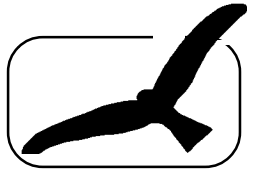


# THE NIOC HARRIER



NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ORNITHOLOGISTS CLUB

WINTER 1995 - 96

## CLUB NEWS



### THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This year the Annual General Meeting will be held on Wednesday, January 24. The committee is keen that as many members as possible attend the event. It is an opportunity for the membership to learn how the committee has been managing the affairs of the club over the past twelve months, and to comment upon and influence that stewardship over the next year. From the point of view of the committee, it is important that we have feedback, as we cannot operate effectively in isolation from the membership.

Another key activity is the election of the committee for the incoming year. The present committee stands down at the AGM and nominations are then sought from those present.

Any member can stand for election, so long as they are willing to be nominated, and only require a proposer and a seconder to be included in the election. At the time of writing, four members of the existing committee will not be standing for re-election so vacancies will arise. This provides an opportunity for members who wish to actively participate in the running of their club to join the committee. It is hoped that members will seriously consider standing for election to the committee, as a gradual turn-round of interested members is both healthy and necessary if we are to avoid becoming stuck in our ways.

Following the formal business of the AGM this year, as last, we are running a wine and cheese Finger Buffet which will provide an opportunity for us to relax and socialise. The buffet is free and we look forward to seeing and talking with as many of you as possible.

### REMINDER

**1996 Subscriptions are now due !**

### THE WORK OF NORTHERN IRELAND BIRD PHOTOGRAPHERS



The work of Northern Ireland Bird Photographers (WONIBP), now in its 23rd year, is a unique event which, each year, gives an opportunity to bird photographers, resident in Northern Ireland, to display their work and have it judged by someone prominent in the field of wildlife photography. This year the judge is Gordon Langsbury FRPS.

The objectives of WONIBP are (1) To provide a showcase for the work of local bird photographers (2) To seek to raise standards via the application of critical judging (3) to seek to encourage new bird photographers to exhibit their work, and (4) to ensure that bird photographers adhere to a Code of Conduct in which the welfare of the bird is paramount. Entrants provide up to six slides of birds. These may be taken locally or abroad.

The entries are placed in one of three categories ie (a) Beginners (b) Intermediate and (c) Advanced. In each of the three categories the winning slides are placed as follows: Commended, Commended, Highly Commended, Third, Second, First. In addition, those who have entered the full complement of six slides are eligible for the Best Portfolio Award. For the purposes of subsequent display, high quality Cibachrome prints are made from the winning slides.

The 1995 / 96 WONIBP will take place on the evening of Wednesday, March 20, 1996 in the Ulster Museum. The last date for entry is Wednesday, January 24th, 1996. An entry form for the event is enclosed.

If you have slides of birds please do consider entering them for the show. It really doesn't matter what your level of competence is - we have a category for everyone. Alternatively, if you are not a photographer yourself, but know someone who is, please pass the entry form to them.

### COMMENT

A happy new years birding to all our members.

Why not start your 1996 lists on our first field trips of the year to Donegall and Galway.

The second year of Project Barn Owl gets under way and members participating will receive their packs shortly.

Our own nest box scheme also gets off the ground early and we need more volunteers for this project too. So lets see more of our members participating in 1996

Many of you will have been to Neville McKee's talk on native trees and their associated birds. It might now be a timely reminder that the next few months are the optimum time for planting such trees. Their benefit to native wildlife cannot be overemphasised. So lets see more of you growing lots of Sessile Oak and Willows.

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## LECTURES

### 10th JANUARY 1996 CHRIS ROLLIE BIRDS OF DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

Chris is the RSPB warden at the Wood of Cree reserve in Dumfries and Galloway, a place the club annually returns to and is rarely disappointed. This region is popular with our members in all seasons, and this is a chance to hear Chris, who brings first hand knowledge and experience, prior to our weekend trip in February.

