

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@sarahgee.com
 Newsletter Web-site: www.teesmouthbc.freeserve.co.uk

Thanks to the contributors to this issue:- Chris Sharp; Ted Parker; Vic Fairbrother; Philip Stead; John Fletcher

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.

MONTHLY SUMMARY by Chris Sharp

November 2004

Early in the month both Slavonian Grebe and Great Northern Diver were on Seal Sands. A Black necked Grebe was at Hemlington Lake (2nd) and showed well until (5th). An adult Mediterranean Gull was also present here. A Hen Harrier flew north over the cliffs at Saltburn (2nd) with Black Redstart and Ring Ouzel there also. Last month's Siberian Stonechat remained at South Gare until 2nd. Bearded Tits showed well early in the month with 1 at Cowpen Bewley (3rd), 3 on Coatham Marsh (4-7th), 1 at South Gare (6th) and up to 11 on Long Drag (from 6th). This latter party remained in the area throughout the winter though were often elusive. Both Greenshank and Spotted Redshank were still on Greenabella Marsh during the first week of the month and the regular wintering flock of Twite returned here often giving stunning views. 2 or 3 Little Egrets were also in the area and remained to winter occasionally being seen on the Long Drag and along Greatham Beck at Hartlepool. 2 Hen Harriers were at Scaling Dam for about 2 weeks from 10th and 2 Whooper Swans were also recorded here. The sea off South Gare regularly held 2 or 3 Long-tailed Ducks along with 3 Velvet Scoter. A 2nd winter Iceland Gull was present at Dorman's Pool (10th) with a late Black Tern on the rocks at Hartlepool headland the same day. The 11th saw a Smew on Coatham Marsh. Good numbers of Little Auk were off Hartlepool (13th – 14th) with over 300 on both days. A Rough-legged Buzzard was around Sleddale (15th – 18th) and a Raven was reported from Scaling Dam (15th). Small numbers of Little Auk continued to be reported for the next few days and several flocks of Waxwings were reported at this time including 85 at Billingham (23rd).

Late in the month 8 Velvet Scoter were on the sea between Marske and Redcar with circa 200 Common Scoter. A redhead Smew was at Scaling Dam (27th) and commuted between here and Lockwood Beck for the rest of the year. The latter locality also held a good wintering flock of Brambling with up to 200 birds present.

December 2004

2 Chiffchaffs were on Portrack Marsh (2nd) along with a single Jack Snipe. A Bittern was on Coatham Marsh (4th) along with a drake Goosander. The relatively mild weather meant few scarce winter visitors to note. Waxwings continued to be noted throughout the County. Slavonian Grebe is another species, which has become commoner in Cleveland. Twenty years ago only 1 or 2 birds were seen each year but this year 3 birds were wintering at Teesmouth (2 on Seal Sands and 1 on Reclamation Pond). Also on Seal Sands in mid-month were 5 Pale-bellied and 1 Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Velvet Scoter and up to 20 Red Throated Divers and 48 Red-breasted Mergansers. A Great Northern Diver was here (19th). A Smew was on the Reclamation Pond (22nd). An unringed female Wood Duck was on the River Tees at Stockton with the Mute Swan flock (23rd) and 8 White-morph Snow Geese were on Seaton Common the same day. Less doubt as to the origin of these birds was an Avocet on Seal Sands the same day and 3 Whooper Swans on Dormans Pool. No further reports of wild Swans were received during the rest of the winter for Cleveland (until 28th February).

January 2005

Numbers of Waxwings early in the month increased with the largest flock being 260 in Billingham. An adult Iceland Gull was at Hartlepool (1st) with a first winter at Skinninggrove from the 3rd to the 20th. These two birds were part of a national influx of white winged Gulls at the time. 3 Black-throated Divers were reported on Seal Sands (2nd). The regular wintering Green Sandpiper was at Portrack roundabout.

