

Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

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BIRD NEWS

Number 116

March 2021



Twitter and CAWOS

County Rarity: Honey Buzzard

Species Spotlight: Snow Bunting

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Front cover: Firecrest by Ray Scally

Other illustrations by Phil Jones

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 12th June 2021

Guest Editorial

Welcome to *Bird News* Number 116 for March 2021.

I make no apology for beginning this Guest Editorial by immediately addressing some of the content of this issue. Perhaps it is not inappropriate that information about a number of changes within the organisation of CAWOS should appear in this the spring edition of *Bird News*. It is to be hoped that the timing of the announcement of the changes signifies continuation and renewal within the Society, as a number of individuals who have devoted many, many years of ability, enthusiasm and hard work step down from their roles, hopefully to spend more of their free time birding.

In alphabetical order I refer to Geoff and Sheila Blamire without whose efforts it would have been virtually impossible to prepare the long, award-winning, series of County *Bird Reports*, Sheila is a past Chairman of the Society; Brian Dyke whose contributions go back as far as pre-CAWOS days, subsequent to which he has served terms as Chairman, Treasurer and Committee member; Norman Scott, for over 30 years auditor of the CAWOS accounts; David Steventon who has just finished his second term as CAWOS Chairman and to Richard Sturman who has set up indoor meetings over the last five years. The letter from the in-coming Chairman in this edition of *Bird News*, together with Reports from the out-going Chairman and the Secretary flesh out these changes. Members might bear in mind that the workload of those currently in the CAWOS administration could be eased if more volunteers were to come forward.

Looking back there have been considerable challenges and changes in bird recording and reporting since CAWOS was formed in 1988. One of the challenges was making the change from paper-based to digital recording. Geoff Blamire's database answered that challenge to a great extent and enabled *Bird Report* compilers to handle large amounts of data when preparing species accounts. It also enabled CAWOS to provide more easily ornithological data in support of objections against planning applications at valuable ornithological sites.

The potential protection of such sites has always been a major reason for the collection of bird records and it is important that this continues into the future. With this in mind I think it is timely to remind readers of the articles on 'Recording in Cheshire and Wirral' on pages 26-27 of the November 2020 *Bird News* which detail the change to using BirdTrack to record and store Cheshire and Wirral bird records.

One challenge, continuing to this day, concerns getting birders to make details of their sightings available to CAWOS. Ideally, from 2020, this will be via the British Trust for Ornithology BirdTrack set up in a nationwide effort to involve large numbers of people in systematic recording of birds. BirdTrack records of birds in Cheshire and Wirral have been available to CAWOS for a number of years and have greatly increased the volume of data, particularly for common species. eBird is a resource which may also be used in the future. However, in this age of social media there is the danger that sightings circulated via Twitter, WhatsApp groups, blogs and forums etc. will be lost from the recording system. As someone who has fought and lost a planning application affecting a favourite birding site, I ask every member to make an effort to ensure that their favourite birding sites are well represented by records sent to BirdTrack, which will then be available to CAWOS. Any patch of woodland, scrub or individual area of water which is of ornithological value is worth protecting where possible, so please take advantage of the BirdTrack facility to closely define your recording areas.

Finally, I think there is much to enjoy and to think about in this edition of *Bird News*, I hope you enjoy reading it.

Steve Barber

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 12th June 2021 - please be prompt

We cannot guarantee that material received after this date will be published in that issue. If you are aware that your material may be delayed, please let the Editor know as soon as possible.

Species Spotlight

SNOW BUNTING *PLECTROPHENAX NIVALIS*

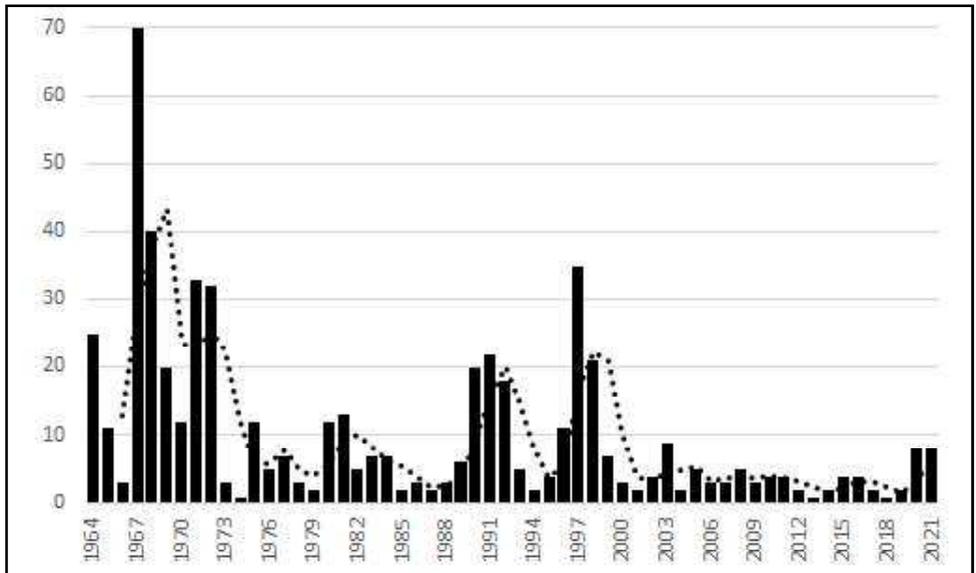
This article was first published in the February 2021 On-line Newsletter of Dee Estuary Birding (www.deeestuary.co.uk).

The arrival of eight Snow Buntings along north Wirral on December 27th 2020 caused some excitement as this was the largest flock seen here since nine on November 3rd 2003, and those had only stayed one day. Four arrived at Little Eye on 26th and when four were then spotted on the embankment around Leasowe Lighthouse on the morning of 27th it was assumed they were the same birds - until an email drops into my inbox in the afternoon to say the Little Eye birds were still there! There were still some who thought we were seeing one highly mobile flock of four but by 28th we had all eight at Leasowe to remove all doubts. They spent much time on Hoylake Shore where the new proto sand dunes were very much to their liking.



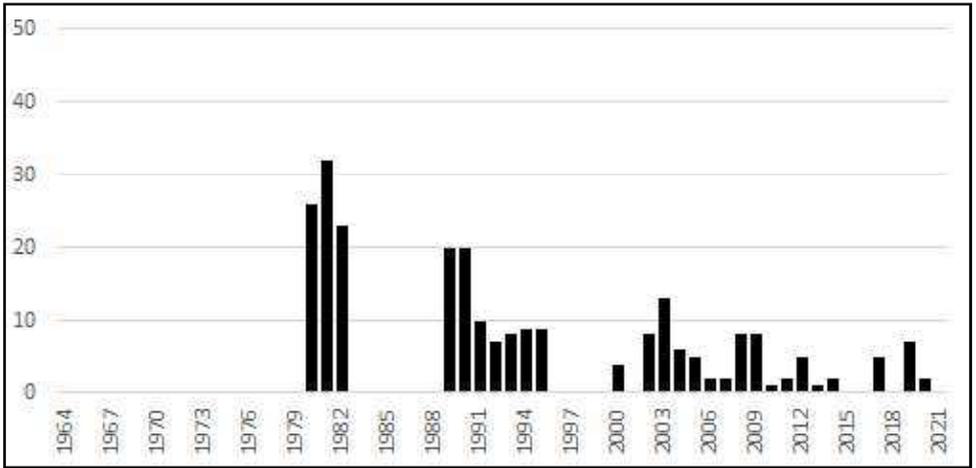
Snow Bunting
by Phil Jones

Eight may not sound very many but most records these days are of just one to three birds and usually they don't stay more than a few days, but as I write this these have already been here for well over a month. To put this flock into context I have plotted the two bar charts below which show the annual max, the one for the English side of the estuary is complete and goes from when the first *Cheshire Bird Report* was published in 1964 to the present day. The bar chart for the Welsh side of the estuary is unfortunately incomplete for various reasons, but I have included all the data for years for which I do have records.



Snow Bunting - Max Annual Count
English shore of the Dee Estuary, Hilbre and north Wirral

Note the trend line (dotted line) which is a three-year running average; intriguingly it suggests a cycle with peaks every four to six years. No idea what would cause such a cycle or if it's statistically valid, but fascinating nevertheless.



**Snow Bunting - Max Annual Count
Welsh shore of the Dee Estuary including Gronant
(data incomplete)**

One thing we can say is that we used to get a lot more Snow Buntings than we get now. Going back prior to 1964 Coward and Hedley Bell give the impression that before the mid-20th century numbers were not that much higher than they are now but there was then a significant increase in the 1950s. 30, at West Kirby in October 1953, were 'many more than previously reported'. But it was the winter of 1959-60 which was exceptional with a flock of 98 on the west side of Wirral and around Hilbre in December, there then followed a large influx in January when a remarkable 450 were counted - what a sight that must have been! Snow Bunting flocks are usually of around a max of 30 birds, with flocks up to 100 much more unusual but mega flocks of several 100 are very rare and this might well have been the largest flock ever recorded in the Liverpool Bay area. In the 1960s Leasowe shore consisted of sand dunes running down to the beach and any sea defence was rudimentary. The Snow Buntings found the area very attractive and reached a peak of 70 in December 1967. Flocks of over 30 were still present there in the early 1970s but then in 1973 the Bird Report compiler bitterly writes "... three at Leasowe Dunes on December 6th. The latter locality, where this species has wintered for a number of years, is being 'developed' and 'tidied up' so that its attraction is rapidly being lost...". NONE was seen there in 1974 although by the early 1980s some had returned with 12 in 1980 and 13 in 1981. But it must have been shortly after this that the embankment was built along that stretch and there were no further records from there for several years.

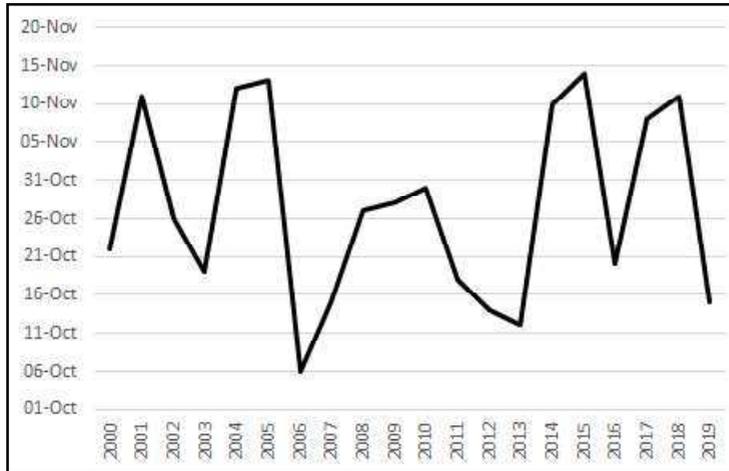
Numbers increased again in the 1990s and all the largest counts for that decade came from Hilbre with a very respectable maximum of 35 on December 20th 1997. Over the years Snow Buntings have been regular at Hoylake, Red Rocks and West Kirby up to the present day, and, although not annual, Snow Buntings are recorded at Heswall every two or three years, six were seen there in 1997 with ones and twos since.

On the Welsh side of the estuary the extensive beach and sand dunes which run from the RSPB reserve at Point of Ayr to the Little Tern Colony site at Gronant are the best place to see Snow Buntings in Wales. Writing in 1994 Lovegrove said flocks of up to 30 were regular there and that was certainly the case in the 1980s as shown in the bar chart. Numbers have been much lower this century although I'm sure this extensive area is under-recorded in winter with birds ranging over a wide area. Snow Buntings do turn up along the Welsh coast in the Dee Estuary itself and there have been several records from Flint and Connah's Quay over the years and even one at Shotwick Boating Lake on the very early date of September 20th in 2008.

The reason for the decrease in numbers of Snow Buntings this century is not clear, there has been no indication of any significant drop in numbers of the population as a whole. It may well be

a combination of factors including tidier and busier beaches, but the main impact is most likely global warming with birds staying nearer their breeding grounds. Certainly many Snow Buntings breeding in Iceland have always been sedentary and it is not surprising more now stay there rather than taking the long flight to the British Isles.

