

SOMERSET HOVERFLY REPORT 2012

In general 2012 was a poor year for hoverflies due to the extreme weather conditions and widespread flooding. However, two recent surveys in the Somerset Levels and Moors have added some interesting records including several species new to the county list, plus some new records of species that are rare or threatened nationally. Strangely, for some hoverflies the flooding of 2012 seemed to have a positive effect.

Amongst our own most notable records, sightings in our Yeovil garden of the striking *Helophilus trivittatus* in late summer and autumn were much more numerous than usual, with numbers of individuals frequently outnumbering the normally common *H. pendulus*. In most years *H. trivittatus* is rarely seen in more than ones and twos.

Our recording activities were reduced somewhat in 2012, and we tended to keep to more local sites, ie those close to Yeovil. We made several visits to the Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) reserve at Great Breach Wood, but managed also to visit fifteen other localities.

The total number of species recorded in the county in 2012 was 105, largely thanks to the surveys done at Catcott and Ham Wall, the results of which were kindly supplied to us by Martin Drake. As well as Martin Drake, we would also like to thank J. Ismay, B. Widden, N. Mellow, C. Iles and P. Akers for their lists and records.

The following are the most interesting records; all dates refer to 2012 unless otherwise stated.

- Didea fasciata* – Yeovil garden, 1 September.
- Ischyrosyrphus laternarius* – Great Breach Wood, 29 July.
- Melangyna lasiophthama* – Pen Wood, 28 March.
- Parasyrphus punctulatus* – Bickham Wood, 20 April.
- Platycheirus europeus* – Catcott SWT reserve, 16 May (M. Drake); a new county record.
- Platycheirus occultus* – Catcott SWT reserve, several dates, June to August (M. Drake).
- Platycheirus tarsalis* – Pink Wood, 11 May.
- Anasimyia lineata* – Catcott Lows, 27 July (M. Drake).
- Anasimyia interpuncta* – Catcott SWT reserve, 19 June 2009 (M. Drake); a new county record.

This is a rare species nationally, otherwise restricted to fens and river floodplains in East Anglia and south-east England.

- Anasimyia lunulata* – Ham Wall RSPB reserve, 3 July 2009 (M. Drake); first record for Somerset since 1951. A predominantly western species in Britain, quite well distributed in Wales but otherwise scarce and local.
- Anasimyia transfuga* – Tadham, 4 May 2007 (M. Drake).
- Sphaerophoria loewi* – Ham Wall RSPB reserve, 3 July 2009 (M. Drake); a new county record. This is a rare and mainly coastal species in Britain, with very few records from south-west England.
- Cheilosia latifrons* – Catcott SWT reserve, 16 May (M. Drake).
- Cheilosia ranunculi* – Long Sutton, 16 May.
- Cheilosia urbana* – Catcott SWT reserve, 10 August (M. Drake).
- Cheilosia soror* – Pink Wood, 22 August.
- Criorhina floccosa* – Yeovil garden, 7 May.
- Eristalis abusivus* – Catcott SWT reserve, several dates, July to September (M. Drake).
- Eristalis similis* – Catcott SWT reserve, 13 September (M. Drake).
- Helophilus hybridus* – Meare Heath, 29 July; Yeovil garden, 1 September.
- Helophilus trivittatus* – Ham Wall, 5 August; Yeovil garden, many dates between 29 July and 30 September (maximum count of 20+ on 1 September).
- Heringia heringi* – Yeovil garden, 15 to 17 August.
- Lejogaster tarsata* – Catcott SWT reserve, several dates, June to August (M. Drake); a scarce species with a mainly coastal distribution in Britain and very few records from south-west England.
- Melanogaster aerea* – Catcott SWT reserve, 16 May (M. Drake); widely scattered but scarce in Britain, with very few Somerset records.
- Neoascia geniculata* – Catcott SWT reserve, 13 September (M. Drake).
- Neocnemodon pubescens* – Pink Wood, 11 May.
- Parhelophilus consimilis* – Catcott SWT reserve, several dates in May and June (M. Drake). This is the scarcest of the three British *Parhelophilus* species.

