



## Welcome

As snow and hail is blowing horizontally across the garden in a gale force wind it doesn't feel much like spring at the moment, but our birds know differently. More and more are singing, shags are sitting on nests along the sea cliffs and migrants are arriving, including the first very brave swallow!

As travel restrictions are starting to ease, more of us will be able to get back to visiting favourite places like Loch Spynie, which features in this edition of the newsletter, and Findhorn Bay where the first Common Sandpipers have already returned. Several other less obvious species of sandpipers are also sometimes seen in the Bay and Richard Sommers Cocks' article will help you to know what, with a bit of luck, you might see there this spring. For anyone planning a birding trip further afield when international travel is possible, Hilary Rolton's article explores the amazing variety of birds that Japan has to offer.

Bird song is one of the pleasures of spring. Martin Cook's article explains why birds sing and encourages us all to learn to identify bird songs – something which makes any birding trip at this time of year more rewarding.

More and more of us are feeding birds in our gardens all year round and wild bird food sales in the UK are worth several hundred million pounds annually. Al Young's article explains that the food we provide is probably helping far more birds than we realise. This also means that our bird feeders and baths can pass diseases to large numbers of birds so it is important that we all give our feeders and baths a spring clean.

I look forward to seeing lots of you at our next virtual meeting on the 13th of May when hopefully spring and many more migrants will have returned.

David Law

Chair

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## **RSPB Loch Spynie in 2021**

**Lorna Dow**

### **RSPB Warden, NE Scotland Coastal Reserves**

As for everyone, Covid-19 has influenced our work over 2020 and will continue to do so into 2021. Loch Spynie is managed as part of a group of reserves in the north east of Scotland, with the staff being based out of the office near Fraserburgh at Loch of Strathbeg and our reserves are spread throughout Aberdeenshire and into Moray. The lockdowns and various tier restrictions have posed logistical challenges for our small team.

For Loch Spynie this meant the work in 2020 and so far into 2021 had to be scaled back and we couldn't achieve as much as we had planned on site. Last year all fieldwork within RSPB was cancelled but I'm hoping that won't be the case this year and am looking forward to being out and about on the reserve more.

Normally we have two long term volunteer interns and other regular volunteers, who provide invaluable help in helping us manage the reserves. Due to Covid and the working practices the RSPB has put in place to keep everyone safe, we have had to pause our residential volunteering scheme and some of our local volunteering while the restrictions are tighter. We are hoping to get volunteering back up and running again as soon as it safe to do so. The safety of staff, volunteers, and visitors is RSPB's highest concern.

Although the hide had to be closed due to Covid and I can't give a definite date on when it may reopen, we tried to provide safe alternative viewing of the



*Perch Bench*

loch. A couple of perch benches at the loch edge were added to the north of the hide and the bird feeders were moved from beside the hide to allow access to the loch shore without disturbance of the feeders. The decisions around hide closures are regularly under review but under the current restrictions most RSPB hides are closed.

Covid will continue to impact what we can achieve this year but I'm hopeful that as the year progresses, we can make progress in our goals at Loch Spynie.

Long term we have plans to continue working on improving various habitats across the reserve including the wet fen meadow area to the north of the loch, the wet grassland on the west side of the reserve and improving the condition of some of the reedbed areas.



Softrak

Last autumn in the wet grassland area to the west, we were able to get a contractor out on site with a Softrak machine. This is a tracked mower with low ground pressure that can access wetter areas without churning up or compacting the ground. Currently this area is dominated by soft rush and the cattle that have seasonal access to the area are having little impact on it. By cutting back the vegetation, the cattle will be able to access these areas better and we are hoping the sward will be improved and become more diverse. We hope to get the Softrak back to continue this work. In this area we are also investigating waterflow and whether more control might be possible, to allow seasonal variation and again encourage more

diversity.

This winter the work on the wet fen meadow north of the loch paused but we hope, Covid allowing, to continue to improve the condition with more work parties to compliment some light grazing next autumn and winter. This work is focusing on knocking back the encroaching willow, birch and reeds around the fen meadow. The meadow is one of the SSSI designated features of the reserve and has currently been classified to be in unfavourable condition so we want to continue to make progress with it.



Some of the nest boxes have been replaced, as many had deteriorated, and I hope to continue to add to them through the woodland. A blue tit was already inspecting some of them as they were being put out during February! This winter has been extremely wet and the paths need a bit of attention in the muddier areas. In other practical matters, we are



looking into improvements of the car park and repairs to the hide.

