Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society
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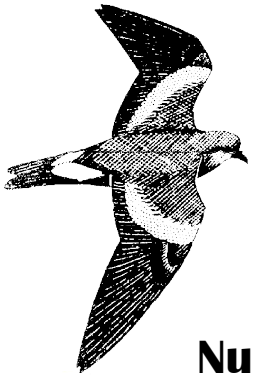

BIRD NEWS

Number 119 March 2022

Migration Spotlight

County Rarity: 'Siberian Chiffchaff'

Dee Estuary 2021: A Year to Remember

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Bird News welcomes articles, letters and comments relevant to birdwatching in Cheshire and Wirral. Please either email or post your contributions to the Editor at the address shown above.

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Front cover: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker by Ray Scally

Other illustrations by Tony Broome and Phil Jones

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 18th June 2022

Guest Editorial

This Guest Editorial is a joint contribution by David Hiley and David Steventon. We volunteered to write this to give our perspectives about what it means to be on CAWOS Council and how we got there. We come to this from quite different backgrounds, David Hiley getting involved with a county ornithological society relatively late in life and David Steventon having been involved with many different ornithological societies over more than 50 years since school days way back last century.

David Hiley writes: My birding life story is different. A keen interest as a child, membership of the YOC and other wildlife organisations, but other distractions took over in my teenage years. I am from Sheffield so one of those distractions was football, which meant I was watching some different owls, until that became too stressful! My interest and involvement were rekindled with the birth of my children. Both became members of YOC. As much of their childhood was in South Lakeland, RSPB Leighton Moss was a regular haunt. It was on my retirement in 2017 that I properly re-engaged with birding. I decided that, along with my other lifelong interest in photography, it would be the activity to keep me occupied in my later years. One of the benefits of birding and retirement was that I finally came to know and appreciate the Cheshire countryside which has been my home for the last 15 years or so. Yes, there are some 'barren' parts of the county, but, with two estuaries, forest and woodland, heath, rivers and farmland, we are fortunate to have such diverse habitats on our doorstep.

I decided that it was important to support various birding/conservation charities and, particularly, my county's ornithological society - CAWOS. I have to say, it puzzles me how some people go birding in the county and choose not to be a member. It became clear to me in my first copy of *Bird News* that the society was struggling to fill a number of positions. Many, probably most, of you reading this will have more birding knowledge and experience than I but, nonetheless, I decided to put my name forward for a few areas where help was needed. These included helping organise some meetings in the west of the county (that did not materialise); compiling some sections of the *Bird Report*; representing CAWOS at DECG (Dee Estuary Conservation Group) meetings. I also decided to strengthen my support of the society by offering to fill one of the vacancies for an ordinary council member. So, what 'extra' responsibility does being a Council member mean to me? For me it strengthens the support I already provide, but also enables me to assist in other ways that I wouldn't be aware of if I weren't a Council member. As an example, I delivered membership posters to BMW and will look to do a similar exercise with posters advertising the *Bird Report*. I have recently taken over Zoom hosting responsibility from the Chairman so that he can concentrate on chairing meetings.

David Steventon writes: I've been involved with Councils/Committees/Working Parties for more than 50 years. Why? - somebody's got to do it, otherwise you don't get a functioning club or society. The personal benefit is that you get an insight into what is going on in the county and meet with other field ornithologists. What? - bird reports, surveys, conferences. Doesn't matter whether you call them Councils, Committees, Sub-committees, Working Groups, the purposes are the same - a group of people working together, some with specific tasks (eg Treasurer), others with ad hoc jobs (eg pulling together a programme for a conference). The objective is to get things done for members (eg bird reports, newsletters) and for the benefit of the county's birds (eg organising surveys, objections to developments). What follows are examples of what has been done elsewhere, to illustrate what being on a council/committee/group means. It shows it can be done at any age, can be many different roles, and can be dropped and picked up again to fit in with other commitments.

I started birdwatching in the mid-1960s at a school with a strong natural history tradition (Peter Scott was an old boy). My first cooperative task was to help write up the *Avifauna* of the school area for the school Natural History Society. At University in the late 1960s, the Cambridge Bird Club was largely run by undergraduates. I took on the position of Field Officer. This involved encouraging coverage for the first *BTO Breeding Bird Atlas* for the six 10km squares centred on the city. All this was organised by letter and personal contact, long before the days of mobile phones and email. Starting work in Hampshire in 1970, I served on the Field Studies Committee

of what became the Hampshire Ornithological Society, organising the WeBS counts and submission of records to the BTO. I was also on the organising committee for two BTO/HOS One Day Conferences. Having relocated to Cheshire for work reasons in 1986, I first got involved with the group that set up CAWOS. Since then, I have been on the Publications and Records subcommittee, dealing with the *Bird Report* production up to the turn of the century; Chairman in the 1990s; briefly Treasurer; but then unable to contribute due to work commitments; Chairman again after retirement; and now just an ordinary council member.

The two Davids: So, what happens at a CAWOS Council meeting? We meet five times a year, the meetings lasting a couple of hours. We follow an Agenda (obviously), that goes through a list of recurring items - reports from the Treasurer, Bird Report team, membership numbers, surveys, conservation issues. New items appear under Any Other Business and could be promoted to recurring items on the agenda, depending on how long the topic needs to be worked on. Ordinary members lend a hand, whether at the meeting or following up afterwards, to ad hoc requirements that crop up. Examples include: what Brian Dyke did with creating CAWOS policy with respect to the General Data Protection Regulations; input to planning applications such as Ted Lock and Steve Barber attending a Public meeting in front of a Government appointed Planning Officer about a Water Sports Centre at Mere Farm Sand Quarry; and more recently, in the absence of a Programme Secretary, dividing up the task of searching for speakers for the Indoor Programme. The next planning application to rear its ugly head is housing development at Danes Moss, close to an SSSI - any volunteers to deal with this? Use of Zoom video-conferencing technology makes it easy to attend meetings without leaving home on a dark winter's evening, but best of all are the face-to-face meetings to which we hope to return.

David Hiley and David Steventon

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 18th June 2022 - *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.

CAWOS News

A happy New Year to all our members. This time last year I wrote "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, wear masks and wonder if the hides are open. Freedom of travel again". Well I got that wrong! However, a year later it does look as though we may soon have more freedom. The number of Omicron cases in the country is still very high, but the mutated virus, although very infectious, does appear to be less harmful. So let's hope the WeBS surveys, Breeding Bird Surveys and many other surveys will happen in 2022.

Many members probably wonder what Council does and the editorial in this issue discusses that point. So I decided to give members a flavour of what Council has been doing since my last report in November 2021.

Some Council and general members have been very busy getting the bird records together for the 2020 *Bird Report*. Two major changes have taken place in this area; after many years the database run by Sheila and Geoff Blamire stopped on their retirement last year and we moved to Birdtrack as our database. In the expert hands of Phil Hampson, our Chairman, the records have been extracted from the BTO database, sorted and, with the help of Graham Palmer, validated with regard to location. Records from key birding site reports around the County have been included, plus the ringing report and the early and late sightings of migrants arriving and leaving the country. In addition, all records of County rarities have to be checked by the Rarities Committee. The records were then divided up into sections and seventeen volunteers wrote the reports, with the last coming in from Hilbre Observatory in late December. The second change

has been the retirement of Andy Livermore the Bird Report Editor, who has done an excellent job for four years. Phil and I agreed to take on the role jointly, and now realise just how much work is involved. So where have we got to? The Systematic List is complete and currently being proofread, and 80 good quality photographs have been chosen with the help of Mark Woodhead, our photographic editor. The typesetter is working on putting it together and, with a good wind we hope to get the report out sometime in March.

Two CAWOS members have come forward and are prepared to join Council at the AGM next month. So, some help at last but we could always do with more! Hugh Pulsford our County Recorder for seventeen years has decided to step down but has agreed to stay on Council as an ordinary member so we can benefit from his experience. We have found a replacement for him; I wish it was like that for all Council positions. Subject to election at the AGM, Jane Turner, who is currently secretary of the Rarities Committee and has many years of birding experience, has put her name forward for the post. Great news.

Membership numbers at this time of year are rather hard to comment on as many members have not yet paid. A few have paid at the old rate and need to update their standing order. Since 1st November 2021 we have had 7 new members join; a very warm welcome to: Mike Tonks, Al Orton, David Husband, Nigel Holbrook, Sean O'Hara, Thomas Giles and Andy Ingram.

Conservation issues are always on our agenda due to plans for building more houses in areas of concern. Members write to us about development in their area and we endeavour to take this seriously, but there is a limit on our resources and we have to be selective. We use our database to ascertain the bird status in these sites so that we can either challenge for mitigation or try to prevent development. Some examples are the planned building close to Danes Moss, a Cheshire Wildlife Trust (CWT) site near Macclesfield, where we were able to support CWT with bird data. HS2 is now being extended from Crewe to Manchester and has already impacted areas in the south of the County. We are working with and supporting CWT in this case. A Warrington by-pass is planned which may impact some areas south of the Manchester Ship Canal. Work is ongoing at Rudheath Lime Beds, where CAWOS objected to the plans, but it was approved by their local Council. The removal of two of the beds could be the start of demolishing more. The raised beds are a very important site for roosting and breeding birds in the County. In winter Curlew, Golden Plover, Lapwing and gulls roost there; on migration Whimbrel roost on their route north; and in 2020 Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Avocet and Redshank all attempted to breed, some successfully, but many were deliberately disturbed. Unfortunately, birders are not welcome.

I hope that gives you some idea what Council does to add to that in the Editorial.

Ted Lock, Secretary

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Well where does a year go? CAWOS and many other Societies/Clubs like us have had a very different year. Whilst many restrictions have now been lifted, we still have this dreadful thing hanging around. We did ask about the room we have used pre-COVID in Knutsford but they didn't want to let it at that stage with all the extra cleaning they had to do. As your Council, we decided to carry on with our meetings using Zoom. The meetings have been good in that we have people from the further extremes of the CAWOS area joining us. For the 2021/22 programme the numbers have dropped back to c35/36 per meeting, whereas last programme, 2020/21, was 45-50. Zoom allows us to have talks from people we would not normally have been able to have due to travel. There were a couple of problems where I lost my link but we have now put measures in place that should that happen again someone else can carry on the meeting. We are looking at building on that for the 2022/23 season.

Membership remains steady at around 310 and within this year has increased with seven new members; further details from Ted. There are still a number of people who have not paid their 2022 subscription; if you haven't and need a new form, please just email me at memsec@caows.org and I will send you another. I did attach one to the email reminder.

The cost of postage is constantly rising, plus the stationery needed. We always send the first renewal notice with the November *Bird News*, so please ensure you check the envelope. Likewise, final reminders go out with March *Bird News*. At the end of January the first reminder for people

for whom we have an email address for is sent and effectively cost nothing but the time. However, if we do not have an email address it is a different story and each letter now costs almost £1 and takes a considerable amount of time, which is given voluntarily to create, envelope and then make a trip to the Post Office. So if you receive a letter and have an email address you use please let us know, they are NEVER disclosed anywhere or to anyone else.

The 2020 *Bird Report* work has been ongoing through most of last year and we hope to get this out to members in the April/May period. I have to thank everyone involved, it has been a very co-ordinated effort and again the compilers have been excellent, for which they are due a huge thank you. For those who don't know, producing the Systematic List for the Bird Report is split between a number of people and it takes many hours per person to collate the data into the required format, these are the compilers. Whilst I have handled and processed the data outside BirdTrack, I also have to express thanks to Graham Palmer for all his hard work at a difficult time with the output from BirdTrack. Also a big thank you to Ted Lock for his editing and David Steventon for stepping in to do a second pass of the sections.

That brings us into the 2021 *Bird Report*. Effectively, we are now back on track and the production for this report has started. If you have records that you've not uploaded to BirdTrack please send to me at submissions@cawos.org for processing and uploading to BirdTrack. Please 'the earlier the better' and we have a cut-off date of 30 April, any received after that may not be included and used in the production of the report.

