

Teesmouth Bird Club

Newsletter



Editor: M.J.Gee, Technical Adviser: R.Hammond, Distributor: C. Sharp
 Address: All correspondence to 21 Gladstone Street, Hartlepool, TS24 0PE.
 Email: tbc@dial.pipex.com
 Web: <http://ds.dial.pipex.com/watsonpress/tbc>

Editorial

This newsletter has been delayed and sharp-eyed readers will quickly spot the absence of the Monthly Summary for the period November to February, for which apologies. The Monthly Summary has been most expertly compiled since 1995, firstly by Chris Kehoe and latterly by Richard Taylor, to both of whom we owe a debt of gratitude. We now need a new compiler if the newsletter is to continue beyond this, the 15th issue in five years. If you are willing to carry out this crucial task please contact either the Editor or a member of the Committee by June 15th latest, and copy (covering the period March to June inclusive) must reach the Editor by July 15th to enable the next newsletter to be published.

Thanks to the contributors to this issue:- Mike Leakey, Graham Megson, Graeme Joynt. Illustrations by Peter Garbutt.

All unsolicited copy will be most welcome, ideally sent by email, or on 3.5" computer disk, using word processing software, but typed and handwritten copy is equally acceptable. Any topic concerned with birds or the local environment is grist to the mill.

NOTICE BOARD

Geoff Boyce

It is with deep sadness that we report the death of Geoff Boyce - a long standing member of the club. Don Page and Ian Edgar represented the club at a presentation, by ex-colleagues of Geoff's, who wished a collection they had made to go to the club. This was a much appreciated gesture.

Special Study Species 2000

The Special Study Species for 2000 are Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat and Nuthatch. All records of these 3 species should be submitted with the rest of your records at the end of the year.

Huntsman-Tioxide Sponsor Day

We are delighted to announce that Huntsman Tioxide will again be sponsoring a 'Big Day' to raise funds for the Club. The event is to take place on Sunday 30th April and local birders will be attempting to record as many species as possible on Greenabella Marsh between dawn and dusk that day. This event has raised a lot of money in the past and is also an enjoyable day, usually producing some good birds. If you would like to lend your support then please be on the Marsh at some point during the day, though as usual birders should stick to the raised embankments around Greenabella and not go onto the Marsh itself. If you need any further details please contact Graeme Joynt on 01429 289968.

OBC Meeting in Newcastle on June 24th

The Oriental Bird Club has an all-star cast for its first meeting in North East England. The speakers will be: Nigel Collar, Pamela Rasmussen, Brian Sykes and Colin Bradshaw. Nigel, chairman of OBC and Birdlife International's expert on the threatened birds of the world, will talk about "Threatened Birds of Asia". Pamela, from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC who co-re-discovered Forest Owlet in India in 1997, has chosen "Asian Owls: new discoveries and rediscoveries" as her subject. Brian Sykes, OBC secretary, will talk about "Goa - Gateway to the Orient" and the day will be rounded off by British Birds Rarities Committee chairman Colin Bradshaw's lecture on "Oriental Birds & the British List". The all-day meeting (run jointly with the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club) is on Saturday June 24. The venue is the first floor lecture theatre of Newcastle University's Claremont Tower, Claremont Road, Newcastle upon Tyne. During the lunchbreak there'll be an opportunity to examine skins in the Hancock Museum across the road from the meeting venue, including the Victorian Oriental collection of Herbert Stevens. The meeting is open to all and anyone wishing to attend can contact Adrian Pitches (Tel 0191 272 8547 - Email: adrian.pitches@bbc.co.uk)

South Gare & Coatham Study

>The Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, with funding from Europe, Redcar & Cleveland BC, and British Steel (Corus) have commissioned a long needed study to produce agreed plans for the long term use and management of the South Gare & Coatham Sands. In the coming months the Trust will be approaching local users and communities in the vicinity to find out more about their interests.=(From >Green Bits - Winter-Spring 2000'). This is obviously a chance for the birders and Bird Club to let them know our views. One contact point given in the article is Don Vine at the Trust: tel. 01642 759900. Nb. following the last committee meeting Ian Edgar is to write to Jeremy Garside at the Trust to express concern at the damage motorcyclists are doing at South Gare.

