

Lothian Bird Bulletin



The Newsletter of Lothian SOC

2004 : No 2

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Editorial

After none of the Lothian SOC committee got my joke in the last Lothian Bird Bulletin, I've decided to make this a *serious* issue. With this in mind, here is a challenging question for serious birdwatchers:

Q. Where would you find Mealy Golden Plover?

I'll publish the answer in the next issue. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy reading this one. It features a report from the LSOC Chairman Jacky Robinson and a summary of the 2003/2004 accounts by John Pringle, a piece by Graham Checkley on the butterflies and insects of Arthur's Seat, the story of Oliver the Tawny Owl by Chris Mylne, and a quick look at the new Lothian SOC Website.

As always, thanks very much to everyone who contributed to this LBB...***and please keep the articles coming in.***

Stephen

News

2002 Lothian Bird Report - Available Now

The new 2002 LBR is now on sale. You can get a copy from Charles Frank, Rose Street, Edinburgh for £7.50. Alternatively we can post a copy to you. Send a cheque for £8.50 (inc p&p), made payable to *SOC Lothian Branch*, to

*John Hamilton
30 Swanston Gardens
Edinburgh
EH10 7DL*

2004 Lothian Bird Race

The Lothian SOC team was the winner of this year's Lothian Bird Race, with a record 129 different species seen or heard in a single day. The result ended a 4-year winning streak for the East Lothian Countryside Ranger Service team. The LSOC team featured Mark Holling, Gavin Paterson, and Stephen Hunter.

Help Edinburgh's Swifts

Andrew Sandeman is looking for records of Swifts nesting in the city. He would also like to know of any new building development or refurbishment in areas where Swifts are present. The information gathered could help prevent damage to existing nesting sites, and could allow new sites to be created by the provision of 'Swift bricks' - artificial nest holes which can be incorporated into the brickwork/stonework of a building. For more information see the Lothian SOC website (click on Surveys). (If you don't have access to the internet, contact the Lothian Bird Bulletin for details, or phone Andrew Sandeman on 0131 554 1310.)

The Breeding Birds of South-East Scotland

The proceeds from the sale of this tetrad atlas, published by the SOC in 1998, may be used to fund a bird hide in the area. A location has not yet been chosen, but we'll let you know when a decision is reached. (A few copies of the atlas are still available, priced £15, from the SOC, or from Charles Frank, Rose Street.)

LSOC Chairman's Report

Little did I expect 12 months' ago to be writing this end of year report. When Richard Birch resigned in October 2003 I viewed taking on the chairman's role with some fear and trepidation. Now six months on, with the support and dedicated hard work of my fellow committee members, and encouragement from many branch members, I've survived. I am pleased to report that the branch seems to be in a healthier position in terms of monthly meeting attendance, its financial situation and in the production and sale of the annual Lothian Bird Reports (LBR).

We want to make branch indoor meetings welcoming whatever your level of interest or expertise, and to make sure we listen and respond to members' needs and suggestions. For instance, I am aware that not all members have access to the internet and email; we must ensure they do not feel left out. One suggestion might be for those who *do* have access to volunteer to be an information point for what's about or the latest branch news for those who do not.

Each season SOC HQ arranges speakers for four of our eight indoor branch meetings; the others being arranged locally by the committee. What a wealth of local talent we have when I can report that in fact only two of this season's speakers came from outwith Lothian region. Your committee has discussed the venue for indoor meetings at length; so far we have been unable to better the current one (Meadowbank Stadium) in terms of value for money and convenience, but we're always open to suggestions.

Since October the outdoor meetings have all been by car, led very successfully in each case by one of our own members. Group outings aren't for everyone but if you're new to the area, new to birding, don't have transport, or occasionally like to bird in company, then the monthly outing is good way to meet and share your enthusiasm with like-minded people. Our December outing is now an annual feature of the calendar - a morning walk at Aberlady followed by a Christmas lunch at the Kilspindie Arms Hotel. You're guaranteed gentle exercise, an excellent meal and convivial company. If you haven't been before, join us for the next one!

We are extremely grateful this year to Ian Andrews who has taken over the editorship of the Lothian Bird Report. Through his sterling efforts and those of his team of compilers we are getting back on target. The 2002 LBR is now on sale, and work will be starting soon on LBR 2003.