If you would like to contact Lorna with anything about the reserve or have any feedback please contact her at [Lorna.Dow@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Lorna.Dow@rspb.org.uk)





*Common Sandpiper*

## Sandpipers on Findhorn Bay

### Richard Somers Cocks

Over recent years we have seen a good selection of sandpiper species on Findhorn Bay. Some we see pretty regularly, like **Common Sandpiper**, while others are much scarcer and are only occasional visitors. The more frequent sightings are European species, but there have also been a number of North American migrants that have appeared around the bay.

The Common Sandpiper is present every year arriving in mid-April and breeds along the lower reaches of the Findhorn, as well as other rivers and water features in Moray. With their distinctive bobbing action, they can be readily identified on the shingle banks of the River Findhorn as it flows into the bay. The Mosset Burn is another good location to see them where they often gather in summer before their departure in early September to over-winter in Africa.



*Green Sandpiper*

**Green Sandpipers** are a scarce migrant often seen in late summer but have also been recorded at other times of the year. They tend to prefer freshwater pools and streams, and as a result most of the sightings at Findhorn have been on the small ponds near Netherton and occasionally on the Mosset Burn. They can be notoriously difficult to see and photograph as they tend to fly off very readily.

**Wood Sandpipers** breed on northern European bogs and marshes and are also scarce migrants to Moray usually seen in spring and autumn passage.

The last sighting at Findhorn Bay was a very late bird that was feeding on the saltmarsh near the bird hide at the end of November 2018.



*Wood Sandpiper*



*Curlew Sandpiper*

**Curlew Sandpipers** are considered a scarce migrant, but every year we get a small number on the bay as they are migrating south in late summer and autumn. By this stage they are often in winter plumage. Some years we also see one or two mixed in with the flock of Dunlin and Ringed Plover in May and these can be in summer plumage with their brick red fronts making them stand out from the slightly smaller Dunlin.

One or two sightings of North American species seem to occur most years. The **Pectoral Sandpiper** is one of the commonest vagrants to Britain and one was picked up on the pools at Netherton

on 2 June 2013 and another was seen on the bay on 26 September 2018. Even so, this latter sighting was still only the 16th record for Moray and Nairn (M&N). Slightly larger than a Dunlin with longer yellowish legs and characterised with a distinctly demarcated pattern on its front.

About a week after the Pectoral sighting in 2013 I was on the bay looking through some Dunlin when I came across a small wader which was largely pale underneath with black streaks on its flanks and wing-tips longer than its tail. This was another American species - a **White-rumped Sandpiper**. It stayed around over the



*Pectoral Sandpiper*



*White-rumped Sandpiper*

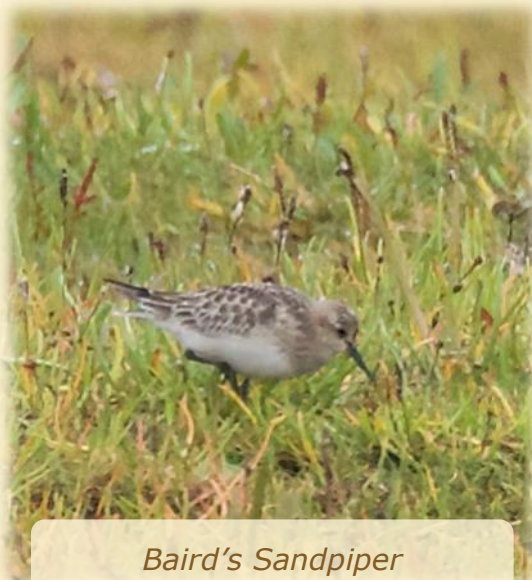
period 10-14 June which gave plenty of birders the opportunity to see it. This was only the 2nd record for M&N.

On 29 May 2015 a **Broad-billed Sandpiper** was seen on the bay. Unfortunately, it was only around for a day before departing and I was at Cape Wrath so missed it! It was the 4th record for M&N.



*Spotted Sandpiper*

Exactly a year later in 2016 I had more luck at the Mosset Burn. I was looking downstream when something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye in the burn just below where I was standing. At a glance it had many similarities to our Common Sandpiper - size, colouration and distinctive bobbing action - but this bird was heavily spotted underneath. This was another North American species, a **Spotted Sandpiper** in breeding plumage. It only stayed around a short while on 29 May, but long enough for a few others to see it. This was the 2nd record for M&N.



