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Scotland's Bird Club Ayrshire Branch

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For up-to-date information on all aspects of birding in Ayrshire, go online and visit our local website maintained by Kevin Waite:
www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk

Chris Rollie would like to inform you of the Birdtown Festival of events at St. John's Town of Dalry on Friday 30 September to Sunday 02 October. There will be a bird race, art exhibition, stalls, guided walks and the film 'Eagle Odyssey' will be shown. More details later.



Welcome to the summer edition of *TheStonechat*. I hope you have all had a good summer - and are still enjoying what remains of it (hopefully an Indian one!). We have a full programme of events lined up for you this coming season, both interesting and topical subjects for our evening meetings - as well as a wide variety of places to visit on our field trips. As always, these will be arranged jointly with the RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group. We are arranging two coach trips during this period. We have a day trip on Saturday 26th of November and the destination will be the John Muir Country Park at Dunbar, Aberlady Bay and of course, a visit to Waterston House. The cost for this should be about £20. From Saturday 23rd to Monday 25th June 2012, we are organising a three-day long weekend to the north-east coast of England - and will take a boat trip to the Farne Islands and to Coquet Island in search of roseate terns. We anticipate the cost to be around £175 for the coach travel and overnight accommodation in a three-star hotel. In this edition we have an article by Tom Cameron on his visit to Fiji and New Zealand. I have also written an account of our successful Norfolk trip in June of this year. Please also note that we still have just two places left on our forthcoming Ayrshire Birders trip to Extremadura and Andalucia in May next year (09 to 21 May 2012). The cost will be £1700 inclusive of flights, half-board accommodation and all travel within Spain. Why not join us? You would be most welcome. Please see details on the back page. I hope you enjoy reading this edition of 'Stonechat'.

Best wishes, Tony Scott / Editor

The Search for the Bristle Thighed Curlew and the Red Tailed Tropic Bird

A report by Tom Cameron

After five weeks in Fiji and New Zealand we were on the last leg of our journey. This was to be the relaxing part of the holiday - no driving. We left Auckland and headed north-west across the South Pacific and landed at Rarotonga at 21.00 hrs. Thirty minutes later we were in our bungalow by Muri lagoon.....a quick visit to the local shop for supplies and then we went down to the beach to take in the view. It was a full moon and we could easily make out some small islands about 300 metres offshore. There was a warm balmy breeze blowing and we could hear the sound of the waves crashing against the reef. Looking at the moon, it seemed different and then I realised that in the southern hemisphere it is upside down and waxes and wanes left to right. Back to our bungalow and off to sleep with the ceiling fans going full blast and air conditioning adding its hum to the sound spectrum.

We awoke next morning to grey skies and rain. I also realised that it was Wednesday again as we had crossed the International Date Line - shades of Ground Hog Day! After breakfast the rain stopped, the clouds disappeared and we had a view of a tropical lagoon with swaying palm trees. The lagoon was an intense turquoise green, contrasting with the azure blue ocean outside the reef. We went for a walk along the beach as far as we could go and started seeing some birds out at sea. These were identified as fairy terns and noddies. We then went to have lunch at the local yacht club - a rather grandiose name for a bar-cum-restaurant that hired out canoes and outriggers. On the way, there was a Pacific golden plover on the local playing field and also mynahs everywhere. I had my telescope with me and searched the offshore islands for signs of bird life. There were more plovers on the sandy shore at the end of the island, but nothing else was seen. The island was supposed to hold a wintering population of bristle-thighed curlews. So it was back to the bungalow and down to the beach to cross to the island. There were two polypropylene kayaks belonging to the complex and, after a potted course on kayaking, I set forth. Cindy took one look at them and said words to the effect "you're not on." She went off guddling for sea shells. Much to my surprise, I took off like Nanook of the North, kicking up a bow wave! Half way out I got grounded, and realised that the water was only about 1.3 metres deep at the deepest, and I could have waded across. I reached the island easily and pulled the kayak up the beach. To my discomfort, I saw that the island was actually made of dead razor-sharp coral. Also, there was a huge amount of damage to the trees by a couple of cyclones that had hit the islands hard about two weeks before we arrived. Instead of green, the leaves had been burnt orange by the drying effects of the strong winds.



Muri Lagoon



Nanook setting forth



Pacific golden plover



Mynah

A complete circuit of the islands produced no bird life at all, which was disappointing. Back at the bungalow, I spoke to our host to see if he knew anything about local bird life. He just lifted the telephone and after a few words, I was speaking to the head forestry conservation officer. The news was not good. I had not realised the extent of the damage caused by the two cyclones that had hit the island a few weeks previously. Yes, the bristle-thighed curlews were exactly where I had been looking, but prior to the cyclones, and had now moved away. The centre of Rarotonga had been trashed with hectares of felled and hung up trees making it too dangerous to enter. Teams of foresters had been brought from New Zealand as the locals had been overwhelmed with the extent of the damage. This meant that our activities would have to be limited to the coastal strip. For the next few days we played the tourist, swimming in the lagoon and watching the beautiful coral reef fish. They seemed fearless. If you stopped swimming, they would immediately cluster round in your shadow. We gradually saw more birds on a daily basis. Greater frigate birds would come in from the sea at sunset. Fairy terns and noddy terns would head out in the morning, and then the Tropic birds appeared, but not the red tails. A teenage fantasy of mine was to see the Tamuri dancers of Tahiti. Dusky maidens shaking their stuff to the beat of drums, a sixteen-year-old adolescent's definition of paradise! Now we were about to see it take place at the local hotel. Drummers started and a mature lady, who could have played the part of "Bloody Mary" in South Pacific, sang a song of welcome.