First Arrival Dates

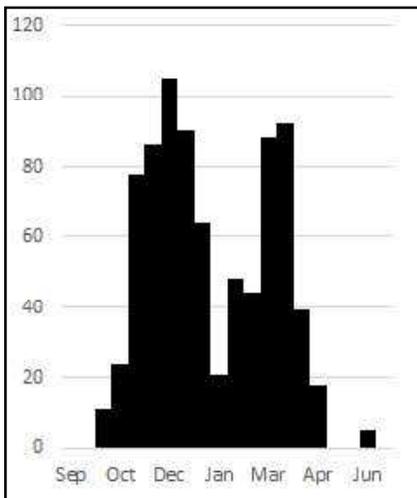


Most autumns the first arrival dates range between mid-October and mid-November. I would guess that if you did an analysis of average first arrival dates they may well be later this century than last, but whether that is due to global warming or just that with much smaller numbers involved the chances of the first one not arriving until November is greater remains unknown. Interestingly, the year before this graph, in 1999, there was a very

**Snow Buntings First Arrivals
North Wirral, Hilbre and English Shore of Dee Estuary**

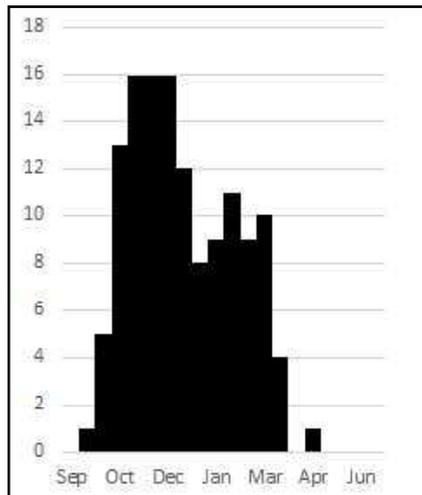
early record of a male at Hilbre on September 23rd which I think is the earliest ever recorded in Cheshire and Wirral. I haven't done a similar graph for the spring as dates for the last departing birds are so varied and some years no birds at all have been recorded in the second half of winter, including 2016, 2018 and 2019.

Annual Distribution



**Snow Bunting Histogram
reproduced from the 'Hilbre' book
Half-monthly totals 1957-77**

Snow Buntings - Dee Estuary/North Wirral from Gronant to New Brighton Number of years birds present half-monthly intervals 2000 to 2019



These two graphs show the annual distribution over two time scales as shown. Craggs, in his Hilbre book says about the Snow Bunting histogram (reproduced in the left-hand graph) - "There is some suggestion, from the histogram, of two passage peaks but the numbers involved may be too small for certainty". With numbers now even smaller and with the Bird Reports often vague about exactly how many birds were involved and on exactly what dates I've made a histogram simply showing when birds were present between 2000 and 2019 in half-monthly intervals, and was somewhat surprised how similar the two histograms turned out.

There is a definite autumn passage which is well documented to take place across the country, but on the Dee Estuary it appears to occur about a month later than elsewhere, I wonder why that is? There then appears to be a mid-winter lull before a less pronounced spring passage. Note that the record in June in the Hilbre histogram is one male that was seen over five days in 1969. What it was doing there at that time of year is anybody's guess but lone males in June are not as rare as you might think and in 2020 singles were at Kent, East Sussex and Durham.

Origins and sub-species

As the peak on the Dee Estuary and north Wirral occurs in late November and December this suggests it is birds which have already spent some time in this country and are flying south from Scotland and/or flying across from the east coast of England where the bulk of this country's Snow Buntings over-winter. The fact that many then move on suggests that they are dispersing around the coastline, and they can turn up just about anywhere on the coast of the British Isles, or perhaps they are moving on to The Netherlands and the north coast of France which ringing has shown where many birds passing through the UK end up.

The Snow Buntings which visit the UK consist of two sub-species *Plectrophenax nivalis insulae* and the nominate race, *Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*. Birds of the *insulae* sub-species all breed in Iceland and probably around 80% of the UK's over-wintering Snow Buntings come from there and their presence has been confirmed by ringing. The *nivalis* sub-species breed in Scandinavia, Greenland and across northern North America. We know they come to the UK as both *nivalis* and *insulae* can, with experience, be separately identified in the field. Circumstantial evidence suggests we get *nivalis* from both Greenland and Scandinavia but nobody really knows, unfortunately, even with over 60 years of effort, ringing tells us virtually nothing with just one ring recovery from Norway and one from Greenland. This would be a nice colour ring project for somebody to take on in the future.

Allan Conlin is lucky enough to live just a few yards from Hoylake beach where the eight Snow Buntings spent most of January. He was able to spend a lot of time studying the flock trying to assign them a race and also sex and age them - a task which turned out to be quite a challenge. Below Allan goes into some details:

Although I was not able to race, sex and age them all with 100% certainty there appeared to be three males and five females in the flock, and six were *nivalis* and two, one male and one female, were *insulae*.

Snow Buntings show a degree of variability within and between races and the *annotated photos are done within the boundaries of current knowledge which is ever advancing. Some birds are difficult 'to do' whilst others are more straightforward. The important thing to take away is that *nivalis* has a frosty mantle contrasting with the scapulars and a white rump overlaid with ginger whilst *insulae* has a mantle colour similar to the scapulars thus no contrast. Also the rump of *insulae* has a dark ground colour overlaid with ginger and black feathers.

Sexing should be straightforward as the smaller coverts such as median and lesser are mainly white with very small black centres indicating a male, whereas females have principally black median and lesser coverts with broad white fringes and tips. The black-centred scapulars are broad and rounded on males, whilst females are narrow and pointed.

Snow Buntings are a stunning winter addition to our beaches and should be enjoyed for being Snow Buntings. However, an added interest is their area of origin that being Iceland / Scotland, Scandinavia or Greenland.

Allan Conlin

*annotated photos are on the original February newsletter on www.deeestuary.co.uk

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Richard Smith, www.deeestuary.co.uk

County Rarities

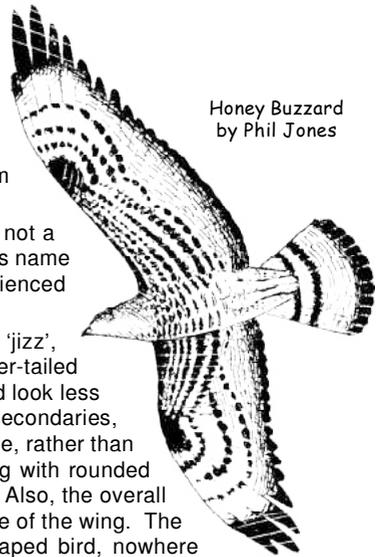
HONEY BUZZARD *Pernis apivorus*

Raptors are, in my view, a set of species that once you have seen them you tend to remember what they look like. I think this is because often one's sightings are of birds flying, sometimes overhead, and so the brain remembers bits of shape, structure and 'things that were different' from other species, rather than plumage features.

This is certainly true of Honey Buzzard. Scientifically, it is not a Buzzard in the true sense, as it lies in the *Pernis* group but its name suggests it is going to look like one and so to the inexperienced observer, an overflying bird is going to be confusing!

To start with they really are a different shape and overall 'jizz', being longer-winged and broader-winged than Buzzard, longer-tailed and longer-necked. Their wings are more parallel-sided and look less 'thick' than Buzzard. Juvenile birds also exhibited bulging secondaries, giving the wing a slightly curved 'S' shape on the trailing edge, rather than the straight, trailing edge that adults show. The tail is long with rounded corners and when partly spread looks both broad and long. Also, the overall wing shape looks different, with the carpal area in the middle of the wing. The long neck and smallish head complete a more 'cross'-shaped bird, nowhere near as compact and chunky as Common Buzzard appears. In flight Honey Buzzards hold their wings flat when gliding or soaring, rarely raised above the level, whilst in active flight, the wings even drooped slightly, pressed forward. So, it lacks the V-shaped wing appearance of Common Buzzard.

Plumage in raptors always seems to confuse as one gets numerous plumage types or morphs and different distinctions with age. But here too, Honey Buzzard plumage is very different from Common Buzzard. Adults and young have a range of plumages from almost white to almost



Honey Buzzard
by Phil Jones

black. The 'usual' features are black wingtips with a broad, black trailing edge to the wings, narrower on juveniles. The flight feathers show obvious cross bars, two or three in adult females, perhaps two in males and four or five in juveniles. The tail is broadly tipped dark, slightly narrower in juveniles which also show more even barring across the tail, rather than the uneven spacing between two or three bars that the adults show. I think once seen, then you have no doubt. However, any description to the County Rarity Team does need to highlight both shape and plumage to eliminate Common Buzzard.

Hugh Pulsford

HONEY BUZZARD IN CHESHIRE AND WIRRAL

In *The Fauna of Cheshire* (1910) Coward wrote "No evidence exists of the former nesting of the Honey Buzzard in Cheshire; it is only known as a rare straggler on migration in spring and autumn". Coward lists eight records and it's a butcher's bill given that all are of birds either 'obtained', 'shot' or 'killed' in the period 1841 to 1908. Dated records came from Burton on 22nd September 1841, Bowdon on 27th May 1872, Capesthorpe in July or August 1897, on the Mobberley side of Tatton Park on 5th June 1903 and at Broadbottom on 26th September 1908. The dates of the three other records were not known to Coward but they came from Aldford, Back Forest and Stockport. In his *The Birds of Cheshire* (1962) Hedley Bell briefly summarised Coward's account and went on to say "no further records of this species have been traced".

Honey Buzzard made its first modern day appearance in Cheshire at Redesmere in 1973. The *Cheshire Bird Report* for the year records that the bird was seen on July 25th and 27th by three observers "well familiar with the species". This appears to be the only known instance of a bird lingering for more than a day at one site in Cheshire and Wirral.

Cheshire (and Wirral) Bird Reports record Honey Buzzard in 24 of the 45 years from 1974 to 2018.

The number of records in each five-year period are shown below:

74-78	79-83	84-88	89-93	94-98	99-03	04-08	09-13	14-18
2	5	2	4	2	12	10	5	0

Obviously Honey Buzzard is a rare bird in Cheshire and Wirral. Its appearance in 18 annual *Bird Reports* from 1973 onwards has been due to just single records, while there have been two records in a further three years and three records in two more years. Under these circumstances the seven records in 2000 and six in 2008 stand out. Cheshire and Wirral shared in a large influx of continental birds into Britain in September 2000, while four autumn records in 2008 was also a good showing. However, Honey Buzzard has not appeared in a *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report* since 2013.

The majority of sightings are of single birds. However, two moved west over Shotwick on 3rd October 1974, while in the 2000 influx two different birds crossed the Mersey at Hale 80 minutes apart on September 25th and two headed south over Burton Marsh on October 1st.

The records are predominantly in the passage periods with monthly distribution:

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
4	7	5	2	7	13	5

Earliest and latest dates are 15th April 1980 at Neston Old Quay and 18th October 1998 at Meols. Approximately half of the modern day records are from North Wirral and the Dee and Mersey Estuaries including Hale and Frodsham Marshes, while the rest are widespread across 'inland' Cheshire including Acre Nook, Backford, Forge Bed, Great Warford, Hartford, Macclesfield Forest, Merelake, Middlewich, Reaseheath, Rostherne, the Sandbach area, Wilmslow and Woolston.

The Breeding Bird Atlas of Cheshire and Wirral (Guest *et al*, 1992) notes that "in late May 1980 a Honey Buzzard was watched soaring over a wooded area suitable for breeding" while the 2000 *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report* includes the statement that "The C&W Raptor Study Group report that a bird was seen in suitable habitat in Aug". Nevertheless, Coward's status statement in 1910 stands pretty well to this day.

Steve Barber

County Round-Up

Some of the records may be unauthenticated and therefore will require review by the Society's Rarities Panel or the BBRC. This report covers the period from September to December 2020.

SITE REPORTS

Chester area

A White-fronted Goose was at Puddington on Dec 28th, and 15 Cattle Egrets were here on Nov 22nd. A Hen Harrier was at Bickley Hall Farm on Dec 29th and Hoopoe at Elton on Oct 18th.

