



... and the beginnings of Bird of the Day, which started with the formation of a Teams' STR group and my response to another person's message concerning a bird ...

23 March, 2020
Barrow's goldeneye
(Bucephala islandica) ...
 DuckCam2020 Lance

Conn Shawn Thompson My contribution. Barrow's goldeneye, male and female. Hope everyone is feeling tip-top. Monday morning, 8:54, and raring to start a new week. Missing all my colleagues.



25 March **Harlequin duck** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*; male and female) ... I had been searching for this species, which can be seen in Alaska, too, in Iceland for 10 days in April 2017; finally, I found two in Blönduós, and I rather think they were the first Spring arrivals that year.

26 March **Pheasant-tailed jacana** (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) ... I took this shot in the wilds of Sri Lanka, which is beautiful and wonderful as long as you keep an eye out for the leeches.





27 March **Common redshank** (*Tringa totanus*) ... Quite regular occurrence in England, but I always like to photograph them standing with one leg tucked in on a fence post. This is from Rainham, Essex, England.



30 March **Eurasian bittern** (*Botaurus stellaris*) ...

Critically endangered in the U.K. when I was a child, this species has fared better in recent years, but it remains hard to see. It can be half a foot back in the reeds, and you would never know it was there. I waited for to two hours to get this shot, and in the centre of London at the London Wetland Centre reserve.



31 March **Waxwing** (*Bombycilla garrulus*) ...

This is the only waxwing species we have in the United Kingdom, but in the US the same species (and you have two species of waxwing, the other being the Cedar) is called the Bohemian waxwing. We only see them in the south of England if the winter is particularly bad in Scandinavia, and if it is really bad then there can be

small irruptions of them. I took this shot in a central London suburb called Canonbury.



1 April Common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) ... A species found throughout Europe and Southern Asia, this is the ultimate fishing species, usually seen perched on a branch. I took this shot on a preposterously hot day at Lake Inle, Myanmar (formerly Burma).



2 April Greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) ... There are six species of flamingo in the world, all pretty much looking similar. They spend an inordinate amount of time standing around on one leg (this keeps the bird cooler in places of high temperature), so it is always nice to get a shot of one flying, which reveals more pink and the black outer feathers that are completely hidden

when its wings are not outstretched. I took this photo in Dubai, from its token nature reserve.



3 April Serendib scops owl (*Otus thilohoffmanni*) ... This owl was only discovered in 2001 and described to science in 2004. Only between 150 and 700 are thought to exist, and all are in southern Sri Lanka. I saw these two after scrambling up a stream of rocks, roots and ledges, and this was the best photo I could get without disturbing them. To think, 20 years ago no one knew this species lived.



6 April Bird of the day. Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*) ... This is fairly common in Europe, but always a pleasure to see with its orangey-pinks and blues, and the fact that it is pretty furtive. In bad light if you see a bird of this size climbing down the bark of a tree searching for insects, it is a Nuthatch; if you see one going up the bark of the tree doing the same, it is a Treecreeper. I believe I took this photo at Cheddar Gorge (where the cheese originates) in Somerset, England.



7 April European storm petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) ... As its Latin name suggests, this is a bird that spends all its time at sea, coming to remote islands only to breed. The same size as a sparrow, these birds are adept at riding ocean thermals and seemingly dancing on the water to pick out crustaceans and small fish. I took this petrel about five miles off the coast of the Isles of Scilly, Cornwall, England.



8 April **Little green bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*)** ... The bee-eater family is a successful one, spread across much of the Old World, and that detaches bees' stings before eating them. This photo, I took in Sri Lanka, shows the *Merops orientalis orientalis* sub-species, evident by extra rufous shading to the neck.

9 April **Water rail (*Rallus aquaticus*)** ... This is not a rarity in Europe, Asia and North Africa but one that can be very hard to see, like the Eurasian bittern (shown to you earlier) skulking in thick Phragmites reed beds and not often emerging. In Gloucestershire, England, I hit the jackpot by seeing these two together, a first for me.



14 April (back from its Easter holidays): **Ceylon frogmouth (*Batrachostomus moniliger*)** ... I was told when I reached Sinharaja National Forest in Sri Lanka that a pair of frogmouth had been heard, but locating and then reaching them for a photo was a crazed affair of brambles, tree branches and that favourite impediment of birders: leeches! This



was the best angle I could get of this iconic species, which is endemic to Sri Lanka and a small region of India. The female is the one to the left.



15 April Eurasian bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) ... Far too colourful for the U.K., one might say, and we might get one or two turn up a year, birds that have just over-migrated, but in 2017 seven arrived in a private quarry on the Leicestershire/Nottinghamshire border, and it was a sensation. The birds attempted three broods on three nests, but unfortunately a cool August meant there was no success in raising young. A little too distant for great photos, but I snapped this one.

16 April Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) ... I

have started to take requests (please ask, I will see if I have taken a photo of the bird, or genre of bird, you ask for), Chris Crenshaw asking for a photo of a falcon. This is probably the most common bird of prey across Europe, North Africa and



parts of Asia, and it is the one bird that truly hovers. It is quite joyous to watch it beating its wings so fast yet its body remaining absolutely immobile as it stares down at lunch. This is the female of the species, the male having some dusty blues and reds, too. This photo I took at Oare Marshes on the North Kent coast where the River Thames meets the English Channel.



17 April Sarus crane (*Antigone antigone*) ... Named for the daughter and guide of Oedipus in mythology, there are thought to be around 25,000 of this largely non-migratory species dotted in India, a few spots of Southeast Asia and Australia. I saw these three flying across a small lake near to Inle Lake, Myanmar, and to say I was excited does not do justice to my emotions. The Myanmar population is counted at about 200, and there was no literature stating there were any where I saw these three. Francesca, my wife, spotted them and said “I think there are some cormorants coming in.” “They’re not cormorants!!!!!!,” I replied, after which my conversation probably become incoherent. These birds are as tall as I am, 5 foot 11 inches.



20 April Streamer-tailed tyrant (*Gubernetes yetapa*) ... The tyrant family of birds are New World flycatchers, that is, only found in the Western Hemisphere. I was in northern Argentina on the search for the spectacular Strange-tailed tyrant, which I saw but was not able to photograph. It looks like it is a sparrow with an eagle-feather stuck to its backside. In Panama I caught up with a Long-

tailed tyrant, but the Streamer-tailed tyrant is perhaps the hardest to find. This is from near to a small Argentine town called Carlos Pellegrini.



21 April Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) ... This is a cool species, an owl frequenting North and South America that nests in the ground like a prairie dog or rabbit and often posts a sentry looking for predators. Living always on the ground, it has quite long legs to help it run to safety when needed. My first time I saw this species was on Duck Cay in the Florida Keys, but this photo was taken at the extreme northern tip of the island of Aruba, at a spot called California.



22 April Red-cheeked cordon-bleu (*Uraeginthus bengalus*) ... A small but very colourful finch that has a wide distribution across sub-Saharan Africa, and a small, introduced population in Hawaii. I photographed this bird—and the very small flock was the only examples of the species I saw—on a hike from the

sunken churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia, to the top of the nearby plateau where Orthodox chapels have been cut over many centuries into the cliff faces.



23 April Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) ... This species can be seen along somewhat swift-moving rivers in hilly parts of the United Kingdom, guarding small stretches of territory. It has unique false eyelashes and nasal flaps that allow it to move up river while under water seeking insects. It gets its name from its characteristics dipping movement as it stands on rocks, as you see in this photo I took after slowly creeping into place (they are skittish) along a river called the Cam Brook near Stoney Littleton in Somerset in the West Country of England.



24 April Long-tailed titmouse (*Aegithalos caudatus*) ... This species is quite common in Europe, always in flocks of about a dozen but also susceptible to cold winters. In England we do not have so many of those anymore, so the species is doing well. It is often tricky to get a decent photo, as the light needs to be right

to bring out the feather detail and the pinky hues. This photo I took at the London Wetland Centre right in the heart of the capital, a former area of reservoirs that was turned into a now-important reserve.

27 April For lockdown week #7 ... Slavonian grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) ...

Known as the Horned grebe in the US, this attractive species is generally seen in the U.K. in winter, when its colours completely change (the creation of



bright colours requires a lot of energy, so birds will only show themselves off to their best ability in breeding season; this species is largely black and white in autumn and winter). I think maybe 30 pairs breed in the U.K., so it is rare in summer. I took this shot in Iceland in an April, and a pair arriving that day were waiting for the nineteen-20ths of a small lake that was yet to melt, allowing me to get fairly close.



28 April Grey-headed fish-eagle (*Haliaeetus ichthyaeetus*) ... Now we're talking! This is an A-list raptor, in the same family as the well-known North American species, the Bald eagle, of which I once saw 50 sitting along maybe two miles of beach in Homer, Alaska. But the grey-headed fish-eagle is resident but rare across much of Southeast Asia., where it is called colloquially the Tank eagle for its practice in sitting on fish and irrigation tanks and presumably hunting for fish. This was taken in the central Sri Lanka.



29 April Long-tailed tyrant (*Colonia colonus*) ... While lumped taxonomically with the New World flycatcher family of tyrants, this species is actually in a family of its own, Colonia. It has a staggering long tail vis-à-vis its body. Living in Central and northern South America, I saw this one, which remains the only one I have seen, in Wekso, Panama, a remote camp that was the former paramilitary training ground for the personal bodyguard of Manuel Noriega, the former Panamanian dictator who spent most of his last 25 years in US and French prisons. Wekso is in the Naso Ameri-indian autonomous province of northwest Panama, and the Naso or Tjër-di people (more info: <https://intercontinentalcry.org/we-are-natures-best-guardians-not-the-state>) are the only people in the Americas to have a king. Their capital is Seiylik (none of this is on Google maps, so you have to take my word for it), three hours up stream in the jungle from the port of Changuinola.

30 April Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) ... The gorgeous, pie-coloured Avocet is the symbol of the Royal Society of Protection of Birds, and a symbol if its and others'



conservation efforts. When I was a teenager, one would have to go to definite reserves in the eastern part of England to see one, and still be lucky, but thanks to education and natural stewardship, seeing one is now almost a given throughout many parts of the

south of the country. I love its Latin name, the "*recurvirostra*" signifying its "upside-down" beak, which it used to scythe through mud for insects. I took this shot in Purfleet, Essex, the exact spot maybe 100 metres from the technical edge of the boundaries of London, and the pylon I feel indicates how it is possible to both have beautiful nature and be within one of the busiest cities on the planet.



1 May Curlew
(*Numenius*
***arquata*) ...** The Eurasian curlew is a species that returns to the United Kingdom and Northern Europe in the spring, where its cry of “currrr-loooo” is one of the most looked-forwards-to, plaintive and wonderful sounds of nature, a sound that evokes both warmer months and

a feeling of wilderness. In recent decades, their numbers have declined slightly. It has the longest bill in relation to body size of any bird we have here. I took this shot on the golf course on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, which is wonderful for birding, and all those bunkers and landscaped hills allow you to occasionally get photos from the same level the bird is on. If I see golfers, I just make myself disappear, not to spoil their game, and then return to birding, and the ground staff have asked to see my photos.

4 May Lockdown Week 8 ...
Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*)

... This species, an Old World flycatcher, has two subspecies, one with a white throat, one with a red throat, despite being called a Bluethroat. The blue on it remains constant for both subspecies. The second part of its Latin name suggests a Swedish origin, and indeed these birds summer in Northern Europe. They are a real rarity in the U.K., so I “twitched” to see this bird on the English Channel in Hampshire.

Twitching is the term birders use when they abandon all other aspects of life to go and see a bird, and of course there are people who take this to the



extreme, but still, taking a train somewhere, jogging a mile or two and then hoping the bird is still there, well, this is where the adrenaline sets in, or the huge disappointment. Bluethroats winter in Africa and the Middle East.

5 May Green-billed coucal

(*Centropus chlororhynchos*) ... This is a member of the cuckoo family (the US has three species of cuckoo, including the world-famous Roadrunner, which I have seen only one of, in the interesting, small town of Chloride, Ariz.). The Eurasian cuckoo arrives from Africa to Europe and the U.K. in spring, indeed, for many hearing it is the beginning of spring, although a little rarer now than it was. Anyway, the Green-billed coucal's status is listed as vulnerable, and it exists only in Sri Lanka, nowhere else.

This photo, a very rare sighting, when I was hiking through the mountains near Dombagaskanda, Sri Lanka. The bill of this bird is only green after the breeding season is over, an ivory colour most of the year, which is curious as I have said previously that brighter colours usually are generated to show off a male to the best of his ability, that is, to find a mate.



6 May Great

shearwater (*Ardenna*

***gravis*)** ... This is truly one of the great sea wanderers, a bird hardly ever seen from the shore and never on the shore. The name shearwater comes from how they glide over the waves, as can be seen in my photo, which I took 10 kilometres or so off the coast of the Isles

of Scilly, itself 20 kilometres off the far southwestern tip of Cornwall, England ... and while I was trying to keep balance on a small fishing boat. This species is not endangered but breeds on only four remote islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, one of which is called Inaccessible Island, and Cornwall pretty much is its northern limit of its range, so to see one for me might be how Tennesseans feel when the Volunteers win the National Championships or Londoners feel when the sun comes out, which it is doing today magnificently.

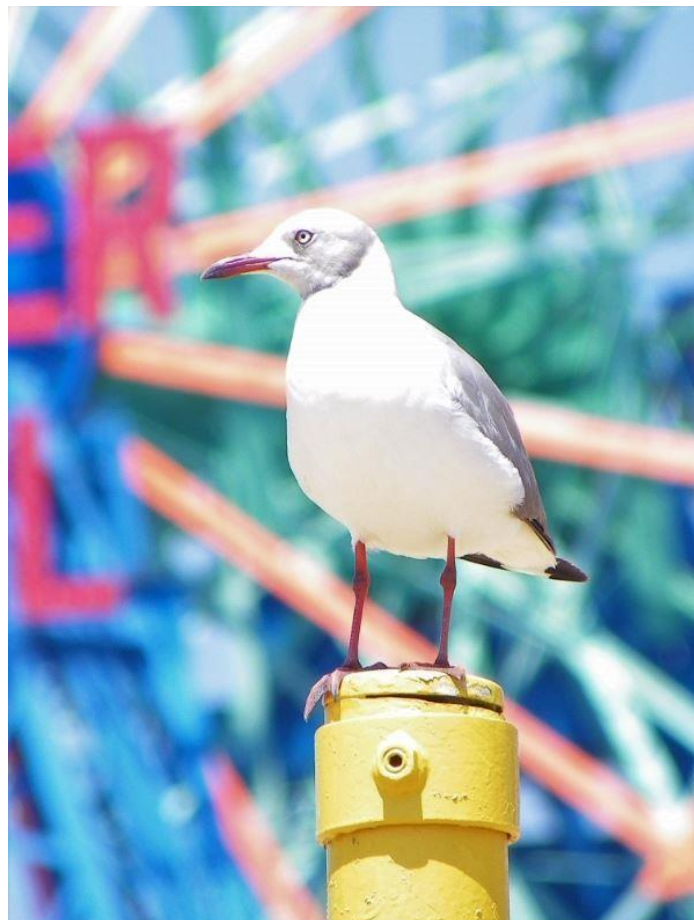


7 May Little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) ... This species might just be about the most geographically spread species on the planet, although not in North America, which does have different species of egret, just not this one. Little egrets also have started to colonise the United Kingdom, and it is not a shock any more to find one in Southern England. When I started birding in the 1980s, it

would have been a sensation to see one. This photo I took in the Mai Po Reserve in Hong Kong, nestled up against the Chinese border. I had met the reserve manager in Sri Lanka, and he invited me, as normally it is not permissible to enter. As I said, the species is not rare, but still beautiful, and in this photo I really like the setting sun, light and composition.

11 May Grey-headed gull (*Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus*) ...

Yes, merely a gull, but one that has only ever been seen in the United States on four occasions, the last time being in 2011 when I was living in Brooklyn. As the eagle-eyed might see I took this photo on Coney Island, Brooklyn, in front of the famous Wonder Wheel. The species lives on the east coast of South America and the west coast of Africa south of the Sahara to South Africa, so one turning up on the hottest day of August 2011 created quite a stir. I jumped on the N train amid many beach-goers, and of course the handful of birders looked complete geeks peering through telescopes and long lenses. One chap watching the gull had flown in especially from Chicago. Yes, it was that big a deal. And I think it is an attractive bird, the red and black bill and yellow eye offsetting the grey head and white body nicely.



12 May Little bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) ... This species resides in southern Africa, where it breeds, but it also migrates to breeding sites in Western Asia and across Europe. In the United Kingdom it is a rarity, with one or two nesting pairs. I photographed this one at the monastery of Iviron in the Greek Orthodox Church autonomous peninsula in northwest Greece, a place where only 10 non-Orthodox (that'd be me) are allowed in a day, as well as



ca. 100 Orthodox, and the process to enter is difficult, lengthy and, charmingly in this day and age, very ad hoc. After years of trying I got a simple email that said "Yes, come." No women have been allowed there since the 9th Century, supposedly at the command of the Virgin Mary. Anyway, I visited for four days last year, and it was otherworldly and memorable. Guests

have to move between monasteries every day, after sleeping for one night, and there is really no transport. When I was walking around Iviron suddenly I saw the beige and black colours of a Little bittern, a bird I had not seen before but instantly recognised. I sprinted to my little monastic cell to retrieve my camera and to my surprise located this small bird in the reeds.



13 May Woolly-necked stork (*Ciconia episcopus*) ...

The second part of this species' name derives from its white collar, reminiscent of the ermine and other finery bishops (from the word "episcopal") wore. This stork, on the vulnerable list, lives in India and other subcontinental countries and is attracted to natural fires, taking advantage of the panic of lizards and other animals trying to escape. All fun,

isn't it? I took this photo very close to the Sri Lanka town of Weligama, to which I had gone to visit Taprobane Island that the American novelist and composer Paul Bowles bought with proceeds of his second novel "Let it Come Down." I met Bowles once in Tangier, Morocco, in 1989, where he lived for most of his life, and also saw him speak at the New School in Manhattan in 1995. Anyway, after seeing the stork and then going to the island, I was caught up in Cyclone Ockhi that claimed 27 lives in Sri Lanka and anywhere up to 750 across its swath. That was a memorable day, a visit to the legendary fort town of Galle, the stork, Paul Bowles' island and a destructive hurricane. Oh, well, as we all know by now, Birds are better than COVID-19!



14 May Black-tailed godwit (*Limosa limosa*) ...

A long-legged, long-billed wading bird that comes in fairly robust numbers to the United Kingdom but breeds only in a few locations in Scotland and north England. This also is the national bird of The Netherlands, its Latin name can be translated as

“muddy muddy,” or “denizen of the mud” and in the last few years some concerns have been raised over its long-term future. There might be a million of this species in existence, but its welfare is the on-going project of several birding organisations in the U.K. In the spring it shows brown-red coloration that offsets the black and white wing bars it shows all year; in winter, it is greyer, but I like this winter shot taken in Kent, where I was born, and offset by the green field and bluish River Thames.

15 May Kori bustard (*Ardeotis kori*) ... This probably is the world’s heaviest creature able to fly, with such birds as the more famous Ostrich not being able to do. The bustard family of birds is well sprinkled around the world, but the Kori member lives in a large arc of Africa from Namibia in the west to Somalia in the north. I photographed this usually shy species in the Awash

(chances are your local Ethiopian restaurant bears this name) National Park in Ethiopia, where I birded with an armed guard. I do not think I needed to pay him £5 for him to point and say “bird” every two minutes, but it was just one of the many “taxes” travellers pay in this wonderfully hospitable country.



Yesterday’s bird, the Black-tailed godwit, is the national bird of Holland, while this bustard is the national bird of Botswana.



18 May Great titmouse (*Parus major*) ...

Not the best photo I have taken, but this one gets to be the BotD for the first day of Lockdown Week 10 because it is only the second species actually to have flown inside my flat (the first was an Eurasian robin (*Erithacus rubecula*). On Saturday a very flustered bird flapped around while we made sure our three house cats did not show it the attention they wanted to show it. This species is very common in European parks, gardens and woodland—indeed, it is its family of birds' most common species—and it shows some nice colours: A black-and-white head, green-yellow back and a yellow breast with a central black stripe running from throat to stomach, although across its large range there are apparently 36 separate sub-species, all showing minor variations of plumage. With DNA technology getting better and better, who knows if some of this number become species of their own at some point. That happens frequently now in Linnaean biological classification. Anyway, after five minutes of a racing heart, the bird

flew out of the window we had left open, and I assume all is okay. White, Super-black and Pieball, our cats, miss it tremendously, but I told them firmly that no cat in this flat takes advantage of any of my avian friends.

19 May Here's one for Chris Crenshaw again.

Marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) ... This is another success story for British ornithology. Reduced to two pairs in the 1970s, some say just one breeding female, this species has bounced back and now is the easiest of the four harrier species we either see annually or, in one case (to be another featured BotD, the Pallid harrier, a rarity. The Marsh



harrier, which resides in the United Kingdom all year, is at its name suggests a bird of reed, pools and marshes, hunting for rodents, frogs and small birds. I took this photo at the beautiful Minsmere reserve in Suffolk, England (indeed, this is where one of those two original pairs would be found) as the raptor zoomed in for the strike. The likely number of this harrier in the U.K. now is ca. 400.