**7 FEBRUARY 1996**  
**Sam Penney Memorial**

**Lecture**

**Gordon Langsbury**  
**EUROPEAN BIRDWATCH**

Gordon is one of the UK's leading bird photographers as well as being a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. His talk will cover birds and habitats in Spain, France, Austria, Sweden, Norway and Finland. Most of us will have come to know Gordons work through his excellent photographs in the birding press, such as Birdwatch or Birding World. Gordon is also our judge for the Work of Northern Ireland Bird Photographers No. 23. We can be assured of an outstanding lecture.



**21 February 1996**  
**James Orr**  
**CASTLE ESPIE**

James has worked at the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT) reserve at Castle Espie, where he is Centre Manager, for some four years. His talk will deal with two aspects of the work at the reserve. Firstly as a Regional Wetland Conservation Centre, to increase its attractiveness to wetland birds, and secondly to breed globally endangered species of wildfowl.

Anyone who has visited the reserve will have been impressed by the wonderful resource which has been created there and, in James's talk, we can look forward to a fascinating look behind the scenes at Castle Espie.

**6 MARCH 1996**  
**GARY WILKINSON**  
**PROJECT BARN OWL**



The NIOC participated in the pilot study in 1994. We then undertook the task of area co-ordination for Northern Ireland in 1995. Organised jointly by the BTO and the Hawk and Owl Trust, the project is a three year survey of Barn Owl population in the UK. Barn Owl numbers have declined alarmingly throughout the UK, generally by 70% and up to 95% in some parts. It is therefore essential to discover just how many birds are left. In Northern Ireland we are covering thirty sites

Gary's talk will include the whole UK project and is a subject dear to his heart. The Barn Owl is his favourite bird and one he used to see regularly along the old Comber railway line between 1962 and 1966. Sadly these birds are a rare sight now and club members rely mainly on our Galloway trip to see this magnificent bird.

**FIELD TRIPS**

**INCH AND BLANKET NOOK**  
**4 FEBRUARY 1996**

16 Members took part in this day trip to Donegal in 1995 and what a superb days birdwatching we had. Geese, Duck, Swans, Grebes, Raptors, and Waders to name but some groups. The weather played its part, being bright with good visibility throughout the day.

Although we can't guarantee the weather, we would thoroughly recommend this trip to all our members.

**Leaving University Square at 8am. or at the Foyle Bridge Londonderry at 9.30am. (car park on City side of bridge). Lifts can always be arranged.**

**DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY**  
**23 TO 25 FEBRUARY 1996**

This will be the fifth trip to the area by the Club and it has always proved to be the most popular.

With an early crossing to Stranraer on the Friday morning (transport by shared cars), birding starts in Loch Ryan looking for Grebes, Divers and Waders. We then usually drive up through the hills to New Galloway hoping for Golden Eagle and Peregrine. The Ken Dee marshes usually provide Greenland Whitefronts with a good chance of Goosander and Smew.

Saturday usually takes us to Caerlaverock (WWT) to see Barnacle Geese, Whooper and Bewick's Swans with the likelihood of Finch and Bunting Flocks (Yellowhammers are regular) and passing Raptors or Owls. Woodpecker hunting in the deciduous woods occupies Sunday morning followed by a scenic drive back to Stranraer for the evening ferry, stopping at West Freugh to witness the Harrier roost.

And that's just the birding ! The 'crack' is always first class and newcomers become regulars.

**All are welcome. Names and £10 deposits to Gary Wilkinson soonest!**

**COOL TRIP**

**A ten day journey through Spain's Andalusia and Extremadura and Portugal's Alentejo savouring the very best that Europe's richest bird region had to offer.**

These were the words that encouraged me to leave home in the early hours at the end of April to fly over to Heathrow Airport and join up with John Gooder's Birders. From Heathrow we flew to Faro in Southern Portugal. Having left a very grey and cold

London, the sunny landscape of Portugal looked very welcoming - until we stepped out of the plane and felt the icy blast that was every bit as cold, if not colder, than we had left behind.