Greater frigate bird



Fairy tern

Next, the girls and young men came out and the dancing started. I was exhausted watching them before my feelings turned from wonderment to terror when "Bloody Mary" started dragging out members of the audience to participate. I sank down as far as I could into my seat to become as inconspicuous as possible. To my great relief, I got away with it! Shopping was now on the cards, so the next day we took the bus into the only town of Averuni, where Cindy could look for some black pearls. Waiting for the bus, I looked up into the tree under which we were standing to see a pair of violet, bulging eyes looking at me. (Not "Bloody Mary" we hope? Ed.) There were two fairy terns sitting about two metres above me. On the journey into town, we also saw two Pacific reef herons. After also seeing umpteen black pearls, I decided to take myself off for a walk and headed for the shore. There on a rock was a wandering tattler, which allowed me to approach close enough to take some photographs. I then turned my binoculars onto the cliff in the centre of the island and saw white birds flying round and landing on the sheer cliffs. Even at that range I realised that these were red-tailed Tropic birds. We would have to return here tomorrow and make an attempt to get as close to these cliffs as we possibly could.



Tamuri dancers (Tom's boyhood dream)



"Bloody Mary"

Next day, we were back in town and set off towards the cliffs, trying to find a road or a track which would lead us there. We passed the government offices and noted a carved totem to island's god of fertility. To say he was a big lad was a gross understatement! We eventually found a promising track which appeared to lead to the cliffs. It petered out however, at an abandoned block of flats. In front of us lay solid jungle with no obvious passageway. I have walked through steaming jungles before and did not wish to repeat the experience. The only other option was to set up the telescope and scan the cliff face. The birds were the red tails, although we had to rely on other diagnostic features as we could not ascertain the tail colour at that range. By this time the mozzies had found us and were enjoying a hearty meal! Back for the bus and a swim in the lagoon. I swam across to one of the small islands and noted a wandering tattler on a rock. Turning on my back, I approached it and ended up just about two metres from it. As I was in the water and probably resembled a fur seal, it was only mildly curious and completely unafraid. I left it to its own devices and came back to shore where I had a look through the 'scope beyond the reef. There I saw two crested terns and what appeared to be noddy terns. Sunset was now approaching and, as I was preparing to return to the bungalow, flocks of what I thought were noddies started to fly over my head towards the interior of the island. I then realised that they were either some form of shearwater or petrel. A look at my guide to the birds of the South Pacific revealed that they were herald petrels. This was nice ending to our stay in a tropical paradise. The evening weather forecast gave us the bad news that tropical storm Percy was about to hit the Cook Islands in about thirty-six hours, just as we would be landing in Singapore. We heard later on that at the last minute it veered away and missed Rarotonga, so sparing them what could have been a total disaster. The lack of birds had been made up by having experienced an underdeveloped tourist destination. It was what you would imagine the South Pacific should be like before the advent of commercialism. How long it can remain unspoiled is anyone's guess. When we got back home, I put the pictures through Photoshop and blew them up to the maximum pixel level. The ones I had taken at long range of the red tails revealed a line of red pixels where the tails were, so definite proof! To complete the set, I now only see the golden-tailed Tropic bird. I hear the call of Christmas Island!! TC



Some Extracts from Recent BTO Newsletters

Thanks to Henry Martin for sending in these details.

Did you know that.....

.....house sparrows can squeeze in up to four broods per year, whereas blackbirds might attempt even more. Woodpigeons and collared doves are the real masters though, nesting at almost any time of year should conditions permit!

Catastrophic curlew declines in Ireland

As waders migrate south through Britain and Ireland, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the fortunes of a 'resident' wader species. During the last breeding atlas, in 1988-91, the Irish population of curlews was estimated at around 5,000 pairs. This spring, BirdWatch Ireland carried out the first survey specifically to find breeding curlew in Ireland. Over 60 sites in Donegal and Mayo that were occupied by breeding curlews during the 1988-91 Atlas were revisited and, shockingly, the results indicated that only six still held breeding pairs. Just four pairs were recorded in Donegal and four in Mayo, indicating that there are likely to be fewer than 200 breeding pairs left in the whole country - a 96 percent decline in 20 years.

Wave of willow warblers

The BirdTrack reporting rate for willow warbler highlights a late July/early August peak in records not seen in any other warbler species (although the chiffchaff reporting rate shows a broadly similar pattern in September). Quite what causes the wave of willow warblers at this time of year isn't entirely clear but one thing is certain: the 1000 individuals logged on Monday 2 August at Bardsey Bird Observatory must have taken some counting! Provisional results from Bird Atlas 2007-11 reveal changes since the last atlas, with willow warblers occupying fewer tetrads in England between 1988-91 and 2008-11 but more in Scotland and Ireland.

