon population has moved to Chew.

BEWICK'S SWAN *Cygnus columbianus*. Recorded every season 1971-80, always irregularly in small numbers (highest count was 37).

SHELDUCK *Tadorna tadorna*. Only six records during 1971-80, with a maximum count of ten.

MALLARD *Anas platyrhynchos*. The regular figure suggests a slight decrease in recent years. Vinicombe (1976) noted that this species had increased spectacularly during 1967-75 and was the most constantly numerous duck at Chew. It must be noted, however, that his counts included July and August, when the highest numbers are present, so the increase may not have been as big as suggested. Perhaps this probable decrease is due to an increasing population at Chew, although Atkinson-Willes (1963) showed that after the formation of Chew, the lake did not gather birds from nearby older reservoirs, but generally had the opposite effect of increasing populations.

TEAL *Anas crecca*. This species has shown a substantial increase during the recent survey period. Vinicombe noted a slight increase at Chew during 1967-75, and in fact a large increase in numbers has also taken place at Chew during 1975-80.

Table 1. Regular and maximum numbers of waterfowl at Blagdon Lake, 1948 - 1980.

(a) Fourteen seasons, 1948 to 1962 (from Atkinson-Willes, 1963).

	Mute Swan	Mallard	Teal	Wigeon	Pintail	Shoveler	Pochard	Tufted Duck	Goldeneye
Regular	30	385	360	375	5	50	315	230	10
Maximum	75	1330	1450	1300	180	245	1215	700	30

(b) The same species, in nine seasons, 1971 to 1980

Regular	12	340	675	255	22	90	320	230	17
Maximum	37	895	1850	970	57	445	2000	630	38

(c) Selected species not analysed by Atkinson-Willes (1963), nine seasons, 1971-80.

	Gadwall	Ruddy Duck	Great Crested Grebe
Regular	35	85	8
Maximum	174	321	22

GADWALL *Anas strepera*. Although the largest population in the area is at Chew, this species has increased in recent years. It is interesting to note that it bred in 1973, the first record since 1960, and has done so subsequently in most years.

WIGEON *Anas penelope*. Has shown a decrease in recent years, this being in accordance with the trend at Chew, where Vinicombe noted a small decrease in his survey. It is interesting to note that Atkinson-Willes found numbers were noticeably reduced after the flooding of Chew during 1954-62.

PINTAIL *Anas acuta*. Usually found in small numbers, the recent survey indicates an increase. Vinicombe noted a slight increase at Chew.

GARGANEY *Anas querquedula*. Recorded most years, mainly in August and September, in very small numbers, (maximum 12, August 1975).

SHOVELER *Anas clypeata*. This species has shown an almost two-fold increase during the recent survey, mirroring the notable increase at Chew during the 1967-75 survey. Two broods were reared in 1973, the first since 1946.

POCHARD *Aythya ferina*. Figures are very similar to the earlier survey, but the regular figure is rather misleading due to high numbers during January/February 1977, when up to 2000 were present. If this is ignored the regular figure becomes 165, and probably indicates an overall decline. Large numbers were also noted at Chew during the same period. K.E. Vinicombe (in litt.) suggests that the reason for the high numbers was the excellent feeding conditions for vegetarian ducks like this species, caused by the drought of 1976 which allowed large scale encroachment of vegetation onto reservoir banks and was followed by rapid flooding in heavy autumn rains.

TUFTED DUCK *Aythya fuligula*. Amazingly the regular figure is the same as in the earlier survey. The highest count during the recent review period was outside the 'counting' season, in August, when 835 were present on 16 August 1972. This high number was probably due to food shortage at Chew, meaning that Chew birds moulted at Blagdon. Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* did the same in 1972, and very low moult numbers of Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus* were recorded at Chew in the same year (K.E. Vinicombe in litt.).

GOLDENEYE *Bucephala clangula*. Has shown an increase, thus mirroring the recent survey results at Chew, where it had shown a three-fold increase.

SMEW *Mergus albellus*. Recorded very irregularly most 'seasons', the population varying from one to three (very rarely four).

GOOSANDER *Mergus merganser*. Recorded most 'seasons', usually an irregular visitor in small numbers (usually less than ten). Exceptionally high numbers were noted during mid January 1979 when up to 79 were present during freezing conditions. The increase at Chew in recent years has not been mirrored at Blagdon. This is most probably due to the lack of coarse fish in the lake.

RUDDY DUCK *Oxyura jamaicensis*. Records show a gradual increase of the wintering population to a peak in February 1980.

