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Scotland's Bird Club Ayrshire Branch

We are always on the look-out for more articles, cartoons and photographs to include in the future editions of **Stonechat**. Please think about contributing and send any work for publication to me: Tony Scott / Editor, at 4 Hilltop Place, AYR KA7 3PB - or e-mail me at: da.scott@tiscali.co.uk

Sightings to: Ayrshire Bird Recorder Fraser Simpson.
E-mail: recorder@ayrshire-birding.org.uk

For all local birding info: please go to www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk Thanks go to Kevin Waite for his excellent work in keeping this superb website on the go.

February 2017

Water pipit at Doonfoot
December 2016

The Stone chat



Photo: Angus Hogg

Hello and welcome to our February edition of Stonechat. Branch chairman **David Rackham**, has written an introduction including details of our Ayrshire branch dinner at the 'Wheatsheaf' in Symington. **Angus Hogg** has an article on water pipits, (great images) and many have been seen this winter along Ayrshire's coastline. **Dick Vernon** has written a fascinating article on his birding holiday in Uganda - again with super photographs. I have also include two articles which, in effect, review **David Attenborough's** programme 'Planet Earth II'; one from **Martin Hughes Games** which appeared in *The Guardian*, and a second from **Téa Obrecht** who writes for the *New Yorker* periodical. There is also a piece by **Stephen Moss** on long-tailed tits (from *The Guardian*) plus: all the upcoming events such as evening meetings and field trips - as always - jointly with RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group and with **Jim Thomson** as leader. I hope you enjoy this edition of **Stonechat**.
Tony Scott **newsletter editor**

Notes from the Chair

David Rackham



Field trip at Maidens harbour, 21.01.2017 (left and right)



Writing in mid-January, what the meteorologists call “anticyclonic gloom” has settled over much of Britain, giving little opportunity to appreciate that, yes, really, sunrise is getting earlier and sunset later. For reasons that I for one do not understand, this does not happen equally. Though we all know that 21st December (give or take a day or two) is the shortest day, by that date the evenings have already started getting lighter, but the mornings do not lighten up till well into January. So your reluctance to prise yourself out of bed after the Christmas/New Year break was not entirely due to over-indulgence!

It certainly seems to take a while for the wheels of normal life to settle to a steady pace after the Christmas/New Year hiatus, and it is easy to find events that, before the break, appeared in the distant future, now approaching very rapidly indeed. One such event is our annual branch social: a meal in a local hostelry. This comes up on Friday 17 February - see details elsewhere in this edition of [Stonechat](#).

By the time you read this, there will be but two evening meetings in the season left, and it is already time for your committee to think about next year’s programme. If you have any suggestions for topics of interest, or, even better, possible speakers with relevant talks, please let your committee know. We had to make a few changes to the programme for the current year: we are very grateful to Angus Hogg for stepping into the breach in December, and also to Gordon Riddle who was able to bring his talk forward several months in a swap to accommodate one of our other speakers. We are hoping there will be no more changes to the programme this season: I am certainly looking forward to John Savory (whom many of you will know from Tony’s trips) coming to talk to us in March about the Carrifran Wildwood project. Another good news story will be told by our final speaker: Ian Malzer, who has been closely associated with the Tay reedbeds and, in particular, the bearded tit population.



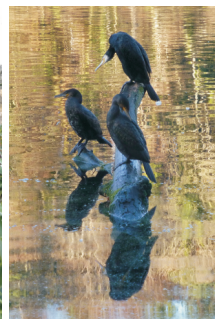
The swan pond, Culzean Country Park, 21.01.2017

Moving on from branch matters, in the last edition of Stonechat I reported the post of Honorary Treasurer for the Club still vacant. Happily that position has now been filled by Andrew Thorpe, who has been involved with the SOC for many years through the North Sea Bird Club. James Main has settled in as president - again some of you will remember James and his wife Doreen on SOC Touring holidays to Sri Lanka and South India. Talking of which, the Ayrshire Birders trip to the North of Ireland is fully subscribed, but we have the usual line-up of monthly Saturday trips to tempt you out for a dose of fresh air as the days lengthen. See the programme elsewhere in this newsletter. And don't forget that there are still entries in the Birdwatching in Ayrshire guide to be checked and updated - contact Anne Dick who is organising the allocation of sites.

