

Cambridgeshire Bird Club



E-Bulletin 50 August 2017



White-winged Black Tern at Grafham Water: photo by Richard Patient.

(The records in this bulletin are unchecked and may be revised at a later date)

HEADLINES

CATTLE EGRET* Kingfishers Bridge one flew along the Cam at dusk on the 10th.

PURPLE HERON* Ouse Fen a juvenile on the 10th - 11th.

HONEY BUZZARD* Cambridge a flyover on the 27th.

STONE CURLEW Devil's Dyke on the 21st.

WHITE-WINGED BLACK TERN* Grafham Water an adult on the 25th.

WRYNECK Fen Drayton Lakes on the 29th, Ouse Washes on the 30th.

Other records

All records below refer to the month at the head of the E-bulletin and where no numbers are given the record relates to single birds.

Where there is an asterisk after the name of the species this indicates that it is necessary to send a description to the County Recorder before the record will be accepted.

Weather: the weather began much the same as July had ended with a more 'traditional' English summer of sunshine, showers and on at least one day a longer spell of rain. Maximum temperatures largely around the 20 degree mark apart from the odd day up towards 30. Rainfall was variable but it was not a noticeably dry month.

Wildfowl

Mute Swan Burwell Fen maximum 17 on the 14th.

Whooper Swan Ouse Washes 2 (injured?) on the 6th.

Greylag Goose Trumpington Clay Farm 32 on the 1st, Burwell Fen over 150 all month maximum c400 on the 14th, Fowlmere NR 190 on the 25th.

Canada Goose Trumpington Clay Farm 48 (some 2/3 grown), Burwell Fen maximum 39 on the 28th.

Barnacle Goose Grafham Water on the 16th, Sutton North Fen 29 on the 20th, Paxton Pits on the 28th.



Barnacle Goose at Grafham Water: photo by James Hanlon.

Egyptian Goose Paxton Pits 2 adults and 2 young on the 21st, 2 adults and one young on the 28th, Burwell Fen 2 on the 20th one on the 22nd, Littleport May Farm 2 all month.

Shelduck Burwell Fen maximum 9 on the 4th, Littleport May Farm 2 juveniles from the 11th.

Mandarin Fowlmere NR an eclipse male on the 5th.

Wigeon Ouse Washes on the 6th.

Gadwall Burwell Fen maximum 130+ on the 11th, Wicken Fen maximum 28 on the 10th.

Teal Burwell Fen 24+ on the 11th, Ouse Washes on the 6th, Fowlmere NR 2 on the 12th, 3 on the 13th and 8 on the 22nd, Littleport May Farm 9 on the 28th.

Mallard Trumpington Clay Farm 25 on the 1st, Wicken Fen maximum 50 on the 10th, Burwell Fen maximum 150+ all month c300 on the 14th, Fowlmere NR 46 on the 18th, Littleport May Farm up to 500 all month.

Garganey *reported from:* Burwell Fen (14), Fen Drayton Lakes, Isleham Washes (adult with 8 young) and Ouse Washes (7).

Shoveler Fowlmere NR 2 on the 13th a single on the 16th, Littleport May Farm a female from 11th - 21st.

Tufted Duck Trumpington Clay Farm 18 plus brood of 3 small ducklings on the 1st, Littleport May Farm 10+ all month.

Scaup Coveney Byall Fen on the 2nd.

Gamebirds

Red-legged Partridge Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Grey Partridge *reported from:* Burwell Fen, Fowlmere NR maximum 11, Littleport May Farm 30+ all month, Wicken Fen.

Quail Great Stukeley on the 6th, in the area of Burwell Fen/Tubney Fen 1-2 birds calling from the 14th and a possible family (adult with c6 young) on the 16th.

Pheasant Littleport May Farm 100+ all month.

Cormorants

Cormorant *reported from:* Burwell Fen (10), Cambridge (3 flying over), Fowlmere NR (2), Littleport May Farm (4) and Trumpington Clay Farm.

Egrets and herons

Little Egret *reported from:* Burwell Fen (20+ on several dates maximum 41 on the 28th), Fen Drayton Lakes, Fowlmere NR, Grafham Water (4), Littleport May Farm (4), Paxton Pits (6), Waterbeach Fen (2) and Wicken Fen (9).