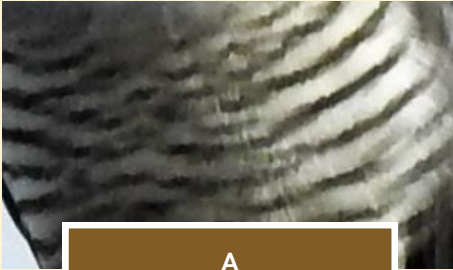
*Baird's Sandpiper*

The most recent rare vagrant from America to the bay was **Baird's Sandpiper** in autumn 2018. A juvenile was seen on 17 September, but despite a thorough search over the next fortnight it wasn't seen again. However on 3 October another Baird's Sandpiper was seen, and given the time gap between sightings it was considered that this must have been a different bird which was somewhat remarkable. The second sighting remained on the bay until 11 October and allowed many birders to see it, including a group of visitors in the bird hide one day when it paraded around in front of the hide! These were only the 4th and 5th sightings for M&N.

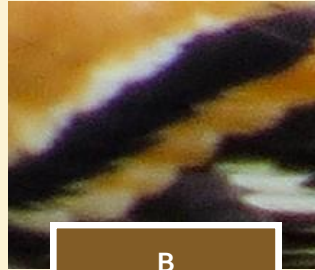
In the coming weeks up to the beginning of June we often get an influx of Dunlin and Ringed Plover stopping off on the bay as they migrate north. It's well worth having a good look through these as many of the sightings mentioned above were picked up in this mixed flock. May to June always seems to be a good period for spotting American waders, so keep those eyes peeled!



## Can you identify the bird?



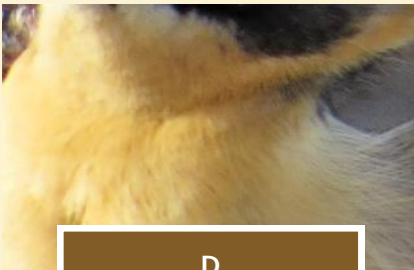
A



B



C



D



E



F

Answers at foot of page 20.

### Available to Download

The SOC's free mobile app; *Where to Watch Birds in Scotland* is available for Android and Apple devices. The award winning app has over 560 sites and new sites will continue to be added and existing ones updated as far as possible.



Join the SOC Scotland's Bird Club



## The Joy of Bird Song

### Martin Cook

With the chilly weather we've been having recently it's hard to accept that spring really is 'just around the corner'. But for birds, spring is as much to do with day length as it is to do with temperature, and song is breaking out all over the countryside.

One of the earliest birds to begin singing is the Song Thrush. Its song is a little similar to a Blackbird's song, but it regularly repeats the same group of notes several times, which a Blackbird never does. A singing Song Thrush is often easy to locate, perched prominently on the branch of a tree while it broadcasts its song forcefully over the neighbourhood. By doing so it is confidently telling other male thrushes in the area that this territory is taken - and they should try their luck elsewhere.



*Sedge Warbler*

Many species, Great Tit for example, have a variety of song types and it has been found that male Great Tits with a greater repertoire can defend a territory more effectively. Perhaps singing in this way gives the impression that more males are present in the area, and that interference here would be a bad idea.

A second reason to sing is to attract a mate and here, despite the risks of attracting the attention of a predator, it is best to demonstrate your skills as a songster proudly than to twitter quietly in the depths of a bush. Such a bird may be safer, but its genes are unlikely to make it into another generation. In this context also, it seems that a more varied song brings advantage. Sedge Warblers with the most complex song routines have been found to attract a mate earlier than those with simpler songs.



Birds that inhabit open country, such as Skylark and Meadow Pipit, may have little chance of finding an elevated song perch within their territory, so they sing as they fly high into the air, often for long periods in the case of Skylarks.

Many birds sing more vigorously in the early morning than they do at other times of day. This is the so-called 'dawn chorus' and if you want to hear it then early April is a time when you don't need to rise from your bed too early. In May, our summer migrants have arrived and the variety of songsters is greater, but dawn is earlier and you may need to get up at 4am to hear the chorus at its best.

But why is there this concentration of song in the early morning, often before the day is fully light? One theory is that it may not be light enough to do much food foraging, and for insect-feeders their food may not become active until the day has warmed up. So this early morning period provides an opportunity to sing before feeding becomes the priority. Another theory is that it is a good time to let your neighbours know that you have survived the night, and they can save themselves the bother of trying to take over your territory.

For people who are new to bird watching, learning to match the variety of songs to singers may seem a daunting prospect. But this is a good time of year to start - the number of singers is limited, and many trees and hedges are still bare of foliage. Once you hear an unfamiliar song, try to creep up on the singer and identify it. And there are several inexpensive Apple and Android apps which include bird songs to help you.



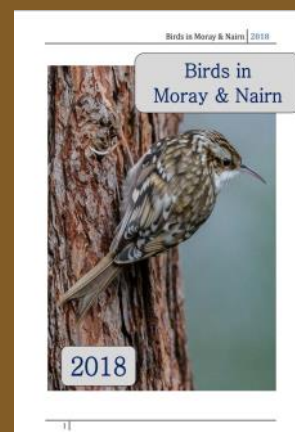
### [Birdsinmorayandnairn.org](http://Birdsinmorayandnairn.org)

is a one-stop-shop for everything to do with birds and birding in the region. View latest sightings, forthcoming survey work, bird club news and more.