The coming year has many opportunities and challenges for the branch. The turf of the new SOC HQ, Waterston House, has now been cut and building work will commence, with the opening expected early in 2005. This will give branch members many opportunities to volunteer their time and enthusiasm at the new centre. We must also look to how we increase attendance at our own indoor meetings and to attract younger members both to meetings and SOC membership.

Our branch will host the joint BTO/SOC Spring Conference in 2005; we need additional branch members as a short-term task group with SOC HQ/BTO staff in planning the event, and to assist on the day - to register delegates, staff stalls, chair sessions and do all the other small tasks that make an event a success. There's a lot to be done, as well as bird watching, of course! Have a great summer birding, and see you all at our next indoor meeting here on 14 September.

Jacky Robinson, April 2004

AGM Report

The Lothian SOC AGM was held on the 13th April. At the meeting, Gillian Herbert was elected onto the committee, and John Hamilton was re-elected. Ian Thomson was re-elected as our representative on the SOC Regional Committee. If you weren't able to attend, below is a summary of our accounts for the year. (The committee would like to thank Nora Henderson for auditing the club accounts.)

Summary of Branch Accounts for Year Ended 31/3/2004

INCOME	Sale of Bird Reports	£1675.25	
	Collections at Meetings	277.50	
	Bank Interest	3.43	
	Total Income		£1956.18
EXPENSES	Cost of Bird Reports	1243.52	
	Misc Costs at Meetings	76.86	
	Branch Newsletter	90.35	
	Donation to HQ	100.00	
	Total Expenses		1510.73
	Excess Income		445.45
	Carried forward from 31/3/2003		853.29
	Account balance as at 31/3/2004		1298.74

It will be seen from the above that the major items arise from the production and sale of Bird Reports. The Editor and their assistants are to be congratulated on producing two in the past year - keeping your committee busy on the sales side! Hence the welcome larger than usual surplus - a substantial portion of which will, by the time you read this, have gone to printing the 2002 Report.

The main costs of meetings (rents and speakers' expenses) are borne by HQ - out of our subs. At their suggestion we try to make a contribution to these as per the donation and misc costs shown.

