

Summer 2016 No.185



The Harrier

Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

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Oystercatcher with young (*Haematopus ostralegus*) photographed by Brian Buffery

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All material for the Autumn edition should be received by 5th September please.

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Editorial

Welcome to the Summer Harrier 185, a peach of an edition even if I do say so myself. I write this after spending an enjoyable evening watching Nightjars on Ash's trip to Blaxhall Heath. There are 11 Swifts over the house and a thunderstorm is brewing. My ornithological highlight this spring was a week away birding in Bulgaria with five SOG friends. Thirty-one lifers for me including Wallcreeper & Nutcracker, as well as a hoot of a twitch trying to get views of a Scops Owl in a park in Krumovgrad, eventually with great success.

As well as the usual trip reports we've a wonderful series of articles and photographs. James Common, a Northumbrian birder, has investigated the decline of the Willow Tit, a species possibly just clinging on in west Suffolk. Dr Katrina Sharps has researched Nightjar habitat in Thetford Forest, showing through radio tracking what's necessary for them to flourish.

Chris Keeling has added to the feral vs naturalised debate with his article titled 'The Unloved Goose' – we fully expect letters; and just pipped to the post by Springwatch and Chris Packham's idea for Roadkill Bingo, we have a great article from Cardiff University's Rachel Stockwell about 'Project Splatter', showing what can be learned from road-killed wildlife and asking for ... contributions. Members of the public report sightings via

social media. I looked into their project after finding a Tawny Owl showing suspiciously well, although horizontally, near Wickham Market. Tragically my latest reports to them have been two of the newly-fledged Peregrines killed by traffic near the Orwell Bridge nest site.

Adam Gretton reviews SOG's own Dr Peter Dare's 'The Life of Buzzards', a magnificent publication that draws its conclusions based on extensive fieldwork; and Alison Ballantyne has again kindly brought her thoughts and analysis to bear on the poem 'The Pettichap's Nest' by John Clare, which, written in his native Northamptonshire dialect, is a fascinating study of the Chiffchaff's nesting habits. Special thanks go to Eddie Marsh for compiling the Spring Birding Review despite recent personal loss.

Once again my thanks go to the photographers and contributors who have provided material for this edition; it's a pleasure to get first dibs on viewing it all. If you have an article within you, or an observation to share, please get in contact: I would love to include it in a future edition.



Little Owl

Photo: Bill Baston

Save Our Suffolk Swifts



The SOS Swifts campaign is again travelling around the county this July. Please join us at one of the following events for an illustrated talk by Edward Jackson followed by a walk to look at existing Swift colonies.

Wednesday 6th July

Old Felixstowe Community Centre,
Ferry Rd, Felixstowe IP11 9NB
from 7pm

Thursday 14th July

St Mary's Church,
Bungay NR35 1AX
from 7pm

Wednesday 27th July

The Centre, St John's Street,
Bury St. Edmunds IP33 1SN
from 7pm

*It would be great
to see you there.*



Save our Suffolk Swifts



Suffolk is losing its swifts. In the 30 years to 2014 numbers have almost halved – and this is happening across much of the UK. Developments in construction, renovation and insulation have seen entrances to swift nest sites sealed off, with devastating results.

The SOS Swifts initiative (Save our Suffolk Swifts) was established in 2013 to add support to a concerted national effort to raise awareness of the threats faced by the species, to encourage the recording of nest sites and screaming parties and to celebrate these unique and truly amazing summer visitors.

The events listed overleaf are open to all. They offer an opportunity to learn more about swifts and will detail simple steps that individuals can take to help turn around their fortunes in the county.

Life on the wing

Swifts spend almost all of their life in the air. They are the only bird to feed, drink, mate and sleep on the wing - they only land to nest. At night they roost at an altitude of over 3,000 metres. A young swift will spend its first three or four years in constant flight before it breeds.

Swifts are in the UK for just three months each summer, then they migrate to Central and Southern Africa to spend our winter there. While they are with us they fill our summer evenings with their aerobatic, amazingly fast flight and trademark 'screaming' calls.

Report your first swift sighting in 2016
using the #SOSswifts hashtag on Twitter



Investigating the habitat use of the European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) in Thetford Forest

The European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) is an insectivorous summer migrant to the UK. As a crepuscular bird, (meaning they are active primarily at dusk and dawn), Nightjars can be tricky to spot. However, you may hear the male Nightjar's distinctive churring call if you are out walking on a heathland or plantation forest at dusk. Traditionally known as a heathland species, nesting on the ground amongst sparse vegetation, the European Nightjar has increasingly been recorded nesting in the young growth stages of pine plantation forests, such as in Thetford Forest.

Primarily as a result of habitat loss, the Nightjar breeding range in the UK declined by more than 50% between 1972 and 1992 and the species was then placed on the UK Red List. However, in recent years, there has been an overall increase in the Nightjar population due to successful conservation management efforts and the Nightjar was moved to the Amber List in 2015. While the last national Nightjar survey in 2004 suggested that the UK population was increasing, the range was not found to be recovering at the same rate. The next survey is scheduled for this summer (2016) when it will be very interesting to see if the population number has been maintained and if the range is now showing signs of expansion.

Photo: Vivien Hartwell



Nightjars nesting in plantation forest have been found feeding in a variety of habitats including deciduous woodland, open oak scrubland, young conifer plantations and heathland. While birds in some populations have been recorded leaving the forest regularly to feed (travelling up to 6km), other studies have shown that birds can also be found feeding closer to the nest. As part of my PhD thesis at the University of East Anglia, I wanted to discover more about the factors driving the selection by Nightjars of foraging habitat in plantation forest.

My study site, Thetford Forest, is the largest lowland commercial forest in the UK and was found to hold around 10% of the UK Nightjar population during the last national survey in 2004. The forest is part of the Breckland Special Protection Area (SPA), designated under the EC Birds Directive for its internationally important breeding populations of Nightjar, Woodlark and Stone Curlew. As the forest is managed by clear-felling, it consists of a mosaic of growth stages. There are also patches of grazed heathland within and adjacent to the forest, amidst surrounding arable land.



Photos: Vivien Hartwell

Thetford Forest different growth stage photos

This secretive, crepuscular species can be difficult to study, so we used radio-tracking to follow tagged Nightjars to their foraging habitats. During the summers of 2009-10, we caught and tagged 31 birds. Birds were attracted to mist nets using taped lures of both courtship and contact calls and tags were attached to the central tail feather. As females were less responsive to the taped calls, we carried out daytime nest searching, and then focused catching attempts near to active nests.

From May to the end of August (2009/10), our field teams lived nocturnally and tracked the tagged birds from dusk until dawn. We used triangulation (taking bearings at three consecutive locations) to discover the bird's location. We also recorded the bird's activity (e.g. active, stationary, churring) at each bearing. This information was used to map song territories and home ranges for paired and unpaired male and female birds. Distances travelled between roost and nest sites to foraging locations were also calculated. I discovered that Nightjar home ranges (for females, paired males and unpaired males) were an order of magnitude larger than the song territories of paired males, emphasising the importance of habitat outside the territory. Birds travelled a mean maximum distance of 747m from the centre of the territory every night, which is lower than that recorded for other Nightjar populations.

Using a technique known as 'compositional analysis,' which allows a comparison of the proportion of used vs available habitat, I found that recently planted forests (between 0 and 10 years old) were important habitats for the Nightjars. Grazed heathland was used as an additional foraging habitat. Ungrazed heathland was not selected. Results suggest that the structure of the forest may influence the extent to which Nightjars leave the forest to forage. Nightjars nesting in densely planted forest of uniform age have been recorded regularly leaving the forest to feed (Dorset, UK), in contrast to the birds nesting amongst the mixed-age growth stages of Thetford Forest. Beetles may be an important prey in the younger forest stands due to the abundance of beetles dependent on dead wood (e.g. Cerambycidae) emerging from cut stumps. Grazed heathland may provide further foraging opportunities, for example dung beetles associated with livestock; while the denser, ungrazed heathland may be difficult for the birds to feed in.

Radio-tracking



Photo: Vivien Hartwell

Brimstone



During the two summer field seasons of my PhD, I used a number of other techniques to try to gain a clearer understanding of the foraging requirements of Nightjars nesting within managed plantation forest, including moth trapping. Moths are another key component of the Nightjar diet and I was interested to find out if Nightjars were foraging in the habitats with the greatest moth biomass. Using actinic moth traps (which have a relatively small attraction radius, therefore moths should not be attracted from outside of the area of interest), we caught a wonderful variety of moths, including the Large Emerald, Puss moths and Pine Hawk-moths.

Large Emerald



Pine Hawkmoth

Interestingly, results showed that the highest moth biomass tended to be in the older stands of forest, whereas Nightjars tend to forage in the more open, young forest stands. It has been suggested that this is because the thick, dense tree foliage within the older stands makes it harder for birds to navigate and search for prey.

While long nocturnal hours can be challenging, I was very lucky to have an extremely resilient and enthusiastic tracking team, with many others assisting with both catching and tagging the birds, and nest finding. Spending long periods in Thetford forest brought other advantages too, including beautiful sunrises and sunsets, listening for Woodcocks flying over-head and looking out for glow worms. Most importantly, by radio-tracking Nightjars we have learned more about the requirements of this secretive species. Results demonstrate that the management of commercial pine plantation forest can have important implications for this species of conservation concern. The combination of mixed-age plantation forest with patches of heathland can provide both nesting and foraging habitat for the European Nightjar, reducing the need for birds to leave the forest and fly long distances to reach suitable foraging habitat.