Once aboard our small coach with Manuel our driver, who was to look after us very well and who, at the end of the trip, had become quite an accomplished birder, we had the very long journey right up the centre of Portugal to our first base - Castro Verde - a little village in the heart of the Alentejo. Our 'suites' were very spacious, but absolutely freezing with no heating and tiled floors. Can you imagine? Next morning we were ready for action - still in our warm travelling clothes - but the sun was shining. We didn't have to go very far along the road before the first Storks on nests were to be seen on the top of electricity poles. Montagu's Harriers were quartering the fields alongside the road, giving some wonderful views. Soon the coach stopped and we got out, going a little way into a field where Little Bustards were popping up and down in the display ritual; all around us you could hear them "blowing raspberries". Further along on the other side of the road as we walked up a rough track towards a typical Portuguese Hacienda, there were more Little Bustards bouncing around, when suddenly, in the distance, three Great Bustards came flying towards us. They landed not far away and we got really good views through the scopes. We journeyed on through lovely rolling farmland, seeing Hoopoes, Rollers, Spanish Sparrows that had their colony in the bottom of a Stork's nest, Bee-eaters, Corn Buntings, Red-legged Partridge, lots of Woodchat and Great Grey Shrikes.

In the afternoon we visited a beautiful old monastery which is home to a Dutch artist, numerous storks and Lesser Kestrels. While packing up the coach next morning one of the Spotless Starlings on a roof top nearby was giving a pretty good imitation of a Scops Owl. We were now heading towards the Spanish border and picked up our first Black Kite. Montagu's Harriers were as numerous as ever, also Storks on top of anything possible. Cattle Egrets were becoming more numerous; in one particular place they went into the hundreds.

We stopped for lunch at a lovely old Cork Oak Wood and a walk through this provided Crested Tit, Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper. There was also a lovely selection of flowers - cistus everywhere, lovely little blue iris and a very strange brown bluebell (*Dipcadi seratinum*)

After crossing the border we had another leg stretch by a river and the first bird we saw was a Little Bittern. Walking on along the riverbank produced Serin, Sardinian, Melodious and Great Reed Warbler, Penduline Tit - and I must tell you that I was the only one to see an Avadavat. On our way back through the Fan-tailed and Cetti's Warblers we disturbed

a Night Heron which flew off up the river squawking his annoyance.

We had now arrived at Trujillo, right in the centre of the Spanish Steppes, where the Conquistadores came from. We were delighted to find that the hotel was nice and warm and had carpet on the floor - Bliss! The next three days were spent exploring the Monfrague National Park and the extensive Plains of Extremadura. Not far out of Trujillo we came on more Great Bustards - one was displaying so close to us you could see his beautiful white whiskers. By this time Azure-winged Magpies and Great Spotted Cuckoos were the norm. We had lunch one day at Pena Falcon where the great craggy rocks were just dripping with Griffon Vultures. A pair of Black Storks had their nest in amongst this miserable looking lot.

We also ticked off Egyptian Vulture, Red and Black Kite, Black Vulture; Imperial, Booted and Bonelli's Eagle in this area. In the smaller section, Rock Bunting and Blue Rock Thrush. Amongst the many plants that were growing in the cracks and crevices of the rocks were a lovely little Alpine Dianthus and an Alpine Foxglove. In the more open country the hillsides were covered with cistus (all colours), French Lavender and Helichrysum augustifolium (the curry plant) which gave the air a lovely aromatic perfume.

Trujillo is a lovely little medieval town perched up on a rocky height with wonderful views out over the vast empty steppes. Storks have their nests on every available roof top and in old church and clock towers. Lesser Kestrels joined the Swifts and Swallows dashing around after insects above the town square. On the outskirts of the town there were various small areas of water where there were Black-winged Stilts and Little-ringed Plovers. Larks were everywhere - Calandra, Short-toed, Crested, Wood and Skylarks. One of our roadside stops alongside a river valley produced Chough, Alpine Swift and Black Wheatears. One day when Manuel was trying to get us on the right road to Caceres, the bus suddenly squealed to a stop and he pointed to a bird on the top of a telegraph pole - it was a Black-shouldered Kite!