**20 May Spotted crane
(*Porzana porzana*) ...**

The Spotted crane—actually all crakes and related rails—are among the more difficult birds to see, especially in England where this species might accidentally turn up once or twice a year and is no longer thought to breed. I was lucky in that this reported individual in Northeast London along the Lee



River chose a patch of marsh to hide in that was no larger than two binocular scans in width. It remains the only one I have seen, and I have also seen only once the rarer Baillon's crane, in the United Arab Emirates and which was only the 31st time it had ever been seen there, found by a group of British birders who happened to be on a tour on the day before the Gulf & Indian Hotel Investment Summit. Anyway, the Spotted crane usually summers in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, and winters in Africa and the Subcontinent. American birders might think it resembles the Sora rail, and it does.



21 May Golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*). This beautiful species winters in the United Kingdom, where, as you probably know now from previous BotDs, it does not have its brilliant markings and plumage, saving energy for when it needs them in the run-up to the breeding season. I have always loved

how this species stands tall and proud, where many wading birds need to be more horizontal and searching for food in the mudflats. Plovers get their name from the Latin for rain, *pluvius*, as it was always thought they gathered together before a shower or storm. I took this photo one April in Seltjarnarnes on the edge of Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, where it is known as the *lóa*, or *vorboðinn ljúfi*, that is, the “sweet herald of Spring,” the species being regarded in Iceland in the same way Swallow and Cuckoo are regarded in the United Kingdom.



**22 May Garganey
(*Spatula querquedula*) ...**

Probably the most smart-looking duck (especially the male) the United Kingdom receives in the summer. It winters in Southern Africa and across the south of Asia and migrates every spring to across Europe, with the U.K. being its most-westerly

breeding grounds. It is regarded as a great find for any British birder, though, with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which I have been a member of since before I was a teenager, stating there probably are 100 pairs breeding in the U.K., mostly in quiet marshland in East Anglia. The day before I took this photo, I had seen one distantly on a lake, but then the very next day one was reported on a small boat pond in East London, something that just never happens. I raced there and had this beautiful duck to myself for an hour, patiently waiting for the one time it decided to have a stretch of its wings.

26 May To begin Lockdown Week

11: Venezuelan troupial (*Icterus icterus*) ...

Another national bird, this time of the luckless, hapless Venezuela, and I learnt something today. Right until a minute ago I thought this bird was simply called a troupial, but it (and you might remember me saying previously that science is doing this all the time) has been split into three species, Venezuelan, Campo and Orange-backed. Well, I never! Anyway, the troupial is evident from its piercing eye and black-orange colour combination, and it was easy to pick out sitting proudly on top of a cactus singing its heart out, when I photographed it on the uninhabited island of Klein Curaçao, off the island of Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles just north of the northern coast of South America. It's a beautiful bird, and it is also a nest-robber, that is, it does not go to the difficulty of making a nest of its own but steals those of other species, either pacifically or less so.





27 May Blue-breasted bee-eater (*Merops variegatus*) ... Some colour for you on this Wednesday morning. This species lives in East Africa, and I am not sure why it has the word “blue” featured in its name. Yes, there is some, but not so much amid the riot of other pigments that make up its glorious cloak. If you have time, report back to me please how many colours and shades of colours you see. Eight? Nine? More? I found this one high above the Ethiopian town of Lalibela, where are a dozen or so sunken churches, one of which allegedly was created overnight by the Archangel Gabriel. I had climbed all afternoon high above the town to Lalibela Hadud, a plateau on which are nine simple overnight cabins and a 360-degree view of the edge of the Rift Valley. On that plateau is a wealth of animals—Gelada baboon; lammergeier vultures, Francolin partridges and rock hyraxes, a sort of large rabbit-type thing that is closer to an elephant than anything else in terms of DNA—while below it are cliff-side churches and hermitages that require to reach

them either a difficult walk or even a climb up a rope.



28 May Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) ...

If I had to name my favourite bird species, it would be this one. A winter visitor to the United Kingdom, it was the first bird species I noticed in my garden in Erith, Kent—where my parents still live—that I knew was different. Then, as now, I await for it to return, and more do

so if the weather is colder in Scandinavia and food is harder to find there. The subspecies type we see in England is *Turdus iliacus iliacus*, while in Iceland, the Faroe Islands and northern Scotland the subspecies is *Turdus iliacus coburni*, of which this photograph is one of, its markings a little darker and more pronounced. It breeds in Iceland, among other remote, northern landscapes, and I saw this one in the tundra and lava fields of Búðir, Iceland, a magical place where Common snipe were courting in the sky, Common seals played in the sea kelp and White-beaked dolphins passed farther out.

29 May Nightingale
(*Luscinia megarhynchos*)

... Not the most colourful of bird species, but when you have a song like this one, you definitely do not need razzmatazz. Its song is considered to be the apex of animal communication, a sound that is unforgettable and for many, along with the plaintive hoot of the Cuckoo, is the sound of spring, although one increasingly less likely to hear.



The United Kingdom anyway represents its most northern range. I photographed this one when I was walking in the outskirts of the village of Ouranoupoli, Greece, the administrative centre for pilgrims going to the Holy Greek Orthodox Church monastic peninsula of Mount Athos, where I went for four days last year. As I walked along a river right on Athos' border and utterly on my own (people just make a beeline to Athos) I heard and saw a dozen of this species, an utter joy, one of which sang above my head as I had some lunch, sitting on a rock with my feet in the water.



1 June Bird of the Day for the day beginning Lockdown Week 12: Firecrest
(*Regulus ignicapilla*) ...

This species (in the same family as the North American kinglets) is the equally smallest species seen in the United Kingdom, sharing that accolade with its close cousin

the Goldcrest. Both weigh about 5 grams, maybe the equal of the sugar in your coffee. The Firecrest is brighter, though, with a flame-red crest, white eye stripe (the main ID differential when they are flying fast and furtively) and a beautiful olive-gold coloration to the back. They are not so easy to find, but there always is a pair roosting in winter in the woods above my flat, Sydenham Woods. I took this photo (and quickly, as they do not hang around for very long!) at the Walthamstow Marshes in North London, very close to large populations and Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. Indeed, it does not live too far north in England as the average temperature would not be kind to it.



2 June Pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*) ... Tuesdays often brings a raptor for Chris Crenshaw, and here is the rarest of the four harriers that comes to the United Kingdom. The other three are all-year or annually migrating species, but the Pallid harrier is the one blown in error. It should be in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Iran and winters in India and Southeast Asia, so to get one in the U.K. is a joy. I saw this one pop up on the

“birding Internet wires” and rushed the 90 minutes to Royston, Hertfordshire, about 20 miles north of London, and when I walked the mile from the rail station to the site it has been reported, it appeared within minutes, despite the few other people there waiting three hours to see it (on the other side of the equation I have patiently waited eight hours for a reported bird that never did show). The male is slate grey with a grey-white belly, while the female has a brown and white belly.

4 June Lesser yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*)

... Such a dear little thing, the Lesser yellowlegs is a North American wader that is rare in the United Kingdom (maybe four or five a year?) but far more likely to be blown off course than its close cousin, also from North



America, the Greater yellowlegs. It breeds from Alaska across to Maritime Canada and migrates to South America across the USA. I have seen many when I lived in New York City and two in the U.K., once with my oldest friend Alex when I was maybe 17, the two of us jumping over a fence in a sewage farm in South London, the second time also with Alex near to where he now lives in Somerset, England (that is the one in my photo). That second time we were watching it, it disappeared just out of view, when a person rushed over to us and said “Where is it?” No “Good afternoon. How are you? Have you seen the reported bird?” So we told her it had flown away an hour ago. Rudeness has no place in birding.



5 June Bird of the day.
Marsh titmouse (*Poecile palustris*) ... A simply coloured but very neat little passerine, the Marsh titmouse is one of my favourites and incredibly difficult to find, and it also looks remarkably similar to the rare Willow warbler, although in the south of England it is rather deemed by geography that what you are seeing is Marsh, not Willow. The former has a glossier cap

and smaller bib than the latter, which is easy enough to read in the ID books but so much more difficult to determine out in the field. I photographed this Marsh titmouse at Hutchinson's Bank, 10-milers to the south of me in South London and technically in the next county of Surrey, and to where during lockdown I have been running to and back essentially to see for the first time the mega-rare Glanville fritillary butterfly, which was introduced to that site six years ago in a conservation project and is now sustainable, but still damned difficult to locate. As I was looking at the ground for the butterfly (I did see it later on), I heard the titmouse's "saw-whetter, pitchou" call, and looking up, there it was, the clearest view I have yet had for this species.

8 June Robin
(*Erithacus rubecula*)

... The robin usually is voted the United Kingdom's favourite bird species. Now, a word of explanation—The American robin, the one our US friends would all recognise, is not an Old World flycatcher, but a thrush, and it only got its name because of its red breast reminded colonists of "our"



robin back home in Europe. The robin, which is present all year in the U.K., features greatly on Christmas cards and allows one to get so near as to almost hand it food, is a feisty little thing and extremely territorial. If you are another robin, think twice before trying to muscle in on another's territory. It also is the first bird to sing in the morning, its more reedy but pleasant song replaced 30 minutes later by the flute-y call of the Blackbird. This was the first Latin name of a bird I could remember, as I grew up in a town called Erith (I took this photo in the garden of my parents, who still live there), which has nothing to do with that name, but of course it would have stuck in my mind.

9 June Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) ... The osprey might be familiar to both Europeans and Americans as its geographical spread is transcontinental. Also known as the Fish eagle, for its diet consists mostly of those, in the United Kingdom this is a quite rare (although growing slowly in number) summer visitor and breeder. The original U.K. breeding pair, after many decades of



absence, in the 1950s to 1970s visited one loch in Scotland, Loch Garten, to breed, and there were 24-hour surveillance of the nest to stop that hideous, scurrilous, unforgivable breed of man called an egg-stealer, who for some perverse reason would rather look at a nest in a tray that he cannot show anyone else than the majesty of this bird of prey. I took this photo at the eastern tip of another Scottish lake, Morar, which is the deepest in the country and also has rumours of the presence of a Loch Ness Monster-type creature. One interesting behavioural characteristic is that when a pair of these birds nest, before eggs are laid, the male has to prove to the female he can fish adequately. On bringing back the first couple of fish, the female will nonchalantly peruse and then discard the specimens, as if to say, don't be too proud, go get me some larger ones. When she is satisfied that the male can look after her chicks, then the next stage of the life cycle can begin.



10 June Purple-throated carib (*Eulampis jugularis*) ... This species of hummingbird is native to a few West Indian islands stretching from the St. Barts down the Lesser Antilles archipelago to St. Vincent & the Grenadines, as well as to Barbados. The male and female have the same plumage, but the female has a shorter beak, with less curvature, than the male. Hummingbirds can be a nightmare to identify correctly, as they move very fast and the light shining off, in this example, the purple throat might render that throat black, green or several other colours. I photographed this example on the island of Martinique at the Jardin de Balata botanical gardens.



11 June Indian roller
(*Coracias benghalensis*)

... I had always dreamed of seeing either of the two roller species anywhere on my travels. Now, I have seen both, the Eurasian in Spain and this one, the Indian, in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula. They are unmistakable, with the Indian species being brighter in its two tones of blue and its pinky

oranges. This family of bird is known for its acrobatic displays, especially the male during breeding season. Yes, just showing off, really. It takes some time to find one, in my experience, but when you do it will not shy away from flying from wire to wire, from wooden post to wooden post, and I caught up with this particular one in the coastal village of Qadah in the separated part of Oman known as the Musandam Peninsula as I was searching for some petroglyphs, the presence of which were shown on a tattered information board at the junction of the coastal road and this small settlement. I found them, and then also the roller, so a good day.

12 June Emerald dove
(*Chalcophaps indica*) ...

That pigeons and doves are boring is a fallacy, and the further southeast in Asia one gets the more flamboyant and fantastic this family becomes. Although here in the United Kingdom, too, we have the summer resident Turtle dove, which gets its name from its wing feathers that look like turtle scales (maybe



that'll be an upcoming BotD?), but this Emerald dove species belongs in India and a few countries of Southeast Asia. It became known to Western ornithologists because of a painting of one that was the pet of a merchant who lived in Rotherhithe, London, some four miles from where I sit. Have a look online at the fabulous Victoria crowned pigeon (*Goura victoria*) from Papua New Guinea, which I have not seen, if you want to see perhaps this family's most prized member. I photographed this particular bird from the window of a minibus that was inching its way up the stony, one-way lane to the entrance of the Sinharaja national park in Sri Lanka, and as the dove was inching its way looking for seeds and insects in the opposite direction.



15 June Lesser whistling duck (Dendrocygna javanica) ... This duck species lives in Southeast Asia and is not rare, but just difficult to find, and they nest in trees. It is also a nocturnal feeder, so during the day it will hunker in large groups in remote, vegetation-heavy lakes. In the US there are two species of this type of duck, the Black-bellied and the Fulvous whistling. In Myanmar (Burma), near the temple ruins of Mrauk-u, I went for a walk with two local guides who it turned out, despite their protestations, knew nothing about birds and only a little more about the route of our hike, but we had a fantastic day, they learnt a new route that involved a farmer rowing us across this lake and then, slowly rounding a corner on that lake, espying a large flock of these ducks, the only ones I saw, apart from another group later on flying overhead. Mrauk-u is a fabulous place, right by the edge of the land of Rohingya people, the ones who have been forced into Bangladesh, not more than some three months after I was there.



16 June Indian paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) ... This is another species that has been split, in this case in three different ways, due to new DNA technology. As its name suggests, this one of the three is a bird of the Indian subcontinent, with the male (pictured) being black and white and with an incredibly long tail. The female is brown, black and white but just as spectacular, and young birds lack that long tail until their second or even third years. Again, having finery takes energy, and the only reason for energy is to breed, and birds in their earliest years do not breed. It is all rather simple. As the bird flew across my vision as I was strolling through a wet town called Kudawella in Sri Lanka, the tail seemed to reach the wire where it perched a full minute after the bulk of the bird.

17 June Bare-eyed pigeon (*Patagioenas corensis*) ... Wow, this is just a cool pattern around its eye, hence its name, and against a pinkish-yellow beak, a startling plumage. The eye ring of this species of pigeon is a dark blue, it has a large patch of white on its wings, most visible when it flies, and it prefers lowland scrub in Colombia, Venezuela and the Netherlands Antilles, which includes Aruba. The literature says it is a shy bird, but that has not been my experience. I took this photograph at the bathing-volcano of El Totumo in northern Colombia, some 20 miles from Cartagena. Visitors climb up slippery steps to the small, muddy aperture of the volcano and bath in the mud, a geological oddity possible only also in one spot in China.





18 June Malabar pied hornbill (*Anthracoceros coronatus*) ... I only did see one pair of these magnificent birds, but that is all one does need. I mean, just look at that beak. It lives mostly in the forest canopy where a lot of its diet consists of fruit and nuts, including *nux vomica*, or poison fruit, a foodstuff that as its names suggests is not for most animals' consumption. The odd top part of its

huge bill is known as a *casque* (the same term is used for a part of added protection to a medieval soldier's helmet), the function of which is to allow its call to travel farther through woodland. Another odd thing about this species is that when the female lays her eggs, the male will seal her up in the nest with a concoction of mud, grit and fruit pulp, leaving only a small aperture to feed her and, later, the chicks, until such time as they are fledged. At least I guess it keeps the family safe.



19 June Tristram's starling (*Onychognathus tristramii*) ... This is a desert-living member of the starling family, and its Arabian home is centred on Israel and Jordan. The female is browner overall, the male (as shown) with the sleeker, blacker coloration. Both have a large patch of orange-red beneath their wings, which shows well in flight, and a longish whistle call that the tired literature always states "echoes through the wadis," wadis being dry, desert canyons. Some say the call sounds like a wolf whistle. The bird is named for Henry Baker Tristram, a 19th Century biblical scholar on walkabout in the Holy Lands but also a very keen birdwatcher and one of the founders of the British Ornithologists' Union, which still to this day keeps the ultimate list of bird sightings and species in the United Kingdom. I photographed this male on the property of the infamous Kalya Kibbutz in Israel, which was destroyed in 1948 by neighbouring Jordan but was

obviously rebuilt and the members of which also manage the Qumran Caves, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were uncovered.



29 June Black-winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) ... I am back from a week off, in which I did so some birding. This week's BotD will all be birds I photographed over the last seven days in day trips from my South London home. First up is the Black-winged stilt, which is distributed quite liberally around the world, although not now the US since a few similarly plumaged birds were, once

again, split into several different species a number of years ago. Very few of the European species reach the U.K. This sighting at Dungeness, Kent, seen on Friday, is only my third for the U.K., although my second sighting was of a breeding pair with chicks, the presence of which was not advertised to the birding world. Ornithologists state that the species might be a regular breeder in the U.K. in the next 20 or so years, but that does not look to be the case right now. The bird was some distance off the shore line, even with a 600mm lens, and I wanted to wait until it decided to un-tuck its head from underneath its wing, which took some patience in the 30-degree Celsius heat.



30 June Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) ... Widespread across Europe and Asia, the Skylark and its song are one of the highlights of the English spring and summer, although yet again numbers of this species are reduced. When the male (and the sexes are alike) sings it as though a puppeteer has it on a string. The lark climbs two feet in a direct line up, hovers and sings, then it climbs another two feet in the same line and sings again, and it carries on and on, up to more than 300 feet, until you cannot see it anymore. All the time it is announcing to the ladies that "yes, you can still hear me, though, my sweet song." You can see from the second photo a little of this characteristic, but to photograph one on a post (they usually hide amid the grass when on land) also is a treat. Actually, it nests on the ground and feeds there, too, so it only takes to the air during breeding season. This was taken last Monday in Sandwich, Kent, where the earl of the manor did indeed invent a snack of placing some salad or meat, or both, between two pieces of bread.



1 July Ringed plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) ... The Ringed plover is a bird of shoreline, where it nests in quickly made divots in the rocks, where its eggs are incredibly camouflaged. So much so that known breeding sites are usually roped off to clumsy-footed beach-goers. A similar species, Little ringed plover, is marked by a bright yellow eye ring. Some 5,500 pairs of Ringed plover breed in the U.K., and some of them, if they have not migrated south, are joined by those migrating south from Scandinavia, and in winter, the country might have 40,000 birds present. This photo was taken in Deal, Kent, where we stopped for fish n' chips (pay in front of a perspex screen; go to the socially distanced queue to await your number; pick up the food from a special window) and ate them along with a pint of pale ale bought from a pub doing only takeaway, just as the sun was setting at around 9:30 p.m.. and what a treat that was as the U.K. mostly comes out of lockdown.

2 July Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) ... Another summer warbler visitor to the United Kingdom, the whitethroat has indeed a white throat, and when the sun shines on it at the right angle quite brilliantly so. It is a bird that likes to sing from the top of bushes, the species spending its winters in Africa, Arabia and the Indian subcontinent, with the female lacking the male's greyish head and



having a less white throat. I once watched a nesting pair on a lone bushy tree when sitting on a hillside above them at the Welsh-language heritage centre at Nant Gwrtheyrn, a former slate mine called Porth y Nant close to the village of Llithfaen on the Llŷn Peninsula at the foot of the mountain Yr Eifl in the country of Gwynedd, Wales, if you would like to see and try to pronounce some Welsh words. That was magical as I was looking down on the nest as the parents continually flew in with insects for their young. The whitethroat together with the Sedge warbler are signs that spring has arrived, as they sweep in across the English Channel. Indeed, I took this photograph on Worth Marshes, two feet from the beach of that channel, at that point the next land being France or Belgium, depending in which direction you look.



3 July **Gull-billed tern**

(*Gelochelidon nilotica*) ... Not all my photos are crisp, clear images. Actually, far from it, but on this day—and I wish all Stateside readers a very happy 4 July—I wish to show some of the fun, trepidation, anxiety and madness of birding. I had never seen a Gull-billed tern in the United Kingdom before. In Europe, this species is supposed to be in Southeast Europe, although I have also seen it in Sri

Lanka, United Arab Emirates, New Jersey and Florida. As I had the week off last week, I decided to go birding on a couple of days, and my decision where to go was made by a report (I subscribe to birding sites that update sightings) that a Gull-billed tern was at that moment frolicking in my home county (state) of Kent. So off I went to chase it. In birding parlance, this is called “twitching,” and it can be exercised in various, crazed ways. A drive down to my neighbouring region is a twitch, but not a spectacular one, such as hastily made phone calls to friends and the chartering of a light aircraft in the hope of adding one more species to one’s U.K. species list, or to whatever is your list of choice. I have not gone to such lengths, but even on a shorter trip, the stomach is full of butterflies. Will it be there? Has it inevitably been seen one minute before you got there? Do I have enough birding skill to find it for myself? Will it reappear one minute after you have decided to leave? Dungeness in Kent, where the bird was, is a large area, but thankfully that morning the car park nearest to where the bird had been reported had reopened, but it still took me three hours to find the tern. There is of course much else to see, but finally in the distance (hence the poor quality of the photo), there it was, its sleek black cap merging into an all-black bill. It also has black wing tips. I had wonderful views through binoculars, but a heat haze reflecting off the water surface did not do much for photography. Generally found alone or in small numbers, it is a nice species to have added, and seeing it made eating my sandwiches on Dungeness Beach all the more appetising.