***BIRDS IN MORAY & NAIRN 2018*** is now published and can be found under 'Bird Reports' – '2011 onwards', in:

[birdsinmorayandnairn.org/](http://birdsinmorayandnairn.org/)

The report is only available on that website, from which it may be printed if desired.





## How Many Birds Visit Our Gardens?

**Alastair Young**

Like many people I put out food for the birds in my garden: some peanuts, some mixed seed and a few fat balls. While I do this in the hope of attracting birds so that I can see them close up, it is also to help my local birds get through the hard winter months when life is a bit harder for them. Many species come in different numbers and we recognise those that we see all the time and breed in our gardens like Robins and Great Tits, and those which are often only passing through like Siskins and Redwings. When it comes to our local birds, however, we often only see a few with perhaps five or six at any one time. We also think of these as 'our' birds and I hear people say things like 'my family of Blue Tits are back', and 'I get four Robins every day', but are they correct? How many birds are we actually helping when we put out food?

As a licenced ringer I am lucky in that I can catch them, and with lockdown I have done a little bit more in the garden than normal. During the period from the 20<sup>th</sup> of December to the 22 January this winter, I ringed in the garden on eight days for 2-3 hrs each day. This gave me a bit more insight into how many birds actually visited. To show what I found I have picked three species, Coal, Blue and Long-tailed Tit, all relatively regular visitors that breed locally. So, what did I find?

### ***Long -tailed Tit***

I regularly get a flock of about 10 birds but over the period I actually caught 21 different individuals, 17 being un-ringed and four already ringed. That's not such a surprise as I always expected a few more than I could count at any one time. By the end, most birds were ringed, so I think I had caught the majority coming in. Of the birds ringed the oldest was first caught on the 22/1/2017 and recaptured on the 22/1/2021, four years later. It had also been caught four other times in between so it was one of my local birds. Given that these birds don't live very long on average 21 could easily represent the majority of adults and young of the 5-7 pairs I have in my local woods within 2 km of my house.



### ***Coal Tit***

This a regular bird and I often get 6 to 8 at any one time. Over the month I caught 72 different birds of which 45 were new and 27 previously ringed. Of those birds, 46 were adults and 26 were juveniles. That's quite a low proportion of juveniles and gives an indication of how many don't make it through the first autumn, or that they had a poor breeding season. So where were they coming from? The oldest bird was a young bird ringed on the 09/03/2014 and caught on the 28/12/2020 making it at least 6 ½ years old. It had also been caught in 2015, 2017 and 2018. There were another 4 birds more than 3 years old which had been caught several times so it's clear that many of these birds are local. The majority of birds by the end were ringed suggesting that the 72 caught was most of the visitors. Given that the local woods are mainly coniferous and there are probably c20-25prs within 2 km of my house, it is likely that this could be mainly birds from the local area. The furthest bird I have caught that was ringed in my garden was 2.5 km away in Teindland forest.



### ***Blue Tit***

A regular visitor with 5-6 birds not being unusual. It does not appear as frequent as Coal Tit, so it was interesting to see that I caught 105 individual birds of which 98 were new birds and only seven birds previously ringed. This consisted of 41 adults and 66 juveniles, quite different from the Coal Tit and it would appear they had a better breeding season. With only a small number previously ringed it was not a surprise that all had been ringed in the garden. The oldest bird having been ringed as a juvenile on the 19/09/2012 so making it at least 8½ years old. The others being ringed between 2017 and 2020. So, I do get my local birds coming back regularly. The number of breeding Blue Tits locally is not that great because of the coniferous woods and there are only c15-20 pairs within 2km of my house so it's also clear that birds were moving more than

that to get to my garden, especially as there were still several unringed birds at the feeders. Looking back at my records, I also have a previously ringed bird which came from Buckie, 13 km away, and a bird found dead in Fochabers, 8 km away, still relatively local but showing that they do move a bit more than the other species.

### Summary

Total number of birds caught				
	Blue Tit	Coal Tit	L-t Tit	Total
<b>New birds</b>	98	45	17	143
<b>Retraps</b>	7	27	4	35
<b>Total</b>	105	72	21	178

Overall, for the three species, I caught 178 individual birds, with still some unringed birds around. That clearly shows that my feeding in the back garden helps not just the birds breeding in my boxes and the woods adjacent to my garden, but also helps the wider community, probably within a few kilometres of my house, and for the Blue Tit a bit further still. So, when you see one of these birds in your garden, you now know that for resident species like this your local area extends over several kilometres and includes far more birds than you may have thought.