Great White Egret Fen Drayton Lakes on the 9th - 10th, Kingfishers Bridge on the 10th, Ouse Fen on the 10th - 11th, Paxton Pits on the 11th - 12th and 21st.

Grebes

Little Grebe *reported from:* Burwell Fen (14), Fowlmere NR (2), Littleport May Farm (15), Trumpington Clay Farm (3) and Wicken Fen.

Great Crested Grebe *reported from:* Coveney Byall Fen (5), Fen Drayton Lakes, Grafham Water, Littleport May Farm (4 adults + 4 young) and Wicken Fen.

Raptors

Red Kite Fowlmere NR 3 on the 5th, Grafham Water 2 on the 22nd, 9 on the 27th, Wicken Fen on the 27th, Littleport May Farm 2-3 all month.

Marsh Harrier *reported from:* Burwell Fen (2), Fowlmere NR, Grafham Water, Haddenham/Aldreth Fens, Littleport May Farm (6 adults + 4 juveniles) and Wicken Fen (2).

Hen Harrier Haddenham/Aldreth Fens a ringtail on the 11th,

Sparrowhawk *reported from:* Burwell Fen, Cambridge, Chippenham Fen (2), Fowlmere NR (2), Great Shelford (2), Littleport May Farm (6) and Paxton Pits.

Buzzard *reported from:* Barton, Burwell Fen (2), Cambridge (11), Chippenham Fen, Fowlmere NR (6), Grafham Water (6+), Great Shelford, Haddenham/Aldreth Fens (2), Littleport May Farm (10+), Pampisford (3), Six Mile Bottom, Tubney Fen, Waterbeach Fen and Wicken Fen.

Osprey Grafham Water from 25th - 28th, 2 on the 27th, Ouse Washes on the 30th.

Rails and crane

Water Rail *reported from:* Eldernell, Grafham Water, Littleport May Farm Littleport May Farm 50+ all month (6+) and Wicken Fen.

Moorhen Burwell Fen maximum 11 on the 4th, Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Coot Wicken Fen maximum 26 on the 10th, Burwell Fen maximum 53 on the 28th, Littleport May Farm 10+ all month.

Common Crane Ouse Washes 3 on the ground and then a flock of 13 flew over on the 11th, 15 adults seen on the 13th, 19 flew over on the 31st, Eldernell 6 on the 13th, 2 on the 22nd.

Waders

Avocet Ouse Washes 3 on the 6th, Littleport May Farm 4 on the 11th.

Oystercatcher Littleport May Farm 5th - 11th.

Golden Plover Burwell Fen 15 on the 13th, 3 on the 21st, c45 on the 23rd, Ouse Washes c40 on the 13th- first returning birds, Trumpington c30 near the A10/M11 roundabout on 15th.

Lapwing Fowlmere NR 100 on the 12th, Burwell Fen c325 on the 14th, c550 on the 21st, c650 on the 28th.

Little Ringed Plover Burwell Fen see table, Littleport May Farm 2 on the 11th.

Ringed Plover Burwell Fen see table, Littleport May Farm 2 on the 15th.

Black-tailed Godwit Burwell Fen see table, Ouse Washes 6 on the 6th and 7 juveniles of the 'Icelandic' race on the 7th, Paxton Pits on the 11th - 12th, Grafham Water on the 18th, Littleport May Farm 5 on the 21st, Fowlmere NR 2 on the 22nd, Paxton Pits on the 29th.

Turnstone Paxton Pits on the 21st, Grafham Water a juvenile on the 25th.

Knot Burwell Fen on the 18th.

Ruff Burwell Fen (see table) Fen Drayton Lakes on the 6th, Grafham Water on the 22nd, Littleport May Farm several all month maximum 9 on the 18th.

Dunlin Fen Drayton Lakes on the 1st, Burwell Fen (see table), Littleport May Farm on the 11th, Grafham Water on the 20th, Paxton Pits on the 21st and 28th.

Common Sandpiper Burwell Fen see table, Wicken Fen on the 10th, Paxton Pits 3+ on the 12th, 4 on the 28th, 2 on the 29th, Grafham Water 7 on the 18th, 4 on the 20th, a single on the 22nd, 2 on the 27th and 30th, Colne Fen GP 2 on the 20th, Sutton North Fen 6 on the 20th, Fowlmere NR on the 25th - 26th, Littleport May Farm 4 all month.