6 July Blue-cheeked bee-eater (*Merops persicus*) ... I have presented to you before during BotD other species of bee-eater, a wide ranging family of birds, with the Little green bee-eater (8 April); Eurasian bee-eater (15 April) and Blue-breasted bee-eater (27 May), and here is a fourth, the Blue-cheeked. This is one is limited to North Africa and the Middle East and lives in acacia trees, where it hunts insects, mostly dragonflies. It rarely is found outside its range. I photographed this one in the small United Arab Emirates' city of Al Ain, in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. Al Ain is a real settlement in the UAE, not a hastily built pop-up city such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Al Ain has been on the Bedouin trading route for millennia, a Saharan outpost wedged against the neighbouring country of Oman beneath the mountain of Jebel Hafeet. Al Ain has oases, and they are wonderful, peaceful places where the shade of palm trees cools the trickling irrigation waters.

7 July African fish eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) ... The national bird for Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (the bird appears on the national flags of two of these countries ... you might as well choose a predatory eagle, rather than a tiny sparrow), this species lives throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is in the same family of birds, *Accipitridae*, as the US symbol, the Bald eagle, which has a little less white on its neck than its African cousin, but the similarity is evident. I was hoping to see this eagle when I was travelling around Ethiopia, but I needed to go to the south of that country before the climactic differences allow for it to flourish, and I only did see the one perched on a branch above a waterfall, That was in a place called Lake Ziway, where I also saw my only ever hippopotamus.



8 July Mandarin duck (*Aix galericulata*) ... This species of duck is native to the Far East, where due to habitat change it is less and less common. It is now just as likely to be seen in feral or established (accepted by nature associations as being sustainable and having at least five breeding seasons in any one country) populations in such places as the United Kingdom. I

happened to be in New York City when one showed up there and became a media star, even though “serious” birders knew it to be no more than an escape from a zoo or private collection. It is closely related to the American species Wood duck. In the U.K. one must be careful as to the origin of any one Mandarin duck you encounter (that is, if you care about such things, rather than just enjoying the beauty of the duck, which I do), and these two I photographed in Epping Forest, northeast London, from an established population. Despite the male’s bold colours (a little too much, some say), they disappear easily into woodland, and they do, as do Wood ducks, nest in trees. I rather prefer the subtle but beautiful greys and mottled shades of the female.



9 July Sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*) ... One of two crane species found in North America, the Sandhill crane is a large bird that is unmistakable to identify. This species in the US has a few distinct populations that are two in Florida and Mississippi that do not migrate and one general population that summers in Alaska, the Yukon and Northern Canada. I have seen them fly on migration through Southern Alaska, but this photograph I took of a

non-migrating bird at one of the Rosen hotel properties in Orlando. In fact, I was chased off one of those hotel’s golf courses by golf cart-driving security for preferring not to tee up but to go for a run and search for this bird and the also localised Wood stork, which in the States is generally confined to southern Florida. Cranes (I provided before in BotD a Sarus crane from Myanmar) are majestic creatures, some four to five feet in height and with wingspans of between six and eight feet. In the U.K. we have one species, the Eurasian, which has returned after several centuries away in the last 20 years. I saw a flock of them appear as small dots on a grey horizon and then magically transform themselves into these special birds as they slowly floated across the flat marshes of Norfolk.



**10 July Starling
(*Sturnus vulgaris*) ...**

This is the bird that was (and it might be a myth) introduced into the US in the Victorian era by the founders of the American Acclimatization Society who thought that what those Americans really needed was to have among them every species of bird mentioned in the works

of William Shakespeare. The 60 or so Nightingale (see BotD passim) released died within months, as did those of other species, but the humble starling multiplied and multiplied. In Europe it has actually declined in number of late, but it still is plentiful, and at certain times of the year it gathers to roost in numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Before they settle for the evening they swirl in complex patterns known as murmurations. Perhaps search online for a video of this, as it is complex, wonderful and breath-taking. The photo I took in the Ham Wall reserve in Somerset, England, captures some of that wonder, but the number of birds in it is low for the phenomenon. On close inspection, the Starling is beautiful, especially the adults that show purples, greens, browns and white speckling against red legs and a yellow beak.



**13 July Linnet
(*Linaria cannabina*)**

... The linnet is a small passerine species that shows a varied colour range in both sexes. The “classic” sighting is of the type in the photograph, a male, with a grey head offsetting a red-brown back and a red on its breast that is almost pink. The species flits around in small groups of

about a dozen, and its Latin name translates more or less as linen/hemp-eater, for its fondness of flax and hemp seeds, hence the “cannabina” part. Often it can be found on coastal marsh land, which is among my favourite terrains, myself having been brought up in a north Kent marsh village called Hoo All Hallows where my Aunt Kitty and Uncle Frank lived.



14 July White-bellied drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*) ... The drongo family comprises 29 species, mostly dark and which stand very upright on wires and posts. This is the White-bellied drongo, and you can see the edges of that white to either side. One very strange thing about this species is that when it feels it is in danger it will mob whatever is that source while imitating squirrels or cats' meows. Imitation in birds is not an extremely rare phenomenon, but it is notable. I recently saw a new species for me in the U.K. called a Marsh warbler, which is rare in the U.K. and is known to imitate more species than any other bird likely to visit, so many in fact that ornithologists can tell where it spent the winter and in what direction it migrated to Europe by the calls of species it imitates. As I watched the warbler it was sounding like an Eurasian bee-eater. I spotted this White-bellied drongo near Kandy in Sri Lanka, while I was sitting in the dry on a balcony birdwatching and the afternoon rains fell, but spending time that way at least kept the leeches from seeking my leg veins. One got

me, and after that I learnt how to avoid them.



15 July Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*) ... A member of the grouse family, the Ptarmigan is a mid-size bird that changes colour in winter, when it is pure white, and spring and the rest of the year, when it is mottled brown and black. All year it retains its red "eyebrow." The one I photographed perhaps did not receive the email, but you can see it is just starting to change colour ... well, a little, and not

enough at that moment to fool a fox, but it makes it easier to pick out for humans, too. In winter, they simply disappear in the snow. I found this one just outside of Longyearbyen on the Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, where to go for a walk I had to take a rifle with me to guard against polar bears, although one has not been seen close to Svalbard's only town for many years ... I do not know if I would have known how to use one anyway. The only other sizable settlement there is the Ukrainian/Russian mining town of Barentsburg, which felt like stepping back 100 years and can be reached only by boat.



16 July Woodchat shrike (*Lanius senator*) ... The first shrike species to make it on BotD, shrikes are wonderful birds that prey on insects and collectively are referred to as butcher birds for their habit of pinning captured food on thorns of acacia bushes and the like in order to feed on later. Indeed, the “*lanius*” part of the family’s Latin name means “butcher,” with the “senator” part of this particular species name

referring to the colour of its cap mirroring the brown stripe on Roman togas that could only be displayed by senators. Latin names of birds and all animals are a feast of such wonder. My first Woodchat shrike I saw many years ago in Kent, my home country in England, which remains my sole sighting in my country, where it is a rare visitor, but in Eastern Europe and the Middle East it is easier to find. This one I photographed in the Birkat Al Khalidiya forest, near Sall Ala, Oman, literally where the road ends in that country’s separated, northern enclave of Musandam, a desert region where I was invited to have tea with a family living in open-sided shacks amid a herd of goats. “Who is this idiot pointing a long camera at birds. Invite him over for tea. He obviously needs a rest.” I could not understand a word of what they asked me, but I could offer them pistachio nuts, so all went very well, and there were birds, and let’s face it, Birds are so much better than COVID-19!



17 July Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) ... The Spoonbill, correctly, the Eurasian spoonbill, is a large bird that when I was growing up was limited in the United Kingdom to the eastern county of Norfolk, although now it more often shows up in other regions. It still is a joy to see, whether one encounters it, in the case of the photograph in Hong Kong’s Mai Po reserve. I’d met the reserve’s warden

while birding in Sri Lanka, and he invited me, as usually it is off-limits, wedged as it is against the Chinese border. If I had been there a month later I might have seen the very rare, endangered Black-faced spoonbill, and my heart skipped a beat when I was there as I saw a spoonbill with its head tucked under its wing. I had to spend an hour or so birding before it decided to look at the world, when I saw it was just a wonderful example of the Eurasian species, which in England is limited to eight breeding pairs. There are examples that migrate to the U.K. to add to that number of breeding pairs, which has always been low. Note the Little egret to its left, which is not a small bird but much smaller than the Spoonbill.



20 July for the first day of Lockdown Week 19:

Grey-headed swampphen (*Porphyrio poliocephalus*)

... This species was until 2015 considered the same species as the Purple Swampphen, but then it and five other close relative species were deemed full species. (Actually, the Purple swampphen has occurred in the U.K. only once, and I went to try and see it but “dipped,” which

is birding slang for when you go to see a specific bird only not to see it; it had been there for five days, but departed sometime in the night of the day before I arrived. Oh, well ... !) The Grey-headed variety has a population in southern Florida (the dumping ground of every exotic bird and reptile), and despite efforts to eradicate it, lives on, so much so that it is now accepted on the American list of native species. The bird photographed I saw in Van Long National Park in Vietnam, which is one of the few bird-rich, quiet spots in the northern section of that country. I was very disappointed with the lack of conservation there, but there are dedicated people working to change that. I photographed this from a slow-moving wooden boat propelled by oar. I was not doing the rowing.



21 July Pintail (*Anas acuta*)

... The pintail is a species shared by the US and Europe, and is quite liberally distributed around the northern part of the world, and while not rare it is my experience that not too many are ever seen at one time. It likes to hang out with other species of duck, rather than with members of its own kind. It gets its name from its long tail, which, not too

confusingly, looks like a pin—a hat pin, if those are still used? The male (as photographed) is more spectacular, with a white band separating an unusual grey coloration from a chocolate-brown head. In winter both genders look very similar. I took this shot at my local Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve in Rainham, Essex, which I could see from my childhood home of Erith across the River Thames—although it was not a reserve then, just landfill—but could never reach as there was no public transport that would make the 30-mile journey to the nearest bridge and back around. The reserve this week reopened, but the visitor centre and small café remain closed. I will go back soon.



22 July **Red-faced malkoha** (*Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*) ... With the probably longest Latin name so far in this series, the Red-faced malkoha, which lives in only the southern half of Sri Lanka and at that mostly in the Sinharaja Forest, was the bird that I saw in my travels to this beautiful Indian Ocean island that drew gasps of wonder from us band of five ~~nerds~~ birders. A type of cuckoo, it was one species we thought we probably would not see, and when it arrived it appeared like a ghost out of the vegetation, and 20 seconds later vanished in the same way (I managed to get this one photograph). Cuckoos make little sound anyway, and this one followed that type. Through the leaves, it arrived in a foraging flock of perhaps 10 different species, which science believes forms to collectively protect themselves against predators. Safety in numbers. First come in the smaller birds, then other species and lastly, but not definitely, and maybe five minutes later come ones such as this. It is the equivalent of hearing a rumour that The Smiths are to reform after 33 years of division and acrimony and play a gig and then, with that news far from being confirmed, having to listen first to The Killers and The Strokes. This was the only example of a Red-faced malkoha I saw, but one is enough, one is sufficient to feel somehow sitting in the garden of the gods.

23 July **Turtle dove** (*Streptopelia turtur*) ... This is the species immortalised in the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas”—‘On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, two turtle doves ...,’ which is a little odd, for if the carol is English or French then this species would not have been evident in the colder months of the year. Maybe they were plucked, dried and stored somewhere until



December, and unfortunately today its numbers are severely reduced in the United Kingdom, perhaps due to habitat change, more likely due to the unforgivable hunting practices of some Mediterranean islands and Middle Eastern countries that by law should not be shooting this species but to which bullets are indifferent to anyway. When I was a child my friend Alex and I (and he still has our birding notes from that era) on birding trips in Southeast England would list “Turtle dove: 50+,” which meant we stopped counting. Today, I have seen one in

the eight years I have been back home. Actually, the one photographed. They do show up every year, though just in smaller numbers. This one, ironically, I did see in winter, in January of this year and in a usually un-birded park in East London. It was found by a group of birders involved in the Great Bird Count that takes place that month. I assume a group of birders who did not want to travel far just decided to go birding at their local park, and they hit gold dust. I happened to be five miles away birding when the news broke, so off I went. It is a beautiful bird of pinks and rich orange-browns, with black-and-white markings on its neck (hidden in the photo), and it purrs, which might be why it was chosen for the carol.

24 July Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*) ... A member of the Old World flycatcher family of birds, the Stonechat is a relatively common feature of heathland and marsh in the United Kingdom and Europe. The one photographed is a juvenile, probably a female, and the adult males have brighter red on their chests and a solid black head. One nice thing about photographing these birds is that they often come back to the same perch they just flew away from, which is a trait of flycatchers, especially the Spotted flycatcher, which is becoming rarer in the U.K. I had one once nest in the guttering of my house when I was a child, and it caused quite a sensation, well, among my two or three friends who were also birdwatchers. A close cousin to this species is the Whinchat, which arrives in summer, and this is eagerly awaited for. Stonechats themselves migrate only very short distances, so sometimes you will see the same family all year long. Its call is similar to the sound of two stones being hit against one another, and this is where its name derives.



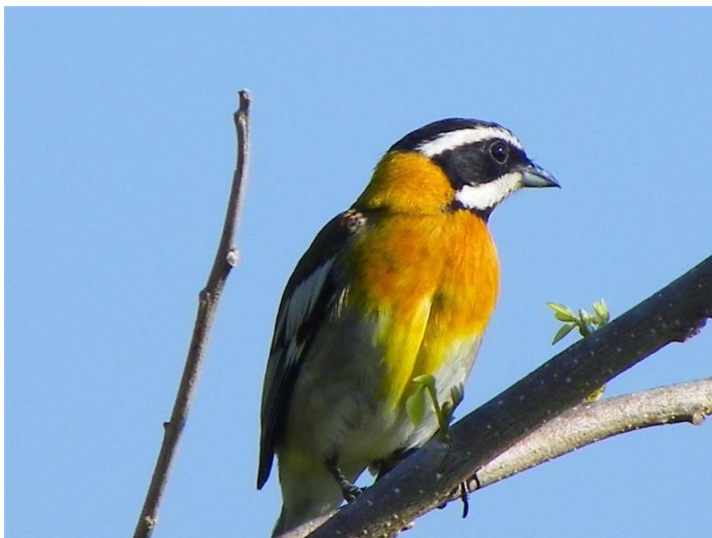
27 July To start my/our 20th week of working from home, today a Honey buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) ... Smaller than the Common buzzard, this species is recognisable by its rich brown, indeed, honey coloration on its breast and stomach and its smallish head and large eye, which appear somewhat like that of a pigeon's. In German it is called a *Wespenbussard*, or

Wasp buzzard, for its favourite prey. I have only ever seen one in the United Kingdom, where it is a relatively infrequent visitor, and this one I photographed in the Liwa Oasis in the United Arab Emirates close to the Saudi Arabian border. I saw two circling when I was off on a very hot walk to a nearby Arab fort, not understanding a word the local groundsman uttered and whose job it is, seemingly, is to hunch down on their feet while looking after water sprinklers watering that odd type of grass that never needs more watering at golf courses. Just afterwards I was invited into a courtyard in which were 30 or so posts on each of which was a hooded falcon. This was a halfway house for birds awaiting buyers, each one of which can fetch prices of \$100s of \$1000s of dollars.



28 July Little stint (*Calidris minuta*) ... I found this species on Sunday walking through the beautiful Cuckmere Haven in Sussex, England, a meandering river that there flows into the English Channel at the Seven Sisters chalk hills, the famous ones that face France and fall sheer to the water's edge. I was collecting samphire, an edible succulent, which we ate with pasta, pan-cooked tomatoes and garlic. Even

with a number of day trippers all talking too loudly, it found a spot to shelter and feed and be out of everyone's way. The Little stint is not rare (around 700 reach the U.K., but breeding pairs are very rare) but a difficult species to catch up with. It generally breeds in Scandinavia and Siberia. It also is a species where a study of its details brings further joy, its scalloped, almost turtle shell-like wings, the white V shape on its back, the russet brown to the front of its neck, its short bill .. and all in a breeding male, which I had not seen one of before. A little farther down the meander was a Wood sandpiper (maybe a BotD soon?).



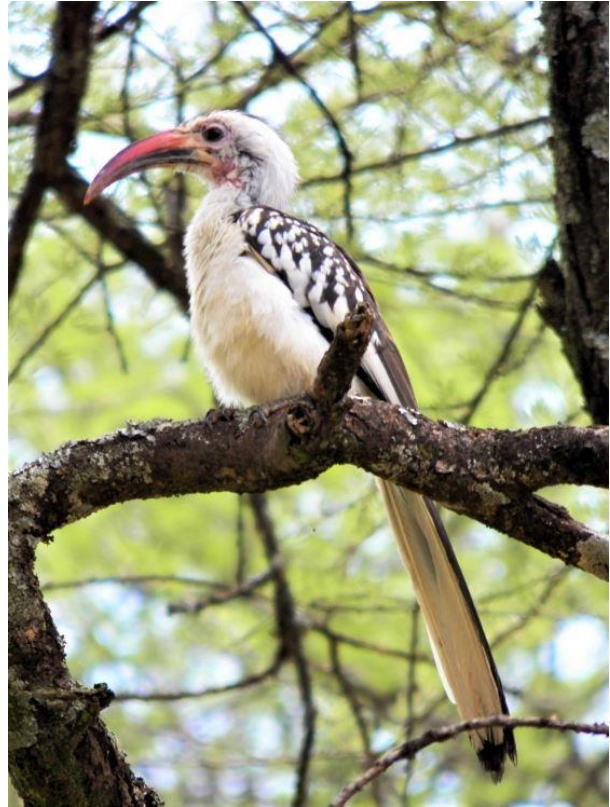
29 July Western spindalis (*Spindalis zena*) ... Formerly known as the Stripe-headed tanager (a species that has since been divided into four species, including *zena*), this is a West Indian species common on a few islands such as The Bahamas and the Cayman Islands, where I photographed this one at the Queen Elizabeth II Royal Botanical Gardens, which is also home to the endangered Blue iguana. The male Western spindalis, as in the photograph, shows all the bright colours, a vibrant yellow

breast and nape, an olive back and those prominent black-and-white head stripes, and on occasion they do fly out of their range and drop down in Florida, where they cause the American birding scene some excitement. I was in the Cayman Islands undergoing my PADI scuba-diving accreditation, so I saw more underwater species on that trip than I did avian ones.



30 July **Yellow-fronted barbet** (*Psilopogon flavifrons*) ... What a wonderful, colourful bird is the Yellow-fronted barbet, which is endemic to Sri Lanka. I was told that it would be a 25% chance of seeing this species as it has regular patterns throughout the day, and where we were going to be at any time of the day likely was not where this bird wanted to be, too, but we got lucky, on two occasions, the last of which in the Sinharaja Forest it stayed long enough for me to get this photograph. Just look at that blue, green and yellow coloration, and with a little splash of red where the bill starts ... it's appears to be a set of traffic lights for the forest canopy. It also has tiny hairs by its bill, rather like a cat has whiskers. These are known as rictal bristles, and the use of them is still being studied. Theories include them having a sensory function for feeding or gauging flight through the air. Others say they can detect in the air movements of animals after they have initially flushed out prey. Maybe STR employees can be given a set to help detect subtle changes in hotel-performance data for individual markets?

31 July Red-billed hornbill (*Tockus erythrorhynchus*) ... The Red-billed hornbill is a species living across a great swath of northern Central Africa, from Mauretania in the west to Somalia in the East. I photographed this one in the Sof Omar Caves in Ethiopia on the road to the obscure point where one road happens to ford the River Shebelle. Francesca, my wife, wanted to go there, even if the bridge was a pale, concrete slab and the river not at all wide at that point, as it does emerge from the ground close to where we were in Ethiopia and eventually flows to Mogadishu, Somalia, where she grew up for five years when her father was teaching physics at the university. Fifty or so slow miles before that point are the caves, which reputedly is the largest cave system in Africa and named after a Muslim holy man. Like the Malabar pied hornbill (see BotD 18 June), this species also seals its eggs, and the female sitting on them, in a hole in a tree with a mixture of mud and feathers.



3 August White stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) ... The white stork is the bird that supposedly brings babies to mothers, the baby wrapped in swaddling cloth. In reality, they are often seen in Central and Southern Europe tidying up nests of sticks, some built by the same birds many years before,

on the roofs of churches and other tall buildings, the adults returning from Africa in spring, which is probably the reference to new birth. A couple of pairs fledged young in England this year, the first for the species in 606 years, all due to a reintroduction project at the Knepp Estate re-wilding project in West Sussex. That project is not without its controversy, some stating species such as the White stork and the Great bustard, also reintroduced, have either not been a part of the British countryside for centuries or never really were. Sights of White stork, all from that project, are reported relatively constantly now around southern England. I photographed this example while sipping a glass of white wine in the French village of Eguisheim close to the German border.