Puss moth



Thetford forest sunrise

Further reading:

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Sharps, K. 2013. The conservation ecology of the European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) in a complex heathland-plantation landscape. PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

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Photos: Vivien Hartwell



What can we learn from wildlife roadkill?

Roads and their associated traffic have adverse effects on local wildlife such as habitat fragmentation, disturbance and ultimately mortality through collisions with cars. But how much of an impact are roads having on our UK wildlife and which species are prevalent as roadkill? To address these questions, which have important conservation implications, Project Splatter was created in January 2013. Project Splatter - 'Social media **PLAT**form for **E**stimating **R**oadkill' - is a citizen science research project run from Cardiff University, which collates wildlife roadkill reports sent in by members

of the public via social media. Using these reports we map wildlife roadkill locations and provide feedback on the data to our followers through graphs, maps and a weekly 'Splatter Report', the latter of which details what has been spotted that week and by whom. To date we have received over 19,000 reports, 2% of which are from the Suffolk area (Figure 1). Mammals are most commonly reported to us (61%), with birds making up 35% and the remaining 4% consisting of amphibians, reptiles and 'UFOs'; unidentified furry/feathered objects.

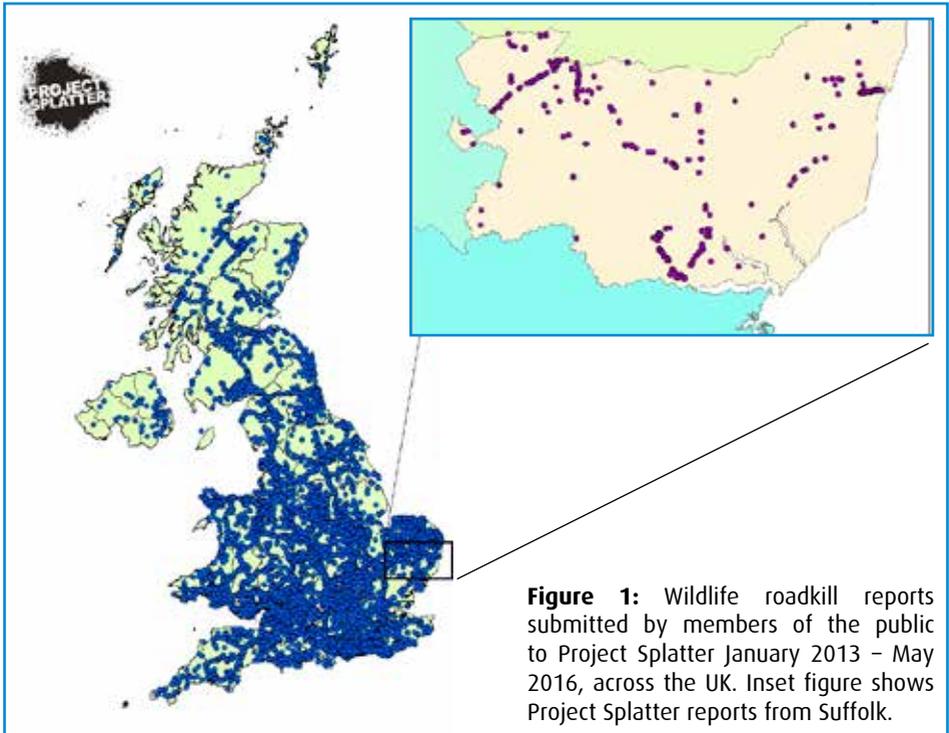


Figure 1: Wildlife roadkill reports submitted by members of the public to Project Splatter January 2013 – May 2016, across the UK. Inset figure shows Project Splatter reports from Suffolk.

At a national level the European badger (*Meles meles*) is the most frequently reported species, followed closely by rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and Pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*) (Figure 2); a pattern most likely explained by the ease of identification, coupled with the abundance of these species in the UK. Suffolk follows the national trend, albeit in a slightly different order. Although strictly speaking not wildlife but instead a game bird, the Pheasant is the most frequently reported species, followed closely by badgers and rabbits (Figure 2). Every year in the UK up to 35 million Pheasants are reared for game shoots, so it is not surprising that they are often seen as roadkill. In Suffolk, however, Pheasants are now established in the wild,

with approximately 90 wild Pheasants per 100 hectares found in East Anglia (Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust). These highly abundant Pheasant populations within Suffolk may explain why they are the most frequently reported roadkill species. Birds constitute 49% of the total number of reports from Suffolk, and include species such as Red-legged Partridge (*Alectoris rufa*), Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) and even a single Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*)! The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) and water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*) are amongst Suffolk's most valued species, but this has not stopped them from becoming victims to roads, with 19 hedgehogs, five Barn Owls and a vole being reported.

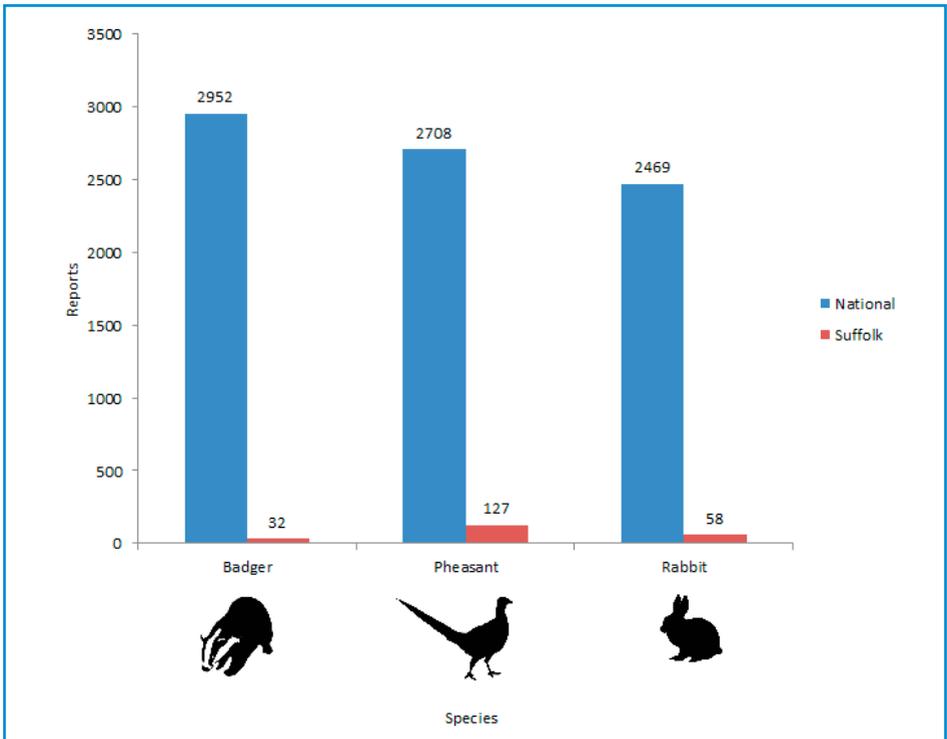


Figure 2: Top three wildlife roadkill species reported to Project Splatter by members of the public January 2013 – May 2016 both nationally and in the county of Suffolk.

In general, what drives animals to end up as roadkill? Is it the noise from traffic, the street lighting, the surrounding habitat or the number of cars present? Wildlife road mortalities do not occur randomly, rather they are spatially clustered (Clevenger *et al.* 2003). Collisions are seen to peak where roads pass by or through high quality habitats, which can result in the attraction of wildlife to roads (Santos *et al.* 2013; Rhodes *et al.* 2014). As well as surrounding habitat, traffic volume, road speed, road noise and artificial lighting in the form of street lamps have an effect on the number of wildlife roadkill (Clevenger *et al.* 2003; Jaeger *et al.* 2005; Rotics *et al.* 2011; Grilo *et al.* 2015). These factors all contribute towards the barrier effect which restricts animal movement across roads due to avoidance behaviours (Jaeger *et al.* 2005). At a national level, we are now gaining sufficient data in 'Project Splatter' to start to investigate how road and landscape characteristics may contribute to wildlife road mortalities in the UK. Our future work will focus on trying to determine which of these mechanisms are most detrimental to wildlife and how we might be able to mitigate against them.

Help Needed

To ensure we get excellent data and good coverage across the UK we need your help. Overall our reporting is high, but the number

of reports we have received from Suffolk is still comparatively low. From neighbouring Norfolk we have received 1226 reports compared to just 434 in Suffolk. This may not be due to a lack of wildlife, or even roadkill, but may simply be due to a lack of reporters. As such, we are very keen to recruit new spotters in Suffolk. If you would like to get involved with the project, you too can help us to estimate the impact of roads on our wildlife by reporting any wildlife roadkill species seen, the date and as specific location as possible to:

- 1 Twitter ([@projectsplatter](https://twitter.com/projectsplatter)) and Facebook ([SplatterProject13](https://www.facebook.com/SplatterProject13))
- 2 Website (www.projectsplatter.co.uk) through an online form
- 3 Email (projectsplatter@gmail.com)
- 4 Android app, available from the Google Play Store ([tinyurl.com/projectsplatter](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.projectsplatter)).