Green Sandpiper *reported from:* Burwell Fen see table, Colne Fen GP (9), Coveney Byall Fen (2), Fowlmere NR, Godmanchester GP (2), Grafham Water (9), Littleport May Farm (2), Ouse Washes, Paxton Pits (2+) and Wicken Fen (3).

Spotted Redshank Burwell Fen a flyover on the 4th, one on the 30th, Grafham Water on the 27th.

Greenshank Burwell Fen see table, Ouse Washes 3 juveniles on the 6th and 7th, Paxton Pits 4 on the 12th, 5 on the 21st and 28th, 4 on the 29th, Fowlmere NR on the 13th, Grafham Water 3 on the 19th, one on the 22nd, 7 on the 26th, one on the 27th, 2 on the 30th, Nene Washes on the 20th, Colne Fen GP 3 on the 20th, Coveney Byall Fen on the 21st, Littleport May Farm 2 on the 21st, one on the 30th, Fen Drayton Lakes on the 29th.

Wood Sandpiper Burwell Fen see table.

Redshank *reported from:* Burwell Fen (4), Littleport May Farm (4), Ouse Washes (2), Paxton Pits,

Woodcock Littleport May Farm 4 all month.

Snipe *reported from:* Burwell Fen (9), Fowlmere NR (3), Littleport May Farm (30+), Paxton Pits, and Tubney Fen.

Summary of wader passage at Burwell Fen

	1	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
RPI		2								1		11	7			13	3			10	11	3	9	1			3		1
LRP		4								1		3				1	4				4	5		2			1		2
BtGod										8			5				4						1	1					
Ru		8							1			11	9			9	10		7	16	7		13				2		5
Dun		1		1					6	19		13	11			7	5		4	7	13		11				1		7
CS		2							2	2			3			2			1	3	2		6	2					3
GS		6							3	10		25	24			9	10		10	1	7		10	5			5		5
Gsk		3		1					9	6		2	1			2	5		1	4	3		6	2			6		4
WS												1	1			1	1					1							

From the top: Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank and Wood Sandpiper.

Terns and gulls

Black Tern Grafham Water 2 juveniles on the 19th - 22nd, thereafter a single until the 26th, Ferry Meadows CP a juvenile on the 30th.



Black Tern at Grafham Water: photo by Mathew Mellor.

Sandwich Tern Eaton Ford a flyover on the 11th, Paxton Pits 4 on the 29th.

Common Tern *reported from:* Burwell Fen (35), Grafham Water (10), Trumpington Clay Farm (3) and Wicken Fen (2).

Black-headed Gull Trumpington Clay Farm 12 plus 2 young on the 1st, Burwell Fen maximum 27 on the 4th, Littleport May Farm 20+ all month.

Mediterranean Gull Burwell Fen a juvenile on the 2nd, Grafham Water a juvenile on the 25th.

Common Gull Littleport May Farm 4 all month.

Lesser Black-backed Gull Littleport May Farm 39 on the 7th, 128 on the 28th and 134 on the 31st, Burwell Fen 400+ on the 11th, Fowlmere NR 50 flying south on the 12th, 150+ on the 13th then up to a maximum of 1,000 in surrounding fields on the 27th.

Herring Gull Littleport May Farm 68 on the 7th, 79 on the 28th and 112 on the 31st.

Yellow-legged Gull *reported from:* Burwell Fen (3), Fowlmere (2), Grafham Water (15+).

Caspian Gull Fowlmere a juvenile with other gulls on the 25th.

Great Black-backed Gull Littleport May Farm 2 on the 27th,

Doves, cuckoo, owls kingfisher and woodpeckers

Stock Dove Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Woodpigeon Burwell Fen maximum 45 on the 28th, Littleport May Farm 200+ all month.

Collared Dove Littleport May Farm 30+ all month.

Turtle Dove *reported from:* Croydon (3), Fowlmere NR (3), Haddenham/Aldreth Fens (3).

Cuckoo Burwell Fen on the 2nd - the last report received to date.

Barn Owl *reported from:* Fowlmere NR, Littleport May Farm (6) and Waterbeach Fen.

Little Owl *reported from:* Fen Drayton Lakes and Littleport May Farm (4).

Tawny Owl *reported from:* Hare Park (2) and Littleport May Farm (2).

Short-eared Owl Littleport May Farm 2 all month, Chippenham Fen on the 31st.