Highlight of the winter was undoubtedly the Wilson's Phalarope which was on a flooded field at Seaton Carew Golf Course on the 9th. This was the first winter record for Britain of this American wader, although it was the 13th record for Cleveland. It showed well all day and the same flood held Ruff, Bar-tailed Godwit and an adult Mediterranean Gull. At least 15 Black-tailed Godwits were wintering on the North Tees Marshes and Short-eared owls showed in greater numbers than in recent winters. A first winter Glaucous Gull was at

Hartlepool (20th). A Lesser Whitethroat was in Stockton (from 21st). Increased numbers of Warblers are now found wintering in this country with the milder winters of late.

Northerly winds from 24th produced a small number of Little Auks at the coast. 3 Long-tailed Ducks and a Great Northern Diver were also off Hartlepool (25th). Late in the month both Hawfinch and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker were reported from the Hutton area though the latter was extremely elusive. A Great Northern Diver was off the Power Station (30th).

February 2005

A first winter Glaucous Gull was around Dormans Pool (to 12th). Up to 5 Water Pipits were around Haverton Hole early in the month. A Shag was on the River Tees by Portrack Marsh (8th – 10th) – an unusual location. The redhead Smew was present throughout the month at Lockwood Beck and a drake joined the 3 redheads on the North Tees Marshes (from 13th). An adult Ring-billed Gull was at Billingham Technology Park (13th) having been previously reported from Portrack Marsh (4th). It was seen on several other dates at the Technology Park during the remainder of the month usually in

the late afternoon and for not more than a few minutes. A Bittern was at Billingham Bottoms (from 15th), with birders searching for this finding a male Bearded Tit there the following day. A Red-necked Grebe was off Hartlepool (20th) and was again reported (27th). Strong north easterlies on 23rd produced a Leach's Petrel, which was close inshore at South Gare. Also there on the same day were a Great Northern Diver and a second winter Iceland Gull. Two Little Auks were present on the sea here briefly (26th). More obliging was a Great Northern Diver, which frequented Hartlepool harbour mouth (26th – 28th). Around 40 Red-breasted Mergansers were also here at this time. Single Barnacle Geese were at Margrove Ponds and Seaton Common (27th). 30 Waxwings were at Wynyard Village (27th). 24 Whooper Swans flew past Hartlepool (28th).

Despite the cold weather for the last 10 days of the month, the winter had generally been fairly mild and perhaps because of this was one of the quietest in recent times apart from the Wilson's Phalarope. Hopefully Spring 2005 will be one to remember!



NEWS UPDATE FROM THE COMMITTEE

Five-Year Plan

It is now a little under a year since we launched Five-Year Plan and the Committee and 3 Sub Committees have been working very hard during this time. Some targets have already been met, including revisions to the Club's Constitution, the completion of the disabled access to the *Jeff Youngs Hide* at Dormans Pool and the Membership Questionnaire Survey. The profile of the Club has increased significantly and we have had considerable press, radio and even TV coverage during our campaigns against various harmful developments at Teesmouth. As a key player, we have been invited by the RSPB to have regular meetings with them during the build up to the opening of their Saltholme Reserve in 2007 and we have also been invited to participate in the Environment Agency's 'Tees Estuary Flood Management Strategy' and the 'Tyne to Flamborough Shoreline Management Plan', which is being overseen by Scarborough Borough Council. We will continue to work hard during the coming year in our drive to make the Club one of the best in the country.

Membership Questionnaire

You should receive a copy of the Membership Questionnaire Survey with this Newsletter. This is the first such survey for more than 20 years and obviously much has changed in that time, with the rise of home computers, the Internet, Pagers, Bird Information Services and other many things besides. The Survey links directly with the Five-Year Plan and will inform and drive our progress on this. It is vital that the Committee receives frank feedback from members on how they currently perceive the Club, its strengths and weaknesses and how you feel we might improve things, so please take time to complete the questionnaire and return it to Chris Sharp at 20 Auckland Way, Hartlepool, TS26 0AN by 31st May 2005

Hartlepool Headland New Town Square

Since the last Newsletter, Hartlepool Borough Council and their consultants held an exhibition of the worked-up proposals for the area in front of the Borough Hall. This was very well attended by local people, with over 250 visitors. Several Club members attended and fed back their views to the Council. The current proposals are restricted to the rectangular area fronting the Borough Hall and include the demolition of walls; the demolition of the run-down bus station and toilets (and their replacement with an attractive modern building); the creation of a new, circular 'plaza'/events area, defined by raised planters, which double as seats; the planting of a formal garden on the southern part of the site; and new street furniture and lighting. The Club's view is that the scheme generally respects the existing infrastructure of mature trees: it will involve the removal of only 16 trees, mainly along the bus station boundary, and the planting of 76 additional trees and will not, therefore, seriously detract from the Headland's importance for migrant birds.