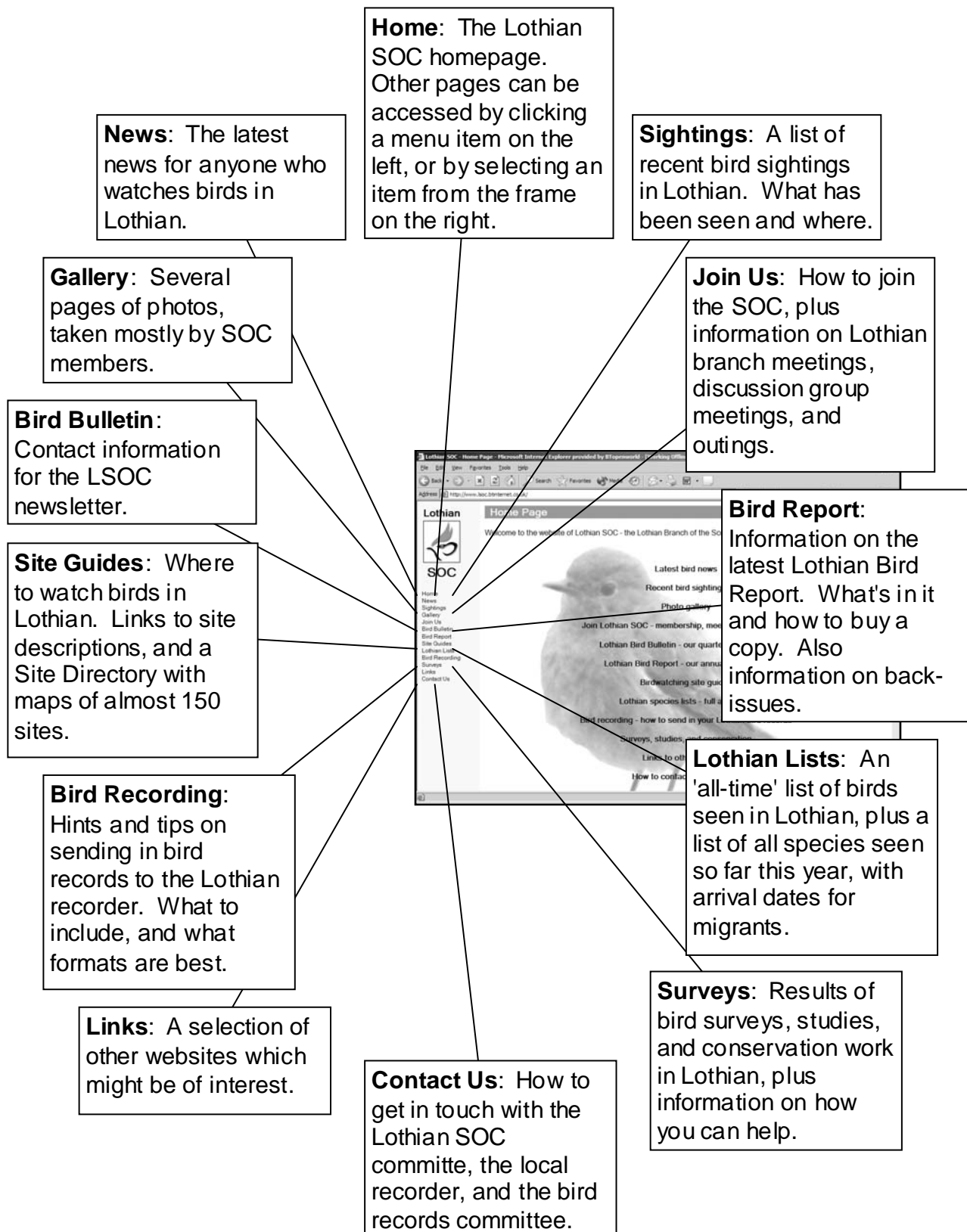
The only other significant item is printing of our branch newsletter. Surely a worthwhile expense considering this goes 'free' to all Lothian members.

Any questions? Come along to the next AGM and ask them.

John P Pringle, April 2004

The Lothian SOC Website

If you have access to the internet, you can find the Lothian SOC website at www.lsoc.btinternet.co.uk. Here's a quick guide to what's in it. New items are added regularly, and suggestions for content are always appreciated.



Pet Sounds

A couple of issues ago in the LBB, I mentioned having heard an unusual Tawny Owl song. This struck a chord with Chris Mylne, who sent the following reply:

"In the 1950's we rescued a very sick tawny owl one autumn and kept it in an aviary while it recovered. When the weather got very cold we brought it into the house where it adapted quickly and became a household pet. When spring came he was still with us, presumed by measurements to be a male and now called 'Oliver'.

He was returned each night to his aviary just outside the living-room window where he was often visited by Tawny Owls from the neighbouring woodlands of the Milton Bridge/Glencorse area of Midlothian.

However during the day he established the kitchen (warmest room!) as his territory and sat on the curtain rail much of the day. When I returned from work in the evening he would greet me with excited calls and squeaks. Then one day he flew across the room as I entered, and landed on my head, which even in those early days was getting bald on top, and making exactly that low crooning call you describe in the latest Bulletin proceeded with his full courtship and mating display on my scalp. The best imitation of it can be made by doing a low whistle slowly rising in pitch but interrupted into short notes by letting ones breath out in a rapid stacatto fashion. The result is an affectionate quavering note, clearly expressive of his deeply felt love for me! As Tawny Owls have formidable claws and talons which are not easily sheathed, this was a decidedly scratchy experience which would have gone on long enough if I hadn't put my hand up for him to perch on instead. In the wild I have only heard it in early spring as a sure indication of the courtship period preceding egg-laying. It is fully described in column 2 of p.540 of *Birds of the Western Palearctic* under "(2) Bubbling Call", where it is given as commonest in winter and associated with nest-site prospecting; or in the case of Oliver's display, my approach to his chosen nest-site in our kitchen where a cardboard box full of bits of newspaper was regularly used by him as the 'nest' he was clearly preparing for me to use.