Swift Coveney Byall Fen 100 on the 3rd, general departure seems to have been around the middle of the month. *Late dates* 28th +: 28th Cambridge, Fen Drayton village, Hemingford Grey, Landbeach (still feeding young), 30th Godmanchester GP.

Kingfisher *reported from:* Barway, Burwell Fen, Fowlmere NR (2), Grafham Water, Littleport May Farm (6) and Wicken Fen (2).

Falcons and parrots

Kestrel Fen Drayton Lakes a leucistic individual on the 12th, Littleport May Farm 12+ all month.

Merlin Wicken Fen on the 25th - first of the winter.

Hobby *reported from:* Burwell Fen, Chippenham Fen, Colne Fen GP (2 juveniles), Eldernell, Fen Drayton Lakes, Fowlmere NR, Grafham Water, Littleport May Farm (4), Ouse Washes(5), Paxton Pits (4), Sutton North Fen and Wicken Fen.

Peregrine *reported from:* Burwell Fen (juvenile), Cambridge, Monks Wood (2 young birds), Littleport May Farm (a male).

Corvids

Magpie Littleport May Farm 30+ all month.

Jackdaw/Rook Chippenham Fen 3,000 minimum emerging from a roost at dawn on the 11th, Ely c380 feeding in a stubble field on the 3rd (mostly Jackdaws in both cases).

Jackdaw Littleport May Farm 300+ all month.

Rook Littleport May Farm 500+ all month.

Carrion Crow Littleport May Farm 300+ all month.

Raven Etton 2 on the 13th, Eldernell 2 on the 22nd, Paxton Pits on the 28th, 3 flying over on the 29th.

Tits and larks

Bearded Tit *reported from:* Wicken Fen (a family party on the 29th).

Skylark Littleport May Farm 100+ all month.

Hirundines and warblers

Sand Martin Paxton Pits 100+ on the 21st.

House Martin Fowlmere NR 60+ on the 19th, Fen Drayton village 40+ on the 22nd.

Cetti's Warbler *reported from:* Littleport May Farm, Paxton Pits and Wicken Fen.

Willow Warbler Ouse Washes 'passing through in good numbers on the 7th.

Grasshopper Warbler *reported from:* Wicken Fen.

Starling and thrushes

Starling Burwell Fen c250 on the 14th, Fowlmere NR a roost of c60 on the 16th, Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Spotted Flycatcher *reported from:* Croydon (bred), Fen Drayton Lakes, Fowlmere NR, Godmanchester GP, Haddenham (bred), Ouse Fen, Quy Fen (3), Waterbeach (bred) and Wicken Fen (8).

Starts and chats

Redstart Eldernell a male on the 20th, Cam Washes a male on the 20th, Fowlmere NR on the 20th and 27th.

Whinchat Grafham Water a juvenile on the 18th, another on the 20th and 25th, 2 on the 27th, Nene Washes on the 20th, Fen Drayton Lakes 2 on the 28th.

Stonechat Littleport May Farm 2 on the 28th.

Wheatear Littleport May Farm 2 on the 11th and 18th then 3 on the 21st, 2 on the 28th and one on the 31st, Nene Washes on the 20th, Sutton North Fen on the 20th, Grafham Water on the 20th, Paxton Pits on the 21st, Wicken Fen on the 22nd, Ellington on the 25th, Magog Down on the 25th, Fen Drayton Lakes 2 on the 28th.



Wheatear at Wicken Fen: photo by Roger Cresswell.

Sparrows, wagtails and pipits

Tree Sparrow Redmere Farm 120+ all month.

Yellow Wagtail Grafham Water 20+ on the 19th, 24+ on the 22nd, 30+ on the 30th, Fowlmere NR c50 on the 19th, Nene Washes 200+ on the 20th, Littleport May Farm c100 maximum.

Grey Wagtail *reported from*: Fowlmere NR, Grafham Water and Waterbeach.

Pied Wagtail Littleport May Farm maximum 67 on the 31st.

Meadow Pipit Littleport May Farm 30+ all month.

Finches and buntings

Greenfinch Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Goldfinch Fowlmere NR 40+ on the 27th, Littleport May Farm 80+ all month.

Linnet Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Corn Bunting Littleport May Farm 50+ all month.

Reed Bunting Littleport May Farm 100+ all month.

Exotica

Bar-headed Goose Sutton North Fen 2 on the 20th.

