

Reviews

RARE BIRDS WHERE AND WHEN: AN ANALYSIS OF STATUS & DISTRIBUTION IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND. VOLUME 1: SANDGROUSE TO NEW WORLD ORIOLES.

By Russell Slack.
MPG Books Group, Bodmin
and King's Lynn, 2009.
493 pages; numerous
black-and-white vignettes
and figures.
ISBN 978-0-9562823-0-9.
Hardback, £29.99.

I must confess to having wondered whether this book would prove to be little more than an update of earlier volumes, notably the Poyser titles *Rare Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1976 and 1989), and *Rare Birds Day by Day* (1996). All three were, in reality, little more than catalogues of rare-bird records, albeit of some contemporary value. In 1996, the excellent *Rare Birds in Britain and Ireland* by Keith Vini-combe and David Cottridge really did offer something different, covering identification, patterns and trends of vagrants in the context of other European records and attempting to unravel the factors influencing vagrancy.

Russell Slack is, however, to be congratulated. This work is thoroughly researched, well written and packed with fascinating and relevant information. It goes much further than any of its predecessors. The inclusion of Irish records makes biogeographical sense, while the incorporation of European and, where relevant, Western Palearctic records enables a much wider perspective when assessing trends and patterns of vagrancy. So, for example, we learn how the record arrival of 16 Chimney Swifts *Chaetura pelagica* in Britain & Ireland in 2005 was part of a much wider displacement of birds following Hurricane Wilma (including no fewer than 112 on the Azores). Indeed, the book is worth it alone for bringing these records of

vagrants from across Europe together in a single source.

An excellent introductory chapter on vagrancy by Alex Lees and James Gilroy presents a healthy mix of fact and speculation, summarising current knowledge on the subject and considering the factors that cause vagrancy. With sections on vagrancy from the Nearctic, the eastern Palearctic and the near continent, it challenges the concept of 'reverse migration', an idea that has perhaps too readily been used to predict which eastern Palearctic species might occur here naturally, as opposed to via the cagebird trade. However, it offers little to explain why so many species that were once extreme rarities in Britain (e.g. White's Thrush *Zoothera dauma*) are now appearing with increasing regularity, while a whole new set of 'eastern' species that were simply not on the radar of most rarity finders (e.g. Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*, Eastern Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus coronatus* and Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*) have turned up in recent years – surely observer coverage alone cannot account for this. There is also no mention of 'pseudo-vagrants', although the concept was first put forward (in *BB*) by Lees & Gilroy. A summary would have been useful as the term is used frequently in the species accounts. Brief sections on the role of BBRC and BOURC follow, written by their respective chairman. That of the BBRC is both more involved and more interesting, perhaps an indication of its wishes to engage more with 'rank and file' birders.

The species accounts cover 200+ species currently considered by BBRC and IRBC. These include *all* published records up to and including 2007, along with many subsequent records from 2008 and even 2009. Sadly, if understandably, the suite of species recently 'dropped' by BBRC, including such gems as Radde's Warbler *P. schwarzi*, are not included. For species recorded 22 times or fewer, sections

on range and taxonomic status are followed by a list of records and a brief discussion. The remaining species are given a more thorough treatment, with additional sections on status, historical review, 'Where', 'When' and a much fuller discussion.

The comments on subspecies seem well researched, which is important given current taxonomic progress and useful in raising awareness of potential splits. The status section gives the total number of records in both Britain and Ireland. The historical review takes us from the first record through to 2007 or beyond. It includes comments on patterns and trends and changes in status; Ian Wallace has brought his wisdom and entertaining writing style to some. 'Where' outlines geographical spread, 'When' deals with arrival patterns (seasonality), while the discussion considers factors that may help to explain observed patterns and trends, for example changes in range, population size and migration routes. The context provided by the inclusion of records elsewhere in Europe is of enormous relevance here. Embedded in many of the historical reviews are narratives relating to one of the records. These are generally entertaining, though I especially liked those relating to older records that I cannot remember reading before. Arguably perhaps too many have appeared relatively recently (and do I detect a disproportionate east-coast bias?).