A quail-year?

Back in June we encouraged BirdTrackers to listen for crepuscular species, including quail, to help fill in a few gaps for the Bird Atlas. A month on and 2011 is really starting to look like a 'quail-year'. Throughout June, the quail reporting rate remained substantially higher than the previous two years and there have been several reports of multiple calling males, including 12 at a site in East Yorkshire, 17 at a site in Cleveland and a whopping 20 at one location in Northumberland! BTO The Nunnery, Theftord, Norfolk, IP24 2PU01842 www.bto.org

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Nightjars, White Horses and a Black Prince in Poppyland

Ayrshire Birders Norfolk & Humberside trip in June 2011. [Report by Tony Scott](#)



A wide-ranging title for a most diverse holiday in the fens, saltmarshes, heaths and woodlands of North Norfolk and surrounding areas and counties. We would also say that, apart from our main focus on birds, there were many other things to satisfy all tastes, something for everyone in fact. The nightjars at Dersingham Bog NNR will be the most powerful memory for me; and the searching for and finding the elusive and beautiful Dartford warbler comes a very close second. Of course, the white horses, pigs, bells and horseshoes all added a food-driven spice and many a thirst-quenching brew to the trip. The Black Prince was the curtain raiser to a short but enjoyable steam journey along the picturesque 'Poppy Line' - the North Norfolk Railway. A wallowing in true nostalgia. Black Princes were not the only heraldic icons around. We may (or may not) have 'found our thrill' (as there was no Blueberry Hill to speak of) - but we did find a most agreeable place to stay at the top of Knight's Hill in South Wootton. The 'Boston Belle' also made an impression, as she slowly revealed her hidden secrets as we entered the River Welland to unveil the avian jewels of the saltmarsh and mudbank. Truly a cornucopia of birdlife, with grey plovers, little egrets, little gulls, and marsh harriers - not to mention the many grey Atlantic seals hauled up on the sandbanks. Ah yes, and many of these sightings would also have remained unseen without the aid of our very own Magic Merlin of the bird world to guide us. I speak of course of none other than Angus Hogg, whose knowledge and help is a vital part of these holidays. In fact, both Gerda and I can also say that the other most vital ingredient to success is a generous sprinkling of agreeable and pleasant company, which we had in abundance. We thank you all for helping to create such a brilliant and convivial atmosphere throughout the ten wonderful days. We must also mention Derek of Dodds, the man who kept us safely on the straight and narrow until he knocked down that hare at Old Moor. Praise be that a friendly priest arrived in the nick of time to administer the necessary hare restorer! So now we have Derek, the spinner of yarns, as well as our driver-birder John to choose from on any future trips. Together may they keep the wheels turning on our insatiable quest for the best birds, real ale, fine food, stunning landscapes and that good company I spoke of earlier. I should say 'Amen' to that - but what I will say is "Here's to the next time!"

Snippets from the diary

Saturday 18 June

Despite leaving Ayrshire and the dreaded Moors of Muirkirk in all its monotone dampness, we did emerge into a dappled sunlight when we reached the Republic of Yorkshire in the afternoon. The Wykeham Forest and its raptor viewpoint was new land for all of us. We had a distant hope of finding honey buzzards, but they did not show themselves. However, the views from here were superb, and raven, common buzzard, willow warbler and crossbills were seen and it was a pleasant place to start our tour. We were chatting to another birder who appeared to know the site well and assured us that honey buzzards are doing just fine in the area. Our next stop was RSPB's Bempton Cliffs reserve and this definitely had the 'WOW-factor'. The searing sea cliffs resounded with the calls of kittiwakes, the grumbings of razorbills, the cackling of fulmars and the grating of gannets. Our colourful little friends the puffins put in an appearance and we eventually noted a fair number of these favourites. The views along the North Yorkshire coast are something special and the sunlight helped to create an impressive panorama. From here we drove through the cathedral town of Beverley and on to our overnight stop at Willerby near Hull. The Best Western Willerby Manor Hotel was most welcoming and we soon had our rooms allocated and met for a pre-dinner drink in the bar of the hotel. 'Figs Brasserie' was where we ate, and we were allocated a pleasant garden room to ourselves, in which to enjoy such delights as the confit of Yorkshire pork belly with crackling, squash puree and delicious lemon-thyme jus. Something to tickle the taste buds.