Keeping up the list: at the end of August (according to the E-bulletin records) the county species total for 2017 is now 201. New species this month: White-winged Black Tern.

Contributors:

Colin Addington, Richard Allison, Malcolm Ausden, Louise Bacon, Ian Barton, Peter Beckenham, Peter Bircham, Richard Broughton, Chris Brown, Mike Burdekin, Howard Butler, Josh Carter, Ade Cooper, Steve Cooper, Martin Davis, Ian Dawson, Ian Dickerson, Brendan Doe, Mike Everett, Mike Foley, Andrew Gardener, Ian Gordon, Chris Hainsworth, James Hanlon, Andy Hannaford, Mark Hawkes, David Heath, Jon Heath, Mark Hill, Michael Holdsworth, David Hopkins, Sarah Howlett, Colin Kirtland, Charlie Kitchin, Nick Langley, Hugh Lewis-Wright, Ade Long, Bruce Martin, Paul Mason, Steve Mumford, Martin O'Leary, Richard Patient, Doug Radford, Chris Rider, Kathleen Rosewarne, Norman Sills, Clive Sinclair, Jonathan Taylor, Michael Taylor, Richard Thomas, Chris

Thorne and the Wicken Fen Group, , Luke Wake, Mark Ward, Robin Ward, Jamie Wells, Kevin Wilson, David Withrington and Christoph Zöckler.

Raptor Survey 16th September 2017 11a.m. - 12 noon

Raptors are some of our most exciting yet controversial birds. It's a dull birdwatcher that does not thrill to the sight and sound of a Red Kite. At the same time we are frequently told that there are "too many" Buzzards/Kites/Sparrowhawks - delete to suit the prejudice of the moment.

In Cambridgeshire we are blessed with a good range of raptors. It was not ever thus. Scroll back fifty years and it was a red letter day to see a Sparrowhawk let alone a Kite or a Buzzard.

The status of most Raptor species continues to change. At present we do not have breeding Ospreys but it's only a few miles from Rutland Water to Ferry Meadows so maybe in a few years ...?

A few years ago the club did a raptor count - we did 2 spring ones and an autumn one. It has been a while, and we thought we would repeat this survey

What to do - Pick a watchpoint and log all the raptors seen during the hour preferably 11am - 12 noon. Then send us your results. Your spot can be anywhere, but a raised viewpoint might be an advantage?

Our chosen date of September 16th 2017 should be when resident species are dispersing, and it is still within migrant raptor season, so the opportunity for Osprey or rarer species is also there.

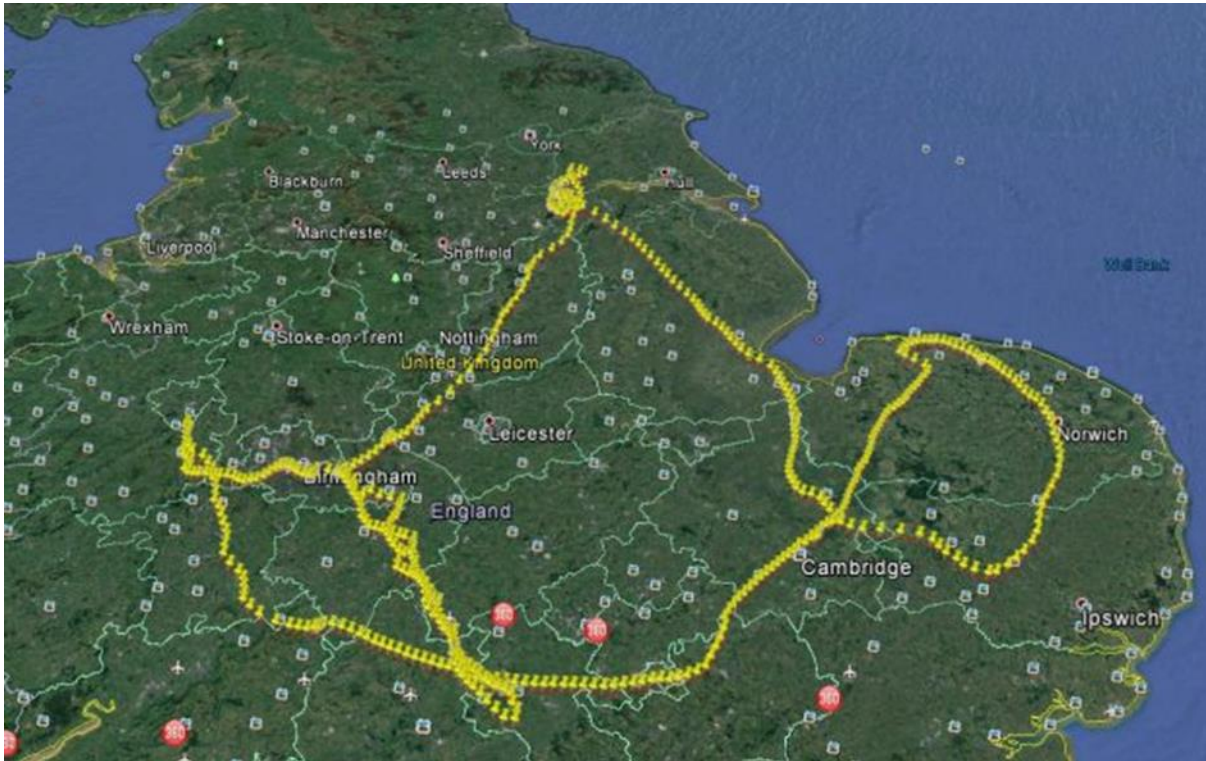
Send us your location, and time spent on watch (the suggested hour is ideal but not strict). Log your sightings with species, count, gender if known, and activity. From a watch the birds may be close, distant, hunting, etc. so notes on direction, activity etc. are additionally useful.