Congleton area

Two Common Scoters were at Astbury Mere on Sep 27th with a juvenile Shag from Sep 1st to 11th, a Little Gull was at Brereton Heath on Nov 11th and Hobby at Congleton on Sep 14th. A Yellow-Browed Warbler was at Congleton on Oct 5th, Cheshire's second Dusky Warbler was at Astbury Mere from Dec 20th, 100+ Pied Wagtails roosted at Congleton on Dec 2nd and two Crossbills at Brereton Heath on Oct 22nd.



Yellow-browed Warbler
by Phil Jones

Crewe and Nantwich area

1000 Pink-footed Geese were at Bar Mere on Oct 10th, 17 Whooper Swans at Hurleston Reservoir on Oct 10th with two Egyptian Geese at Doddington and Rodeheath during Dec, 17 Goldeneyes were at Doddington on Dec 13th. Three Great White Egrets were at Bar Mere on Dec 31st, Osprey flew over Sandbach Flashes on Sep 6th, Marsh Harrier at Quoisley Mere on Sep 26th and Red Kite over Audlem on Dec 24th.

A Grey Phalarope was at Doddington on Nov 6th, Spotted Redshank at Elton Hall Flash on Sep 15th. Merlins were at Maw Green Tip on Oct 7th and Baddiley on Dec 12th and a Hobby was at Sandbach Flashes on several dates. A Yellow-browed Warbler was at Bickerton Hill on Oct 10th, two Spotted Flycatchers at Lea Forge on Sep 18th, Dipper at Lawton Lake on Nov 20th and Richard's Pipit at Crewe on Oct 22nd.

Ellesmere Port and Neston area

Wildfowl included: 6100 Pink-footed Geese at Burton Point on Oct 15th, Bean Goose at BMW on Oct 5th, 16 Whooper Swans were at Denhall on Oct 13th and 10 Egyptian Geese at BMW on Oct 1st. A Garganey was at BMW from Sep 14th to 22nd with another at Decca Pools on Oct 2nd. Seven Spoonbills were at Parkgate on Sep 1st and 3rd with a Bittern in the same area on several dates, 18 Cattle Egrets at BMW on Dec 11th with a max count of 37 Great White Egrets on Sep 30th. 133 Little Egrets were noted on the Sep WeBS count. Single Ospreys were over BMW on Sep 16th, Parkgate on Sep 19th with another reported on Dec 2nd, 10 Marsh Harriers were at Parkgate on Nov 1st and four Hen Harriers on Oct 26th.

A Spotted Crake was noted at BMW on Sep 2nd, 230 Avocets were counted on the Mersey WeBS count on Sep 20th, three Knots were at BMW on Sep 3rd, 10 Curlew Sandpipers on Sep 3rd with Little Stint on several dates. A Pectoral Sandpiper was at BMW from Sep 27th to 29th, nine Spotted Redshanks on Dec 15th and 16th and 12 Greenshanks at Parkgate on Sep 25th. A Glaucous Gull was at BMW on Dec 4th. Four Merlins were at Stanlow on Oct 18th and two Hobbies at Parkgate on Sep 2nd. Two Bearded Tits were at BMW on Nov 27th and 28th and Twite at Decca Pools on Nov 23rd.

Halton area

1450 Pink-footed Geese were at Hale on Nov 4th; a White-fronted Goose was at Hale on Nov 6th with five Whooper Swans at Hale Duck Decoy on Oct 20th. A Gannet was at Pickering's Pasture

on Sep 25th with Shag on Nov 24th and 29th. Eight Turnstones were at Hale on Dec 19th, seven Curlew Sandpipers at Pickering's Pasture on Sep 10th with nine Little Stints on Oct 21st. A Sabine's Gull was at Hale from Sep 6th to 14th whilst a Guillemot was at Pickering's Pasture on Sep 10th. Up to four Merlins were in the Hale area during Oct-Dec with a single Hobby at Carr Lane Pools on Sep 3rd. Single Yellow-browed Warblers were at Pickering's Pasture on Oct 26th and Hale on Nov 16th with a Firecrest at Hale on Sep 15th. Ring Ouzels were at Hale on Oct 4th and Pickering's Pasture on 14th, Redstart at Hale on Sep 8th with Richard's Pipit on Oct 17th. Three Rock Pipits were at Hale on Oct 18th and Pickering's Pasture on Dec 7th, 11 Bramblings at Hale on Oct 5th and Crossbill at Pickering's Pasture on Sep 9th.

Macclesfield area

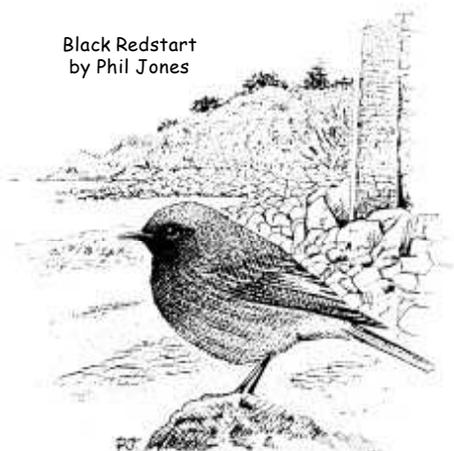
A White-fronted Goose was at Chelford, Dec 26th, 14 Whooper Swans at Redesmere on Dec 2nd and 11 Egyptian Geese at Chelford on Dec 2nd. A Red-crested Pochard was at Redesmere on Nov 10th, Smew at Lapwing Lane Pool on several dates during Nov and Redesmere on Dec 17th. A Black-necked Grebe was at Tatton Park from Sep 23rd to Oct 8th and two Common Cranes over Capesthorpe Hall on Sep 26th. A Dipper was at Bosley on Nov 29th with Crossbill on 26th and a Snow Bunting at Bollington on Dec 14th.

Vale Royal area

Up to five Brent Geese were at Frodsham Marsh on Oct 4th, 23 White-fronted Geese at Marbury CP on Nov 4th and 37 Whooper Swans at Frodsham Marsh on Dec 17th. Three Garganey were at Frodsham Marsh from Sep 24th to 26th and 42 Pintails on Oct 11th and Common Scoter on Sep 27th. A Black-necked Grebe was at Neumann's Flash on Sep 15th to Oct 8th, two Bitterns at Marbury CP for most of the period. Up to four Cattle Egrets were at Frodsham Marsh with a single in the Neumann's Flash area from late Sep to mid-Oct, seven Great white Egrets were at Frodsham Marsh on Nov 27th and Dec 17th with 46 Little Egrets on Oct 6th. Five Marsh Harriers were at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 23rd and a Hen Harrier in the Marbury area on Nov 11th and 12th.

c70 Avocets were at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 22nd and 42 Grey Plovers on Oct 4th, eight Bar-tailed Godwits on Sep 21st, 26 Knots on Sep 22nd and Curlew Sandpiper on Sep 19th and Little Stint on 20th. Four Woodcocks were at Carey Park on Nov 28th, 15 Jack Snipes and 74 Snipes at Ashton's Flash on Nov 27th and four Greenshanks at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 2nd. Two Common Terns at Marbury CP on Sep 14th whilst a Long-tailed Skua was at Frodsham on Sep 9th. Three Hobbies were at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 3rd. A Marsh Tit was an unusual visitor to Frodsham Marsh on Oct 21st, a Yellow-browed Warbler was at Neumann's Flash on Oct 15th and Firecrest on Nov 11th and 12th. A Black Redstart was at Knutsford on several dates in Dec and Frodsham Marsh on Dec 6th, 30 Bramblings at Newchurch Common on Dec 14th and Crossbill on Nov 28th.

Black Redstart
by Phil Jones



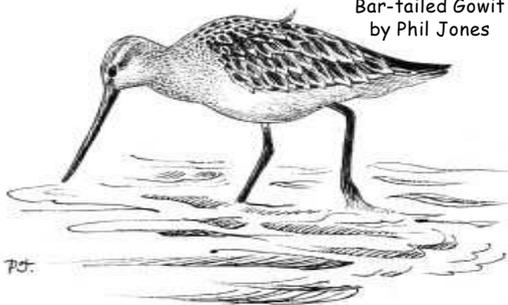
Warrington area

12,500 Pink-footed Geese were in the Woolston Eyes area on Dec 19th, three Bean Geese at Woolston Eyes on Nov 30th, a White-fronted Goose at Risley on Dec 28th and Culcheth on Dec 2nd and 25 Whooper Swans at Woolston Eyes on Dec 3rd. Two Cattle Egrets were at Woolston Eyes on Oct 6th. A single Marsh Harrier was at Woolston Eyes for most of the period and a Red Kite on Nov 10th. 30 Dunlins were at Woolston Eyes on Nov 23rd and four Woodcocks at Risley Moss on Dec 21st. 14,200 Woodpigeons were noted during visual migration at Woolston Eyes on Nov 3rd, Merlin at Risley and Woolston Eyes, two Hobbies at Woolston Eyes on Sep 2nd. 10 Ravens were at Woolston Eyes on Sep 15th.

Wirral area

270 Brent Geese were at Hilbre on Dec 7th, 16 Whooper Swans were at Leasowe on Oct 16th. 970

Pintails were at Heswall on Dec 17th, Velvet Scoter off Hilbre on Dec 2nd and 29th, 3000+ Common Scoters were off Meols on Sep 29th, 17 Goosanders at West Kirby on Dec 10th and 11 Red-breasted Mergansers at Heswall on Dec 17th. 35 Red-throated Divers were noted off Hilbre on Dec 2nd with Black-throated Diver on Sep 13th and 19th and Great Northern Diver on 30th. At least five Leach's Petrels were off New Brighton on Sep 5th and four Manx Shearwaters off Hilbre on Sep 13th. 174 Little Egrets were at Thurstaston on Sep 12th and 50 Gannets off Hilbre on Sep 13th.



Bar-tailed Godwit
by Phil Jones

Waders of note included: two Whimbrels at Thurstaston on Sep 3rd, 85 Bar-tailed Godwits at Heswall on Dec 25th, 4900 Black-tailed Godwits at Caldy on Sep 3rd, 414 Turnstones at New Brighton on Dec 17th and 40,000 Knots at Thurstaston on Nov 10th. 16 Curlew Sandpipers were at Hoylake on Sep 3rd with 800 Sanderlings on Nov 13th and Little Stint on Sep 3rd, Wood Sandpiper at Hilbre on Sep 2nd and a possible Lesser Yellowlegs at Thurstaston on Sep 20th. A Sabine's Gull was at Meols on Sep 5th, Little Gull at New Brighton on Oct 10th, five Mediterranean Gulls were at Thurstaston on Sep 23rd, 60+ Sandwich Terns at Hoylake on Sep 3rd, four Little Terns at Hilbre on Sep 8th and Arctic Tern at Leasowe on Oct 10th. A Great Skua was at New Brighton on Nov 16th, three Pomarine Skuas at Leasowe on Oct 10th with Arctic Skua on Sep 19th. 14 Guillemots were at Hilbre on Dec 2nd and four Razorbills at Red Rocks on Nov 13th. A late Cuckoo was at Heswall on Sep 1st with four Short-eared Owls on Nov 15th and a late Swift at Meols on Oct 21st.

Elsewhere, a Siberian Chiffchaff was at Leasowe from Nov 13th to 18th, single Yellow-browed Warblers were at Hooton on Oct 17th, Heswall on Oct 24th and Leasowe on Nov 10th and 11th. A Firecrest was at Hilbre on Sep 24th, Ring Ouzel at Hoylake on Oct 18th, 1000 Fieldfares at Leasowe on Oct 18th, Spotted Flycatcher at Meols on Sep 10th. Two Black Redstarts were at Wallasey on Nov 21st, two Redstarts at Hilbre on Sep 18th, 20+ Wheatears at Leasowe on Sep 15th, Tree Pipit at Leasowe on Sep 28th, Richard's Pipit at Hoylake on Oct 11th and seven Rock Pipits at Hilbre on Oct 12th. 10 Twites were at Hilbre on Oct 13th, two Crossbills at Heswall on Oct 4th, single Lapland Buntings were at Heswall on Oct 28th and Red Rocks on Nov 17th with eight Snow Buntings along the north Wirral coast throughout Dec.

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Thanks/acknowledgments to: Dee Estuary Website, SECOS, WECG, Dermot Smith (Mersey WeBS), NNHS, Frodsham Marsh Birdlog, *Birdwatching* Magazine, Manchester Bird Forum, whatsapp groups (Cheshire, Marbury and Sandbach), Rob Cockbain, Bill Bellamy and everyone else who passed records on.