Teesside Offshore Wind Farm, Redcar

There has still been no indication from the DTI concerning its decision on the offshore works. The Chairman has offered to meet locally with Keith Welford, the DTI's officer dealing with the Application, along with the Redcar action group, Save Our Shoreline. A reply has been received from EDF Energy's consultants concerning the Club's written response to the Ornithological Impact Assessment in the Environmental Statement and the special sub group set up to deal with the windfarm will be reconvening in the near future to consider our next move. It is highly unlikely that the Club's stance will change, as the consultants have brought no new evidence or arguments to the table to allay our grave fears of collision risks to birds posed by this development.

Hartlepool Observatory

Sadly, the Club is no farther forward on this protracted affair, though we have sought some informal legal advice from a senior partner in a local law firm, who considers that, subject to further research of the history of events, we have a strong case against the Council, particularly as we are still paying rent but being denied access. We will keep you informed of any further developments.

Scaling Dam

News from the Scaling Dam Wildlife Advisory Group is that the reservoir came second nationally in the BTO Hanson Bird Challenge in 2004. The winner was Ogston Reservoir in Derbyshire. This is an excellent achievement for our local reservoir and thanks are due to all those observers who gave their time and effort to provide records. The final total for the year was 146, with some notable 'firsts' for the site, including Little Egret, Reed, Grasshopper and Wood Warblers, and Quail, backed up with some other excellent species, notably Great White Egret, Green-winged Teal, Long-tailed Duck and 22 species of wader. On the negative side, there were some significant omissions to the Scaling list last year, including Grey Partridge, Short-eared Owl, Common Crossbill, Redstart, Spotted Redshank, Common Tern and Tree Sparrow.

Revisions To The Club's Constitution

The revisions to our Constitution have been approved by the Charity Commission and these will be put to members at the April AGM for approval. There will be a chance to discuss the revisions further at the AGM, or ask questions, if members wish to do so.

Breeding Bird Survey

Due to the number of tetrads still to be surveyed (approximately 25), survey work is to be extended for another season. The writing up of the Atlas will be undertaken in tandem, in order to meet the autumn 2006 target for publication. Tasks that have to be completed over the coming year include inputting bird data into a specially-purchased software package, seeking out sponsors (it is estimated that the publication costs for the Atlas will be in the region of £25,000), writing up of the introductory sections and species accounts, preparing a Marketing and Sales Plan and finalising the artists' inputs. A special Breeding Bird Survey Project Team has been set up to oversee and co-ordinate work up to the publication of the Atlas.

Volunteers for the final season of fieldwork are urgently required and should contact Graeme Joynt on 01429 289968. Assistance with the writing up of individual species accounts for the Atlas is also needed and those willing to help should contact Vic Fairbrother on 01287 633744. Even if you can only do a single species, this will help spread the heavy workload and you will be given advice and a typical example as a 'template'. All those who help will be acknowledged in the published Atlas.

It is evident from the sheer volume of fieldwork undertaken to date, the degree of coverage and the huge amount of time that volunteers have spent in their respective tetrads that this will be one of the most comprehensive and accurate Breeding Bird Atlases ever published in the UK.

Sharing Bird Information

Following my request in the last Newsletter, there has been a slight increase in the number of local messages being put on to the Pager services. It would be of great benefit to local birders if more people would participate. As a reminder, the relevant telephone numbers are:

Birdnet: 01623 511679 (this is a new number and the old one given out in the last Newsletter is now defunct)

Rare Bird Alert: 07626 952952

2004 'Cleveland Bird Report'

Any outstanding records, photographs or sketches for consideration for the 2004 report should be submitted without delay to the County Recorder, Rob Little at 5 Belgrave Court, Seaton Carew, HARTLEPOOL, TS25 1BF.