It was now time to leave this fascinating place and make the long journey down through Andalucia to Matalascanas, our last base. We had various stops along the way and there was a very noticeable rise in temperature. Our hotel was right on the beach, so it wasn't long before I was in the sea for a swim and was able also to add 20 Sanderling to the list. La Rocina and El Rocio were our first real Spanish Wetlands and we soon were enjoying Purple Gallinule, Collared Pratincole; Gull-billed, Whiskered, White-winged Black and Black Tern, Kentish Plover, Glossy Ibis,



## LETTER

### D2 LAGOON BELFAST HARBOUR

As many of you know work has been progressing on D2 Lagoon, Belfast Harbour. At the time of writing (27/11/95) the work is virtually completed, with some adjustments to the viewpoints and the observation room unfinished. RSPB has had an advisory role in all these works and hopes to acquire the site as a reserve in the near future. However in the interim, before handover to RSPB, the hide and facilities are not under the control of the society. In fact the Lagoon is still the property of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The buildings and infrastructure were built with EU and DoE (Belfast Development Office) monies and remains their property.

Until the transfer of lands between BHC and DoE (BDO) takes place and then a satisfactory agreement with RSPB, the society has no jurisdiction on the site. It is with some regret therefore that we cannot, at the present time, organise any access to the observation room or authorise access to the rest of the site. We sincerely hope this situation will be rectified as soon as possible so that we can facilitate proper access arrangements.

*Dave Allen Reserves Manager RSPB (NI)*

Spoonbill, Purple and Squacco Heron, Avocet and Spotted Redshank.

In the woodland and scrub of Acebron we were able to catch up on a few more Warblers, such as Blackcap, Whitethroat, Garden, Dartford, Olivaceous, Savi's, Bonelli's and the Spanish race of the Chiffchaff.

Having read Guy Mountfort's 'Portrait of a Wilderness', written about his expeditions to the Coto Donana in the fifties, it was a pity to see that the wilderness was really no longer there - the tourists have taken over. The number of species are still there but nowhere were there the large numbers of birds described in his book.

We now had to move on for our last long drive back to Faro but, leave it to Manuel, trying to get through Huelva he got lost again, and we ended up in the most wonderful sea marshes at the mouth of the estuary where we had a stunning group of 30 - 40 Flamingos, Grey Plovers in summer plumage, Whimbrel and a flock of 20 Common Sandpipers - but the best was kept for last, when we eventually got back on the right road again, our last stop at a couple of mucky pools in the middle of strawberry fields produced White-headed Ducks and we had really fine views of four spinning males - it made a grand finale. Time was running out, so we all piled back into the bus for the last time and headed non-stop for Faro where we said our good-byes to Manuel at the Airport, thanking him for all the good birds he found for us, accidentally or not, and headed for our flight back to London and home.

*Heather Black*

## SPECIAL YEAR

### TREE-NESTING HEN HARRIERS IN 1995

**This year a "record" 3-pair of Hen Harriers were discovered "tree-nesting" in their favourite Co. Antrim forest.**

On the evening of 27th June the "first" of

these was found. It was approx. 10-metres high and was once again in a deformed Sitka Spruce, as were the other 2-nests. Tell tale signs of occupancy were apparent below each of the nests, i.e. hatched egg-shells, pellets, prey items, chalky white excreta, and moulded feathers from the females, with the absence of the latter from the third nest. The (first) nest was kidney-shaped and quite large giving one the impression that it may have been used before. Two badly deteriorated primary feathers found nearby seemed to substantiate this theory, as a first year nest is generally of a circular nature.