As the new CAWOS year starts after the AGM I have to recognise and thank an outgoing Council Member and welcome some new ones. Hugh Pulsford has decided to retire from his position as County Recorder. This is a role that has changed a great deal over the years, and we owe Hugh a huge 'thank you' for representing us for many years. He is, however, staying on Council as an Ordinary Member, carries on with his BTO roles and supports us with his knowledge. We are very lucky indeed to be able to welcome Dr Jane Turner to Council as the new County Recorder. Jane has worked for many years in the background for CAWOS as the Rarities Secretary and is a well-known and hugely respected Wirral birder and ringer. Thanks for stepping up Jane and I look forward to working with you. Following our appeals we also have two new non-Executive Council Members, Carolyn Bailey and John Jones. Carolyn will be taking over the Membership Secretary role with a gradual handover from me over the year and the next renewals will have her name and details on. John will bring his IT skills to us and help on Council. We do still have one position open for a non-Executive Member. We would really welcome someone to step forward to fill this role. We will be having a number of projects over the coming year to try and re-invigorate the Society.

I have deliberately not mentioned birds as they are covered by others in this *Bird News*.

Phil Hampson, Chairman, Data Manager and Membership Secretary

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CAWOS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 4th MARCH 2022

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2021-22

Introduction: None of us expected that 2021 would impact our lives in a similar manner to 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic; how wrong we were. Again we had restrictions at different times of the year. This impacted our birding significantly as we were back to only going out for daily exercise, some were confined to urban areas, others lucky enough to be able to walk in the countryside. Sheila and Geoff Blamire embarked on daily walks during the first lockdown in 2020 and carried this on throughout 2021 covering 1399.14 miles (6.28mls/day) or 2251.70km (10.01km/day) from 1st January until Sheila unfortunately had an accident, which thankfully she has fully recovered from.

The Chairman's, Secretary's and Treasurer's reports for the calendar year 2021 to the Annual General Meeting held online on 4th March 2022 are included in Bird News 119 (March 2022).

Membership: There were 304 members towards the end of 2020 (as reported at the Council meeting in November). Most members have updated their standing orders after the price rise 3 years ago. However, there remains a small handful who had not done so. This may seem insignificant but it creates a disproportionate amount of extra work for the Membership Secretary; as can be seen

below this is now more important that these are rectified with a new Membership Secretary taking over later this year. A few members have asked if they could pay by Direct Debit. Unfortunately we do not have a computer system that will enable us to link into the banking system to do this. We may investigate using a 3rd party in the future, but there is a cost implication.

Council and Subcommittees: Five Council meetings were due to be held during the year, on the third Thursdays in January, April, July, September and November. The November meeting was held at the Kilton Inn in Knutsford as previously primarily for new member David Hiley to meet us all in person; all the subsequent meetings were held via Zoom. The 2021 AGM was held via Zoom with voting for the Council member roles done automatically online.

In his report last year, the outgoing Chairman, David Steventon, referred to the pending retirement of Geoff and Sheila Blamire. The migration to BirdTrack took place seamlessly and the uploading of the historic records was completed, thanks to the efforts of Geoff Blamire.

Indoor Meetings: All our talks throughout 2021 were conducted via Zoom. We did explore going back to indoor meetings later in the year when we thought restrictions were easing but the church would not rent the room due to the additional cleaning measures they would have to put in place to meet COVID requirements. Using Zoom allows us to engage from a wider number pool of speakers as location is immaterial, where as had they visited in person the expenses would have been prohibitive. More importantly for the Society it enables people from the further extremities of our area to join in.

Annual Bird Reports: As I write this report the compilers have completed their sections of the Systematic List and now Ted Lock and myself are in the process of editing the 2020 *Bird Report*; this is almost complete. To get to this stage some 60,000+ records were checked and uploaded into BirdTrack, but when we did the extract from BirdTrack this increased to 220,000+ records. At this point I must mention Graham Palmer for his hard work in setting up the process to check the records out of BirdTrack, we worked very closely together throughout. When we undertook the checking his attention to detail and constant dialogue were very helpful and undertaken at a time when he himself was unwell, thank you Graham on behalf of the Society but also from me personally. I know how challenging it was and took many weeks of hard work. The only issue I would like to bring to the attention of members is to please **as far as possible use the names** as defined in the gazetteer. For example, in the 2020 data we had over 25 different variations of the names for Burton Mere Wetlands!

As I write in mid-February the Systematic List is complete and going through its final check for typo's etc. As each section is complete it is being sent to the typesetter, then we have to proofread it again and that is a challenge in itself. All the other sections are all almost complete. As in the previous two reports we will be including around 80 full colour photographs submitted by photographers from across Cheshire and Wirral. We are on schedule to publish the report in April 2022. Thank you to Mark Woodhead, Photo Editor, for the help and advice given to Ted and myself. I appreciate that your role is very much in the background but does take a considerable amount of time and effort.

It would not be possible for us to have reached today's position without the combined efforts of the whole team involved, to everyone thank you on behalf of the Society and personally from Ted and myself. I also have to thank Scott Mayson of the BTO for his help and support throughout the switch to BirdTrack.

The 2021 *Bird Report* will be back on schedule and should be published by the end of this calendar year.

Newsletter: Throughout the lockdowns we managed to continue with the production and delivery of *Bird News* of March, July and November. This required me to produce and post the labels to Sheila and Geoff who then undertook the manual operation of stamping and placing in an envelope. Rather than go to the Post Office they posted in several local post boxes, some postmen must have wondered what was happening! Thank you to Sheila for all her hard work with editing and producing *Bird News* and them both for their hard work in posting them.

Bird News has, as usual, a wide spread of articles covering sightings, ringing, various other reports and a diary. Sheila is always looking for articles, or, those focussing on birding locations

in C&W. If you regularly visit a location, small reserve, please consider spending an hour or two to write an A4 page or so about it and send it to Sheila.

Council: Over the last 2 or 3 years we have had vacancies on Council and have asked many times in *Bird News* for help. I'm very pleased to say that, subject to approval at the AGM, we have John Jones joining as a non-Executive member and Carolyn Bailey as Membership Secretary who will be gradually taking over from me, fully from November 2022 when the renewal notices are sent out. I am especially grateful to Carolyn for stepping up.

At the AGM Hugh Pulsford is stepping down after 17 years as the County Recorder. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him on behalf of the Society for all his work throughout these years. He is staying on Council as a non-Executive member. Fortunately, again subject to approval at the AGM Jane Turner, who has been the Rarities Secretary for many years, has stepped up to take on the role of County Recorder. I look forward to working together with Jane.

Our thanks are due to John, Carolyn and Jane.

Although not a Council member Andy Livermore has been editing the *Bird Reports* for us and was instrumental in introducing the new format and colour photographs. He has stepped back from that role now, but has been in the background providing help and advice for Ted and myself. Again on behalf of the Society thank you Andy for all your hard work and effort, it is very much appreciated.

Website: Our website has been changed and refreshed with a more modern frontage. Thank you to Mike Hems for the help he gave me checking what I had produced and his hard work in setting it all up.

Summary: Unexpectedly we again had a difficult year, our birding was limited at times but nevertheless the number of records submitted has remained steady. Many formal BTO surveys were cancelled to the sorrow of the many who enjoy doing them, although some people were able to continue as they were local to their survey area and conducted as part of their 'daily' exercise.

Our membership remains steady. It would be nice to see more people joining the Zoom meetings though, the details for joining are on each invitation email and there are links to help videos. We have only about 10% of our membership active and attending the talks we have.

At some stage this year we will be asking people what they want from the Society by a survey. Can I appeal to you, the membership, to help move the Society forwards please? We can do nothing if we don't get responses and the last membership survey was many years ago. This will probably be done in the summer when the Compilers are working on their sections of the 2021 *Bird Report*. It is important to look at this as the age demographic we have is very heavily weighted towards the older end and we need to attract younger people.

Last, but not least, I have to mention Ted Lock. Throughout the last 12 months Ted has been a tremendous support to me personally and the Society in his role as Secretary. Additionally his contribution to the 2020 *Bird Report* is another hidden role. Ted has been editing the sections as they come back from the Compilers, commenting and checking with me any data queries that arise. All in all many hours of very hard and dedicated work; thank you Ted from everyone in CAWOS and also all involved with the production cycle of the 2020 *Bird Report*..

Phil Hampson, Chairman, Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

SECRETARY'S REPORT FOR 2021-22

Council has had another busy year with concerns about the future due to the lack of commitment from the membership with regard to getting involved in the running of the Society. Several members have been approached over the last 2-3 years and adverts placed in *Bird News* three times a year which had resulted in just one person offering to help, David Hiley. After my Guest Editorial in the last *Bird News* we have now had two further people step up, John Jones and Carolyn Bailey. Carolyn will be taking over from Phil as Membership Secretary.

We started the year with a new Chairman who has worked hard to bring about change. Council meetings via Zoom became very focussed on those issues that needed a decision to be made. Key information was circulated ahead of the meeting as usual, and members were expected to have read them so good discussion could take place in an efficient and timely manner which

leads to shorter meetings. But we still had time for some social chat after the official business was done and our November meeting was face-to-face so we could all meet and catch up with one another.

The Chairman's AGM report has included most of the key business points during the year, so I will focus more on the members who have or are about to step down from Council following, in one case, many years of service.

The annual *Bird Report* is one of the key features of the Society, separating us from all the other bird societies and clubs in the County. The 2019 *Bird Report* was out before mid-year to the usual very high standard, with some stunning photography to lighten the heavy load of bird data which forms the meat of the report. This report, like those before it and those that follow, records the changing pattern of birds in the county which is part of history.

We were very sad to lose Andrew Livermore who for 4 years was the Editor of our *Bird Report*. Andrew made significant changes to the report by moving to size B5 and full colour and including a large number of colour photographs resulting in a quality product. Having taken on the role of Editor with our Chairman for the 2020 report I have discovered how much hard work is involved in putting the report together and that after several years it takes its toll. We are also going to be losing our County Recorder at this AGM; Hugh Pulsford has been in post for at least 17 years and has made an important contribution to the *Bird Report* over those years, in particular with the validation of sightings of rarities as Chairman of the Rarities Committee. His knowledge and experience as a ringer has made him an expert on birds of Cheshire and much wider. He is one of the Cheshire BTO representatives and has been influential in that role by co-ordinating with county recorders across the country to improve information exchange and processes. Hugh's expertise will not be lost to Council as he has put his name forward to become an ordinary member of Council at the AGM.

At the last AGM we should have appointed Brian Dyke, one of our longest standing members on Council, as an Honorary Life Vice-President of CAWOS. Brian was a founding member of the COA (Cheshire Ornithological Association) in 1974, was invited onto Council to represent the Wilmslow Guild Ornithological Society and in 1979 took on the role as Treasurer until the COA was wound up and CAWOS was formed in October 1988. He continued in the role of Treasurer on CAWOS Council for the next ten years. At the AGM in 1999 Brian became Chairman for one year handing over to Sheila Blamire, and at the end of her term in 2005 became Chairman again for a full five years before handing over to Clive Richards. He remained as an ordinary Council member until in 2010 when he did a further year as Chairman before handing over to David Steventon and then being appointed an ordinary member of Council until his retirement in 2021. That's 47 years supporting birding in Cheshire and Wirral and 33 years with CAWOS. As you can tell, Brian has been a reliable and committed member of the Society and very well deserving of becoming an Honorary Life Vice-President of CAWOS.

Finally, I would like to thank Mike Hems for his continued support of our website, David Craven for running the CAWOS twitter account, Mark Woodhead as photographic editor of the *Bird Report*, all members who have submitted records to BirdTrack and conducted surveys across the County, the compilers who give their time writing up sections for the *Bird Report*, and of course those on Council who worked with me to keep the wheels turning.

Ted Lock, CAWOS Secretary

TREASURER'S REPORT FOR 2021

I have pleasure in submitting the audited accounts of the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society for the year ended 31st December 2021. These accounts show that the Income and Expenditure account shows a surplus for the year of £1,150 on our General Fund. Database searches contributed £805 of this surplus which means that we would still have had a small surplus even if no searches had been requested. Membership subscriptions for the year of £4,669 were down slightly by £176 compared to the previous year.

The costs of producing the *Bird Report* and *Bird News* remains stable for now, but inflationary pressures might be a problem in future. The previous year's costs were flattered by the write-back of an excess provision.