4 August Baillon's crane
(*Porzana pusilla*) ...

Baillon's crane is a member of a family that is pretty mythical for being almost spectral in nature. I think I said that about the unrelated Red-faced malkoha (see BotD passim), but cranes and rails live in the space half a foot into a reed bed and thus almost never detected by observers, who not only do not see the birds themselves but



also not any evidence of them moving just out of sight. If you want a life of pained searching and false hopes, try and find a Yellow rail or Black rail in the US, or a Little crane or Corncrake in Europe. These species, which includes the Baillon's crane, live just outside our experience, it seems. This one—the 31st ever for the United Arab Emirates—I found at the Al Wathba reserve in Abu Dhabi, and the two other people in the birding hide with me did not see it at all, despite my meaningless help such as “there, look there!” and some arm-pointing. I took three photos (before I tried to help others), and only this one is in some small way satisfactory. It then simply disappeared again. One ornithological note in the United Kingdom states “Breeding suspected in Britain.” That is an incredible statement, as it means we simply do not know as we can never see and rarely hear this wondrous creature.



5 August Wood sandpiper
(*Tringa glareola*) ... The Wood sandpiper is a neat-looking member of the wader group of birds that includes Redshank and Greenshank, indeed, the smallest member of that family, but I have always liked its sharp, patterned plumage, crisp supercilium “eyebrow” and all those little white dots that look as though there were dabbed on in some version of pointillism *à la* Paul Signac. That might be the case, as I am always more

likely to see it in mainland Europe than in the United Kingdom, where the one in the photograph that I saw on 26 July being only my third for my country. The one I have seen the closest up was when my friend Francesca Paci rented a small, former tuna factory, known as a *tonneria*, in Italy for her birthday along with a group of friends. It was very close to the southern tip of Italy, its heel, in a place called Punta Prosciutto, or Ham Point, and its large garden had a small pond in it, no larger than two paddling pools. Awake early one morning, I walked past it and to my disbelief saw walking around its edge a Wood sandpiper that must have arrived overnight exhausted from the flight across the Mediterranean.

6 August Olive bee-eater (*Merops superciliosus*) ... There have been a number of bee-eater species in BotD before—Little green bee-eater (8 April); Eurasian bee-eater (15 April); Blue-breasted bee-eater (27 May), and Blue-cheeked bee-eater (6 July)—and here is another, the Olive bee-eater, although at the time in the Awash National Park in Central Ethiopia I was searching for a Carmine bee-eater, which I remain to see. This is still a beautiful bird, though, with rich orangey-yellows, green wings (from where it gets its name) and a Zorro-like black eye stripe. I first saw it as it swooped over an Ostrich, which is the only time I have seen a wild specimen of the largest bird on the planet. Ostriches weigh up to 160 kilograms, while Olive bee-eater weigh in at 0.04 kilograms, a huge difference, especially when there are much smaller bird families than bee-eaters. The species is somewhat unique in the bee-eater world for not raising young in a community of other parents, but alone. Perhaps the Neil Young of the birding world?



7 August Bearded titmouse (*Panurus biarmicus*) ... Always grouped in with the titmouse family, this species' name was changed to that of the Bearded reedling, but actually more correctly should be known as the Bearded parrotbill, as it is the only United Kingdom member of that family, albeit with a few differences, so it flutters between families and often

always just out of the sight of birdwatchers. It likes to sit at the top of reed beds, but it takes only a little wind for it to disappear into those reeds, leaving only a “ping ping” sound as it communicates to others of its species similarly hidden in the phragmites. The male, as photographed, shows a spectacular black moustache, rather than a beard, and chalk-blue cap. This was a rare species when I was growing up, but I once saw six males at the same time, so I always thought it was not too difficult to see. Since then I have seen very few males. This one was at my closest Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve in Rainham, right on the outskirts of East London. I was watching it 20 metres from a warden, who was explaining to a group what to look out for. He should have been looking for himself.

**10 August Little grebe
(*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) ...**

Approximately 26 centimetres (10 inches) in length, this species, the smallest grebe species in Europe, used to be called a Dabchick, but that name seems to have gone out of fashion. This is a bird of lakes and marshes that you first see out of the corner of your eye as a small black dot drops beneath the water's surface to hunt.



The birdwatcher then

looks at the ripples where it disappeared and waits, and waits, and waits. Then s/he might see a small black dot pop up 100 metres or so away, and that is the Little grebe. They are always immensely enjoyable to view. Grebes live close to the water's edge, or usually on it, as their legs are set a little farther back than, say, perching birds, and this means the advantage of those legs being more powerful for swimming but also the disadvantage of them being terrible for walking. So they don't walk. I saw this example hidden in dense vegetation in a reserve just tucked into London, my eye caught by the little white patches on the sides of its face.



**11 August Pearly-eyed thrasher
(*Margarops fuscatus*) ...**

Thrashers are a North American group of birds with curved beaks, part of a family called the mimids, which is a word I have always loved. Mimids! Mimids, just to write it again, include catbirds and mockingbirds, which I am sure those in STR's US offices are very familiar with (I think there are similarities). The Pearly-eyed thrasher lives in a number of Caribbean islands, including the US Virgin Islands, where I happened to be once for

work on my one and only ever mass-cruise. Cruising is enjoyed by many, but it is not my chosen cup of tea, but there I was, and I was asked if I wanted to go on the ship's "adventure tour." Sure, I said, but the adventure was akin to perhaps walking to Walgreen's, but I enjoyed myself and started chatting to a cruiser who needed sticks to help her walk, so I helped her around this one-mile adventure showing her what birds I was seeing, and one of them was this thrasher, which I might have missed if I had rushed off on an adrenaline-fuelled birding extravaganza. It gets its name from its very bright eyes, mostly, probably, as the rest of it is not so colourful, although its speckled brown-buff front is pretty, I think.

12 August **Hobby** (*Falco subbuteo*) ... Today's BotD is literally hot off the press, and it is unprecedentedly hot here in the United Kingdom, the first time ever (global warming?!) that we have had six days in a row above 35°C (100°F), and here we do not have AC in our homes. The weather is supposed to break overnight tonight, but, anyway, after work last night to cool off I went down to a local park where I had heard a rumour that a falcon species called a Hobby had bred and raised chicks, which had fledged but were not yet so confident in flying. Hobbies usually hunt for insects over marshland and heath land, and they are consummate hunters, but to have then in a London suburban park is very unusual. The two in the photo, which I took less than 20 hours ago, are juveniles, and superb. They were tucked away from the sizable number of people lazing in the sun and swimming in a small lake. One thing birders know about this species is that it provides the name for a tabletop football/soccer board game. The inventor wanted to call his game "hobby," after the word meaning pastime, but whoever it is who says yes or no said no, as it was deemed that word was too generic, so the investor took the Latin name for the bird called the Hobby instead, subbuteo. The name Hobby derives from the French.



13 August **Bird of the day for the Hotel Data Conference** (<http://www.hoteldataconference.com>): Ceylon swallow (*Cecropis hyperythra*) ... As its name suggests, the Ceylon swallow is endemic to Sri Lanka, and a startlingly beautiful species, with its completely red breast a stark contrast to the usual Swallow, technically, the Barn swallow, seen in both the United Kingdom and United States. A member of the hirundine family, this species was lumped in with the Red-rumped swallow, one of which I have seen in the U.K. where it is a rare visitor, but since it was made its own species, the numbers of this particular species became smaller, obviously, and it is a fact that DNA

separation of species, or newly discovered or rediscovered species, immediately cause a conservation issue. Farmers and others do not always want to encourage such science as it might limit their ability to practice in the same way, for suddenly the area they live and work in might overnight become a reserve. That has not been the case for the Ceylon swallow, where numbers are robust. Saying that, these were the only two I saw, somewhat distant on the other side of a small valley. What struck me was how content they looked.



14 August Yellow-browed warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) ... The Yellow-browed warbler breeds mostly in Eastern Europe and Russia, and of those a small handful occasionally reach the British Isles. It is a member of the *Phylloscopus* family of warblers, none of which are that colourful, certainly not like their American New World cousins, but I still do not think this species deserves the Latin-translated name of “plain warbler.” I think it is quite neat

and pretty, with that bold eye stripe, two wing stripes, soft face and yellow-olive back against white breast and stomach. Maybe 100 of this species reaches the southern parts of the United Kingdom, usually in autumn, blown west from Russia’s Ural Mountains, Poland and Slovakia’s Tartra Mountains and the Great Plains of Hungary. The one in the photograph is the second I have seen in the U.K., actually both within the boundaries of Greater London, and they are a difficult species to pin down. They are constantly on the move, so some luck and a fast shutter speed are required. This one I saw on the River Wandle in South London, right before lockdown this year, in early March, one of maybe five or 10 of the species that for whatever reason also arrive here during the winter months.



17 August Spot-winged thrush (*Geokichla spiloptera*) ... This Asian thrush species is named for the little white flecks on its wings. A member of the same family as the American robin, it is found in densely wooded areas above 1,500 to 3,000 feet and only in Sri Lanka, so therefore it is one of the species that birders want to see when visiting this Indian Ocean island. There are 26 endemic species on the island. The Spot-winged thrush was the species I saw where I competed most voraciously

with leeches, some of which were the size of my thumb. You see them inching across the pathways on the shortest possible route to the blood of your calves, but a combination of good boots, leech wraps around those boots and well-tucked-in trousers, plus a spray or two, generally keeps them from finding your veins, if not your boots. This species, the thrush, not the leech, is deemed Near-threatened, mostly due to its small geographical range in southern Sri Lanka meaning its population never gets too high in number.



18 August Spotted flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) ... Named for the faint streaking on its breast, the small, sweet Spotted flycatcher is not the most colourful of species, but it makes up for that by being graceful and mysterious. Mysterious in that one never knows where to find one every spring when it arrives from its wintering grounds in Africa and western Asia. When I was a young teenager in Northwest Kent, for three years a pair nested in the eaves of our house, which was met with disbelief and then wonder by the very small birding fan club at my senior school, Chislehurst & Sidcup Grammar School (motto: "*Abeunt studia in mores*" ("Through study, character

grows")); blazer uniform colour: purple; headmaster: John Sennett, educated Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University; former headmaster, Manchester Grammar School). Then when my parents built an extension to the house, they never came back, and today—and not because of that—it is a diminished species in the United Kingdom, although it can still be seen regularly. Look for a bird that takes off on what are called sorties, short aerial hunting loops in which it flies up five or six feet into the air, catches an insect and then always returns to the same post, branch or stump. It will do that countless times, and it is a joy to watch.



19 August Green-throated carib (*Eulampis holosericeus*) ... Closely related to the already shown Purple-throated carib (10 June), this species lives along the West Indian archipelago from the extreme east of Puerto Rico all the way down to Trinidad and Tobago. As with all hummingbirds it is tiny, no longer than 10 centimetres and weighing the equivalent of a 5¢ coin. I found this one (a male due to the absence of orange coloration on the upper wings) in a patch of jungle behind Pearls Airport in Grenada, an abandoned airport that contains a few relics of Soviet presence on the island before the American invasion in 1983, as well as a Cuba-state airline Cubana passenger plane. All are rusting away in the heat and surrounded by goats. The hummingbird fluttered over everything oblivious to history. The international airport now is right on the other side of the island, in its far south, and it remains the only airport from

which I have left its entrance and literally walked over the mountain in front of it to reach my hotel on the other side. As I walked up the steep-ish slope, I saw a man begin to whittle a stout stick, which when I arrived to him he gave me, saying it would be protection against the dogs on the other side. I never did frequent any, but I kept the stick nonetheless.



20 August **Great grey shrike** (*Lanius excubitor*) ... In the same family as the Woodchat shrike (see 16 July BotD), the Great grey shrike is a winter visitor to the United Kingdom and a species that takes some real hunting down to find. Even if one is reported, they are hard to track, living as they do across wide areas of heath land when the ground beneath your feet is crisp and hard and your breath hangs in the air. It is the largest European shrike

species but also very similar to the separate Loggerhead shrike, which I (and maybe some of you) have seen in North America (the last one I saw Stateside was on a golf course in Savannah, Ga., where I was watching the shrike and not noticing an alligator., which was probably 15 metres away but in that instant felt as though it was only five). You might remember from the description of that previous shrike that this family is known for popping insects and small rodents onto sharp tree thorns for later consumption, and indeed this species' Latin name translates to "Butcher watchman," "watchwoman" (females show identical plumage) or "sentinel." I found this particular bird this January on Frensham Common in Surrey, south England, a small black-white blob on a distant, bare tree just looking slightly different than normal, quite often the cue for raising binoculars.



21 August **100!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Today we celebrate the 100th Bird of the day!!!!** My, how time has flown (sorry about the pun!). Anyway, today's BotD is a special one, the Sri Lankan junglefowl (*Gallus lafayettii*) ... **ATTENTION: THIS IS NOT A CHICKEN!** The Sri Lankan junglefowl is, however, Sri Lanka's national bird and very closely related to the Red junglefowl from which our humble egg-laying friends derive. The Sri Lankan bird (it lives nowhere else

on Earth) is not so easy to find, and I had to search for some time before I saw one fortunately pop out of dense foliage and walk across a path. Look at its colours. It is so beautiful. I was told to listen to the jungle for a bird call that sounded like the name "John Joyce," repeated quite quickly after one another. Does anyone know a John Joyce? And indeed I only saw two groups of this bird the entire time I was birding there. A side note about when I went to Hawaii for my one and only time and I visited the island of Kauai, which remains the most beautiful island I have been to. There, the rooster/chicken, a feral population of what we know to be a chicken, is top of the food chain due to the very good fortune of Kauai being the only Hawaiian island not to have present invasive mink and rats. As they are Animal #1, they have proliferated, and thus the males have had to become even more grand, imposing and colourful to successfully woo females. As one drives along Kauai's roads, they race alongside you displaying a myriad of rainbow colours.

24 August **Marsh sandpiper** (*Tringa stagnatilis*) ... Small, petite and exquisite, the Marsh sandpiper is a wading bird that calls homes in breeding season far-eastern Europe and Russia all the way to the Pacific Ocean, but yet one or two a year do get blown off course to the United Kingdom. I think it is beautiful—the subtle



white eye stripe, the white breast juxtaposed against darker wings, the also subtle yellow legs. I saw this one, actually, my only one, in Cliffe Marshes, Kent, where it gave almost impossible sight lines through the reeds of, or course, a marsh. I wondered if I might get a better view and found a small hole in the reeds that could fit me and my camera and no one and nothing else, and at that moment the bird decided to go for its one flight of the day right in front of me. You might detect a very faint yellowish blurring to this photo to the bottom left- and right-hand sides, which is caused by a long-zoom lens not being able to focus on the reeds as the magnification instead selects the bird. After one photo, it decided it had preferred its original spot, and largely disappeared again, which makes this photo one of my favourites. The species spends its winters in Africa, parts of India and Australia, so it conducts two epic migratory flights per year.

25 August **Black-hooded oriole** (*Oriolus xanthornus*) ... A member of the oriole family, of which North America has the celebrated Northern oriole, formerly the Baltimore oriole and the symbol of the Baltimore Orioles baseball club, which when I first lived in the US was mentioned only in relation to how many consecutive games Carl Ripken Jr. had played, this species is one of the group's Asian relatives, an inhabitant of a large swath of the continent from India through Vietnam and Indonesia. Despite being so



marvellous this bird is hard to find (hence the poor photo) as it spends much of its time in the tree tops and flies directly and fast from one piece of cover to the next. There is a closely related species, the Golden Oriole, which is a rare but annual visitor to the United Kingdom, but which I have never seen anywhere. I have heard one in the tall poplar trees of the Nationaal Park de Biesbosch in The Netherlands, close to the fabulous canal town of Den Bosch, or correctly 's-Hertogenbosch, where the medieval artists Hieronymus Bosch painted his macabre scenes, but it remained hidden. You would have thought a bird so colourful, and the Golden is similar in appearance to the Black-hooded, would stand out a mile, but they simply do not, and the female is less vibrant, so that does not help.

**26 August Azure-winged magpie
(*Cyanopica cyanus*) ...**

A member of the corvid, or crow, family, the Azure-winged magpie is one of the more colourful of the family, with blues and roses, a shiny black cap and a white tip to the tail. It is like its cousins noisy and on occasion bullying to other species in the competition for nest



holes. A resident of China, Japan and Korea, with a little bit of Mongolia and Russia, thrown in, this magpie also has a population in Spain and Portugal, but that is likely to be given full species status when the ornithological eggheads put it on the agenda for discussion. No other population exists anywhere between the two, so chances are the split was finalised a million or so years ago. That's wonderful, isn't it? I photographed this one at the Mai Po Nature Reserve in Hong Kong last October, somewhat jet-lagged following a flight from London as I readied for the HICAP hotel conference. I only had a vague idea of how to get to the reserve by public transport (it is tucked in a relatively obscure corner), and a very kind lady who spoke English and lived for 20 years in Herefordshire, England, gave me the \$1 bus fare off her electronic bus card as the conveyance did not take coins or notes.



27 August **Ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*)** ... The United Kingdom has one member of the parrot family, the Ring-necked parakeet, which is also known as the Rose-ringed parakeet. It is an invasive species but one that now is not going away, its first foothold in the country being Foots Cray Meadows, a suburb of London in which I used to run cross-country races in when I was a child. The rumour is that an original two were let free from the London apartment of guitarist Jimi Hendrix when he lived in the capital in the late 1960s. A nice story, but one that is not true. When I lived in Brooklyn, it, too, had a species of parakeet, the Monk parakeet, which only lived in an electricity substation on 23rd Street and 6th Avenue, two blocks from where I lived. It used to roost there or on warmer days in the Gothic entrance in the Green Wood Cemetery. The U.K. species is one of the few to squawk as it flies, which it does usually in groups and which goes against the usual idea that birds will try and be as quiet as possible in what is after all a break from cover and an onset of vulnerability. Technically, this species' home is India and a band of northern-central Africa, but they are now happily bullying other birds but providing a dash of unusual colour also in northern European countries such as Germany and Belgium, but especially the U.K. When it shows its very narrow rose-coloured neck ring against its light green plumage, rosy eye and red beak, it is very attractive, and you can make that ring out in my photo taken in Beckenham Place Park. Its Latin name has absolutely nothing to do with the Seinfeld character Kramer either.

28 August Eurasian crane

(*Grus grus*) ... The third crane species featured in BotD, following the Sarus crane (17 April) and Sandhill crane (9 July), this species, the Eurasian, is the only crane species to, not surprisingly, live in Europe but also in the United Kingdom, although it has only regained its footing there in the last 20 years. Cranes used to frequent the U.K. for hundreds of years but were



hunted to extinction, but now they are back in the marshlands and fens of Eastern England. I photographed these two near to the German town of Lübbenau in an area called the Biosphärenreservat Spreewald 50 or so miles southeast of Berlin. Spreewald has its own distinct culture and language, called Sorbian, although everyone there speaks German, too. It is a maze of narrow canals and footpaths, agriculture and marshland, and I would on occasion see a distinct V-shaped group of these cranes flying overhead, which is a sensational site. Sometimes I would see the group start to land, but by the time they decided where to do that and dipped below the treeline it would be almost impossible to find them, but once I did (see photo), and hidden behind some trees I watched them parade haughtily up and down for an hour. **(Please note, BotD is taking a break for a couple of weeks as my camera and I are off on holiday to Somerset (West England) and Sussex (South England), but I will return on 14 September. Have a wonderful Labor Day, and remember no wearing of white shoes thereafter!)**

14 September Wheatear
(*Oenanthe oenanthe*) ...

Welcome back. I had two wonderful weeks with Francesca and our three cats in Somerset and West Sussex, and today's BotD comes from that last destination, which coincided with many species' migrations south through England and across the continent to Africa and beyond. The Wheatear, technically the Northern wheatear, undergoes one of the



longest migrations of any small bird, leaving northern Europe and Greenland for Western Africa, and of course back the next spring. On one day of my vacation I ran 20 miles of the South Downs Way, and on hillier sections Wheatear were flying from fence post to fence post always a little in front of me, which was a joy and the only way to see the black and white markings on their tails, which usually are hidden when they are standing. The Wheatear in the photo is a female; males have black on the head and wings. I also saw half a dozen of

them on Ditchling Beacon, one of the highest points of the South Downs Way, as I searched—unsuccessfully on one evening, successfully the next morning—for a Dotterel, a mountain wading species I had never seen before, which was also pausing to feed and rest during its migration.



15 September Green

woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) ...

This is BotD's first woodpecker, a European species more aligned with the American flicker woodpeckers than it is to the "classic" woodpeckers such as the Greater-spotted in Europe and the Pileated and Downy in the Americas. It does not tap, or drum, its bill against the sides of trees, rather eats ants and other insects off the floor in parks and woodlands. Quite often the first

view of one is as it flies off from the ground to the low branches of a tree, where it sits the danger out. So this photo shows it, I believe, having just arrived on a tree but with no intention of feeding there. As it flies, one sees its green wings and a white rump, which always seems curious to me as it acts like a big flag saying "here I am!" I must research this? Other animals such as rabbits have that, too, and it must be because it confuses predators, I would have thought. This is the species that Francesca, my wife, always wanted to see, and finally one day we saw one feeding, not flying off. In my home county of Kent, to the southeast of London, we call this species a "yaffle," probably for its shrill cry as it erupts from the ground. Older British STR-ers will remember the children's animation programme named "Bagpuss," which had among its many characters a wooden woodpecker-shaped bookend that came to life, as did all the characters, called Professor Yaffle. Its creator Oliver Postgate lived and worked for most of his life in Kent.