Don't be concerned if you cannot answer all the points above. Each observation adds to the snapshot. Send your results to research@cambridgebirdclub.org.uk, preferably by Oct 1st.

Hopefully, we will be able to repeat this survey in the years to come thereby producing trend data of even value than a one off.

Robert Brown (Research Officer) and Louise Bacon (County Recorder)

The peripatetic Nightjar



For those who did not see this here is the track of a Nightjar in mid-summer as it seemingly searched for a mate. A lesson to be learned is that it is not impossible to see a migrant in the 'wrong' place in the middle of the breeding season. It seems to have wandered through our area unreported but spent a day resting at Waterbeach and Louise has added that there were reports 10 days before and 10 days after (did Marcel do three circuits?).

Next indoor meetings:



Friday 13th October, Cottenham Village College

Giving Wildlife the Edge on Fenland' drains by Cliff Carson

After managing the RSPB and The Wildlife Trust Ouse Washes Reserves from 1975 for 30 years, Cliff Carson moved to join the Middle Level Commissioners in 2005. In his role as Environmental Officer for this large Fenland drainage authority, he works to enhance the rivers and drains of the Middle Level system for biodiversity.

His particular interest is in adapting or creating man-made structures to provide sites for wildlife. Over the last decade otters have benefited from a network of 80 holts constructed in the otherwise bare banks of fenland drains. Kingfishers have been provided with secure nest sites behind holes drilled for them through steel piles and brick headwalls at 90 pumping station and bridge sites. Water voles and pollinating insects benefit from soft engineering coir roll revetments, pre-established with native riparian plants. Over 90 barn owl boxes and 100 bat boxes installed in Drainage Board Districts now offer breeding sites to both species.

As a close second to practical conservation projects, Cliff enjoys photographing wildlife and communicating the importance of its conservation

Friday 10th November, St Johns Hall, Cambridge

Cuckoos: an African perspective by Claire Spottiswoode

Claire joined the Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge, in 2002 as a PhD student (supervised by Professor Nick Davies), coming from the University of Cape Town in her home country of South Africa. She has stayed on ever since supported by a series of research fellowships from Sidney Sussex College, The Royal Society, and currently the BBSRC, and is a Senior Research Fellow at Magdalene College. From mid-2016 she has been splitting her time between the Department of Zoology and the [FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology](#) in Cape Town.



Friday 8th December, St Johns Hall, Cambridge

Christmas Social

Come and enjoy mince pies and mulled wine in good company while listening to inspiring short talks by club members.

Please contact [Vicki Harley](#) if you would like to give a short presentation.

2017 Autumn Meeting of the Oriental Bird Club

St Johns Church Hall, Cambridge; Saturday 23rd September 2017.

Doors open at 10:30 and the meeting starts at 11:00. All are welcome. Snacks, cakes and hot and cold drinks will be available all day.

The Annual General Meeting, at which only OBC members may vote, will be held at 12:10 pm.