Our activities were once again disrupted by the pandemic, but the sales of 2019 *Bird Report* enjoyed a slight improvement on the previous year thanks to the gradual reopening of sales outlets in the visitor centres at the local reserves. The evening programme meetings were suspended throughout the year but replaced by Zoom meetings for which we receive no income though we do save on our outgoings, such as room hire charges. This year saw awards (costing £252) made to three of our long-serving members (Sheila and Geoff Blamire, and Brian Dyke) for their outstanding work over the years.

The results for the year were completely satisfactory, and despite interest on our cash balance being reduced significantly in line with market forces, our reserves increased by £1,176 to £43,329.

John Patterson, Treasurer

Sites to Watch

DEE ESTUARY 2021: A YEAR TO REMEMBER

First published on the RSPB Dee Estuary Blog on 16 Dec 2021 – see https://community.rspb.org.uk/placestovisit/deeestuary/b/deeestuary-blog

The turn of the year is often a time for reflection and 2021 will certainly live long in the memory whether we like it or not. Due to various impacts of the pandemic, it's inevitable that some of you visited us less frequently than usual, or perhaps not even at all, meaning there's a good chance you may have missed some of what was a very busy and successful year at the Dee Estuary reserve. Despite the obvious challenges and another uncertain year ahead, 2021 will be remembered for so many reasons, including plenty of highs.

With the country in lockdown from early January and Burton Mere Wetlands remaining open only for local people to get daily exercise, few would have seen the site flooded by extreme rainfall in the third week of the month which resulted in the highest water levels we've ever endured and stretches of our trails under inches of water! The resulting waterlogged wetlands posed a problem to the contractors installing nearly two miles of predator exclusion fence around the original Inner Marsh Farm part of the reserve, developed 30 years ago. Having already been delayed by deep snow at their North Wales home, it was a race against time to have the work finished before the birds were getting in the mood for breeding season.

Finished they did though, and as the reserve gently awoke from lockdown, Avocets piled in from the south and Lapwings "peewit-ed" their way into pairs. BMW, and the Dee Estuary reserve as a whole, has two over-riding objectives that we manage the habitats for: to maintain the internationally important numbers of over-wintering waterfowl, and to increase the numbers and success of breeding waders.

Whilst our management of the vast tidal parts of the reserve is largely left to natural processes - which works perfectly for protecting the winter flocks - BMW is where we can intensively manage the reclaimed land to deliver stretching targets to make a positive impact on breeding bird numbers. All natural habitats undergo a process known as succession, meaning if they are left unmanaged they will change significantly and often quickly. Regular visitors to the reserve will know how much rush, reed and even willow advances on the wetlands each summer! Maintaining the predominant wet grassland habitat of BMW takes extensive effort each year, which isn't as easy as it used to be now we've developed as a popular visitor haven.

Speaking of which, there were significant improvements in infrastructure with a remodelled Bridge screen in April better suiting the needs of the broader audience BMW now attracts, and with the further easing of lockdown in May, visitors were able to enjoy the highly-anticipated Border hide for the first time.

Although a cold, wet May threatened to hamper the nesting waders, they bounced back in the second half of the breeding season. Back in early spring, amidst anticipation for the first nests and arrival of summer migrants, nobody predicted the sound of a booming Bittern first heard by a couple of our volunteers one Tuesday evening in mid-March. Great excitement inevitably ensued, and Bitterns became a new theme for the summer.

We go to great lengths protecting wader nests from large mammals with the electric fence, but chicks are still vulnerable to raptors, corvids, gulls and herons - and to our disbelief, one of the pioneering Bitterns was seen scoffing Avocet chicks on the main scrape on more than one occasion. Nature is amazing, but can't half be cruel sometimes!

Increased effort was also invested 15 miles away at our Welsh outpost, Point of Ayr, where Little Terns followed up their staggering 2020 breeding success. Helped by our first volunteer Little Tern warden who committed countless hours to ensure the condition of protective fences and reduce human disturbance along with a small team of volunteers. This year 14 pairs fledged 10 chicks and the hope is with our sustained management the site will continue to flourish as a satellite colony to the large population at nearby Gronant.

Come August and the height of summer for many of us, the reserve quickly entered its programme of autumn management work. Taking advantage of, traditionally at least, drier summer months, sluices are opened wide to draw down the water level, aiding our wardens to drive the tractor through much of the wet grassland with trailed topping equipment. Along with cattle grazing, and the use of a pedestrian mower and brushcutters in wetter, densely vegetated areas, this prevents rushes, reeds and young willows from dominating the grassland which would make it unfavourable for the priority waders.

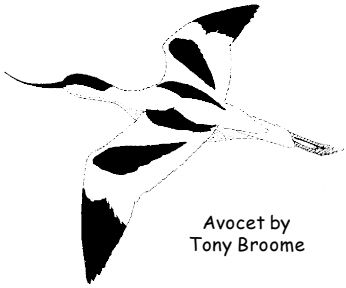
This year, further improvements were made to drier, less productive parts of the wet grassland using a specialist spoil spreader to create new, shallow ditches where the kind of aquatic invertebrates that wader chicks eat, will thrive. Simultaneously, a neglected area of rank weeds was removed from near Border Pool to reinstate long-lost open water. Even with this heavy work done in a matter of days, it will take months for these areas to settle, mature and be refined to become truly fruitful, something to look forward to watching through 2022.

September marked the 10th anniversary of opening the BMW and almost as if in celebration the reserve was graced by its most significant rarity in years - a Wilson's Phalarope. And, as brilliant as that was, attracting over 1000 birders over its three-day visit, we don't do all this land management for the sake of attracting rare birds; they're just a bonus.

Breeding season is met with intensive surveying of the wet grassland to monitor and record how the waders are faring; number of pairs, nests, chicks hatched and crucially how many chicks manage to reach fledging age. This data is submitted to the RSPB Reserves Ecology team in autumn for them to collate and compare, and an annual report is written for each reserve.

The first breeding Bitterns were an obvious triumph - the reedbed planned and hand-planted in 2007 with them as the primary target; as was a successful pair of Pintails on the Welsh side of the wet grassland - a first record anywhere in Wales for over two decades. However, the focus is on the waders, so imagine how the team felt when we learnt BMW had the highest density of breeding waders of any wet grassland on RSPB reserves last year!

A record high 54 pairs of Redshanks nested, 63 pairs of Avocets - both with exceptionally good fledging success - and although Lapwing numbers were down on their best years, they recovered well with second broods after most of the first succumbed to May's unseasonal weather, That's nearly 200 pairs of waders supported at BMW, which is exactly what threatened species need to sustain their numbers until longer-term land use and policy changes in the wider countryside allow more of them to nest in their natural habitats away from nature reserves.



Avocet by Tony Broome

The recently-published *Birds of Conservation Concern 5* reports that an alarming 70 out of 245 UK bird species are classified on the red list, reflecting their rapid declines and shrinking or fragmented distribution in this country. This includes Lapwings, demonstrating the clear need for us to work

so hard to help them sustain their local population in the hope that in years to come they can recolonise traditional breeding sites in the surrounding countryside.

Erratic weather may be out of our hands, but at least here we have the benefit of a series of sluices to help regulate water levels on the wet grassland to avoid flooding or drying out at critical times of the breeding season. The intensive management of the wetlands each autumn may inhibit visitors birdwatching on occasions, but is essential to maintain the conditions for the reserve's priority species - which as the numbers above tell us, is clearly working wonders!

And it wasn't just the warden team who had reasons to be cheerful; BMW's annual appraisal by Visit England's Quality Assessment Scheme measures the quality of all things associated with the reserve's visitor facilities, and as well as achieving our highest ever overall score of 86%, we received a 100% score for the 'Staff' section of the report - for the second time in three years - reflecting the friendly yet professional atmosphere we have a high reputation for. This resulted in us being awarded Visit England's prestigious 'Welcome Accolade', one of just eight visitor attractions in North-West England to receive any of their five accolades in 2021.

The pandemic may have halted our steady growth in visitor numbers, but we're still eager to improve and expand the reserve for people as well as wildlife. We continue to pursue plans for a café at BMW to build on the popular light refreshments we already offer, as well as help generate more income to invest in doing more to protect nature across the vast and unique Dee Estuary.

2021 was one of our best years yet, but the team are determined to build on that success, and we hope that you'll share the journey with us.

Dan Trotman, Visitor Experience Manager at RSPB Dee Estuary Reserve

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BIRDING AT DANE'S MOSS

Dane's Moss is an area of lowland, raised bog just south of Macclesfield in Cheshire East that is partly classified as an SSSI. This type of habitat is sadly now becoming very rare and is classed as a priority habitat on a similar rating to ancient woodland, but unfortunately, does not get nearly as much publicity. The deep peat deposits lock in carbon and this makes it an internationally important habitat with regard to climate change. A key factor in locking in this carbon is the year-round waterlogging which makes it very much a wetland. This habitat comes with its own unique range of biodiversity and it is a great spot for dragonflies, butterflies and lizards. The site holds populations of Green Hairstreak and Small Heath and is a great site for Black Darter. Sadly, the range of Black Darter is moving northward with the onset of climate change and in the last couple of years Small Red-eyed Damselflies have moved in from the south. The southern area of peatland encompassing the SSSI area is a Cheshire Wildlife Trust Reserve and contains a mix of open bog, wet birch woodland and deciduous woodland with a number of pools to the north-east. The central area is a now closed landfill site of grassland and the northern peatland area is a mix again of wet woodland, scrub and open grassy areas.

Birding visits are always interesting and year round 25+ species can be found in a visit; although, like on any site, it may initially seem a bit barren. Regular visits throughout the seasons provide the best results as they give familiarity on the most productive spots and the little side paths that can be explored. There is a public footpath that runs through the centre of the CWT reserve from east to west with a loop of boardwalk through the southern area. This can be accessed by parking in the lay-by on a corner of Woodhouse End Road, from there follow the footpath north then take a sharp right into the reserve. The northern peatland is best accessed from walking north along the canal at the east end of the reserve after going over the railway bridge, then crossing back over the next railway bridge. Alternatively, parking in Lyme Green Retail Park gives closer access if needed. Wellies are good in the winter especially (it is a peat bog!) and fly repellent is not a bad idea for the cleggs [horse flies] in early summer. Visiting in the middle of the day is not as productive with the usual selection of visitors and dog walkers.

The north-eastern pools are the most productive for waterbirds, Teal and Water Rail can be expected all year round. Winter ducks are usually Shoveler and Tufted Duck but there is always the chance of an occasional Wigeon, Goosander, etc. It can take a bit of experience to work out the best vantage points from the paths to minimise disturbance as well as minimising the risk of

disappearing into one of the very deep ditches. Woodcock and Snipe are regular and elusive winter visitors and are always welcome to see in the usual fleeting views as they fly, having been flushed from the path.

The boardwalk loop is good for the usual mix of woodland birds and can yield Spotted Flycatcher and Garden Warbler among other species and in this irruption year has been good for Brambling, with the usual winter thrushes, Siskin and Lesser Redpoll. In summer the central peat bog area enclosed by the boardwalk loop is alive with Willow Warbler, Whitethroat and Reed Bunting plus an occasional Cuckoo. In addition to this, with a visit at the right time of day, birders can be rewarded with the sound of multiple Grasshopper Warblers. Scanning the fields adjacent to the reserve edge can be very rewarding for Skylark in the summer and occasionally a Tree Sparrow. This tends to be the best option on spring passage, especially on any newly-seeded fields. Wheatear, Whinchat and Yellow Wagtail have been found to be regular.

In total, records indicate the chance of 100 or more birds can be seen throughout the year. The star species of these is Willow Tit which has now been recorded on multiple occasions over the last few years. Personal experience indicates the wet woodland and scrub in the northern peatland area is best and due to their usual low population density a healthy measure of luck is needed. Sadly the northern peatland area is now under threat from development with a proposal of large scale removal of peat, drainage and habitat loss which would inevitably impact the hydrology of the SSSI and dry the site out. There has been no quantification of carbon emissions as yet and is sheer madness in these times of climate change. Information is easy to find on social media and any Cheshire East residents should consider writing to their local councillors to lobby them. If saved from development Dane's Moss will continue to be a biodiversity gem to be enjoyed by future generations in Cheshire East.