The resident male was a very small bird in comparison to his partner. As he was a 2nd calendar year bird his brown plumage changing slowly to grey. Could this young male have fledged from the previous years (1994) tree-nest?

On 12th July, as we stood below the nest, five items of prey were delivered to the site within a 4-minute period. One of these items - a "live" Meadow Pipit - fell through to the forest floor, but it died in my hand minutes later, probably of shock. Activity on the nest to-day was "superb" to watch from below with three and possibly four chicks wing-flapping and branching like young Sparrow Hawks on the surrounding foliage. On the evening of 18th July I decided on the spur of the moment to visit the site again, as normally my birding activities are confined to week-ends only. On arrival I found 2-chicks huddled together beneath the tree; they were almost fully feathered, but they could not fly. They were wet and bedraggled, seemingly in distress, and almost certainly hungry. Both had obviously fallen from the nest (10 M high), and the question now was "how do I get them back, and if I can't what do I do with them"? It was virtually impossible to climb the nest tree carrying 2-chicks, and I doubted if both would remain on it due to apparent overcrowding. If left under the tree both would die of starvation as both adults would be unable to get through the canopy to feed them - they would be predated by foxes as

well. If left in the nearest ride they would be predated there also although the parent birds could still feed them. Around 9:00pm I wrapped both chicks in a car rug and took them home with me, my wife nursing them on her knee. At home I made contact with the wildlife inspector from the D.O.E who came at 11:15pm and collected the chicks, after both had eaten a hearty meal of raw steak which was mainly hand-fed. Both chicks were taken to a reliable falconer and game-keeper who also cares for injured Raptors. Two recent visits saw both in good health. They had been ringed, 1-male and 1-female, with release back to the wild imminent. This was eventually achieved in August!

On 29th July a fledgling was found below the tree with a chick calling from the nest above me - a "record" 4-chicks had been in this tree-nest. With help from a friend we managed to guide the bird to a small open area approx 16-rows to the rear of the nest tree. This area was available due to the failure of several sitkas which had not grown. The surrounding trees were approx. 15 metres tall and they created a funnel-type effect which this young Harrier would have to ascend, otherwise it would not escape from the forest floor. The process was successful, with the harrier ascending in helicopter-fashion, clearing the forest canopy in style, much to our relief! By the 5th August the fourth and final chick had successfully fledged from the "amazing" tree-nest. The recently rescued fledgling was also observed.

On the morning of 1st July the "second" of these tree-nests was found approx. 1-km from the first site. It was 12-meters high with the nest placed firmly on the boal of the deformed trunk - on the ground lay three recently hatched egg-shells. This site was also regularly monitored over the next 4-weeks in case any chicks fell from the nest. Thankfully two fledged successfully!

During my several observations at the site I regularly watched the female feeding her chicks. On occasions she would walk around the sides of the nest and then sit on the edge of it with her tail clearly visible from below. On 22nd July I watched her feed a recently fledged chick in a firebreak close to the nest. On the ground I found a partially eaten Meadow Pipit, a Skylark (both juveniles), and a headless snipe chick - a single pellet lay close to the Pipit. By 29th July the area had been vacated by all of the Harriers - a sure sign of a successful nest!

During the afternoon of 13th July the "third" and final tree-nest was found approx. the same distance that separated the second from the first nest (1-km). It was only 5-metres high but soundly constructed in a similar manner to that of the second nest found.