*Parhelophilus frutetorum* – Catcott SWT reserve, 17 June (M. Drake).

*Rhingia rostrata* – Blagdon Lake, Holt Copse, August (N. Mellow); Cleaves Wood, 25 September (M. Drake). A scarce species, with rather few localities in south-west England.

*Volucella inanis* – Avon Gorge, 12 August; Bath golf course, 16 August; Bath University, 6 September; Sham Castle Fields, 14 August (all C. Iles); Blagdon Lake, August (N. Mellow).

*Volucella zonaria* – Glastonbury, 20 October (C. Iles); Abbey Manor, Yeovil, 28 August (P. Akers); Thorne Gardens, Yeovil, 1 September (P. Akers); Trinity Street, Taunton, several dates, September (S.J. Leach); Fiveways roundabout, 2 August; Yeovil garden, 20 August, 5 and 29 September.

#### Is *Doros profuges* extinct in Somerset?

The rather exotic looking hoverfly *Doros profuges* (Fig. 1) has never been common or very widespread in Britain, and has not been recorded in Somerset since 1947. In fact, all the county's records refer to the 1940s and all were taken by John Cowley within a relatively small area straddling the 10km squares ST33, ST34 and ST43. John Cowley (1909-1967) was either very lucky when he began collecting hoverflies from his home in Edington, on the edge of the Somerset

Levels, or was extremely sharp-eyed and clever with his net. He is responsible for records of several species from that area which we have been unable to find since and which are generally rare in Britain.

We have never observed *Doros* in Somerset, but we do have a specimen from Dorset and have seen video evidence of one in Wiltshire; we have also had the good fortune to find this large and distinctive wasp-like species more than once in France. We think this species is liable to turn up almost at random, then to persist for a few years before suddenly (and inexplicably) disappearing again. This makes it difficult to be sure of its true status in Somerset, and for that reason we have been reluctant to declare it extinct in Somerset.

*Doros* is a large and distinctive wasp mimic, more like a large wasp than a hoverfly in its general appearance (Fig. 1), yellow-striped with a narrow 'waist' and darkened bands on the leading edge of its wings. The antennae are short, however, quite different from a wasp's antennae. Our specimens are about 20mm in length, with a wingspan of about 30mm. Despite its threatening appearance, *Doros* neither bites nor stings – providing the observer with a reliable but painful way of ruling out *Doros* in cases of uncertainty! Of course, *Doros* (being a fly) has only two wings, whereas wasps have four – although this can be quite hard to see when viewing a live specimen in the field.

Its habitats seem to be woodland and scrub or grassland edges, where patches of bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) are a typical sunbathing situation. There are those who say that it is rarely seen because it spends a lot of time in the tree canopy, but it also occurs at sites well away from trees.

The larval stages are a mystery for such a large fly, but there are suggestions that larval development may involve ant species and/or root aphids. If this is the case, its apparent rarity may be connected to the rarity of the ant or aphid species with which it is particularly associated. Other wasp mimics inhabiting similar habitats, like *Xanthogramma* species, also have much of their larval development shrouded in mystery. Like *Doros*, they tend to be found singly rather than in groups; and following a female intent on egg-laying low down in grasses amongst bramble bushes is extremely frustrating and difficult. On the continent we have seen it feeding on the flower heads of umbelliferous



Fig. 1 *Doros profuges*, drawn from a specimen photographed in Dorset (E.T. Levy)

species, but even the feeding habits of adults are little known.

All of Cowley's Somerset records are dated 15<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> June, and our own sightings in Dorset and in France were all made in June, so its flight period may well be only a week or two in duration. Details of Cowley's records seem to be lost, but may refer to hedgerow umbels or individuals sunbathing on leaves or on the ground in the area around Edington and Loxley Wood.

We hope that naturalists will be encouraged to search for this species in the county, especially in areas of suitable habitat around the fringes of the Somerset Levels.

E.T. & D.A. LEVY

#### ADDITIONS AND CORRECTIONS TO THE LIST OF SOMERSET BEETLES 2012

This note gives details of beetles newly added to the Somerset list in 2012. The following records were made by James McGill (JAM), Bill Urwin (WU) and Tony Allen (AJWA). Thanks are also due to Andrew Duff for alerting me to additional historic records in the published literature. It should be noted that records listed here are largely unchecked and, unless explicitly confirmed by an authority, have yet to be authenticated.