WANTED: NEW COUNCIL MEMBERS

There are three vacancies for Non-Executive
(Ordinary) Members of Council

For further information, please contact:

Ted Lock Email: secretary@cawos.org Tel: 01625 540466

THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU!!!

Ringling News

Ringling plays an important part in developing our knowledge of birds. In this feature we invite ringling groups, or individual ringling, active in Cheshire and Wirral to contribute their own accounts of their activities. In general, the idea is that these should provide a means of updating local birders on the groups' work - both by way of information about birds ringling or recovered, and news of other events (or incidents). Future contributions will be welcomed.

RINGING AT WOOLSTON - SUMMER 2020

As a result of the first national lockdown in spring 2020 no ringling took place between 21st March and 16th May and accordingly the summer ringling period was truncated by eight weeks. For this reason, the following comparisons must be viewed as indicative only. In the period from 16th May to the end of September a total of 3,541 birds of 49 species were ringling at Woolston. On the face of it this is a sharp reduction from the 4,550 birds of 50 species that were ringling in the summer of 2019. Part of this reduction of 1,009 birds ringling results from the 'closed period' but, in the equivalent period of 2019 only 573 birds were ringling so it cannot be the whole story.

The following first ringling dates for juvenile birds indicate that for resident species the timing of their breeding season was at the early end of the normal range. Ringling only restarted on 16th May and it is possible in the case of Robin that an earlier first juvenile date would have been recorded if ringling had been continuous.

Ringling date of first juvenile (resident species)

	2020	2019	2018	2017
Robin	25-May	07-May	26-May	28-May
Wren	09-Jun	09-Jun	22-Jun	11-Jun
Dunnoek	22-May	11-Jun	08-Jun	06-May
Bullfinch	07-Jun	23-May	29-Jun	11-Jun

In the case of our migrant warblers the following table of 'first juvenile' dates indicates that the timing of the breeding season for Chiffchaff was early, whilst the dates for Blackcap, Whitethroat and Reed Warbler are more typical.

Ringling date of first juvenile (migrant warblers)

	2020	2019	2018	2017
Chiffchaff	26-May	31-May	13-Jun	03-Jun
Blackcap	07-Jun	09-Jun	02-Jun	03-Jun
Whitethroat	16-Jun	09-Jun	23-Jun	17-Jun
Reed Warbler	16-Jun	22-Jun	23-Jun	02-Jul

The duck trap is not operated during the summer, but two Teals and a single Mallard found their way into the mist nets. On 21st May 2020 a Woolston-ringed Teal was shot in the Komi Republic, 970km north-east of Moscow and 3,420 km from Woolston. This is our furthest recovery of a Woolston Teal. There were no raptors ringling.

The Green Sandpiper passage was again well sampled with eight colour ringling as part of the national study, the same number as in 2019. Colour ringling of Green Sandpipers began in 2014 and 46 have now been so ringling. In 2019 a colour-ringed Green Sandpiper was photographed on the River Conder in Lancashire but, whilst the combination indicated a Woolston ringling bird, the photographs showed insufficient detail to enable the identification of an individual bird. In 2020 two Woolston-ringed birds were re-encountered in coastal locations in Lancashire and the colour rings were successfully read. One had been ringling at Woolston in 2018 and was re-sighted on Aldcliffe Marsh and the other was ringling on August 4th 2020 and ten days later was on the River Conder, a regular stopover site.

In 2020 no significant hirundine roost formed on either bed. The seven Swallows and two Sand Martins ringling is the lowest total since 1992. This is the culmination of a steady decline and it

does seem that the days of big roosts at Woolston are over.

We ringed 1,835 migrant warblers, pretty much identical to the 1,843 ringed in summer of 2019. Chiffchaffs and Common Whitethroats did well whilst Blackcaps did not appear in large numbers in the usual peak month of September and were ringed in lower numbers. It was good to see Grasshopper Warbler back in the ringing totals with four ringed, all on No.3 Bed. At Woolston Cetti's Warblers continue to go from strength to strength and the 24 birds ringed represented a record summer.

The resident insectivores were caught in lower numbers than in 2019, but only in the case of Robin, where the 110 birds ringed was a sharp reduction on 180 in 2019, does the variation exceed what might be expected given the reduced effort. For reasons unclear, Dunnocks bucked the trend with 89 ringed compared with 71 in summer 2019.

After two very successful years both Blue Tits and Great Tits had a more modest breeding season in the nest boxes on the reserve with 134 chicks ringed on No.3 Bed (2019: 173, 2018: 163). One brood was too large to ring when ringing restarted so 142 chicks fledged from the boxes, a 15 per cent reduction on the average of the previous two years. One of the most disappointing features of a difficult year was that only 14 Willow Tits were ringed in the entire year. This is the lowest total since 1994. Just 10 different birds were re-trapped meaning only 24 different Willow Tits were handled during the year. The equivalent figure for 2019 was 50 and for 2018 it was 54. The BTO preliminary assessment for 2020 reports a 60 per cent reduction in adult abundance. Given that the 2019 breeding season was a good one at Woolston, this implies that poor adult survival in winter 2019/2020 may be a factor.

After a very weak passage in 2019 with only 15 birds ringed the Meadow Pipit passage returned to more normal levels with 44 ringed (2018: 49).

There was no significant arrival of finches in late summer and all the seedeaters were ringed in lower numbers than was the case in 2019.

There were no 'surprise captures' in the summer period but on 26th September a juvenile female Stonechat was ringed on No.3 Bed. This was the first for the bed, the first since 2009 and just the sixth for Woolston.

As I write this we are in the middle of the third national lockdown and ringing has been suspended since 6th January, so 2021 will be another year of disruption to the ringing at Woolston.

Michael Miles, on behalf of the Woolston Ringing Team

HILBRE BIRD OBSERVATORY (HiBO)

Ringing June 2020 to February 2021

The number of birds ringed in this period has been reduced due to a smaller amount of visits, but we can still look at the data we have and interpret that in perhaps a more speculative way than we might have done in other years. Clearly this reduction in number of birds ringed will stop the 2020 data being used in long-term monitoring projects, such as the Willow Warbler migration survey, but all is not lost and some inferences can be drawn from some of the data.

A Yellowhammer was ringed in August - this is a very rare event for Hilbre and very welcome. 47 Linnets were ringed in July, August and September with most of them being juveniles. This is again very good news and demonstrates that Linnets, a red list bird of conservation concern, had a successful breeding season on Hilbre in 2020.

We have been examining autumn Goldcrest numbers for some years now since the terrible autumn of 2009 when no Goldcrests turned up on Hilbre at all. All Goldcrests passing through Hilbre are migrants and the numbers ringed give an indication of the success, or otherwise, of the breeding season in Scotland/Scandinavia. The expected number of Goldcrests ringed during the autumn is around 40 so 16 in 2020 probably indicates that Goldcrest breeding in 2020 was at a reasonable level.

Another breeding season boost was the ringing of three Rock Pipits, including fledged juveniles, that confirmed their breeding in 2020.

The continued growth in the size of the Brent Goose flock that winters on Hilbre is good news and the recording of colour-ringing data enables lots of data to be collected regarding the movements

of these relatively long-lived birds. Just because we have not ringed any Brent Geese ourselves has not stopped Hilbre being a contributor to the project.

The opportunity for other colour ring recording is there as well. Hilbre members helped at some of the Altcar cannon-netting sessions in 2019 and before so we are still looking for colour-flagged Knot and there is a chance of colour-flagged Grey Plover as well (one colour-ringed bird from Altcar has been wintering around Hilbre!). We would encourage all birders to record and submit colour-ring sightings.

John Elliott, on behalf of Hilbre Bird Observatory

CHESHIRE SWAN STUDY GROUP

Since my last report in October, the Swan Study Group has ringed a total of 22 swans including 7 cygnets, 2 second-years, 2 third-years and 11 adults. These included 1 retrap.

The maximum counts of flocks of Mute Swans since my last report are as follows:

- Acre Dell Pools, nr Congleton: 61 on 21st Oct, 73 on 16th Nov, 64 on 24th Dec and 63 on 23rd Jan.
- Bottom Flash, Winsford: 39 on 8th Nov and 30 on 12th Jan.
- Comber Mere, nr Whitchurch: 41 on 18th Oct, 23 on 15th Nov and 28 on 13th Dec.
- Coole Pilate, nr Nantwich: 18 on 4th Dec and 20 on 10th Jan.
- Doddington Mere, nr Nantwich: 16 on 16th Oct, 18 on 15th Nov, 8 on 4th Dec and 6 on 7th Jan.
- Trent and Mersey Canal, Middlewich: 28 on 7th Oct, 66 on 23rd Dec and 42 on 12th Jan.
- Redes Mere, nr Macclesfield: 11 on 18th Oct, 20 on 13th Dec.
- Sandbach Flashes: 16 on 18th Oct, 22 on 15th Nov, 13 on 13th Dec and 25 on 12th Jan.
- Spike Island, Widnes: 72 on 8th Oct, 40 on 15th Nov, 44 on 13th Dec.
- Woolston Eyes, nr Warrington: 35 on 18th Oct, 40 on 15th Nov, 44 on 13th Dec.

The *Cheshire Swan Study Group Report* for 2020 is now available to view on the website (under Reports): <http://cheshireswanstudygroup.wordpress.com>

Sightings of all swans, geese and Mallard should be sent to David Cookson at cheshireswans@gmail.com giving details of place (6-fig map ref), colour/character combination of ring and, if with other birds, total number present in flock. All sightings will receive a printout of the history for the relevant bird(s).

David Cookson, Group Leader, 70 Rope Lane, Rope, Crewe, CW2 6RD
Tel: 01270 567526. Email: cheshireswans@gmail.com

MID-CHESHIRE BARN OWL GROUP

Given the extraordinary events of 2020 and the constraints the various 'lockdowns' and 'tiers' imposed on our ability to do any conservation work it was, at least, pleasing to get some reasonable results for the Barn Owls in Cheshire. As expected from our previous article, breeding activity was similar to 2019, with brood sizes slightly down.

What had first appeared to be a complete closedown of activities in March/April/May 2020 was eased somewhat in June, July and August 2020, enabling us to carry out a reasonable amount of box checking and monitoring. But the closing months of 2020 again resulted in only limited work being possible, with our hopes to get out and about to clean out, repair, re-erect and erect new boxes - our usual work during that time of year - being dashed. That problem has continued into 2021, with added lockdowns limiting our ability to get out and carry out any conservation work. Not only that, but the weather, to say the least, has been devastating for the Barn Owls - particularly the extended and very wet periods.

But we have to remain optimistic. Indications at the time of writing this article are that Covid 19 infections and deaths are reducing, providing hope that the lockdown will be eased in the near future - raising hope of getting out into the countryside again. Can't wait!!

The most optimistic fact I can raise, and there're not many of those at the moment, is that Covid 19 does not affect our beloved wildlife. We will get over this pandemic, and we will get back to our conservation work, we just have to be patient, and we have to follow the guidelines to get rid of (or at least, control) the virus.

As my now usual final comments - we do our best, but it stretches our limited resources to help support these beautiful and iconic birds. We get a great deal of satisfaction out of the conservation work we do. But we are always in need of more help.

To repeat our usual concerns and plea - if you have seen any Barn Owls recently, please could you let us know (either direct or by our sighting report on the website www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk); as you will appreciate it is important that we know where the birds are regularly seen.

John Mycock, Chairman Tel: 07970 235437 Email: cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com

Conservation News

A round-up of news from the CAWOS conservation representatives, who aim to keep an eye on what is going on in their area. If you have any issues or concerns then do contact your local representative (by letter or email preferably). They may be able to help or should know someone who can! The relevant contact information is listed at the end.