Sunday 19 June

Well, we ran into rain once more shortly after leaving Willerby. We appeared to be descending into Armageddon as we traversed the M62 towards the liquorice darkness of Pontefract. Turning on to the M18 was a good idea, as the sky lightened and a tiny patch of blue appeared as we alighted at Potteric Carr - one of Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's top reserves. We had ample time for a circular walk from Sedum House and the visitor centre, passing Decoy Marsh to Piper Marsh, where we observed a family of reed warblers at close quarters. Avocets with their young were visible farther along the track at the West Scrape. Marsh harriers and jays were seen today and many ducks and waders from hide number 14 which overlooks Huxter Well Marsh. To get here, we had to pick our way carefully through the abundance of 'goose mines' laid by a vast army of Canadian invaders! Our drive south followed around 13.30 hrs., and we arrived in the city of Lincoln for an hour's ramble around the old centre with its Sunday market; or a dash up the steep hill to the cathedral. Anne Dick did it the easy way, 'scoping this historic building from outside the bus station. She had a hunch that peregrines may be nesting on the towers and she was right. The final stage of today's journey took us through Sleaford to King's Lynn and on to South Wootton, where our Best Western Knights Hill Hotel was located. The older buildings were originally part of an extensive estate farm, and have been extended and the original parts converted into an hotel and spa (which we never saw). The grounds, including a walled garden with many trees and nest boxes, attract a wide variety of bird species including green woodpecker. Also within the grounds is a real ale pub (which we did see - frequently, both inside and out). After a warm welcome we met two former RSPB local club members who have recently moved to Kent. Indra and Jim Doyle had told us of their wish to join the group for the seven days we were in Norfolk and fortunately, they were able to do this. It was really great to have their company aboard the 'Dodds Flyer' for the following week of exploration.

Monday 20 June

The sun was shining from a clear blue sky as we awoke this morning - so bright it even shone through the dark drapes of our four-poster bed! After a hearty breakfast we were all out in the courtyard just after 08.30 and Derek, our driver, swung the coach into action shortly after. It was only a short drive from here - down through nearby Hunstanton, past H.M.'s weekend bungalow at Sandringham and along the coast to what is possibly RSPB's best reserve in North Norfolk - Titchwell Marsh. We were not to be disappointed, as within the first hour we had added both common and lesser whitethroat, bearded reedling, spoonbill, red-crested pochard, little ringed plover, little tern and both black and bar-tailed godwits to our trip list! The amazing new Parander Hide was a joy from which to observe all these jewels of this fantastic reserve. The design of the hide also adds to the landscape and is a fine piece of architecture in itself. We then walked on past the Tidal Marsh and down through the dunes to the shore, where the sea and sky meet in one of those classic and wild Norfolk landscapes - and disproves the notion that areas of flat land cannot be scenic and exciting. Farther down the track - reed-warblers were "kirri-kirri-keet-keeting" all around us and marsh harriers were making the most of the thermals. In the nearby woodland, small flocks of long-tailed tits were foraging for lunch. Hang on a minute - that time already, the White Horse Inn beckons us for lunch too!

We were soon in the village of Brancaster Staithe, where the White Horse Inn looks out from its large picture windows across the saltings and the harbour to Scolt Head. The food is good here, with a wide range of tapas and local dishes which include Cromer crab and locally smoked prawns. A range of real ales from the village brewery are on offer as well - and the enticing name of 'Oystercatcher Ale' was too much for any birder to resist! At 14.15 we drove on to the busy little town and harbour of Wells-Next-the-Sea. Not able to find a parking space, we drove out towards the beach, about 1km from the town itself. From this point we could watch little terns over the outer reaches of the harbour, before walking into Holkham Pines and the Holkham National Nature Reserve. We enjoyed this peaceful afternoon stroll through woodland dappled with soft sunlight. We heard the call of the jay and were pleased to see this colourful fellow up close. Great spotted woodpecker was also about and many beautiful butterflies presented themselves, including comma, speckled wood and white admiral. From Wells, we drove back along the coast to our hotel for dinner at 19.30 hrs. We had arranged with Derek to drive out to Dersingham Bog NNR in the hope of finding nightjars on this relatively warm and still evening. None of us had been here before, having been to Kelling Heath for this species in the past. Once we had settled at our chosen spot between woodland and heath at around 21.45hrs, a roding woodcock flew past, and very shortly afterwards the churring of nightjars commenced. We were lucky enough to have about ten sightings of nightjar (maybe seven birds in total), making this our very best sighting ever and anywhere. We also found a glow-worm in the woods on our way back to the coach. This had been a truly wonderful day - rounded off so well by such a grand finale.



Some of our party at Titchwell Marsh reserve, where we saw the spoonbill.....followed by lunch at the White Horse Inn