Portrack Marsh

Also in the same issue of >Green Bits= comes news of the intended construction of two shallow pools, this January, to provide valuable feeding and roosting areas for a wide diversity of waterbirds. This forms part of a major development of Portrack Marsh as part of the Stockton and Middlesbrough Community Environmental Action Plan. For more details see >Green Bits= pp 8/9.

Saline Lagoon

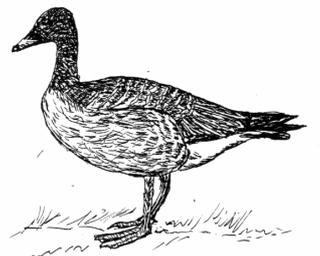
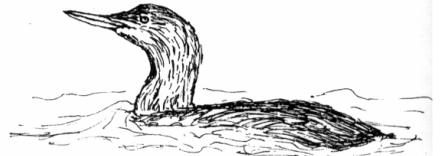
More from >Green Bits=, (p19), this time detailing the background to the creation of, and the hopes for, the saline lagoon located next to Greatham Creek, beside the A178.

North East Wildlife Trusts - Annual Bird Race 2000

Details are given, >Green Bits= (p16), of the above event. Entries must be in by 27th April and the event can take place on any date in May. The full rules will be sent to all entrants, together with official sponsorship forms, species check-list and a copy of the Birdwatchers Code of Conduct. A copy of the entry form is attached to the back of this news letter.

Wetland Birdwatching in Winter

Finally from >Green Bits= (pp 16/17) an interesting article on the above title written by our own Martin Blick. Well worth getting hold of and cutting out for next winter for anyone not wholly familiar with where to watch birds in the Teesside area.



WETLAND BIRD SURVEY TEESMOUTH - WINTER 1999/2000 SUMMARY

Coverage was good with 113 out of 115 sector counts undertaken, constituting a rate of over 98%.

Twelve out of the eighteen species of wildfowl listed occurred in above average numbers. Of those yielding below average performances, only the Shoveler peak was more than 20% down on the norm. New WeBS Teesmouth records were set by Greylag Goose (210, January), Pintail (42, March) and Coot (928, November), while Little Grebe (33, March), Gadwall (105, November) and Tufted Duck (145, March) all returned new seasonal records. Of the wildfowl species traditionally occurring in nationally important numbers at Teesmouth, Cormorant performed reasonably well, while Shelduck, Teal and Shoveler all disappointed. Shelduck numbers in particular continue to cause concern.

Of the fifteen wader species listed in the summary table, only four produced maxima in excess of their respective previous five year averages. Oystercatcher set a new seasonal record (1809, December), the Curlew peak (1016, January) was the best winter count since 1994/95, while Sanderling and Turnstone also scored slightly higher than the norm.

All the plovers performed poorly, with Lapwing and Golden Plover particularly scarce (with peaks of 3468 and a paltry 164 respectively). Knot, traditionally our only internationally important species in winter, yielded a maximum of a mere 1671 (January); the worst showing since 1990/91, and very probably the consequence of a mild winter.

The Dunlin peak of 183 in December was less than half the recent average, and constitutes another all-time seasonal low. Astonishingly, not a single Dunlin was recorded during the February count. It is sobering to reflect that as recently as 1980 the five year mean for this species on the Tees Estuary was in excess of 5000 birds. The decline is perhaps linked to sediment change and algal mat

coverage on Seal Sands, but it is also conceivable that Peregrine predation and disturbance may be a contributory factor.

Ruff and Bar-tailed Godwit peaks were less than half the magnitude of those of an average winter, but the benign weather conditions doubtless suited Redshank, numbers of which were close to the norm (although the species= five year mean reached an all-time high).

Following this winter=s series of counts, Teesmouth and Hartlepool Bay is of national importance for Cormorant, Shelduck, Shoveler, Knot, Sanderling and Redshank.

