



BIRD WATCH

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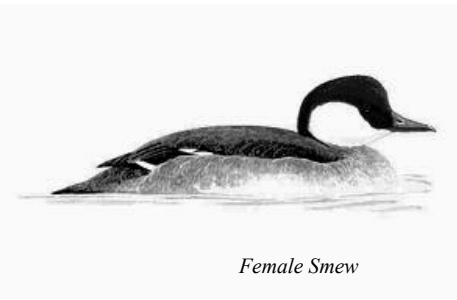
The Big Freeze

It has been a long time since we had such a prolonged cold winter and there is great concern that many of our smaller resident bird populations have suffered devastating losses. We have had bad winters before, my most memorable being 1963 when snow lay on the ground until April in some places. Bird populations suffered then and eventually recovered. But we are looking at much lower populations for some species nowadays and the lower critical masses might seriously impair their recovery. We will only know when this years breeding statistics are in.

The birds thought to have suffered most this time are small insectivorous species such as Wrens and Goldcrests. Garden feeders will have proved a lifeline to tits and finches but birds with restricted feeding habits such as Kingfishers will have succumbed. In fact there have been many reports of Kingfishers found dead on river and canal banks. Even species such as Water rail and Woodcock have been devastated because they have been unable to feed in the frozen ground and water. The RSPB had to put out sprats for wintering Bitterns in many places, and although Water rails took advantage they were still seen dropping dead on pathways, including at Leighton Moss.

Watching the feeding strategies of all the extra birds in the garden has been very interesting. For example, I have never seen a Wren on the bird table before, but mine learned to pick up bits on the bushes below and eventually went straight onto the table to take a variety

of food. He is a survivor! Then there was the Fieldfare which would only take fresh fruit. It ignored the sultanas, dried mealworms and suet blocks I put out for the Blackbirds, and if there were no apples or pears left he would fly off. He could be a loser in the end. The strangest one of all though was the Heron that took quite a few of the fish from our pond. One day it was completely frozen over and the Heron actually gobbled up some half apples. It must have been desperate.



Female Smew

Of course the big bonus of the cold weather has been the influx of unusual birds into the garden. I have had six Bramblings at a time some days, a Great Spotted woodpecker (unusual for here) on fat filled coconuts and a Grey wagtail which daintily picked up shortbread crumbs dropped by the Starlings. My sister had a Red-legged partridge on her bird table and someone was telling me last week that her sister had a Woodcock feeding on her lawn all day.

Even so, my star birds have been the Tree sparrows that have practically lived at the bottom of our garden all winter. I

had never seen this species around here in 26 years but it looks as though they are here to stay, even looking in a Blue tit box last week. It all started when I read somewhere that sparrows were addicted to millet seed. I bought some white millet and sure enough I soon had all the House sparrows in the neighbourhood congregating around the millet feeder. Then one day in October a Tree sparrow turned up and within no time at all there were nine. So now I have three millet feeders and the pleasure of watching the antics of this endearing species all day long. And who knows, my House sparrow box might even get occupied this year too.

Although bird watching out in the field has not been for the faint-hearted this winter, some wonderful species have still been located. Four female Smeews (Redheads) were found on the Ribble in January and although they frequented inaccessible stretches of the river they were still viewable distantly from Bezza Lane. A Black-necked grebe turned up at Rishton Res and a very confiding Velvet scoter stayed at Barrow Lodge until it completely froze over. A Glaucous gull was at Fishmoor Res with two Mediterranean gulls, one of which was ringed in Hungary. Jonathon also saw a Med gull at Corporation Park and a drake Mandarin under the rhododendrons. When I went down the only notable birds were a pair of Goosanders, but it all goes to show – you never know what might turn up anywhere!

Ed

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Size Matters

Perspective is a fascinating subject (the large moon on the horizon phenomenon etc), and birdwatchers are probably as susceptible as anyone to the effect – especially if they are observing a bird that they are not too familiar with.

In the early Spring of 2009 I was walking along the A666 through Darwen where the road passes closely to the India Mill chimney. The chimney has for many years been home to a pair of Peregrine falcons and I stopped to watch the birds performing some courtship flying display around the top of the chimney.