To summarize, of the species analysed in the earlier survey, Teal, Pintail, Shoveler and Goldeneye have increased in recent years while Mute Swan, Mallard, Wigeon and probably Pochard have shown signs of a decrease. Tufted Duck seems to have remained at a similar level. Two other species, Gadwall and Ruddy Duck, have increased. Apart from the Mute Swan, Mallard and Pochard decreases, increases and decreases of most species correspond with trends at Chew. The very small Great Crested Grebe population is undoubtedly due to the lack of coarse fish in the lake.

Acknowledgement

I thank Keith Vinicombe for his expert comments on an earlier draft.

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NOTES

Two Long-billed Dowitchers at Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes

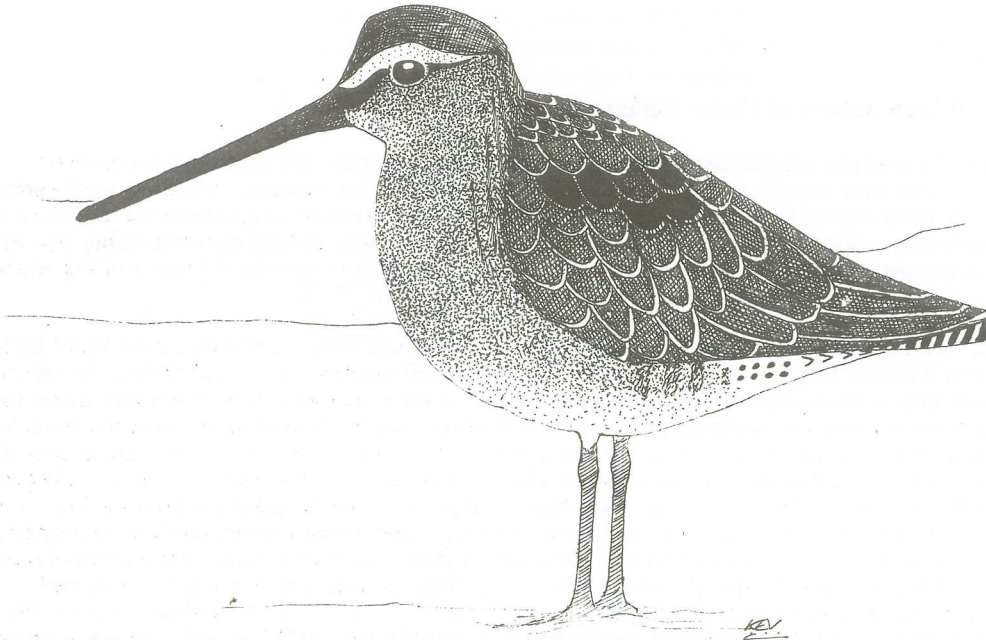
Gale force westerly winds during September can generally be expected to produce records of American waders. Three days of gales at the end of September 1977 were no exception but these winds were unusual in that they produced an unprecedented influx of Long-billed Dowitchers *Limnodromus scolopaceus*. At least ten individuals were recorded in Britain plus another four indeterminate dowitchers presumably also this species. The 16 dowitchers recorded in total in 1977 (including earlier August records in Essex and the Western Isles) are twice the previous peaks of eight in 1970 and 1971 (Rogers *et al.* 1978).

I was fortunate enough to discover two of these birds at Chew Valley Lake, Avon: At 15.10 BST on 30 September I was scanning through Teal *Anas crecca* and Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* in Stratford Bay when to my surprise, a dowitcher walked into my field of view. I watched it for a few seconds before it was joined by a second individual. I crept closer and watched them until 15.30 when they took flight. Following these views I was pretty sure that they were Long-billed but I had not heard them call. The following day I relocated one of them at 08.50 at Herriott's Bridge. Long range views were obtained for two hours and it was seen by many observers including Dorian Buffery, Andy Davis, Tim Dee, Tony Merritt, Roy Smith and Nigel and Laurel Tucker. The second bird was relocated in Heron's Green Bay and some excellent views were obtained confirming its identity as Long-billed. One was seen again on the morning of 2 October but then they mysteriously disappeared. Subsequent searches proved fruitless but I eventually relocated them on 7 October at nearby Blagdon Lake; they had undoubtedly moved here as a result of excessive disturbance by fishermen at Chew. Apart from occasionally reappearing at Chew during October, the two stayed at Blagdon until 11 January 1978, with one remaining until 15th; one then reappeared at Chew on 21st, being seen on the dam in Heron's Green. They obviously left the area in response to cold weather conditions when the reservoir margins became frozen. It is tempting to suggest that a Long-billed Dowitcher seen by Brian Rabbitts at Steart, Somerset, on 13 January 1978, was one of these birds.