Mike Leakey

WeBS Local Organizer - April 2000

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY TEESMOUTH - WINTER 1999/2000 SUMMARY

	Nov 21	Dec 19	Jan 16	Feb 20	Mar 19	Winter 99/00 maximum as % of average peak count over previous five winters
Little Grebe	14	8	12	10	<u>33</u> **	270%
Great Crested Grebe	5	5	16	<u>38</u>	9	89%
Cormorant	164**	48	132**	<u>192</u> **	121*	110%
Mute Swan	27	12	<u>34</u>	19	18	139%
Greylag Goose	140	117	<u>210</u>	45	73	160%
Shelduck	632*	<u>784</u> **	743*	639*	411*	81%
Wigeon	975	657	<u>1860</u> *	667	1033	92%
Gadwall	<u>105</u> **	33	36	54*	69*	222%
Teal	537	561	<u>1130</u> *	487	559	87%
Mallard	291	287	<u>515</u>	254	246	130%
Pintail	18	54	26	30	<u>42</u>	194%
Shoveler	<u>83</u> *	22	35	38	73*	71%
Pochard	131	132	<u>152</u>	139	37	105%
Tufted Duck	86	10	38	124	<u>145</u>	214%
Eider	52	31	76	<u>78</u>	26	312%
Goldeneye	54	94*	100*	91*	<u>103</u> *	91%
Red-br. Merganser	44	<u>60</u> *	45	41	23	102%
Coot	<u>928</u> *	54	574*	402	449	422%
Oystercatcher	1433	<u>1809</u> *	850	1377	577	154%
Ringed Plover	48	<u>55</u>	5	45	27	79%
Golden Plover	<u>164</u>	0	127	90	0	15%
Grey Plover	<u>175</u>	39	106	93	12	75%
Lapwing	2313	616	<u>3468</u>	2399	383	53%
Knot	344	864	<u>1671</u> *	411	17	51%
Sanderling	199*	283**	326**	<u>456</u> **	169*	119%
Purple Sandpiper	109*	<u>137</u> *	102	136*	103	80%
Dunlin	96	<u>183</u>	72	0	52	45%
Ruff	3	0	3	4	4	36%
Snipe	18	<u>26</u>	18	8	7	73%
Bar-tailed Godwit	32	83	<u>130</u>	80	0	49%

Curlew	364	515	<u>1016*</u>	636*	803*	121%
Redshank	1192**	889*	1018*	<u>1282**</u>	1079**	94%
Turnstone	207	189	148	<u>348*</u>	264	112%

Underlined counts indicate winter 1999/2000 maxima N.B. >Teesmouth= includes Hartlepool Bay
 * indicates a count of >50% of national significance ** indicates a count of national significance *** indicates a count of international significance

CLEVELAND BUTTERFLY REPORT 1999 by Graham Megson

Twenty-two species of butterfly occur in Cleveland. This is a brief report on how they fared in 1999. Each year British butterflies have to contend with a mixed bag of weather. Spring 1999 was pretty dismal but the summer yielded some good sunny spells, which helped many individuals to find mates. Larvae from these will hopefully survive the hazards of winter, such as predation, parasitism and fungal attack, to launch new broods in 2000.

The species of most concern was the **Small Copper**, which fared very badly all year, despite normally managing two broods in its favoured habitat of acidic grassland.

Due to the unsettled spring weather I had no opportunity to check the moorland colonies of **Green Hairstreak**, on Eston Moor and behind Scaling Dam.

My first butterflies of the year were 5 **Small Tortoiseshells** and 2 **Peacocks** on 1 April. Numbers picked up slowly as the season progressed. **Dingy Skippers** were flourishing along the Hart to Haswell in May and **Orange Tips** were widespread and had a fairly long season.

Work by the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE) has shown that most species are now emerging earlier than they were 15 years ago because of an average warming of the climate. First and second broods of some species are also running into each other as butterflies are on the wing for longer.