Newsletter Editor

This Newsletter will be Mike Gee's last after over 10 years as editor and I would like to thank him personally, and on behalf of the Committee, for his superlative efforts over this time in producing such a fine document.

Ted Parker – Chairman

BIRDS, BIRD CLUB, AND BIODIVERSITY

The survey work for the proposed Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Cleveland is almost complete, and this will give us for the first time, an accurate assessment of the status of our local breeding birds. This will also provide us with a benchmark against which we can monitor future fluctuations in the fortunes of our residents and summer visitors.

Although there are well known periodic and cyclical fluctuations in the populations of some of our breeding birds there is also strong evidence of a more worrying long term decline in common birds, with woodland birds showing moderate declines and farmland birds showing steep declines.

The future sustainability of the breeding birds of Cleveland is closely linked to the concept of Biodiversity.

Biodiversity means the variety of life, everything from an ant to an oak tree. The UK biodiversity action planning process arose from the governments' commitment to the international Convention on Biological Diversity signed at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A UK Action Plan was published in 1995 and local Biodiversity Action Plans have followed. Our local BAP is the Tees Valley BAP published in 1999 and this provided an audit of the habitats and species in Cleveland, with priorities and objectives to conserve and enhance them.

The Tees Valley Biodiversity partnership includes the four local authorities, relevant government agencies and local groups and a steering group meets each quarter. Liz Auty is the Biodiversity Officer charged with taking the plan forward and involving local people in positive actions for biodiversity. Three action groups have been formed to develop action plans for farmland, wetland/coastal and urban/industrial habitats.

Russell McAndrew represents Teesmouth Bird Club on the wetland/coastal group and Vic Fairbrother represents the club on the farmland group.

One of the first tasks was to produce an up to date audit of farmland birds for each of the priority farmland habitats. This will be further updated when the new Atlas is published.

The next task was to identify priority species and begin to develop species action plans, which could be integrated with the developing habitat action plans. Work is now well advanced on plans for Corn Bunting, Grey Partridge, Tree Sparrow and Barn Owl.

It is anticipated that farmland habitats will benefit considerably from the introduction by DEFRA of new Environmental Stewardship Schemes in spring 2005. The new Entry Level Scheme is expected to attract 60-70% take up compared with the 10% in current stewardship schemes. In addition there will be opportunities for restricted entry to a Higher Level Scheme.

52 farmers responded positively to a questionnaire from the farmland group, which was sent out to all local farmers concerning wildlife on the farm. Many of the respondents were interested in a volunteer monitoring wildlife on their farm and/or in receiving some training in wildlife identification.

As a result pilot bird surveys were carried out on 24 farms during 2004. The initial success of this venture means that additional volunteers are now needed so that we can include more farms throughout Cleveland. Breeding and wintering populations of farmland birds can then be monitored as the new farming Environmental Stewardship Schemes are introduced and local action plans are developed.

The basic skill level required is to be able to identify our farmland birds. The surveys entail two farm visits in the breeding season and two in winter. Those involved in the pilot surveys found them both enjoyable and rewarding. If you have very little experience of surveys or none at all please do not be put off from volunteering. There will be briefing meetings, introductory farm walks and guidance notes and farm maps will be provided. This could be the opportunity to add a whole new dimension to your bird watching and to make a valuable contribution to the welfare of our local farmland birds.