Description: Bigger than Snipe, but not a great deal larger and often not separable in a distant view. Shape and structure very similar to Snipe. Bill very long, of Snipe-like proportions. Steep forehead, short neck, fat, rounded body and medium length legs. Feeding actions and behaviour similar to Snipe, feeding up to their 'knees' or above, in water, with their bills held down almost vertically giving characteristic 'sewing-machine' feeding action. Often fed in vegetation, particularly at Blagdon, where they could disappear for long periods. They would occasionally run into vegetation when wary, or crouch low on the mud like a Snipe.

Plumage generally quite dark, becoming whiter on lower belly and vent area. Crown, from base of bill back, dark brown with slight black flecking, especially at front, making crown look very dark from a distance. Lores noticeably dark blackish, this extending back through eye, slightly paler behind eye. Prominent pale whitish-buff supercilium, appearing very white at times. This curved up slightly in front of the eye, but tapered somewhat behind it. Underparts a dull sooty-brown, becoming slightly paler lower down. Very faint line of demarkation on lower breast. Lower cheeks and throat slightly paler. Very faint dark streaking on nape and sides of breast. Back finely streaked black and brown. Scapulars and wings grey-brown with noticeable narrow pale feather edgings. There were some darker feathers in the scapulars (possibly with buffer edgings) and one bird (Bird A) had more of these than the other. The wings were as long as or fractionally shorter than the tail. Tail and rump heavily barred black and white, with the black bars slightly exceeding the white ones in width. The outer tail feathers appeared completely white on the outer webs at least. The flanks and under tail coverts differed on the two individuals. Bird A (which, incidentally, was slightly bigger and longer billed) had some smudgy patches on the flanks and behind these were two rows of small black spots (about four in each row) followed by a line of arrowheads just below the closed wing. On the under tail coverts were two rows of faint small arrowheads stretching up towards the end of the tail, with a few additional arrowheads between these at the base of the under tail coverts. Bird B had smudgy markings on the flanks, but behind this was a large area of random black spotting. It also had the two rows of faint arrowheads on the under tail coverts, but it lacked the additional third row between these at the base. Plumage appeared neat, fresh and unworn. Bill dark blackish, faintly paler towards the base. Legs dull green. Plumage indicated that they were immature birds.

In flight, proportions again resembled Snipe, with rather a long appearance caused by the long Snipe-like bill. Plumage in flight looked grey-brown with rump and tail appearing paler grey. Conspicuous large white oval patch on the back (NB this is not on the rump, nor is it a white 'V' as described in most books – see photograph in *Brit. Birds* 70 (1977): 339). Also conspicuous was a narrow white trailing edge to the secondaries.



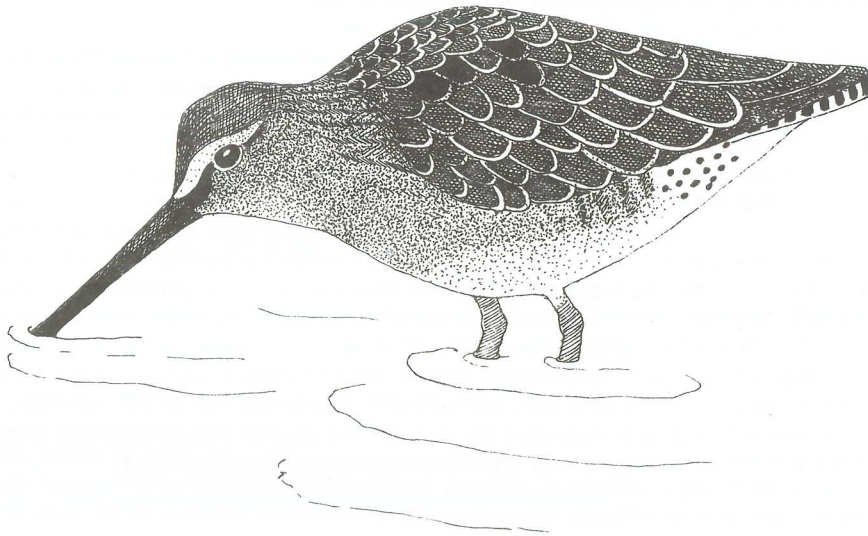
Voice: A great deal of confusion seems to surround the calls of dowitchers. Wallace (1968) quoting an American expert, Dr J.R. Jehl Jr, stated that 'a single note usually written as *keek* is characteristic of *scolopaceus*. This call may be trebled or drawn out'. He regarded a trisyllabic *tu-tu-tu* as characteristic of both races of Short-billed Dowitcher *L. griseus*. However, Wallace goes on to describe a variety of calls given by British dowitchers, for example the 1957 Cley Short-billed* uttered a penetrating *quip* or *kip* recalling a phalarope *Phalaropus* sp. or a Little Stint *Calidris minuta*. The famous Hayle Estuary Long-billed of 1966/67 uttered calls reminiscent of those of Turnstones *Arenaria interpres* and Dunlins *C. alpina* plus monosyllabic calls like those of the Cley Short-billed as well as a melodious *k-vit* and a variety of *heek*, *keek*, or *kreek* calls. He also states that the 1966 St Agnes Long-billed never faltered from calling *keek* while Smith *et al* (1969) stated that two Long-billeds on St Mary's in 1968 were accepted because 'they uttered the monosyllabic *keek* note attributed to that species' in addition to supporting descriptive details. In later correspondence on the subject, Wallace (1972) suggested strongly that any dowitcher calling *keek-keek* is undoubtedly Long-billed.