Interestingly the call has often been compared to the 'drumming' of snipe, with which on reflection it is remarkably similar in sound although of course the snipe display 'call' is entirely mechanical in performance, being caused by the vibration of the two outer tail feathers in accelerated swooping flight, performed solely for the purpose of producing the sound."

Thanks very much for the information - and the entertaining story - Chris. Oliver's call sounds very like what I heard - and the Snipe comparison certainly rings a bell.

A Short Walk up Arthur's Seat

The summer of 2003 was a good one for the butterflies of Arthur's Seat. My regular evening walk was up Arthur's Seat from Pollock Halls via the new "Gutted Haddie" path, and then down to St Margaret's Loch via the ruined chapel. Here's a short guide to what I was seeing and where.

With light winds and late afternoon sunshine the hillside by the "Gutted Haddie" (NT 274 728) was an excellent spot for a variety of species. With the new path in place it was quite possible to study the species feeding on the thistle flowers at close range, but without disturbing them. The best spot was between the third and fourth zigzag of the new path. Species seen here – Painted Lady, Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Grayling, Small Copper, Meadow Brown, Red Admiral and Comma.

Slightly higher up. As the thistles die away look out for more Grayling, Meadow Brown and some Burnett Moths.

The top of Arthur's Seat. In light wind conditions a great place for Red Admiral, Painted Lady and Grayling. Also lots of flying ants if the weather is humid!

The descent to St Margaret's Loch. This follows the valley (NT 275 734) down to the ruined chapel. Upper section, lots of Burnett Moths and the occasional Common Blue. Middle section, good for Meadow Brown and Ringlet. By the Chapel itself, lots of Burnett Moth, more Common Blue and Grayling.

Another good route is to follow the burn back from St Margaret's Loch (NT 275 737) towards Hunters Bog. This was the best section (along with the west edge of Hunters Bog) for Small Coppers. It also produced an occasional dragonfly in the form of a Common Darter.

Have a look at www.pbase.com/grahamcheckley for the results. Good luck with the weather!

Graham Checkley, February 2004 (grahamcheckley@aol.com)

(Graham is leading an outing to Holyrood Park in July - see overleaf.)

Lothian SOC Outings

East Lothian Farm Visit - 28th February

This extra-curricular visit to Mike McDowall's farm turned out to be both enjoyable and educational.

Our tour started opposite the main farm buildings, where waste grain had been left out for birds at the edge of a field of winter wheat. On one side 7 Skylarks were enjoying the free meal, and around the corner were impressive numbers of Yellowhammers, and even a couple of Bramblings.

Along the road and another grassy field was popular with Mistle Thrushes and Fieldfares. A nearby set-aside area contained more Brown Hares than I'd ever seen in one place, and Roe Deer were glimpsed at the field edge. Other wildlife seen during the visit included several Grey Partridges and a number of Buzzards.

Mike was taking part in a controlled experiment known as SAFFIE (Sustainable Arable Farming for an Improved Environment). The aim is to improve conditions for birds in and around the most dominant UK crop - winter wheat. One strand of SAFFIE involves leaving

unsown patches within the crop of winter wheat in order to increase the abundance and accessibility of food and nest sites. A second strand involves the sowing of three different types of grass seed mixture, in various arrangements, and the adoption of a variety of different management practices (cutting, herbicide use etc). The success of each of these is monitored.

As subscribers to Lothian Bird News will know, bird ringing takes place regularly at the farm, and we were shown how a 'whoosh net' works in Mike's back garden...while a Great Spotted Woodpecker watched from a nearby tree.

Thanks very much to Mike for taking the time to show us round. It's good to know that farms needn't be hostile places for wildlife.

Stephen Hunter and Jacky Robinson

Glen Artney and Braco Moor - 28th March

The main target for this Perthshire trip (to the area SE of Creiff) was Black Grouse, and we certainly weren't disappointed, with excellent views of a number of birds. But Black Grouse wasn't the only species seen. The day got off to an impressive start, with 5 Red Kites and 4 Buzzards overhead almost as soon as we turned off the Creiff road onto Braco Moor. An Osprey was also glimpsed by some of the group, and later we encountered a pair of Short-eared Owls in Glen Artney. On the way home 3 Ravens made an appearance.