Tuesday 21 June

Quite a breezy day today, but a fair bit of sunshine accompanied us as well, with temperatures up to 19 centigrade. We left Knights Hill at 08.30 to be at Morston Quay for our ten o'clock boat trip to Blakeney Point. As it happened, we arrived at Morston Quay earlier than anticipated and Brian Bean and his son ferried us over to the landing at Blakeney Point 15 minutes earlier - aboard their motor boat 'Sea Trout'. This gave us a full 90 minutes in which to explore the dunes and reach the viewpoint where we could watch a variety of terns heading to and from their colonies on the spit. At 11.25 we were collected in the motor boat 'Sarah Jane' to head out to the tern colonies where sandwich terns nest in their thousands, along with as many black-headed gulls and a fair number of little, Arctic and common terns. A Med gull was also seen, plus knot, curlew, turnstone, common gull, great black-backed and herring gulls and of course, the many grey Atlantic and common seals which were mainly lazing on the sandbanks and spit, while a few were watching us inquisitively from the water. Feeling refreshed from the sea breezes and stepping off the boat on to dry land, our thoughts turned to other forms of refreshment and indeed to lunch. We had notified the Three Horseshoes at Warham All Saints of our arrival time, and we did make it there for 12.45. This cosy little inn, situated in such an idyllic village, is really in a time warp. The gas lighting in the bar, the stone flagged floors and many artefacts from days gone by adorn the three small rooms and the public bar - all complete with rustic chairs, benches and scrubbed-top tables. Real ales are served from the wood and home made lemonade is also well worth sampling. As we reluctantly left the Three Horseshoes behind, we drove back along the coast and on to Cley-Next-the-Sea and Norfolk Wildlife Trust's famous Cley Marshes Reserve, where we spent a productive couple of hours. The new visitor centre is most impressive, with its huge picture windows looking out over the marsh, and its spacious café and extensive bookshop. Marsh harriers were showing well here, as well as avocet and little ringed plover. We also had some excellent views of spotted redshanks. On our way back to the hotel, we drove out along narrow and twisty lanes to the raptor watchpoint at Great Ryburgh, where kestrel, sparrowhawk and common buzzard were seen, along with yellowhammers in the surrounding bushes. We returned to our hotel for another superb dinner and a most relaxing evening.



Wednesday 22 June

A day of heavy, thundery showers and one absolute deluge! It was also fairly humid, but we had a dry morning and some sun in the afternoon. Our destination was the Brecks, inland and spreading across the Norfolk and Suffolk borders. Our first stop was at Weeting Heath, a Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) reserve. Weeting is well known for its stone curlews, and today didn't disappoint, as we saw a few adults and a couple of chicks as well. Rabbits were everywhere on the heath and we had sightings of mistle thrush, jay, treecreeper, coal tit, goldcrest and green woodpecker, ideal conditions as the heathland is lined with a narrow belt of pine woodland. The nearby Forestry Commission site at Santon Downham was our next visit. We walked into open felled woodland where we hoped to see woodlark, but they were not obliging us today. Nevertheless we had nuthatch (amazing that we didn't see more of this species on the trip), garden warbler, chiffchaff and spotted flycatcher. We were lucky to have a little sunshine here, as heavy showers met us on our way to Thetford - home of the BTO - for lunch. The Bell Inn was good choice, with most friendly and efficient staff. Leaving Thetford, our afternoon was spent at RSPB's Lakenheath Fen Reserve, a wonderful place which is home to golden orioles, bittern and common crane. The vast majority of our group were caught in a thunderstorm and were well and truly drenched, returning to the visitor centre to dry off. The sun came out and it was amazingly hot - the thunder still rumbling around. The head warden had explained in detail where we should see certain species, so we embarked on a second foray into the field and were lucky to get a male golden oriole, a number of great bitterns flying over the reedbeds, a kingfisher and a most obliging grasshopper warbler. Cuckoos seemed to be everywhere, and we even saw them as well as hearing them. So once more, another successful day despite the wet clothes (and the muddy boots), and we returned to another well presented dinner at Knights Hill Hotel.

Thursday 23 June

A most relaxing day - also for Derek, as he joined us on our cruise on his free day. Our journey was relatively short today - just over an hour got us to Sluice Bridge, where the 'Boston Belle' is berthed. The owner of this well appointed vessel is Sarah Sims and she welcomed us to Boston (Lincs) and both the 'Belle' and the 'Jolly Sailor Café', adjacent to the quay-side. We boarded just after nine, and everything was made ready for an 09.30 departure. This is most definitely a family run enterprise, with Sarah in overall charge and her husband the skipper (who also has a boat at Stranraer), and her daughter and son crewing and also looking after the onboard food and the bar. There were two other crew members and another 'old salt'; a most pleasant and informative man who obviously knows The Wash and all its channels like the back of his hand. He was more than happy to pass on his wealth of knowledge about the area to all who were interested. After leaving the fairly tight lock, we drifted into the lower reaches of the River Witham, known locally as The Haven, and passing the famous Boston Stump (church tower) to our left. Around about this point Angus shouted that there was a red kite overhead, an unexpected sighting here. We then passed through the town and, because it was low tide, the mudbanks were exposed - as were the many rotting hulks of old vessels lining the channel. Downstream, a large flock of Canada geese with one greylag 'in charge' were disturbed by our presence. We then slowly made our way into The Wash, before turning into the River Welland. The RSPB own much of the vast saltmarsh adjoining the river, and this must be home to many thousands of breeding birds. We saw grey plover, dunlin, great crested grebe, many little egrets, grey heron, mute swan, tufted duck, shelduck, oystercatcher, ringed plover, knot, black-tailed godwit, curlew, redshank, common sandpiper, turnstone, little gull, black headed, lesser black-

backed, herring and great black-backed gulls, sandwich and common terns and many marsh harriers, some very low overhead. There were also lots of grey seals to be seen on the mudbanks. Ian and Henry then discovered an excellent bottled real ale in the bar, from the Lincolnshire brewery Bateman's - a six-grain ale which was a lovely, malted and rounded ale. Moreish! We were back in Boston at 14.00 hrs, just a little later than planned, as we had to wait for the tide to recede just a little to allow us under one of the town bridges. We then made our way into the 'Jolly Sailor Café' to eat the lunches we had ordered on board the 'Boston Belle'. This had been a superb cruise - most relaxing and with some really good sightings. We left Boston at 15.15 for the drive to the old Hanseatic League town of King's Lynn, where we had a good two hours to explore the Hanseatic Trail - viewing the Custom House, Thorseby College, Holy Trinity Guildhall and St. Margaret's Priory Church and the renovated quay-side.