16 September Daurian redstart (*Phoenicurus aureus*) ...

The redstart family of birds is a colourful one, especially the males, this photo I took in the Tai Po Kau Nature Reserve in Hong Kong (close to the island-state's principal university, which was a sea of political graffiti when I visited last October) is of a female. I seem to be showing photos of a lot more females than males, recently, but while she lacks the bold black face and red breast of a male,

she does show some gorgeous red to the tail, that little touch of white to the wing and a serene face. And to get one perched wonderfully on a rock is a photographer's dream. To reach this reserve I took a bus from the subway station in the town of Tai Po, and it was only the bus line I could see that did not have regular bus stops but rudimentary blue signs haphazardly stuck into course concrete bases. It was strange, as though my bus line did not

exist, but along it came and up into the hills we wound with not a single other passenger. A bus solely for birders! Confusing might be that redstarts are Old World flycatchers, while the American redstart, which really fans out its red and black tail, is in fact a warbler, so probably got its name due to its similarity with European species. I also saw male and female Common redstart, which in the United Kingdom we just call Redstart, last week at Pagham Harbour RSPB Reserve in West Sussex.



17 September Green imperial pigeon (*Ducula aenea*) ... Pigeons are far from dull and boring. If you need convincing, search online for photos of the Nicobar pigeon (*Caloenas nicobarica*) and Seychelles blue pigeon (*Alectroenas pulcherrimus*). I only saw and photographed this one Green imperial pigeon, but my heart leapt as I scanned the Sri Lankan jungle and saw this magnificent beauty perched on a

branch showing the full splendour of its lilac head, orange breast and nape and green and dark-blue wings, and perhaps as it was five in the morning and I needed a jolt to fully wake myself up. It is imperial. Resident of a line of the planet going across Southern Asia from Southern India across to the Philippines, this pigeon consists of 12 subspecies, so who knows how many of those will be one day be designated their own full species? Just due to where I found it, I know this subspecies is *pusilla*.



18 September Barred warbler (*Curruca nisoria*) ... This is a species I “twitched,” that is, I heard that an example had been seen, and I immediately decided to check on train timetables and accessibility so I could get down to where it was as quickly as possible. That required a trip of some three hours, but it was a gorgeous day in Titchfield Haven, Hampshire, and I was rewarded with what I believe is a good photo of the bird against

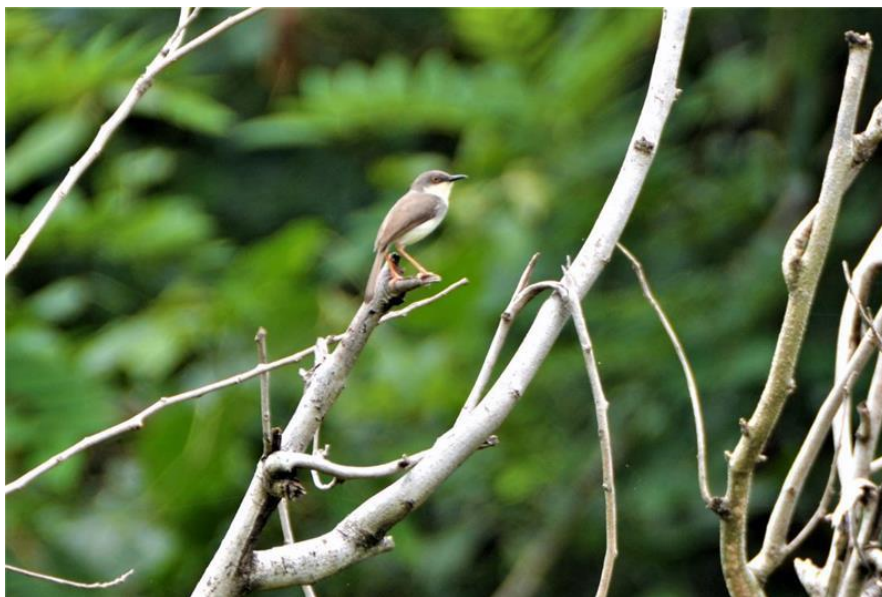
a wall, rather like a photo of a late 1970’s punk band in an urban landscape taken by one of their friends against a graffiti’d backdrop. This bird spends its springs and summers in Eastern Europe and Russia, and it migrates for the colder months down to Eastern Africa, and it is usually a juvenile bird that does not get the correct memo and somehow migrates off track, much to the pleasure in this case of British birders. Adult birds show barring across their breasts, an identification aid that this bird is just about developing, as my photo shows. I saw a Bluethroat (see BotD 4 May) at the very same site, albeit out on the marsh, not right behind the visitor centre as was the case with this warbler. That yellow eye and slightly down-curved beak are superb.

21 September Whooper swan

(*Cygnus cygnus*) ... The Whooper swan is similar to, but a different species from, the Trumpeter swan found in North America. This is a swan species that in the United Kingdom does not come any farther south than a region that starts about 70 miles north of London, and at one reserve, Welney, in Norfolk, its arrival in late autumn is reverently awaited. I happened to be at that reserve near to when it should have



arrived, but I was told that they had not yet done so from Siberia and Greenland where they breed. At that moment I was at the reception that had behind the receptionist a huge glass window overlooking part of the Welney marshes. I could see distant swans, so I asked what those ones were. Looking through his binoculars, the receptionist said, "oh, my word, they've arrived." The swans were finalising their flight as I was driving north, which I very much liked. Our common swan here is the Mute, which has been introduced into the US, but this photo clearly shows the Whooper has a yellow bill, not an orange one as does the Mute, which is a little less vocal than other swans, hence its name. "Cygnus" means "swan" in Latin, as I am sure is evident, so to call a swan "Swan swan" in Latin must add some weight to this species being the royalty of the family? (BotD could be called Butterfly of the Day (if I run out of bird photos of mine, maybe we shall start on the butterflies?)), and on Saturday as part of my training (more on that later) I ran 25 miles along the South Downs in southern England to finish in Brighton where has been seen a very rare butterfly for the U.K. called a Long-tailed blue. It is possible that this species will expand due to the generally warmer weather, but there I was stretching tired muscles when I saw a female drift in to sit on some Everlasting sweet pea flowers, my first sighting of the butterfly species.)



22 September Grey-breasted prinia
(*Prinia hodgsonii*) ...

It is always interesting and wonderful to see a species of bird that you have no idea as to what genre it belongs to. Yes, the Grey-breasted prinia is evidently a passerine, that is, a perching bird, which makes up more than 50% of all bird species, but to what exact family? As I scanned the Sri

Lankan jungle and settled my eyes on this attractive creature, I was nonplussed. Thankfully in the back of my pack I was carrying Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne's "A Naturalist's Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka" (I am sure you all have a copy at home) so quickly identified that it is

a wren-warbler, which I did not know existed as a grouping but has 27 members across Asia and Africa. This one is rather neat, a breeding male with a grey head and breast band, brown wings and tail, white throat and breast, yellow eye and a slightly down-curved beak. It also stands very upright, showing its beauty off to its best effect. As it is part wren, it came as no surprise that it is a bird that skulks around the undergrowth a lot, but also a surprise that it for once was standing in full sight in the open.



23 September Common redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) ...

Exactly a week ago, BotD featured the Daurian redstart (16 September), and today it selects its cousin, the Common redstart, or simply Redstart. Again, their division is probably due to advances in DNA technology, and the fact that the one redstart species that comes to

the United Kingdom gets the simple name of “Common” is due to much of the classification system for the animal world deriving from Europe. The redstart, despite its common name, is a hard bird to pin down in the U.K. It is a summer visitor, and being a small passerine it migrates under cover of darkness and then finds some nice woodland to disappear into and feed for the day. There usually is a fair chance of seeing them as they return on their southerly migration, and indeed this shot was taken in Pagham Harbour Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Reserve in West Sussex in the first days Of this September. There was a pair, a female and this male, and the male’s combination of white, black and red does give you a start when you see it. The “start” comes from the flash of red seen on its tail as it flies away. It is very similar genetically to the Robin (the European one), and it is one of the species parasitised by the Common cuckoo, which does not build nests of its own but lays one egg in the nest of another, and when the young “imposter” bird hatches, it quickly throws out of the nest all the other eggs. Yes, nature can be cruel, but even so birds remain so much better than COVID-19!

24 September

Southern coucal
(*Centropus*

sinensis) ... The Southern coucal is far more common than its cousin, the Green-billed coucal (see BotD 5 May) and a resident of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. This is one of my favourite photos I have taken of the



avian world, although I do realise a tiny bit of twig falls across its bill. Please excuse me. Some of you might write to me to say, Terry, surely this is the same species as Greater coucal? But the thing is the Eggheads are discussing now as to whether it will be declared a full species, and I rather believe it will. This is an adaptable species happy in the deep forest or in the back garden. It comes as a surprise that it is not that great at flying, rather it is happier bouncing around the floor or hopping from branch to branch. It is a member of the cuckoo family, but it is not one of that family that lays its eggs in the nests of other species. It will eat other species' eggs, though, so do not picture it as a complete saint, and there are many tales spoken of it that mark its call as a portent of bad things to come. Nevertheless, I think it is a superb bird, which remain so much better than COVID-19!

25 September



Common cuckoo
(*Cuculus*

canorus) ... This species, the Common cuckoo, has been mentioned in one or two of the very latest BotDs, usually in less than stellar light. It is a parasite. The species' eggs are laid in the nests of other species, whose own eggs are swiftly booted out so that the host

parents look after it, nothing else. When the mother cuckoo lays that egg she mimics a Sparrowhawk and thus birds, including any mothers protecting their original eggs, keep well

away. That is so mind-blowingly brilliant, and of course, all said, it is just doing what nature decreed and thus should not be denigrated. The Common cuckoo is not as common as it once was, but its call of “cuckoo” is eagerly awaited every spring in the United Kingdom, with the first hearing reported to the national newspapers. They winter in Africa. The one you see in my photo is a juvenile—so it definitely is not a “baddie” yet—and shows more speckling and barring on its wings and head than do adults. Again this is another bird that landed on a fence post much to my delight to be able to show it off.

28 September Brambling
(*Fringilla*

***montifringilla*) ...** The Brambling is a winter visitor to the United Kingdom, a European species whose Latin name means “mountain-finch finch,” which is spectacular and largely wrong. Yes, it is a finch, but it is not one that necessarily spends time in upland areas, a case that would be true of its cousin, the Snow



bunting. The Brambling is famous in Hotel News Now’s Cleveland office as when I once visited, on the Saturday before I worked there for a week in December 2015, I scrambled down to Medina County to see Ohio’s second-ever example of this species, which, of course, was thousands of miles off course. That was an interesting birding experience, as it mostly was me standing in line with 10 Amish birders looking at a tree beside a lone house. I first saw the Amish Birders of Ohio approach with the winter sun behind them, walking in a line across a narrow road, wearing broad-brimmed hats and carrying telescopes on tripods over their shoulders, altogether looking like an epic shot in a Quentin Tarantino movie. Then they and I, separately, drove to Cleveland, convenient for me, to see another European rarity, a Black-headed gull, which on an average day in London I might see 2,000 of, but had never seen Stateside. Rarity is relative. The bird in my photo, from London, not Ohio, is a juvenile. Juveniles are far more likely to be confused in their migrations, although the one I saw was not nonplussed, and the one I saw in Ohio was a spectacular male. If the species does reach the Americas, most likely it is to Alaska.

29 September **Little ringed plover**

(*Charadrius dubius*) ...

BotD on 1 July featured the Ringed plover, and today we move on to its cousin, the Little ringed plover. I hope you are enjoying these birds' Latin names, and this one has a corker, as 18th-century naturalists were not sure the two species were different, hence the "dubious" moniker of the



Little ringed. They are, to anyone's eye, quite separate, with the Little ringed showing a bright yellow eye, different colour legs and a different pattern of black and white markings on the head and upper breast—utterly a different species. A summer visitor to the United Kingdom, its breeding success is patchy on my islands, but a pair did successfully rear young last year (maybe this year, too?) at the London Wetland Centre right in the heart of the capital in Barnes and of which I am a member. Its nest in 2019 there was encased by reserve wardens in a large chicken-wire cage to save the chicks from hungry herons, crows and woodpeckers, this being a crowded reserve. I photographed this example in Dubai, pretty much the only sliver of marsh remaining from the developers and that is essentially a tourist magnet to stop off for five minutes to see the Greater flamingos. I quickly stopped trying to focus people's attention away from the pink birds to other species such as Temminck's stint and Greenshank, but in the "Interest Stakes," flamingos win every time for most people.



30 September **Raven (*Corvus corax*) ...**

Now we're on to the big boys and girls! The Raven is the largest member of the crow family and resident across most of the northern hemisphere, with the exception of the Eastern US from the Mississippi to Long Island. It is a majestic bird as it floats imperiously over moorland in ones or groups of two or three with its echoing croak and tell-tale diamond-shaped tail. In the United Kingdom it has extended its range from being only found in the most remote settings to being seen

somewhat regularly across even flat lands, although very rarely in urban settings. "Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling; by the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore" wrote Edgar Allan Poe of the raven, which, as every English schoolchild knows, if the small flock kept at the Tower of London ever leaves then the United Kingdom is done for. To that extent, the beefeaters, the protectors of the Crown Jewels, clip the ravens' pin feathers so they are unable to fly far. I took this photo on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, where I saw three ravens sit on three consecutive fence posts, looking all the world as portents of doom, although I seem to remember afterwards I had a great meal at the Three Chimneys, finished with a 10-year-old dram of Talisker whisky.



1 October Sand partridge

(*Ammoperdix heyi*) ...

The sand partridge is a desert bird, one you might expect to see hundreds of in flocks continuously pecking for food off the dry surfaces, but all the time I was searching for birds in the United Arab Emirates this photo's example was the only one I saw. I was driving up the Jabal Hafeet

mountain and pulled over just before reaching Accor's Mercure hotel, the only one on this huge lump of rock and which sponsors an annual professional cycle race that goes up this 3,000-foot, 11.7-kilometre rock, which I have run up on foot, just because. Anyway, as I stopped, up popped this Sand partridge, who might have been contemplating running up, too? The rippling on its flank looks like a salt-caramel ice-cream dish, and overall it just looks like a very gentle bird for what is a very harsh landscape. Harsh for everything. The heavy plastic road railing it is standing on is there to stop drivers, cyclists and runners careering off the edge of one of the 52 bends of this mountain road and falling into the neighbouring country of Oman hundreds of feet below.



2 October Lapwing

(*Vanellus vanellus*) ... In

the same family as the Ringed plover (1 July) and Little ringed plover (30 September), the Lapwing also is known as the Green plover and the Peewit, after its beautiful, hanging call heard over its breeding grounds on moorland. Ten years ago there was a little bit of a scare in the United Kingdom due

to its numbers dropping substantially, but things seem to be more stable today and again sizable flocks descend outside of breeding season to delight birders. If the light shines on them from the right angle, what might have appeared as black wings reveal greens, hence its alternative name, purples, reds and other colours. The crest is very noticeable, and when it flies its underwings are noticeable for their large patches of black and white, and you can also see rounded wings, which in waders is not so common. It also is Ireland's national bird (I do not know why countries need national birds, but there you go. The U.K.'s is the Eurasian robin (see BotD 8 June), although I think that is by some surreal public vote on the Internet, not something ingrained in official legislation.)

5 October Common tern
(*Sterna hirundo*) ... Terns,

including the Common tern, are among the world's great migratory species, some flying 20,000 miles or more across a year, from their wintering grounds in southern Africa to their breeding grounds in northern Europe. In the United Kingdom their presence swooping low over lakes and marshes, or



diving from a height onto prey, is one of the harbingers of warmer weather. The last part of its Latin name is a nod to the swallow family, that is, the hirundines, because of its gracefulness and dexterity. I photographed this example at the wonderful Oare Marshes in my home county of Kent back in July, and from the garden of a pub from where I had my first lockdown pint one Saturday, drinks being served thorough a hatch in the pub and where hand sanitiser was available before and after the transaction.



6 October Brown-headed barbet
(*Psilopogon*

***zeylanicus*)** ... I cannot abide the anthropomorphisation of animals, that is, giving them human characteristics, and even wildlife documentary makers insisting on having twinkling muzak in the background as the lion cubs frolic in the sunshine, or something along that

line. Nature is majestic but focused or cruel, largely ... anyway, I must say this little fellow looks like a cheeky little one (I think I am being vastly hypocritical here! 😊). This is a Brown-headed barbet, a species limited to the Indian subcontinent and with a Latin name hinting at the place I saw one, Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon. What a yellow eye patch! That large red beak is used to good affect both on burrowing nest holes in trees but also making short work of their main foodstuff—fruit, mostly mangoes and jack fruit. Barbets are closely related to toucans.



7 October

Sparrowhawk
(*Accipiter nisus*) ...

The Sparrowhawk, evidently a bird of prey that hunts small passerines, such as sparrows, is probably the finest flying thing in the universe, a small hawk able to weave in and around trees and branches as it speeds up to what it wants for lunch, a bird that can, to use the expression,

turn on a dime and magnificently gauge distance, proximity, obstacles and poor light to either drop a shoulder or reposition a wing to get to where it needs to be. This photo is of a female, and it is a species where the sexes not only look different, the male being blue-grey, but also are different in size, the female being 25% to 30% larger. This is among the largest difference in gender size in any species. I saw one at the Welney Reserve in Norfolk perched on a branch staring covetously at a flock of uncommon Tree sparrows, with me watching entranced but hoping it would take a more common goldfinch. This photograph I took at the Rainham Reserve, quite close to where I live, and as I walked around a corner there it was on a branch that draped across the path. It seemed happy, so I decided to take another path to get far around it. Its yellow eye seems to penetrate inside you, and the barring on the breast is exquisite. I have already mentioned in previous BotDs that the bird species the Cuckoo can mimic the Sparrowhawk, and also resembles it, both plies resulting in the species it is parasitic to leaving it well alone, for if it really turns out to be a Sparrowhawk, then beware.

8 October **Velvet scoter** (*Melanitta fusca*) ... Not the crispest of photographs I have taken, but that hardly matters when the subject matter is a rare Velvet scoter, a sea duck that usually spends its time an annoying distance between the shore and your binoculars, telescope and camera and a wave it feels comfortable bobbing up and down. Up it bobs, down it bobs, and

it is difficult to see the flash of white under wing (see photo) amid the ebb and flow of water and because it often, too, will be tucked in with a flock of Common scoter numbering in the hundreds, if not thousands. Last December as my friend Alex (who I have been birding with



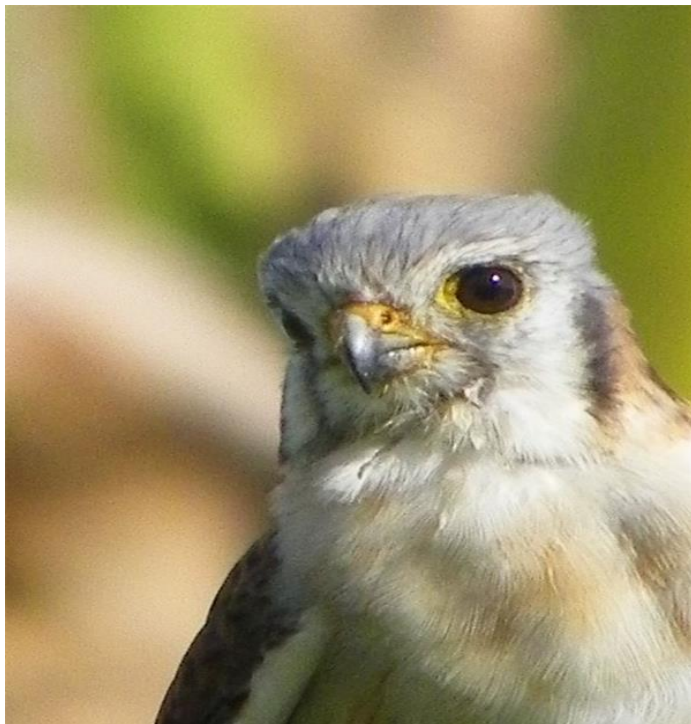
since age 11) and I scanned a very large flock of winter-visiting Brent geese, trying to find a dark version from its Greenland subspecies, I suddenly found this female Velvet scoter, and

in a calm, lagoon pool behind the sea. The white of its under wing can be seen as a lengthy slit, and we waited (yes, it's still a poor photo) until it decided to exercise its wing muscles to have no doubt as to the species. The male has a bright yellow bill. The United Kingdom is about as far south as it winters, its breeding grounds being in northern Scandinavia and Siberia. It is a bird considered to be threatened in terms of its conservation.

9 October White-browed crake (*Porzana cinerea*) ... In the rail, or rallid, family of birds that includes previous BotD superstars, Water rail (9 April), Spotted crake (20 May) and Baillon's crake (4 August), the White-browed crake is a small member off this family that lives in an area of the Eastern world from Australia up and around to Southeast Asia. Like



many of its close cousins, it is a skulker, so to see and photograph this one in the Van Long National Park in Vietnam (not the easiest country to see wildlife, unfortunately; I was shocked by the lack of conservation) was a nice surprise. Van Long is magical, and I was fortunate to get there for its last 90 minutes of “opening,” when it is possible to hire a canoe and paddler and watch the birds start to roost as the sun fell behind sugarloaf hillsides draped in foliage. It was silent, which allowed the birds to be approached, and for this species it is essential to be in place in the first or last hours of light ... or it is gone deep within thick reeds.