CONSERVATION NEWS FROM STEVE TURNER

The bird situation here at Weaverham has been very good; I have had the following on my feeders: Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Siskins, a solitary Lesser Redpoll, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Coal Tits and after 10 years a male Chaffinch on the ground under the feeders. Even though they breed in the churchyard over the road I have never seen one in the garden since moving here. Also Long-tailed Tits and on the floor under the suet ball feeders, Robins, Blackbirds, Dunnocks, and to my amazement, along with the House Sparrows and Starlings for the last week, a female Blackcap has been visiting every morning to gorge on the suet balls. It came in very useful for the Great Garden Birdwatch as she has been coming every day between 10:00 and 11:00, so guess what time I did my watch! The only downside to this is they eat more in a week than I do, I'm not saying I eat bird seed even though it is very nutritious.

In the last *Bird News* Richard Smith placed an article about paragliders on the Dee Estuary and along Wirral. The disturbance these things cause is immense. Please note any sightings you have of these and file them for a later date if the need arises. The only thing I can suggest to Richard is "how high can you throw a stick"?

As you will notice there are now three vacancies for Conservation Reps: Chester, Congleton and Macclesfield. I am appealing for members in these respective areas if they can spare a little time each week to apply for these posts - all that is required is to be a point of contact to members in those areas if they have a planning issue or conservation matter to bring to the attention of the society, and to keep an eye on the local press to see if any planning issues are likely to cause a problem. If your own local papers are like the *Northwich Guardian* that won't take many seconds - if a problem comes up that needs attention pass it on to me and if I can't help "I know a man who can".

On a more worrying note, published this week in one of the shooting magazines, is a report on the status of the Grey Partridge as a result of a survey carried out by The Game Conservancy Council that nationally numbers are down by a staggering 84%. I know we have some quite large coveys in the Aston area and Acton Bridge but as for the rest of the county I am not sure. Please keep an eye open whilst out and about and record any sightings you may get (submissions@cawos.org).

I can remember in my youth the local shoots in my area of Norfolk would shoot anything up to 300 Grey Partridges a day and there still seemed to be the same amount about after they had shot. These days are very different. I have spoken to a couple of Norfolk gamekeepers over the last week and they advised me that anyone who shoots a Grey Partridge is ordered to pay a large fine donated to a local charity. One of the shoots gives the offending gun a bird identification guide and they are asked to leave and are banned for life from attending that particular shoot. To turn away someone who is paying up to £500 a day to shoot shows the dedication a lot of shoots have to protecting the Grey Partridge. More locally High Legh Shooting Syndicate have started to leave

corners of fields to return to the wild and are tipping 'loads of the stuff our roses love so much' in these corners to attract flies for Grey Partridge chicks, this is also having a knock-on effect for other insect lovers to use a local takeaway. Again at High Legh the shooting of Grey Partridge is forbidden and carries a hefty fine to any offenders. Whilst I appreciate that our area is not prime partridge country, we need to keep an eye on our population to make sure it does not disappear. I realise that a number of Red-legged Partridges are living wild after release and that a great number are released by shoots. These are stable, it's the Greys I am concerned about. Keep safe and take care.

**Steve Turner, Conservation Officer, 11 Pinfold Way, Weaverham, Northwich, CW8 3NL
Tel: 01606 853796 Email: conservation@cawos.org**

WARRINGTON AREA

The new wetland creation at Woolston Eyes is developing well and is attracting lots of wildfowl. With the Black-necked Grebes due back in a few weeks' time, and Black-headed Gulls already showing interest in the islands, it would be good if some Black-necks would be attracted too.

Brian Martin, Warrington Area Representative

WIRRAL AREA

The COVID 19 lockdowns brought many more people than normal to the shores of Wirral with the potential of much bird disturbance. However, the only problem seems to have been at Heswall Marsh where the footpath which runs along the landward edge of the marsh became unusable due to the heavy rain turning it into a quagmire. Consequently, people started walking along the edge of Heswall gutter which unfortunately meant they disturbed all the wildfowl and waders which use that channel for both feeding and roosting. Wirral Council, who owns the land, and Natural England have been informed. Ideally the original footpath needs to be improved and the route by the gutter blocked in some way, perhaps by digging a ditch or two. But as it's part of the Dee Estuary SSSI nothing can be done without due process, hopefully with better weather the footpath will dry up and the problem will go away, until next winter!

Richard Smith, Wirral Area Representative

CONSERVATION TEAM

Conservation Officer	Steve Turner, 11 Pinfold Way, Weaverham, Northwich, CW8 3NL Tel: 01606 853796 Email: conservation@cawos.org
Chester	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Congleton	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Crewe and Nantwich	Colin Lythgoe, 11 Waterloo Road, Haslington, Crewe, CW1 5TF. Tel: 01270 582642 Email: colin.lythgoe@uwclub.net
Halton	Tony Parker, 41 The Park, Penketh, Warrington, WA5 2SG. Tel: 01925 726986 Email: tonyparker@cawos.org
Macclesfield	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Vale Royal	Roy Leigh, 8 Hall Drive, Marston, Northwich, Cheshire, CW9 6DT Tel: 01606 892032 Email: roysleigh@aol.com
Warrington	Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Tel: 01925 264251 Email: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com
Wirral	Richard Smith, March Wall, King's Drive North, Caldy, Wirral, CH48 1LL. Tel: 0151 625 2320 Email: richard@deestuary.co.uk

Note: If YOU see anything of interest in your local paper, on the Internet, or even in the national press, relevant to Cheshire and Wirral, please bring it to the Editor's attention. Either scan in the article and email it, or cut it out and put it in the post. Please make sure the source and date is clear. Editor's contact details are on the inside front cover of *Bird News*.

Notes and Letters

Bird News is always keen to hear from CAWOS members. Please send us any notes of unusual avian behaviour or amusing anecdotes that you think your fellow birders will be interested in. Also, we are always interested in your views on any of our articles or on the newsletter itself. Ed.

MY GREEN BIRDING LIST 2020 - THE FINAL EPISODE

Episode Five - On the way to Tier Four and Five (*August to Dec 2020*).

Past readers may recall that I am keeping two environmentally-friendly bird lists for 2020. One is a 'Fuel-free Birding List', of birds seen using only bike and boots, within 10 miles of my inland home. My other list is a 'Green Travel Birding List', which allows me also to use public transport, plus driving for official bird censuses and for social and family duties. I was amazed when by July the first list, at 120, was only nine species behind the easier second list.

For my Green Travel list, a useful fact is that my sister lives at West Kirby. Visits to her have proved profitable for green birding for many years (especially if the family fancies a walk to Hilbre). Way back in 1979 I directed to nearby Meols one family stroll that involved me, my sister and spouse, Mum, Dad and *nana* - alias the Asian Desert Warbler of that famous year! All the family enjoyed watching the crowd that was watching the crowd that was watching the bird. Sadly 2020 brings me no *nana*; but a sisterly visit in August is nicely preceded by high tide at Hoylake, which adds Curlew Sandpiper, Manx Shearwater and 20 Little Terns to my Green Travel List.

Meanwhile, for my Fuel-free List it's surprising how many surprises turn up - such as a Shag at Astbury Mere. However, the most frustrating bird family this year is the chats. This year all available Stonechats have dodged behind stones to avoid me, I missed a Wheatear by minutes, and even taking my boots and socks off and wading through floodwater was not enough to find a Whinchat. (Is that a new way to dip out?). But then comes September and suddenly chats are like London buses; in the space of 72 hours all three species sit up and pose for me. Huh! Tell me which half-dozen weeks to birdwatch for during next year and I'll sleep through all the rest.

There were failures that I never overcame. I was not the only local birder this year who failed to solve The Mystery of the Missing Hobby. Perhaps the movements of Hobbies near my home are governed by quantum mechanics, so that they click in and (when I appear) out of existence with no explanation; or maybe Schrödinger's cat ate the one I was supposed to see. But in October a lovely female Goldeneye brings up my 125 species, followed minutes later, at long last, by the local Peregrine I should have seen in the spring.

All the easy birds have been ticked off, and I am grimly adding them singly now. It's reached the point where I am setting out on my bike in search of birds that common sense tells me have probably already gone. A long ride to Redesmere finds a fine flock of waterfowl but the Red-crested Pochard is not among them. A faint hope of an Egyptian Goose on floods at Rode Heath is another predictably vain ride. However, it does get me out on good long bike rides that I need to get fit.

And purple days still happen. It is probably the muddiest expedition of the year. I hate cycling in wellies. But we slither and slide to an unidentified bone-chilling spot where we set up our scopes and scan the bushes hopefully, looking for perhaps only a couple of feathers showing in the deep darkness under the bushes. A first scan finds nothing - we ignore the plump bird sitting in full view in the leafless tree in front of the bushes (mental assumption - just a Woodpigeon). Huh - nothing at all, apart from that brown woodpig. *Brown?* Perched openly in the winter sunshine, a fluffed-up, comfortable-looking Long-eared Owl gazes back at us sleepily. Confessions of a lazy birder... And the same day adds a Jack Snipe in flight, a Water Rail, and even an actual real visible Cetti's Warbler! As I say, tell me in advance what day the birds have marked in their diaries. But the rough area I planned to explore next has a tractor cutting it all down. Ah well, you can't win 'em all.

Now it's time for another unlikely expedition. It's said that the canal bank is the best place to watch for a Woodcock. Oh, yeah? Somewhere in the gloom somewhere between the Trent and the Mersey? Can you narrow it down a bit, please? From the vague clues I am given I make a guess and cycle along the muddy towpath to a rough field in front of trees. Plenty of Rooks and Jackdaws high against the darkening sky, but I scan among them in vain. I am thinking of leaving

when a black shape zooms up from the field *below*, almost straight at me. I don't know which of us is more shocked - I am glowing weirdly in the gloom in my cycling jacket, so the bird swerves wildly round, a stunning silhouette just above the skyline only twenty yards from me. Wow - I'd never realised Woodcock were such solid birds, and what a bill! One of those moments that lasts for a second and fills the memory for a year. Next comes a long flog to Lapwing Hall Pool (just inside my ten-mile radius) for a Smew. What is it about this particular lake that the bird I want is always the very last one I look at there?

Time is getting short and what I have is under pressure. As it happens, I've just been elected the new secretary of our church - I thought of refusing to admit I'd won and challenging the results, but I don't think I'd get away with it. So, aargh! - paperwork. Those COVID risk assessments! I'm editing the latest one when my phone wakes up. *WHAT?* A Dusky Warbler at Astbury? I can't risk missing that! Sadly, it's too late to cycle safely there on Day One. And on Day Two, to my great dismay, I am committed to helping a friend fail their driving test for the eighth time. (No, I'm not part of a Deep State green plan to force drivers off the road.)

And there's no report yet of Dusky, by the time I set out after lunch on Day Three. I ride to Astbury for the exercise anyway; then I check my phone again. Still no sightings. Gloom. But I'm here now. Reaching the lake, I Google the call of Dusky Warbler and play it back to see what I'm listening for - but I keep the sound low so that I don't start a stampede of any nearby birders... The last report was from the west side of the lake, but I am feeling some bladder pressure, so I decide not to ride to join the disappointed crowd yet (or at all, if there are too many), and I turn the other way round the lake heading first for the facilities at the visitor centre. Along the path ahead, only one grey-haired couple is in sight. They are carrying bins and obviously looking for the Dusky, but they are in the wrong place and don't act like seriously hard-bitten twitchers, so I only slow slightly. 'Any good?' I ask dismissively. The man holds out a flat hand and wiggles it. 'Sort of.'

'*Oh!*' I pull on my brakes and come to a halt beside a bush. Inside it, by the water less than five yards away, something is making an unusual but suddenly not unfamiliar ticking sound. Wow! Serendipity or what? I glimpse what looks like a fat brown Chiffchaff and call out. It's strange how a crowd can materialise from an empty path; and the magnetic attraction of birders for each other accelerates exponentially as the crowd gets bigger. But the bird moves away fast. Soon, I pedal away from the gathering mob, still heading on round the lake towards a place of aquatic relief. Further along, two new birders have glimpsed something. I halt again, to stand behind them. There!! I point, and the crowd is suddenly right behind me again. Sighs of delight fill the air. After a short but convincing great show by a great little bird, the crowd turns to me on my bike. 'Well done!' 'Thanks!' 'I'd given up and was on the way back to my car!' an exquisitely satisfying compliment, that. Bikes forever!