Friday 24 June

All steamed up and raring to go! Steam railways hold a certain fascination for many people and quite a number of our group fit readily into this category. This sunny summer Friday then, was a particular highlight for this group, and we sincerely hope, a most pleasant experience for everyone. It was a day to be transported back in time to the 1950's or earlier, when branch-line steam was nothing out of the ordinary, just a fact of life. The North Norfolk Railway as it is today may just be a truncated part of a much longer line, but it still has the ability to re-create that certain nostalgic magic which turns grown men (and women) into enthusiastic children once again. The magic commenced even before reaching Sheringham, as ahead of us in the queue of slow moving traffic, a low-loader was bearing the heavy weight of the steam locomotive "Black Prince", owned by David Shepherd, the famous naturalist, painter and steam enthusiast. Our scheduled service was the 10.30 steam-hauled train to Holt, and the engine 0-6-2 ex-Great Western Railway tank no. 5619 in British Railways unlined green livery was already sitting at the head of its rake of coaches gently hissing away. Schoolchildren were gathered on the platform, dressed in a similar manner to 1940's schoolchildren, complete with satchels and even cases containing gas masks! An air-raid warden was giving them a talk and a group of ladies, also in 1940's fashions, were in charge - obviously school teachers. All of this added to the vintage atmosphere of the railway. When we were all aboard, the guard blew his whistle and the barking exhaust from the engine followed - with just a bit of wheel slip (as it used to be) and we slowly moved out of the station, gathering speed as we passed through the rolling countryside of fields and meadows, with villages, churches and windmills; white horses and ponies and the azure sea sparkling in the background. Idyllic.



On board the 'Boston Belle'



Views of.....and from the North Norfolk Railway.....and The Pigs



Our first birding stop was the raptor watchpoint at Swanton Novers. We were still in with a chance to see honey buzzard and indeed, some lucky person had seen and recorded one on the notice board just thirty minutes earlier. We were here the best part of an hour, but the HB did not return. However, we did see an amazing number of common buzzards - at least ten! Lunch beckoned us to the interesting and unique inn at Edgefield - 'The Pigs'. The house speciality was a longish menu of 'Iffits' - the Norfolk version of tapas (we are told). A number of these delights were ordered, including crispy pig's ears and dirty beef dripping with toast. After lunch we moved on to NWT's Hickling Broad Reserve where we had tremendous views of a nearby hobby - posing beautifully. Also seen in close-up was a wonderful swallowtail butterfly, and dragonfly species such as four-spotted chaser and black-tailed skimmer. Birds included little egret (naturally), Egyptian goose, more common buzzards, mistle thrush, Cetti's warbler, garden and willow warblers, jay and yellowhammer again. We noted quail and red-legged partridge en-route. We returned to our hotel for 19.25 hrs; not a lot of time to get ready for dinner 35 minutes later - but we did have quite full programme today and it was well worth it.

Saturday 25 June

Another warm day with temperatures reaching 22 centigrade, as we headed south to visit RSPB's premier reserve in Suffolk - Minsmere. En-route, we stopped at Norwich, as Jim Doyle was alighting here to spend the day immersing himself in the wonderful ecclesiastical architecture and other historic buildings of this ancient city. We made it to the city centre for 09.10, and following a further comfort stop at a BP station, arrived in Minsmere for 10.45. After a quick but informative talk about what was to be seen and where, the warden in charge handed out maps and information leaflets of the reserve. Anne Dick and Charlie Conner headed in the direction of the hides around the main scrape - as well surfaced tracks allowed the use of Charlie's wheeled chariot. The rest of us visited these hides later in the day, but went off through the woodland to the Bittern Hide. From our elevated viewpoint we had excellent views of great bittern flying low over the extensive reedbeds, and even one view of a marsh harrier harassing a bittern - quite unusual I would imagine. During the course of our stay, we were serenaded by the explosive song of the Cetti's warbler, which appeared to be coming from directly below the hide. Moving on to the Island Mere Hide, where we were lucky to get good sightings of bearded reedlings, as well as more exciting views of food passes between male and female marsh harriers. For some it was then time for lunch at the RSPB café back at the visitor centre, and others had a walk in the woodland to try for nightingale. At 15.00 hrs we left to visit the nearby Westleton Heath to search for Dartford warbler and woodlark. We saw woodlark almost immediately, but it took just a little longer to manage Dartford warbler. Luckily, a couple of birders already had a fixed spot where the warbler had been seen and they were sure it was still around. Patience was all that was needed, and we were repaid handsomely with a great view of a beautiful male bird sitting up and out in the open. We also noted a pair of stonechat on the heath. An excellent spot.