## News

### *Forthcoming Events*

We intend to have another virtual talk on Thursday, May 13th when a few people will give talks on some local birding spots. We will provide you with more details on these talks later, together with details on how to attend. We also welcome any feedback on any of our previous talks.

### *Crested Tit Appeal*

As a result of the latest data available suggesting that there may be less than 2,000 breeding pairs of Crested Tits an appeal has gone out for good quality records of Crested Tits from the 2020 breeding season onwards. More details are available at <https://www.the-soc.org.uk/news/crested-tit-appeal-high-quality-records-needed>

### *Birdwatching for beginners*

If you would like to try and encourage your friends or family into birdwatching then a new Facebook group by the SOC may be of interest. It is called: *SOC Birdwatching for Beginners* and can be found at [www.facebook.com/groups/socbirdwatchingforbeginners](http://www.facebook.com/groups/socbirdwatchingforbeginners). It is aimed at birdwatchers who are just getting started or looking to improve their bird knowledge. SOC staff will monitor the page and be on hand to help with your ID or bird behaviour queries.

### *Spring Migrants*

You can keep track of when and where our spring migrants arrive by checking out the table on the SOC website at: [www.the-soc.org.uk/bird-recording/spring-migrants](http://www.the-soc.org.uk/bird-recording/spring-migrants)



*Steller's Sea Eagle*

## A Visit To Japan, February 2020

### Hilary Rolton

I was very fortunate to travel just prior to the Coronavirus global lockdown. I joined a party of 6 birdwatchers including a leader who had travelled to Japan for the last 20 years. It was a long journey involving delays in the flights from Inverness to Heathrow and Heathrow to Tokyo; but once airborne the flight was smooth. We met our Japanese interpreter Kiwa who was helpful, competent and spoke excellent English. We had time to rest in our hotel before tackling the first Japanese meal; here Kiwa was much needed, as the menus were not in English. However, her advice was always available, and the food was not only tasty but said a lot about Japanese culture. Apart from the birds and scenery I learnt much about Japan through Kiwa.

#### *A day in Tokyo combining birding and culture*

Apart from tackling the busy Underground, our time was spent in the comparative tranquillity of Yoyogi Park. We were in temperatures similar to home and walking amongst bare deciduous trees and unfamiliar evergreens. There was time to become familiar with some of the common birds like the very noisy, numerous **Japanese Crows**, the colourful **Dusky Thrush** foraging boldly on the ground, the very vocal **Brown-eared Bulbul**. **Tree Sparrow** and **White-cheeked Starling** were especially abundant. Plenty of **Oriental Turtle Doves** amongst the fallen leaves and the first of several sub-species of **White Wagtail** not seen at home. The very striking **Varied Tit** became a favourite. The winter sun was catching the plumage of the birds making identification easy, particularly



*Brown-eared Bulbul*

the more elusive **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker** and **Bull-headed Shrike**.

After lunch we made our way to Meiji Jingu, a Shinto shrine that is dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shoken. They were responsible for the industrialisation of Japan and adoption of Western ideas involving enormous changes in social and political structure. The shrine was restored after WW2 and is a place for calm reflection and still used for traditional ceremonies throughout the year. Shinto and Buddhism are popular religions in Japan. After walking round the traditionally styled buildings we moved to the Inner Garden for more birding. There were **Masked Bunting** feeding amongst the leaf litter and **Pale Thrush** (harder to find in the undergrowth) as well as **Japanese Green Woodpecker** in the tree canopy. We left the peaceful garden with water features and a tea house to return to the hotel.

### *Travel to Karuizawa in the Japanese Alps*



*Japanese Waxwing*

We left Tokyo on one of the fast and sleek-lined bullet trains bound for mountains to the NW of Tokyo. Here we stayed for 2 nights and explored the area in a comfortable hired van. After a picnic lunch, we had time to walk up a track beside a river and were delighted to see a flock of **Japanese Waxwing** feeding on mistletoe, their preferred food. We saw the first of many **Black-eared Kite** and **Eastern Buzzard**.

### *River and reservoir*

We woke next day to a dusting of snow, sun and a strong breeze. We continued to explore locally, hoping for the elusive **Copper Pheasant**. Instead we found small woodland birds including **Japanese Tit**, **Oriental Greenfinch**, **Red-flanked Bluetail** and **Pygmy Woodpecker**. Beside the river were **Brown Dipper**, and a **Wren** so dark and distinctive that I was surprised to find it was a subspecies (so far).