It just remains for me to wish you a Happy New Year, and I will hope to see you at the Tuesday meetings and/or our social outing in February.

David

Below: All three images at Culzean (SOC Ayrshire and RSPB Central Ayrshire group's first field trip of the year, 2017).



Let's hear it for pipits!!

Angus Hogg

Water pipits at Maidens, December 2010 (left) and at Girvan, December 2009



Water Pipits

“Well, nobody looks at pipits!!” An often repeated statement from birders and non-birders alike. It's perhaps understandable, since this little group of birds is maybe not the most glamorous. Well, maybe I can persuade you to have a look at some of these “little brown jobs” since there's a lot more to them than meets the eye (at least, in the first instance!).

Ayrshire currently has five species of pipit on its list, with the large Richard's pipit having been recorded on only a single occasion so far. Of the four other species, water pipit is undoubtedly the scarcest, being a winter visitor from the European mainland. Rock pipit is the nearest to an omni-present species, with some migration taking place during spring and autumn, when some other races may be involved. Tree pipit is a summer visitor and is usually present as a breeding bird in our upland forestry areas between mid April and September. The one that most of us will be acquainted with is meadow pipit although it, too, is a migrant, with only a few choosing to overwinter.

So, let's take two of these closely allied species to begin with and see how we can identify them. Water pipit and rock pipit used to be considered as the same species, but a recent “split” resulted in a separation – and one which seemed sensible to those of us who had suggested some time previously that their habitat choices, for one thing, were substantially different. If we take water pipit to begin with, it's important to know **when** to look for it in Ayrshire. Since the first record in 1970, the bird has been well recorded within the county, and Ayrshire has proved to be one of the best counties in Scotland in which to see one. It's primarily a winter visitor from its high montane breeding grounds in west and central Europe and, while many will head south into areas like southern Spain and the Balearics to overwinter, some head north-west to spend the winter months in the UK.



Water pipit at Seamill, December 2010



Rock pipit at Troon, January 2009

When they arrive in the late autumn, you might be forgiven for thinking that the bird in front of you is just a bright-looking rock pipit. However, your attention might just be drawn initially to its unusual, flighty behaviour – quite different from most rock pipits, which normally allow fairly close approach. Secondly, once you've caught up with it, you'll be aware of a bird which is largely white below and brown above; a contrast to most of the nearby rock pipits which are pretty drab with their olive-tinged grey/brown upper-parts and dull underparts, often with heavy, dark streaking in this area.

A closer look at the bird will pick out one or two other notable plumage features:- a clear white supercilium, two white wing-bars on the tips of median and greater wing coverts, a white or off-white throat, and white outer tail feathers, the latter feature showing well as the bird flies away from you again! The dark streaking on the breast can appear much finer than that of rock pipit, and is largely concentrated on the upper breast, thinning out on to the belly and becoming much more diffuse on the flanks. A brownish/grey back will show some dark streaking, but the rump is often a richer, warmer brown colour. The bill, which is usually more slender than that of a rock pipit, has a largely yellow base to the lower mandible and the legs are dark, often showing reddish brown (a useful feature if you're unsure about a greyish meadow pipit perhaps?). With a lot of these features, it's well worth remembering that light conditions will play a big part in what you perceive to be colours and tones.

Water pipit,
Pow Burn.
December 2016

Most birds are fairly active feeders, and a good time to look for them is at high tide, when the seaweed will often be disturbed by waves lapping against it, perhaps unsettling invertebrate life within it. Above all else though, patience is the key, since most birds which take off and appear to fly for miles along the beach in front of you, will often return to exactly the same spot they were feeding in a few minutes beforehand.