I then became aware of a Crow flying in my direction with a piece of branch in its beak – obviously engaged in nest building. However, instead of flying over my head, to my amazement it disappeared behind the chimney, It then dawned on me that I was not actually watching a Crow flying between myself and the chimney but a large Raven that was actually further away from me than the chimney.

The Raven meanwhile did not re-emerge from behind the chimney and was obviously intent on using the far side of the chimney as a nest site. The falcons however had other ideas and proceeded to swoop around the far side of the chimney until the Raven flew off- still with the piece of branch in its beak.

A. Culverhouse

Winter Walks

Our first walk of the season was to **Leighton Moss** in October. It was a mild misty morning with the promise of sun – perfect conditions to see Bearded tits on the grit trays. Sure enough, we were treated to a succession of birds as they took the grit, often six to seven birds at a time. We saw a Bittern fly into the favoured place opposite the Public Hide and Marsh tits at the feeders. Eric Morecambe had a single Great white and several Little egrets and the local Kingfisher showed beautifully. We dipped on the Hawfinch at Woodwell but there were plenty of wildfowl and waders at Jenny Browns Point. A rewarding day out with 55 species.

A cold bright day in November saw us at **Pilling**. Unfortunately we had got the tides wrong and the ducks and waders were too far out to see. However we did get a good view of a Merlin sat on a post and five Little egrets were spread out across the marsh. A Kingfisher also gave lovely views as it flashed along a gully. We moved over to Eagland Hill and there we saw 20 Tree sparrows, but other farmland species were not found on this occasion. In all we recorded 34 species.

The January walk to **Marton Mere** was cancelled due to the severe weather conditions but we were able to go to **Martin Mere** in February. The Reserve was alive with the sound of Whoopers, Wigeon and Teal, and it was lovely to get really close-up views of them at feeding time, together with lots of Pintails and Shelducks. We spent some time at the Ron Barker hide and had great views of a pair of Peregrines through the mist. Stonechats and Stock doves were also out on the farmland and the local Red-breasted goose dropped in to feed with the feral Barnacle flock. Three Ringed plovers had arrived back on the scrape where they breed and it was noticeable that several Tree sparrows were investigating nest boxes. Total species seen: 51.

Bringing Life Back to Bowland

Driving over the tops from Stocks Reservoir one Spring, I was struck by the absence of wading birds up there. In other similar upland areas you expect to see Curlews and Lapwings displaying, or a stunning Golden plover in full summer plumage or even (if you are lucky) a Snipe performing its evocative drumming flight. But all I saw that spring evening were Meadow pipits and the odd Wheatear.

I found out the reason why some time later when Peter Guy came to the Club to talk about Bowland birds and his experiences in his career with United Utilities. Stocks was 'on his patch' and he explained how the construction of the reservoir had damaged the moorland habitat. Stocks was created in the 1920's to meet the growing needs of the populations of

the Fylde, Preston and Blackburn. It was the biggest body of water in Lancashire and grips (open ditches) had been dug into the surrounding catchment area to collect as much water as possible. Very soon the blanket bog had been drained and the moors dried out.

As a result the ground became too dry for wading birds and important upland habitat was lost. However, Mother Nature had her revenge because any rainfall now ran down through the grips too quickly and the rushing water picked up nutrients, making it extremely dirty. It was expensive to treat this dirty water and eventually, many years later, the powers that be realised that the water entering the reservoir would be far purer if it was allowed to drain slowly and naturally.

So United Utilities are now damming and diverting the grips with peat and metal posts and the bog is slowly being restored. This can only be good news for wading birds as a vast expanse of moorland above Stocks will become wetter, so allowing long billed birds such as Curlew and Snipe to feed and to breed. A good news story about Bowland birds for a change!

One snippet in Peter's talk that is also worth a mention here is that in the conifer forests of Bowland where there are no deciduous trees, Tawny owls have taken to nesting underground. Wooden nest boxes have been put in place to prevent badger and stoat predation and are apparently a great success. Who would have believed that we would have our own burrowing owls in Lancashire! **Ed**

Bulgaria, September 2009—Trip Report

165 species in 4 days - that's the quality of the birding in Bulgaria. The reasons for the abundance of birds are two-fold - Bulgaria is a poor undeveloped country with old-fashioned farming methods, and the country sits right on the Black Sea migration route, catching a big percentage of the birds coming out of Russia, eastern Europe and Scandinavia, on their way to Africa.