Against this background it is interesting to compare the calls of the Chew and Blagdon Long-billeds. I saw these birds on 17 occasions and they were heard to call on seven of these, invariably in flight. Like the other dowitchers described above, they had a variety of calls:

- (1) By far the most frequent (heard on all seven occasions) was a distinctive high-pitched long drawn-out trill, usually written as *pit-it-it-it-it-it-it-it*, varying between perhaps 5–10 notes. It was thought to be slightly Turnstone-like, but was higher pitched and had a different tone.
- (2) Also frequently given was a single high pitched *pit* or *prit*, though this was often run together to form the above trill.
- (3) On 21 October, a liquid *prit-ik* was heard and on occasion this was also run together to form a trill.
- (4) Also on 21 October a very high pitched *peet*. *peet*. . . *peet* was heard and on 1 October a thin, high pitched *jeet* was given though these calls were probably slight variations of call number 2.

They therefore never really gave anything that could be written as *keek* or *keek-keek*, though presumably calls No. 2 and 4 above are the equivalent of this note. A Long-billed Dowitcher which I saw on St Mary's in October 1978 called like the Chew/Blagdon birds, giving a quick, high pitched *pip*, *wip*, *kik* or *weep* and once a *pip-it*. However it also gave the fast trill, written as *kik-ik-ik-ik-ik*.

* Having seen black-and-white photographs of this bird, I am not at all happy that it was correctly identified!



A great deal of controversy has surrounded dowitcher identification since F.A. Pitelka forced full recognition of the two species in 1950. However there does seem to be some light at the end of the tunnel, especially if one considers what is implied in Prater *et al.* (1977). They state that *juvenile* Short-billed is quite easy to distinguish as it has 'crown, back, scapulars and tertials dark brown, broadly edged and vermiculated bright buff-brown. Subterminal dark area of feathers extends as a point down shaft, so worn feathers have buff-brown fringe broken by dark shaft streak. Submarginal markings clearly visible, especially on the scapulars, and tertials often conspicuously tiger-striped'. In addition, it seems that juvenile Short-billed is a buffer looking bird, especially on the breast. Short-billed Dowitcher has not been recorded in Britain since 1965 and at least one American expert is of the opinion that should another occur, the identification may not be as difficult as expected, especially as many British observers are now so familiar with Long-billed. A thorough review of all the old records of Short-billed Dowitcher would be highly desirable.

The Chew and Blagdon birds are the first recorded in Avon, though they were closely followed by an indeterminate dowitcher (presumably Long-billed) at Aust Warth on 16 October. In many ways it is remarkable that Long-billed Dowitchers occur in Britain at all. In Canada they apparently breed in extreme N.W. Mackenzie and perhaps northern Yukon (Godfrey 1966) but the bulk of the population breeds even further west in Alaska and N.E. Siberia. However, many of them cross the whole of Canada (and the range of Short-billed Dowitcher) to pass down and winter on the Atlantic coast. Some must get caught in the meteorological conditions that bring other North American migrants to Europe before making a landfall in Britain. It is perhaps hardly surprising that after such a long flight birds reaching this country tend to stay for long periods or even overwinter. Including the Avon birds, there were nine wintering records in Britain and Ireland between 1966 and the end of 1977.