Photo: Chrissi White

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Willow Tits

Living as I do in Northumberland, the charismatic Willow Tit (*Poecile montanus*) is thankfully still a firm fixture of daily life. Indeed, at present I am lucky enough to regularly host a pair of these enchanting little birds in my garden, a privilege that people dwelling in the south of the country would no doubt envy. Willow Tits, though at first appearing rather drab in comparison to their somewhat more flamboyant cousins, really are a pleasure to behold; timid, delicate, discreet and undoubtedly rather sweet. Their characteristic call – though far from melodious – readily separates them from the near identical and similarly embattled Marsh Tit (*Poecile palustris*). Its existence in the UK only confirmed during 1897, the Willow Tit was once a relatively widespread fixture in the British landscape; currently, the future of this enigmatic species appears bleak, with the reasons for its decline the subject of much debate. Although the science is by no means conclusive, it does throw up a number of interesting possible explanations.

Background

Scrutiny of Common Bird Census (CBS) and Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data has shown that the Willow Tit declined by approximately 88% between 1970 and 2006 (Eaton et al, 2008), representing one of the most worrying and rapid declines of all British bird species. Indeed, of all the species monitored by the BBS, the Willow Tit showcased the greatest decline: 77% between 1994 and 2007 (Risley et al, 2007). Such findings were not isolated, with further worrying statistics brought to light by both ringing data (Perrins, 2003) and the Repeat Woodland Bird Survey – the latter recording a decline of 70% in woodland ecosystems over a similar timeframe. In addition to an overall population decline, the



Photo: Ian Goodall

Willow Tit has also suffered a severe range contraction in recent years and has been lost entirely from many counties in the south of England (Gibbons et al, 1993). As such, the Willow Tit is on the UK's Red List of birds of conservation concern and is a priority species on the UK biodiversity action plan.

Research into the decline of the Willow Tit has thus far focused on three hypotheses: increased competition, increased depredation and habitat loss, all of which are touched upon in depth in a recent study by Lewis et al (2009).

Competition

Some evidence suggests that competition from both Blue Tits and Great Tits could be a major factor in the decline of the Willow Tit in the UK. Willow Tits nest in cavities excavated from dead wood; the nest building process often proving to be a noisy affair as the birds call continuously to one another throughout. This, coupled with the obvious visual implications and the production of visible by-products such as wood chips, means that excavating Willow Tits are vulnerable to detection from both the species previously mentioned; both of which can extirpate the occupants of a nest with relative ease (Maxwell, 2002). The construction of a nest hole is a very time consuming process and often, losing a nest site following its completion can result in complete breeding failure. A study carried out between 1995 and 2000 courtesy of Maxwell (2002) highlighted perfectly the potential implications of competition on nesting Willow Tits. Here, 30

Willow Tit pairs occupying both natural holes and nest boxes were observed, with only 10 of these pairs successfully fledging young. Of the 20 unsuccessful pairs, 18 had their nest cavity taken over by Blue Tits and a further two by Great Tits. The populations of both competitor species have recently increased in the UK, with Blue Tit numbers rising by 33% and Great Tits by 91% (Eaton et al, 2008), which has led to speculation that interspecific competition for nest-sites may also have increased, thus contributing to the marked decline of the Willow Tit. It should be noted however that some studies, notably that of Lewis et al (2007), dispute this hypothesis.

Predation by Great Spotted Woodpeckers

Once nesting gets underway, Willow Tits remain fairly vocal around the nest-site, leaving them vulnerable to detection from predators. Many species, including non-native Grey Squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*), have the potential to impact upon nesting success, though one species in particular is cited as a major threat to vulnerable Willow Tits: the Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*). As their name suggests, Woodpeckers are accomplished at extracting prey from rotten wood (Wesolowski, 2002) and have been shown to easily destroy Willow Tit nests, predated both eggs and chicks. Willow Tits, unlike some species, are single brooded; this means that if predation occurs at the chick stage, that pair are extremely unlikely to breed again for another year. In Britain, Great Spotted Woodpecker numbers have increased dramatically in recent years with an estimate by Eaton et al (2008) stating an increase of 314% between 1970 and 2006. Evidence of a negative relationship between *D.major* and *P.montanous* is however scarce; indeed some studies, including that of Lewis et al (2007) concluded that woodpecker predation is not a limiting factor. The same study did however find a negative relationship between the

two species on farmland sites and did note an increased density of woodpeckers in woodlands where Willow Tits have declined (Lewis et al, 2007), potentially highlighting a need for further research.

Habitat Alteration

Willow Tits, in the UK at least, largely inhabit areas of damp, scrubby woodland (Perrins, 1979) and despite recent declines can occur at relatively high densities on sites where these characteristics dominate. Indeed, the decline of *P.montanous* has been less pronounced on such sites compared to mature woodland and farmland areas (Siriwardena, 2004). In recent times, the species has also become increasingly associated with ex-industrial, brownfield sites where early successional vegetation such as birch, alder and elder dominate (Jones & Champion, 2009). This is undoubtedly due to the similarities between such sites and the damp areas mentioned previously. Wet woodland is becoming increasingly scarce in recent times, possibly contributing to the decline of the Willow Tit (Lewis et al, 2007); similarly ex-industrial sites – often disregarded due to low overall biodiversity levels – are being reclaimed for urban development and agriculture, removing a second vital lifeline from Britain's remaining Willow Tits. Such areas tend to lack the mature trees favoured by other tit species and Great Spotted Woodpeckers – the latter require trees with a minimum diameter of 18cm for nest excavation – so the removal of these brownfield sites, or allowing them to mature, increases the likelihood of both predation and competition for Willow Tits, and could therefore be the single biggest factor driving the decline of this wonderful woodland species.

Competition and predation may impact on a local level, putting further pressure on already depleted populations, but it is habitat loss that we must combat in order to save this often overlooked British bird.

The Unloved Goose

The word 'feral' according to the Oxford English Dictionary is from the Latin 'ferus' a wild animal or wild, and is used for animals that have lapsed into wild form from a domesticated condition. Feral, according to Christopher Lever in the *Naturalised Animals of Britain and Ireland*: "should properly be applied only to those species which have been fully domesticated and having escaped from captivity are living in a wild state". It is thus incorrect to refer to any animal that has simply escaped from captivity as 'feral'. To regard the American mink as a domesticated species is, according to Lever 2009 "preposterous and wrong". The only truly feral species in Britain are sheep, goats and, arguably, native breeds of ponies and herds of semi-wild cattle maintained in parks. Any wild species unaltered by selective breeding which then escapes from captivity to establish self-perpetuating populations without the support of, and independent of, humans – such as the Mandarin Duck – is thus 'naturalised', and not feral.

Canada Geese have been kept in parks and private estates in England since the 17th Century. As with the mink, the extent to which Canada Geese were truly domesticated prior to their escape from captivity must be open to question; nevertheless, established breeding populations of Canada Geese are invariably described as feral; as are Greylag Geese, despite their occurrence as a native breeding species throughout most of Britain until the early 19th Century (Holloway 1996). Almost as ubiquitous as the Canada Goose, the Greylag was once widespread in Britain with breeding populations in Yorkshire, Lancashire, the Lake District and the Fens of East Anglia (Brown and Grice 2005).



Photo: Barry Woodhouse

Greylags were formerly indigenous in England and bred in "the vast and extensive, and impenetrable swamps and fens contiguous to the eastern coasts of the kingdom" (Montague 1833). Montague claimed that large numbers were once domesticated: "the young are frequently taken, and become tame". Indeed following their extinction in the wild as a result of overhunting in the early 19th Century, their only observable presence in the countryside was as feral domesticated Greylags. To what extent Greylags harvested from the wild and subsequently allowed to escape can really be considered fully domesticated remains open to question. Nevertheless, and perhaps due to this practice, wild-living Greylags were largely ignored by naturalists for the remainder of the 19th Century.

Greylag Geese would appear to be twice damned: first by the ease with which their young were collected and reared, and then by their disappearance from the national consciousness as a wild species. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, Greylags were re-established in the wild in England following re-introductions by the then Wildfowling Association of Great Britain and Ireland (WAGBI, now incorporated into BASC). To describe Greylag Geese in England as feral is to ignore the origins of English Greylags captured as wild birds or collected as eggs in Scotland, following which over 1,300 birds were released or reared on WAGBI reserves (Brown and Grice 2005).

It is at this point that the history of the Greylag in Britain bears comparison with both the Mute Swan and the Gadwall. The Mute Swan was 'domesticated' to an even greater extent than the Greylag and as the 'tame swan' was only rarely known to breed in a wild and unprotected state. Despite archaeological evidence for the presence of the Mute Swan breeding in East Anglia in or around the 10th and 13th Centuries, it was considered by almost all contemporary writers and naturalists in the 19th Century to be a tame bird and in many cases was equally ignored (Holloway 1996).

When we further compare the history and distribution of the Greylag and the Mute Swan with the Gadwall, the correct interpretation of feral as a biological category becomes a matter of semantics. There is no evidence of Gadwall breeding in England before the mid 19th Century and they were considered to be one of the rarest wintering ducks (Brown and Grice 2005). However, in or about 1849, a pair were collected at Dersingham decoy in Norfolk and released on a lake at Narford which supported a population of 70 Gadwall by 1875 (Holloway 1996). In 1897 Gadwall bred for the first time in Suffolk at Euston, Elveden and Thetford (Ticehurst 1932) and for the first time in Scotland in 1909 at Loch Leven (Thom, 1986).