The format of the list is the same as that adopted in last year's report (Boyce and McGill 2012). For each record I give 10km square, site name, date(s) and recorder's initials. The emboldened Red Data Book and Nationally Scarce categories given in square brackets after the species names are explained below. They are taken from the national Coleoptera review prepared by Hyman and Parsons (1992; 1994).

**RDB3** – Red Data Book, Category 3 – Nationally Rare. Taxa which are known from 15 or fewer 10km squares of the GB National Grid but not thought to be either Vulnerable or Endangered.

**RDBK** – Red Data Book, Category K – Insufficiently known. Taxa suspected of belonging to one of the other Red Data Book categories (Nationally Rare, Vulnerable or Endangered), but for which there is currently a lack of information.

**Na** – Nationally Scarce, Category A. Taxa which are thought to occur in 16 to 30 10km squares of the GB National Grid.

**Nb** – Nationally Scarce, Category B. Taxa which are thought to occur in between 31 and 100 10km squares of the GB National Grid.

#### Order COLEOPTERA

*Ptinella denticollis* (Fairmaire) [**Na or Nb**]  
**ST 57:** Leigh Wds, n.d. (Blatch 1882)

*Baeocrara variolosa* (Mulsant & Rey)  
**SS 94:** Luccombe, viii 1984 (Johnson 2012)

*Biblopectus delhermi* Guillebeau [**RDBK**]  
**ST 12:** Hele, i 2012 (JAM)

*Aleochara verna* Say [**RDBK**]  
**ST 12:** Hele, i 2012 (JAM)

*Rugilus angustatus* (Geoffroy) [**Na or Nb**]  
**ST 44:** Shapwick Hth., xi 2012 (WU)

*Heterothops minutus* Wollaston  
**ST 32:** West Sedge Moor, iv 2011 (JAM)

*Heterothops* "*dissimilis*" sensu lato  
This taxon is now recognised as consisting of *H. minutus* Wollaston (see record above) and *H. dissimilis* (Gravenhorst); without further evidence the following records of *H. dissimilis* should be regarded as indeterminate and therefore *sensu lato*.

**SS 94:** Minehead, ix 1953, iv 1955 (WAW)  
**ST 30:** Tatworth, iii 1969, ix 1974 (GLF)  
**ST 43/44:** Shapwick Hth., iv 1933 (CET)

*Clambus pallidulus* Reitter [**RDBK**]  
**ST 12:** Hele, i xii 2012 (AJWA, JAM)

*Langelandia anophthalma* Aubé [**RDB3**]  
**ST 42:** Muchelney, i 2012 (JAM)

With the addition of the above species, the list of Somerset beetles stands at 2471 species of Coleoptera and three species of Strepsiptera recorded in the last two centuries, plus 74 species of subfossil Coleoptera.

#### References

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- Hyman, P. S., and Parsons, M., 1992. *A Review of the Scarce and Threatened Coleoptera of Great Britain*, Part 1, Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee.
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- Johnson, C., 2012. 'New records and data on notable British Ptiliidae (Coleoptera)', *Entomologist's Gazette*, 63, 63-68.

JAMES A. MCGILL

#### MOTHS IN SOMERSET 2012

As reported elsewhere in these pages, the wettest April in a hundred years was followed by one of the wettest and dullest summers on record. All moth-trapping nights planned by the Somerset Moth Group (SMG) between 1<sup>st</sup> April and 3<sup>rd</sup> May had to be cancelled because of the weather, and moth numbers throughout the summer were very disappointing. However there were a number of good records, summarised below.