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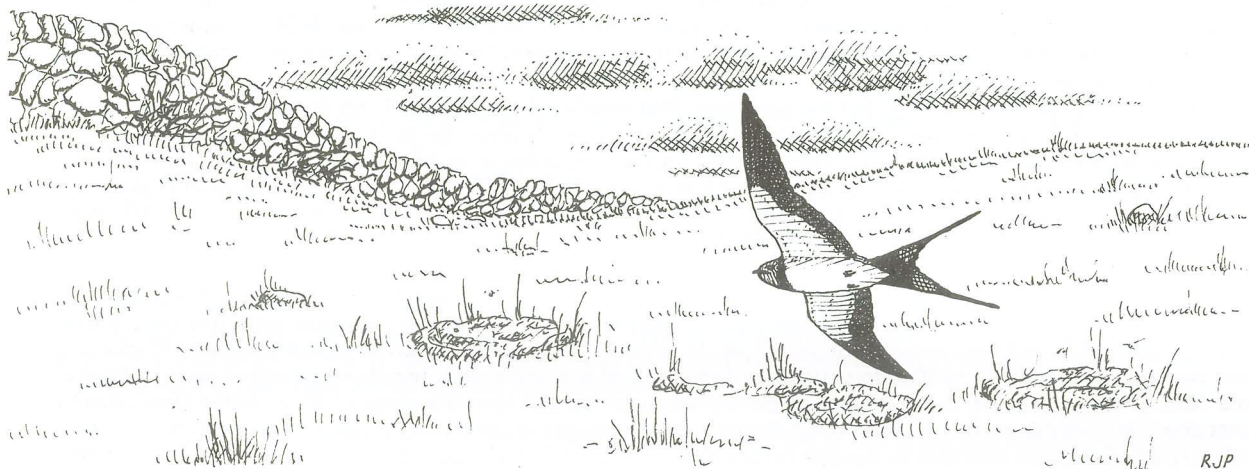
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Feeding behaviour of an early spring Swallow on the Isles of Scilly

I have described the behaviour of Swallows *Hirundo rustica* wintering in Cornwall from October 1974 to February 1975 (*Brit. Birds* 70 (1977): 341), and how some of these survived gales and heavy rain storms by seeking the shelter of a coniferous grove to feed on the plentiful supply of winged-insects *Diptera*. I have since had the opportunity to study the feeding behaviour of an early spring Swallow which I found on 4 March 1976 on St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly. On successive days — 5th and 6 March — the islands were subjected to torrential rain and wind storms. I wondered whether the Swallow had managed to survive and it seemed worthwhile to try to locate it. After a deal of unsuccessful searching I resorted to visiting all the accessible farm buildings in the area where it had first been seen and eventually found it in a cow shed, the door of which was permanently ajar. It took me a little while to become used to the rather dark conditions but the Swallow was there, perched on a rafter in a far corner. The floor of the cow shed was strewn in places with excrement and rotting straw, and the material had attracted a great many Yellow Dung Flies *Scatophaga stercoraria*. After a short while the Swallow commenced feeding on the flies by swooping low to pick up grounded insects, some of them it found on the rafters and, of course, others which were flying about. The same shed was visited on the second day of the inclement weather: the Swallow was again present and feeding as described. By 7 March the weather had considerably improved and the bird could not be found; if it had survived it may well have resumed its migratory flight.

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'Freezing' attitudes of an aberrant Hoopoe

Keith Vinicombe has made some interesting observations of 'freezing' attitudes of Hoopoes *Upupa epops* in France and Tunisia in 1973 and 1975 respectively (*Brit. Birds* 68 (1975): 208). I had rather a similar experience at St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly on 13 March 1977. As I quietly walked along the Garrison path a Hoopoe was seen in good light as it rested on a very small patch of well cut grass about 27 metres from where I then stood. It observed me but made no attempt to move or raise its crest, but held its neck a little upward; otherwise, it just squatted on the ground, quite still. I do not think that it was the behaviour of a tired bird as it was very active a little later. I was prepared, however, to remain quite still for an indefinite period, and the Hoopoe seemed in no hurry either, but just 'froze'. We must have been like this for some twelve minutes and I could see it was in immaculate plumage. However, the dark patches and stripes on its upper parts including its tail (and I think the head markings) were all a uniform deep brown, rather than black. The colour tone was similar to that on the head of an adult summer Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*. This, as well as the bird's 'freezing' behaviour, also certainly intrigued me. Eventually a stray dog caused it to take flight below and past me and there was no question that it was brown marked as I have described.

Bryan L. Sage (in litt.), an authority on aberrantly plumaged birds, informed me as follows: 'The only plumage variations in this species of which I am aware is an albino in the museum of the Bombay Natural History Society, and one with some white feathers seen in New Delhi, India in 1961. It would seem that your bird must have had the darker of the melanism pigments missing from its plumage'.

