

SOMERSET BIRDS IN 2007 AND 2008

There is inevitably some delay between receiving the large number of observer records that make up the content of a county bird report and its production. The amount of work falling on editors is significant, and Somerset does well to produce its annual report, *Somerset Birds*, in the year following the receipt of data. Some counties cope far less well: many such annual reports have lapsed, while others are now some years behind schedule, negating the value of the content.

The most recent Somerset report, published in 2009, covers the year 2008. The style of *Somerset Birds* was extensively revised and improved in 2007, so it may be useful to summarise here the more interesting records for both these years.

2007

Two species, Cormorant and Common Tern, bred for the first time in 2007, and although neither is rare in a national context it was good to add them to the Somerset list. Cormorant numbers have steadily increased in the Avalon marshes, and four pairs nested. Common Terns, never that 'common' in the county, also bred here, raising three young. The much rarer Spotted Crake was heard calling at one site. The species has bred occasionally over the years, and may well have done so in 2009, although obtaining proof is always difficult with such a secretive bird. Elsewhere, four pairs of Little Ringed Plover bred in the east of the county, and 108 pairs

of Lapwing were recorded. Little Egrets continued to increase, and for the first time breeding pairs reached double figures; this species can now be seen fishing on the smallest of streams, even in busy urban areas. A Savi's Warbler, potentially a breeding species, sang at Ham Wall for several days in spring.

Quite the most extraordinary ornithological event of the year, and one well-covered in the national and local press, was the finding of an albatross grounded on a driveway next to the sea at Brean. Any albatross is very rare in UK waters, but this bird proved exceptionally so. Rescued and taken to *Secret World* animal sanctuary at East Huntspill, it was released the following day from the end of Brean Down before any local birdwatchers had heard of its discovery: staff at *Secret World* were apparently unaware of just how rare their charge was, but quite rightly put its welfare above any other consideration. It was subsequently identified from photographs and video clips as a Yellow-nosed Albatross, the first record of this species in the UK. Amazingly, another bird was seen on the same day off Norway, and another, or perhaps the same, the following day inland in Sweden. The Somerset bird evidently made its way inland after release, despite having been launched seaward, and was seen on waters in Derbyshire and Lincolnshire though, again, not by birdwatchers. One can only speculate on the weather conditions that caused this South Atlantic species to cross the equator and move so far north.

Interesting seabirds generally appear in Somerset after strong westerly gales, and 2007 was no exception. A Sooty Shearwater, regular enough off the south coast and in northern waters but rare in the Bristol channel, was driven close inshore at Burnham in July, while a Balearic Shearwater, for which there are only 16 Somerset records, was seen off Dunster in September. Both European and Leach's Storm-Petrels were also noted in small numbers, one of the latter having been picked up dead in Glastonbury following a storm. A Little Auk, another county rarity, passed Hurlstone Point in January. Five Grey Phalaropes were recorded in autumn, and a single juvenile Long-tailed Skua flew past Minehead, while two Sabine's Gulls, one an adult, were seen on the same date in August.

Birds of prey continued to do well. Peregrine numbers remained stable, or possibly increasing, with most suitable breeding sites occupied. This handsome falcon could even be seen in many town centres; in 2007 one used the tower of St James

church in Taunton as a vantage point, often taking a close interest in the local feral pigeon population, while others could regularly be seen flying over Yeovil.

Throughout the year small numbers of Marsh Harriers hunt the Avalon marshes and other sites on the Levels. Although they do breed sporadically in Somerset, it is puzzling why they do not do so more regularly, since there appears to be plenty of suitable habitat. They dislike disturbance, but this does not seem to be a problem locally. In 2007, at least two males and females were present in spring, but there was no evidence of nesting.

In 2007 there were 72 records of Red Kites at widely scattered locations. It is not clear whether these birds are wanderers from the expanding Welsh population or from the various successful introduction schemes elsewhere. In any event, although a recent breeding attempt in Somerset was unsuccessful, it seems only a matter of time before the Red Kite becomes a welcome addition to the list of breeding species.

Hobby, once reduced to around 80 pairs in England, is now a familiar bird at sites such as Shapwick and Meare Heaths. As many as 50 birds, mostly first-years, can now be seen soaring on good days in late spring, and 2007 was no exception. Secretive when nesting, the size of the breeding population is difficult to estimate. It is, however, encouraging to note an increasing number of sightings from across the county throughout the summer.

2007 was a good year for Ospreys, another species that may well breed in Somerset in the not too distant future. Sixteen were seen in total, many flying over, although at least one lingered for some days in the autumn at Shapwick.

Not all the news is good. Turtle Doves, once familiar, are now rarely encountered: there was just one record of this species in 2007. Cuckoos continued to decline, and Kestrels were among those that had poor breeding success. Spotted Flycatchers and Marsh Tits are birds with steadily reducing populations.

Yellow-nosed Albatross apart, it was not a classic year for rarities, although two other species were recorded for the first time in Somerset, a Lesser Scaup at Cheddar Reservoir, and a Caspian Gull at Torr Reservoir. National rarities also included Cattle Egret, of which more in 2008, and Glossy Ibis. Scarcer wildfowl species included a family of Whooper Swans, a Green-winged Teal, a long-

staying Ring-necked Duck at Hawkridge Reservoir and a Long-tailed Duck at Wimbleball.

A Common Crane flew over Ham Wall in April, and a White-Rumped Sandpiper was seen at Catcott Heath in November. 2007 was a good year for migrant Wrynecks, with six seen in various places in autumn.