#### Resident species – macro moths

The first moth of the year was reported by Paul Newman when he had a December Moth (*Poecilocampa populi*) on New Year's Day. This was followed by a trickle of Winter Moths (*Operophtera brumata*) and December Moths, interrupted by a Silver Y (*Autographa gamma*) on 9 January in Weston. The first two weeks of February were extremely quiet and nothing was reported before the 13<sup>th</sup>, but there followed several weeks of decent catches; highlights included a Spring Usher (*Agriopsis leucophaearia*) from Ian Mathieson, only the second record for his 10km square, ST41. Hebrew Character (*Orthosia gothica*), Common Quaker (*O. cerasi*), Small Quaker (*O. cruda*), Powdered Quaker (*O. gracilis*) and Twin-spotted Quaker (*O. munda*) all appeared to be having their second consecutive promising season. The highest catch was by Robin Clatworthy and Mike Ridge at Middleroom Wood on 18 March when they recorded a total

of 727 Small Quakers. Amongst other notable spring species, three Red Sword-grass (*Xylena vetusta*) were recorded in March, by Doug Miller at Westonzoyland and Paul Jennings at Milverton on the 6<sup>th</sup>, while Robin Clatworthy had another at Great Breach Wood on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

Other interesting catches in March included nine Lead-coloured Drabs (*Orthosia populeti*) at Middleroom Wood on the same night as the huge catch of Small Quakers. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> at Lime Ridge Wood the catch included 29 Early Tooth-striped (*Trichopteryx carpinata*), eight Blossom Underwings (*Orthosia miniosa*) and two Lead-coloured Drabs, whilst on the 25<sup>th</sup> at Great Breach Wood there were 165 Brindled Pugs (*Eupithecia abbreviata*), 47 Twin-spotted Quakers and a Barred Tooth-striped. At Bickenhall Wood on 30 March there were a further nine Lead-coloured Drabs. Several of these species, including Barred Tooth-striped (*Trichopteryx polyommata*), Blossom Underwing and Lead-coloured Drab, are moths that are rarely encountered in garden traps, indicating how worthwhile it is to make an effort to join a field trip now and again.

A Humming-bird Hawk-moth (*Macroglossum stellatarum*) was seen by Nigel Parsons nectaring on Primroses (*Primula vulgaris*) in a Frome garden on 24 March. He speculated that it was possibly an early migrant. Nationally a good number of this species was seen in the first three months of 2012 and it is just as likely that these were successful

over-winterers. David Agassiz reported another at Weston-super-Mare on 1 April.

Two Shaded Pugs (*Eupithecia subumbrata*) were caught at a private reserve in Norton-sub-Hamdon on 7 June – the second and third records of this species in South Somerset (VC5). Chris Iles recorded Grass Rivulet (*Perizoma albulata*) at Edford Meadows reserve on 9 June, while Reddish Light Arches (*Apamea sublustris*) was recorded by Paul Newman in East Lydford on the 18<sup>th</sup> and by Ian Mathieson at Norton-sub Hamdon on the 25<sup>th</sup>. A Triple-spotted Clay (*Xestia ditrapezium*) was taken by William Langdon in Taunton on 28 June, the second record for 10km square ST22.

Brean Down yielded some good records for Paul Bowyer: Thyme Pug (*Eupithecia distinctaria*) – of which there are only a handful of Somerset records – on 26 June, Suspected (*Parastichtis suspecta*) on 4 July and Small Ranunculus (*Hecatera dysodea*) on 19 July. Andrew Slade also had this last species at Burnham-on-Sea on 9 August; its resurgence is remarkable – it is a scarce and highly localised species in Somerset – and it was good to see it out in such a poor year weather-wise.

Paul Bowyer, this time trapping at Weston, had records in July for both Devonshire Wainscot (*Mythimna putrescens*) and Shore Wainscot (*M. litoralis*), as well as Golden-rod Pug (*Eupithecia virgaureata*). He also recorded a Southern Wainscot (*M. straminea*) on 15 August. Nigel Cottle took a Scallop Shell (*Rheumaptera undulata*) at Bishop's Hull on 3 July, and Dave Ayling trapped Archer's Dart (*Agrotis vestigialis*) at Blue Anchor on 21 July.

A historical record of potentially great importance is a Coast Dart (*Exuoia cursoria*) taken by Robin Clatworthy in 1985, but only confirmed by Phil Sterling at the end of 2012 following dissection of the genitalia. This is a species thought not to occur in Somerset; it is easily confused with forms of the Sand Dart (*Agrotis ripae*) and Archer's Dart. Could it still be a Somerset species? Investigations are planned for 2013.