Bernard King

Wintering warblers in Avon, 1979/80

In a previous paper in this journal I documented the numbers of wintering Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* and Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* in Avon in the period 1962/63 to 1978/79 (*Bristol Orn.* 12 (1979): 63-66). The purpose of this note is to bring that paper up to date by adding the records for the winter of 1979/80. The nomenclature used for recording numbers is as defined there.

The winter of 1979/80 was less severe than the previous one, and the number of Blackcap records was correspondingly lower. The coldest spell came in early January, as did the largest weekly total of Blackcap-days, with 108 in the week 20-26 January. From that peak numbers fell steadily, with a small secondary peak in the very cold penultimate week of March. Overall, as Table 1 shows, the number of apparent individuals was much the same as in the previous winter, but there were fewer apparently resident birds, and so the Blackcap-day figures were lower. H.R.H. Lance trapped a record number of 17 individuals, retrapping five of them at intervals of up to eleven weeks, demonstrating that individuals can stay in the same general area over long periods of time. Song or sub-song was recorded on fourteen occasions, nine of them in March. There were one or two records of Blackcaps feeding on insects, and one of feeding on offal left after a flood. An instance of mortality was one bird caught by a cat. Of 206 apparent individuals, 125 were male, and 66 female (15 had no sex stated), a ratio much the same as in the previous winter.

Table 1. Numbers of Blackcaps in the winter 1979/80 compared with those in 1978/79. Note that figures for March are included in the totals

Apparent individuals	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
1978/79 *	5	37	72	96	81	291
1979/80	10	30	76	48	42	206
Blackcap-days						
1978/79 *	5	134	621	899	662	2321
1979/80	24	99	429	285	205	1042

* A number of additional records reached me after the publication deadline of *Bristol Orn.* 12, and the figures given here are the corrected ones. There were some 36 additional apparent individuals and 600 Blackcap-days. They do not, however, significantly alter the comments in my previous paper.

For Chiffchaff, it was a better winter than 1978/79, there being records of 41 Chiffchaff-days, the largest yet recorded for Avon, with, unusually, no records from Chew Valley Lake. Song was recorded in very mild conditions by three different observers in mid February, and one bird was present in a suburban garden.

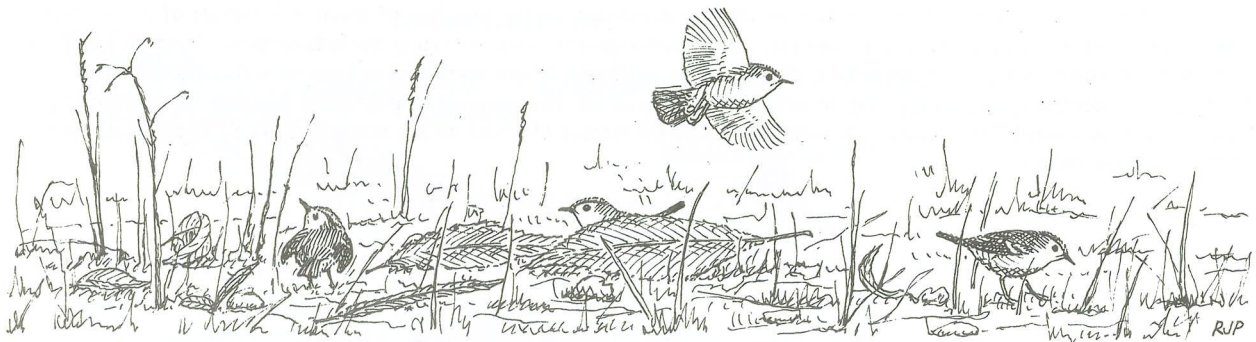
I am grateful to the 47 observers whose records are here included, and I hope that all Club members will continue to note these species in future winters so that this relatively new behaviour may continue to be monitored.

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Winter feeding behaviour of an inland Little Gull

The phenomenon of Little Gulls *Larus minutus* wintering inland in this country may not be so very unusual but from perusal of the literature little has been recorded of their behaviour. J. Driver (*Brit. Birds* 65 (1972): 355) has described the feeding method of a first-winter Little Gull in Lancashire, in January 1972 which was seen with Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus* dipping to the ground, presumably taking small insects. My experience of an inland wintering Little Gull, also a first-winter bird, occurred between early December 1959 to late March 1960, at, or near, Chew Valley Lake, Somerset (now Avon) when I visited the area at weekends. It had, like the Lancashire gull, attached itself to a flock of Black-headed Gulls, and where they went, so dutifully the Little Gull followed. Without molestation from its larger companions it fed with them across meadow land, when it was seen to pick up earthworms (sp?) as well as other unidentified items. Furthermore, it followed the gulls working along the deep furrows of arable land. Sometimes it also fed along the shore of the reservoir, when in milder weather masses of dead insects (mostly *Diptera*) were wind drifted and collected in the white spume along the exposed edges. With eagerness the Little Gull competed with wildfowl to feed on the insects and so became caught up in the frothy material itself. Towards dusk I found it flying out into the lake, not only to obtain edible items by alighting on the surface, but also to join with many thousands of other gulls which poured into the locality to bathe, preen, and roost.