Speyside Weekend - 23rd-25th April

Friday morning, and the SOC minibus headed north with Richard Birch at the helm, destined for Sunny Speyside.

Birdwatching was taken at a leisurely pace on the first day, with a pleasant walk through the forests of Glen More, and an after-dinner trip to Boat of Garten in search of roding Woodcock.

Saturday was harder work, when we left the hotel at 5.30am and headed for the Cappercaillie viewing at Loch Garten. These sessions are now extremely popular and, with 70 or so people crammed into the RSPB Osprey Hide, the scene resembled the January sales on Princes Street (although Cappercaillies are rare on Princes Street these days). Although fairly distant, we enjoyed good views of 2 or 3 displaying males, and some of the group managed to glimpse a couple of elusive females too. I almost felt sorry for the pair of Ospreys clearly visible from the hide - hardly anyone seemed to notice them in the excitement of the Cappercaillie watch.

Later in the day we managed to fit in walks in Rothiemurchus and Abernethy forests, a visit to Cairngorm, and a stop at Loch Vaa on the way back to the hotel.

Sunday was another early start for those willing to drag themselves out of bed at 6am. We headed for Tulloch Moor, where the fantastic sound of lekking Black Grouse seemed to be coming from every direction. In the afternoon we headed north and finished off the weekend with a visit to 'Eagle Alley' - otherwise known as the Findhorn Valley.

Apart from the Cappercaillies and Black Grouse, star birds of the trip were a pair of displaying Golden Eagles, a pair of Slavonian Grebes, and three Black-throated Divers in full breeding plumage - surely the most stunning British species. We did miss out on a couple of target species - Crested Tit and Crossbill - but it did nothing to spoil an excellent weekend (and provided a handy excuse to go back some other time).

Aberlady - 9th May: The Great Bacon Buttie Twitch

Passing Aberlady at 5am on Sunday, 9th May, seeing a full carpark and a line of 13 shrouded figures crossing the bridge some could be excused for thinking witches' coven rather than dawn chorus.

But Yes, those twelve hardy souls plus a visitor from 'Highlands' had endured a middle of the night rise and a dreich dawn for Ian Thomson's promise of a full cast of the area's warblers - willow, sedge, blackcap, whitethroat (common and lesser) and a backing group from lapwing through to little grebe, reed bunting, chaffinch and an unseasonable pair of Canadas.

The expected fine array of waders - many in breeding plumage - included one curlew sandpiper. The first common terns of the year were offshore along with seaduck and two distant divers, but apart from a yellow wagtail there was little sign of passage migrants.

Yes IMT did fulfill his guarantees - though the lesser whitethroat was definitely lesser in song - and lesser lesser in appearance!

But enough of this tedious talk of birding. At 9.30 am the true reason for our outing became clear as we all sat down in the splendid ambience of the spanking new Craighielaw Gold Clubhouse to be served with lashings of hot coffee and a choice of bacon, Lorne sausage or fried egg rolls!

Surely a new standard has been set for field trips.

Thank you Ian...only one omission...black pudding rolls!!

John (when I was a boy) P Pringle

Coming Up...

- 25th Jul: Holyrood Park
- 1st Aug: Aberlady - Birds, Beasties, and Botany
- 12th Sep: Eden Estuary
- 10th Oct: East Coast Migrants
- 14th Nov: Clyde Area
- 12th Dec: Aberlady and Christmas Lunch

Contact the Lothian Bird Bulletin for details.