12 October American kestrel (Falco sparverius) ... Don't let the serene face fool you, this is a consummate predator. The American kestrel is evidently similarly named to the (European) Kestrel (see BotD 16 April), but the two are not that closely related. The American version lives across both American continents, breeding in Canada and some northern US states and wintering in South America below the Amazon and in most of the US, where it is colloquially called the Killy hawk for the screeching sound it makes. It is the smallest of the US's raptors, inherent in the last part of its name, which in Latin loosely translates as "sparrow-like." I took this shot in the West Indian island of Barbuda, a few years before the island was devastated by Hurricane Irma, looking around the abandoned remains of the K Club hotel, which supposedly was Princess Diana's favourite.



13 October Black-winged lovebird (Agapornis taranta) ... The Black-winged lovebird (you can just see a slice of that black wing in my photograph; it is far more evident when it flies) is also known as the Abyssinian lovebird, for it is endemic to Ethiopia, formerly Abyssinia, well, and a little bit of neighbouring Eritrea, that was once part of Ethiopia and has had a very fractious relationship with its former parent. This lovebird has not been domesticated into a caged pet, thankfully, and even though it measures approximately 16 centimetres in length it is the largest of the lovebird species. This is a male, as the females lack red on their heads. It nests in trees on high mountainsides and plateaus, and I took this shot at a spot called Lalibela Hadud, a five-mile walk up a chapel- and hermitage-pocked hillside above the famous town of

Lalibela and its sunken Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The plateau of Hadud is known for its troop of Gelada baboons.



14 October Canyon wren (*Catherpes mexicanus*) ... A real treat on All Hands CoStar Meeting Day, the Canyon wren is an inhabitant of desert, rocky expanses and dry hillsides across Mexico and the Western US, maybe just into British Columbia. It is more often heard along canyon floors than seen, its loud call echoing off valley sides and large boulders, but this one popped up on a Route 93 road sign between

Phoenix, Ariz., and Las Vegas, Nev., right by the hamlet of Nothing, Ariz., where I stopped to get fuel (there is nothing between those two cities, although I once met a regional GM for a series of InterContinental Hotels & Resorts' properties in Norfolk and Suffolk, East England, who was from the small city of Kingman, which is between those two cities, and he was amazed I had been there). Nothing is basically three mobile homes, a lot of junk and some very expensive petrol. If your gas tank is close to nothing, then you have no option but to go to Nothing and spend Everything, cash only please. Anyway, the Canyon wren is the only member of the *Catherpes* family, even if it is closely related to other wrens, and it uses its long, sturdy bill to prise (or "pry" in American English) insects and the like from rock crevices. What a set of eye-stripes they are!

15 October Ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*) ...

In the very confusing world of both juvenile and adult gull identification, the Ring-billed gull stands out as it is instantly recognisable by the black band that circles its bill about two-thirds of the way towards the tip. Why it has a Latin name that points to the state of Delaware is not known by me, but I



would guess that early ornithologists came across huge bands of this gull along the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. It is probably the US's most-common gull species, but I enjoy taking photos of common birds in situations that portray them differently, and I hope this photo works in that regard. It was taken in Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, just inland from Lake Erie. Perhaps five or 10 of these gulls arrive in the United Kingdom each year (I have not seen one), and they cause great excitement, whereas in the States they are usually overlooked even by birders as just being "that gull in the supermarket car park." That's an odd thing about birding. Rarity makes things more spectacular when that should not be a matter at all. I am guilty of this, too.



16 October Cuban Trogon (*Priotelus temnurus*) ... The Cuban trogon is as its name suggests endemic to Cuba. In other words, it lives nowhere else, and it is Cuba's national bird as its colours—red, white and blue—match the country's flag (yes, in my poor photo, the back looks black, but is in fact a rich blue), but of course those colours also match the flags of the US, Puerto Rico, Texas, Chile, the United Kingdom, Thailand and many other places. The Cubans say it is also the national bird as it cannot be domesticated or caged! Trogons are a dramatic family of birds, all this size and shape but displaying a rainbow of colours, tails and crests. Cubans call this species the “*tocoloro*” for its plaintive cry in the deep midst of forests. I found this one just outside the spectacular, almost museum-like small city of Trinidad in a forest of waterfalls called Los Topes de Collantes, which I reached in an old American Pontiac taxi and

where there is much natural beauty and a state-owned hotel, down on its luck but reputedly still continuing with its spa treatments, called the Kurhotel Esambray. I had been told what this trogon sounded like, and when I at last heard it, I discovered three all close to one another. When you come out of this forest—the only other person I saw was a female Israeli traveller—a man pops out of a reed shack and hands you a free glass of rum, which is how birding should be.



19 October Masked shrike (*Lanius nubicus*) ... Sizzling hot off the presses! This is a new bird for me that I saw yesterday in my home county of Kent, the fourth-ever Masked shrike to be seen in the United Kingdom, a bird that had appeared on Saturday, I saw yesterday and I rather think with last night's southerly winds has disappeared before today's first light. No reports have come in so far today, but off I went yesterday in a very small window to see it.

Following up from previous shrikes in BotD (Woodchat shrike: 16 July and Great grey shrike: 20 August), the Masked shrike lives in south-eastern Europe and across Mesopotamia in such places as Iraq and Iran, that is, nowhere near to the U.K. It also is unsurprisingly the first of its kind to be seen in Kent. This is a juvenile (as I have commented before, it is the young that most often make migratory mistakes and head off, delightfully for us, in a completely wrong direction). Adults are spectacular, with rich maroons, a white flash on its black wings and two black stripes on the head that do appear to look like a mask. The juvenile is still a beautiful thing, with that sharp, tipped shrike bill, grey and brown speckling and a puffy white breast that makes picking it out in the hawthorn bushes a lot easier.

20 October Black-necked stilt

(*Himantopus mexicanus*) ...

The Black-winged stilt is a species easily found—if you are prepared to walk to lonelier marshes, bays and the like—throughout the Americas, although not in the Amazon or to the east of the US inland or on the coastline north of Chesapeake Bay. It has wonderful clean colour divisions between its whiteness and blackness, and I have



always been intrigued by the peculiar colour of pinky-red of its legs. In Europe, we have the closely related Black-winged stilt (see BotD 29 June), which is common in some parts of the continent but only now is establishing itself in the United Kingdom, with this year seeing its second breeding success in the last three or four years. That is, one pair having offspring, not more than one pair. More will come. Anyway, back to the American species, this stilt might be split into two species, a North American and a South American (stay glued to reports from the ABA, American Birdwatching Association; I am sure you will!). Some believe there might be a third, on Hawaii, which I have seen, too. In birding parlance such a bird is known as an “insurance” bird, that is, if you can go and see one, do so, so that you are insured if the ABA, or whatever, decides that it is a separate species. This can be a very nerdy activity, but it still is, after all, birding!). I photographed this one on the made-up-name island of Half Moon Bay in the Bahamas, which is the private island of the Holland America cruise line. It is the only time I have been on a mass cruise, and on the island, where we were all marooned

for the day I walked along the island’s coast until I found an area of brackish marsh. There is nothing else on this island, so I felt I was Robinson Crusoe for a little while.



21 October Little owl (*Athene noctua*) ...

The Little owl is, as its name suggests, a small owl, indeed, the smallest that we have in the United

Kingdom, but it is certainly not the smallest owl by size on the planet. As I am sure you know, BotD has already featured the Serendip scops-owl (the scops-owl genre of owls are the smallest) on 3 April and Burrowing owl on 21 April. The Little owl was introduced into the U.K. in the late 19th Century and is one of two of our five owls that is mostly diurnal, that is, they hunt by day, not by night. (I feel like the other three species at the moment as today for me it was a 5 a.m. start to cover a hotel panel from the Hotel Investment Conference Asia-Pacific, which was beamed live from Hong Kong and thus involved a seven-hour time difference from London.) Anyway, back to owls, this species has a large range sweeping across Europe, Central Asia and across to China, with populations also in North Africa and some parts of Arabia. It is the owl species most connected with the idea that owls are wise, as its Latin name *Athene* implies, deriving from the Greek goddess Athena, born as she was from the forehead of Zeus. It, the owl, not Zeus, measures only 22 centimetres, or so, some nine inches, tiny, and I took this photograph at the small town of Harran in Southern Turkey, very close to Syria, which I was not able to get into as the border guards required me to have a visa from Damascus; that was the year before Syria turned nasty, so I might have lost my chance. Harran is one of the oldest settlements in Mesopotamia and literally has layers and layers of history, including a now ruined great mosque, a Kurdish population and cool, beehive-shaped houses.



22 October White-crowned wheatear (*Athene noctua*) ... The White-crowned wheatear is a bird of dusty scrub and rocky outcrops that is a cousin to that previous BotD star, the Wheatear, or Northern wheatear (12 September). It is quite superb, I think, with its white crown and white underparts, and it calls home Arabia, Iraq, Iran and northern Africa, that is dry, desolate

locales where it picks out insects in rock faces, where it also finds nest holes. I photographed this one (the background colours produce a desert feel) after a long, dusty, dry episode of my own, climbing up the very steep slope to the Israeli fortress of Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea, where more than 900 Sicari Jews committed suicide rather than being taken by the Romans during the Roman-Jewish war of 73-74 AD. As I was climbing up, a group of Jewish youths were coming down armed to the teeth, well, carrying a couple of semi-automatic guns, which to me is not a sight I can ever get used to. From a height, looking down, one can see the shapes of the Roman camps far below, where they stayed as they slowly built up a rocky bank to reach the rebels. Anyway, more jubilant things awaited at the top, including this beautiful bird. The first part of all wheatears' Latin name can be translated as "wine-flowers," as their appearance in Europe occurs at the same time as grapevines blossom. Birds have always been and will always be better than COVID-19!



23 October Common sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) ... There is not so much so common about the Common sandpiper nowadays. Its numbers are not threatened in the United Kingdom, it is just that it is not so easy to come across and always a joy to find. I hope this photograph, which I took in my home of Kent, is a good example of why it does not always produce the best picture if one concentrates

solely on the bird and not also on the surroundings, which can tell an excellent story. It is most closely linked with an American species, the Spotted sandpiper, which I saw on numerous occasions when I lived in New York City and also once on Welsh Harp Reservoir in northwest London, which was quite the day, believe me, considering I heard about the bird at 11, dropped everything, travelled across London, was fortunate that a kind person let me into what is a private hide there, and then, with the bird not being seen for two hours, it duly flew down and landed right in front of us. If only it could always be so easy! The Common sandpiper, meanwhile, with its subtle but beautiful markings, summers across all of Europe and Northern Asia, and it winters across most of the southern part of the planet, but also in very small numbers in the U.K. too. It can amass in large flocks, just that I do not remember seeing that for quite some time. Maybe this weekend, I can find some?

26 October Olive thrush (*Turdus olivaceus*) ... It looks a little annoyed, doesn't it, my interrupting it when it was sipping water from a small leak in the red hosepipe above it. The Olive thrush, from the same family as the American robin, is a species from the highlands of central Africa, but can also be seen on occasion grazing parks for worms and the like. This, too, is a



species that might be split into two or three different species, the one you are looking at the Abyssinian thrush subspecies, at least for the moment. I took this photo in the grounds of the wonderful Seven Olives hotel in Lalibela, Ethiopia ... well, wonderful in a sort of run-down way, and for the wildlife, even though the rooms themselves need an overhaul. I like the fact that bill, belly, eye-ring and legs are all the same colour, more orange than olive, and I rather think this is a rare thing with birds. **(Please note: BotD will be off for four days (use it or lose it), back on Monday, 2 November, a beginning of what will likely be a lively week in the US. I have already voted.)**

2 November **Sacred ibis**
(*Threskiornis aethiopicus*) ...

A species of mythological and religious importance, the Sacred ibis is linked to the Egyptian god Thoth, who had the body of a human and the head of this species and was the Egyptian god of writing, wisdom and death ... not quite sure how the last of those is linked to the other two. The Sacred ibis lives in Africa and



Iraq, which is curious and speaks of two distinct populations, but I found four having a stopover on their migration in one direction or the other. I was amazed when I saw four in a strip of watered grounds in the dusty United Arab Emirates city of Al Ain. I blinked twice, perhaps five times, when I suddenly saw them. A quick look in the rear-view mirror, a slow moving down of the driver's-side window and some photographs. Its nearest relative in the US is the Wood stork, which one has to go to southern Florida to see. I once was hauled off to Sea World in Orlando, which was of interest only because at the top of the dolphin enclosure was a line of Wood storks, White ibis and other birds all waiting to see if there were leftover fish intended for Flipper and his pals.

4 November **Bridled quail-dove**
(*Geotrygon mystacea*) ... BotD took yesterday off to flock to the US polls, where its editor does get a vote due to his having lived in the US—well, in New York City—for 20 years, but it is back today with a stunning species, the Bridled quail-dove, which lives in a number of Caribbean islands from St. Vincent up and around to Puerto Rico. A denizen of mountains and subtropical forest, it is very difficult to find, hence—and this is my excuse—my so-so photo. I uncovered one four-fifths



the way up 1,156-metre-high (3,792-feet-high) Mount Liamuiga, a volcano that has not erupted in 1,600 or so years and is the highest point on St. Kitts. I was in the presence of guide O'Neal, who paid me a compliment by saying he would walk with me again, which I think meant I was not a dawdler. Lunch was eaten in the company of a mongoose, which I did not allow too close to my lunch or fingers (in its mind there might not have been a difference between the two). Anyway, the quail-dove is a skulker to say the least, and it likes shady nooks, which makes it even harder to locate. White stripes that run below the eye seem to me to be far less common than ones that run through or above it.

5 November **Augur buzzard (*Buteo augur*)** ... I have been asked if I have any photographs of a Bald eagle, one of the symbols of the US, in this week of heightened awareness in that country, but sadly I do not think I do. That remains a project, but close in majesty, and looking like it, too, should not be messed with, is the Augur buzzard, a bird of prey resident only in two somewhat large patches of East Africa, parts that have slopes ranging between 2,000 and 5,000 metres, some 6,700 to 16,000 feet, above sea level. This is a mountain specialist, and I saw my one on the slopes of the Bale Mountains in Ethiopia, where I also saw the very rare Ethiopian wolf, which looks more like a Red fox in shape and colour, and the even more rare—incredibly rare—Bale monkey that only emerged to a side of a road due to rain crashing down and us enjoying the near-mathematical unlikelihood of being in the right place at the right time. The Augur buzzard is non-migratory, so here, too, one has to be in the correct spot. I have just learned that the Seattle Seahawks American-football team use a tamed Augur Buzzard at its game-day mascot. Presumably they tried using a Bald eagle, but those American species cannot be tamed (insert your reasons why here please).



6 November **Magnificent frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*)** ... They might look like a scene from an Alfred Hitchcock movie, or mildly Halloween-ish, and they have a Latin name that translates obviously into the English common name, but the Magnificent frigatebird is a true champion and survivor of tropical and subtropical mangrove landscapes, and

the males show magnificent, magenta-red throat patches that stand out a mile as they float over you, and “you” would probably be in a boat at the time, or at least in the sea. I was, standing in a underwater pen full of stingrays off Antigua but evidently more interested in the avian life above me, or too nervous to look at what was swimming around my ankles. Its bill is magnificent, thin but albatross-like, and it uses it menacingly in a practice known as kleptoparasitism, which means essentially it harasses other bird species until such bird gives or coughs up its lunch. This is a phenomenon by no means the property of just frigatebirds, of which there are a number of species. Frigatebirds get that name from the French word *frégate*, or frigate, that is, a fast ship of war.



9 November Darwin's rhea (*Rhea pennata*) ... There are only two species of rhea, the Greater rhea that lives in Central and southernmost Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina and some parts of Paraguay and this one, Darwin's rhea, which lives in Chile and Argentina. Rheas are flightless birds, and like the Ostrich is among the largest birds we have. I was so thrilled to see a rhea of any kind. I just

happened to be scanning a huge section of what is known as the Altiplano, a plain at altitude, above 1,500 metres (4,700 feet), when I saw one distinct blob in the distance, my first Rhea. Darwin's rhea, also known as the Lesser rhea, is smaller than the Greater, not surprisingly, and has sharp claws. Most flightless birds do, as they do not have the defence of flying, and one of those rhea/ostrich-family birds, the Cassowary, native to Australia and Papua New Guinea, is legendary for its ability, if provoked, of easily slitting a human in two. The local word for a rhea in Chile is the *ñandú*, which means "large spider," for it supposedly replicates the shape of one when it opens its wings. When I saw this one I was on my way from the southernmost Chilean city of Punta Arenas up to the magnificent mountains of the Parque Nacional Torres del Paine and on the way I saw an Andean condor, so it was quite the day.



10 November Subalpine warbler (*Sylvia cantillans*) ... This species was a few months ago split into three separate species, and technically the one in this photo I saw in Greece is subspecies *albistriata*, but as I would be utterly unable to split the three species apart other than by where I saw them and because this news I have not yet studied, I will stick with what I grew up learning in bird books and just lump this with all

the other Subalpine warblers, and I am happy with that as this is the only one I have ever seen. Those among you who want more clarity we be told to peruse "Phylogeny and biogeography of the genus *Sylvia*" by Hadoram Shirihi, Gabriel Gargallo and Andrea J. Helbig. I am not even sure I have the correct Latin name up here either. It doesn't matter, mainly due to the huge breeze of joy I felt when I spotted my Subalpine warbler once sunny May morning last year hiking between two monasteries in the Greek Orthodox Church's Holy Peninsula of Mount Athos in Greece, having emerged from the woods, where I was told I could get easily lost, up onto the plain that lead to the central track that eventually reached the area's only village, Karyes. Singing away in a screechy wisp common to *Sylvia* warblers, I turned to see this majestic thing perched at the top of a bush. The red eye is a good ID indicator, as is the grey head coloration that crosses in a straight line above, in the male, a magenta throat and breast, divided by the thinnest trip of bright white, but there are couple of other warblers with very similar markings.



11 November Wilson's storm petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) ... This is one of the prize bird species to see in the United Kingdom, with those wishing to see it needing 99.9% of the time to get on a boat and travel away from land. This is a species that will get grown adults sprinting across a boat deck faster than Usain Bolt could, the identifying features being a jiggly style of flight and legs that trail behind it, as can be seen in

my photograph, which I took off the Isles of Scilly on a memorable early evening when I also saw Great (see BotD 6 May), Cory's, Manx and Sooty shearwaters, Eurasian storm petrel (see BotD 7 April) and a Great skua. Usually even from a boat Wilson's will fly a little distance from the deck railing, but on my epic day one seemingly flew up from where the water line met the boat and suddenly spun over the deck, which led to a great degree of human squealing and delight. In fact, it is one of the most common sea birds there is, living across much of the Southern Hemisphere, where in Antarctic waters it has the accolade of being the smallest warm-blooded breeding creature of all, but the U.K. is a notable distance above its range, so what we get are adventurers or the lost. And it stays out in the ocean throughout its range, an idea wonderfully supported by its Latin name.



12 November Eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) ... One of the star species of the Eastern Seaboard of the US, the Eastern bluebird of fame is not so easily seen as one might suspect from its immortality in literature, verse and celluloid. This shot is over-exposed, which hints at the few opportunities I have had of photographing it, not alone seeing it. I saw my first one at a friend's country house near Pine Plains in Upstate New York (we New Yorkers regard everything as Upstate above the north end of Central Park!), a lone bird flitting up a fence up a hillside. That is apt as it is the state bird of New York State. I have also seen the very similar Western bluebird on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and the very uncommon Mountain bluebird (joy of joys!) among the broken-down buildings of the ghost town of Bodie in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains. This and its related species are members of the thrush family, akin to the

common ol' American robin.



13 November Hume's wheatear (*Oenanthe albonigra*) ... Related to the Common, or Northern, wheatear (see BotD 14 September) and White-crowned wheatear (BotD 22 October), Hume's wheatear is one of the rarities of this family of birds, a high-mountain, desert specialist that more often can be heard than seen, although if you find one, you will likely find more. Locally common is probably the right phrase to use. I was extremely lucky, scanning the mountain top of Jebel Hafeet in the United Arab Emirates. There is a small cafe there, and as day-trippers sipped coffee or cyclists paused from their strenuous climbs, I was slowly turning 360 degrees to try and find this particular bird. One popped out onto the edge way, way above me as much as to see if it could have any lucky seeing an example of that lumbering ape species *Homo sapiens*. As is known by us, some animals are as curious to see us as we are to see them. Hume's wheatear is on the "red list" of threatened birds and confined to Eastern Arabia and

parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Wikipedia page on the bird is so short as not to be really worth having, and it has an illustration, not a photograph, which I think speaks volumes. This is a species incredibly hard to pin down, and what a plumage, as though an Ancient Egyptian architect has just divided it straight down its length, one half black, the other white, although that is the male. The female is white, brown and red.