By mid March, if your overwintering bird is still around, you'll start to see a few changes in its plumage. It starts to look quite scruffy and gradually takes on a pale greyish appearance. The white supercilium is still there, but now it's set against a pale grey crown and ear coverts. The upper-parts become mostly pale grey and the dark breast streaking almost totally disappears, leaving plain white underparts with a pinkish breast. The top part of the head pattern can vaguely resemble a northern wheatear at times. It should be pointed out, however, that many birds will depart before they look like what most field guides show as typical breeding plumage.

Other races of water pipit have been recorded within the UK, and it's possible that the closely allied buff-bellied pipit could be a future addition to the Ayrshire list. That would require more folk to look harder at pipits though..... so, how about it?

Next time round: Rock pipit.

Angus Hogg 21/12/2016



Water pipit,
Doonfoot.
December 2016



Water pipit,
Maidens.
Late March 2007.

Ugandan activities

Dick Vernon



Malachite kingfisher

I like Africa – I have been there several times and always found the vast array of wild life enthralling. Most trips have been to southern countries, so for a change - east Africa, Uganda to be precise. The big selling point here of course is its primates, with Gorillas leading the list. The bird entourage is also impressive, with the weird shoebill being the crowning glory.

Plenty of trips to choose from, almost all with very impressive price tags, but Exodus had one which looked to fill the bill without costing an arm and a leg. Perhaps I should add that my dear wife does not accompany me on these trips, but does put a time limit on them (and takes a keen interest in cost)!

Whatever, I arrived at Entebbe airport in March, to be met by our local leader, Jude, along with the rest of the party. Then off to Kibale Forest National Park, an excellent centre in the western hills, with a good population of chimpanzees. Our hotel complex (a collection of chalets) abounded with birds including the grotesque great blue turaco and the much more attractive, if petite, African blue flycatcher. For the chimpanzees we were divided into parties of eight; ours was led by a diminutive local lass armed with a large rifle. This was not to encourage slow visitors, but to deter forest elephants. These knew that chimps were messy eaters and dropped a lot of ripe fruit from the trees where they were feeding. Indeed the first occupied tree we found was abandoned hastily, with a curt order 'run'; you don't argue with armed women! Further occupied trees lacked an elephantine guard providing good views of chimps. In another part of the walk we even found them eating on the ground, quite oblivious to our presence.

The next day it was off to the Queen Elizabeth park, but not far down the road Jude brought the vehicle to a halt so we could gawp at one of the key birds of the region – black bee-eater. I have seen a lot of species of bee-eater, but this was particularly impressive; sadly, it was camera-shy. QE park was classic Africa – savannah with plenty of antelope, elephant and even a few lionesses (lions are not common in Uganda). What particularly pleased me was the huge number of buffalo; I find the old males very photogenic with their gnarled faces a mixture of suspicion and menace. Plenty of birds of course including a good number of the usual raptor crew (martial eagles, Bateleur, snake eagles etc).