Lothian Bird Sightings

JANUARY

At *Aberlady*, 2 **Red-throated Divers** on the 4th; 30 **Twite** on the 4th; a **Peregrine** on the 4th; a **Black-throated Diver** on the 4th; a **Red Kite** on the 10th. At *Ballencrief*, a **Red Kite** on the 2nd. In *Belhaven Bay*, a **Kingfisher** (*Biel Water*) on the 3rd; a **Black-throated Diver** on the 3rd. At *Duddingston*, 2 **Kingfishers** on the 4th; an immature male **Smew** from the 16th. In *Dunbar Harbour*, a **Black Redstart** on the 4th. In *Edinburgh*, 50 **Waxwings** (*Drum Brae*) on the 1st; 12 **Waxwings** (*Joppa*) on the 4th. At *Fenton Barns*, 50 **Tree Sparrows** on the 1st. In *Gosford Bay*, 12 **Red-necked Grebes** on the 4th; a **Black-necked Grebe** on the 4th; 27 **Slavonian Grebes** on the 4th; a **Black-throated Diver** on the 4th. At *Musselburgh*, a **Mediterranean Gull** on the 4th; 6 **Mealy Redpolls** on the 6th. At *Tynninghame*, 4 **Greenshanks** on the 3rd; a **Red Kite** on the 3rd. At *Whiteadder*, a **Rough-legged Buzzard** on the 3rd; a **Merlin** on the 3rd; 200 **Twite** on the 3rd. At *Whitecraig*, 100 **Whooper Swans** on the 10th.

FEBRUARY

At *Aberlady*, 12 **Snow Buntings**, a **Great Northern Diver**, a 1st winter **Little Gull**, a **Water Rail**, a **Peregrine**, a **Greenshank**, and a **Pintail** on the 11th; 17 **Red-throated Divers**, 27 **Red-necked Grebes**, and 740 **Golden Plovers** on the 17th; a **Great Northern Diver** on the 21st; 11 **Red-necked Grebes** on the 21st. At *Barns Ness*, 7 **Snow Buntings** on the 22nd. In the *Bathgate Hills*, 1270 **Pink-footed Geese** on the 1st. In the *Botanic Gardens*, a **Kingfisher** on the 13th. At *Craigmillar Castle*, 3 **Waxwings** on the 17th. At *Cramond*, 9 **Scaup** on the 3rd-17th; a **Black-tailed Godwit** on the 3rd; 2 **Greenshanks** on the 17th; an adult **Mediterranean Gull** on the 20th; 2 **Scaup** on the 20th; a **Greenshank** on the 20th. At *Duddingston*, an immature male **Smew** throughout; 2 **Kingfishers** on the 4th; 2 **Green Woodpeckers** on the 4th; a **Buzzard** on the 4th. Near *Edinburgh Airport*, a juvenile **Hen Harrier** on the 20th. At *Gladhouse Reservoir*, a male **Smew** on the 20th. At *Gosford Bay*, a **Black-necked Grebe** on the 20th; 74 **Slavonian Grebes** on the 20th; 22 **Red-necked Grebes** on the 20th. At *Sheriffhall* (near *Whitekirk*), a **Red Kite** on the 26th. At *Tynninghame*, 60 **Twite** on the 5th; a **Shore Lark** on several dates. At *Vogrie Park*, a **Nuthatch** all month; a **Barn Owl** on the 16th; a **Brambling** on the 16th. At *Whitekirk*, 51 **Whooper Swans** on the 3rd, 110 **Whooper Swans** on the 5th.

MARCH

At *Aberlady*, a **Great Northern Diver** on the 5th; a **Black-throated Diver** on the 5th and 29th; a **Merlin** from the 7th-8th; 4 **Short-eared Owls** on the 8th (with 3 on the 18th); a **Kingfisher** on the 8th; 6 **Snow Buntings** on the 13th (with 2 on 10th and 22nd); a **Lapland Bunting** on the 26th; up to 23 **Red-necked Grebes** from the 5th; a **Jack Snipe** on the 29th; 940 **Common Scoters** and 660 **Velvet Scoters** on the 29th. At *Barns Ness*, a **Whimbrel** on the 24th. At *Bathgate Bog*, a **Water Rail** on the 29th. At *Cramond*, 3 **Black-tailed Godwits** on the 12th; 8 **Scaup** on the 13th; 2 **Greenshank** on the 13th (with 1 on 30th). At *Duddingston*, a 1st winter male **Smew** all month. In *Gosford Bay*, a **Black-necked Grebe** on the 29th. At *Joppa*, a **Black-necked Grebe** on the 21st. In the *Lammermuirs*, 2 male **Ring Ouzels** near *Faseny Cottage* on the 30th. On *Linlithgow Loch*, a **Red-crested Pochard** on the 13th. At *Musselburgh*, a 1st winter female **Surf Scoter** on the from the 4th; up to 3 **Mediterranean Gulls** on the 6th-11th; 2 **Snow Buntings** on the 10th and 12th; 8 **Lesser Redpolls** on the 29th (and 2 on 18th). In the *North Berwick* area, a **Red Kite** at *Balgone* on the 1st and at *East Fortune* on 3rd, with 2 at *Brownrigg* on the 8th; a **White Wagtail** on *N Berwick Law* on the 19th; 5 **Snow Buntings**