After lunch we headed for the Chikuma River and a reservoir, Saku Chosei-ike, full of ducks, a great many familiar to me except **Spot-billed Duck**. We had a walk beside the river and were rewarded with a sensational view of the **Green Pheasant** as the sun shone on its amazing colours of green, purple and pink. Dazzled as I was, I could admire a gorgeous **Daurian Redstart** flitting about looking for food as we headed back along the river. From the Mikage Bridge we saw **Japanese Wagtail** and a subspecies of white wagtail, **Black-backed Wagtail**. Finally, the target of the afternoon was a **Long-billed Plover** picking its way amongst stones and water. It resembled a Ringed Plover but it had a long black bill. A good time to return to the hotel for a welcome hot shower and food.



*Japanese Wagtail*

### *Travel from the main island Honshu to the southern island Kyushu*

We left the mountains behind dominated by the snow-covered cone of Mt Asami, an active volcano. We returned to Tokyo and took a flight to Miyazaki on SE of Kyushu, where we were greeted with sun and warmth. Another vehicle was hired and we drove north to Hyuga for a one-night stay, stopping off at Hitotsusegawa wetland nature reserve. There were many species of



*Black-faced Spoonbill*

duck but the highlight was a group of **Black-faced Spoonbill** standing in shallow water snoozing and preening.

### ***Travel west to Izumi***

It was a short drive to Hyuga harbour where we boarded a fishing boat and very quickly saw our target species the tiny and adorable **Japanese Murrelet** on calm waters, diving synchronously in pairs. They breed January-March on the rocky islands which our boat approached; a protected species because it is in serious decline. Overhead, two **Ospreys** chased one another.

Eurasia being such a large continent, we were seeing gulls, cormorants and herons of the eastern seaboard which are not present in Western Europe, such as **Vega** and **Black-tailed Gulls**, **Japanese Cormorant** and **Eastern Reef Egret**. After the short boat trip, we returned to the wetlands of the previous day. Here we enjoyed sightings of the familiar such as **Pintail**, **Pochard** and **Lapwing**, all in large numbers, and the unfamiliar such as **Meadow Bunting** and **Black-faced Spoonbill**. There were large numbers of Tree Sparrow. We then had an enjoyable drive across the forested spine of the island over to the west coast and to our hotel in Izumi.

### ***Cranes in the rain***

The next day was one of non-stop rain. We spent the morning at the Arasaki Crane Observation Centre. From the observation tower, we looked down on a large area of flooded fields where cranes overwinter and farmers do not plant rice crops until the cranes leave in March. There were about 14,000 **Hooded Cranes** calling ceaselessly; an amazing spectacle and in amongst them were a few tall, elegant **White-naped Crane**. It took much searching to find **Common Crane** (a stray from the overwintering grounds in China) and **Demoiselle Crane** (which mainly overwinter in India).

Later in a separate field were a family of **Sandhill Crane** (a North American and Siberian species). The rest of the day was difficult searching for small birds in reed beds and scrub in rain and poor light. We did however end the day on a good note by visiting a river near Satsuma Sendai for **Crested Kingfisher**.

### ***Travel to Saga City***

We drove north up the western side of the island following Route 447 through the forest. On arrival

at Saga, we spent time at Ariake Sea embankment and then an area of shallow sea, a RAMSAR site Higashi Yoka Higata, important for the rare **Saunders's Gull** which were seen along with the eastern races of **Eurasian Curlew** and **Dunlin**. There were delightful **White-eye** and **Penduline Tit** in nearby scrub areas. On the way back to the hotel we examined wires packed tightly with **Eastern Rook** and **Daurian Jackdaw**.

### *Fukuoka to Komatzu*

We spent time on Shikanoshima Island for some sea watching including divers such as **Pacific Divers** as well as **Pelagic Cormorant**. By this time, we were north of Saga near Fukuoka airport where we took a short flight to Komatzu back on the main island Honshu but this time on the west coast almost opposite Tokyo (which is on the eastern side of Honshu). It was unusually warm, with none of the expected snow (only on the distant mountains). We had time to visit Kamoike Sanctuary to enjoy the comforts of a very sophisticated Visitor Centre with central heating and large windows overlooking a sizeable pool. There were **Taiga Bean Geese**, **Bewick's Swan**, **Baikal Teal** to view amongst the wildfowl. We checked into our hotel and then a restaurant (Japanese hotels rarely offer meals except for breakfast). As we were close to the sea for the last few days, I was experiencing the local fish and seafood; really tasty and different from the North Atlantic fish I normally enjoy.