I am up to 134 species 'Fuel-free' and 149 by 'Green Travel'; can I reach the round numbers? After Christmas, snow, ice and slush deter me from cycling; but on New Year's Eve caution fails me. Somehow, I've never ticked off a convincing Siskin in 2020; and I received new bins from Santa. Surely? Riding gingerly to Foden's Flash I scrutinise the top of every alder tree in the area through crystal-clear lenses, then give up. Riding home, three little birds fly into a solitary thin alder - right above a (too) busy road junction where none of the cars can stop, but I can! What a satisfying finish. Geronimo! 135 and 150.

So, these are my gauntlets. Any takers for either? I could (and perhaps should) have recorded more species to show the potential of green birding. Shamefully, in my 'Fuel-free' total of 135 I missed locally all of Cuckoo, Hobby and Green Woodpecker, all 'shanks and all rarer sandpipers and tits, Golden Plover, Waxwing, and all winter gulls. And there were few bonuses in my list - no fly-through raptors or terns. So my total could easily be challenged. Yet I feel little guilt; cycle birders cannot roar to the lake just before the mega takes flight. (Actually, I missed most good birds by getting out of bed too late.) But this has been one of my best bird memory years.

Now, how's your green list for 2021 doing, anyone? It doesn't seem worth trying very hard now we're back in Tier Four, or is it Five? On New Year's Day I might just stay in bed and look out of the window. Except that - ooh! Is that really a stunning male Blackcap on my feeders? And ooh! again, a Black Redstart on the pavement outside the Oxfam shop where my wife works! Missed that one last year. Perhaps I will start a new list, after all. Alternatively, does anyone want to borrow my bike?

George Hill

NIGHTJAR ON HESWALL DALES 1977

The excerpt from Bob Hughes' book in the November *Bird News*: 'Nightjars on Caldly Hill', brought back very happy memories of my own first Nightjar, 19 years later, on Heswall Dales on 30th and 31st May and 1st June 1977. By then, Nightjar was, for me, a mythical, dreamt-of, Wirral bird - a veritable holy grail.

I birded very locally, around Heswall and Gayton, north to the Dungeon Wood area, towards Thurstaston, and south to the north edge of the marshes off Parkgate - not forgetting occasional forays, in waders, out west over the Dee mud and (the vast and unexpected) sand, across the (then) Clwyd boundary. So, by 'Wirral', I really mean just Heswall/Gayton.

Yes, Nightjar *had* been a Heswall bird. But the last published report I could find was "1 pair Heswall", in Eric Hardy's 1962-3 *MNA Report* - crediting E. Lloyd Jones (who lived in Oldfield Road, next to the Dales), preceded by "nested Heswall Dale, 1961", in his 1960-2 *MNA Report*, again crediting ELJ, and "1 Heswall Dales 19.6.61", in R.J. Raines' Liverpool Ornithologists Club 1961 *Birds of the Wirral Peninsula Report*.

But the habitat had not changed since 1962, 15 years earlier. The Dales were still largely open heathland. So, on the evening of 30th May 1977, a Monday, I walked out from home onto the Dales, with 'Object - Nightjar - search' - and (for once, you might think!...) found what I was looking for. From there, I'll let my notes do most of the writing:

A male "churred" over a period of (at most) 5 minutes - in (I thought - but, 'not counted') 3-4 bursts, all short. Not seen. Song hollow. Less loud than expected. Identified immediately [when I got home] from track on Witherby's *Sound Guide*. (No 'xenocanto' and the like on the internet then!) Churred from c.2210 - so, from c.43 minutes after sunset (at 2127). Clear, moonlight, wind ENE2, cool at 5.7C, at 0025.

Near the SW. corner of the Cleaver Hospital's metal boundary fence - seemingly, on a fence cross-bar or in gorse within the Cleaver grounds.

On 31st May it "churred" from c.2150-2220 (SS 2128). Frequently, but not continuously. Song less loud than Grasshopper Warbler (then a Heswall regular). Glimpsed twice, flying against Oldfield Drive houses. Once, white patch on front part of wing seen, which showed flying bird male, and therefore presumably the singing bird. Strange, bubbling sound heard once at the end of churr, thought whilst in flight. [Flight]-note heard twice, like cork popping in bottle. Clear, moonlight, wind E1, again cool at 6.6C, at 0100.

In area of gorse and bracken [on the Dales], between west side [of] Cleaver fence and Oldfield Drive, and (most continuously) between main path [on the Dales] and Warren Way gardens, in area of close-packed birches (S. end) and gorse (N. end) and, possibly, garden trees!

On 1st June it churred from 2114 (16 minutes *before* sunset at 2130) to c.2230 - mainly c.2145/2230. Intermittent. *Not* strong. "Cork-popping" flight-note again heard - and the "gurgling/bubbling" once, at end of song. Glimpsed once, not continuously, for a short period, flying along tops of gorse [on the Dales], Oldfield Drive edge, to N. of [a] cleft. Song was 'concentrated' in that cleft - grown with bracken, gorse, 1+ hawthorn. White on sides of tail, only plumage-feature noted (barring, as 31.5, dull colour, thought brown), [showing] flying bird male, and therefore presumed singing bird. ?2 *males*, as [cork-popping] flight-note [is] confined to male, [but once] heard in different area from [where] song heard soon after. Clear, moonlight, wind NNW0-1, warmer 10.1C, at 0010. Light very good.

Visits on 8th and 20th June drew blank. So, I presumed it had been only a passage bird. For those interested, the location's OS reference was c.SJ256823.

How neat my writing, then! But, how fallible we are - I'm afraid I noticed three small (immaterial) errors, on re-reading those notes, 43 years on.

And what, now, of the Corn Buntings, Spotted Flycatchers, Little Owls, Grey Partridges, Lesser Redpolls, Tree Sparrows, Willow Tits, Yellowhammers, all scattered through my 1977 Wirral summer-season notes, all also Heswall regulars, back then?



Projects and Surveys

WEBS - THE WETLAND BIRD SURVEY



The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK, which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The UK is of outstanding international importance for waterbirds. Lying on some of the major flyways for Arctic-nesting species, large

numbers of waterbirds are attracted, especially during winter, by the relatively mild climate and extensive areas of wetland, notably estuaries. The UK thus has both moral and legal obligations to conserve both these waterbirds and the wetlands upon which they depend.

Counting started in 1947 and around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. These WeBS Core Counts are supplemented by occasional WeBS Low Tide Counts undertaken on estuaries, with the aim of identifying key feeding areas.

In Cheshire there are a number of sites available. If you are interested, please contact me and I will have a look at what is available within the distance you state from home. I am the Local Organiser for Cheshire - North, but if the site is in Cheshire - South I will pass your details and request on. Some are very small that will literally take minutes, others of course cover larger areas.

You do not need to be an 'expert' birder. As long as you can identify the waterbirds, gulls and terns that is the only requirement. Nor do you have to be an 'IT' expert, you can send your records by email or use the WeBS recording form that I can supply which covers a full recording year. I am more than happy to input counts for people not comfortable using computers.

Please contact: Phil Hampson Email: btowebspjh@icloud.com Tel: 07545 465069

BTO HERONRIES CENSUS

Annual survey of all Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Cormorants and scarcer herons nesting in the UK

Heronries are the places where Grey Herons, Little Egrets and sometimes other waterbirds gather to nest. Nesting often persists for many decades at the same location and becomes very well known to birdwatchers. Grey Herons in particular are monitored efficiently and accurately by counting 'apparently occupied nests' in their heronries. The BTO's Heronries Census has gathered nest counts annually since 1928 at the UK's heronries.

The main species covered is Grey Heron, but Little Egret is fully included, as are rarer species of colonial waterbirds such as Cattle Egret and Spoonbill. Nest counts of Cormorants are also collected, especially where they are nesting alongside herons.

Ideally 2-3 visits to a heronry are done if possible, to repeat the count and get the best, most accurate estimate for the year. Visits should ideally be made between March and May. Nests should be counted in the second half of April, with this count being supplemented (if possible) by an earlier and a later visit. You can visit a heronry at any time of day, although the birds may be more active in the morning.

There are sites available in the CAWOS area, if you would like to participate then please contact me and I can give you more information.

Phil Hampson btowebspjh@icloud.com



Sites to Watch

BURTON MERE WETLANDS AND DEE MARSHES

SPRING SPRUCING AND HOPE ON THE HORIZON



As spring approaches, it is only natural for us to think about new beginnings. After one of the most challenging years most of us have ever endured, the thought of fresh starts serves well to lift our collective spirits, and the Government's roadmap out of lockdown this week tells us we should be able to get outside more and enjoy most of the forthcoming season.

It's certainly no secret that nature has played a huge part in helping many of us cope with the past year, and in fact it has resulted in significantly more people across the UK taking an interest and developing a love of nature, which should have long-standing benefits for nature conservation in this country.

This revolution was reflected in a surge of new visitors to Burton Mere Wetlands when we were able to reopen in the summer as people sought local places to visit, often in search of green space and wildlife a little different from that they had begun to notice in their garden or immediate surrounds.

We were delighted to see this trend continue into autumn and winter, however, this coincided with a period of essential, yet disruptive work which whilst ongoing left the reserve looking and feeling far from its best. From substantial boardwalk repairs and painting the visitor centre impacting our usual friendly welcome area, to major projects including the construction of Border Hide and installation of extensive electric fencing, the Covid pandemic certainly hasn't stood in the way of us improving the reserve for people *and* wildlife in the past six months.

However, some of this work, the last of which has just finished, left the reserve looking a little worse for wear at times, with mess caused by tractors transporting materials onto the reserve, and other machinery performing heavy labour. On top of this, the wetlands sometimes appeared barren as the birds moved away from the location of works to farther, quieter reaches of the site.

If you have been able to visit in the past six months, you'll know exactly what I mean; sections of accessible trails shattered and peppered with debris, an unfathomable and unsightly amount of mud, and fruitless time sitting in Marsh Covert Hide before Christmas watching the fencing contractors edge their way past the reedbed and around Bridge Pool.

If you visited for the *first time* in the past six months, we're conscious that the reserve may have seemed a little underwhelming, disappointing even, and not particularly inspiring to hurry back again. Yet with all this major work completed just in time for the start of the crucial breeding season, we hope you will venture back here once lockdown starts to ease, in search of a spring and summer nature fix to see the reserve in all its glory filled with fascinating sights and sounds in all directions.

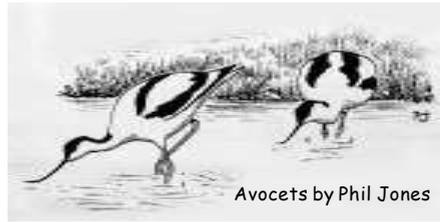
Not only will the landscape naturally recover with the spring growth, we will turn our attention to fully repairing the damaged trails, not least to reinstate the high quality fully-accessible route now proudly extended to the new Border Hide we're eager to unveil when permitted.

The most prolonged disruption this winter was caused by the erection of an electric predator exclusion fence around the perimeter of the Inner Marsh Farm wetland, the oldest part of Burton Mere Wetlands where abandoned crop fields were purchased way back in 1986. Regulars to the reserve will be familiar with the identical electric fence around the main scrape and wet grassland installed as part of Burton Mere Wetlands' development a decade ago. Not to overshadow the tantalising new hide, this work that offers the same protection to the older habitat has been mooted for years, so to finally achieve it is a huge step forward in the reserve's conservation objectives.

Coupled with a switch from sheep to cattle-grazing and scope for using our soil-spreading machine to create more wet foot drains and further improve the habitat, we could - should - see an improvement in our already impressive numbers of breeding waders. Years of hard work have resulted in Burton Mere Wetlands becoming home to not only locally but nationally significant populations of Lapwings and Redshanks, whilst the pressures continue to mount on their historic

breeding sites in the wider countryside, plus the iconic Avocets although their fortunes are generally much brighter across the country.

Why go to such extreme measures of having miles of electric fencing, you may ask? It's not required everywhere, but our experience of developing Burton Mere Wetlands over the past thirty-five years tells us that despite creating quality wetland habitat, the biggest threat to the vulnerable ground-nesting waders that we set out to give a home to is their eggs being scavenged particularly by badgers and foxes. Given our semi-rural location on the urban-farmland fringe, there is an abundance of these predators so the electric fence is to prevent them accessing the rich wetlands and diverting them to other plentiful food sources that are less of a nature conservation priority elsewhere on the reserve.