on the 26th. At *Portobello*, a **Mediterranean Gull** on the 13th. At *Skateraw*, 5 **Snow Buntings** on the 28th. At *Smeaton*, a **Nuthatch** from the 6th-10th. At *Tynninghame*, a **Shore Lark** from the 9th; up to 90 **Twite** from the 9th-26th; 3 **Crossbills** on the 9th; 5 **Snow Buntings** on the 26th; 12 **Barnacle Geese** on the 23rd. At *Whitelaw Cleugh* in the *Moorfoots*, 300-400 **Bramblings** on the 12th.

APRIL

At *Aberlady*, 2 **White Wagtails** on the 11th; 2 **Short-eared Owls** on the 11th; 910 **Common Scoters** on the 11th; a **Ring Ouzel** on the 12th; 129 **Sanderlings** on the 12th; a **Merlin** on the 17th; an **Osprey** on the 18th and 19th; a **Hen Harrier** on the 23rd; a **Grasshopper Warbler** at *Gullane Point* on the 23rd; a **Redstart** on the 23rd; up to 4 **Grasshopper Warblers** from the 24th; 3 **Tree Pipits** on the 24th; a **Yellow Wagtail** on the 25th. At *Almondell*, a **Goshawk** on the 16th. At *Barns Ness*, a **Water Pipit** on the 1st; 40+ **White Wagtails** on the 24th; a male and a (probable) female **Blue-headed Wagtail** on the 24th; a **Short-eared Owl** on the 25th; 2 **Yellow Wagtails** on the 27th. At *Belhaven Bay*, an adult **Mediterranean Gull** on the 2nd. Over *Cairnpapple Hill, Bathgate*, 2 **Ravens** on the 25th. At *Cramond*, 45 **Black-tailed Godwits** on the 27th. In *Currie*, 50 **Twite** on the 14th. At *Duddingston*, a 1st year male **Smew** until 4th; a **Ruddy Duck** on the 3rd; a **Jack Snipe** on the 11th. Near *Gifford*, 10 **Bramblings** on the 11th. At *Gladhouse*, 2 **Ospreys** on the 26th. Over *Harperrig Reservoir*, 2 **Ospreys**, on the 26th. In the *Lammermuirs*, an **Osprey** over *Fasney Cottage* on the 12th. At *Linlithgow Loch*, a **Red-crested Pochard** on the 1st. At *Little Moss, Gorebridge*, 800 **Golden Plover** on the 23rd. At *Livingston*, a **Grasshopper Warbler** on the 23rd. At *Musselburgh*, a female **Surf Scoter** at least until 26th; 2+ **Mealy Redpolls** on the 20th; a 1st year **Mediterranean Gull** on the 23rd; a **Grasshopper Warbler** on the 25th-27th; a female **Merlin** on the 26th; a **Yellow Wagtail** on the 26th. In the *Pentlands*, a **Ring Ouzel** at *Green Cleugh* on the 23rd; a **Dotterel** on *Carnethy Hill* on the 25th-27th. At *River Almond Pools*, a **Grasshopper Warbler** on the 24th-25th. At *Skateraw*, a **Water Pipit** on the 10th. At *Smeaton*, a **Nuthatch** at least until 11th. At *Tailend Moss, Livingston*, a **Water Rail** on the 11th. Near *Tranent*, a male **Merlin** on the 9th. At *Tynninghame*, a **Shore Lark** until the 8th; 38 **Twite** on the 4th and 27 on 8th; an **Osprey** on the 4th. At *Woodhall Dean*, a **Redstart** on the 25th.

Thanks to Eleanor Hurley and everyone who contributed to these records.

Mystery Bird

Identify the species pictured below. The answer will be published in the next issue.



(The last mystery bird was a **Baird's Sandpiper**.)