From here it was west and south in to the foothills of the Ruwenzori – Bwindi



Mountain gorilla

Impenetrable Forest Park - gorilla country! The scenery was impressive – hills divided by ominously steep-sided, well vegetated valleys. We eventually arrived at our lodge in a mountain village again well supplied with birdlife. An early start saw us at the ranger centre for the gorilla hunt. The animals I am glad to say are well protected and worth protecting – a permit to try and see them costs a princely £450! Also, to involve the local community, we were encouraged to hire a porter to carry our gear; this provided an appreciated source of income for the local young men. There were thought to be at least ten families of gorillas in the park, three of which had agreed to see people. Again we were split up into parties of eight with a guide and an armed guard. We had been advised that the terrain involved some steep hillsides, but most of the party weren't quite prepared for what was really involved! Initially we walked along a pleasant ridge on a good path surrounded by dense, shoulder-high vegetation, followed by a steep, slippery descent into a valley bottom. Now the porters took on a second role helping folk down; couples, who had hired a single porter between them, began to regret their decision! Nearing the bottom I spotted a large male gorilla disappear in to dense vegetation - was that it? We had been told at the centre that we should not approach the animals closer than seven metres, but these proved to be the very short Ugandan metre. Into the bushes we went to find the whole family of gorillas lurking there. Most were quite indifferent to our presence. A young one enticingly climbed into the tree above us; the lady I was beside was a retired paediatrician and quickly spotted the danger suggesting we stepped back – just in time as a golden stream rained down – they are our nearest relatives! Gorillas are vegetarian, but as a lass found when stepping a little too close, they have a very impressive set of teeth with rather large canines for such a diet. Most, however, just seemed bored by the whole proceedings; the alpha male lay on his stomach looking at his hand as if he was timing us – they probably knew we were allowed only an hour with them. Sadly this was soon up, and then the real challenge began and the porters definitely earned their fee; the path back up to the road was steep – seriously steep. Fortunately I go hill walking most weeks, so it was not a problem, but those from flatter parts of the UK wondered if their end had come. Still with a lot of pulling and pushing from the porters all eventually emerged on to the road – knackered, but ecstatic!

The village hosted a family of pygmies, refugees from the Congo. The adults were 'small but perfectly formed', with quite sharp facial features. Two sulky teenagers, however, were as large as the adults and with much broader features, suggesting a nutritional as well as a genetic component in their size. A sadder feature of the village was an orphanage with about 50 children; although not said, I guessed these were victims of HIV. These kids certainly knew how to 'sing for their supper', and at least looked well-fed and mostly clad in clean school uniforms.

Now it was back down to the plains. I asked Jude if there were Augur buzzards in the area (a bird that had eluded me in Namibia). Jude's ability to spot distant birds when driving was reminiscent of one A. Hogg, and a few miles down the road he stopped the vehicle – on a post was a fine, if distant Augur buzzard. A little further was another treat – a pair of grey-backed crowned cranes, nonchalantly fiddling about on the edge of a reed bed right beside the road; another key bird in the bag!

Our new destination was Mburu Lake National Park, one of the few places in Uganda with giraffe, and even here only a few; but a must see for those who hadn't been to Africa before. Jude worked hard talking to all we met and eventually, lo and behold a small troupe of the beasts! My objective was rather different; a lake there had a population of finfoot, a strange looking bird – a sort of cross between a duck and a dachshund! Needless to say it was also elusive. But, the leader on our boat was good; he took us to a spot where a couple of white-backed night heron roosted and produced great views of a malachite kingfisher, so close you could almost touch it. Then the key cry of finfoot! Sure enough lurking by the bank was a male – the view was brief but definitive before the bird just disappeared. We looked elsewhere for more but no luck. Plenty of fish eagles though – common in Africa, but still superb birds, and not camera shy!