Mid - summer butterflies had good broods, with **Common Blue** doing much better than last year. **Meadow Brown** was again one of our commonest species. **Ringlets** flew in good numbers and showed further evidence of colonising new grassland sites. The **Northern Brown Argus**, a species mostly connected with Castle Eden Dene National Nature Reserve, flew in good numbers at its isolated coastal colonies. This is a species which is threatened by sudden habitat loss, such as caused by grass fires.

I observed one **White-letter Hairstreak** in Crimdon Dene (Hartlepool) but didn't monitor this particular colony. I did however check repeatedly for it on two magnificent elms just inland from Crimdon beach, in Easington. One was reported near the dunes by the Little Tern warden in 1998 and must have come from these trees! I didn't see any, but was rewarded with a **Holly Blue** flying past. Holly Blue had earlier been on the wing in Saltburn gill. I also looked extensively around oak trees in the vicinity of Crookfoot Reservoir, but failed to find **Purple Hairstreaks** despite seeing a single two years ago. I understand that new sites for Purple Hairstreak were discovered in the North York Moors area in 1999.

Once again the **Painted Lady** was a scarce migrant. It is now 3 years since the invasion of these strong flying butterflies in 1996. **Red Admirals** were common, often flying with Peacocks as the summer progressed. Small Tortoiseshells had two broods, but for once it was not the commonest autumn species as numbers failed. The three whites - **Large**, **Small** and **Green-veined** all did well.

The **skippers** - **Small** and **Large** - and **Small Heath** were to be found in grassy habitats at appropriate times of year. There has been some concern nationally over the **Wall**, a butterfly which has been declining in south-east England. This double brooded species appeared to do well in 1999 in this area.

Finally **Commas** had another good year with a further marked spread. My highlight of the year was watching eight together on a ragwort flower-head. I guess these had hatched simultaneously from the same brood. The Comma was just about the last species on the wing in 1999 and will be one of the first in the new millennium. Watch out for them as the weather warms up in April.



In terms of lepidoptera, the most impressive record was a **Death's-head Hawkmoth** which was picked up exhausted on Redcar beach on 26 August and could be seen on the cafe wall at the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust in Kirkleatham until the 29th. Also reported was a

Convolvulus Hawkmoth from Saltburn cliffs.

CLEVELAND DRAGONFLY REPORT 1999 by Graham Megson

With a growing interest in Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies), I felt it worthwhile to provide a brief report on some of the Cleveland highlights of 1999. Many observers will have checked other sites and have additional records. Currently there is no dragonfly recording body in Cleveland, although records can always be sent to the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust or to The Durham recorder Ian Waller (see me). Thanks to Dave Britton and Ian Waller for records.

The best known sites in the area are Lovell Hill, Cowpen Bewley Country Park and Stillington, all of which are 14 species sites. Lovell Hill, near Guisborough, should soon be a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its Odonata populations. Formerly owned by ICI the site has recently been sold. There is strictly no public access.

Spring interest in Cleveland's Odonata concentrates on the early emerging damselflies. Dave Britton recorded **Large Red Damselfly** on 20 May on ponds in British Steel (Redcar) and Ian Waller observed the species at Stillington on 27 May and 25 June. Both **Blue-tailed** and **Common Damselflies** emerged by 28 May. They can be seen at Stillington, Cowpen Bewley CP, at the Castle Eden Walkway and other sites. The first **Emerald Damselfly** was on 25 June. This is a widespread species which can be discovered at many wetland sites in the area. It likes acidic sites so look out for it on moorland bogs. It was noted at Stillington, Cowpen Bewley CP, Billingham Beck Valley CP and Brenda Road (Hartlepool). Although the **Azure Damselfly** was not looked for on ponds between Wilton Lane and Dunsdale, it does occur there. It was seen at Cowpen Bewley CP, Stillington and Castle Eden Walkway by Ian Waller.