#### Resident species – micro moths

Possibly the micro-moth highlight of the year was the publication of Phil Sterling and Richard Lewington's A Field Guide to the Micro Moths

of Great Britain and Ireland which has made identification of many of these often beautiful little species rather easier. It is published by British Wildlife Publishing (ISBN 978-0-9564902-1-6), and is an excellent book.

We currently have no micro moth recorder but Nigel Cottle recorded *Chrysoesthia sexguttella* from his dining room window. This is reported as local in Somerset whilst Robert Homan identified a new Somerset species when he found the Holm Oak leaf-mining *Ectoedemia heringella* at Victoria Park in Bath on 16 May. John Bebbington had a colony of Tree Bumblebee (*Bombus hypnorum*) in a garden bird box and a mass of larval cocoons found during the winter cleanout has so far produced 31 Bee Moths (*Aphomia sociella*) and four White-shouldered House Moth (*Endrosis sarcitrella*).

#### Migrants

Despite the weather, migrants had a reasonable year in 2012. Silver Y was recorded in better numbers than at any time since the migrant spectacle in 2006; Paul Bowyer at Brean Down recorded 30 on 2 August and one even turned up in Langport on 18 November. Dark Sword-grass (*Agrotis ipsilon*) was seen quite regularly, but sadly no Rannoch Loopers (*Itame brunneata*) were recorded in 2012; the hope that the latter species may be establishing itself in the county following the massive influx in 2011 has faded.

In early July there were a number of Striped Hawk-moths (*Hyles livornica*), with Roscoe and Tara Wright at Wimbleball, Colonel Peter Smith at Wells and John Bebbington at Langport each recording one. John also had a Convolvulus Hawk-moth (*Agrius convolvuli*) (Fig. 1) on 21 August, and Tara and Roscoe trapped a second specimen on 3 September. The only summer record of a Hummingbird Hawk-moth in Somerset came from Doug Miller in Westonzoyland on 30 June.

The Four-spotted Footman (*Lithosia quadra*) was recorded by Sue Davies on 16 August and by Jane Durham on 3 September. William Langdon recorded both Vestal (*Rhodometra saccharia*) and European Corn Borer (*Ostrinia nubilalis*) in mid-August whilst Ian Mathieson recorded Somerset's third Dewick's Plusia (*Macdunnoughia confusa*) at Norton-sub-Hamdon on 21 August. Ian had also recorded a Scarce Bordered Straw (*Helicoverpa*



Fig. 1 *Convulvulus Hawk-moth*  
(*Agrius convolvuli*)



Fig. 2 *The Tortricid moth Cydia amplana*

*armigera*) on 25 June which, until the beginning of September, was the only 2012 British record. October saw more migrant activity on the south coast and this led to a Delicate (*Mythimna vitellina*) at Norton-sub-Hamdon on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and another at Thurlbear on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

In the middle of August there was an unprecedented influx of a Tortricid, *Cydia amplana* (Fig. 2), on the Dorset coast. Several made their way north and were recorded by, amongst others, John Bebbington, Peter Tennant, David Agassiz, Andrew Slade and Paul Gay. Before this year there had only been four previous Somerset records. Apparently this species has now been found breeding in Hampshire. The larvae live in acorns.

#### The new Atlas

One of the early highlights of the year was the emergence in February of the long-awaited Somerset Moth Group's *Macro moth distribution atlas*, priced at £18 (£15 to members). At the time of writing (April 2013) there are still a few copies left, so if you haven't yet purchased yours then I strongly urge you to do so as soon as possible. The Group arranges regular moth-trapping meetings throughout the spring and summer. Details can be found on the Group's website (<http://www.somersetmothgroup.org.uk>). New members are always welcome.