From the 1930s onwards Gadwall were breeding throughout Britain on lakes and pools, with further introductions taking place in the 1970s. At SWT Lackford this species has benefited greatly from the transformation of old gravel pits into a

wildlife reserve, while the development of gravel pits in south east Suffolk has resulted in a further colonisation of an area where the species was formerly scarce (Piotrowski 2003). The extent to which truly wild birds have contributed to the establishment of Gadwall in Britain is difficult to qualify with any certainty, yet you are unlikely to hear them referred to as feral within their British range.

By Lever's criteria, any species established in a wild state, maintaining a fully self-sustaining population without human assistance must be treated as a 'naturalised' species. Thus sika deer, Chinese water deer, Canada Geese, Egyptian Geese, Mandarin Duck, edible dormouse, Ring-necked Parakeet, Little Owl and rabbit are all fully established here outside of their normal geographic range and are therefore naturalised. An eclectic mix of species from almost every continent that is variously described as 'feral', 'naturalised', or so firmly established that they are 'honorary natives' in a landscape that we have made in our image according to our needs and requirements.

We have restructured the landscape and nature of our islands according to cultural bias, necessity, sport and aesthetics. In doing so, we have moulded a landscape that reflects our needs and prejudices. Depending on one's own prejudice or perception, the countryside is either a mosaic of fields and fragmented woodlands, where natural systems flow like a restrained river; or a land irredeemably tamed for agriculture and sport, where the anthropogenic landscape is permanent and irreversible. And yet, whether by accident or design, we have provided habitats for native and non-native plants and animals that, unlike our pets and livestock, live beyond our immediate control in the literal sense as 'wildlife'.

Photo: Barry Woodhouse



Britain is one of the few European countries to have entirely or largely extirpated any large mammal or predatory bird that might be considered a danger to public health or income; unless you count the return of wild boar as a greater danger than crossing a busy street. Now, with a greater awareness of the threats to biodiversity presented by non-native species, we seek to eradicate or control non-natives that may threaten some of our more vulnerable native species, for example mink predating on water voles and the Ring-necked Parakeet that may compete with native species for nest sites. Conversely the Mandarin Duck and the Chinese water deer, threatened by habitat loss and over-hunting in their own natural range, find a refuge in our countryside.

Words have power to charge ancestral memories, awakening both fear and fascination. Especially so when applied to those mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, trees and arable weeds we variously dismiss as being of no value, seek to eradicate, or accept and maintain as long established natives – as is the case with the brown hare and fallow deer – all with a blasé familiarity that defies geographical barriers.

Depending on your personal prejudice, feral can be the ‘almost’ wild cat, its outward appearance evidence of domestication, half-seen and lurking in the shadows; or the noisy, resident flock of Greylag Geese in an urban park, casually noted but rarely valued by the majority of birders. The ease with which they accommodate themselves in proximity to humans is indicative of their former domesticity rather than a magical encounter with the true wild. To be feral is to invite recapture and containment.

Those same birders ignore, or forget, that the Little Owl is not native to Britain and is not known to have bred in these islands until its deliberate introduction from continental Europe in the 19th Century. It

is now fully naturalised and accepted as an honorary native; unlike the Eagle Owl which strangely merits no mention in *Birds of England* (Brown and Grice 2005).

Amid concerns that it will prey on Common Buzzards and displace other birds of prey – as it does elsewhere in Europe – the Eagle Owl continues to excite discussion. If Eagle Owls can be shown to be wild, rather than the product of accidental release, then they can be ‘ticked’, increasing the value of the sighting, and we are once again alert to the snap of a twig, the rustle of leaves, and a half-seen shadow, native or feral. In our schizophrenic evaluation of wild, feral or tame, we expect the truly wild to be just beyond our reach. The uplands and moors are treasured as a ‘wilderness’ haunted by the shades of wolves and Bronte’s tragic lovers where determined adventurers clad in brightly coloured clothing drift like flowers blown in from suburban gardens.

Will the Eagle Owl with its moss flecked shadow plumage find greater acceptance than colourful noisy parakeets, even if it can be shown to have jumped the fence rather than flown across the North Sea? Whatever criteria we apply will have implications for the countryside of the future. ‘Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret’: you can drive nature out with a pitchfork but she always returns.

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Chris Keeling

SOG Field Trip RSPB Wallasea

7 February 2016

Leaders: Chris Keeling & Chris Tyas (RSPB)

Having promised Corn Buntings and raptors I reminded myself that the main purpose of this field trip was to see a major marine habitat creation project – the largest of its kind in Europe in its very early stages of development – before the habitats have had time to develop and the wildlife the opportunity to return to a wilder landscape, a landscape that was until two years ago arable farmland.

On arrival we were greeted by Chris Tyas, the RSPB project manager, who gave a very informative presentation on the historical background to the Wallasea Wild Coast Project and how work has progressed through the design stage and construction, as well as plans for the future.

Wallasea Island lies in the heart of an internationally important estuary close to the Thames Gateway and for many people it will be their closest accessible wild coast. Although work will not be completed until around 2025, visitors can still visit and view the project's progress from the North (Defra) sea wall as the marshland naturally regenerates and each phase of the project gradually comes to life. We were fortunate in having permission from the RSPB to explore parts of the island not open to the public. We were ably escorted by Chris along rough tracks used until recently by heavy construction machinery to sculpt a new landscape of scrapes, lagoons and ditches. We were taken to the massive new

tide control gates that will eventually enable the RSPB site managers to regulate and control water levels throughout the site.

Gales

Strong winds made standing – let alone holding a scope steady – virtually impossible unless the trip legs were weighted with lead. Not surprisingly the birds were keeping a low profile. If birding were always easy and the birds always predictable it wouldn't be half as much fun, I reminded myself, as Chris and I led our group of stalwarts across the wind-blown plain of Wallasea Island. Although I kept telling myself that a major driver for the trip was to see a landscape-scale habitat creation literally from the ground up, I had serious doubts that we would see any birds. It was then, as always, that the first Peregrine was seen, however briefly, as it flew low, part hidden by the sea wall and reappearing beating hard into the wind. A later sighting of a Peregrine suggested that there were at least two birds; this conclusion based on the apparent size difference between them.

Two Merlins put in an appearance with one bird dutifully perching on a hummock of raised ground giving everyone the opportunity to view our second raptor of the day. Later on the way back the wind seemed to drop a little and the hoped-for and expected Short-eared Owl was finally spotted by Chris Courtney, hunting over

Readers' Photographs

Mistle Thrush



Photo: John Richardson

Kingfisher



Photo: David Borderick

Crossbill



Photo: Brian Buffery

Redstart



Photo: John Richardson

Bullfinch



Photo: Brian Buffery

Turtle Dove



Photo: John Richardson

Yellowhammer



Photo: Brian Buffery

Turnstone



Photo: David Borderick

Grasshopper Warbler



Photo: Lesley Starbuck

an area of rough grassland that currently provides habitat for adders, slow worms and common lizard, many of which were captured and relocated from the old sea walls before these were breached or from the edges of the old ditch system. I am grateful to Chris as there couldn't have been a better ending than Short-eared Owl to an interesting and enjoyable visit. Eventually

we made it back to the RSPB site office where everyone was rewarded with a Wallasea coffee mug as a souvenir.

Twitch

On the way home we diverted via Abberton Reservoir and enjoyed the black and white broken ice pattern of three drake Smew against the fading light.

David Walsh

SOG Field Trip Eastbridge – 'off the beaten track'

Sunday 8 May 2016

Leader: David Walsh

With various regulars unavailable, mainly on foreign birding trips, it was a depleted group of just seven stalwarts which gathered at Eastbridge at 7am. On a beautifully sunny and calm morning, we first headed up the bridlepath adjacent to some of the recently reclaimed heathland, then through the woodland and out onto Dunwich Heath. We walked south along the beach, scanning the North Marsh and fields before making stops in the East Hide and at the public platform, allowing us to scan the Minsmere Scrape. Eventually it was time to begin the last leg of our walk, along the footpath from the sluice to Eastbridge village. We completed our five mile stroll at 12.30pm, back at the cars in time for lunch and a well-earned rest!

Everyone agreed that it was a superb morning in all respects, one participant saying that it was the most enjoyable field trip he had ever been on! Exploring such a

diverse range of habitats helped us see an incredibly wide variety of birds and other wildlife. 'Bird of the Day' was undoubtedly the Wood Sandpiper which we found ourselves on the Konik Field. Amongst numerous other highlights were Dartford Warbler; summer plumage waders including a pristine Grey Plover; Stone Curlew and Sandwich Tern. The timing of the trip gave us a perfect opportunity to refresh our knowledge of bird songs; we were able to compare Garden Warbler and Blackcap, for example. Beyond the birds, we were pleased to find Large Red Damselflies and Orange Tip butterflies out in the sunshine. Perhaps the abiding memory of the trip will be the Cuckoos: we listened intently as one sang for ages in the woods before scoping one in the open as it perched up nicely. Let's hope we have the same luck with the weather in 2017!