Minutes after finding the nest the female arrived, but she was not carrying prey to feed the excited chicks. Instead she mantled her long wings over them to shade them from the strong sun. It was not until 15th July that an adjacent tree was climbed so that the chicks could be counted. There were "three" in the nest approx. 2 1/2 weeks old. Several photographs were taken of the nestlings (for record purposes) as Hen Harriers had never been photographed in a "tree-nest" before. This was truly another historic and exciting day that will live in my memory for a long time. The next couple of weeks went by smoothly at this "tree-nest" with no mishaps to report, but I did note how quickly the chicks were growing. By 1st August two of the chicks had ventured onto the outer branches of the nest with one daring to hop to an adjacent sitka. I also noticed that the female had used a couple of old "tissues" to help replenish the nest. Evidence of this could be seen clearly on the outer edge of the nest, with several smaller torn pieces lying below the tree itself. She had also discharged at least four carcasses from the nest, three of which were juvenile starlings, the other a Meadow Pipit. By 5th August two chicks had fledged with the third perched high on the outer branches of the nest - fledging was probably imminent. At noon the female was heard "yikking" nearby, then she appeared above the nest with prey in her talons. The 2 fledglings returned to nest, with the third chick joining them on the base of the nest. The prey was dropped, but it missed the nest and landed on an adjacent sitka. I discovered that it was a Meadow Pipit and amazingly it was still "alive" even though its tail feathers and most of its right wing had been plucked off. Feathers were missing from its breast as well. This is the second time this summer that "live" prey had been delivered to a tree-nest - the first Pipit died within a matter of minutes, probably of shock! This was on 12th July and surprisingly the Pipit was completely feathered! I now believe that the adult Harriers deliberately bring "live" prey to the nest sites when the chicks are near to fledging - they would then

be capable of learning the skill of killing in advance of leaving the nest. By the way, I brought this unfortunate Pipit home with me and managed to hand feed it, but after signs of improvement, it died at 10:40 on 6th August. To-day was probably my last nest visit of the season!

**Final Comments** - From a record 3 tree nests there fledged 9 young, averaging 3 young per nest. The single ground nest fledged 5 young, so the 4 nests had a combined total of 14 young fledged, averaging 3.5 young per nest. In previous years the fledging rate from tree-nests was relatively low with no more than 2 young per nest. With figures for ground nests not exceeding 3 young per nest, poor weather was mainly responsible for the low success rate.

The regular monitoring of tree-nests, especially when young chicks are close to fledging, is most important. In past years, after each nest was found, I deliberately stayed away from them until the young had fledged, as I thought my presence would have caused desertation and unnecessary disturbance etc. I now believe that this is not the case. So as long as you are discreet and reasonably quiet you will not endanger these unique nest sites. In 1994 I found the badly decomposed remains of a fledgling that fell from the previous years nest. This bird could have been saved, as prompt action on two occasions this year saved the life of 3 would-be fledglings. The problem of falling from nests arises when the young are close to fledging, and as activity on the eyrie is hectic due to wing-flapping, branching, and jostling for position. For me Hen Harriers are special birds and are too precious to let die - I am glad that I was around when they needed help. The scenes that I observed below these "tree-nests" in 1995 was - spectacular, and quite unbelievable at times.

**Sincere Thanks** - To Philip McHaffie, who has accompanied me untiringly during these historic years for "Circus cyaneus". Thanks also to Rodger Clarke from the "Hawk and Owl Trust", -his help has been invaluable to me.

*Don Scott*

## WEXFORD WEEKEND

A combination of good weather, good birds, good food, and good company made the Wexford trip (24th - 26th Nov 95) both memorable and enjoyable. On our way down we stopped at North Bull for lunch and got a pleasant surprise with a Spoonbill amongst the more usual Pintail Shoveler and Godwits. Too late to birdwatch when we arrived in Wexford, we went straight to Tims Tavern which had been recommended by our landlord. That turned out to be a real treat. The food and drink were excellent and we decided to book dinner for the next evening as well. Saturday morning at Tacumshin and raptors were the order of the day, with Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Merlin, Kestrel and possibly Short-eared Owl. Lady's Island added Bewick Swans to our list.

That evening we visited the North Slob looking for a "dawn and dusk" elusive Glossy Ibis (it only appeared when it was too dark to see it!)

Sunday on North Slob gave us several Spotted Redshank, thousands of Greenland Whitefront Geese, a single Pinkfoot and a nice Green-winged Teal to finish.

On our return North we ended the weekend with the Spoonbill and a Little Egret at North Bull.

*Gary Wilkinson*