Andrew Emmerson

Editorial Note: For more information about the proposed development see the following website: www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/news/concerns-raised-over-development-impacts-danes-moss-nature-reserve. Also there's a petition for you to sign at: www.change.org/p/stop-the-destruction-of-danes-moss-peatland-for-housing-and-retail-development.

TATTON PARK

It was exciting to have a Great White Egret spend some time on the lagoon of Tatton Mere for a short spell during the winter period. It was joined at one point by two Little Egrets. They are far from common here at Tatton, unlike other sites where they are now regular or even resident. It was hoped that they would spend some time down at the Higmere end of Tatton Mere where our small heronry is, and they too take up residence. The wildfowl numbers don't seem as high as normal although it has been a relatively mild winter. Goldeneye, Pintail, Shoveler and a few Wigeon have been present but no signs of a Smew or diver yet. No big flocks of Bramblings yet either, a good place to look is up on Beech Avenue where they like to feed on the beech mast; the avenue along the Rostherne Drive has also held small flocks in the past too. Stonechats have been present around the mere edges but not seen as often as in recent years.

There are good numbers of Redwing and Fieldfare in the park, they favour the short grass on the RHS showground site. Plenty of Meadow Pipits are around too at the moment. Barn Owls successfully reared three chicks in the park last summer. When I checked the box last year I noticed it was getting a bit tatty, so the other day I installed a new one in the same location. I've got a few dotted around the park but they favour this one site and have been successful for a few years here.

There are signs that spring is around the corner with woodpeckers drumming and even a pair of Great Crested Grebes displaying on Melchett Mere in January! It won't be long until the first Sand Martin arrives over Tatton Mere, usually in the first two weeks of March, followed by other summer migrants. Dog Wood is a good place to listen for the first Chiffchaff and a good spot to hear plenty of birdsong. Spring could also see Osprey passing through and Hobbies are now annual over the mere in spring.

Spring is a great time for birding at Tatton and as we know anything can turn up!

Darren Morris, Tatton Park Ranger

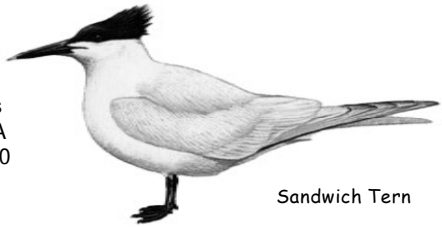
County Round-Up

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 May to August 2021.

SITE REPORTS

Chester area

Three Whooper Swans were at Puddington on Dec 25th and six Cattle Egrets there on Dec 20th. Red Kites were at Mollington on Sep 1st and Hoole on Nov 21st. A Marsh Tit was noted at Aldford on Dec 14th. 2200 Redwings were at the Gowy Meadows on Nov 7th.



Sandwich Tern

Congleton area

Two Common Scoters were at Astbury Mere on Nov 18th to 29th, two Sandwich Terns were there on Sep 30th and Oct 1st and a late Yellow Wagtail was at Mere Farm SQ on Nov 25th.

Crewe area

18 Whooper Swans were at EHF on Dec 7th. A Little Gull was at EHF on Nov 26th and 27th and a Black Tern was at Winterley Pool on Sep 2nd and 3rd. A Common Crane was at Alsager on Oct 16th, nine Spoonbills were at Sandbach Flashes on Oct 7th and a single Bittern was at EHF on Sep 11th. Red Kites were over Bunbury on Sep 4th and Basford on Sep 24th, whilst three Hobbies were at Haslington on Sep 6th. A Marsh Tit was noted at Bickerton on Oct 23rd, a late Swallow at PHF on Dec 25th, two Hawfinches were at Groby Flash on Nov 30th and Dec 1st and 25+ Lesser Redpolls were at Winterley on Nov 25th.

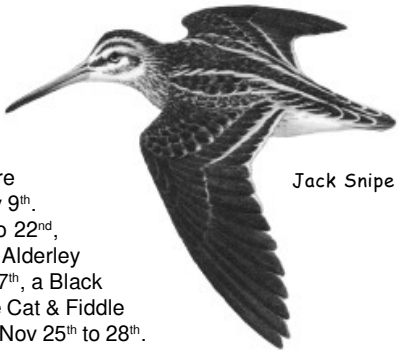
Ellesmere Port area

12,500 Pink-footed Geese were at Parkgate on Oct 25th, 24 Whooper Swans at BMW on Dec 19th and 10 Egyptian Geese at Burton Marsh on Nov 3rd. Three Garganeys were at BMW on Sep 19th and a single Long-tailed Duck at Shotwick on various dates during Nov and Dec. A Spotted Crake was at BMW on Dep 22nd. Waders at BMW included: Avocet on Dec 5th, two Little Stints on Sep 5th and Wilson's Phalarope on Sep 22nd to 24th. A max of seven Spoonbills were at Parkgate on Sep 5th, 13 Cattle Egrets were on the Ince Marshes on Nov 5th, 210 Little Egrets present during the Sep WeBS count on the Mersey Estuary on 12th and 38 Great White Egrets at BMW on Oct 22nd. Ospreys were at Parkgate on Sep 8th and Denhall on Sep 14th, 13 Marsh Harriers at Neston on Oct 19th with up to four Hen Harriers and Red Kites were at BMW on Sep 1st and 27th. Up to six Short-eared Owls were observed at Denhall on Nov 14th, a party of five Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were present in a Burton garden on Dec 3rd. Two late Swallows were at BMW on Nov 24th, seven Whinchats at Burton Marsh on Sep 4th, 11 Cetti's Warblers at BMW on Sep 11th, a Yellow-browed Warbler at Burton on Oct 28th, a Siberian Chiffchaff was at Parkgate on Dec 25th and a Corn Bunting at BMW on Dec 12th and 13th.

Halton area

Wildfowl at Hale included: 2,500 Pink-footed Geese on Oct 23rd, eight Whooper Swans on Oct 13th and a Garganey at Hale on several dates in Oct. Waders included: 23 Avocets at Hale on Oct 21st, 27 Turnstones at Hale on Oct 29th, single Curlew Sandpipers at Pickering's Pasture on Sep 21st and 24th and a Little Stint there on Nov 3rd, record count of 14,500 Dunlins were at Hale on Nov 7th. Two Caspian Gulls were present on the Mersey at Widnes from Nov 9th to 30th, a Guillemot at Pickering's Pasture on Oct 3rd and a Leach's Petrel at Hale on Oct 5th. A Spoonbill was at Hale on Sep 17th, Bittern at Halebank on Dec 12th, two Cattle Egrets at Carr Lane Pools on Nov 27th and 153 Little Egrets at Hale Duck Decoy on Sep 2nd. A Siberian Chiffchaff was at Pickering's Pasture on Dec 12th, a Firecrest was noted at Hale Park on Sep 12th and Oct 24th, elsewhere a Channel Wagtail was at Hale on Sep 4th, three Tree Pipits there on Sep 19th and three Water Pipits were at Carr Lane on Dec 28th.

Macclesfield area


Jack Snipe

Six Egyptian Geese were at Acre Nook SQ on Oct 11th, c50 Mandarins there on Oct 6th and a Smew was at Lapwing Lane Pool from mid-Nov. A Black-necked Grebe at Acre Nook SQ from mid-Nov into 2022. A Purple Sandpiper was at Chelford on Nov 6th to 8th and 11 Jack Snipes were counted at Mow Cop on Dec 21st. A Kittiwake was at Mere Farm SQ on Nov 6th whilst a Gannet was at Chelford on Nov 9th. A Great White Egret was at Bosley Reservoir on Sep 19th to 22nd, Oct 9th and Oct 29th. A Golden Eagle was reported over Alderley Edge on Sep 20th. A Marsh Tit was at Brown Knowl on Oct 7th, a Black Redstart was at Shutlingsloe on Sep 11th and 12th and at The Cat & Fiddle on Oct 7th to 16th, two Snow Buntings were at Shining Tor on Nov 25th to 28th.

Vale Royal area

Wildfowl included: four Bewick's Swans at Frodsham Marsh on Dec 26th to 30th, 21 Whooper Swans there from Dec 18th, a Blue-winged Teal at Neumann's Flash on Oct 8th to 23rd, two Garganeys at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 12th to 15th, Scaup at Newchurch Common on Nov 3rd and a Smew at Marbury and Neumann's Flash on Nov 30th. Waders included: c130 Avocets at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 19th, nine Bar-tailed Godwits at Frodsham Marsh on Oct 8th, 3400 Black-tailed Godwits on Sep 1st, three Curlew Sandpipers at Frodsham Marsh during Sep, Little Stint at Ashton's Flash on Sep 4th and 5th and five Spotted Redshanks at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 12th. A Caspian Gull was at Winsford on Oct 2nd and a Manx Shearwater was at Frodsham Marsh on Sep 12th. A Great White Egret was at Frodsham Marsh on Oct 17th. A Goshawk was at Delamere on Dec 23rd, Red Kite over Haydn Pool on Oct 10th, two Hobbies were at Ashton's Flash on Sep 20th and 22nd. A single Waxwing was at Toft on Nov 21st, c80 Tree Sparrows at Whitley Reed on Dec 19th and two Water Pipits at Frodsham Marsh on Dec 5th. Up to 120,000 Starlings were estimated over the Budworth Mere reedbed on Dec 23rd.

Warrington area

2,200 Pink-footed Geese were at Woolston Eyes on Dec 11th, 23 Whooper Swans there on Oct 23rd, 12 Common Scoters over Walton on Nov 18th, with Smew reported from Moore SQ on Nov 7th. 15,000 Woodpigeons were noted on migration over Woolston Eyes on Oct 21st. 15 Jack Snipes were at Woolston Eyes on Dec 11th, six Woodcocks at Risley Moss on Dec 29th. Single Bitterns were at Moore NR on Oct 23rd and Woolston Eyes on 28th and a Glossy Ibis was at Woolston Eyes on Nov 25th. An Osprey flew over Woolston Eyes on Sep 4th and a Goshawk was there on Dec 2nd, a Red Kite was over Silver Lane Pools on Oct 16th and four Hobbies were at Woolston Eyes on Sep 18th. 82 Jays were at Woolston Eyes on Oct 14th, a Siberian Chiffchaff on Nov 19th and 25th, Ring Ouzel on Nov 4th, 2500 Fieldfares on Nov 4th, 8700 Redwings on Oct 14th, all at Woolston Eyes. 135 Bramblings were at Woolston Eyes on Dec 11th and a Hawfinch was there on Oct 14th.

Wirral area

A record count of 612 Brent Geese were at Hilbre on Nov 18th, two Bewick's Swans there on Nov 5th, five Whooper Swans at Thurstaston on Oct 14th, 2000 Common Scoters off Meols on Dec 17th, two Long-tailed Ducks at Hoylake on Nov 9th and 20 Goosanders at West Kirby on Dec 2nd. Waders included: 5,700 Black-tailed Godwits was the highest count at Caldy on Sep 20th, seven Curlew Sandpipers at Hoylake on Sep 12th and West Kirby on 18th, three Little Stints at Hilbre on Sep 9th and a Grey Phalarope at New Brighton on Oct 22nd. A Sabine's Gull was off Hoylake and Hilbre on Oct 5th, two Little Gulls at New Brighton on Oct 5th, 175 Sandwich Terns and two Little Terns at Hoylake on Sep 12th, and a Black Tern was at Hilbre on Sep 5th, 7th and 11th. Two Great Skuas were off Hilbre on Oct 6th and four Arctic Skuas on 1st, Guillemots were present at several sites during Oct, with a Little Auk on Oct 21st also at Hilbre. 10 Red-throated Divers were off Hoylake on Nov 18th, a Black-throated Diver was at Hilbre on Nov 13th and 14th and a Great Northern Diver there on several dates and New Brighton on Sep 25th, five Leach's Petrels were at Hilbre on Oct 5th along with three Manx Shearwaters and 30 Gannets were there on Sep 4th.