Scarcer passerine migrants were represented by a single Woodlark, and three species of shrike, Red-backed, Woodchat and Great Grey, while a Yellow-browed Warbler found in Burnham late in 2006 lingered into early January.

Five Choughs, wandering from the Welsh breeding population just across the Bristol Channel, visited Brean Down in spring, raising expectations that they may settle down and breed. This did not happen, but given that their nearest Welsh breeding cliffs can be seen from Minehead on a clear day, we can remain optimistic.

2008

This was an exceptional year, both for the quality of the breeding birds and for the list of rare and scarce species recorded in the county. For many it will be remembered as the 'year of the herons'. Bitterns bred successfully for the first time since 1969. The signs were promising in 2007 when at least one booming male spent the summer at the RSPB Ham Wall reserve, and in 2008 two females raised young. Bitterns have quite exacting habitat requirements, and the RSPB has put in an enormous amount of work to meet these, so it is just reward returned. (It is also worth noting that another potential breeder, a rare male Little Bittern, spent much of the summer of 2009 at Ham Wall.)

In early 2008 there was an unprecedented influx of Cattle Egrets into the UK, with over 20 in Cornwall alone. Long predicted as a potential coloniser, Cattle Egrets have expanded their world range during the last few decades and have even invaded the Americas. It is the familiar bird foraging behind herds of Wildebeest on the Serengeti. Despite their aggressive expansion, few expected the first British breeding record to come from Somerset, so it was a pleasant surprise to discover two pairs raising single chicks at different sites in the spring of 2008. Cattle Egret, along with its close relative Little Egret, is a welcome addition to the county avifauna, though it remains to be seen how both these species will cope with a run of harsh winters.

It was indeed a remarkable year for rare herons, with a Squacco Heron, a Purple Heron and perhaps as many as three Great White Egrets wandering the Somerset Levels. Closely related Spoonbills and Glossy Ibis were also present at various times.

Long-eared Owls bred at two sites, Common Terns nested for the second year running and Common Snipe had a good breeding season. On the negative side, Dartford Warblers evidently suffered in the severe late winter weather, and Bearded Tits, for many years regular breeders at Berrow, failed to breed in 2008. Ring Ouzels may now be extinct as a breeding species on Exmoor, and this mirrors their decline throughout the UK.

Major rarities included another Lesser Scaup, Black-winged Stilt, Baird's Sandpiper and a Dark-eyed Junco, the latter visiting a bird table in East Coker. Remarkably, this is the second record of this species in Somerset, and Dark-eyed Junco remains the only North American passerine so far recorded in the county.

It was a good year for rare gulls, with single records of Bonaparte's Gull and Franklin's Gull, both from North America. There were further records of Caspian Gulls and Iceland Gulls, the latter spending some weeks on the Minehead seafront, and a Whiskered Tern visited Berrow in early May, the day after a Roseate Tern joined other terns by the Huntspill sea-wall. Mediterranean Gulls, while still scarce, continue to increase.

A Black Kite, another species increasingly seen in the UK, drifted over Taunton in May, while a single Red-footed Falcon joined Hobbies hawking insects over Meare Heath.

Among the more exotic visitors were nine Bee-Eaters, and four Hoopoes. For the second successive year, autumn Wrynecks appeared in good numbers. It was another excellent year for shrikes, with perhaps as many as nine Great Grey Shrikes roaming the county, although inevitably there was much overlap in sightings. A juvenile Red-backed Shrike was found on Mark Moor in September, making it the fourth year running for this former breeding species. A Woodchat Shrike on North Hill, Minehead in June proved to be of the distinctive race *badius*. The Woodchat Shrike is a scarce, though almost annual, visitor to Somerset, but this race from the Balearic Islands has only been recorded seven times in Britain. Unfortunately it quickly moved on, and was sometimes uncooperative during its brief stay.

Two Rose-coloured Starlings were found in June, one in a Porlock garden and the other in Wellington.

A small influx of Hawfinches in late autumn resulted in several sightings, mostly in the east, and a Serin at Steart in April was just the tenth county record.

A Barred Warbler on Brean Down in September became the fifth record for Somerset, and four Yellow-browed Warblers were found in the autumn, including two inland. This delightful leaf warbler seems to have increased in recent years, and is certainly seen in Somerset more often.

Snow Buntings, always scarce, are usually seen on the coast, so an inland record at North Hill, Chewton Mendip in January was noteworthy. An individual of the closely-related Lapland Bunting was seen at Huntspill on two days in late October.

In general, little interest is taken in exotica and the escaped species which turn up from time to time. The exception is the small number of Great Bustards that now regularly winter in Somerset, usually in the company of Mute Swans. Most individuals are readily identifiable by wing-tags, and are birds originating from the introduced breeding population on Salisbury Plain. It may not be quite the same as

watching them on the open plains of Hungary and Russia, but they are impressive to see nonetheless.

The year ended with the discovery of a wintering Lesser Whitethroat, a bird that should be well south of the equator at this time of year, visiting a garden in Aller.

A brief summary like this can hardly do justice to the information contained in the annual reports for 2007 and 2008, copies of which are still available. To obtain these, and to get the very latest news of bird sightings and events in Somerset, readers can visit the Somerset Ornithological Society website at www.somersetbirds.net. The Society would also welcome new members, and a year's subscription, including a copy of *Somerset Birds*, costs just £10. Membership details, and much more besides, can be found on the Society's website. Non-members can purchase *Somerset Birds* for £7.

BRIAN HILL
Somerset Ornithological Society