JOHN BEBBINGTON  
Somerset Moth Group

#### SOMERSET BIRDS 2010 AND 2011

##### 2010

A juvenile Little Bittern seen on 23 July at Loxton's Marsh, part of the RSPB Ham Wall Reserve, provided welcome confirmation of this first breeding record for Somerset, although birds had been present since May. In contrast, breeding Cattle Egrets seemed to have fizzled out, although a pair was present at one of the known sites from two years earlier. Cold winters appear to have checked the progress of this cosmopolitan species, but we probably haven't seen the last of this resourceful heron, and further colonisation

attempts are likely. The number of breeding Great Bitterns continues to increase, tribute to the extensive management work undertaken, particularly at Ham Wall and Shapwick reserves, to encourage this still vulnerable species. In addition, at Ham Wall there were four pairs of breeding Garganey, and a number of passage and presumed non-breeding birds were also noted.

Sightings of Great White Egret have become more frequent in recent years, and individuals were widely reported, particularly from sites in the Avalon Marshes. There was only one Purple Heron record, that of a bird at Ham Wall on 27

April. Though still rare, White Storks are now almost annual, and there were two certain records in 2010. Two Spoonbills were seen at Greylake in March, with a further two at Dunster on a rising tide in June. The two Glossy Ibis seen in 2009 remained in the county until at least 15 April.

The Common Crane reintroduction project is well underway, and the 21 released juveniles proved popular with visitors to Aller Moor. At least one other individual was thought to be genuinely wild.

Five pairs of Little Ringed Plover bred or attempted to breed at Torr Reservoir, but unfortunately they suffered high levels of predation and only two chicks were known to have fledged.

Amongst the more notable records of breeding raptors, Red Kites built a nest and laid eggs at a site in the Quantocks, but then deserted; this species was reported from several sites across the county, however, and must surely breed successfully soon. Two pairs of Marsh Harriers bred on the Avalon Marshes, while numbers of Hobbies in the county, both summering and breeding, continue to increase. Sadly, Exmoor seems to have seen the last of the Merlin as a breeding species. Sightings of other scarce raptors included three Honey Buzzards and nine Ospreys. There were few Goshawk sightings, but this species is certainly under-recorded.

Dartford Warblers were again checked by severe winter weather, but the number of male Firecrests holding territory in east Somerset reached a record 27.

Rarities were few. Of those considered by British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC), perhaps a Black Stork seen on 27 April at Robber's Bridge, the fourth County Record, was the most exciting. A Black Brant, a subspecies of Brent Goose, also in April, was the first Somerset record. A Spotted Sandpiper in summer plumage spent a day at Dunster Hawn in July, and Loxton's Marsh hosted a singing Savi's Warbler for a week in late June.

White-fronted Goose is now an irregular visitor, so a flock of 32 at Shapwick in December was noteworthy. A neck collar on one of these was traced to a ringing scheme at Nijkerk in the Netherlands. Three Pink-footed Geese were also recorded. Two single Green-winged Teal, now recognised as a separate species, were seen in January and March. Other scarce wildfowl included singles of Ferruginous and Long-tailed

Duck, Smew and Velvet Scoter, with the last of these a long-staying bird at Bridgwater Bay during the early months of the year. Ruddy Ducks appear to have been all but eliminated in Somerset by the controversial cull, and there were no breeding records.

Grey Partridge continues to decline, and was recorded at six sites only. It was also a particularly poor year for Quail.

Both Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes were noted at Cheddar Reservoir during both winter periods, with five of the latter in February.

A juvenile Spotted Crake spent three weeks in October at Greylake RSPB Reserve, and may well have been raised locally.

Three Dotterel were seen in a single flock at Tealham on 25 April. This was unusual, but a colour-ringed juvenile Stone Curlew seen at Steart for two days in August was only the eleventh Somerset record. A Pectoral Sandpiper, a now virtually annual wader, frequented the drained lagoon at Meare Heath in late September/early October. Four Grey Phalaropes were seen on the coast in autumn. Avocets now regularly haunt the Parrett estuary in autumn and winter, and numbers peaked at a record 223 in November.