By August hundreds of **Common Darters** had emerged, especially around the estuary. Over 250 around Dormans Pool was probably an underestimation. This is a widespread species which occurs at many sites. With them were a number of **Ruddy Darters**. This species has spread steadily northwards over the last eight years and has now reached Newcastle. It was recorded from Cowpen Bewley CP, Stillington (5 males and 1 female on 19 July), Dormans and was still active at Seaton Dunes and Common NNR on 6 September (5 males).

Also flying at this time were **Black Darters**. Initially known from Eston Moor they have now turned up at Kirkleatham Business Park pond, Stillington, Dormans and Cowpen Bewley CP. At least 3 males and 1 female were at Cowpen, where the species was on the wing from 5 September to 5 October.

Reports of **Brown Hawkers** turning up at many sites preceded my first live observation of this species in Cleveland. A male noted by Alex Cruickshanks in Hargreaves Quarry was the first of many, with others at Billingham Beck Valley CP, Cowpen Bewley CP, Dormans Pool and at Stillington Pond. The Brown Hawker has reached many ponds in the north-east recently and now appears to be colonising Cleveland from the west. A female was seen ovipositing at Stillington on 30 July.

Britain's largest species, the **Emperor**, has spread into this area over the last five years. It was reported from Kirkleatham Business Park, Cowpen Bewley CP (2 on 13 July) and Stillington (3 on 13 July).

The hawk dragonflies were also well represented with **Common Hawker**, **Southern Hawker** and good numbers of **Migrant Hawkers**. The separation of these three species requires some care, especially if they won't settle. Common Hawker was noted at Stillington on 25 July. Southerners were at Castle Eden Walkway on 8 July and at Billingham Beck Valley, Stillington and Cowpen Bewley CP. The Migrant Hawker was noted ovipositing at Cowpen Bewley CP, where over 40 were present on 21 September. They were also seen at other ponds in the estuary at this time.

Another good site is Carr Bog on Eston Moor, where **Four-spotted Chaser** can be seen. This species was also seen at Kirkleatham Business Park and Cowpen Bewley CP (4 on 25 June).

The pretty **Banded Demoiselle** occurs on some of the Leven and Tees waters near Yarm, in the south west of Cleveland.

Another species on the edge of the area is the impressive **Golden-ringed Dragonfly**. This species is restricted to moorland becks, particularly on the North York Moors. Dave Britton has recorded it in Sleddale and the assumption must be that it is in the Cleveland portion of the valley.

For anyone wanting a good field guide, then the absolute best is Steve Brooks >Field Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Great Britain and Ireland=, illustrated by Richard Lewington (ISBN 0-953-13990-5) and published by British Wildlife Publishing. When I purchased it in 1997 it was ,16.

Finally, I would welcome news and records in 2000, to produce a more comprehensive report next year.

FROM THE COMMITTEE

The committee has met three times since the last summary of its deliberations in issue 13 of the newsletter. The dates were 7/7/99; 13/10/99; 25/01/2000. A number of items have been the subject of continuous discussion:-

Dormans Pool

It would seem from a reply from English Nature to the club that the proposed improvements to Dormans Pool by ICI and its leasing to an environmental body remains a distant prospect, relying as it does on a purchaser for the Reclamation Pond.

Jeff Youngs Legacy/Dormans Pool Hide

The decision was taken that one good way of spending some of the legacy was to donate to the Field Centre a telescope and some binoculars for education and conservation purposes. The Field Centre accepted the offer and agreed to order optics to the value of ,2000. The Bird Club is to receive the optics, have them engraved >in memory of Jeff Youngs= and present them formally to the Field Centre with Mr. & Mrs. Youngs in attendance. As of 25th Jan the Bird Club was awaiting news that the order had been placed. The Secretary is to contact the Field Centre.