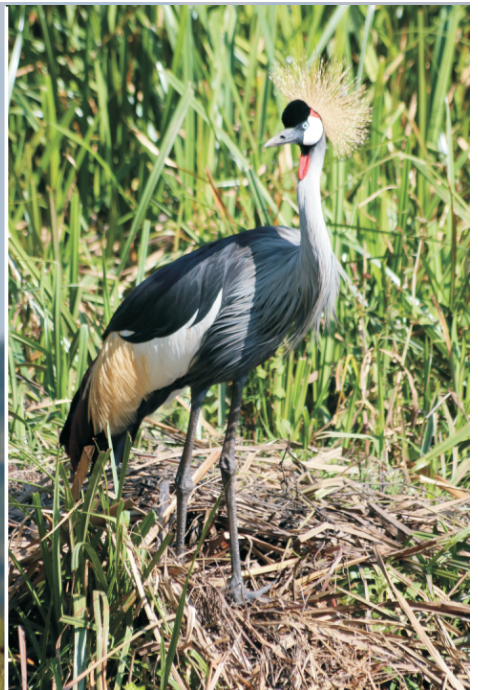
Fish eagle

Well, the last day soon dawned. We were now faced with a long drive back to the airport, but with a stop at Mabamba swamp on the NW edge of Lake Victoria to look for shoebill. Most tours look for the bird in marshes further north, so I was not over optimistic, but Jude was a very determined leader! So, ensconced in long, narrow boats with questionable engines we set off along a narrowing channel into the marsh. The propellers occasionally became tangled with weed just to add to the excitement. Eventually we arrived at a pool where the channel seemed to end. Standing up, I saw two distant birds take off – shoebill -so, they did exist! Distant, but definitive; however, not good enough for Jude. Soon the boat crews were in the water hauling the boats through reed choked channels deeper into the swamp. Flying back today? Maybe! Then Jude, who was standing up surveying the reeds called me to the front beside him. At this point, just ahead, two huge grey birds with massive bills launched into the air – no doubt as to what these were! They circled above us a couple of times before heading deeper into the swamp. 'Crippling views' barely does justice to the sightings. Now of course there was the challenge of escaping the swamp and getting to the airport. More battles with the reeds, then a dubious, local ferry across Lake Victoria and we made it – just!

Looking back, with all four key birds, bee-eater, crane, finfoot and now shoebill in the bag, plus gorilla and chimps, it was a clean-up job. Yes, I like Africa! So, where next?

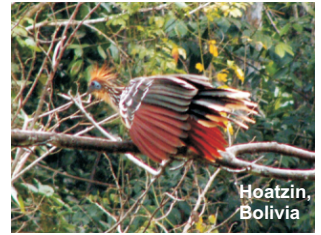


Shoebill
Grey-backed
crowned crane
(right)



The press view on: Planet Earth II

Two views of the new David Attenborough programme from the UK and the USA



From The Guardian 02. January 2017

Why Planet Earth II should have been taxed

Martin Hughes Games



I have the greatest admiration for the teams who made Planet Earth II but I fear this series, and others like it, have become a disaster for the world's wildlife. These programmes are pure entertainment, brilliantly executed but ultimately a significant contributor to the planet-wide extinction of wildlife we're presiding over. The justification, say the programme makers, is that if people (the audience) become interested in the natural world, they will start to care about the natural world, and will be more likely to want to get involved in trying to conserve it. Unfortunately the scientific evidence shows this is nonsense. For instance, the WWF and Zoological Society of London's authoritative 2016 Living Planet Report has concluded that between 1970 and 2012, there was a 58% decline of vertebrate population abundance worldwide.

This encompasses the period in which Sir David Attenborough's outstanding natural history series have been broadcast (starting with Life on Earth in 1979). The prime factor in this destruction is humankind's insatiable need for space, destroying and degrading habitat at an appalling rate, coupled with species over-exploitation, pollution, invasive species, climate change and rampant poaching. Yet these programmes are still made as if this worldwide mass extinction is simply not happening. The producers continue to go to the rapidly shrinking parks and reserves to make their films, creating a beautiful, beguiling, fantasy world, a utopia where tigers still roam free and untroubled, where the natural world exists as if man had never been.

By fostering this lie they are lulling the huge worldwide audience into a sense of false security. "If David Attenborough is still making these sorts of wonderful shows then it can't be that bad, can it?" Yes it can, and it's going to get much, much worse. Even as Planet Earth II was being broadcast, it was reported that elephant and lion numbers were tumbling, and last month it became clear that the giraffe population could be heading towards extinction, with numbers plummeting by 40% in the past 15 years. But no hint of the continuing disaster is allowed to shatter the illusion.