An Osprey was over Red Rocks on Sep 14th, six Marsh Harriers were at Heswall on Oct 21st and a Red Kite was at Thurstaston on Sep 27th. A Marsh Tit was at Upton on Dec 13th, two late Swallows at New Brighton on Nov 9th with another at Hoylake on 24th, Lesser Whitethroat at Heswall on Nov 29th, Firecrests were noted at Bidston Hill and Hoylake both on Sep 19th and at Hilbre on Sep 7th, Oct 8th and 9th. A Ring Ouzel was at Leasowe on Nov 8th and Meols on 14th, Pied Flycatcher was at Hilbre on Sep 5th. Otherwise 11 Rock Pipits were at Hilbre on Nov 14th, 37 Twites at West Kirby on Nov 5th, five Snow Buntings in the Wallasey area from late Nov and a Corn Bunting at Hilbre on Dec 13th.

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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.

County Rarities

SIBERIAN CHIFFCHAFF Phylloscopus (collybita) tristis

Siberian Chiffchaff

Identification of races and subspecies of Warblers in particular has long been a bit of a nightmare and no more so that trying to separate Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita)* from so called 'Siberian Chiffchaff' *(Phylloscopus (collybita) tristis)*. This problem is complicated by the correct identification of the form and the difficulties of separating true Siberian *tristis* (largely from east of the Yenisey) and *'fulvescens'* (on the West Siberian Plain) from *abietinus* (from Scandinavia and western Russia west of the Urals). Originally a BBRC problem, the correct assessment of records now lies with the County validation committees.

Historically, the view that any late autumn Chiffchaff lacking green in the crown and mantle and lacking yellow in the face and underparts can be labelled *tristis* has been refined. It is evident from extensive research (*Dean and Svensson) that true *tristis* is defined additionally by the presence of pale brown or grey-brown hues above and the presence of warm buff in the supercilium, ear-coverts, breast-sides and flanks. *'Fulvescens'* is similar in appearance though may be a little paler overall and may show very limited yellow and olive hues.

So the previous image that a 'grey and white' Chiffchaff was *tristis* is not now consistent if it lacks the pale grey-brown and buff hues now firmly linked with the form. The origins of such grey and white individuals remain unclear but may include eastern *abietinus* and intergrades between *abietinus* and *tristis*.

So faced with a pale, late autumn Chiffchaff, where do you start? Luckliy these days the advent of digital photgraphy and ability to take a sound recording on a mobile phone has greatly assisted in getting to grips with this subspecies.

Last year in October on Scillies there were multiple claims of Siberian Chiffchaff, and several were singing, so I spent quite a bit of time looking at individuals to see if the above plumage 'rules' held true on birds identified by song.

The following features are key, and importantly all need to be there!

- Absence of olive in the crown and mantle
- Absence of yellow away from the underwing
- Presence of a grey-brown or pale brown hue in the upperparts

- Presence of warm buff in the supercilium and ear-coverts and presence of buff at the breast-sides/flanks
- In addition, a very black-looking bill and legs and the call, a thin, piping near-monosyllabic Bullfinch-like or Dunnock-like call
- If you are lucky enough to hear it a song is also markedly different from western Chiffchaff's.

Ref: *Dean and Svensson: (*British Birds* 98: 396-410).

Hugh Pulsford

'SIBERIAN CHIFFCHAFF': CHESHIRE AND WIRRAL STATUS

In his accompanying article on the identification of 'Siberian Chiffchaff' Hugh uses the words 'nightmare' and 'complicated' in connection with the separation of 'true Siberian *tristis'* from other eastern races *fulvescens* and *abietinus.* Hugh references a paper by Alan Dean and Lars Svensson, 'Siberian Chiffchaff revisited', in the August 2005 edition of *British Birds* in which this problem was addressed. A further *British Birds* paper in June 2010, 'The status in Britain of 'Siberian Chiffchaff' by Dean *et al*, includes further discussion of identification features. These relatively recent papers are all very well but 'Siberian' and 'Scandinavian' Chiffchaffs were first mentioned in *Cheshire (and Wirral) Bird Reports* as long ago as 1969. They re-appear as '*tristis*', or 'Northern' or '*abietinus'* or '*abietinus/tristis',* sometimes prefixed by 'possible' or 'probable' in a dozen more *Bird Reports* before Dean and Svensson's 2005 paper. What is one to make of these records, the birds identified without the benefit of the paper? There are no relevant records in C&WBRs between 2000-2007 and Allan Conlin and Eddie Williams in their, must-have, volume *Rare and Scarce Birds of Cheshire & Wirral* (2017), understandably take a pragmatic view and publish only records of *tristis* from 2008-2015 with 2016 records marked as "under consideration by the County Rarities Committee". However, it is possible to take the view that the birds mentioned in earlier C&WBRs will in most, maybe all, cases have been reported by experienced birders. Birders who well knew that the bird they were looking at was what the literature of the time referred to as one of the eastern races of Chiffchaff. In view of this I think it is worth looking at all the published records and the review that follows are based on all such records in C(&W)BRs from 1969 onwards and should be read in conjunction with the table.

The first record is of several seen and heard at Red Rocks by Dr Raines in Sep 1969. The first Hilbre record followed quickly on 14th May 1970 - a bird stated to have the call notes and characteristics of *tristis*. The bird at Hilbre on 11th Sep 1970 remains the earliest eastern Chiffchaff in the county. Red Rocks had birds in Sep 1972, but there were no further records until one was at Eastham on 16th Sep 1978 – the first away from the coast. Further non-coastal records followed: at Hale in Dec 1984 and the Eaton Estate in Nov 1986; before the next coastal birds at Red Rocks in Oct 1988 - the same year which brought the first Dec record at Runcorn Hill. The first of a number of Woolston records came in Nov and Dec 1989. Red Rocks had seven birds from late Sep well into Oct 1990 and was again favoured with multiple sightings in the first half of Oct 1994. A description of a bird believed to be *tristis* at Frodsham Marsh from Nov 29th to Dec 5th 1998 was submitted to BBRC but it seems that no opinion was forthcoming. 1999 brought the first Jan sighting - at Heswall, a bird at Leasowe in Oct - the first from the North Wirral coast away from Red Rocks and one at Wilmslow in Nov - the furthest from the coast recorded at that time.

The next appearance in a C&WBR was not until Feb and Mar 2008 at Neston, but records since have been annual. There have been Apr records at Woolston in 2012, Hilbre in 2015 and Bollington in 2017 - the latter easily the most easterly record to date and in 2019 a bird sang in the Thurstaston Common/Royden Park area on May 27th and 28th. Sep to Nov has remained by far the most likely period for a sighting with Oct being the busiest month in terms of numbers; many of the coastal sites already mentioned holding birds in this autumn period. 2016, a year which brought exceptional numbers of Yellow-browed Warblers to the County, also resulted in eastern race Chiffchaffs being recorded at five sites in Oct/Nov with up to seven at Woolston. A bird at Denhall Lane in Dec 2013 remained into 2014 and one at Prestbury in Jan/Feb 2015 was presumably over-wintering.

There are no guarantees in birding but the stretch of coast between Leasowe and Red Rocks in October seems likely to give the best chance of a 'Siberian Chiffchaff'.

Year	Month	Date	Site	Race	Comment
1969	Sep	n/k	Red Rocks	Siberian	several calling & seen
1970	May	14th	Hilbre	tristis	call & seen
1970	Sep	11th	Hilbre	tristis	call & seen
1970	Oct	4th	Hilbre	tristis	4-5/10, call & seen
1972	Sep	26th	Red Rocks	Siberian	several
1978	Sep	16th	Eastham	abietinus/tristis	
1984	Dec	2nd	Hale Decoy	tristis	
1986	Nov	29th	Eaton Estate	Northern	a pale 'northern bird'
1988	Oct	24th	Red Rocks	abietinus	
1988	Oct	25th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
1988	Nov	12th	Hale Decoy	tristis	ringed
1988	Nov	23rd	Runcorn Hill	abietinus	into Dec
1989	Nov		Woolston	tristis	Nov & Dec
1990	Sep	28th	Red Rocks	abietinus	6 birds, browner upperparts, whiter underparts & distinctive 'cheeping' calls 28/9 to 24/10
1990	Oct	27th	Red Rocks	tristis	descriptive notes C&WBR 1990 p97
1994	Oct	9th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	3 birds
1994	Oct	15th	Red Rocks	tristis&abietinus	3 tristis inc 2 caught and 2 abietinus
1997	Sep	28th	Red Rocks	abietinus	2 birds
1998	Nov	29th	Frodsham Marsh	tristis	29/11 to 5/12
1999	Jan	3rd	Heswall	abietinus	
1999	Oct	24th	Leasowe	abietinus/tristis	
1999	Nov	2nd	Wilmslow		probably abietinus, possibly tristis
2008	Feb	2nd	Neston	tristis	photographed
2008	Mar	30th	Neston	Eastern	
2009	Oct	17th	Red Rocks	tristis	
2010	Oct	5th	Hilbre	Eastern	
2010	Oct	11th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2011	Oct	30th	Leasowe	abietinus	
2012	Apr	6th	Woolston	tristis	6-7/4, confirmed as tristis by sonagram
2012	Oct	9th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2012	Nov	10th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2012	Nov	28th	Woolston	tristis	ringed
2013	Sep	26th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2013	Dec	13th	Denhall Lane	tristis	13/12 into early Jan 2014
2013	Dec	26th	Moore	Eastern	26-28/12
2014	Oct	31st	Leasowe	tristis	31/10 to 3/11
2014	Nov	18th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	2 birds
2015	Jan	n/k	Prestbury	tristis	Jan/Feb
2015	Apr	2nd	Hilbre	tristis	
2015	Oct	31st	Parkgate	tristis	
2016	Mar	9th	Neston	abietinus/tristis	
2016	Oct	10th	Red Rocks	tristis	
2016	Oct	11th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2016	Oct	28th	Leasowe Lighthouse	tristis	
2016	Oct	31st	Hoylake	tristis	
2016	Nov	13th	Woolston	Eastern	up to 7 birds 13-19/11
2016	Nov	27th	Oxmoor	Eastern	
2017	Apr	14th	Bollington	abietinus/tristis	photographed & heard
2017	Sep	28th	Red Rocks	abietinus/tristis	
2017	Nov	3rd	Leasowe	abietinus/tristis	3-9/11
2018	Nov	9th	Hale	tristis	
2019	May	27th	Thurstaston Common/Royden Park area	tristis	singing bird 27-28/5

Steve Barber

Ringing News

Ringing plays an important part in developing our knowledge of birds. In this feature we invite ringing groups, or individual ringers, 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 ringed or recovered, and news of other events (or incidents). Future contributions will be welcomed.

RINGING AT WOOLSTON - SUMMER 2021

It now appears to be the 'norm' that I start these twice-yearly reports with an outline of the disruptions suffered during the period under review. In summer 2020 it was the first national lockdown that was the culprit. In summer 2021 ringing on No.1 Bed was restricted for a much more positive reason as a pair of Marsh Harriers nested successfully on the bed. An 'exclusion zone' was enforced to eliminate any risk of disturbance and for the first part of the summer the ringing team was restricted to a relatively small area in the south-west corner of the bed.

In the six months ended 30th September 2021 ('this summer') 2968 birds of 45 species were ringed at Woolston, a reduction of 573 birds (16%) from the total of 3541 birds of 49 species ringed in the six months ended 30th September 2020 ('last summer') and a shadow of the 4550 birds of 50 species that were ringed in the summer of 2019. This reduction is very much 'a tale of two beds'. On No.1 Bed, despite the restrictions, 1283 birds were ringed, an increase on the 1182 birds ringed last summer in the truncated period. On No.3 Bed only 1685 birds were ringed this summer compared with 2473 birds in the truncated period last summer. The largest reductions were in migrant warblers and Greenfinches and these effects are described in a little more detail below.

The first ringing dates for juvenile birds indicate that for resident species the timing of their breeding season was in the normal range despite the cold dry April and the cold wet May.

Ringing date of first juvenile

	2021	2020	2019	2018
Robin	27-May	25-May	07-May	26-May
Wren	04-Jun	09-Jun	09-Jun	22-Jun
Dunnock	26-May	22-May	11-Jun	08-Jun
Bullfinch	18-Jun	07-Jun	23-May	29-Jun

In the case of our migrant warblers the following table of 'first juvenile' dates indicates that, with the exception of Chiffchaff, a short-distance migrant, the timing of the breeding season was the latest in recent years confirming the impression on the ground that most migrants were late coming back and that conditions were not favourable when they arrived.