### *Shibayama Lakes*

The next day we headed for the Shibayama lakes; a mix of flooded fields and rice paddies. Our target species was **Grey-headed Lapwing**; rare and not easy to find. The first unusual sighting was a group of Japanese birders and with the help of Kiwa, our leader was able to ask about a local birder he had often met here. The birdman arrived in response to a call on Kiwa's mobile and took us to a field near their breeding site where we saw three, well camouflaged against brown soil; very attractive dainty birds.

At the main Shibayama Lake were **Falcated Duck**, named for the long sickle-shaped tertials hanging off its back. It is a bird of the eastern Palearctic, unlike the more widespread **Wigeon** and **Teal** which were also present.

Our next rarity was the **Oriental Stork** and for this Kiwa made contact by mobile with a local who regularly monitored a pair during the breeding season. We then drove to Hingoh village near Fukui city and after some searching found them feeding peacefully in the local village pond. We kept our distance and watched them for 10-15 minutes. We were told that they had been observed collecting nesting material.

After our usual picnic lunch, we moved onto more flooded fields and saw a group of **Siberian White-fronted Geese**; I normally see Greenland White-fronts. Amongst them were two **Lesser White-fronted Geese** proving rather a challenge to see amongst constantly moving birds. Good to meet Japanese showing some care for birds and their needs.

### *A return visit to Kamoike Bird Reserve*

We drove to the Hashitate fishing port and Kasa Point, followed by a return visit to Kamoike Bird Reserve and a revision of the birds we had seen. We then drove to Kaga station for a ride in an express train which took us across Honshu south to Nagoya where we were to board a ferry which



*Grey-headed Lapwing*



resembled a large cruise vessel. We were to spend 2 nights on the ship sailing north to Sendai and then Tomakomai on the north island of Hokkaido. Our comfortable cabins were on the sixth floor next to the restaurant and after a buffet style meal, I returned to my cabin, and was sent to sleep by the gentle rocking motion of the boat.

### *Cruising northwards*



*Short-tailed Albatross*

The ferry was sailing steadily north along the east coast of Honshu and our group assembled on the stern deck before breakfast and were treated to a feast of **Albatross**. All three expected were seen; **Laysan, Black-footed** and **Short-tailed** and it was so exciting to see albatross for the first time.

There were also three species of **shearwater; Streaked, Sooty** and **Short-tailed**. There was plenty of time to study gulls, such as **Vega, Slaty-backed** and huge numbers of **Kittiwake**. It was interesting to experience birds that roam the Pacific and compare them to the Atlantic species I am more familiar with. The flurry of activity suddenly went quiet and we went for an 8 am breakfast. Sea watching continued throughout the day. The ferry docked for three hours at Sendai in the late afternoon. During our sail we were always within sight of the coast and could see many power stations; both coal and nuclear, including the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant complex.

### *Hokkaido island*

There was more sea watching especially **Laysan Albatross** coming in close to the boat with the long wings banking and the wing tips almost touching the sea surface; breath-taking to watch such flying skills. We docked at Tomakomai late morning, took a taxi to Sopor airport for a short flight to Kushiro and drive to Nemuro on Eastern side of the island. We stopped at Akkeshi Lake to experience sea ice and **Steller's Sea Eagle** and it lived up to its legendary reputation. We were at latitude 43 degrees compared to 58 degrees at home; and yet it was so much colder, which shows what a difference the Gulf Stream makes to the UK climate.

We arrived in the dark after an overnight dumping of snow but all roads had been cleared.

### *Exploring the island*

We explored wide open spaces in contrast to the urbanisation of Honshu and even Kyushu. There were fields of deep fresh snow and areas of scrub and forest. Whenever we reached the coast it was blue sea and sky and we breathed clean air although very cold!! It was a great day for birds of prey; not only **Steller's Sea Eagle** (the world's largest eagle, by weight) but **White-tailed Eagle** (fourth largest) and **Rough-legged Buzzard**.

We explored the long sliver of land as far as Cape Nosappu and looked out to the Kurile islands, taken by the Russians after WW2. They looked stunning, covered in snow, with cliffs and a cone-shaped mountain, and had long been part of Japan. Looking at the map they are geographically one group of islands (Japanese); I will make no further comment.

We worked our way west along the south coast and stopped where there was a hide and small, feisty birds riding the swell. With patience it was possible to identify some interesting auks; **Ancient Murrelet, Long-billed Murrelet, Least Auklet, Common Guillemot** and **Spectacled Guillemot**; quite a feast! A group of **Brent Geese** flew low over the water. These were **Black-bellied**, complementing my sightings of subspecies seen at home (Light-bellied and Dark-bellied).