Common Tern



Sandwich Tern



Black Tailed Godwit

Photos: Allan Myatt

Spring Birding Review

MARCH

March's weather started mild on the 1st reaching 12°C, peaked at 13°C on the 25th with a low of -1.5°C on the 13th. As well as enduring 15 days of rain, Suffolk was hit by Storm Katie which brought heavy rain and winds up to 60mph to end the month.

The Alton Water **Great Northern Divers**, **Black-necked Grebe**, and **Red-necked Grebe** continued to show all month, with another **Great Northern Diver** seen on the River Orwell from Loompit Lake. Two **Whooper Swans** continued at Minsmere and Dunwich until the 13th; on the 19th there were four **Bewick's** reported from Reydon.

It seemed that most of Suffolk's over-wintering geese had dispersed northwards, with only 12 **White-fronted Geese** reported all month on the 4th from Dunwich. A single

Pink-footed Goose was recorded at Dunwich on the 4th and 13th and then Reydon on the 19th. In the west of the county at Lackford, the extremely long-staying female **Long-tailed Duck** remained till the 11th following which there were no reports, indicating that she had moved on. However, out of the blue she re-appeared on Long Reach on the 31st! Two **Goosanders** were still on Christchurch Park's Wilderness Pond on the 1st followed by three on the 7th at Alton Water from Lemon Hills Bridge: two drakes and a female.

The long-staying **Cattle Egret** at Sandy Lane/Ferry Road, Iken was spotted again on the 4th by John Richardson and me, showing very well, although it was not reported again from this location during the rest of the month. North Cove's similarly enduring **Cattle Egret** remained faithful to the site all month.



Photo: David Borderick

Cattle Egret



Photos: David Borderick

Iceland Gull

Reports of **Great Egrets** continued around the county all month from Dunwich, Walberswick, Reydon, and Lakenheath. Two **red-head Smew** continued at Minsmere and were being reported up to the 12th. **Spoonbills** seemed to have dispersed with only one at Walberswick on the 25th and then RSPB Hollesley 30th-31st.

In gull news... a first winter **Glaucous Gull** was at the Pier in Lowestoft and then Kessingland sewage works; an immature was seen on the 20th, one again at Walberswick on the 22nd; a second winter bird was at Minsmere the 27th with another seen at Corton on the 31st. **Iceland Gulls** were seen in the west and north of the county with a juvenile at Livermore 3rd-4th; an adult at Snape 15th-16th; a first winter bird at Thorpeness on the 24th and a juvenile on the 27th, 29th, 30th and 31st. **Caspian Gulls** were reported around the county all month.

Purple Sandpipers were still present at Lowestoft with six on the 14th, eight on the 16th and six on the 17th, then no further reports.

Hen Harriers were still reported all month with males seen at Alderton 19th, Minsmere 25th and Shingle Street 25th. Ring-tails were seen at Dunwich on the 20th with probably

the same bird seen regularly on Westleton Heath towards the end of the month.

The **Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers** continued all month at Santon Downham, with a pair being seen on 30th and 31st. What excellent news it is that a pair are still possibly breeding in Suffolk.

A **Willow Tit** – a rare bird these days in Suffolk – was trapped and ringed on the left leg by Simon Evans and Lee Gregory on the 24th at RSPB Lakenheath. Marsh Tits in the area are ringed on the right leg. The **Willow Tit** visited the feeders by the visitors' centre infrequently with no regular pattern. It was still present until 31st at least, and good numbers of **Lesser Redpolls** were also within striking distance of the visitor centre.

At nearby Grimes Graves, the **Great Grey Shrike** was reported on the 23rd, the bird being in the area all month. On the 27th two **Ravens** were seen over SWT Lackford and an **Osprey** over Cavenham Heath.

On Sunday the 27th a **MEGA** was broadcasted on BINS late morning: a **Thayer's Gull** had been found early morning on East Scrape at RSPB Minsmere. It was seen on the South Levels on the morning of the 28th between 9.15am and 10.15am, with the last sighting on South Scrape at 2.10pm.

Brian Small's summary of Events As They Unfolded...

"Arriving at Minsmere at around 8.15am, having cadged a lift with my wife who was managing the tea room, I had a couple of hours before I needed to cycle home and meet my son for a driving lesson. As I walked to East Hide, a Sand Martin flew across the North Bank, and once in the hide, the usual congregation of large gulls and Black-tailed Godwits as usual took my attention.

Amongst the gulls, it was nice to see a couple of Caspians (first- and second-winters) and also at least three Yellow-leggeds. It was not long before I found, amongst a group of Great Black-backs and Herring, a strangely distinct, paler mantled gull, with soft and blotchy crescental streaking on the head - creating a vague hood - a dark eye and raspberry pink legs.

It was a very distinct gull and was different enough to make me think, straight away, that it was a northern Pacific-Rim gull because although I had never seen adults of these, it somehow seemed familiar.

John Grant strolled in and we had a bit of a natter and I mentioned the gull to John who also was rather taken by it. For the next hour we watched it carefully - in between pointing out Caspian Gulls to those interested. I proposed to John it might be a Vega Gull and we joked as to who would "ring it out"; I certainly was not prepared at that time to disseminate news of a "funny-looking" gull at Minsmere...

As part of the BBRC review of the Pitsea Thayer's Gull, one of the committee members had brought up that, at times, the two might look very similar (daftly I did not pick up on this until later!). I also let David Fairhurst know, hoping that he might be able to get to see it. With familial duties finally calling, I cycled home, the bird still nagging me as I went.

To cut a long story short, I met my son Ben to take him out for a driving lesson but with my photos still in the camera (left in my wife's car at Minsmere), I wanted to check some references on the internet. There was no doubting my first impression that the head shape looked like the images of the Vega Gull in Ireland, though it wasn't quite the same; one thing was for sure, there was too much white in the primaries for it to be Vega. I then looked at the photos of the Irish and Spanish Thayer's on Birding Frontiers and... well, the penny dropped in an expletive-ridden manner.

By now it was late morning and David Fairhurst had finally succumbed to temptation and was watching the bird when I rang him. We discussed the plumage, deciding it looked spot on for Thayer's but, like me, Dave was a little concerned about its size and head shape.

By now I think David felt we had better put it out as something - I am not a fan of 'possible' or 'probable' species, so he texted it to Suffolk BINS as a gull showing the characteristics of a Vega Gull. Almost instantaneously, however, we realised it was more likely a Thayer's. He had seen (and videoed) it in flight and we went through the primary pattern over the phone. I then texted to BINS that it showed more characteristics of a Thayer's Gull.

Finally I took Ben out for a drive and somehow (strangely) we ended up at Minsmere. Gathering my gear from Janet's car, we walked to West Hide, from where, looking into the light, you could see the bird (asleep or hidden!) but viewing was not ideal. After 'flat-batting' a bit of questioning by those present, I saw it suddenly take flight and WOW! What had seemed quite a large gull on the ground seemed somehow neat and compact and smaller in flight; more importantly the general wing pattern seemed great for thayeri. Superb! There was a lot of excitement at that point and I

got a text from Adam Rowlands who had seen it do the same flight; he confirmed (with a few choice words) our impression of it being Thayer's, though there was still a little caution as we had yet to see a good photo that showed the precise wing pattern. Walking round to South Hide you could see the bird from the path, though hidden; from the hide it was head on.

I was mentally kicking myself that I had not sorted it out earlier, but now that I was more confident in what it was, it somehow seemed a lot easier. With some excellent and sharper photos of the primary pattern taken by Craig Fulcher and Jeff Higgott, you could finally see the exact pattern on the wings and (like Adam) I felt it was definitely a Thayer's. All of the features fell into place: the dark eye giving a quite gentle feel to the face;

the pale creamy yellow base to the bill; the smudgy and ochre-brown head markings; the raspberry legs; and, most importantly, the wing pattern.

What a day! A bit fraught early on, what with having to leave it in the morning, plus my initial leaning towards Vega: I simply had not expected how much alike Thayer's and Vega Gulls might be, which did not help in my prevarications over the gull's identification.

It was a group effort and big thanks go to Adam and David for looking and for their parts in the critical discussions over its ID. As I had not seen Thayer's before, the day had been a steep learning curve, and it just goes to show there is always a lot to learn..."

Brian Small 29th March 2016



Photo: Jeff Higgott

Thayer's Gull

Other Highlights

Occasional **Merlins** were reported from various locations in the county, but none hung around long enough for anyone to catch up with them; a shame, as these are a fantastic falcon to see. There were not many reports of the over-wintering **Twite** from Dunwich, but 40 were counted there on the 6th. A single **Snow Bunting** was at LBO from the 9th to the 11th and another at Easton Broad on the 9th. A nice flock of 50 **Brambling** were seen in a field near the 30mph sign at Walberswick on the 13th.

A **Serin** flew north over LBO on the 20th, the first **Garganey** was reported from Minsmere on 21st and continued to 30th at least, plus two on Dingle Marshes on the 23rd. A **Jack Snipe** showed well at Minsmere from North Hide, with up to three seen from the 25th to the end of the month. There were two seen at the Managed Retreat, Trimley on the 18th as well. The first **Willow Warblers** of the month were recorded at LBO and at Kessingland on the 30th. Good numbers of **Red Kites** were moving through the county during the month. Extremely good numbers of **Firecrests** arrived in the county during the month, with too many sightings to mention individually. The two highest counts were on the 31st with seven reported from Southwold and six from Minsmere. On the 23rd two

continental Coal Tits arrived at LBO and were trapped and ringed; they remained until the end of the month. There was an influx of **Sand Martins** on the 26th, and Justin Zantboer got this year's earliest **Common Tern**, at Trimley on Loompit Lake, equalling Suffolk's earliest record for this species, set at Sizewell on the same day in 1980.