Ringing date of first juvenile

	2021	2020	2019	2018
Chiffchaff	28-May	17-Jun	26-Jun	26-Jun
Blackcap	26-May	07-Jun	16-Jun	16-Jun
Whitethroat	31-May	09-Jun	09-Jun	22-Jun
Reed Warbler	13-Jun	02-Jun	23-Jun	23-Jun

The duck trap is not operated during the summer but a single Teal found its way into a mist net. For the second summer in succession there were no raptors ringed but a female Tawny Owl and three chicks were ringed on No.3 Bed. The chicks fledged successfully.

Water levels on No.3 Bed were such that very little mud was exposed in the area where a net is set for Green Sandpipers and as a result just a single bird was ringed, the worst return since the project started in 2014. However, any disappointment was tempered by the news that NV38191, ringed as a juvenile on 7th August 2018, was re-sighted at WWT Slimbridge on 15th August 2021.

In last summer's report I said "In 2020 no significant hirundine roost formed on either bed. The seven Swallows and two Sand Martins ringed 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." Well, I was

partly correct. There were no autumn roosts on either bed for the second year running, but a short-lived but sizeable roost of adult Sand Martins formed on No.3 Bed and on the evening of 23rd April, Kieran Foster and Dan Owen took a catch of 131 birds. We think this spring roost is a new feature at Woolston. One bird had been ringed in 2019 whilst breeding at a sand quarry in south-east Cheshire and one of the birds ringed at Woolston was re-trapped in breeding condition at the same sand quarry later in the summer.

We ringed 1420 migrant warblers, compared to 1835 ringed in summer of 2020. All species were ringed in lower numbers with the exception of Lesser Whitethroat (three compared with two!). The largest falls were in Blackcaps and Reed Warblers. Chiffchaffs also declined and those three species usually make up 80% of the warblers ringed at Woolston. It appears to have been a poor breeding season. Grasshopper Warblers hung on with three ringed. The 17 Cetti's Warblers ringed was a reduction from last summer's record of 24 but still a positive return.

Amongst resident insectivores only Dunnock, with 54 ringed compared with 89 last summer, showed a variation above the normal year-to-year fluctuations. Dunnocks are predominantly caught on No.3 Bed where the declines this summer have been concentrated but whether these two things are connected is unclear.

Both Blue Tits and Great Tits had a reasonable breeding season in the nest boxes on the reserve with 140 chicks ringed on No.3 Bed (2020-135, 2019-173). After a very poor breeding season in 2020 Willow Tits appear to have recovered a little with 21 ringed this summer compared with 12 in 2020. There is evidence of poor adult survival in the winter of 2019/2020 and hopefully the breeding population is recovering. That being said, as I write this on 1st November a total of 24 Willow Tits have been ringed at Woolston, whereas the figure was 41 for the calendar year 2019 so there is some way to go.

The Meadow Pipit passage was later than in recent years with just nine ringed by the end of September. Good numbers were ringed on No.1 Bed in October and the year-end total will be a typical number.

For the second year running there was no significant arrival of finches in late summer and all the seedeaters were ringed in lower numbers than was the case in 2020 with the exception of Lesser Redpoll (33 vs 9) where there was a small arrival on No.1 Bed. Greenfinches continue to decline at Woolston. This summer just 196 were ringed compared with 431 last summer. The year to date total is 285 compared with 617 in the calendar year 2020. We do not see much evidence of trichomonas at Woolston but the population of Greenfinches is certainly declining and it may be that the housing estates to the north and south of No.3 Bed, where most Woolston Greenfinches are caught, do have a higher incidence of the disease.

There were no 'surprise captures' in the summer period.

Michael Miles, on behalf of the Woolston Eyes Ringing Team

HILBRE BIRD OBSERVATORY (HIBO)

Ringing October 2021 to February 2022

This report follows on from the exceptional summer and early autumn of 2021 and at first sight seems to present a disappointing record of both species and number of birds ringed. Only 28 birds of 9 species were ringed. One species that we monitor closely is Goldcrest and our autumn numbers are usually a reflection on the quality of the breeding season for these birds; Goldcrests do not breed on Hilbre and all the birds that arrive on the islands are migrants, probably from Scandinavia. We have never caught a Goldcrest that was ringed somewhere else in the UK. In the period from September to November in most years we would hope to catch between 40 and 80 birds. In 2021 we caught 8. This would suggest a rather poor breeding season for Scandinavian Goldcrests in 2021.

We would expect a reasonable passage of Robins and Wrens through the island at this time of year, but only 4 Robins and 6 Wrens were ringed. This might suggest a poor breeding season for these species in our local area, but it might relate to changes in timing of post-juvenile dispersal or migration. The timing of breeding has clearly been getting earlier and earlier and the consequence

of this on autumn movement is not clear - reduced numbers of birds at this time of year is not necessarily a problem and we will study the changes in the next few years with interest.

Blackbirds and Song Thrushes have turned up in small numbers to spend the winter on the island, as we would expect. The effects of global warming have clearly led to earlier arrivals of migrants and earlier commencement of breeding for local birds however, other changes may be able to be attributed to these longer, warmer springs and summers. The BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) has undertaken an initial study of Blue Tits that appears to show that their post-juvenile moult is becoming more extensive. Some of our ringers have taken part in this study but not on Hilbre where Blue Tits are rare birds!

There were developments this year that were interpreted as good news. The numbers of Brent Geese around the islands increased dramatically from previous years with over 480 pale-bellied birds being counted on a number of occasions. Whilst we do not catch the Brent Geese, like other local birders, we generate lots of useful data from sightings of colour-ringed birds. Our observers have found birds from all over England, Wales, Ireland, Iceland and Canada, as well as from Denmark. We had another notable colour-ringing sighting in October this year when we found a Mediterranean Gull that had been ringed in Poland in May 2018. Other good news was a peacock butterfly that was found in December, but this had to be tempered by the bad news that a fox was seen on the island in the same month. There are far too many foxes on the Wirral, it is hard to go anywhere on the peninsula without finding some and one of the consequences of foxes on Hilbre is to make the island unsafe for Shelduck to breed. We had a colony of 30 breeding birds before the foxes arrived on a regular basis. In the last couple of years we felt that perhaps one pair has bred on the island. It will be interesting to see if these breeding attempts continue.

John Elliott, on behalf of Hilbre Bird Observatory

CHESHIRE SWAN STUDY GROUP

Cheshire Summary of Avian Influenza (H5N1) to date 1st Feb 2022

Total Mute Swan deaths in Cheshire = 67.
Total Cheshire-ringed swans dead = 33: 17 cygnets, 3 second-years, 5 third-years, 8 adults.
Total ringed swans from outside Cheshire dead = 6: 2 cygnets, 1 second-year, 3 adults.
Total un-ringed swans dead = 28.

Ringing Report: Since my last report in October, the Swan Study Group has ringed a total of 37 swans including 29 cygnets, 1 third-year and 7 adults. These included 2 retraps.

Because of Avian Influenza the Group have not ringed any swans since 1-12-21.

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

- Acre Dell pools, nr Congleton = 34 on 18th Oct, 61 on 14th Nov and 32 on 13th Dec.
- Bottom Flash, Winsford = 19 on 21st Oct, 19 on 20th Nov and 25 on 18th Dec.
- Comber Mere, nr Whitchurch = 32 on 10th Oct, 13 on 7th Nov and 2 on 19th Dec.
- Coole Pilate, nr Nantwich = 18 on 24th Dec and 16 on 21st Jan.
- Doddington Mere, nr Nantwich = 58 on 21st Oct, 56 on 3rd Nov and 1 on 19th Dec.
- Neumann's Flash, Northwich = 16 on 18th Dec.
- Sandbach Flashes = 3 on 10th Oct, 8 on 7th Nov and 31 on 18th Dec.
- Sankey Valley CP, Warrington = 18 on 10th Oct, 11 on 7th Nov and 3 on 19th Dec.
- Spike Island, Widnes = 91 on 6th Oct and 76 on 10th Nov.
- Tabley Mere, nr Knutsford = 42 on 10th Oct, 36 on 7th Nov and 14 on 19th Dec.
- Trent and Mersey Canal, Middlewich = 32 on 22nd Nov and 32 on 18th Dec.

Movements: CPP6 was ringed as a female cygnet on 1-8-20 on the canal, Barbridge, near Nantwich. Seen on 31-1-22 at Radford Meadows, Stafford = 56 kms.

The final *Cheshire Swan Study Group Report 2021* is now available on the website (under Reports): http://cheshireswanstudygroup.wordpress.com

Sightings of all swans, geese and Mallards 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, 70 Rope Lane, Rope, Crewe, CW2 6RD
Tel: 01270 567526. Email: cheshireswans@gmail.com

Editorial note: As from the end of 2021 David Cookson has stood down as the leader of the Cheshire Swan Study Group. The Group was started in August 1988 by Dennis Elphick and then David took over the leadership of the group in 1992 - an amazing 30 years! Fortunately, swan ringing will continue as usual in Cheshire under David's supervision and all sightings will still be welcome. Also, David will continue to update CAWOS membership from time to time.

MID-CHESHIRE BARN OWL GROUP

You may think the winter months would be a period of relative quiet, waiting for the New Year to begin and breeding activity to start in earnest. However, the winter months can, weather permitting, be a very busy period, with nesting boxes needing to be checked, emptied, repaired, renovated and replaced where necessary in readiness of what we hope will be a successful breeding 2022.

But this is also a time to take stock and review how things have gone over the last few years. In this respect the last six years have been very good for the Barn Owls in Cheshire. In fact, between 2016 and 2021 recorded breeding pairs have not fallen below 142 (this being 2020 when the ability to check boxes was very restricted).

The trouble is that, in theory, we should not get a run of six consecutive 'good' years. This period should have been broken by the cyclical breeding of voles and shrews which usually have a significant dip in breeding every fourth or fifth year. So what is happening and what does 2022 hold for us - another good year, or the anticipated collapse?

The next few months will determine where 2022 will go. But is Mother Nature and the consequences of climate change affecting our wildlife, our Barn Owls, and the voles, shrews and other small mammals on which they rely? As ever, we can only wait and see what Mother Nature conjures up for us.

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

Hope you all had a good Christmas and New Year and Santa brought you all you asked for. All I asked for was someone to step up to the plate and apply for the jobs of Conservation Reps for the vacant areas I outlined in the last *Bird News*, but no takers so far. Please think on, our Society is run by volunteers who happily give up their time to ensure everything runs well and all members get something out of it. It's not rocket science, if people do not help, the Society ceases to

function, and if we don't do anything you will not miss it until it's gone. Volunteers can only do so much. Here endeth the sermon.

Here at Weaverham the garden birds are eating like it's going out of fashion, I am spending more on their food than I spend on my own. I have had a pair of Blackcaps coming every day since October for fat balls; they spend their time here in a large Camellia bush and gorge themselves, then away until the next day. Regular as clockwork I can set my watch by them, but on the day I choose to do The Big Garden Birdwatch they let me down and were late. For the first time since living here I have a pair of Chaffinches coming in, they are plentiful in the Churchyard over the road but have never been seen in the garden, word must have got out the food is good. I do not have to travel to Northwich now to see a Starling murmuration, I have my own every evening - all 11 of them - they are performing well and entertain for a good half hour before settling for the night in a large Leylandii.

After the pandemic, which trust me is here for good - it has not gone away, now we have Bird Flu; the swans and geese at Winsford Flash have taken a large hit. If you are out and about and find dead or distressed birds please DO NOT touch them, contact The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and update them, to contain this scourge they need the full picture, and after all we are their eyes and ears out on the ground whilst they are in the office with tea and cream buns in front of mountains of unnecessary paperwork If we do not tell them they won't know, trust me they don't go out and look for cases, they wait till people like us report it.