I'm not for one moment suggesting such shows should not be made. They are wonderful records of the beauty rapidly disappearing from our planet. I believe that in 100 years people will be amazed, and profoundly sad, that it was still possible to make such programmes. What I am suggesting is that the fantasy should be balanced by reality.

I would like to propose a "conservation tax" among natural history commissioners across all channels. This tax would insist that a fifth of natural history commissions are significantly conservation-oriented. As a matter of urgency, a development team should be set up to think how the reality of what's happening to wildlife worldwide can be portrayed in innovative ways, integrated into dramas, in children's shows, in collaboration with producers like Aardman Animations, perhaps, or video diaries of inspirational people working with animals. Some shows could be overtly conservation-oriented, others more subtle - perhaps a detective drama where the villains are smuggling rhino horn or ivory. But why would any TV development team put effort into imaginative conservation programming when escapist productions are so successful - unless it were taxed?

The BBC is in a unique position to work with a conservation tax. It could do this as part of its public service remit, without having the financial pressure that independents and commercial producers do. It would also be a very positive initiative for the BBC to be seen to be doing. We cannot simply carry on producing escapist wildlife fantasy ignoring the manmade extinction raging around us.

Martin Hughes Games is a natural history programme producer and presenter of BBC's Springwatch.

From the New Yorker
December 19 & 26 2016 issue

David Attenborough's exploration of nature's marvels and brutality

His game-changing shows remind us that ours is an impermanent and fragile world

Téa Obrecht



No trip to the American Museum of Natural History in New York is complete without a visit to the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life. It's a blue-tinged room, booming with surf-roar and the cries of gulls and rimmed with marine dioramas: teeming kelp forests and coral reefs, a walrus lost in thought, dolphins and tuna fleeing through twilight seas. The hall's vaulting showcases a life-size blue whale, midway through an eternal dive.

Whenever I crane to look up at the expanse of its light-dappled underbelly, I think of how Sir David Attenborough described this leviathan in his television series “The Blue Planet”: Its tongue weighs as much as an elephant. Its heart is the size of a car. And some of its blood vessels are so wide you could swim down them.” Of all Attenborough’s eyeopeners - and there have been many since the BBC’s ground-breaking 1979 series “Life on Earth” set both the bar and the template for nature documentaries - this one continues to shake me. Not just because the statistics are eminently quotable, equally impressive to distracted adults and too-cool children, but because they put humans right in their place: small enough to swim in a blue whale’s veins, and yet, by 1970, responsible for that species’ near-extinction.

For more than fifty years, Attenborough, who is now ninety, has originated, written, produced, and narrated many of the most game-changing nature shows of our time, from “The Trials of Life” to “The Private Life of Plants” and “Planet Earth.” Thanks to his teams of filmmakers and scientists, who have overcome environmental and technological challenges to bring us nature’s most hidden and far-flung spectacles, we have delighted in the insane plumage of birds of paradise and spied on polar-bear families emerging from their winter dens. Last month, we cheered a young iguana’s internet-shattering escape from racer snakes, in the British premièr of “Planet Earth II” (it airs here January 28th). Every encounter, every thrilling chase and absurd mating dance, reveals the heartening tenacity of life.

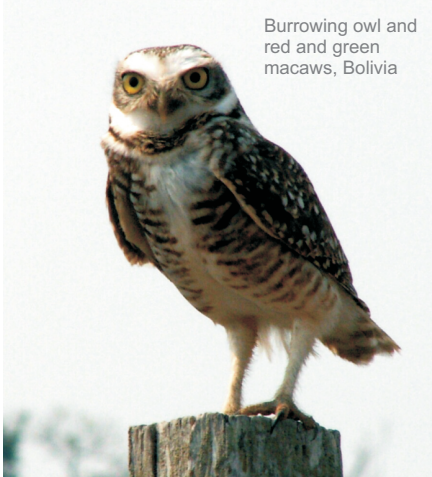
One of Attenborough’s hallmarks is a refusal to look away from nature’s inherent brutality. I’m not as outraged by this as some viewers are. I like to be reminded occasionally of what Joseph Campbell called the sorrow of realizing that life feeds on other life, that ours is an impermanent and fragile world, susceptible to unforeseen and life-ending phenomena: an orca attack on a newborn seal; a fallen bough in the path of a caribou fleeing a grizzly; an asteroid hurtling towards the Yucatán; the ascension of a bipedal, storytelling mammal, armed with a ship-mounted harpoon and a biblical mandate to dominate and subdue.