Water Pipits were reported at Tinkers Marsh on the 22nd and 24th, followed by a nice count of seven from RSPB Lakenheath on the 25th. The resident **Black Redstarts** continued to show all month at Sizewell Power Station, and were joined by migrant birds of the same species all month, from the north (Lowestoft) and to the south (LBO). There was an exceptional good-looking male at Shingle Street whose long stay kept the photographers happy. The first reported **Northern Wheatears** arrived at both LBO and Cavenham on the 25th, with three seen on the 26th at Shingle Street. A **Lesser Whitethroat** was reported from the Sea Front Gardens at Lowestoft on the 27th and a few days later on the 30th four **White Wagtails** arrived in the Lowestoft area. **Little Ringed Plover** were reported from Breydon Water on the 9th and from SWT Micklemere on both the 25th and 27th. Four **Common Cranes** were seen at Minsmere on the 21st, then a nice count of eight were reported at RSPB Lakenheath on the 25th.



Garganey

Photo: John Richardson

APRIL

The weather for April as a whole was cold with temperatures only in low double figures, as well as being wetter than average for April. The range was between 7°C, recorded on the 16th and 17°C on the 14th. Highest recorded rainfall in the month was 16mm on the 3rd.

On Alton Water, the two juvenile **Great Northern Divers** remained showing well till the 27th. The **Red-necked Grebe**, now looking splendid in summer plumage, was last reported there on the 13th. It was a good period at Alton Water with these long-staying species keeping the local birders happy during the winter months. Meanwhile Lackford's long-staying and indeed **Long-tailed Duck** remained until the 28th at least.

The **Cattle Egret** remained into April and was last reported on the 7th at North Cove. This was followed by an adult at Boyton Marshes sighted at 11.50am on the 22nd before it flew off, not to be relocated. **Great White Egrets** continued to be reported all month from the usual sites around the county. A first-summer **Iceland Gull** was at RSPB Minsmere from the 1st to the 14th, subsequently seen at Sizewell on the 7th and Thorpeness on the 12th. Two **Spoonbills** were seen offshore from Thorpeness on the 6th with one at Minsmere on the same day and one at RSPB Hollesley on the 14th. A male **Hen Harrier** and a **Merlin** were seen at Shingle Street on the 2nd, and a **ring-tail Hen Harrier** – probably the same bird – seen at Dunwich on the 5th and Westleton 9th, 13th, 17th and 19th. Another ring-tail was seen at Alderton on the 10th and Reydon on the 16th. Good numbers of **Red Kites** moved through in the early part of the month with seven at Blythburgh on the 5th. A few **Short-eared Owls** seemed to appear in the the county during the month, after a very quiet winter.

Excellent news for Suffolk: the **Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers** continued into April

at Santon Downham from the 1st to the 14th, with two pairs of birds being seen on 3rd, 5th and 14th, usually downriver from the green bridge. There were no more reports during the rest of the month although we hope that breeding has taken place. The **Willow Tit** that was trapped and ringed on the 24th of March continued to show at RSPB Lakenheath, still visiting the feeders by the visitors' centre until the 3rd, but no sightings after this date. The two **continental Coal Tits** trapped in March at LBO were both seen on the 1st and one on the 8th but no further sightings after this date. A **Lesser Yellowlegs** made a one-day appearance on the 3rd at Carlton Marshes, possibly the same bird seen in January at Burgh Castle. A late **Purple Sandpiper** was at East Lane, Bawdsey on the 28th. There was a scattering of **Little Gulls** in the county with some spanking adults. A **Jack Snipe** continued its stay at RSPB Minsmere till at least the 23rd, and another was seen on the managed retreat at SWT Trimley on the 6th.

By the 9th there were good numbers of common migrants in the county including **Wheatear**, **Chiffchaff**, **Willow Warbler**, **Sedge Warbler** and **Yellow Wagtails**, and still extremely good numbers of **Firecrest** during April, with too many sightings to mention. Good numbers of **Black Redstarts** arrived into the county between the 1st and the 16th especially at the well birded coastal sites. Interesting records include one from Long Melford on the 2nd and a singing male in Foundation Street Ipswich on the 13th and on the Wine Rack building on the 14th. On the 13th and 14th a possible **Eastern Lesser Whitethroat** was present at Kessingland cliff top, north of the beach café, and Dave Thurlow saw a **Red-rumped Swallow** fly north over North Warren on the 18th.

A late **Water Pipit** was at RSPB North Warren on the 2nd. On the the 3rd, two **Hooded Crows** were seen at Benacre. A **Rough-legged Buzzard** was reported on the 4th near

Chillesford and another over High Lodge, Thetford on the 5th. A **Northern Long-tailed Tit** was reported from near Clarence Road, Gorleston-on-Sea on the 5th. Three **Common Cranes** were seen heading towards Minsmere from Campsea Ashe on the 12th with three reported from both Lowestoft and Minsmere on the 23rd, then two from Southwold and one from Westleton on the 24th possibly being the same birds. As far as I know, the first **Swift** was seen at Minsmere on the 18th, with reports from Trimley Marshes and Loompit Lake on the 22nd, and then plenty at the end of the month. A **Cuckoo** was first reported calling at Pipp's Ford on the 21st. **Great Grey Shrikes** were reported from Foxhole Heath on the 21st and Westleton Heath on the 25th. Two **Little Terns** were seen on the 21st at LBO and then on the 22nd there was an unusual record of a **Bonxie**. Two **Black Terns** showed well from Lemon Hill Bridge on the 21st-22nd along with eight **Arctic Terns** and three **Little Gulls**. Two **Little Ringed Plovers** were at SWT Trimley on the 21st. **Ring Ouzels** arrived and continued to be reported all month, with LBO seeming to have their share at the month's end. The first **Turtle Doves** were reported from Battsford on the 19th, with another at Alton Water on the 22nd and 25th and two at Sutton Hall Estate on the 30th. **Hobbies** were reported from the 21st at Westleton, then Reydon on the 24th, Southwold on the 27th and Bawdsey on the 28th and 29th. A **Wood Warbler** was heard singing in Lowestoft on the 28th. Two **Redstarts** and several **Whimbrels** were reported from Bawdsey on the 28th. **Whinchats** were seen on the 23rd and 30th at LBO and one at the end of the runway at Woodbridge Air Base on the 29th. A **Grasshopper Warbler** was at Southwold on the 29th; three **Tree Pipits** at LBO on the 29th and 16 **Wheatears** on the 30th. A **Spotted Flycatcher** was seen in Blythburgh village on the 29th and a **Purple Heron** was seen at RSPB Hollesley on the 30th. An **Osprey** was seen on the Stour Estuary on the 30th.

There were plenty of **Garganeys** to catch up with during the month with reports from Lakenheath, Minsmere, Hollesley and Trimley to name just a few locations.

A good find by Darren Underwood was the discovery of Suffolk's first spring record of a **Yellow-browed Warbler** on the 24th, showing well and frequently calling throughout the afternoon behind the sewage works.

Scarcities

On the rarities front, a **Subalpine Warbler** briefly visited a Reydon garden on the 12th. A **Spotted Crane** was found singing at Reydon Smear on the 23rd and was still whip-lashing on the 30th. Many Suffolk birders visited to hear this unique song. A **Savi's Warbler** was audible from Island Mere Hide Minsmere on the 13th where it remained until the 30th. This bird was best heard early mornings and evenings. However, as it was singing on the other side of the mere, it was difficult to hear, let alone see the bird! A probable **White-tailed Eagle** was reported high over West Hall Woods Rickinghall on the 25th and also on the 26th over Middleton. A report came through to BINS on the morning of the 25th of two **Corncrakes** calling from oilseed rape at Hessett near Bury St Edmunds. Other birders went to the site later that day, but the birds were not heard again during the 25th or thereafter.

MAY

Migration got into full swing during May and saw many good birds arrive. The weather for the month was generally dry and warm with fifteen days over 18°C, including a high of 25°C on the 8th. There were five days when the lowest temperature was below 5°C with the lowest recorded being 1°C on the 15th. There were two full days of rain on the 22nd and 23rd with 19mm measured on the 23rd, as well as a cold snap right at the end of the month with a high of just 12°C, along with 50mm of rain.

The **Spotted Crane** only remained until the 2nd. The long-staying **Savi's Warbler** was still singing at Minsmere and remained throughout the month till the 28th at least. **Garganeys** were reported from RSPB Lakenheath, Minsmere, Hollesley, Boyton and SWT Trimley. **Great White Egrets** and **Little Gulls** continued to be reported all month from around the county from all the usual locations. A male **Hen Harrier** was seen at Aldeburgh on the 18th. A few lingering **Short-eared Owls** hung around coastal sites during May. A long-staying female **Ring Ouzel** remained at LBO till the 13th. A few **Red Kites** were still being seen around the county during the month. The female **Long-tailed Duck** continued from last month at Lackford until at least the 7th. Subsequently a male **Long-tailed Duck** was seen south offshore at Southwold on the 23rd, and then on the scrape at Minsmere on the 24th where it was still being seen to the 31st. It was good to see **Grasshopper Warblers** arriving, with one on the 1st at RSPB Lakenheath, followed by sightings at Bawdsey on the 2nd and 7th, and two on the 15th. There were good numbers of **Turtle Dove** reports from around the county during May which is encouraging, including one long-staying bird at LBO from the 16th-23rd. Plenty of **Hobbies** were reported from around the county during the month with 11 at RSPB Lakenheath on the 1st. An occasional **Tree Pipit** and **Whinchat** were seen during the early part of the the month with LBO seemingly the best place to catch up with them, as well as a few lingering **Firecrests**.