Vic Fairbrother

For further information: Tel. 01287 633744 or E-mail: vic.fairbrother@ntlworld.com



HISTORIC LOCAL RECORDS by Philip Stead

The older members of the Teesmouth Bird Club will recall the flock of Demoiselle Cranes, which frequented the Cowpen Marsh region in 1967. Originally four birds, they were first seen on 6 July, two of these disappeared later in the month but the remaining pair stayed until 17 September. In my account in *The Birds of Teesside 1962 – 1967*, I mentioned that a number were present in the country at this time and were thought to be escapees from captivity. At this distance of time I cannot remember where I got this information, possibly word of mouth. However, reading the recently published “*The Birds of Norfolk*”, I came across a reference to a flock of six Demoiselle Cranes at Horsey on 23rd April 1967. The authors state that efforts were made to trace whence the birds had originated but that these drew a blank. Despite the three-month gap between the two occurrences it seems to me highly likely that the Cowpen and Horsey birds were one and the same. Perhaps after all they were genuine migrants.

D.J. Britton in his article on species still to be added to The Cleveland list mentioned the Black-eared Wheatear seen at Roseberry Topping on 6 June 1915 by W.S. Medlicott. The bird, a male, was watched for three hours through binoculars down to 15 yards. The account in *British Birds* Volume IX pp 122-123 mentions a quarry. As it happens fifty years later I met W.S. Medlicott whilst watching the Harriers in Kielder Forest. I remember asking him about the quarry and he confirmed that he was referring to the rock face and scree just below the summit. It had crossed my mind that it might refer to the area to the south where the Whim Sill is quarried. Had Cleveland County been in existence in 1965 I might have been able to ascertain which side of the boundary the bird had been seen. C'est la vie.

W.S. Medlicott was also involved in monitoring the breeding Montagu's in the 1940's and 1950's. I recall he regaled me with an account of sitting on Freebrough Hill watching the male Montagu bringing food to the nest on Wamplsey Moor around 1943.

Still regarded as the founder of Israeli ornithology, the Reverend Baker Tristram F.R.S. was one of the giants of nineteenth century ornithology with some eleven species of birds worldwide named after him. When he died in 1906 he was Canon of Durham Cathedral but at one point in his ascent of the hierarchy of The Church of England he was the vicar of Greatham. One morning in August 1862 his children came running into his study to tell him a large black bird was walking about outside. There was a Black Stork marching about in the swampy meadow. The bird was still present the next morning but in the afternoon it was shot by someone from Hartlepool. The specimen was originally sold to a Mr. W. Christy Horsfall of Horsfall Hall near Leeds who wrote an account of it in the *Zoologist* 1862 p 8196. Tristram, writing in 1905 stated that the specimen was in the Hartlepool Museum but I could not find any trace of it when I was researching the Teesmouth specimens forty years ago.

BIRDING TRIP TO NEW ZEALAND - NOVEMBER 2004 by John Fletcher

Since the arrival of Europeans New Zealand has lost half of its endemics due to loss of habitat and the introduction of predatory mammals. There has been some re-introduction to islands that are free of predators or have been made largely free. New Zealand extends about a thousand miles in latitude, so to see most of its endemics, its unique kiwis, and its famed seabirds requires a lot of driving and a number of sea trips. Fortunately, on this Birdquest trip I didn't have to do any of the driving, but motoring for up to four hundred miles in a day was a bit cramping.

From Auckland Airport we took an internal flight to Dunedin which gave us our first views of the mountains of South Island. From Dunedin it was off to the nearby Otago Peninsula with its small colony of Northern Royal Albatross, the windy headland allowing the albatrosses to easily take-off and land. We had marvellous flight views of the albatrosses with birds coming overhead. (We did not visit the nearby colony of Yellow-eyed Penguins.) En route we picked up our first endemics such as Spotted Shag and Paradise Shelduck. The next day we drove to Invercargill and then flew in a small plane to Stewart Island to be greeted on the landing strip by a pair of Double-banded Plovers. The next day we were off at 7.30 on a pelagic, our first birds being a Brown Skua and a Cape Petrel of the local Snares Island race. At the next island we were relieved to find a Yellow-eyed Penguin standing on the shore before departing for the day, whilst behind us were over ten thousand Sooty Shearwaters forming a huge raft on the sea. (Sooties, or Muttonbirds, were a special delicacy for Maoris and have given their name to two groups of Muttonbird Islands offshore from Stewart Island.) The first of many Common Diving Petrels and a single Mottled Petrel were seen on approach to the chumming zone. The chumming was novel to say the least. A bloke with a fishing rod put a baited hook overboard and within a minute or two was reeling in a blue cod, or other species. His mate hacked at the flapping fish chucking lumps into the sea. Amazingly the first albatross to appear was a Buller's followed later by eight White-capped and a single Salvin's. The skipper was disappointed at the “small” number of birds, evidently due to shark boats working further out to sea and attracting “masses” of birds with gutting, etc. On the way back we stopped off at Ulva Island, now cleared of rats and supporting a thriving bird population including re-introduced species. Here we had our first Weka Rail wandering around our feet and what turned out to be brief views of the only Yellowheads of the trip. Back on the mainland for 6.30p.m. we had dinner, then it was off on another boat for kiwi.