Amongst 'seabirds', it was a poor year for skua passage, with low numbers of both Pomarine and Arctic, although an immature Long-tailed Skua was seen off Hurlstone Point in July. The only Sabine's Gull of the year also passed Hurlstone on 22 August. There were no records of Black Terns during spring passage, and very few in autumn. Two Little Auks were seen off Burnham in November, this tiny seabird is rare and generally seen after gales. Scarcer still in Somerset is the Puffin, yet there were four sightings in May off Hurlstone Point. A Balearic Shearwater flying west at Hurlstone Point on 18 August became the eighteenth Somerset record. Rarely are they seen beyond north Devon.

A Bee-eater flew over Bruton on 21 June, and there was a single Hoopoe, at Westonzoyland, in March. It was a particularly good year for Wrynecks (Fig. 1), with a record number in spring and a total of 12 sightings in autumn, several of these at Bridgwater Bay. A Golden Oriole sang for a week, at Timberscombe, in June, while three species of shrike were recorded during the year: a juvenile Red-backed Shrike in late September; six Great Grey Shrikes, including a long-staying individual at Shapwick Heath; and, for the fifth

consecutive year, a Woodchat Shrike, this time a first-summer female at Minehead.

A Woodlark flew over Lilstock in mid-October, a typical autumn record but the only one in 2010. Yellow-browed Warblers are now recorded virtually every year, and there was a good showing with six in autumn, mostly on the coast. An Aquatic Warbler was trapped at Steart on 4 September, raising the county total to 84.



Fig. 1 Wryneck (Photo: Brian Gibbs)

Late November saw the beginnings of a Waxwing influx, with flocks of around 40 birds at Yeovilton and Creech St Michael. Several other smaller flocks were seen in subsequent weeks.

At least seven Water Pipits wintered at Huntspill Seawall from January to March, with smaller numbers in the second winter period.

Bramblings are always an erratic winter visitor, and this year there were few. In contrast, Somerset had a modest share of the large Lapland Bunting invasion with several coastal sightings (see *British Birds* 105, 654-673). Snow Buntings too were seen in small numbers in autumn. There were seven records of Hawfinch, a better than average showing, and a Twite at Brean Down on 16 October was the first since 2006. This species was once a regular visitor in winter to the Somerset coast, but is now something of a rarity.

## 2011

Pallid Harrier is extending its range westwards, and sightings in Britain are certainly on the

increase. Even so, a first-summer male on Black Down from 28 September to 16 October was hardly expected. Its long stay, and its faithfulness to one site, enabled many observers to enjoy good views of this elegant raptor. This is the first Somerset record in what was evidently an 'influx' year for this species in Britain.

Other BBRC rarities in Somerset in 2011 were a Black Stork (for the second year running), the returning Little Bitterns, a male Lesser Scaup, a Squacco Heron, two Glossy Ibis, two long-staying Long-billed Dowitchers, two Lesser Yellowlegs, a Bonaparte's Gull, a Gull-billed Tern and a Great Reed Warbler. In addition, a Richardson's Canada Goose at Torr Reservoir was considered by many to be a genuinely wild bird.

Very few records of breeding wildfowl were received for 2011, but this may be due to lack of effective coverage rather than a lack of birds. Sadly, the Little Bitterns were judged to have failed in a second breeding attempt, but 19 Great Bittern nests were located as this species continues to flourish.

Of the raptors, Marsh Harriers once again bred on the Avalon Marshes, and Goshawks were confirmed as breeding at a second Somerset site. Fourteen Ospreys passed through, nine in spring and five in autumn, and a second-year female Red-footed Falcon, the first since 2008, was photographed at Meare Heath on 19 May.

Two Spotted Crakes, both singing birds, were located in suitable breeding habitat to the south of the Poldens; and measures were taken at Torr Reservoir to protect Little Ringed Plover nests from predation, where two pairs bred. It was a much better year for Quail than 2010, with at least 21 seen or heard from a wide scattering of sites.

It was also a good year for rare geese: a Taiga Bean Goose was in fields at Brean on 10 December, a flock of 14 Pink-footed Geese was present at Wall Common from 31 January to 6 February, and the 32 White-fronts from 2010 were still in the Meare area until 4 January. Of other wildfowl, there were three records of Green-winged Teal from Greylake, West Sedgemoor and Meare Heath. The first Garganey appeared at Catcott Lows on 21 March but, despite pairs being seen in eminently suitable habitat, there was no confirmed breeding this year. Three Ring-necked Ducks were present on various waters, and a drake Ferruginous Duck was at Cheddar Reservoir on 3



November. A single Eider and up to four Velvet Scoters were seen off the coast.