A Daily Review

On the 1st, a **Hoopoe** put in a brief appearance at Kessingland; another sighting was made at Dunwich Beach car park on the 4th. A drake **Goosander** along with five **Bar-tailed Godwits** were at Benacre Broad on the 2nd, and two **Stone Curlew** flew south over Corton Cliffs. **Ospreys** were seen over SWT Trimley on the 4th, Kesgrave on the 7th, Little Glenham

on the 8th and Sproughton on the 17th. On the 5th a **Serin** flew over LBO. One was on the beach there on the 17th and singing from the Tomline roof on the 19th. Also on the 5th four **Spoonbills** flew south from Minsmere where three appeared again on the 7th. At Southwold, three **Temminck's Stints** were on Town Marshes on the 5th and 6th with four there on the 7th coinciding with two **Little Stints**. **Wood Sandpipers** were reported from Walberswick on the 5th, two on the 6th and 7th at Town Marshes and at SWT Carlton Marshes on the 7th. On the 7th a **Hawfinch** – a hard bird to catch up with in Suffolk these days – was trapped and ringed at LBO. On 8th-9th both a **Blue-headed** and a **Grey-headed Wagtail** were seen at Southwold. On the 11th, a male **Pied Flycatcher** was on the disused rail track at Corton with **Whinchats** there and on Sutton Heath. Four **Black Terns** were off LBO and surprisingly a drake **Common Scoter** was seen at Alton Water. On the 12th a good sighting of a **Honey Buzzard** flying north over Pipp's Ford was reported at 11.20am.

A Wood Sandpiper was at SWT Carlton Marshes on the 13th followed by three on the 16th. Minsmere hosted a **Roseate Tern**, two **Spoonbills** and a **Wood Sandpiper**. A male Crossbill flew north at LBO the same day which also saw a **Tree Pipit** noted. A **Spotted Flycatcher** was at East Lane on the 15th and two **Redstarts** were on the cliff. On the 16th a **Little Ringed Plover** was at RSPB Hollesley. Two **Temminck's Stints** were seen on the winter flood area at SWT Trimley Marshes on the 17th but no sign on the 18th. On the 18th a **Curlew Sandpiper** was reported from both Minsmere and Tinkers Marsh and a **Cattle Egret** flew south over Sizewell mid-morning. On the 19th a **Glossy Ibis** was seen north over the scrape at RSPB Hollesley, and at Pipp's Ford a stunning full summer plumage **Cattle Egret** was on the restored gravel workings before it flew towards Needham Market at 11.35am. A **Black-winged Stilt** was found at Minsmere at 8.27am on the 20th where it

remained all day. On Sunday the 22nd a **Bee-eater** was reported north over Beresford Road Lowestoft at 9am and at the same time a **Black Kite** was seen south over Kessingland. This Black Kite was then reported high south over Minsmere at 10.10am and then south over Thorpeness Common at 11.30am. On the 23rd a probable second-summer **Purple Heron** was found at Kingsfleet at 11.08am where it remained until 16.04pm when it flew and perched in trees at Deben Lodge. On the 23rd a **Marsh Warbler** was reported along the track at Covehithe Broad. At Minsmere on the 28th an adult **Purple Heron** was in the main reedbed where it was seen until the 30th. On the 31st two **Glossy Ibises** were found at SWT Micklemere – a great mid-Suffolk record. A good bird for the whole of Suffolk was a **Greenish Warbler** that was found on the 31st at Dip Farm, Gunton by James Wright.

In my opinion, the 'Star Bird of the Month' was the stunning female **Red-footed Falcon** that was first found by Sean Minns on the 23rd, although on that occasion it was only seen for five minutes in near dark conditions in a pine tree on Sutton Common. However, the falcon showed extremely well the next day, giving

great views to birders and photographers alike. On the 25th it showed well again until 11.00am when it was seen drifting off high north west, returning late afternoon when it showed well until dusk. On the 26th it was again clearly visible until 10.30am at which point it got up and drifted off high, this time to the south west, but this time it did not return.

On the 30th of May a second **MEGA** was reported by Mike Marsh from Orfordness. The adult **Laughing Gull** which was present on Lantern Marsh from 10.30am-11.30am was presumably the same bird that had been at Dungeness in Kent. The lack of easy access to this site meant that it was not well seen by local birders – a shame for me personally as it would have been nice to have seen an adult **Laughing Gull** in Suffolk.



Photo: Lesley Starbuck

Red-footed Falcon

Alison's Poetry Corner

Collins Bird Guide (2nd edition) tells me that the Chiffchaff “breeds in woodland, normally open and with tall deciduous trees and moderate scrub layer” and that it “nests on ground in domed cup”. Double checking with Wikipedia (so it must be right) reveals that “the female’s nest is built on or near the ground in a concealed site in brambles, nettles or other dense low vegetation. The domed nest has a side entrance, and is constructed from coarse plant material such as dead leaves and grass, with finer material used on the interior before the addition of a lining of feathers”. So when was such precise knowledge about the breeding behaviour of this small bird first recorded? John Clare’s observations from 200 years ago don’t entirely match the above - but then he was a poet and probably not only using his observations about this bird to record ornithological details.

John Clare (1793-1864) was an English nature poet and the son of a farm labourer. His poetry was re-discovered in the late 20th Century and he is now considered to be among the most important 19th Century poets. His biographer Jonathan Bate supports this view when he argues that Clare was “the greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced. No one has ever written more powerfully of nature, of a rural childhood, and of the alienated and unstable self”. Clare had little formal education, and wrote in a Northamptonshire dialect (from which comes the title: ‘The Pettichap’s Nest’). Originally he used little punctuation in his poems but later publishers felt it too difficult to follow, so inserted some. I don’t know if the punctuation and vocabulary in this version of the poem are his or a later addition but I think it’s a pleasing version.



Photo: Bill Baston

The Pettichap's Nest

Well in my many walks I rarely found
A place less likely for a bird to form
Its nest close by the rut gulled waggon road
And on the almost bare foot-trodden ground
With scarce a clump of grass to keep it warm
And not a thistle spreads its spears abroad
Or prickly bush to shield it from harms way
And yet so snugly made that none may spy
It out save accident - and you and I
Had surely passed it in our walk to day
Had chance not led us by it - nay e'en now
Had not the old bird heard us trampling bye
And fluttered out - we had not seen it lie
Brown as the roadway side - small bits of hay
Pluck't from the old propt-haystacks pleachy brow
And withered leaves make up its outward walls
That from the snub-oak dotterel yearly fall
And in the old hedge bottom rot away
Built like an oven through a little hole
Hard to discover - that snug entrance wins
Scarcely admitting e'en two fingers in
And lined with feathers warm as silken stole
And soft as seats of down for painless ease
And full of eggs scarce bigger e'en then peas
Heres one most delicate with spots as small
As dust - and of a faint and pinky red
- We'll let them be and safety guard them well
For fear's rude paths around are thickly spread
And they are left to many dangers ways
When green grass hoppers jumps might break the shells
While lowing oxen pass them morn and night
And restless sheep around them hourly stray
And no grass springs but hungry horses bite
That trample past them twenty times a day
Yet like a miracle in safetys lap
They still abide unhurt and out of sight
- Stop heres the bird that woodman at the gap
Hath frit it from the hedge - tis olive green -
Well I declare it is the pettichaps
Not bigger than the wren and seldom seen:
Ive often found their nests in chances way
When I in pathless woods did idly roam
But never did I dream until today
A spot like this would be her chosen home.



The poem tells us the story of how he came across a beautifully constructed nest in a very precarious position. The opening word: 'Well' seems to achieve two aims. Firstly, 'well' is the kind of word we all use when we want to begin our turn in a conversation. It's known as a filler - it fills the gap and signals you want to start. Secondly, it is an expression of surprise 'Well!' So before we have got past the first word Clare is telling us it is going to be a story about something unusual.

The story continues and he wants us to see his surprise at finding the nest built not in a concealed site but next to a deeply rutted farm track with little or no vegetation to cover it. He builds the drama of the bird's choice through a sequence of descriptions.

There is 'scarce a clump of grass' nor 'a thistle' or 'prickly bush' to protect it. But look again at this. Here is the observant ornithologist telling us of the usual kinds of places where such a nest can be found and the protective instincts of the bird.

The next descriptive detail outlines how the nest has been constructed. 'Snugly' is not an objective word choice but one that conveys many ideas: perhaps safe and warm but mainly how neatly and skilfully it has been fitted into its place. So skilfully situated, he goes on to suggest, that it was only chance that he saw it at all when the 'old bird' left the nest and gave away its position. At this point in the story he is not sure what kind of bird it is.