Stewart Island is about fifty by twenty miles, mostly in the Rakiura National Park. It supports over 20,000 Brown Kiwis of the Stewart Island race, which unusually for kiwi are active in daylight. So it is possible to go hiking to look for kiwi, but it is easier to take a guided boat trip at night. With a guide we crossed the peninsula and walked the beach without any luck. Fortunately on the return our guide stopped and spotlighted a kiwi about ten yards away. We watched it foraging at the top of the beach for about ten minutes. On the return boat trip spotlighting produced several Fairy Prions, a Cook's Petrel and a Mottled Petrel.

Two days later we were cruising down the spectacular Milford Sound with about a hundred or so Asian tourists. It produced the odd Fiordland Crested Penguin standing on the shore but little else. But later that day on a raging stream we were fortunate to get a Blue Duck without having to really work for it. The next day took us into the dry interior of South Island with irrigation required to produce decent crops. We only saw the famous bungee-jumping spot on the Kawarau River, outside Queenstown, because we had stopped for a New Zealand Falcon that had flown by. At another spot we had a scarce Black Stilt flying overhead whilst we watched a Wrybill on territory with lovely Black-fronted Terns flying around. With spectacular snow-capped mountains always in view, it was typical South Island birding. An evening attempt to look for Bittern failed but we did get a hedgehog.

The next couple of nights were spent looking for Great Spotted Kiwi, but only three of our party of fifteen—one of the lucky three was TBC Member Margaret Barrow - got a glimpse of a juvenile. North of Greymouth we gathered one night just before dusk to watch Westland Petrel milling around offshore and then flying in overhead to their nests in the mountains behind us. The next day outside Kaikoura we were at St Anne's Lagoon and were intrigued by an insistent songster hidden in reeds. It turned out to be an Australian Reed Warbler, the first for New Zealand. Unbeknown to us it had been located the day before. Andrew, our New Zealand co-leader had the third highest list for New Zealand and this bird took his list to 200! (Our group total for the trip was 139).

The next day we set off early on the pelagic out from Kaikoura. Soon after leaving harbour we had Hutton's Shearwaters 8000 pairs of which breed in the mountains above Kaikoura. Eight miles out chumming took the form of towing a steel mesh containing a chunk of fish, kept buoyant with two red flotation balls. This drew in ten-plus Salvin's Albatross and similar numbers of Wandering Albatross of the "gibsoni" race. We were split between two boats and the other boat called an "antipodensis" race, but our skipper, Les Battersby (yup, that's right), said it was a young Gibson's. At times the albatrosses were so close you could almost have hand-fed them. There was one Wilson's Storm-Petrel and one Buller's Albatross, with lots of White-chinned and Westland Petrels. There were a hundred-plus Cape Petrels, mainly the Snares Island race but a few Southern present.. We were back on land after three hours, but back again in the afternoon, this time going six miles offshore. This time there were simply masses of albatrosses with up to 60 present at one time plus lots of squabbling Northern Giant Petrels. Unfortunately a Grey-faced Petrel passed by, but in the melee was not picked up by everybody.