Swallowtail butterfly, and a heron and little egret at Hickling Broad

Marsh harrier at Minsmere

Sunday 26 June

And now it was goodbye to South Wootton and the Knights Hill Hotel, as we were heading north today. We still had two days ahead of us, with an overnight stop at the Mount Pleasant Hotel near Doncaster. First though, our route took us past Wisbech and we then skirted Peterborough and the a little surprise. We were stopping to buy sandwiches for lunch at Wansford, but not in the village. We arrived at Wansford Station, headquarters of the Nene Valley Railway, another heritage line. Amazingly, two engines were in the station on our arrival (we couldn't have timed it better had we known...). On through some lovely rolling countryside and picturesque villages such as Whitwell, Oakham and on to Egleton - where the Rutland Water Reserve's visitor centre is situated. A very well appointed centre and well maintained and massive reserve. Our target today was osprey and we had good views of these elegant raptors flying, fishing and taking their catch back to the young birds in the nest. We also visited the nearby Lyndon Visitor Centre where we had lunch at a shady picnic area (it was very hot again today) and visited a total of six hides accessed from the two visitor centres. Apart from the wonderful osprey sightings we had large number of other species, but the highlights must have been great crested grebe with young, little ringed plover, another superb sighting of hobby, and another red kite, avocet, common sandpiper, tree creeper and bullfinch. Butterflies included small skipper, brimstone, common blue, comma, speckled wood and gatekeeper. After some cooling ice creams and a drink, we were on our way again and arrived at the rather grand Best Western Mount Pleasant Hotel at 17.00 hrs. We had plenty of time to relax in our truly enormous rooms - so much space! Each room was individually furnished and was more like a small flat with a large seating area around a fireplace, and a separate sleeping area and a spacious and well appointed bath and shower room. We met on the front lawn for drinks about an hour before dinner, to enjoy the evening sunshine.

Monday 27 June

Our last day of the holiday - and once again - bright sunshine and warm - even before breakfast. Today was going to be a scorcher with temperatures reaching 32 centigrade - to be honest, much too hot for birding! Still, we gave it our best shot. After a sumptuous breakfast and a wander around the lovely garden where a nuthatch was calling, it was reluctantly, time to leave Mount Pleasant and head to the nearby RSPB Old Moor Reserve, This reserve has only been in existence about seven years, and it is amazing what has been done during this time. The enthusiastic head warden explained how this former industrial wasteland had been transformed and he is immensely proud of the achievements, particularly with regard to the encouragement and involvement of local young people. By the time we set off into the reserve (and there is very little shade) the heat and humidity did slow everyone down, but we enjoyed what we saw and this included little and great crested grebes, gadwall, teal, shoveler and whole host of ducks, both ringed and little ringed plovers once again, knot, curlew, redshank, green sandpiper was a highlight, common sandpiper, and Mediterranean gull was another plus. Kingfisher is always wonderful to see, lesser whitethroat, garden and willow warblers, blackcap, willow tit - our only view of this species, nuthatch, jay and a colony of tree sparrows too. At 13.15 we headed north on the A1 as far as Leeming services, where we all enjoyed the air conditioned cool of the quiet café and shop. Our final stop before reaching Ayr was at Abington Services on the M74. At this point, Derek made a little speech and thanked us for our company and a new insight into the world of birds and birdwatchers. We had enjoyed a truly wonderful ten days of great birding, good company, superb landscapes and good food. Roll on Spain 2012! TS

SOC Ayrshire evening meetings

at Monkton Community Church Hall and Pioneer Café (Tuesdays 19.00 hrs for 19.30 hrs). Contact: Gordon Riddle 01655 750 335.

- 13 September 2011 [CHRIS ROLLIE on Peregrines.](#)
11 October 2011 [DUNCAN WATT - the Ayrshire Branch on Tour - highlighting RSPB's Leighton Moss and WWT's Martin Mere reserves.](#)
08 November 2011
[IAN THOMSON - My life with birds.](#)
13 December 2011 [MEMBERS' NIGHT - photos and memories of past events.](#)
10 January 2012 [DAVE FAIRLAMB - the changing scene at RSPB's Mersehead.](#)
14 February 2012
[JOHN BUSBY - with the artist's eye.](#)
13 March 2012
[PAUL WALTON - a history of bird conservation.](#)
10 April 2012 [AGM & KEN MCGINIGAL & JOYCE REID - Muirshiel hen harrier project - a video history.](#)

Welcome to the 2011 - 2012 winter meetings programme of our Ayrshire branch. We do hope that as many of you will come along to support our excellent monthly presentations, and also to enjoy a chat with your fellow members. Your SOC membership also entitles you to attend meetings anywhere in Scotland so, if you find yourself away from home in another branch area, please feel free to go along to any of the meetings - both indoor and to the field trips.