Photo: Bill Baston

Chiffchaff

And what does this observer say it is made of? Bits of hay from an 'old propt-haystack' and 'withered leaves' from last summer that have begun to rot down under the hedge create the colour and texture of the nest. But this isn't all. The haystack has been standing for some time - it is 'old' and 'propt'. The leaves are the 'yearly falls'. Clare wants the reader to be aware of time passing and the different seasons, as well as how adept the bird is at weaving such fragments together.

Does 'built like an oven' refer only to the shape of the nest or does this reflect back to snugly? It is an amusing simile: not sure he would have been making an allusion to 'bun in the oven' but something is certainly being 'cooked' in the warmth of the nest. And it is so small! The entrance to the nest is 'hard to discover'. He checks to see if there are eggs and describes the warm softness of the nest lining: 'feathers warm as a silken stole' and 'soft as seats of down for painless ease'. The second simile made me smile and relate to the 1800s - a down padded cushion to stop hard seats causing numbness. The effect here is to remind us of the huge effort made by the female Chiffchaff. I think Clare knows it is only the female who builds the nest and looks after the young as later he says 'her chosen home'. His amazement at the size of the eggs is caught when he describes them as 'scarce bigger e'en than peas' and their colouration with pinky red 'spots as small as dust'. That's quite small.

The story continues as he replaces the eggs and considers the danger they are in. If 'green grass hoppers' landed on them the shells would break. He then lists all the farm animals that daily, if not 'hourly' go trampling up the track, but the eggs 'still abide unhurt and out of sight'. The list emphasises just how miraculous their escape is.

The occupant of the nest returns and the poet's surprise is conveyed by 'Well I declare' as he recognises the pettichap. The phrase 'it is olive green,' and the comparison 'not bigger than the wren and seldom seen' indicate his knowledge of both the physical features and behaviour of the species. Coupled with his explanation that he has often found their nests in undisturbed woodland we can see the depth of his experience.

So is it just a story about finding a nest?

On one level, yes, but some analysts of this poem see it as an analogy about the difficulty of writing a poem. I can see that. Ideas for poems can be unexpected, they happen by chance, they are complex constructions, they are hard work and not always easy to understand. I could go on but I am inclined not to. Clare's poems take a bit of getting used to with little punctuation and strange dialect words but I think they are worth the effort - especially if you know the bird he is writing about.

Book Review

Adam Gretton

The Life of Buzzards

By Peter Dare

Whittles Publishing, 2015; pbk, xii + 292pp;
many colour illustrations and figures

ISBN 978-184995-130-2, £22.99

The return of the (Common) Buzzard to Suffolk (and the rest of Eastern England) in recent years has been hugely welcomed - not least as firm evidence that previous levels of persecution have been greatly

reduced [though sadly not eliminated totally]. Anyone wanting to find out more about this wonderful bird really should get hold of a copy of this excellent and very well produced book, a very worthy successor to *The Buzzard* by Colin Tubbs (1974).

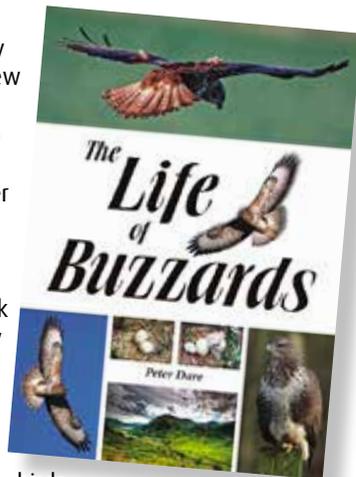
Suffolk's own Peter Dare has a long lifetime's experience of Buzzards, having begun his PhD on the Buzzards of Dartmoor in 1955, during the aftermath of myxomatosis. He also studied Buzzards in NW Wales, before moving to Suffolk in 1982 – then with Buzzards only very rare visitors. The importance of rabbits to Buzzards is well known, and it will be very interesting to monitor the effects of the current dramatic declines of rabbits in some areas (such as Breckland, with RVHD* suspected as part of the cause). There can be few biologists who have published such a comprehensive book sixty years after their PhD studies on the same species! Peter has published at least 13 papers on Buzzards, including three in the Suffolk Bird Report (between 2006 and 2013). He will also be well-known to many SOG members for his outstanding sea-watching efforts over many years at Pakefield, as documented in the annual reports, *Suffolk Birds*.

In 15 very detailed chapters the book covers seasonality, breeding biology, territory, prey aspects, population dynamics and much more. It is written very clearly, but with more than enough scientific information and bar charts (plus 28 Appendices) for the likes of Chris Packham. A very well-chosen range of photographs (almost all in the first half of the book) illustrate the story admirably. For example, the classic sequence of a Buzzard taking an unfortunate Grey Phalarope on a Cornish saltmarsh is used to show how opportunistic hunting Buzzards are (p. 143). Other avian prey rarely recorded include Capercaillie (fledglings), Osprey (nestling), Dipper, Crossbill and Chough (juvs).

To quote from the very positive review in *British Birds* (by Rob Bijlsma, Oct 2015): "Peter Dare's book is a reminder of the time that fieldwork was precisely that: being in the field from sunrise to sunset, outwitting the birds (or at least trying to), cycling 40 km daily to reach nests, examining broods up to four times a day, collecting prey remains, observing from hides, and devising experiments to validate pellets as a means to quantify diet. In fact, this book shows that interpretation of logger data can only be biologically meaningful when embedded in knowledge based on hardcore fieldwork. Quick and easy? Forget it. I love this book, for its laudation of uncompromising fieldwork."

The last sentence of the book beautifully sums up the author's deep admiration for this wonderful bird: "The Buzzard truly is the most versatile, adaptable, resourceful and resilient of raptors." One point of detail that I was not aware of (though I'm sure many SOG members are better informed): if you get close enough to a Buzzard to check its eye colour, a pale eye indicates a juvenile, with adults having dark eyes. In conclusion, I have no hesitation in recommending this marvellous book for anyone who wishes to learn more about our most welcome raptor re-coloniser, thus far at least...

* Rabbit viral haemorrhagic disease



Council for 2016

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A formal proposal will be submitted to the 2017 AGM

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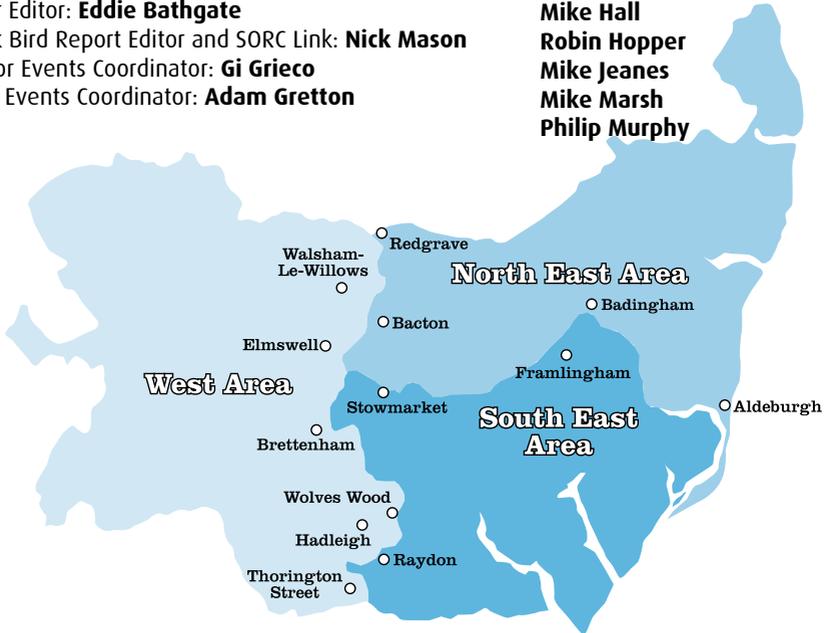
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Suffolk Ornithologists' Group



Who we are

- Founded in 1973 by a group of Suffolk birdwatchers
- Associated with the Suffolk Naturalists' Society
- SOG remains an independent birding group and is a registered charity

What we do

Networking

- A voice for Suffolk birdwatchers
- With established links to many naturalist and conservation organisations

Media

- Strong web presence - www.sogonline.org.uk
- Active Twitter feed - [@suffolkbirds1](https://twitter.com/suffolkbirds1)
- Quarterly magazine - **The Harrier**
- Annual review - **Suffolk Birds** report

Trips and talks

- Annually (20+) field trips - ideal for novices or experts and young or old alike
- Opportunities to visit hot spots and receive practical ID tips in the field
- Programme of talks and presentations - variety of topics (county, national, or international) with quality speakers



Protecting birds

- Actively lobbies to protect habitats and birding amenities
- Provides a county-wide field force of bird surveyors (50+)
- Organises and promotes bird surveys
- Inspires and undertakes conservation projects
- Bursaries available
- Numerous conservation achievements:
 - Contributed to several species breeding successes (Barn Owls, Peregrines, etc.)
 - Undertakes monitoring and ringing
 - Involvement on community and education projects
 - Organises and hosts dawn chorus walks
 - Assists with fund-raising for bird hides
 - On-going participation in key bird surveys for the BTO, such as BBS, the Bird Atlas, various species surveys and WeBS
 - Provides surveys for commercial organisations, such as environmental waste companies etc.



Suffolk Ornithologists' Group

For birds & for birders

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