The next day at Picton we boarded a catamaran skippered by a very young lady for a trip down Queen Charlotte Sound. This soon produced Fluttering Shearwaters. At the end of the Sound, Andrew had to persuade the skipper to proceed further out to sea, assuring her that we were birders and were okay for seasickness. Off Cape Jackson there was a massive upwelling of the sea due to rocks and the meeting of the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea in the Cook Strait. This didn't produce any new birds but was an awesome sight with the raging sea and a great melee of Shearwaters, Diving-Petrels, Terns, Petrels, Gannets and the odd Prion. What a contrast later that day when we landed in volcanic North Island. It seemed to be endless hillocks like some giant golf course.

In South Island we got a decent view of a scarce Fairy Tern and on Aroha Island (reached by a causeway) we got the North Island form of Brown Kiwi, but of course we were all looking forward to the pelagic in Hauraki Gulf. In the Gulf we had Buller's Shearwaters and some Fluttering Shearwaters, then a massive Sei Whale surfaced a couple of times and disappeared. This was followed by a Pomarine Skua and a small flurry of Arctic Skuas. Eventually we ran into dozens of White-faced Storm Petrels.. Then some way south of Little Barrier Island a single New Zealand Storm Petrel flew across in front of the boat, and away. That turned out to be the only view even though we later went north of the Island where they had been seen before. Approaching the Island we ran into Cook's Petrels, which breed there, and then three Bottlenose Dolphins decided to ride our bow-wave followed soon after with three Common Dolphins leaping clean out of the water. The chumming was pretty feeble and didn't really produce anything. We later get lots of Flesh-footed Shearwaters, and a single Black Petrel showed really well raising a cheer. On the return trip we hove-to off the small Beehive Island and struggled to get a decent view of the Shore Plover, some of which have been relocated to various islands from the distant Chatham Islands. We landed after eight hours on the water at Tiri Tiri Matangi Island.

Tiri Tiri Matangi Island is about 25 miles North of Auckland. It was formerly a farm, but predators have been cleared and with much replanting and re-introduction, the Island now has abundant birdlife. With its peacefulness it's bird heaven yielding Kokako, Stichbird, and Sooty Crake which can be difficult to see elsewhere. Having walked briefly round we reached the Bunkhouse, made dinner, then off to look for Little Spotted Kiwi. Everybody had seen one by 1.15 am. The next morning we had a couple of hours to enjoy the Island before catching the boat and off homewards.

The big surprise in New Zealand was the abundance of introduced "British" birds, with the songs of familiar birds such as Song Thrush, Blackbird, Chaffinch and Skylark dominant. On a long drive one day in North Island well over a hundred Song Thrushes were seen. The abundance perhaps highlights how much numbers have fallen in Britain.

A TRIP TO SWEDEN by Ted Parker

As we stepped off the plane the drop in temperature was dramatic. Everywhere around the airport was frozen solid and I had to watch my feet as we made our way to the small terminal building. The air, however, was crisp and dry, with pin-sharp visibility – ideal conditions for woodland birding.

This was my first visit to Sweden and the airport was Västerås, about 60km to the north-west of Stockholm. Mark Askew, Mike Corner, Graham Megson and myself had decided only a few weeks before to 'twitch' the Hawk Owl, which had been wintering in a large forest clearing near the village of Sotter, about 40km east of Uppsala. The lure of such a stunning bird was too much and, with flights being so cheap (£20.00 each way), the decision was made for us. We were also confident of seeing Pine Grosbeak, as parties of this sought-after northern breeder had regularly been seen in the suburbs of both Uppsala and Stockholm, well south of their normal range, immediately prior to our visit. The outward flight time required an overnight drive down to Luton Airport for our Ryanair flight to Västerås, the loss of sleep compensated by the fact that our arrival at 9.40am gave us a full, first day's birding. We had made contact with a number of Swedish birders before we left, not just to obtain information but also to try and secure a guide for at least one day. The Swedish forests are vast and, at this time of year, they are also extremely quiet. It is imperative, therefore, that you know where to go, as the best places invariably involve feeding stations established by local Swedish birders and some of these are deep in square kilometres of forest!