Rare herons included three Purple Herons, one of these on Cary Moor, a Night Heron at Shapwick Heath in May, and up to three Cattle Egrets. Great White Egrets were seen in every month, with the majority of sightings from the Avalon Marshes.

For the second year running, Avocet numbers in the Parrett estuary exceeded 200 in November. Scarce waders included two Little Stints, and three Pectoral Sandpipers, two at sites in the Avalon Marshes and one at Huntspill.



Fig. 2 Grey Phalarope (Photo: Brian Hill)

September gales drove at least 11 Grey Phalaropes (Fig. 2) into the Parrett estuary and further inland. One at Huntspill was taken by a Peregrine. Amongst other more notable 'seabirds' to be recorded in 2011, at least ten Sabine's Gulls were seen at sites from Brean to Hurlstone Point and, unusually, a moulting adult spent five days at Shapwick Heath in November. Spring skua passage was much improved on 2010, with 17 Pomarine Skuas in May, and at least two Long-tailed Skuas – another species which is now recorded most years. Mediterranean and Yellow-legged Gulls, both uncommon, continue to increase, and in an excellent year at Torr Reservoir there was a fourth county record of Caspian Gull, plus single records of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. An exhausted Sooty Shearwater was seen off Burnham on 27 August and early September gales forced good numbers of Leach's Petrels into the Parrett estuary. These were joined by the odd European Storm Petrel.

For the first year ever, there were no records

of Turtle Dove, which with Willow Tit now appears lost to Somerset. Other species in steady decline include Marsh Tit and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, while Dartford Warblers maintain a precarious toehold in the county following a run of recent harsh winter weather (notably in December 2010). Numbers of breeding Stonechats also seem to be down on previous years. Long-eared Owls, on the other hand, were again found to be breeding at Bridgwater Bay, and may be less scarce than generally supposed.

A scattering of 'summer rarities' included an Alpine Swift at Bruton on 20 August and a single Bee-eater at Littleton on 9 May. A total of five Hoopoes were also recorded, mostly in private gardens; more must surely go unnoticed. This is probably also the case with Wryneck, of which there were three records in 2011. A female Golden Oriole was recorded on King's Sedge Moor on 21 May, and was the nineteenth record for the county.

A Woodlark flying over Black Down on 9 September would probably have done so unnoticed had the Pallid Harrier not attracted birdwatchers to the area. It was the only autumn record for the species. There were two Yellow-browed Warblers, including one inland at Ashcott Corner in November. A total of eight Great Grey Shrikes were recorded in both winter periods, while small flocks of Waxwings from the 2010 invasion remained into January, mostly at sites in the east. The Ring Ouzel, another species to have been lost as a breeding species in Somerset in recent years, is still recorded on spring and autumn passage in small numbers. The Tree Sparrow, on the other hand, continues to thrive in its relatively isolated breeding stronghold around Green Ore and Cary Moor, where supplementary feeding and nest boxes are provided. Of the pipits, a Tawny Pipit, the first since 2005, was seen briefly at the Brue Estuary on 10 October, the eighteenth county record, while three Water Pipit records were received, all from the coast.

A Common (Mealy) Redpoll was seen in a flock of Lesser Redpolls at Westhay Moor in early January, and two were at Brean Down on 9 April. Two Snow Buntings were recorded in the first winter period, and there were several sightings, mostly on the coast, from September onwards. In contrast, Lapland Bunting sightings were limited to a single at Black Down on 3 October, a return to

normality after the 2010 influx. For the third year running, a Corn Bunting fed in the forage crop at Cary Moor in both winter periods and, unusually, there was a summer record from near Marston Magna in July. It is some years since this ungainly bunting bred in Somerset.

The year closed with increasing hope that yet

another rare heron would settle down and breed for the first time in Somerset. I will leave you to guess both the bird and the outcome!

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