Perhaps seeing our unwillingness to confront terrifying inevitabilities, however, Attenborough largely refrained from highlighting humanity’s ecological impact until “State of the Planet,” in 2000. Then, in the 2003 finale of “The Life of Mammals,” during a spry cavort across the ruins of the ancient Mayan capital, Tikal, he suggested that the city, which rivalled Rome in scale and was the seat of one of Mesoamerica’s most flourishing kingdoms, might have been decimated by its own inhabitants’ over-estimation of natural resources. The episode was one of his first ventures into what has since become an urgent objective: forcing us to accept that our unlikely success as a species has made us a potentially life-ending phenomenon - not just to other animals but to ourselves.

Historically, we have found countless ways to justify our continued exploration of the environment: discovery, tradition, Manifest Destiny, even Chinese hoax. But we're all out of excuses now. Each passing day swells the data on greenhouse gases and extreme weather, shrinking reservoirs and rising sea levels, and diminishing biodiversity. Our resources are finite, the window for change, if not firmly shut, is certainly closing, and all life must adapt or be doomed.

Attenborough has devoted his career to teaching us that to embrace the world's marvels is also to fathom its harshest inevitabilities. Lately, I find myself thinking of those towering hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the ocean, in "The Blue Planet," impossibly supporting life a mile and a half from sunlight. Huge, lolling tube worms and ghostly crabs tick along in the crushing dark. One slight seismic tremor, and the life-giving spumes could go cold. A whole world, gone for good. I'd like to think that humankind has more claim to survival than those weird, wondrous creatures. But the truth, I fear, is that the only real difference between us is the tube worms' lack of agency in their own demise.

This article appears in other versions of the December 19 & 26, 2016 issue of "The New Yorker", with the headline "David Attenborough."



Burrowing owl and red and green macaws, Bolivia



Bolivian photos: Tony Scott

Please keep in touch with **SOC events** by logging on to the SOC's Twitter and Facebook pages



Birdwatch Long-tailed tit

Stephen Moss



From The Guardian 23.01.2017

A brief, high-pitched “see-see-see” sound, followed by the appearance of half-a-dozen tiny balls of fluff, each attached to what looks like a protruding stick. Then, more calls, as these flying lollipops flit from one tree to the next, pause, grab an invisible insect, and then move rapidly on.

Encountering a flock of long-tailed tits on a frosty January day is always a delight. Few other birds so immediately provoke a smile, for few other birds are quite so....well, adorable is the word that comes most readily to mind. When you discover that - as my friend and fellow nature writer Dominic Couzens puts it - the long-tailed tit is the only small bird that spends Christmas with its family, then their status in the pantheon of cuteness is confirmed. Am I falling for the nature writer's greatest sin: anthropomorphism? Perhaps yet as with other species that tug at our heartstrings, from the song thrush to the robin, I find it increasingly difficult not to attribute human qualities to certain birds.

With long-tailed tits, it's not just their endearing appearance: pink, buff and black, with their tiny bill and impossibly long tail. It's also their sociable habits: youngsters from a previous brood will often help their parents raise the next one, in what scientists call “cooperative breeding”. And you simply never see a lone long-tailed tit: one is always followed by another, then another, until a host of them are flitting around you, seemingly fearless of this great lumbering mammal in their midst. When I was growing up, I didn't see long-tailed tits anything like as often as I do nowadays. This isn't because I was any less observant; this species really has bucked the trend of songbird declines, having almost doubled in numbers since the 1980's.