We spent the first two days on the NE coast close to the Romanian border where sea-watching, lakes with wader scrapes, steppe and headland scrub were the order of the day. Straight away on the first morning we got the bird that had inspired me to go to Bulgaria, the Red-breasted flycatcher. Gorgeous little birds with a call just like a wren on steroids, they are unusual in that they winter in Western Asia and that's why they are common on the Black Sea coast in September. I was also thrilled to see three Ospreys, my favourite bird, fishing on the sea and witness one catching a fish at its first attempt. Gull species were Yellow-legged, Med and Little and there were numerous Black terns and some Whiskered. The wader scrapes were very interesting and produced at least one lifer for most of us - Broad-billed sandpiper, Marsh sandpiper and a Red-necked phalarope. The steppe produced some interesting birds such as Isabelline wheatear, Tawny pipit, Stone curlew, Roller and a lone Red-footed falcon. And it was here that we came to realise that in Bulgaria there were Red-backed shrikes on every bush and Bee-eaters everywhere. The headland was alive with birds and we wished we could have stayed longer. A fall of Whinchats, Corncrake, Thrush nightingale, a Hobby pretending to be an insulator on a pylon, Alpine swifts, Yellow wagtails, Wryneck and even a Little crane in a tiny pool.

Our journey to the south Black Sea area took us on a meandering route via a quarry where Eagle owls roosted and a watch point in the mountains. There was no owl on view that day but we did see a small group of Levant sparrowhawks climbing on the thermals and we were able to study them for a lengthy period. A beautiful rufous Long-legged buzzard also performed some spectacular dives over the quarry. Magic. After that we

climbed up to the tree line on the mountains but there was no other raptor migration happening that day. But we did see a spectacular flock of 1000+ White pelicans gaining height and turning towards the coast, stretched out in V shape just like Pinkfeet. In the mountains we explored an area of open oak woodland, where we found Green, Middle and GS woodpeckers, Woodlarks, Short-toed treecreepers and a pair of very elusive Sombre tits.

Our third day was spent around the lakes and reservoirs of the Bourgas area. There were approx 3000 White pelicans on Bourgas Lake which was surrounded by heavy industry and shrouded in murky mist. It was almost surreal watching them systematically flying short distances around the lake and engaging in synchronized feeding frenzies. There were only a few Dalmatian pelicans which seemed to keep themselves to themselves, and I have to say that they were one of the ugliest birds I have ever seen. Whilst we watched the pelicans we were treated to fly-pasts of Gull-billed, Black and White-winged black terns, and Purple, Squacco and Night herons. One of those birding experiences you never forget.

Moving on to the reservoir, we found yet more Ospreys, Garganey, Great white and Little Egrets and a few Ferruginous ducks. The Bulgarian equivalent of the RSPB has a Visitor Centre amongst the reedbeds here and we enjoyed the best lunch venue of the trip, sat on the roof and enjoying a 360° panorama of birds. The problem was that the weather was too settled and the spectacle of hundreds of raptors we had been promised did not materialise. Still it was nice to see an Osprey and a Sparrowhawk climb up and up right above us until they were just specks in the sky. That WAS migration! Simeon our local Guide had received a tip-off and we hot-footed it back to a creek leading off the reservoir. There we found a Little crane out in the open feeding. Then it was joined by a Spotted crane which emerged from the reeds followed by a juvenile Moorhen. Incredible! To see all 3 birds and compare the size differences was a wonderful experience. It was hard to turn our attention to a Wood sandpiper and Black-headed yellow wagtail

feeding just a little way along the bank but it was not a problem as the cranes carried on feeding, with the Spotted continually bullying his smaller cousin. Only a White-tailed eagle landing in a tree could compensate after that! We ended the day on another high; some salt pans where Slender-billed gulls were a new bird for most of us.

Our last day was spent in the mountains again, calling first at a reservoir which was accessed along a dirt track. We soon discovered that the valley was a magnet for migrating raptors and the bus pulled up to allow us to study a Lesser-spotted eagle resting in the pasture. Soon we spotted other raptors on the ground and hunting over the ridge - Long-legged buzzards, Short-toed eagles, Booted eagles and more Lesser-spotted. The valley was farmed in the traditional way with sheep and goats tended by shepherds and large dogs, a habitat rich in prey for the raptors, especially Susliks - an endearing kind of ground squirrel which sits up motionless like a Meerkat. We had gone to this lake to look for Ruddy shelduck which breed there but none were to be seen. The watch point on the mountain top again produced no visible migration but at least we had had excellent views of the species we had come to see.