Bernard King



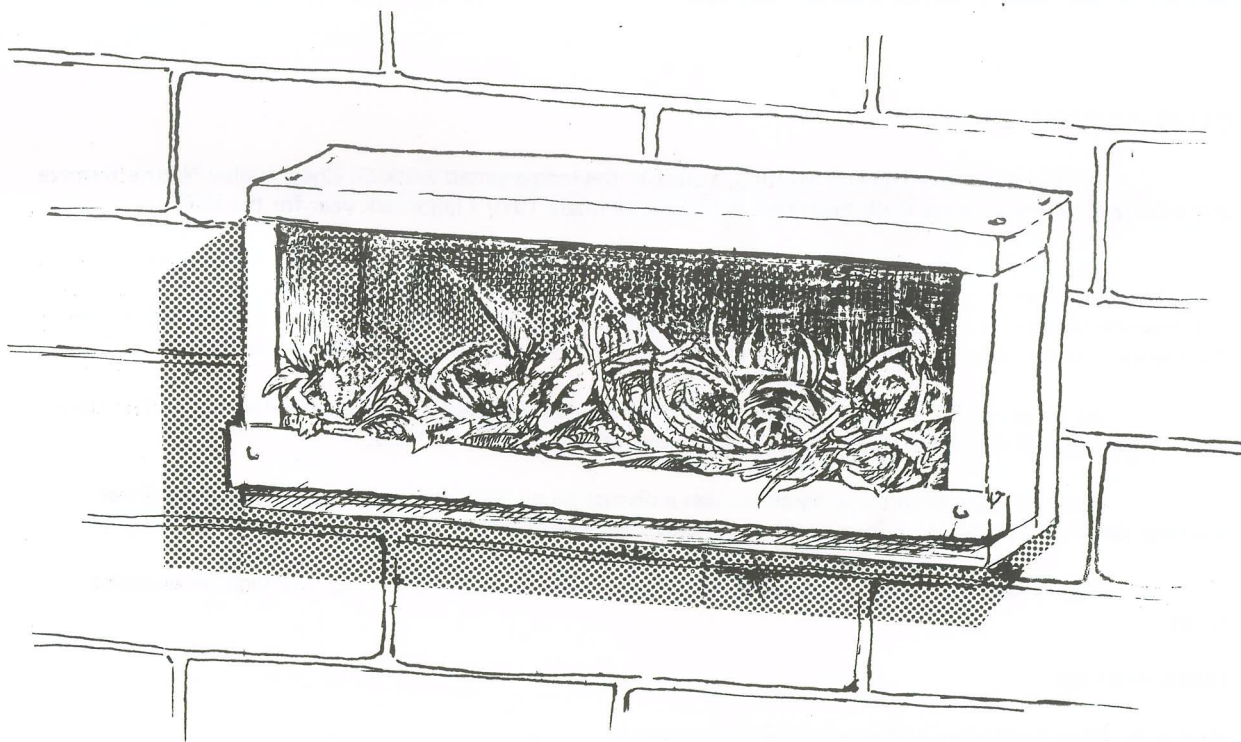
Immigrant Goldcrests feeding at ground level

I have come across Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* on a number of occasions in Avon and Cornwall feeding at ground level, and occasionally with tits *Parus* spp. and other species (see also *Brit. Birds* 62 (1969): 202). When Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* are rather common in winter in parts of Cornwall, they will also feed on the ground with Goldcrests. However, an experience new to me occurred on St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly on the 27th and 28 October 1975, when immigrant Goldcrests were found in large numbers. These were congregated in many of the small fields, and it seemed a good opportunity to give them priority attention. For instance, in one of the fields, at least 50 Goldcrests were working the furrows and ridges over the ploughed land. They were almost certainly feeding on small grounded winged insects *Diptera*. Others were located in short grass, in fact even haunting the verges bordering rough paths. These very active birds were often in continuous 'twittering' song whilst they avidly fed. Sometimes they experienced 'dreads', especially those in the exposed arable ground, every bird rising in great alarm to alight in the bushes and hedges, only to return to earth as quickly as they had departed. This may have been due to the presence of predators. There were even greater numbers in the trees and bushes and other elevated places. I estimated that there were at least 600 Goldcrests in the St. Mary's area, though probably there were also very many on the outer islands. The *Isles of Scilly Report* (1975:23) merely mentions 'unaccountable numbers during the period'. Later I consulted much ornithological literature without finding records of a similar nature concerning Goldcrests feeding on the ground in such numbers.