Programme

10:30 Doors open - hot drinks & cakes available

11:00 Opening remarks by the Chairman

11:15 Is the Pochard Baering up? Updating Baer's Pochard conservation Debbie Pain, Director of Conservation, WWT

12:10 Annual General Meeting

12:40 Lunch break - refreshments and sales

13:40 In search of the Grey Ghost - Snow Leopards and birds of Ladakh Andy Mears

14:30 The Asian songbird crisis Brian Sykes

15:15 Winners! OBC Prize Draw 2017

15:30 Break - refreshments & sales

15:50 Species conservation beyond borders: the need for collaboration Rob Sheldon, Chairman of OSME

16:40 Beidaihe: migration on the East Asian Flyway Mark Andrews

17:20 Closing remarks by the Chairman and day raffle draw

17:30 Meeting closes

Sales by WildSounds

Day raffle in aid of the OBC Conservation Fund

<http://orientalbirdclub.org/>

Cambridge Natural History Society (CNHS): Tawny Owl Survey.

The (CNHS) project to look at the wildlife and Natural History of Cambridge City and its immediate environs kicked off at the beginning of the year. Our study area is an 8x8km square centred on the junction of Mill Road and Covent Garden. Our study area is approximately bounded by the A14 to the north, the M11 to the west and includes Cherry Hinton and part of Teversham to the east and Trumpington to the south.

Our project has three main components, species surveys, a survey of gardens and ongoing recording by local experts. The wintering Blackcap survey continues - interim results are on the nathistcam.org.uk web site in the July blog. Thank you do to all who contributed. I'd like to continue this winter. Please send records to my email below.

Our latest surveys include a Tawny Owl survey of our study area. It's about now that young Tawny Owls have disbursed and are trying to establish territories. If you know of breeding sites in our study area, single birds or any Tawny record please let me know: date, location, behaviour.

I'd be grateful if you would send me records to: bobjarman99@btinternet.com. All records (and Blackcap records) will also go to Louise our County Recorder.

Thank you
Bob Jarman

Ruminations from the Editor on bird populations over time.

In the period of the Ice Age (ten thousand years ago and before) did warblers fly to Britain from Africa? When Britain was covered with 'wildwood' little over three or four thousand years ago what was the status of the Skylark, or the Yellowhammer or the Whinchat, Wheatear and so on.

There is considerable emphasis today on the losers in the avifaunal stakes of Great Britain, blame lying in loss of habitat mainly centred upon the changes in farmland - often described rather simply as the countryside. The BTO Common Bird Census and its successor the Breeding Bird Survey can seem to be a methodology for showing a declining birdscape and somehow this grasps our attention as we see the birds of our childhood and youth disappearing from the countryside, or if not disappearing then declining such that in the places where we formerly found them they are no longer present. Turtle Doves are perhaps the best example.

Over the millennia since the emergence from the Ice Age man has deliberately altered the landscape and habitat of Britain to suit his needs always using the current state of the art technology, be it the simple flint axe or today's hedge flail on a tractor from slash and burn to a behemoth of the modern bulldozer. Thus wildwood was reduced to create farmland and pieces of all kinds of habitats were levelled to build first of all houses then factories and towns in a never-ending process. For the birds it was a case of simple adapt or die. As a result of our creations the wildwood species such as Hawfinch, Goshawk, found themselves more and more marginalised.

There is a Darwinian aspect to this situation. For many species fast adaptation has been required to survive and even to thrive, those that have failed in this respect are the species now featuring on the lists of red and amber concern. If Turtle Doves overwintered for instance (and why don't they?)

they would almost certainly be better placed to boost their flagging population much as Marsh Harriers populations have gradually changed from being migratory to being partially resident - a change that has taken place in only a few generations and helped the population to grow and spread rapidly. Fast adaptation indeed. Change or die.

Perhaps I have a perverse view of events, but all I can see is a balancing out of the pluses and minuses. For examples, who would have thought of the arrival of Little and Great White Egret even ten years ago, or the breeding of Black-winged Stilts. And for my generation breeding Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards, Red Kites, Common Cranes, Cetti's Warbler and Bearded Tits in Cambridgeshire seemed fanciful thirty years ago, to say nothing of Avocets, Hobbies, Peregrines etc. and that is just some of our gains.