Please keep an eye on any developments in your own areas especially now the nesting season is nearly upon us, as you are all aware if there is a plot of land not much bigger than a postage stamp someone wants to build two houses on it. Developers seem to think any old clump of bushes and scrub has been placed there for them to turn a bulldozer or digger loose on for their entertainment. As I have said before all developers need an Environmental Survey done before they can start work. But again, it's the old story "he who pays the piper calls the tune". I am not saying all surveyors carry out surveys in this manner, 95% do it by the book and report it as it should be, but some (say no more).....

I hope you all have a good spring and summer and get that elusive lifer. Please remember if you see something that causes the alarm bells to ring in the old grey matter you are probably correct in your concerns. Let someone know it could be something and nothing or it could be spot on, it usually is.

Stay safe and well.

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

Editorial note: To report suspicion of a notifiable animal disease (for example, Avian Influenza) contact The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ring 03000 200 301.

CONSERVATION REPRESENTATIVES

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	**Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role**
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@deeestuary.co.uk

Migration Spotlight

ARRIVAL DATES FOR MIGRANTS

Back in March 2021 Sheila sent me a link to a Rare Bird Alert (RBA) article 'Spring Migration 2021' (https://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/v2/content/spring_migrants_2021.aspx?s_id=1020999445).

The article contains a 'First Arrivals Table' which is made up of the species in the table below plus several more which don't commonly occur in Cheshire and Wirral (C&W). Among the data tabulated is the median first date for each species based on reports to RBA over the period 2002-2020. The RBA article also has a section of 'Individual Species Accounts' which includes graphs for each species based on their first arrival dates in each year 2002-2020.

	C&W median 1st arrival date 1983-2001	C&W median 1st arrival date 2002-2020	RBA median 1st arrival date 2002-2020	C&W median 1st arrival gap 2002-2020 in days
Quail	15-May	15-May	14-Apr	31
Garganey	02-Apr	29-Mar	27-Feb	30
Swift	20-Apr	17-Apr	31-Mar	17
Cuckoo	13-Apr	15-Apr	21-Mar	25
Turtle Dove	02-May	13-May	06-Apr	37
Little Ringed Plover	17-Mar	16-Mar	04-Mar	12
Wood Sandpiper	05-May	27-Apr	08-Apr	19
Little Tern	24-Apr	23-Apr	06-Apr	17
Common Tern	15-Apr	10-Apr	22-Mar	19
Arctic Tern	20-Apr	15-Apr	03-Apr	12
Black Tern	27-Apr	26-Apr	12-Apr	14
Osprey	12-Apr	23-Mar	04-Mar	19
Hobby	29-Apr	13-Apr	28-Mar	16
Sand Martin	12-Mar	11-Mar	28-Feb	11
Swallow	19-Mar	17-Mar	23-Feb	22
House Martin	02-Apr	25-Mar	08-Mar	17
Wood Warbler	23-Apr	22-Apr	10-Apr	12
Willow Warbler	26-Mar	25-Mar	12-Mar	13
Sedge Warbler	15-Apr	09-Apr	24-Mar	16
Reed Warbler	18-Apr	09-Apr	01-Apr	8
Grasshopper Warbler	17-Apr	08-Apr	02-Apr	6
Garden Warbler	24-Apr	17-Apr	03-Apr	14
Lesser Whitethroat	23-Apr	14-Apr	02-Apr	12
Whitethroat	18-Apr	09-Apr	30-Mar	10
Ring Ouzel	24-Mar	23-Mar	05-Mar	18
Spotted Flycatcher	03-May	02-May	17-Apr	15
Pied Flycatcher	18-Apr	13-Apr	01-Apr	12
Redstart	14-Apr	07-Apr	22-Mar	16
Whinchat	21-Apr	15-Apr	01-Apr	14
Wheatear	12-Mar	12-Mar	28-Feb	12
Yellow Wagtail	06-Apr	05-Apr	20-Mar	16
White Wagtail	13-Mar	10-Mar	28-Feb	10
Tree Pipit	05-Apr	06-Apr	24-Mar	13

The only species with less than complete runs of C&W dates post-1982 are Hobby and Wood Sandpiper (both missing 1983), Black Tern (2010) and Turtle Dove (2005, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018 & 2020).

Early birds 2002-2020

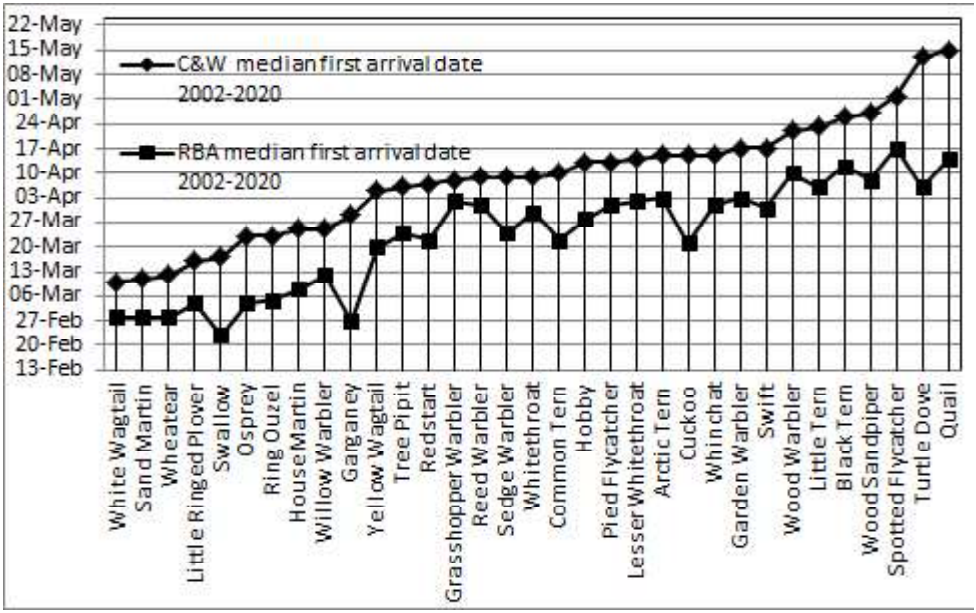
As compiler of the 'Early and Late Dates for Migrants' section of the annual *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report*, I thought it might be interesting to compare the RBA median arrival dates which are based on information from observers scattered nationally, with median arrival dates based on data gathered together each year by CAWOS which relates only to Cheshire and Wirral.

Firstly I looked to see which species have the earliest median arrival dates. In order of appearance the earliest five species on the RBA list are Swallow, followed by Garganey, then Sand Martin, Wheatear and White Wagtail with the same median dates. In C&W the earliest species are White Wagtail, Sand Martin, Wheatear, Little Ringed Plover and Swallow. Garganey which has the 2nd earliest RBA median date has the 10th earliest C&W date while Little Ringed Plover, which is the 4th earliest arrival in C&W, has the 6th earliest RBA date.

The five latest species to arrive based on RBA median dates are, in order of appearance, Wood Sandpiper, Wood Warbler, Black Tern, Quail and, finally, Spotted Flycatcher. In C&W the latest are Black Tern, Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Flycatcher, Turtle Dove and Quail. Wood Warbler is only two places outside the C&W five latest arrivals, while likewise Turtle Dove misses the RBA latest arrivals by two places.

Lagging behind

For the obvious reason of geography if nothing else, it was no surprise to find that, for all the species considered, median arrival dates in C&W lagged behind the RBA dates. What may be surprising is the range generally and extent specifically of the date 'lags' (see graph).

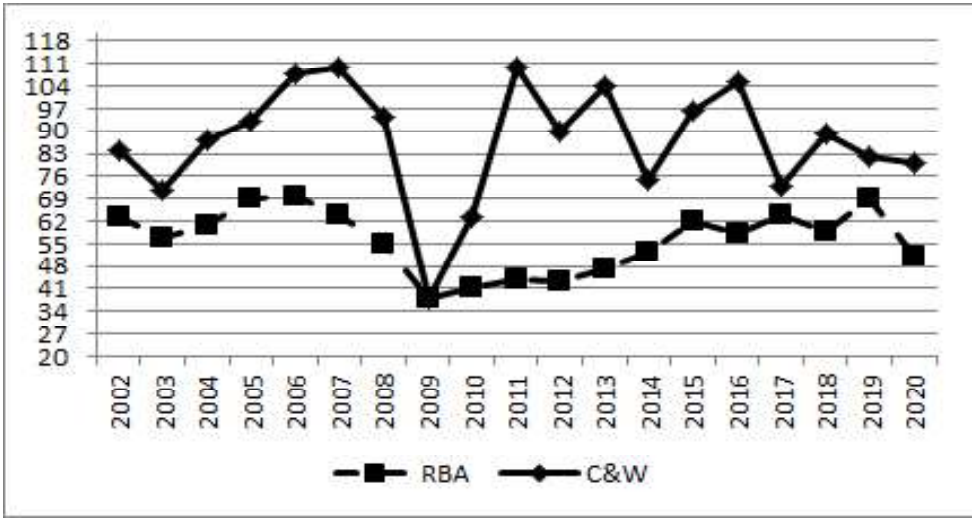


The shortest lag, and the only one of less than a week, is of six days between the median RBA and C&W dates for Grasshopper Warbler. Reed Warbler has the next shortest lag at eight days. At the other end of the range Turtle Dove shows a massive lag of 37 days, with Quail at 31 days, Garganey at 30 days and Cuckoo at 25 days. Nationally, Turtle Dove has suffered a marked contraction in geographical range in recent decades, breeding has not been confirmed in C&W since 2000 and birds have become so scarce here that no early dates were recorded in seven of the 19 years 2002-2020. Although not quite to the same degree, Cuckoo has also become very much scarcer. The numbers of both Quail and Garganey reaching C&W vary from year to year historically but are always small and this should be borne in mind when considering the relatively large lag in their first dates.

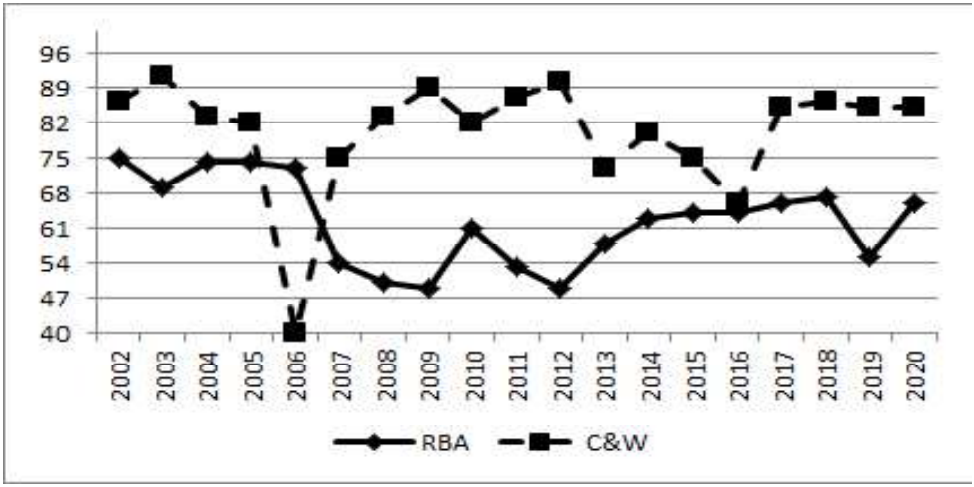
Coincidences?

I was intrigued to try and look into whether, in any year, an RBA arrival date earlier or later than the previous year would be matched by a similarly earlier or later C&W arrival date. The information provided in the RBA article, combined with the C&W data, enabled me to try to 'test' for this. The first species that I tested was Garganey (see graph) and I got quite interested when I found that for 11 of the 14 years from 2002-2015 an earlier or later C&W date coincided with an earlier or later RBA date in that year! However, for the rest of the period there was only one 'coincidental' year and it turned out that the run of 11 coincidental years was the best for any of the species I tested and the total of 12 coincidental years was the most, equal with Whitethroat, for any of species 'tested'. Perhaps strangely, 10 of the 12 'coincidental' Whitethroat years were also from 2002-2015. At the other end of the scale Osprey had the least coincidental years with just five (see graph).

GARGANEY EARLY DATES



OSPREY EARLY DATES



The very early 2006 C&W Osprey date was presumably not picked up by RBA.