The Dormans Pool hide has been the subject of concern for some time as reported in previous newsletters. It had withstood the 1998/99 winter, albeit without a door, had been creosoted and had been useable. However, it was decided to investigate getting a new hide built on the other side of the Pools - a safer, and now much better side from which to see birds. The chairman has been busy on this and reported on the 25th Jan that ICI has no objection to the idea but consent was required from English Nature and planning permission was also possibly required. ICI has agreed to waive their legal costs but certain supervisory costs might be payable. ICI was prepared to grant only a 2 year rolling lease. The relevant permissions are to be sought. A quote for a hide of the type built at Seal Sands and on the Long Drag has been obtained. Total costs are estimated at between ,4300 and ,5041. It was thought that this hide would be a fitting tribute to Jeff Youngs. It was also proposed to move the existing hide to the west side of the Pools after construction of the new hide and it was hoped ICI might help in this work. The legacy has also been used to purchase a computer for the club. It will be used in the first instance to process the results of the breeding bird survey.

Bird Club 40th Birthday

Chris Sharp has agreed to join a sub-committee comprising reps. from the Field Centre (30th birthday) and Wildlife Trust (20th birthday) to plan this event. A tentative date of 23rd Oct 2000 has been proposed using the Field Centre as the venue. Adrian Pitches is still hopeful that a BBC programme might be produced to celebrate the 40th birthday. The Bird Club was also supportive of the idea that a book should document the environmental changes in Teesside over the period and thought Mrs. Cooper the best qualified to write it.

Sponsorship

The club is pleased to report that Northumbria Water donated ,300 towards the 1998 bird report.

Use of Landfill Tax Revenues

An investigation into the possible use of landfill tax revenue to promote an environmentally valuable project, kick-started by some of Jeff Youngs= legacy, has shown this to be a non-starter for a small club like ourselves.

Hartlepool Single Regeneration Bid 6

Mike Gee reported that Hartlepool=s SRB 5 bid had been successful and would lead to improvements to the infrastructure of the Headland (eg street lighting, energy conservation for council properties, renovation/removal of derelict buildings etc.). There was now a bid for large scale funding under SRB 6 which if successful would lead to much more visible changes so as to create an attractive tourist environment on the Headland. This would mean changes to some of the features which in the past have been used by birders, principally the Heugh Battery (site of the bird observatory), and possibly the Croft Gardens, though the most recent plans seem to play down changes to the latter. The planners seem, however, to be aware of possible tourist interest in the rich ecology of the Headland coast, particularly the birds, and there could well be alternative provision to the obs. in the final plans, as well as increased planting of trees and shrubs. Watch this space! Your committee will seek mitigation to any changes if they threaten birder=s interests.



Charltons Pond

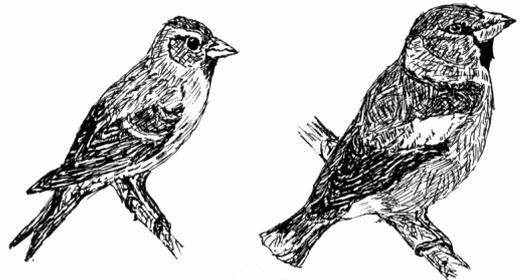
Our rep. on the management committee reported that fishermen were pressing for a policy of shooting the Cormorants present there. Russell McAndrew will oppose this on the club=s behalf at future meetings but may have to agree to a carefully targeted method of scaring the birds off.

Membership

Chris Sharp reported a slight fall in membership for 1999, 214 as against 221 in 1998.

Treasurers Report

This will be presented to members at the AGM following its presentation to the committee on 25th Jan. A notable feature is that the subscription will remain the same for 2001, reflecting the pretty healthy financial position of the club. Details on Wed. 5th April.



Committee 2000/01

Nominations for the next committee are as follows:-

Chairman	Ian Edgar
Vice-chairman	Russell McAndrew
Treasurer	Don Page
Secretary	Chris Sharp
Ordinary Members	Mark Askew Brian Hague John Sharp

Mike Gee, as the longest serving member, stands down. The committee will seek an interested nominee.

Next Meeting

Wednesday 12th April 2000, 7.00pm Middlesbrough Golf Club.