So, as we embark upon our journey to emerge from the disruption of Covid over the months ahead, we also look forward to leaving behind our own unpreventable disarray caused by these important infrastructure improvements. As spring rejuvenates the landscape, we'll be working hard to tidy up everything else and return to doing what RSPB reserves are renowned for; inspiring you, our supporters, with unforgettable experiences of nature and celebrating the successes of our vital conservation work.

As part of repairing the inevitable damage to the surfaced trails by the movement of contractors' machinery, we will also be altering Bridge Screen to address the unavoidable matter of the new electric fence creating a visual barrier, through raising the level of the viewpoint to provide views over the fence onto Bridge Pool. In doing so, the slight elevation will offer visitors better views of more of the pool, another exciting improvement to look forward to.

Regardless of how quickly our lives can regain any sense of normality this year, there's plenty to look forward to at Burton Mere Wetlands, which somehow already clocks its 10th anniversary in 2021. Whether your next visit is your first, second, or 92nd, we can't wait to share it with you.

Dan Trotman, Visitor Experience Manager

TWITTER AND CAWOS

Towards the end of 2020 there was some discussion about the county society, CAWOS, and where it was going. Although the membership was stable it wasn't growing and there was an obvious lack of new, and more importantly, young, talent and enthusiasm. If it was compared to some of the local Twitter sites which had thousands of followers, the society membership was paltry and the obvious question to ask, was "Why?".

In the editorial of the last *Bird News*, Tony Broome also raised the subject and suggested that a first step to address the lack of young interest in the society would be to use social media, and in particular, Twitter, to publicise CAWOS with the aim of attracting the interest of young birders. It was agreed at council level that an account should be set up and one local birder, Dave Craven, of Hale fame, agreed to be the moderator. After looking at what other societies did, a design was suggested, one that would be instantly recognisable as CAWOS but also up to date and attractive, the society logo being prominent and a photo banner being changeable to suit what was happening on the birding scene.

In December 2020 The Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society Twitter site was launched for 'everyone with an interest in birding in Cheshire and Wirral'. It would be used for up-to-date birding news, rarity decisions, events and anything else that the society was doing. It was a reasonably immediate success with many local birders adding it to their 'following' lists and the daily selection of news and top notch photos was welcomed by all. To date there are over 500 followers. As the covid restrictions ease and spring arrives there should be a lot more birding news and it is expected that the numbers of followers will grow. The county rarities committee will also be using it to publicise decisions made for submitted county rarities.

The site can be found by typing in @CAWOSBirding. It is updated hourly and often more frequently by Dave Craven who is doing a brilliant job, so many thanks to him.

Phil Hampson

CAWOS News

A happy New Year to all our members. Let's hope in the spring/summer life will return to a near normal situation, so that we can get out birding without worrying that we must keep 2 metres apart, wearing masks and wondering if the hides are open. Freedom of travel again. However, in many aspects life will never be quite the same and on the positive side, Zoom, Teams and other platforms, have helped us reach out to our membership. Our 'indoor meetings' have been virtual and this has enabled members from across Cheshire and Wirral (and further afield) to join our talks using the internet. Will we hold indoor meetings in the future? That is up for discussion, but in the winter when it is cold, icy and sometimes snowing do people want to travel to the church hall in Knutsford or stay at home in the warm, with a nice cup of tea or a drink and listen to the talks in their armchair? There is a need to involve as many of our members as possible in the talks as we are the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society.

Birding for younger people no longer seems to involve joining a bird club, and attending meetings to listen to speakers. The internet has taken over as somewhere they can seek information readily and world-wide. This is leaving many bird societies with mainly older members and no young, enthusiastic members joining. There are exceptions such as the RSPB focussing in particular on young birders as well as older members. For all societies this is a worrying trend, one needs a mix of people of different ages and experience to be able to run bird surveys, to contribute to county *Bird Reports*, to study and ring species of importance.

Climate change is having a major effect on the environment world wide. In Cheshire and Wirral, who would have predicted that we would not see Corn Buntings, there was only one record in 2019, and other species like Turtle Dove and Cuckoo are in serious decline. With the climate warming we are seeing species that would only have been seen in Europe in the past; all three egrets have now bred in Cheshire, with Little Egrets widespread and Hoopoes appearing in Cheshire gardens.

So this leads to my next question: how are we in Cheshire and Wirral going to record the changes in summer and winter bird populations that are happening at a very fast rate? It is over 15 years since the start of the last county *Atlas* of breeding and wintering birds in Cheshire and Wirral, and organising that was a massive challenge. Your Council is currently struggling to keep going due to the lack of volunteers prepared to give up a small amount of time to attend five meetings a year and get involved with one of our activities. So if you have some time to help put records into BirdTrack, or have an interest in contributing to writing some of the annual *Bird Report*, or could project manage the process of producing the report please get in touch with me. Having spent the last 5 years working hard to clear the backlog of *Bird Reports*, we are going to be losing our Systematic Editor once the 2019 report is out later in the year. We need help from experienced birders to step forward and help the county produce the 2020 *Bird Report*. If we can get that commitment from members we may be able to consider updating our county *Atlas* in 2-3 years' time.

Council has met twice since the last issue of *Bird News*, in November and January. We welcome new members: David Craven, Steve Fry, Mr F Stubbs and family, Mr T Mawdsley, Mr H Mayhew and family, and Mr T Ormond, bringing the membership to 307. There have been two resignations and one member sadly deceased.

The Membership Secretary is continuing to receive membership fees of £12. The annual membership fee went up to £15 a year ago. There are still members who have not changed their standing order to the new price in 2020 and we already know that standing orders for 2021 membership for a small number of members is still £12. Last year these members did not receive copies of *Bird News* or the annual *Bird Report* and have not complained!!! The Membership Secretary was in touch with these members on several occasions and the Chairman has phoned to ask them to change their standing order. If you are one of these members, please check what you paid at the start of 2021.

The AGM is coming up before our last virtual talk on 5th March and at present we have vacancies for Vice-Chairman and two Ordinary Members of Council, do please contact me if you are willing

to help. For over a year we have been advertising in *Bird News* for help with a number of roles and I think it fair to say only two members have come forward so far.

In order to keep CAWOS functioning some of us are multi-tasking, for example, Phil Hampson is Membership Secretary, up for election as Chairman at the AGM and is a key person involved in managing our records. As Secretary, I have also taken on compiling for the *Bird Report* and managing the type-setting and production of the report and, following the retirement of the Programme Secretary at the last AGM, organised the virtual talks. This cannot continue; we need help to lighten our workload.

Ted Lock, Secretary

LETTER FROM THE IN-COMING CHAIRMAN IN APRIL

I'd like to start with some words of thanks, in no particular order. Firstly, I would like to make special mention of Brian Dyke who has been in the background for many years on Council in a number of roles and of course at least twice as Chairman. What an incredible contribution Brian has made, thank you on behalf of every member of the Society, past and present. Then I move on to two people who have been around since the day dot. I mean Sheila and Geoff Blamire, or to put it another way Mr & Mrs Records and Database. They have jointly accepted and processed countless thousands of bird records and set up and maintained the database for 20 years. A commitment that many members will not realise over the years has amounted to countless hours, endless stress and with the utmost dedication. From every one of us THANK YOU both. Now you do not get away with it that easily as Sheila is continuing as the *Bird News* Editor, so the regular nagging for your annual records may have ceased, but she will still be asking for *Bird News* contributions, so beware! Lastly to the Council Members leaving their roles this AGM and to David Steventon for his 5 years in the chair.

When I was asked about taking on the Chairman role there was no hesitation in my acceptance.

We are living in very strange times which have had a significant impact on our common interest in birds. As a Society we are riding the difficulties and have continued our programme of talks by using Zoom. This is proving successful; no night-time drives in bad weather, but watch and listen in the warmth and comfort of our own homes, with a drink in a glass or cup. We are getting attendance from members in the further boundaries of the CAWOS area which is absolutely excellent. The January and February meetings were each attended by well over 50 people. If you haven't joined a Zoom meeting do give it a try, there is no mystery about it and there is no need to be a tech wizard. You do not have to have a camera on your computer to view the presentation, listen and contribute. Everyone is welcome and I am happy to help if people have any difficulty.

Some people are lucky enough to be able to go birding very local to their homes, others are concentrating on their gardens. I had a new garden tick at the end of January with a Little Egret flying over. 30 years ago never in my wildest dreams would I have expected to see a Little Egret from the house. I remember twitching my first one in Scotland on North Uist in a drainage ditch, when I worked for the RSPB and travelled around their Scottish reserves. How times have changed, now locally we have a small roost and no doubt very soon a breeding population in East Cheshire. Within the CAWOS area we have Great Egret and Cattle Egret, another two species that not so many years ago would have necessitated a trip to Europe to see.

Now, the hard message! CAWOS needs to change. We have no individual young members and they should be the backbone of the Society. Our membership is just over 300 and the Council has a number of empty roles, with some of us undertaking 2 or 3 roles. There is nothing mysterious about Council it is just the committee that governs the Society. Council is comprised of ordinary members like you and the roles we undertake are purely voluntary. **BUT**, it is not possible for us to continue putting all the pressure onto a small number of people. There are 5 Council meetings a year and all are on Zoom so no travelling needed. In this copy of *Bird News* you will see the roles and descriptions where we need people, please consider helping us. It is very easy to gloss over these words but if we cannot generate more interest and help then there will only be one outcome for CAWOS.

I did not hesitate when I was asked about becoming Chairman and follow others who have contributed to the Society. It is as we stand a daunting role as I have no wish to be at the

'helm' should the Society fold. The roles we have vacant vary in size, but anyone volunteering will not be alone - we are all there to help, advise and support. Please consider stepping up and helping us. We can co-opt people to Council so the fact we have had the AGM doesn't stop recruiting people.

It is not just on Council that we need help with, we **NEED** to recruit more members, especially at the younger end of the spectrum. For people still in full time education, up to the age of 25, we offer free membership. I know that getting young members is not a problem just for CAWOS but I would not be doing my job if I didn't highlight this. We now have a Twitter feed; the details are further on in this newsletter. You may not wish to post on Twitter but if you follow it you'll see what is happening in the CAWOS area. Some years ago I set up a CAWOS Facebook group but that has not taken off with very few of our members joining. I appreciate we are an older membership but Social Media can be an excellent tool, if used properly.

Being very blunt about it, if we do not change, reduce the age demographic and fill the Council CAWOS will not be in existence for much longer and that would be a real loss, not least for all the work contributed in the past by many people. We need your help, we need your ideas, we need your comments. Please, please contact myself, Ted or any other Council member with your feedback.

We are in the process of creating a new website with a more modern look. There will be a closed section just for members that we will use to pass on information and if speakers agree we will record talks and post them for people who could not attend to watch later.

As members we need you to tell us your expectations of CAWOS, surely it isn't just getting 3 *Bird News* and a *Bird Report* every year. Even with the increased attendance to meetings we are still only getting around 15% of members attending.

Phil Hampson, Vice-Chairman

“THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU”

Phil Hampson will retire as the Membership Secretary at the AGM in March 2022, so we need a volunteer(s) to come forward to take over 2022, with some help with Phil. Below is an attempt to give some idea of the workload involved:

JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

- to send out reminders to members about the payment of subscriptions (usually one in the autumn and one with the *Bird Report* in January).
- to collect subscriptions, either at meetings, those received by standing order, or those received in the post, to pay these into the bank and to inform the Treasurer of the amount paid in (Oct-Feb the peak period). There is a computer programme for the collation of members' details.
- to respond to all applications from persons wishing to join the Society (it takes approx 10-15 min to process an application).
- to keep a record of the 'numbers of current members' and to inform Council through the Secretary of any significant changes.
- to keep Gift Aid records and to pass them on to the Treasurer for forwarding (they are automatically kept by the computer programme).
- produce labels, purchase stamps, fill envelopes and post *Bird News* (with help if needed).
- produce membership spreadsheet for *Bird Report* printer's use.