16 November Woodland kingfisher (*Halcyon senegalensis*)

... The Woodland kingfisher is a widely distributed member of the kingfisher family, living in nearly every part of Africa south of the Sahara Desert. It is brightly coloured, although my photograph of it in front of the sun does not show its bright blue back and wings and only just shows its right red beak. This is because as I was trying to take a photo five or six local kids were throwing stones at it, perhaps annoyed I did not want

to buy a pencil from them. This was in Lake Ziway, Ethiopia, where after a little birding I took a rickety boat out to see Hippopotamus, a species I had not seen before or since. My father grew up in Kenya and what was then called Tanganikya, now Tanzania, in Mombasa and on the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, and he said the most dangerous animal in Africa is the hippo. Get overturned in your boat by one of them, and that's basically just about it, but we kept our distance. I heard the Woodland kingfisher make its call, which sounds like fingers being run down a comb. No birding here in the U.K. this weekend, the weather was so horrific, with rain, strong winds, drizzle, dark cloud, a weekend to stay at home with a book ... about birds, which have always been better and will always remain better than COVID-19!

17 November **Yellow-headed caracara** (*Milvago chimachima*) ... A large falcon, the Yellow-headed caracara is a bird of prey of open, scrubby sites of northern South America from the top of Argentina up and the entire range of Central America. Often seen perched on cacti or exposed branches of trees, it is evident for its black eye-stripe on a yellowish head, with the same coloration on its throat and stomach. It is a falcon but unlike that family it is not swift or graceful in the air, mostly because it is a scavenger and does not need to hunt. It also eats ticks from the backs of livestock. I found this individual in the extreme north of its range, in Panama, at the wonderful Gamboa Resort, where unfortunately I was not able to photograph the even more wonderful Ocellated antbird, which I found very close after the most strenuous exercise of my life, rowing across the Chagres River, the river that feeds the Panama Canal, to walk along the original, now overgrown path that *conquistadores*, or at least the natives they enslaved, carried their stolen gold from Peru en route to Spain. The ruins of the churches they built on the path still can be seen.



18 November **Eider** (*Somateria mollissima*) ... Northern Europe's largest sea duck, the Eider is of course where traditionally the feathers and down derive for eiderdowns, which here in England right now are being taken out of summer storage. This is a duck, too, that can be seen off North American coasts, notably off the East Coast. The male is the colourful one, the female the less so, but down used for pillows and coverlets,

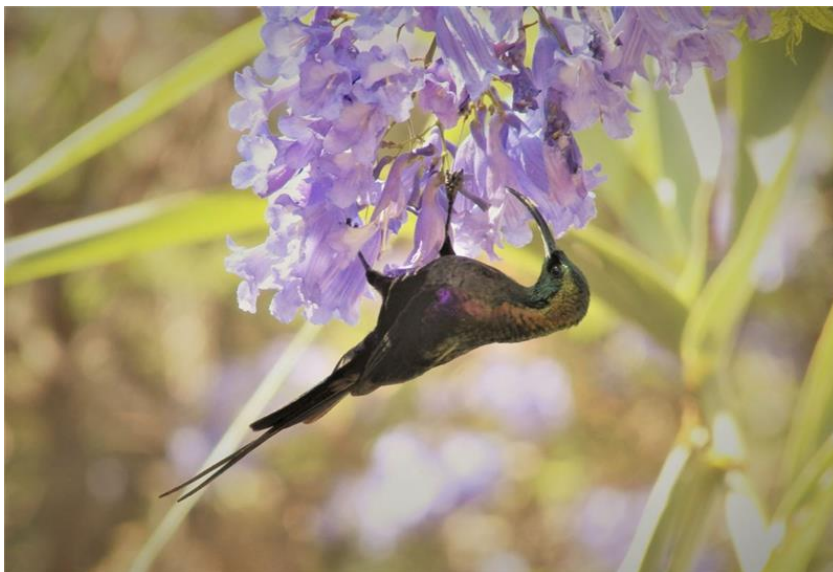
and for the Eider's nest, is all taken from the female (poor little ones!), by both humans and male ducks, and indeed the species' Latin name can be translated as "the very softest body wool." I saw these two on the Holy island of Lindisfarne, in Northumbria, England, which is very apt as hereabouts the species is also known as St. Cuthbert's duck, after the most famous bishop of Lindisfarne, who, among other notable decisions, was said to have decreed one of the first conservation laws safeguarding wildlife and, notably, this duck. Holy Island is a phenomenal place to visit, reached by sturdy car at low tide across a causeway. Fairly numerous are the times in which drivers think they can beat the tide back to the mainland, but then realise they cannot, leaving them and their vehicles stranded. Besides a church and the remains of an abbey, the island, where fellow priest the Venerable Bede wrote the first history of the British Isles, also has a castle, a small village, a regular supply of lost bird-species rarities and two pubs. I enjoyed a pint at the Ship Inn.



19 November **Plush-crested jay (*Cyanocorax chrysops*) ...**

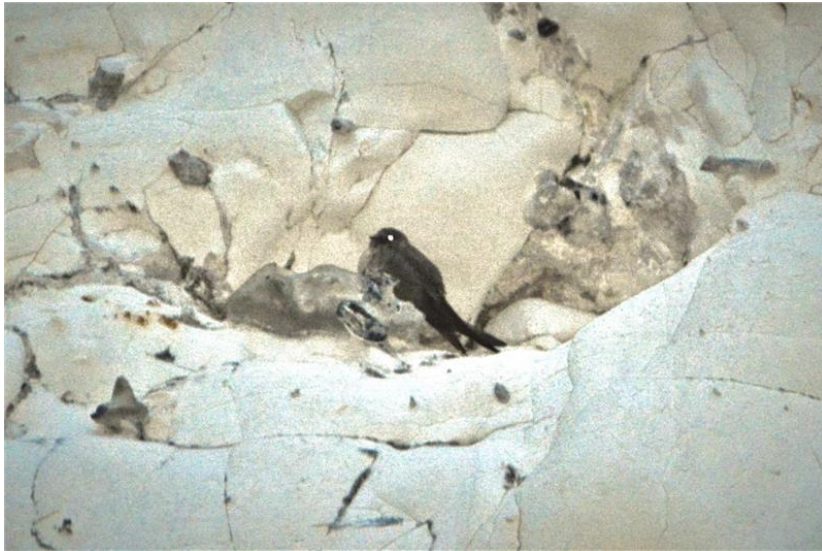
The Plush-crested jay is a large member of the jay sub-family within the Corvid, or Crow, family and inhabits a somewhat thin belt of South American tropical and neo-tropical belt from southern and eastern Brazil down to northern Argentina, where I saw this one. A creamy-yellow stomach offsets blue wings and a vibrant turquoise

eye-stripe that makes this species very evident as it crashes around palm-tree foliage and other tropical plants. I was visiting the dramatic waterfalls of Iguazú, or Iguacu if you are on the Brazilian side, in Argentina, which is a little bit of a circus, reaching the edge of the falls by a toy train, but the cataracts themselves are stupendous and a walk to minor falls away from the main ones is fantastic. You'll have the jungle to yourself, and along one I saw several species of a bird called a manakin and, craziest of all, a Black-billed scythebill (*Campylorhamphus falcularius*), which you will just have to search for on the Internet as unfortunately I could not get a photo. It has the longest bill I have ever seen, and the most curved. The Plush-crested jay is not so rare, but it is a delight to watch.



20 November **150th BotD is today! Let's celebrate with some birdwatching this weekend! Tacazze sunbird (*Nectarinia tacazze*) ...** How the year is racing away on the wings of a dove. Here we are at the 150th BotD, and that sequence takes into account, or actually does not, weekend days, national holidays both in the U.K. and US and my vacation days, which

shows how this virus has certainly overstayed its welcome. Anyway, a very bright bird for this day, the Tacazze sunbird, which lives in the Horn of Africa and one or two other countries, Kenya and Uganda, notably. Sunbirds are the Old World equivalent of hummingbirds (after all, its Latin name means "nectar-drinker") and of which in the Old World none exist. It is named after the Täkkäze River, which forms the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea and is one of the tributaries of the Nile. Yet again, the bird in the photo is a male, very colourful, while the female is drab and brown, and it is the largest of the sunbirds, and thus I rather think the largest of all hummingbirds and sunbirds. This photo was taken on the banks of another river, the Shebele, which flows to Mogadishu, Somalia, where my wife grew up.



**23 November Crag martin
(*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*)**

... Get ready for a nerdy bird story. On Saturday morning, my oldest friend Alex who I have been birding with since I was 11 years of age sent me a message that just said "Eastern yellow wagtail. Worth." As you no doubt all know, Worth is Worth Marshes, next to Sandwich, where indeed the sandwich was invented by the Earl of

Sandwich, "sandwich" meaning "sandy harbour" in Old English. I thought, I'd like to see that. As you no doubt all know, too, the Eastern version of the Yellow wagtail was recently split from the Yellow wagtail into three species ... Eastern; Alaskan and, simply, Yellow. Worth is an hour from my home, and when I got there, no further sign of the bird had been seen, but I did find two Lapland bunting, a species I have never seen before. All in all an enjoyable jaunt, but just as I was leaving a message came through on the bird app I subscribe to saying "Eurasian crag martin, Kingsdown." I checked where it was, and I was 15 minutes away. Sorry for the poor photo, as it could be espied from the base of a white cliff, the same, famous White Cliffs of Dover, but only really examined well with the aid of a telescope, with which I had fantastic views, but it was just a little too far away for a large lens. It was found by a non-birder who noticed a swallow- or martin-type bird in a part of the year where they have all returned to Africa, so he called a birder friend who came for a look, and then the news went haywire. That was at 3 p.m., and it gets dark here in November at 4, so I was just able to get there to see it in the last light. I can only imagine birders at home seeing the discovery, glancing at their watches and realising there is no way they'll be able to see it that day. Some birders no doubt did not sleep that night, to make sure they were in place for when the sun rose, and indeed a small handful were lucky as at first light it stretched its wings and flew south as all knew it would. They knew, as we did the day before, that there was a good chance of seeing it as the bird had to roost for the night, and this species does that on inaccessible cliff ledges, but these are the thin margins the obsessed dwell in. I for one would not have bothered that morning, even if I had not seen it the day before ... I do not think I would have! I called Alex on the way home and he asked if I had seen the wagtail. I say no, but then related the story, and as this crag martin was only the 10th ever to be seen in the U.K., we both realised the mathematically small chance of me being in the right place at the right time. Crag martins are hirundines, that is, in the swallow family, and live around the margins of the Mediterranean. It is best identified when it is flying (I did not see that) when a series of white spots can be seen on the underside of its tail, but the detail I saw in the dying minutes of the day was sufficient for me to tick a new "lifer" bird for my list. This Thanksgiving Week started off on a bang.



24 November
Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) ... A female example of a bird this time around, one of Europe's *Sylvia* warblers and of which the male has the black cap, the female the brown, but as this species is usually seen only in breeding pairs, the two together is always a glorious sight to see. Quite common across Europe and Asia, Blackcap is a species that is only partially migratory, so many

spend the winters in the United Kingdom. Indeed, several species of warbler and other passerines have started to winter here, too, as winters get more clement. I photographed this one, and with a berry in its bill, at the Slimbridge World Wetland Trust reserve in Gloucestershire, England, which was set up by Sir Peter Scott, an artist and conservationist, in 1946, with the WWT having gone on to become a worldwide organisation in terms of conservancy, breeding and environmental sustainability. Some refer to the Blackcap as the Northern nightingale for its tuneful song.



25 November **Wilson's snipe (*Gallinago delicata*)** ... The Wilson's snipe is a bird of marsh that has its first part of its Latin name, as other snipe species, translated from the Latin, and also pretty much the Spanish, as "little hen." That family also lists the Woodcock, which might not grace the dinner plate any more but used to probably before the age of the supermarket. Snipe have long, stocky bills that

literally push straight through the mud in search of food. The Wilson's snipe used to be a subspecies of the Common snipe, which we get in the United Kingdom, but in 2003 scientists split the species into two, with the Wilson's being resident in the New World, not the Old. I photographed this one at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, which I encouraged everyone to visit. That is where the Meriwether Lewis-William Clark Expedition started out from in 1803 on their adventures west. It is not so much to look out, that area, but

I found it hauntingly beautiful, and I got the sense that the ground beneath me was constantly shifting. The Missouri is the longest river in the US, but I believe it is not counted as such as it is technically a tributary of the Mississippi, so is therefore technically not a river. **BotD will take a two-day break as of today as readers from the US are celebrating Thanksgiving. There are always things to be thankful for even in this very strange year. Back on Monday. My Italian wife and myself both hold US passports, so we will be celebrating too.**



30 November Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) ... Back after Thanksgiving, BotD begins the new week with one of the most powerful birds of all, the majestic Golden eagle, which inhabits broad chunks of the Northern Hemisphere, including the western US and some parts of Europe, although there can be isolated pockets of them. That probably is because they require large spaces of wilderness. Indeed, in the United Kingdom that generally means the more rugged areas of Scotland, but reintroduction schemes are taking place in English sites such as the Lake District. Their biggest enemy are gamekeepers, who see them and other raptors as enemies to their grouse populations for profitable shooting excursions. Prison sentences or fines of real substance need to be introduced, or some will just feel they can get away with killing these amazing creatures. I photographed this one in what is one of its most isolated homes, in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia,

where I have no doubt the species has evolved in small but distinct ways from other populations. I have seen one in the U.K.. on the Isle of Skye, and they are magnificent to watch. Their wingspan can be more than 7.5 feet in length, noticeably longer than the tallest basketball player.



1 December Pied wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) ... The Pied wagtail is the most common European wagtail, seen often chirping along concrete reservoir banks, on open fields and sports fields and even in car parks, but I rarely see them perched in trees, hence my wanting to take this photo, which was shot this August in beautiful Cuckmere Haven, which contains the

Cuckmere River as it meanders widely to the English Channel at the base of the Seven Sisters chalk cliffs. The Pied wagtail actually is a subspecies of the White wagtail found across Europe and which has a black back as opposed to the White's grey one, but as the Pied is the variety we get in England that is name we stick with. The female is a little more grey (this is a male in the photo). All wagtail species, not surprisingly, wag their tails as they take breaks from flying or eating, and it is thought they do so to alert other birds or predators that they are being vigilant, although no one really knows.

2 December

Yellow oriole

(*Icterus nigrogularis*) ...

The Yellow oriole is a striking bird of black and yellow that lives in the very northern countries of South America and a few of the very southernmost islands of the West Indies. It is notable for, like some other genres of birds, notably weavers, its nest



being a hanging basket attached to a branch by a long rope of twine it collects and creates bit by bit from the vicinity. It is quite similar in colour to the Golden oriole, which is a rarity in the United Kingdom and a bird I dream of seeing in my own country. I have heard one only once, in the De Biesbosch national park in The Netherlands. I found this Yellow oriole on a very beautiful, sunny day that turned into a violent storm in the northern Colombian national park of Tayrona. The small rivulet we had crossed on the way to the remote beach, administered by the Kogi Native American people who live high up in the neighbouring, massive Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria mountain, turned into a racing stream that we got soaked to the chest trying to cross. That was fun, in hindsight, and ended up with me and my companions jumping into a hot spring to warm up again.



3 December Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) ...

Technically, a species known as the Black-legged kittiwake, as in western parts of the US there also is the Red-legged. The Kittiwake is the “soft-looking” member of the gull family, no brooding presence, somewhat mean-looking faces and aerial attacks on ice-creams with this species. Its thin, pure-

yellow beak helps it look sweeter, too. This species’ land range really only covers the United Kingdom and the northern islands of Japan; elsewhere it frequents coasts. It is just that the U.K. is small enough that the bird is present around it all, but sightings inland, even in such a small island, are not common, and especially not in summer months when it takes to the open oceans. I took this shot at the wonderful Minsmere reserve in Suffolk, England, where much of the original conservation work took place on behalf of British birds, starting in the 1930s. A community of these birds recently started to take shape along the iron bridges spanning the River Tyne in the largish English city of Newcastle, and they are subject to a protection order now, the bird having swapping cliff edges for metal girders.

8 December Rustic bunting (*Emberiza rustica*) ...

Apologies for my unannounced absence on Friday and Monday, but it suddenly became prudent to take some leave (use it or lose it, I believe is the refrain), and I took full advantage by having two days of birding. Some decent and no-so-decent photos will emerge this week from those adventures, suffice to say yesterday was a day of thick fog here, which does



not happen in the United Kingdom very often at all despite a thousand movie clichés. On Friday, though, absolute joy as I found at 8 a.m. in the morning on Thursley Common, Surrey, a very rare Rustic bunting, a Scandinavian/Siberian species that is now classed as vulnerable, its numbers lately reduced. A bird of taiga and conifer, it winters in China and Japan. I found it after a squelchy walk across boggy heath and within a small flock of common Reed buntings, and there was also another species of uncommon bunting there, too

(that is to come later this week). The Rustic bunting is picked out from the others by a small crest, a bill that has the lower mandible a different colour from the top one, two white wing bars and, most tellingly, a broad white supercilium eye-stripe, all of which are obvious in a field guide, less so in the field itself. Plus, every bird in that thick piece of scrub and gorse in which I found it was very active. The literature says the U.K. sees eight or nine a year, usually to the far north of Scotland, Orkney and Shetland. I reported the news, and I think many birders enjoyed seeing it this weekend.



**9 December Hen harrier
(*Circus cyaneus*) ...**

*Apologies for the photo ...
I could hardly see beyond
my nose in the fog. When
I was a child the order of
rarity of the four harrier
species resident in or
occasionally seen in the
United Kingdom was as
follows: Hen; Montagu's;
Marsh, and Pallid. Now it
is Marsh; Pallid;
Montagu's, and Hen,
although perhaps the Hen*

harrier can be seen if lucky in winter. And I was! This is the first one I have seen for more than 30 years, and it is a species that grouse gamekeepers disgustingly try to eradicate despite that being against the law and the bird protested. Good work is being done by many to help save the few breeding pairs that breed in the U.K., most in remote landscapes in Scotland, Wales and Northern England, but the penalties simply are not stern enough, and one gets the distinct impression any fines are paid by the land-owners, not the gamekeepers, more worried about having rich "sportsmen" paying exorbitant amounts of money to shoot grouse and partridge, which are stocked every year in their millions to satisfy that urge. I saw this one in the gloaming murk of last Monday in the Isle of Sheppey in my home county of Kent, and it floated along a field before swooping up and away. I assume that the mist covered my presence, and I was very happy about that. This is a female, commonly referred to as a ringtail; the males have slate-grey bodies and wings ending with black tips, and one of those I have not seen for even longer. What a bird! (Please have a look at images or video, as I realised my photo is poor.)



10 December Little bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*) ... A **bright** photo amid yesterday and tomorrow's photos taken in deep mist. On BotD 8 December was featured the Rustic bunting, and I mentioned I found another uncommon bunting on that day, and here it is, the Little bunting, one of my favourite species. I have only seen one once before, that being on 28 January, 2018 (I know as

not surprisingly I keep detailed lists) in Walthamstow Marshes, a day in which I and several other birders stood for two hours in toe-splitting cold for a bird that had been reported but was quite sensibly staying warm within the brambles. When it did pop up for 15 seconds, we all saw it, and 15 seconds later we had all dispersed, most of us to the local café for coffee. This time around it was warmer, and also warming me up was the fact that I had found a very rare Rustic bunting. What a colourful, serene face has the Little bunting, a species that like the Rustic bunting also breeds in Northern Europe and Siberia and winters in East Asia, so perhaps it is not such a huge surprise they both might be caught up with a flock flying in their right direction, just not the Little's and Rustic's. Males and females are identical. I saw this bird sitting on a bush with its back towards me, so my camera shutter was going mad as I tried to get a few with its head twisted around and facing me.

11 December Barn owl (*Tyto alba*) ... Please excuse the terrible photo, magnified and cropped, but it is a Barn owl after all! The graininess of the photo to me somehow feels more evocative of its life on the fringes of our cognisance, or something like that. Even after you've seen one, you're never quite sure you have. One of the five owl species to be



seen in the United Kingdom, the Barn owl is probably the best known, but like all owls it is seldom seen. A species that hunts right at the end of twilight and into the night, it can occasionally be seen hunting as one drives along country lanes bordering fields, the owl flying up, down and across them in an act known as quartering. This really is a "ghost bird." I have seen video of them flying that has been recorded with state-of-the-art sound equipment,

and barely a ripple emanates. Doubled with its excellent eyesight and hearing, prey such as mice and voles stand no chance. The species' enemy is rain. Those soft, silent feathers do not like rain, and if it pours for days this is a bird in big trouble. As I mentioned with the Hen harrier (see BotD 9 December), I saw this species on this Monday's foggy afternoon. I was in a spot in Kent called Capel Fleet, and I was hoping to see another species of owl, the winter-visiting Short-eared owl, but scanning fence-posts in the gloom I saw a white shape that on strenuous squinting of the eye revealed the majesty of the Barn owl, with its inset dial face and yellowish and white feathers. My heart jumped! I rested my big lens on a fence-post, and this was the best effort I could manage, a poor effort that still shows an owl, so nothing else is of consequence. It is a species distributed across North America, too (indeed, it has the widest global distribution of all owls, despite being absent from most of Asia), but I wonder how many Americans, and others, have seen one? I have seen maybe 20 ever, and some of those have just been a white blob in a nest box that I just had been told was one.