For us in Cambridgeshire there the re-wilding projects at Wicken and the Great Fen have delivered snippets so far but in future threaten to change things dramatically. Burwell Fen is a start but there is more to come, add to that Ouse Fen and Fen Drayton Lakes and we are looking at a much better future for wetland birds. And take a glance into your garden and see the thriving populations of former woodland species, tits and thrushes plus finches from the countryside, all given a new habitat and food sources by our actions. Remember, most of the population censuses do not cover suburban gardens and do not reflect these changes. A wise man once pointed out to me that how you look at the population of a species depends entirely on where you start.

In short I think the emphasis on declines is overblown and disproportionate. The changes in agricultural practices are in fact a continuation of the process that began millennia ago in which we took the natural habitat and changed it to suit ourselves, something we continue to do today with the continuing consequences on the birdlife, however, we are doing our best to ameliorate the effects. All is far from lost, quite the contrary in fact. I believe that overall birdlife in Britain is healthy; a measure of which is the contrast between the number of breeding species 'lost' in the last forty years against the number of species gained.

STOP PRESS: this month we learn that Night Herons have bred in Somerset, Cattle Egrets in Cheshire, Dorset and Somerset , Great White Egrets in Norfolk and Somerset and Spoonbills in Yorkshire - you see what I mean!

And from the Chairman - a different perspective.....

Really no problem?

Peter Bircham's 'thought piece' on the changes to our county birds is provocative, perhaps deliberately so - it is certainly important to debate these topics. One of the aims of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club is the 'conservation of birds in Cambridgeshire' but if there is no problem then perhaps we can relax and just enjoy the changes, if indeed the gains match the losses... but really? Does the evidence back that up?

Of course if by some miracle humans failed to discover Britain until now, it would be a very different place with a completely different birdlife. But the current thinking on how the 'forested' landscape would have looked is not one of continuous tree canopy but of a more open, savannah-like scene where large herbivores and natural events create and maintain openings. I've recently visited an attempt at 'rewilding' in Sussex (Knepp) where herds of cattle and deer keep areas open and scrubby, ideal for what we think of as farmland birds such as Yellowhammers, while wild pigs disturb the ground creating conditions for 'arable weeds' that sustain an increasing population of Turtle Doves - absent from the site until they stopped arable farming and let it go wild. And a friend who visited in the spring found nesting Skylarks in scrubby patches which would not imagine them using in the arable landscape we have created. So I think our 'farmland' birds would have been present, maybe in different numbers, even if we had not started farming.

So to counteract Peter's optimistic list of gains, what have we lost? Abundance of many species has gone down considerably, as charted by the farmland and woodland bird index, while efforts to create new wetlands and to improve water quality has indeed caused a stabilisation in the overall numbers of wetland birds, and as these are the sort of places birders tend to go we may well notice these and think things are OK. The sampling of the largest part of our county by the BBS shows what is going on in the majority of the landscape and it's not good. We have lost breeding wetland birds as well as gained others - if we were to go back 1000 years there would probably have been Storks, Ospreys and White-tailed Eagles but in recent recorded times Red-necked Grebe and Ruff entirely, Pintail more or less, and Redshank and Snipe from the general countryside away from highly managed protected sites. But species of the general countryside have many more losses - Honey Buzzard (probably), Montagu's Harrier, Corncrake, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Wryneck, Willow Tit, Tree Pipit, Wood Warbler, Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Whinchat, Wheatear, Hawfinch, Lesser Redpoll and Cirl Bunting are all former breeders from not too distant times. These are countered by gains of Collared Dove, Grey Wagtail and a few introduced species like Canada Goose and Mandarin!

Over to the members to contribute I feel.

Vince Lea

Biodiversity of the University estate - a request for help

I am getting in touch from the University of Cambridge Environment team. We are trying to establish what biodiversity exists on the University estate, in particular any sites or species of importance for conservation, and I was hoping you and your members might be able to help us? Your thoughts on the following questions would be greatly appreciated.

Any concerns about the University's impact on biodiversity, or suggestions for how we might improve?

Any wildlife/ habitats on the University estate believed to be of importance, particularly in locations which might not be covered by Statutory or City/ County Wildlife sites?

I cannot guarantee that any suggestions will lead to actions from the University, as I am just an intern, but I will do my best to make sure any feedback is taken on board. We know we could do much better in this area, and any help you and your members can give us to do so would be greatly appreciated.

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