So Bulgaria was a very successful trip and I wouldn't hesitate in recommending anyone to go in the autumn, or the spring when eastern European warblers, Masked shrikes, Semi-collared flycatchers and a host of other interesting birds can be seen. But if you do go you need to be prepared for a very different country, even to Hungary. It is very poor and shabby with numerous vestiges of its communist past, poorly constructed and unfinished buildings, peasant farming traditions and piles and piles of rubbish everywhere. There were plastic bottles, bags, cans and all sorts of human detritus in every conceivable place; alongside roads, in lakes and reservoirs, even along tracks in the middle of nowhere. There are a lot of smart developments along the coast, mostly unoccupied, but they will never attract tourists unless they can clean up their country. As someone said - it was like the third world - but well worth visiting just for the birds. **Ed**

Why Not Try Caerlaverock

Have you ever woken to the sounds of Whooper swans, Wigeon and Teal greeting a new day outside your bedroom window? Or opened the curtains to see dawn breaking across the Solway and thousands and thousands of Barnacles and Pinkfeet flying in from the merse to their feeding grounds? Or enjoyed a grandstand seat to watch badgers feed on the nuts and honey put outside your house every night? Well you too can experience these wonderful spectacles of nature, and all for a very modest price.

The WWT Reserve Centre at Caerlaverock let out their farm house throughout the year on a shared facility basis. There are 5 bedrooms ranging from en-suites to family rooms with shared bathroom, and a large shared kitchen and lounge. Prices range from £25 per person per night to £200 for the whole house, which, accommodates up to 10 adults and 5 children.

I stayed up there in January and was lucky enough to have a refurbished en-suite room overlooking the Reserve. I have to admit that the kitchen and lounge were getting a

little tired as they awaited a makeover, but they were perfectly adequate for a bird watching break. And anyway, what are a few inconveniences when you are surrounded by all that wildlife outside!

I have always visited Caerlaverock in winter time, when the entire Barnacle goose population from Svalbard inhabits the Reserve and the surrounding farmland. But now they have an Osprey nest and a live CCTV stream into the Reserve Centre, I am very tempted to spend a few days up there in the summer too. The whole area is very good for birding at any time of year, and it is only an hours drive to the Galloway Red Kite feeding station on Loch Ken. Belymack Farm is just as good as the more famous Gigrim Farm in Wales and is not as crowded.

So why not give Caerlaverock a try? It's well worth a visit especially as the prices are bound to go up when all the refurbishments are finished. You can find all the details on the WWT web site at www.wwt.org.uk/caerlaverock.

Ed

Whimbrel Roost

With all the construction activity taking place at Brockholes, it is unlikely that there will be big numbers of Whimbrels to watch on spring evenings this year. But you can still see these beautiful birds flying in to roost at another traditional stopover site, Barnacre Reservoir at Oakenclough, near Garstang.

The RSPB and United Utilities are running a guided walk to see the spectacle on Friday 30th April at 7.45pm, price £5 per head. Booking is essential either by contacting Pam Bradley on 01524 581001 or emailing pam.bradley@rspb.org.uk.

This is just one of the events taking place as part of the Bowland Festival 2010. You can find all the details on www.forestofbowland.com

Garden Bird Watch 27-28 March

This years Garden Bird Watch will take place over the weekend of 27th to 28th March. All members are invited to take part and friends and relatives can join in as long as they live in the Club's reporting area.

All you have to do is record the maximum number of species seen at any one time in your garden over the weekend. For example, if you see a Robin on six separate occasions, you should only record one Robin because it could have been the same bird every time. But if you see three Robins in your garden simultaneously, then you can record three Robins because you have seen three individual birds. Birds seen at other venues outside your garden should not be included.

A committee member will contact you soon afterwards for your results, and if possible will telephone to remind you in advance.

This exercise is an ongoing survey to monitor bird populations in Blackburn's gardens. We are very grateful to all those who take part in this annual event.