We met our guide, Marcus Rehnberg at Västerås airport on the morning of 11th February. After picking up our hire car (a Volvo, of course) the first day was spent forest birding. During the early part of the year, many birds, particularly owls, Hazel Hen and woodpeckers, are much less territorial and more difficult to see and so our attitude was: if we saw Hawk Owl and Pine Grosbeak anything else would be a bonus. We drove northwards out of Västerås and birded the huge area of forest to the west of Fläcksjöhn, a large, secluded lake, which was completely frozen over (as were all the lakes). Our first stop was a feeding station at Skillberg, which Marcus had stocked up with food just before our visit. Here, we had stunning flight views of a male Black Woodpecker as we got out of the car and a Nutcracker perched obligingly on top of a roadside pine. The feeding station was only a few hundred metres walk into the forest and over the next hour or so, we got sustained, close-range views of a Grey-headed Woodpecker as it fed on fat pushed into a tree crevice – a bird virtually guaranteed by Marcus! There was a supporting cast of numerous Willow Tits and Nuthatches, and a magnificent adult White-tailed Eagle circled overhead. The afternoon was spent in search of Hazel Hen but, despite Marcus's best attempts to whistle them out, we didn't manage to see any, though we did see a few more White-tailed Eagles. In the late afternoon, however, at Bangbo, he did manage to whistle out a Pygmy Owl at a staked-out site and this perched on top of a nearby tree and gave excellent views. The day ended with a walk into the forest at dusk at a Great Grey Owl site. The bird had been heard only the previous night but, despite a long wait until well after dark, we dipped. After dropping off our guide, we drove to Uppsala and stayed overnight in the 'Hotel Uppsala'.

Next morning was Hawk Owl day and I have to admit, my adrenalin was flowing in buckets long before we even got to the site. Would it still be there? We drove the 40km or so eastwards to the village of Knutby and then on to the small hamlet of Sotter, where we left the road and travelled 3.5 km along an icy track into the huge forest clearing where it had been wintering. Before the car even stopped, I could see the characteristic shape of the Hawk Owl perched on a tall, dead larch tree about 200m away. Over the next few hours, we got superb perched and flight views of this extremely sought-after northern owl and I would certainly rate it as one of the top 10 birds I have ever seen. A feature of this species is that its facial pattern is 'mirrored' on the back of its head, so you never quite know whether it is looking at you or away from you! At one point, it was mobbed by a Nutcracker and flew off, looking more like a small Goshawk than an owl. Due to a severe weather warning for the following day, we decided to change our itinerary and drove northwards for several hours to another forest feeding station near Rönbacken - the precise directions having been given to us by Marcus. This was a stake-out for Siberian Jays, in an area well south of their normal range. As soon as we arrived, 4 birds showed immediately down to only a metre and came to bread. In the same area, we also saw White-tailed Eagle, Crested Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Jay, Raven, Common Buzzard, Siskin and Waxwing. We then had a long drive back to Uppsala for an overnight stay in the same hotel, ready for Pine Grosbeaks the next day.

Our decision to change the itinerary proved the right one, for the morning of 13th February was a white-out, with blizzards persisting almost unabated for the rest of the day. The Volvo's metal-studded tyres really came into their own and the car held the road amazingly well considering the conditions. We met another guide, Magnus, at a garage in Uppsala, who gave us detailed instructions on where to see Pine Grosbeaks at 2 sites in the suburbs of Stockholm - at Skondal and Bollmora. In the process, an elderly Swedish gentleman reversed into our car, which delayed us a little but we arrived at the first stake-out in Stockholm about an hour and a half later. Despite a long search in appalling conditions – no Grosbeaks, so we tried the second site but dipped there also. Unfortunately, the weather was against us and we didn't manage to connect with any. Ironically, birds reappeared the next day!

Our flight left Västerås at 10.45pm after a slight delay and ended an outstanding 3 days birding.

A TRIP TO SWEDEN VIDEOGRABS by Ted Parker



Grey-headed Woodpecker
Skillberg



Hawk Owl
Knutby



White-tailed Eagle
Annehill



Fläcksjön Lake



Skillberg Feeding Station



Hawk Owl site
Knutby



Hawk Owl
Knutby



Siberian Jay
Kittan