Partly, that's due to a run of mainly mild winters. Like other small birds such as goldcrests, long-tailed tits are especially vulnerable to long spells of cold weather, which makes it harder for them to find food and keep up their energy levels. But it's also because they have changed their habits: they are seen in gardens far more often than they used to be, and have learned, in the past decade or so, to come to bird feeders.

I often see them in the hedgerow that runs alongside our garden, but until very recently they never came to the food we provide for the birds. Then, just before Christmas, my wife Suzanne put out some coconut shells filled with fat. Since then, we have regularly seen these little sprites only a few inches from our kitchen window, enabling me and the children to enjoy stunning views of these normally flighty birds.

The poet John Clare loved them too: calling them “bumbarrels” (after their barrel-shaped nest), as in these lines from his sonnet ‘Emmonsail's Heath in Winter’

*And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
Flit down the hedgerow in the frozen plain
And hang on little twigs and start again.*

Few words capture the sheer joie-de-vivre of encountering a flock of long-tailed tits quite so well. **Stephen Moss** @stephenmoss_tv

Upcoming events

**Evening meetings at Monkton Community Church Hall and Pioneer Café
Tuesday 19.00 for 19.30hrs.**

14 March 2017 - John SAVORY - The Carrifran Wildwood story + colonisation with woodland birds

11 April 2017 - AGM followed by Iain MALZER - Bearded tits of the Tay reedbeds

Field Trips and tours jointly with RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group

Saturday 18 February 2017 GREENAN SHORE & DOONFOOT, AYR

Meet Greenan Castle car park at 10.00. Birding the bay and coastal strip. Finish 12 noon.

Saturday 18 March 2017 RSPB KEN-DEE MARSHES RESERVE

Meet 10.30 at New Galloway High Street (toilets). On to Ken-Dee Reserve for around 11.15. Please bring a picnic lunch. Finish around 16.00 hrs.

Saturday 22 April 2017 DUMFRIES HOUSE ESTATE AND GARDENS

Meet 10.00 hrs at Dumfries House visitor centre car park (toilets). Walk and birdwatch the riverbank, woodlands and gardens. Café on site or bring a picnic lunch. Finish around 16.00 hrs.

**Monday 15 to Monday 22 May 2017. An eight-day coach holiday. FULLY BOOKED.
BIRDS AND LANDSCAPES OF THE NORTH OF IRELAND**

Coach travel from Ayr. Staying at the 4* Clandeboy Lodge Hotel in Bangor, Co. Down for three nights, and the 4* Best Western White Horse Hotel in Derry for four nights. Visiting WWT's Castle Espie Reserve and Strangford Lough (Co. Down), RSPB reserves at Rathlin Island, Belfast Lough, Portmore Lough and Lough Erne. Also visits to the Inch Levels Wildfowl Reserve and the Blue Stack Mountains in C. Donegal. With a visit to the Giant's Causeway and Carrick-A-Rede: Carlingford Lough, Oxford Island NNR, the Mourne Mountains, Murlough National Nature Reserve and St. John's Point. Coach travel from Ayr and crossing from Cairnryan to Belfast with Stena Line Ferries. Cost of all travel and half board will be £860.00.

Friday 17 February 2017 SOC Ayrshire Branch meal out at the Wheatsheaf, Symington

Please book in advance with David Rackham, either by post to David Rackham, 18 Bathurst Drive, AYR KA7 4QN, enclosing a cheque payable to SOC Ayrshire, or in person at the evening meeting (Tuesday 14.02). The cost is £15.95 per person for two courses and tea/coffee. Any extras (such as drinks or an extra course for £3.00) are payable, individually, to the Wheatsheaf on the night.