SEEING THE OWLS OF FINLAND B AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH by Graeme Joynt

To most birders the northern Owls represent the most elusive and sought after group of birds. To see them all presents a major challenge to the travelling birder; not only are they among the hardest birds to find but the dense forests in which they live stretch for vast distances, with few roads bisecting them. Waiting for them to turn up in Britain is simply not an option B while you may be lucky enough to see Snowy Owl on these shores, the rest are either exceedingly rare or have never occurred. Besides, who wants to share a Tengmalm=s Owl with a thousand other birders when you can see one in a pinewood with just a few good friends for company?

Finland is the place to go to search for these mysterious forest dwellers, and here with luck one can find them all B Hawk, Pygmy, Great Grey, Ural, Snowy, Tengmalm=s and Eagle. The problem lies in planning just how you are going to see them. For starters, you can forget the idea of flying to Finland, hiring a car and driving around by yourself for a fortnight looking in the woods. While you will certainly see a few good birds using this approach, you are not likely to find more than 1 or 2 of the target Owls, such is the nature and sheer scale of the habitat. You may not see any at all! No, this is a group of birds for which you will certainly need inside knowledge. So, do you have to use one of the recognised tour companies? Well, if you are not short of a bob or two, you could certainly join a tour to Finland and spend 2 weeks seeing lots of birds, including all the Owls and the rest of the northern specialities. However, this will probably set you back at least ,2500 and it does take a fortnight. Now I don=t know about you, but if I can persuade my girlfriend that I need a fortnight=s birding holiday there are many more exotic places I would go for that length of time B the States, or maybe South-east Asia.

So what is the alternative approach? Our attempt to >clean up= was borne out of a discussion I had with Colin Dodsworth over a few beers in early 1998. A few phone calls later, and Colin had us set up with Fin-Nature, a travel company based in Finland. Flights were booked, and on Friday 15th May Colin, Tom Francis, Mike Hunter and I travelled from Gatwick to Helsinki, before catching a connecting flight to Oulu, a northern town at the head of the Gulf of Bothnia. Our return flights were booked for Monday 18th May, so we had 4 days in which to search for our quarry. At Oulu airport our guide, Jukka Jantunen, met us and told us the bad news; it was not a great Owl year. The populations vary according to the supply of rodents and this year looked like being a lean one. Despite this

pessimism, he did have a Ural Owl nest staked out and we were soon feasting our eyes on this beauty as it attempted to remove Jukka=s head! Some long walks through pine woodland failed to produce any Pygmy Owls, though I did flush an Eagle Owl at close range from a pine. None of the others saw this bird, and they spent the next 3 days telling me it must have been a Capercaillie. When we returned to the same tree on our last day to find the bird still there they put it down to pure coincidence.

At this time of year it is dark for only 2 or 3 hours in northern Finland, so we were able to bird round the clock, with very little sleep. On 16th, Jukka took us to an area where there were several good birds available, and we spent a brilliant few hours getting great views of Black and Three-toed Woodpeckers, Hazel Grouse and a tame Tengmalm=s Owl. Tom even managed to video them all. The following day found us in the remote Kuusamo area near the Russian border, and from the road we were able to see Siberian Jay and hear Red-flanked Bluetail. As things were now getting desperate, our guide played a tape of Pygmy Owl to try and persuade one that it really should give itself up. Whilst it didn=t work, the tape did prove to be a magnet to the local songbirds, and within minutes Siberian Jays and Siberian Tits surrounded us, while 4 Pine Grosbeaks flew in for a look! We then began the long drive back to Oulu, though things looked up briefly when Jukka got a call to say that a local knew where there was a Pygmy Owl on eggs. We arrived at the site to be given the bad news B a local ringer had taken the female off the eggs and she had deserted. Disaster! It certainly made me wonder which causes the most damage B judicious use of a tape in an out-of-the-way location or indiscriminate ringing for no apparent purpose? We spent our last morning at the famous Liminka Bay reserve where we again saw some good birds, though the drive back to the airport was enlivened when Jukka=s pager went off to give news of a pair of Steller=s Eiders nearby. We still had time to see them and still catch our flight home, but were sorry to say goodbye to Jukka, who had been an excellent guide, and there was a sense of unfinished business about the trip. Although I had seen 9 new birds in less than 4 days, we had connected with only 3 of the >Big 7= Owls. Still, best not to be greedy we reasoned; as well as the birds mentioned above, we had also seen Black-throated Diver, 100+ Velvet Scoter, Smew, Goshawk, Osprey, Willow and Black Grouse, Capercaillies galore, Cranes, Temminck=s Stint, Siberian Gull, Waxwing, Great Grey Shrike, Parrot Crossbill and some fantastic singing male Rustic Buntings. On a >birds to time= ratio, it had been truly outstanding. It had been good value too, with the whole trip costing around ,550 all in.