Of the 30 other species tested, not including Turtle Dove due to its lack of data, the range of 'coincidental' years was split equally between those species with between nine and 11 coincidental years and those with between five and eight years. In total there are slightly more 'non-coincidental' years than 'coincidental' years. I'm no statistician but on the whole it seems to me to be doubtful whether, say, an earlier first RBA date in any year is necessarily an indication that the species concerned will return earlier to C&W in that year.

While looking at early dates.....

The table above provides an opportunity to compare C&W median early dates for the 19-year period 2002-2020 with the median early date for the previous 19-year period 1983-2001. For Quail and Wheatear the median first arrival date is the same in both periods. Tree Pipit and Cuckoo are two of just three species with later dates in the later period, by just one and two days respectively. The third such species is Turtle Dove whose much declining national status, mentioned above, may well be at least partly responsible for its median early date slipping by 11 days compared with 1983-2001. Also mentioned above, Cuckoo has also become very much scarcer since 1983-2001, yet the 2002-2020 median date holds up, being just two days later than the earlier period.

For nine of the species the median date is a single day earlier. This group includes a wader, a couple of terns, a hirundine, a couple of leaf warblers, a thrush, a flycatcher and a wagtail. The Swallow date is two days earlier, Swift and White Wagtail three, Garganey four, two terns and a flycatcher five, Sedge Warbler and Whinchat six and Redstart seven days earlier. At what point does one sit up and really notice the changes over the two periods? The Wood Sandpiper and House Martin dates are eight days earlier, while Reed and Grasshopper Warbler stand at nine days with both the Whitethroats. Hobby, which first bred in C&W in 1998, and Osprey which now passes through in larger numbers than ever before, stand at 16 and 20 days earlier respectively.

Perhaps someone more clued up on migration strategies, wintering areas, etc. than I am can look at the changes in these median first arrival dates and the variation between individual and groups of species and come up with some thoughts on the possible reasons behind them. On the other hand, how much might the data be influenced by the possibility of over-wintering birds being included as migrants and the likelihood of an early arrival being seen and reported? What, if anything, is the relevance of these first arriving birds in relation to the population of their species in general?

Whatever the reasons for the changes and the non-changes, the pleasure brought by the first sighting of a Little Ringed Plover back on its sand quarry territory or the sound of the lovely notes of the Willow Warbler remain undiminished for this particular birder.

Steve Barber

OLD BIRD REPORTS

Do you want to complete your set of Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports? We have a limited supply of BRs from 1965 to the present day (with a few exceptions). All are free up to 2018, just pay for postage or arrange for collection. So let me know which ones you would like and I'll give you a quote for the postage. Contact Sheila Blamire on Email: sheilablamire@cawos.org or Tel: 01565 830168/07837 745939.

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 are clear. Editor's contact details are on the inside front cover of *Bird News*.

Notes and Letters

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

This section is a chance for members to contribute, whether a few lines, or a long article, which might be spilt over several issues. Some ideas might be amusing (or otherwise!) anecdotes, unusual avian behaviour, special memories, ringing and/or survey stories, and looking back over the years – even back to childhood! The list is almost endless – it's up to members. If you think it's worth writing, other members will think it's worth reading! Also, we are always interested in your views on any of our articles or on the newsletter itself. Ed.

HESWALL AREA BIRD NOTES 1960-2015 (part 1)

"In search of lost time… " (with apologies to Proust): writing up my Heswall area bird notes, 1960-2015, but mainly, 69-71, 76-7 and 81-4 - c40/50 years ago. So, I did it. 800 hours, over 6.5 months, May to December 2021. And, now, those 1960-2015 Heswall area bird notes are all written up - in scrawly black biro, filling 12 old-fashioned A4 ring-binders. Hard copy, yes - but, potentially easily scan-able, versus soft - at a price, in time or money.

Where? A small patch, on the west side of the Wirral - Heswall and Gayton, and the fields and shore between Heswall and Thurstaston, and Gayton and Parkgate, and with also a fair few records from the N end of Parkgate (the old baths area), in the 60s and 70s; a smattering from the fields between Heswall and Barnston; and fragments from those between Heswall and Pensby, and Gayton and Thornton Hough. c6km N/S, c4km (inland) E/W (at the widest). Within the patch, I particularly favoured the Heswall/Thurstaston fields (broadly, then, around Oldfield Farm, the Dungeon Wood, the Wirral Way and the Heswall National Trust fields), Heswall Dales and, of course, the Dee shore, from the S edge of Thurstaston to the N edge of Parkgate, and the fields above it.

Who else? Usually, I birded alone - with my father sometimes joining me on shorter outings in the 60s and 70s. Between 1970 and 1996, I made 61 trips to the open Dee shore, walking from the English side to the shore W of the marsh (or of the marsh-line, if N of the marsh), peaking at 9 in 1984 and 8 in 1970 - but with none in 1973-5, 1980 and 1989-94. I never met another observer. My 'dry land' observer counts, though, increased markedly from the mid-70s. That said I rarely met any other birders away from the shore and the fields above it. There seemed to be no interest in the Dales - and little in the Heswall/Thurstaston fields, away from the shore. Most often, I met Ray Eades from 1979 into the 80s, and Dave Wild in the 80s. But I have to say most of my field-chats (and looking back it always seemed so cold and windy as we talked away!) were with local wildfowlers on the shore or out on the W edge of the marsh (at the outer limit of their shooting grounds). In those days, at least, they seemed a hardier (and, perhaps, friendlier) crowd than the Heswall birders, local or visiting - Ray and Dave excepted.

When? Spread unevenly over, and within, the years - and, randomly.

Unevenly, over the years: as a (rough) proxy for observer-effort, my writing-up time ranged from 8 hours (in total) for 1961-5, including general preparation, to 6 for '66, 14 for '67, 21 for '68, 59 for '69, 99 for '70, 93 for '71, plunging to 28 for '72, and just 15 minutes for '74, recovering to 46 for '63 and 26 hours for '76-8, dipping to 13 for both '79 and '80, surging to 40, 65, 63 and 77 for '81-4, falling to 24 (in total) for '85-8, and also for '89-2015. So, my Heswall birding was heavily concentrated in the 9 'intense' years '69-71, '76-7 and '81-4, with virtually none in 32 of the 56 years, in '61-5 and '89-2015. Only a *rough* proxy for birding time, though - because, as I matured, the notes became more legible. So, much less effort and eye-strain transcribing 1984 than 1971.

Unevenly, within the years: taking just those 9 'intense' years: in ''69-71 I was in Heswall only for school and academic holidays, and in '76-7 working, full-time, locally, and then, in '81-4 in London so, my Heswall birding was confined to holidays, weekends and trips 'home' from 'the smoke'.

Randomly, over and within the years: I birded when I liked, where I liked. My only survey work was for the 1988-72 *National Breeding Bird Atlas* and the 78-83 *Cheshire and Wirral* equivalent (but for '78 and '79 only). I contributed only to the 1967, '68 and '76 *Cheshire Bird Reports*. Hardly a 'model' observer, then.

The *best* notes? For content, I'd rate 1970 and 1971 the highest - depressingly (perhaps …) when I was only 16 to 18. I seemed more patient then (fuller descriptions), and more interested in bird behaviour (in what the birds were *doing*). For presentation (ease of transcription) and judgement (convincing IDs) I'd argue, though, for a continuous improvement, to 1984, the last 'intense' year. So, by then, I was recording in the field with a clear eye to the notes making sense for any later write-up - and also becoming more decisive (fewer 'possibles' and 'probables').

Lessons learnt? I'll list them - with apologies, if I ever state the obvious.

1. Memory's incredibly fickle: Broadly, and counter-intuitively, for the 9 'intense' years I found I recalled '69-71 better than '76-7 or '81-4. Presumably, because, in those pre-work years, 69-71, there were fewer other things to think about. The most interesting records are usually still lodged up 'there', but not always, and the actual recorded numbers can disappoint, versus those (so fondly) recalled.

The main memory-problem proved to be the exact locations of fields/other landscape features defined in the notes only by cross-reference to a previous observation (which might have been a decade or more earlier). '1969 Lesser Whitethroat pond' is none too clear, if you're struggling to identify exactly where that pond was. Fine distinctions, too, can floor you. I discovered 'Little Owl tree' was in a different field from 'Little Owl pond' - although did I sometimes refer to two different ponds by the same name … ?

A 2000 1:25000 OS map, and c1970 Wirral UDC street-plan, were invaluable. Even so, house names sometimes foxed me and many road names would have been done without the street-plan.

I did, though, remember that until mid-75, I'd incorrectly recorded the compass-points (W as N - and so on) - and that I'd always confused 'upriver' (S), on the Dee, with 'downriver' (N). Correcting the compass-points could be hair-tearing. Think about it.

After, say half an hour, you're *back* out there - on the shore, in the fields, gazing at the Dee and the Welsh hills. The mind wanders into nostalgia. But, stop - you've got a job to do.

2. Biro's good enough: In the field I wrote the notes in biro, and afterwards a few, back at home, in fountain pen. Don't worry - biro doesn't fade, at least over 50-odd years. Fountain pen, of course, runs in the rain.

3. Locations - record them objectively: So, not by reference to your *subjective* experience, which you may forget - see 1.

4. Any count is better than none: It took until 1970 for me to cure myself fully of 'many', 'good numbers', 'numerous', etc. Dunlin's fate down the ages, no doubt. But what you thought of as 'numerous' on the Dee in 1969 might not be what you think of as 'numerous' now in 2022. And, in any event, you might have forgotten even the rough parameters of that 1969 assessment - see 1.

5. Abbreviations - again, don't worry: Oddly, these weren't a problem. I remembered them and never had to refer to any of the diligent lists I found I'd made, back in c1970.

6. Legibility - of handwritten notes: Well, *I* could read them. For *others*, of course, I can't speak. Occasionally, yes, I *was* defeated. But I still wish I'd been blessed with clearer writing. It would have saved time.

7.'Silo' your bird notes: Until early 1972 (aged 18), some of my bird notes are mingled with personal diary entries. A mistake. Unless angelic/without shame, I doubt you/your family would want an outsider seeing into the latter. So, here's another argument for writing up the bird notes - to separate them from any records about the rest of your life.

8. Record anecdotes - and others' (credible) observations: They add interest. Also, you never know if the other person reports their observations - indeed, unlikely, if not a birder. For anecdotes, just see the comments on Snipe.

Comments welcome - to rodneysatbhf@aol.com. For clarity, I now live in St. Mary Hoo, Kent (near Rochester).

Rodney Smyth

Editorial note: So, what's changed, over those c40/50 years? Part 2, brief notes on selected species, will appear in future *Bird News.*

This section of Bird News has been temporarily suspended because the majority of indoor events have been cancelled due to Covid-19 OR some of the affiliated societies are holding zoom meetings with speakers (eg CAWOS) OR a mixture (eg MRSPB). If you need any clarification please check with each society on their website or ring the contact number below.

We might restart the Diary section in the July Bird News. Any interested societies please contact me.

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 Ornithogical Society ***www.cawos.org***
Meetings St Vincent's RC Church Hall, Knutsford 7:45pm, contact Sec. 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 Sec. Karina Stanley 07532 833083

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 Macclesfield Community Centre, Macclesfield 7:45pm, contact Ray Evans 01625 432635

NCRSPB North Cheshire RSPB Members' Group ***www.rspb.org.uk/groups/north_cheshire***
Meetings Appleton Parish Hall, Appleton at 7:45pm, contact Sec. Dot Seed 07917 567395

NNHS Nantwich Natural History Society
Occasional meetings throughout the year, contact Sec. Roger Crow, 01270 618416

SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithogical Society ***www.secos.org.uk***
Meetings Ettiley Heath Church Community Centre at 7:30pm, contact Mike Tonks 07484 306147

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

Will **affiliated societies,** who wish to advertise meetings of relevance to CAWOS, please send their programme to:- **Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, Cheshire, WA16 6QG or,** ***preferably please,*** **by email: sheilablamire@cawos.org**

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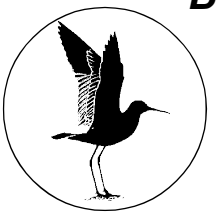

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Note: the copy date for the next issue is 18th June 2022

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