Our own Ayrshire branch will this year, be looking at ways to help pay our way. We will be continuing with the monthly raffles which we do hope you will all continue to support. We will also be introducing a local membership fee which will help to defray the costs of hall rental, speakers, printing and postages. It will be a very modest £6.00 for an individual and just £10.00 for a couple. We hope you agree that this is good value for eight evening talks and all the field trips. This has become a necessary as we were not able to cover expenses from our income last season, and had to boost our income by using some of the special fund savings.



with Angus Hogg and Tony + Gerda Scott
Contact address + info: 4 Hilltop Place AYR KA7 3PB
Tel: 01292 281 085 E-mail: da.scott@tiscali.co.uk

Wednesday 09 to Monday 21 May 2012

SPRINGTIME IN ANDALUCIA and EXTREMADURA

Join us for a magnificent birding and wildlife tour through south and western Spain, with the addition of visits to some romantic and beautiful towns and cities on the way. We will visit the wild and untamed Monfrague National Park in Extremadura, famous for its concentration of black vultures, Spanish Imperial eagles and black storks; and a visit to the beautiful medieval town of Trujillo with its nesting white storks; the vast Laguna de Fuente de Piedre near the town of Antequera, where more than 8,000 pairs of greater flamingo breed. In complete contrast, we drive south to the famous Coto Doñana National Park on the Andalucian coast, a World Heritage Site and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. We will visit the centre of the sherry industry at Jerez and the nearby Laguna de Medina - a true oasis for birds. Finally we head back into the mountains to spend two nights in the ancient town of Ronda, well known for its red-billed choughs and high concentrations of raptors in the magnificent setting of the Tajo Gorge. We will travel in an air-conditioned coach and half-board accommodation will be in four-star hotels in Antequera (two nights), Torrejon el Rubio (four nights), Matalascañas in Andalucia (four nights) and Ronda (two nights). Flights from Glasgow are also included in the cost of c. £1700.00.

JUST TWO PLACES LEFT!

SOC Ayrshire and RSPB Central Ayrshire field trips

Saturday 24 September 2011 [FAIRLIE & PORTENCROSS](#)

Meet at Fairlie Point car park (toilets) at 10.30. We will bird the lagoon area before driving on to Portencross for lunch (picnic) and then walk out to Hawking Craig. Finish around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 29 October 2011 [RSPB's newest reserve at CROOK OF BALDOON](#)

Meet at 11.00 hrs in The Square, Wigtown. We then drive down to the Crook, following the A714 to one mile beyond the mini-roundabout at Bladnoch. Then left at the sign for Penkiln saw mill. Straight on past East Mains of Baldoon Farm. All day trip, please bring a picnic lunch.

Saturday 26 November 2011 [by COACH JOHN MUIR COUNTRY PARK & ABERLADY BAY](#)

Meet at DODDS coach depot, Ayr at 07.45 hrs. Stop at Harthill Services en-route to Aberlady (SOC's Waterstone House) and the woodlands and bay. Picnic lunch at John Muir CP before birding around Belhaven Bay. We will arrange dinner for 17.30 hrs. Back in Ayr 21.30 hrs. Coach tickets at c. £20.00, available from September.

Saturday 10 December 2011 [LOCH RYAN, STRANRAER & WIG BAY](#)

Meet at Ballantrae car park (toilets) at 10.30 hrs. On to various viewing areas around Loch Ryan to Wig Bay. Whole day trip, please bring a picnic lunch. A garden centre with café / toilets is a short drive from Wig Bay.

Saturday 21 January 2012 [MAIDENS AND CULZEAN COUNTRY PARK](#)

Meet at 10.30 hrs at Maidens Harbour car park. Toilets on site. On to Culzean around 12.15. Café and toilets here. Field trip finishes around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 25 February 2012 [GREENAN SHORE AND DOONFOOT](#)

Meet 10.00hrs at Greenan Castle car park. Trip lasts until 12.00 hrs.

Saturday 24 March 2012 [IRVINE HARBOUR & BEACH PARK](#)

Meet at the Harbourmaster's office at 10.15. Bird out to the harbour point and then the Beach Park. Picnic lunch or something warmer at 'Puffers' or the 'Ship Inn' (the oldest pub in Irvine). Finish around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 28 April 2012 [MUIRSHIEL Regional Park & RSPB LOCHWINNOCH](#)

Meet at Muirshiel for 10.30, a walk around the policies and out on to the moorland for hen harriers. Picnic lunch here (toilets, drinks and snacks available). Then call in at Lochwinnoch later in the day. Finish around 16.00 hrs.

Saturday 26 May 2012 [THE ISLE OF CUMBRAE by ferry from Largs](#)

Meet at the seafront car park in Largs at 10.30. Ferry to Cumbrae Slip, walk around the north and west of the island, stopping on the way for a picnic lunch. On to Millport for the bus back to the slip. In Largs for around 16.30 hrs.

Saturday 23 to Monday 25 June [by COACH LONG WEEKEND - The Borders, FARNE](#)

[ISLANDS & COQUET ISLAND for roseate terns](#). Meet at Dodds coach depot at 07.45. Full details available soon. Cost including coach plus two nights B&B - c. £175.00. Booking forms will be available from the November meeting.