Anyone interested should contact **Phil Hampson** for more details:
email: memsec@cawos.org or phone: 07545 465069

CAWOS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 5th MARCH 2021

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2020-21

This report covers the period from the last AGM on 6th March 2020, up to the current AGM on 5th March 2021. The biggest single thing that has affected all our activities over the last 12 months has been the Covid-19 pandemic. From late March 2020, we have not been able to have face-to-face Council or Indoor Speaker meetings. Thankfully, we have been able to conduct both using the video-conferencing software Zoom, for which we have purchased a full licence. The Council meeting in April had to be conducted by post and email but the further four Council meetings since the last AGM, in July, September and November 2020 and in January 2021 were conducted virtually using Zoom. Items covered included the Dee, Mersey, Rostherne Mere, proposed Curlew survey, the CAWOS website and progress with the *Bird Reports* for 2018 (now published) and 2019. These and other business are reported by Ted Lock in the CAWOS News section of *Bird News* and in the Secretary's Report to the AGM.

A major change has been the adoption of the BTO's BirdTrack application to record and store our observations for 2020 onwards. A small group of us met with representatives from Shropshire Ornithological Society and West Midland Bird Club immediately after the last AGM to learn from their experience of using the application. The changes have been reported and will continue to be reported through *Bird News*. BirdTrack replaces the use of the Access database system set up and run by Geoff and Sheila Blamire for the last 20 years. Many thanks to them for their long service in managing this.

Restrictions on movements and meetings will also have had an impact on fieldwork and surveys such as the BTO's Wetlands Bird Survey. First indications are that a high volume of records have been submitted, but we will not know where the gaps are, compared with previous years, until the *Bird Report* compilers get to work on the report for 2020.

Richard Sturman had set up many of the speakers for our winter programme of indoor meetings before having to stand down for personal reasons. We are grateful for the service he has given and for setting up a pipeline of speakers, while we line up a permanent replacement. The organisation gap has thankfully been covered by Ted Lock for the interim. The talks were as follows:

March 2020 - Immediately after the last AGM, Dermot Smith spoke to us about 'Mersey Estuary's Birds', pointing out the distances that counters must walk to get to some of the sites for the Wetlands Bird Survey counts. This was the last physical meeting of the year.

October - This was the first virtual meeting of the year. Unfortunately, Mike Watson had to cancel at short notice but was able to reschedule his talk to December. We still had a meeting, however, taking the opportunity for those new to Zoom as a video conferencing tool to get used to it and for various council members to talk about, among other things, the change to the submission and storage of records on the BTO's BirdTrack application.

November - Jeff Clarke spoke about 'Why they flock, and other interesting behaviours', covering a wide range of topics from Starlings flocking, through formation flying by geese, to Jays food caching and the ability of Ravens to count.

December - Mike Watson spoke about 'Belarus – Birding behind the Iron Curtain'. He did well to find local contacts to help him locate good areas and birds.

January 2021 - Mark Woodhead, who collates the photographs for our *Bird Report*, spoke to us about 'Southern Portugal'. His birding was entirely during the summer holiday period in locations close to holiday resorts.

February - Ashley Saunders spoke to us from Norfolk on 'Norfolk – a Wild Goose Winter'. He made extensive use of video clips taken with his mobile phone, which helped us appreciate the size, noise, and behaviour of the geese flocks.

March - concluding the programme at the AGM, Dr Mark Eaton will be talking on 'Monitoring rare breeding birds in the UK'.

One of the distinct advantages of using Zoom to hold these virtual meetings is that there are no geographic constraints compared with travelling to a specific physical site. We have welcomed a larger audience than in recent years at Knutsford, particularly members from the west of the county who would not have otherwise travelled across the east of the county.

The *Bird Report* for 2018 was distributed in August 2020. Thanks once again to the Systematic List Editor, Andy Livermore, for pulling things together for the main body of the report and to Ted Lock for assisting in the production/project managing role. A B4 report size was used again with lots of interesting photographs collated by Mark Woodhead. Thanks also go to Dave Bickerton in Lancashire, who did the desk-top publishing work to interweave the photographs and pull the whole package together before it all went off to the printer Swallowtail in Norwich. At least one of the team at Swallowtail has dealt with our report for more than 20 years now. We are still looking for a volunteer to perform the production/project manager role of collecting all the contributions together (systematic list and all the other articles) to go to the desk-top publisher. Work on the report for 2019 is well underway with a plan to publish in the third quarter of 2021.

Membership is stable at a little over 300, from whom we still need a few new volunteers to fulfil some roles. Thanks go to all Council and subcommittee members for their work during the year.

David Steventon, Chairman

SECRETARY'S REPORT FOR 2020-21

We are all aware of the impact of Covid-19 on our way of life for the last 9 months, and hence its impact on our birding activities during the breeding season, autumn and winter. Garden Bird Watch has however benefitted. Thanks to modern technology we have been able to hold 'virtual' Council meetings and with the help of Phil Hampson set up our 'indoor meetings' via Zoom.

Membership of CAWOS has remained reasonably stable with 311 members at year end. However, the decision to increase membership subscription from £12 to £15 has caused a lot of extra work for the Membership Secretary as 62 members failed to increase their standing order (SO), despite several reminders and a phone call from the Chairman, but numbers were reduced to single figures!! If you have not been receiving *Bird News* or a copy of the annual *Bird Report*, then you are probably not paying your full membership fee. This issue appears to have persisted in the 2021 membership fees. Can I ask members to check they have increased their SO to £15. My thanks go to Phil Hampson for his ongoing efforts to sort this out.

There are a number of people I wish to thank for their ongoing help they provide to the Society. Our independent auditor for many years, Norman Scott, resigned early in 2020 and Council thanked him for his services over 30 years. A new independent accountant Alex Brenninkmeijer was duly appointed by Council. I wish to thank Mike Hems who looks after our website and mention this is going to have a well-earned facelift over the coming months. Richard Sturman stood down from Council after 5 years of running our indoor programme and was thanked for the interesting programmes he arranged. Our longest member on Council and former Chairman on two occasions Brian Dyke has decided it is time for him to step down at this AGM. Council will miss him and we are very grateful for the contribution he has made to CAWOS over many years.

Council made a decision in July to use BirdTrack as our database for our records, this is a system run by the BTO in collaboration of other major bird groups. This has involved a great deal of effort from a few individuals to help prepare the way forwards to enable data to be available for the 2020 *Bird Report*. The 2018 *Bird Report* has been published and the feedback has been very positive. I wish to thank Andy Livermore who is the systematic editor for the reports; he initiated moves to full colour, a slightly larger size and the inclusion of a large number of excellent colour photographs. A special thanks go to Mark Woodhead who has collected the photographs from fellow bird photographers across the county and made them available in a suitable format for the report. Three years ago we started using Dave Bickerton (Lancashire OS) for type-setting the report and he has continued to do an excellent job. I also need to thank the compilers who freely give up time to write various sections of the report and to Hugh Pulsford, our County Recorder, and the Rarities Committee who debate these observations.

Council discussed the value of the two major rivers in the county and has appointed representatives to the Dee Estuary Conservation Group and the Mersey Estuary Conservation Group so we are kept abreast of issues affecting these estuaries.

On the conservation front I have to report that after 4-5 years of rebutting the development of a Watersports and Outdoor Activity Centre on the North Lake of the former Mere Farm Quarry East, Cheshire Council supported a revised plan for it to go ahead. I would like to thank Steve and

Gill Barber and Brian Dyke for providing bird data on the area over several years to enable us to make a strong objection which was supported at the independent inquiry. However, in February 2019 a National Planning Policy Framework document was issued that said “*Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land*”. This was used to justify the new application for the Outdoor Water Sports Centre which was narrowly supported by East Cheshire Planning Committee. CAWOS also raised objection regarding the removal of two lime-beds on a site at Rudheath. The site has supported breeding of several uncommon birds and as a roosting site for waders and a stopping-off point for rare waders. Lostock Council decided in favour of the development, although some mitigation was accepted and the need for further analysis of samples of soil and water prior to final approval. Removal of the lime-beds is going on at this time. HS2 is also planned to come close to this site which does not bode well for the area in the future.

Ted Lock, Secretary

TREASURER’S REPORT FOR 2020

I have pleasure in submitting the audited accounts of the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society for the year ended 31st December 2020. I am pleased to report that the Income and Expenditure account shows a surplus for the year of £928 on our General Fund.

Membership subscriptions for the year of £4,845 were up by £1,023 due entirely to the increase in subscription charges which typically rose from £12 to £15 a member. This increase has made it much easier for the society to live within its means.

The cost of producing the *Bird Reports* has become sustainably lower as a result of savings to typesetting costs, and so, as you can see from the Balance Sheet, I was able to reduce the provision for production of the 2019 report by £400.

Our activities were disrupted by the pandemic, of course, and this included the sales of the 2018 *Bird Report* which were affected by the closure of the outlets in the visitor centres at the local reserves. Also, the evening programme was suspended in the autumn reducing our income by £150 but, since this is an activity on which we lose money, our outgoings on speakers’ fees and room hire charges have saved us £575. Requests for database searches were down by £525.

The increase to members’ subscriptions has made us much less dependent on factors outside of our control, such as database searches, to balance our income and expenditure. The results for the year were completely satisfactory and when interest on all of our cash balances were taken into account, our reserves increased by £1,182 to £42,151.

John Patterson, Treasurer

ELECTED AT THE AGM 5th MARCH 2021

Honorary President

David Norman

Honorary Life Vice-Presidents

Geoff Blamire

Sheila Blamire

Executive Officers

Chairman

Phil Hampson

Vice-Chairman

vacant

Secretary

Ted Lock

Treasurer

John Patterson

County Recorder

Hugh Pulsford

Ordinary Council Members

David Hiley

Tony Parker

David Steventon

3 *vacancies*

CAWOS Programme

Regarding the 2021-2022 programme, an announcement will be in the July *Bird News* and on www.cawos.org and via emails to the membership (please make sure we have your up-to-date email address).



This section of *Bird News* has been temporarily suspended because the *majority* of events have been cancelled due to Covid-19. Some of the affiliated societies are holding zoom meetings with speakers (eg Chester RSPB, Macclesfield RSPB, SECOS). If you need any clarification please check with each society on their website or ring the contact number below.

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

ADNHS Altrincham & District Natural History Society <http://mpettipher.me.uk/altnats>
Meetings Jubilee Centre, The Firs, Bowdon, Altrincham 7:30pm, contact Jacky Johnson 0161 928 7896

CAWOS Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society www.cawos.org
Meetings St Vincent's RC Church Hall, Knutsford 7:45pm, contact Ted Lock 01625 540468

CRSPB Chester RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/chester
Meetings Christleton Parish Hall, Christleton, CH3 7AS 7:30pm, contact Norman Sadler 01244 335670

HPRSPB High Peak RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/highpeak
Meetings Senior Citizens' Hall, Marple 7:30pm, contact Tim Walters 0161 449 0299

KOS Knutsford Ornithological Society www.10x50.com
Meetings Jubilee Hall, Stanley Road, Knutsford 8pm, contact Derek Pike 01565 653811

MCOS Mid-Cheshire Ornithological Society www.midcheshireos.co.uk
Meetings Cuddington & Sandiway Village Hall 7:45pm, contact Andrew Aldridge 01477 534873

MRSPB Macclesfield RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/macclesfield
Meetings United Reformed Church, Macclesfield 7:45pm, contact Daryll Bailey 01625 430311

NCRSPB North Cheshire RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/north_cheshire
Meetings Appleton Parish Hall, Appleton 7:45pm, contact Olive Giles 01928 733405

NNHS Nantwich Natural History Society
Occasional meetings throughout the year, contact Sec. Mike Holmes 01270 611577

SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithological Society www.secos.org.uk
Meetings Ettiley Heath Church Community Centre at 7:30pm, contact Sec. Colin Lythgoe 01270 582642

WGBG Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group <http://wgbwcopy.wikidot.com/wgbg>
Meetings Wilmslow Guild 7:30pm, contact Brian Dyke 01625 525936

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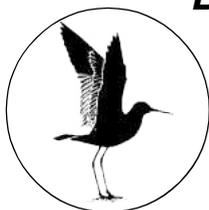
BIRD REPORT PROJECT MANAGER

NON-EXECUTIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

For further information, please contact:

Ted Lock Email: secretary@cawos.org Tel: 01625 540466

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in future Bird News please let me know.

Sheila Blamire at sheilablamire@cawos.org Tel: 01565 830168

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