Over the ensuing 18 months we did mention the possibility of going back, but it was Mike who set the ball rolling. He had kept in touch with Jukka, who now lives in Canada with his wife of 6 months. Jukka had given us the name of a keen Helsinki birder, Antti Lukonnen, who he assured us could help us find the remaining Owls. Mike e-mailed Antti, who promised that he would let us know if and when the target birds were around. At the end of February, the eagerly awaited message arrived and we quickly booked flights to Helsinki, this time from Newcastle. The only downside was that Mike was not able to come due to other commitments, but Tom, Colin and I were all at Newcastle Airport on Friday 3rd March this year awaiting our flight to Finland for another long weekend. On landing at Helsinki airport my heart sank as we took in the blizzards and gale force winds. How the plane landed in those conditions was beyond me, but I was now convinced that this was a huge mistake. We soon met up with Antti, who did not seem too put off by the weather, and within the hour we were searching through a small snow bound wood for a Hawk Owl which had been present all winter. When Colin found it after only 10 minutes I can honestly say it was one of the best moments of my life. To see it sitting on a low stump in the forest, with snow falling all around was truly awesome. It allowed close approach in the gathering gloom and the glum spirits lifted instantly. After this great start followed a harrowing 160 mile drive to stay at Antti=s parents house near the Russian border. We all agreed that we would not have driven even a few hundred yards in such appalling weather but Antti seemed to find it no problem. He did admit to me later that it was the worst weather he had ever driven in, and the number of vehicles that had come to grief by the road certainly kept us all awake.

After a good nights sleep at Antti=s place (his parents had sensibly gone to Florida), we awoke to find a much nicer day and set out in search of Great Grey Owl. Antti had no less than 5 sites for this species, but after failing at the first 3 we were starting to worry. However, on arriving at the 4th site there it was, sitting on a telegraph pole in the middle of a snow covered field. The weather was now cold but still, and we had amazing views of this truly magnificent bird as it hunted over the small field. After a few minutes another appeared and we were treated to the spectacle of them tussling over the feeding territory. In the end one landed on the wires over the road and we all had the most brilliant views. As we were leaving the site we drove around a corner and I spotted a small round shape in a bare tree by the road B Pygmy Owl! We all piled out of the car and enjoyed 5 minutes of this tiny bird before it flew off into the dense forest.



That left only one Owl to see, and it duly obliged on our third day B a first winter female Snowy Owl perched on a telegraph pole in the middle of a vast area of snow bound wilderness. It even had the good grace to fly around a few times! Monday morning saw us back watching the Hawk Owl again in clear conditions before returning to Helsinki airport to catch the flight home after another memorable 4 days. As well as the remaining 4 Owls, we had seen 3 Black Woodpeckers, 2 Nutcrackers, white-headed Long-tailed Tit and a Goshawk, and heard Grey-headed Woodpecker. Birds were much thinner on the ground on this winter trip and we had certainly had to work a lot harder. The weather was only a problem on the first day, though the temperature did get down to B8 on the Sunday morning.

This second trip worked out cheaper at less than ,400, due not only to the fact that we did not need a connecting flight to Oulu but also Antti=s very reasonable guiding fees. So we had seen all 7 Owls at a coast of less than ,950, as well as virtually all the other northern specialities. If time and money are at a premium for you, but you are desperate to see these legendary birds, then perhaps >the alternative approach= is for you.