Bernard King

Spotted Flycatcher building double nest

During the last ten days of May 1979 a pair of Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapa striata* occupied a nestbox attached to the wall of my house in Chew Stoke, Avon. The box was placed very close to a large window in order to frustrate predators, and had an open front of dimensions 20cm x 10cm. The pair built two nests side by side, and six eggs were laid in the right-hand one only, over the first six days of June. The left-hand nest was apparently only used for roosting, and as a perch for the male when feeding the brooding female. Material was added occasionally to both nests during incubation. Before incubation started other species, for example Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* examined the nests but were driven off by one or other parent bird. Eventually four young fledged on 1 July in the normal way.



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Guillemots and Razorbills calling in their autumn and winter quarters

The loud calling of young Guillemots *Uria aalge* at sea in autumn (September to November) may be audible across considerable distances, given suitable weather conditions. They are apparently calling to solicit food from adults – their presumed parents – or to contact or attract them when well separated. However, one would also expect to hear young Razorbills *Alca torda* calling in autumn in similar situations. I have yet to experience this. H.F. Witherby *et al.* (*The Handbook of British Birds* (1938-41) 5:155) state that young Guillemots make a musical 'quee-wee' call, similar to the penetrating noises which I have often heard them utter in autumn. It may seem rather odd that the calls of young Razorbills are not apparently heard at the time when adults are present with them at sea, but they make plaintive whistling noises (*The Handbook* 5:145) and so may be difficult to hear.

Nevertheless, that adult Razorbills persistently call in a very guttural manner when in communal gatherings was well illustrated when two or three, and occasionally four, Razorbills frequented the tidal marine lake named 'Carnsew' (which lies adjacent to the Hayle Estuary, Cornwall) for periods of a week or more during the winters of 1978/79 and 1979/80. Whilst on the surface deep guttural calls were heard as they came together prior to diving; then, on surfacing within seconds of one another the calling was repeated as they regrouped. The behaviour continued in this way until the feeding spate was over. So, it would seem reasonable to postulate that parties of Razorbills similarly call in their winter quarters well away from our shores. As far as I know this behaviour has not previously been mentioned in the literature. There is one record concerning a Little Auk *Plautus alle* heard calling on a gravel pit at Benacre, Suffolk, in November and December 1971 (*Brit. Birds* 65 (1972): 397-8).

Bernard King

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CLUB ACTIVITIES, 1979

An Extraordinary General Meeting, a start to the long-awaited work on Chew Valley Nature Reserve and a determination to revive Club-organised fieldwork all made 1979 a landmark year for the BOC.

The Extraordinary General Meeting in March was called following a petition from 46 members asking for *Bristol Ornithology* to be replaced by an annual report reflecting the status of avian life in the County of Avon. The meeting resulted in a vote against the motion of 52 to 21, but in an effort to improve the *Avon Bird Report*, Club representatives were invited by the Bristol Naturalists' Society to join its editorial committee.

At Chew Valley Lake, various improvements were made at last to the Nature Reserve, and on field-work it was decided to inaugurate or take part in special surveys starting in 1980.

A new departure in the programme was a discussion on bird identification for beginners. Other meetings continued in the same format as before, plus week-end trips to the Ouse Washes, Cley and Hilbre.

Membership stayed constant at around 550, and the RSPB film show again brought in welcome funds.

Indoor meetings

Held at St. Mary Redcliffe and Temple School, they were:

11.1.79	A Visit to the Seychelles — Dr. John Raines
8.2.79	Members' Evening
1.3.79	Bird Identification for Beginners — Robin Prytherch
15.3.79	The Severn Estuary: its Role and Significance — Tony Prater
13.9.79	A Look at Ringing — John Eley
11.10.79	Members' Evening
15.11.79	The Birds of Wales — Roger Lovegrove
13.12.79	Annual General Meeting at Clifton R.F.C.

Publications

Bird News continued to be published monthly, and *Bristol Ornithology* 11 was published at the beginning of 1979.

Mike Lord *Honorary Secretary*