The discussion attempts to explain trends and patterns and I found myself lingering most in this section. There is a mass of fascinating material: for example, why are Black-billed Cuckoos *Coccyzus erythrophthalmus* so much rarer than Yellow-billed *C. americanus* (14 records of the former, 68 of the latter)? Well, Black-billed is much the rarer species and currently in decline. In addition, its migration route takes it down the Atlantic coast, while the Yellow-billed undertakes a lengthy ocean crossing to

Reviews

wintering grounds in northern South America. There are as many questions as answers, though. Britain often punches above its weight in terms of eastern Palearctic vagrants, yet why has Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* remained so rare? There have been 15 in Sweden, 13 in Finland, 10 in Denmark and 5 in Norway. Are we missing them? And just how much longer must we wait for a twitchable Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus*? In late autumn 2008, an influx into Scandinavia resulted in 264 being trapped and ringed at Falsterbo (southern Sweden) while at least 23

reached Denmark.

A few relevant identification issues are also raised and Slack is (commendably) not shy of asking questions, notably with regard to Pallid Swifts *Apus pallidus* and some of the early Citrine Wagtails *Motacilla citreola*, and there is much food for thought here too. Category D species, and those recently 'downgraded' to Category E by BOURC, are included in a separate section. This is useful, especially as one record has been upgraded to Category A since publication.

This book will undoubtedly become the standard work for those

interested in rare birds in Britain & Ireland. Whether you are simply a patch worker who enjoys coming across migrants, a passionate lister, someone fascinated by the phenomenon of vagrancy itself or one of an increasing band of observers for whom their 'self-found' list has become a key driving force, this book is a must for you. Forget the lack of photographs, the content more than makes up for that and at £29.99 this book represents excellent value for money. I look forward to Volume 2.

Paul Harvey

**NORTH NORFOLK'S
WILDLIFE:
DISCOVERING ITS BIRDS
AND NATURAL HISTORY**

By Andrew Bloomfield and
Gary Smith. Red String
Publishing, Sculthorpe, 2009.
144 pages, 161 colour
photographs.
ISBN 978-0-9522459-1-9.
Hardback, £29.99.

Britain has many beautiful and special places but perhaps none is closer to the hearts of birdwatchers than north Norfolk. Key to its charm is its intricately woven mosaic of habitats – open sea, sandy beaches, shingle ridges, dunes, saltmarshes, estuarine mudflats, freshwater and grazing marshes, reedbeds, woods, farmland and charming river valleys. This was a landscape which provided the inspiration for some of the country's earliest conservation efforts and here, one could argue, is the spiritual home of British bird-watching.

This book provides a detailed account of the area and its wildlife by Andrew Bloomfield – someone who knows intimately its most secret locations and its daily and seasonal rhythms. Its chapters are structured according to the area's habitats and within them lies a wealth of detailed information, not just on birds (though they dominate) but also on mammals, butter-

flies, moths, dragonflies and plants.

The text is alive with fascinating facts (for example, 1,200 European Hares *Lepus europaeus* were shot on a single day at Holkham in 1877 as were 140 Woodcocks *Scolopax rusticola* over three days on the same estate in 1997) and is greatly enhanced by the frequent historical contexts, which remind us that the north Norfolk we see today is just a snapshot in a continuum of change. For example, the great hordes of Pink-footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus*, for which the county is now so famous, are a very recent, and probably temporary, phenomenon. We are also reminded of the oft-neglected attractions of the agricultural hinterland to be found just minutes from the more well-known coastal habitats.

Though the rarities for which the coast is famous get a mention, the focus is kept deliberately on those common or characteristic species and the spectacles which define the area and which make it so special. There is, therefore, an admirably comprehensive treatment of such iconic north Norfolk species as the Pink-footed Goose, Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Grey *Hali-choerus grypus* and Harbour Seals *Phoca vitulina* and European Hare.

Structuring the book by habitat illustrates a dilemma. One could

equally well structure the same content by the calendar or by species, but whichever approach is taken it will be difficult to capture all three dimensions effectively. These problems are mostly overcome successfully, though some chapters do seem a little awkward and disjointed. The text is generally well written, but a couple of hours of professional proofreading could have removed a few niggling lapses in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

The photographs are the other key element of this book. Most are by local wildlife photographer Gary Smith, with a few by the author, and all but one are taken in north Norfolk. They illustrate every aspect of the text – the area's characteristic habitats, its great bird spectacles, intimate portraits of bird behaviour and other wildlife. They are almost all of a very high quality and their liberal presence throughout the text is a joy.

The layout and production quality are of a high standard but the map of the area could have been much better, perhaps illustrating the mingling of the different ecological zones and highlighting the numerous conservation designation areas which the region boasts. This is a highly insightful guide to north Norfolk's wildlife, and as a visual treat it deserves to do well.

Andy Stoddart