*Asian Rosy Finch*

After lunch we moved to forests and scrub and had exciting views of a large flock of **Asian Rosy Finch**, perched on telegraph wires, attracted to bird feeders of a house owner who jealously guarded his garden for his B&B guests. He had a reputation for wielding a shotgun at birders who ventured too close to his property; not today though.

We reached Cape Kiritappu and took a short walk to an attractive, small red lighthouse. We looked down on a small sheltered bay to find two Sea Otter lying on their backs eating food they had caught. Other mammals seen on Hokkaido were

the abundant Sika Deer and Red Fox with a thicker coat and large bushy tail.

Also at Kiritappu was a group of **Siberian Scoter** close enough (through bins) to see the white markings on the eye and wing, subtly different from the **Velvet Scoter** seen on the Moray Firth at home. Earlier in the day during a stopover at a harbour, **Black Scoter** had been seen; this has a much more restricted Pacific range than the Common Scoter of Northern Eurasia.

As the afternoon progressed, expectations rose as we were to visit a remote location (with permission) hoping to see the rare **Blakiston's Fish Owl** where it has been monitored for 30 years. Two pairs were close to nesting. We sat in our van with the door open and waited patiently trying to tolerate the cold. However, our patience was not rewarded. We returned to the hotel for a hot shower followed by a warm restaurant.

### ***Notsuke Hanto Nature Centre – the owl at last***

We headed north to Notsuke Hanto Nature Centre built on a very narrow piece of land with a hook shape at the end reminding me of Spurn Head except that the hook curved round to enclose an area of sea that was nearly a lagoon, sheltered and full of sea ice.

We looked north to some impressive Hokkaido mountains and more Russian islands. It was a spectacular place but birding was slow, with no new sea birds.

We returned to the owl location, straining in the dark to look at the perching posts that had been constructed for them. We learnt that a TV aerial of a farm house was what first attracted them and after intermittent losses of TV reception, the farmer and his wife realised that the cause was a very special bird!!

In the end the owl landed on a nearby pylon and we were safe to leave the vehicle quietly with the permission of our guide. We could admire its bulky size, subtle colouring and large yellow eyes looking down on us apparently indifferent to our presence. We were all ecstatic and forgot all about cold feet and hands! There are seven pairs in the area and thirty pairs in Eastern Hokkaido and some interest being shown locally let me hope that the birds were in good hands. This nocturnal predator is the largest living species of owl and found in Japan, Russia and China. Certainly, worth an hour of waiting and feet and hands warmed up in the hotel room.

### ***Our last day in Japan***

I had a last look out of the hotel window at the sea and sea ice. There were more views of sea and ice along the coast as we left Nemuro followed by fields of snow sparking in the sun as we headed towards Kushiro. We had final views of **Steller's Sea Eagle**, **White-tailed Eagle** and **Eastern Buzzard**. We stopped at the village of Tsurui for **Red-crowned Crane**; they are fed by the locals and they breed in nearby Kushiro Marsh. They were thought to be extinct in the early 20th century, have been protected since their rediscovery and numbers in the world are about 1800



*Blakiston's Fish Owl*

(Russia, Mongolia, China where they are migratory). We saw food being spread on the ground and heard their magical calling and elegant jumping in the air as they squabbled. There were at least 100 but only about 8 young. It was a great ending to the trip as we faced a long journey back to the UK, which for me took 3 days. We said goodbye to Kiwa who lives in Hokkaido and had been a great asset to the trip. It was good that she had been to places new to her; and birding might become a new hobby for her!



*Red-crowned Cranes*



## Next Newsletter



We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter. We would like to encourage our members to contribute to the newsletter and we would also welcome any suggestions for future newsletters and we will try to accommodate them.

If you would like to contribute an article that may be of interest to our members or have any suggestions please contact:

Alison Ritchie  
moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

**Welcome**

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**David Law**  
Chair

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**Forthcoming Events**

We intend to have another virtual talk on Thursday, May 13th when a few people will give talks on some local birding spots. We will provide you with more details on these talks later together with details on how to attend. We also welcome any feedback on any of our previous talks.

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#### Front Page

*Dotterel*, Robert Ince

#### RSPB Loch Spynie in 2021 (pp 2-3)

All photos Lorna Dow except *Aerial view of Loch Spynie*, Martin Cook

#### Sandpipers on Findhorn Bay (pp 4-7)

All photos Richard Somers Cocks except *Pectoral Sandpiper*, Gordon McMullins

#### The Joy of Bird Song (pp 8-9)

*Chaffinch*, Martin Cook

*Sedge Warbler*, Alison Ritchie

*Crested Tit*, Gordon Biggs

*Treecreeper*, David Main

#### How Many Birds Visit Our Gardens?

All photos, David Main

#### A Visit to Japan (pp 13-19)

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