14 December Great bustard (*Otis tarda*) ...

For the last week of BotD for this very strange year of 2020, five species have been selected from my excursion on Saturday, 12 December, one of those memorable days of birding when everything went right. The weather was sunny (there was a nip in the moderate winds), and I saw a host of wonderful birds and two new species for me for the United

Kingdom. First up is the world's heaviest flying bird, the Great bustard, which looks like a small tank. There is a reintroduction programme for this species in the U.K. with maybe 100 individuals, the Great bustard (also see 15 May BotD, the Kori bustard) having been present in the country until 1832, but the one in the photograph decided to leave its Salisbury Plain home for a field in the wonderfully named village of Letcombe Regis, Oxfordshire. I have not seen one before in the U.K., only a sizeable flock of them south of Toledo, Spain (Iberia has ca. 60% of the global population of this species classed as vulnerable), and it is a stupendous bird. I'd be scared walking sedately around, looking as fat as this, a few days before Christmas (which is probably why they became extinct in England two centuries ago). The white eye-ring and malar (cheekbone) stripe on a bluish-grey head and the beautiful chestnut-black patterns on its wings are spectacular. Note that this bird cannot be counted on a "wild" list of species seen in the U.K. as it is yet to be self-sustaining (lots of birding arguments about this), not that the fact takes anything away from its magnificence.

15 December Eastern yellow wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) ...

Resident usually in the far Russian northeast, but with a small handful in western Alaska, this species was until recently considered a subspecies of the Yellow wagtail. A few on occasion did over-extend themselves and end up in the United Kingdom, and now because it is accepted as a species in its own right, it



now get birders' serious attentions. (Also see its family member, BotD 1 December—Pied wagtail.) This was the reason for our mad Saturday driving around the county of Somerset. One had been reported at Steart Marshes, but as is typical of this species reports said it would appear for one minute in the 8.5 hours of light that we get at this time of year. My friend Alex, who I have birded with since we were 11, and I usually have a plan of avoiding large groups of birders (especially this year!), who essentially do a lot of chatting and no actual searching, in order to find things, or not, ourselves. There was much to look at as well. A small bird of prey called a Merlin swooped in with force and took out a Redshank for lunch, a Hen harrier (after not seeing one in decades, I have now seen two in five days) glided across the horizon and two Grey plover plodded over the mud of the Bristol Channel, an inlet off the Atlantic. Finally, we heard what we thought was a wispy pip of a wagtail, and, huzzah, the blessed bird settled down 30 feet from us for all of 40 seconds. It preened, then it took a quick bath in a pool, then it circled our heads and lastly it plunged down to disappear, probably yet again for hours. Maybe 10 of us madly scrambling birders saw it; the 40 or 50 strung along the path would have to hope for better luck tomorrow. Alex has a higher bird count of species in the U.K. than I do (as you know, I lived in the US for two decades), so we cannot even remember the last time the two of us saw together a new U.K. species. As you can see from my photo, the Eastern yellow has whiter flushes of what might be called pale yellow than a Yellow does, but the plumage varies quite significantly, and there are a number of other subspecies of the Yellow in which the DNA does not vary significantly to attribute them full species status-hood. The Eastern yellow's tail looks like the uniform of a rounders or baseball-match referee!



16 December **Great northern diver (*Gavia immer*)** ... The Great northern diver is a species in the US is known as the Common loon, a bird famed for its eerie call during the breeding season, which sounds like a crazed person howling at the moon, that is, in Spanish, *la luna*, hence its American name. The three species of diver (this is the first one represented in BotD) we have in the United Kingdom breed only in the far north, mostly the Scottish islands, and it is during that season that their spectacular colours appear. Down south we see them only in non-breeding plumage, but they are still beautiful and imposing. This one I saw last Saturday at just after 8 in the morning, and it is the closest I have ever seen one, a bird moving slowly into a corner of a reservoir as I lay flat on the bank waiting for it to near. It is my experience with divers that whatever the size of the lake or reservoir it is in, it will invariably be in the exact centre of it, hence giving poorer views. Hope that it decides to spend time in a smaller body of water, or get there early enough that it has not been pushed away by there being too many people, birding or dog-walking, or simply walking. The huge bill is what is noticed first, but its piercing red eye and the intricate pattern of its wings also delight. It is a species of the Great North, hence its name, from the northern states of the US and Canada across Northern Europe and over to Russia and Siberia, but it winters also along both coasts of the US. This is the species depicted in the Canadian \$1 note, which in slang is referred to as a “loonie.”

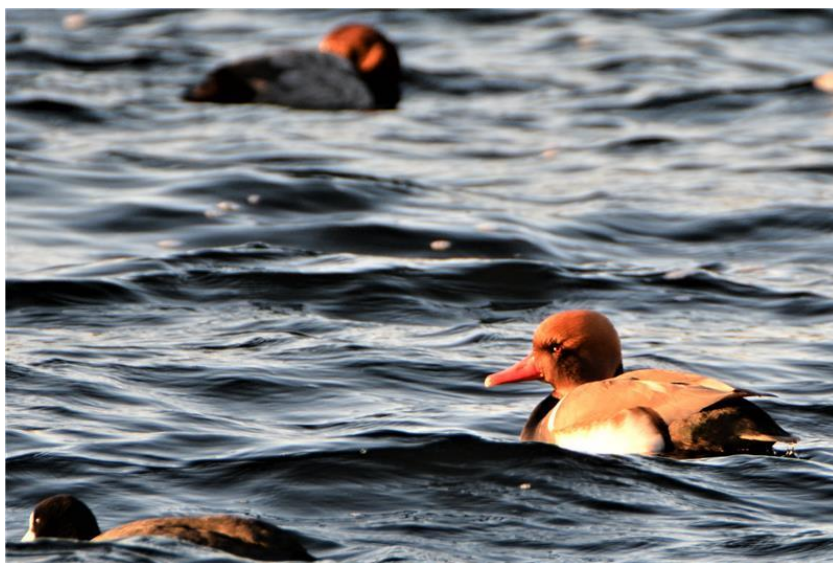


17 December Long-tailed duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) ... The Long-tailed duck truly is a duck of the northern skies, a spectacular species that breeds across the very top of the world and migrates much along the same geography, although juveniles and a few others of the species might skim the coasts of the United Kingdom and

those of the US on its Eastern Seaboard down as far as Cape Hatteras. This duck also looks more spectacular, in my mind, in winter, when its head turns from black to white, along with its primary wing feathers. Its tail remains a twin parallel of lengthy build. The first of this species I saw in the U.K. turned up in a tiny pond, two miles from my home, in Peckham, London, much to the bewilderment of those who went to see it. That was a female, which lacks the long tail and is browner, and in 2013, so I waited until last Saturday before I saw a male in this country, in the middle of Barrow Gurney Reservoir, Somerset. It was a little out of good camera range, but I could have stayed all day watching it—as you know from the BotDs this week, we had other things to find. I had only previously seen males in Iceland, in the waters of Faxaflói around the capital Reykjavík, so seeing one in England was truly a momentous occasion. In the US this bird is now known also as the Long-tailed duck, but some still use the older (and less politically correct name) of Oldsquaw, supposedly for its call that supposedly to some sounded like a Native American woman calling to friends, or something ridiculous like that, so it is said (I have never seen and thus heard the species in summer so could not possibly say).

18 December Red-crested pochard (*Netta rufina*)

... The Red-crested pochard is the last BotD of my trip last Saturday to Somerset, another new species for me for the United Kingdom, but it is a curious one. Its breeding range is mostly Central Asia, the so-called “Stans”—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, &c. with some scattered populations in Europe. It winters in India, Morocco



and Western Sahara and the Nile Delta, but its colourful head and bill has made it popular with zoos and private breeders, the U.K. population most probably remnants of escaped populations. That said, unlike the Great bustard (see BotD 14 December), it is accepted as a

full British species as it has self-sustained for more than the required number of generations to allow it to be listed. Its main U.K. home for some 500 individuals only is the Middle England counties of Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, and for some reason birders upon seeing them do not report them. I have just never caught up with the species, but five seem to be intending to winter in Cheddar Reservoir, Somerset, the area that gives the cheese its name, so right at the end of that Saturday we decided to see if we could see one. Also in this photo is (to front) a Coot and (blurry to the back) a Common pochard, a far more numerous species. And we saw only one Red-crested pochard, although it did not take us long to find it. **Which just leaves me to say that this is the last BotD for 2020 as we all move into the Holidays. I would like to wish you and your families a very merry Christmas or holidays and a Happy New Year definitely a happier New Year!**

4 January, 2021 Butterfly of the day: Glanville fritillary (*Melitaea cinxia*) ... Happy New Year. It has to be a better one than 2020! I have made the bold decision to start the new year with my humble photographic efforts of butterflies, not birds (birds will fly back eventually!), from ornithology to lepidoptery, but sticking to British butterflies, delicate, beautiful things



we birders get interested in during the hot months when birds hide. The U.K. has 59 species, although that might be changing to 60, and there also are one or two rarities that occasionally make their way across the North Sea and English Channel. Our butterflies are small, a result of the cool conditions here. First off is the Glanville fritillary, named for Eleanor Glanville, the British 17th Century entomologist who discovered it. One cool thing about butterflies is that there can be completely different colours and patterns on either side of what are extremely delicate wings, although butterflies can be extremely powerful fliers, even, as I hinted, crossing large bodies of water. The Glanville fritillary has its extreme northern distribution in the south of England, with the Isle of Wight its only stronghold, but a population was nurtured a decade ago and now is naturally sustainable just a few miles from where I live in South London, and during lock down and tiered restrictions last summer I repeatedly ran the 18 miles round-trip to that population to hopefully see an adult, which before that I had not managed to do. This species requires chalk land, south-facing slopes and English plantain, the food plant its larvae need. Anyway, that was one beautiful way I got through 2020, running and running some more and seeing when the butterflies were caterpillars, larger caterpillars and pupae, and what a joy it was when my consistency and exercise showed me my first adult. Running is helped by needing for butterfly photos a fixed-60mm macro lens, not to have to carry a 600mm giant I use for birds, which, along with butterflies, have always been better and will always remain better than COVID-19!

5 January Butterfly of the day: Brown hairstreak (*Thecla betulae*) ...

The Brown hairstreak is nominally the largest of the five hairstreak butterfly species present in the U.K. and often the very hardest to find. It prefers to spend its time at the top of Ash trees and Blackthorn bushes (from where plum-like sloes derive (I have just finished making my 2020 sloe gin) feeding on the secretions of aphids and other insects that themselves have fed on tree sap. This



individual remains the only one I have ever seen, at a spot called Alners Gorse in Dorset, England, a reserve between the villages of Hazlebury Bryan, Fifehead Neville and Okeford Fitzpaine (fans of the literature of Thomas Hardy will recognise that we are in Hardy County here). I am sure it was a newly hatched adult that was in the vulnerable position of needing to dry its wings and pump blood into its veins after emerging from the pupae, but that was to my luck. It emerges as an adult in July, and there might be in warmer years a second brood in October, and it is restricted to southern England and southern Wales. Hairstreak butterflies get their name from the thin lines, in this case white, that cross the wings.

6 January Butterfly of the day: Comma (*Polygonia c-album*) ...

The Comma is one of my favourite British butterflies, and it gets its odd second-part Latin name from the names of two other somewhat related butterflies that the Comma was initially thought more closely related to. I cannot think of another species anywhere that has a



hyphen in its Latin name, but I am sure one of you can find one. It gets its English name from the tiny white mark (readily seen above in the photo) on its the underside of its wings (the top side is far more orange and lacks the mark). This is a butterfly that underwent a hideous downward spiral in numbers, probably due to industrial pollution, but has made a remarkable recovery in most parts of England and Wales. It was on the Welsh borders that it was almost restricted to during its lean years, but it now can be found along country lanes and hedgerows, where at various stages of its life cycle it feeds on Common nettle, as well as

hops, which is why we see it a lot in my home county of Kent, elm (at least the newly sown elm that can resist the devastating, decades-long attack by Dutch elm beetle) and willow. When the sun shines on its over-wings, fantastic browns, crimsons, oranges and yellows appear, and it is the only British butterfly with scalloped wings, which helps it be identified from some distance. That wing shape also is where it gets its colloquial name of Angel-wings. I took this photo 100 metres from one of my favourite birding reserves, Oare Marshes, so that was a nice start to that day.

7 January Butterfly of the day: Grizzled skipper

(*Pyrgus malvae*) ... One of the numerous species within the skipper family, this is a butterfly that emerges quite early in the year (actually, there is no month butterflies cannot be seen in the United Kingdom, although there are not surprisingly fewer to be seen in the winter months). One of its remarkable assets is that it has perfected over millennia a process of vibrating its wings to scare off ants, which are predators to its larvae. A small handful of other

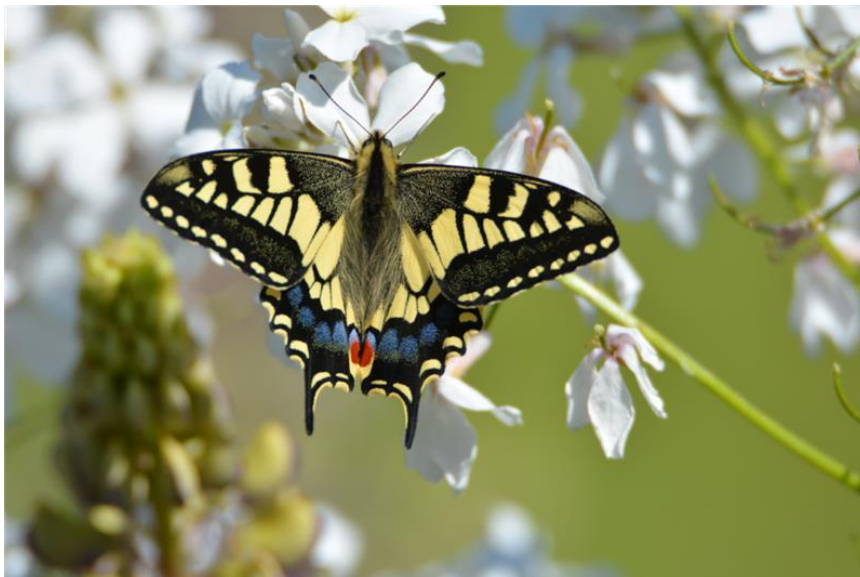


butterflies do this, too, but not within the skipper family. I took this photo at a local beauty spot called Magpie Bottom, near Eynsford, in Kent, beside the River Darent, which flows through Dartford, where I was born. That spot was bought by a couple to save it from any form of development, and it is a haven for butterflies and orchids. It was a gloriously hot day, and life was slow in movement, which allowed me to lie down flat at the same level as this little thing. Those colours! That slate blue, and the chequered pattern of its wings! The last 25 years have not been good to its numbers, but the south of England remains its stronghold. The fortunes of butterflies, perhaps even more so than birds, provide us a definite story line as to how we are treating our planet.



8 January Butterfly of the day: Small blue (*Cupido minimus*) ... With a Latin name that most likely means “the smallest love,” the Small blue, not surprisingly one of our smallest native species, is no cutie, especially in its larval stage where nests, or balls, of caterpillars often number into the 100s and are cannibalistic to one another when their larval food sources are

diminished. Perhaps it can be forgiven, as it does produce such an exquisite adult stage. I have photographs of one sitting on my pinkie finger, so small is it, and note should be made that while it is in the “Blue” family of butterflies, which also, confusingly, contains the Brown argus (an upcoming BotD), it is not particularly blue, more a slate grey, except around its upper thorax. If the sun catches one at the right angle, blue does shine through, though, and that is a great thing about butterflies, how light can refract off them and produce an array of different colours at different angles of diffusion. I photographed this one at Howell Hill Nature Reserve in Surrey, very close to One STR director Thomas Emanuel’s house. It was the first butterfly species I saw when I decided to start searching for our 59 or 60 species, and I did not realise that London and the Southeast is its principal home, so much so that once I met a lepidopterist who had seen every one of those species, and a few more, in the U.K., except for the Small blue! “Well, there’s one by my foot right now,” I said, at which point he sunk to his knees in some form of butterfly reverence I have not seen since.



11 January Butterfly of the day: Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*) ... We’ll start the second week of the butterflies’ section of BotD with the only British rock-star species, the Swallowtail, or correctly the Old World swallowtail. The family to which it belongs is scattered across the world, with the US for example having more than 30 species, a few

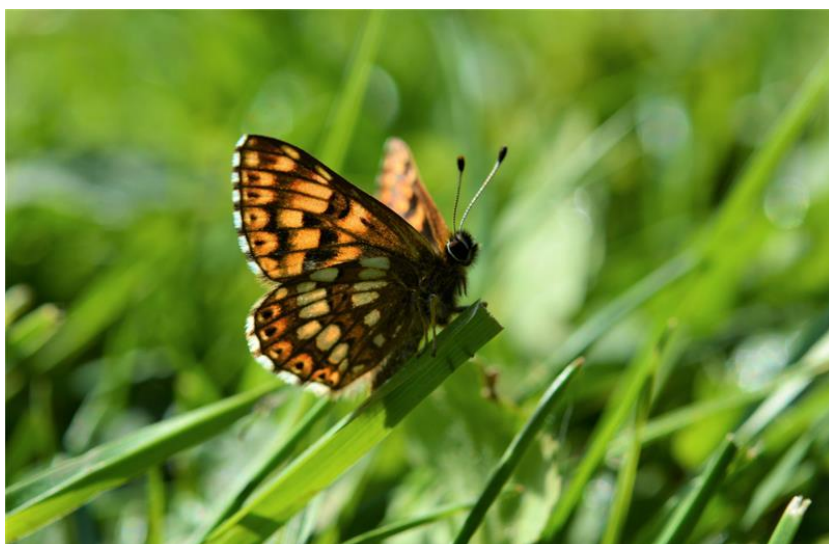
of which look remarkably similar to this one, the family’s only species found in the United Kingdom. (There is, I think, only one other member in Europe, the Scarce swallowtail.) In the U.K., it is restricted to a few spots in the county of Norfolk to the east, and only for a month as an adult in June. Second broods are tremendously unusual, and thus it is one of our rarest butterflies. It can only live in areas where there grows a plant called Milk parsley. I travelled

to a fen (the local name for marshland) called Strumpshaw and hoped I would be lucky, as we do not have very many Swallowtail to begin with, the sun needs to be shining and males need to have decided then and there to use up some precious energy moving from cover to patrol areas likely to have females. When one did come, it was immediately evident, the country's largest species slowly flapping across the view and fortunately deciding to get some more energy from the aforementioned Milk parsley. Find the plant, and one might find the butterfly. Their numbers in the U.K. dived due to less-than-enlightened land management, which saw the maze of small fields and largely uncharted canals, dykes, sluices and cuts as inconvenient to tractors and the like, but conservation efforts have steadied the population. Look at those colours! This photo was with a 600mm lens, as I could not get very close to them, and I had to hope not a single thing would come between me and the subject, otherwise what you would see here would be a series of spectacular blurs.



12 January Butterfly of the day: Black hairstreak (*Satyrium pruni*) ... BotD on 5 January was the Brown hairstreak, and here is its close cousin, the smaller Black hairstreak, which might just be the hardest hairstreak species of the five in the United Kingdom to find. The literature says it is "found only in thickets of

Blackthorn in woodlands on heavy clay soils between Oxford and Peterborough in the East Midlands of England," but three years ago an amateur lepidopterist discovered a new colony near Burgess Heath in Sussex, way to the south of the area described above, and fairly easy for me to reach. This was a phenomenal find, as this butterfly as a group has been seen to move for less than six or so miles in its entire existence, that's the group's existence, not an individual's. What that means is that at least two butterflies do not fly more than that distance to set up a new colony. The two areas mentioned are about 50 miles apart as the crow flies, and of course those two butterflies can only move to a new area if that new area has the right foodstuff. Blackthorn is common, but if there are roads and towns and fields in between, the species is not moving anywhere, and insects are very finicky, fastidious and picky. The butterfly was still hard to find, and I learned that finding them does not involve getting up very early as it might with bird species, the first one I saw not popping out until almost midday. Similar to the White-letter hairstreak (an upcoming BotD), the Black hairstreak is one of the country's rarest butterflies, and I kept my eye rooted on this one as it flew out of cover until it decided to settle, and even then I was lucky to even get this shot of it being 90% not hidden by vegetation.



13 January Butterfly of the day: Duke of Burgundy (*Hamearis lucina*) ... Known affectionately just as “The Duke” and named thus no one knows why (its Latin name “*Lucina*” refers to the Roman goddess of childbirth), this species was once regarded as a member of the fritillary family of butterflies but is actually the only British, and European, member of

the metalmarks group of butterflies. It is not a member of the iron-workers’ union but a small, wonderful little thing that has its range restricted to chalk grassland in wooded clearings. There was real concern that this would be a species that would disappear from the U.K., but careful management since the turn of the century has seen its numbers increase by 90%, but, as we also say looking at some One STR data, that is from a very low base. Numbers are now such that if you want to see one you stand a good chance of doing so, probably in mid-May on a sunny morning, if you are patient, and also lucky, and I saw this one in my home county of Kent at a place called Bonsai Bank. I did not know exactly where they might be, but crossing and crisscrossing a suitable area eventually I indeed was lucky, and I saw how exquisitely small these insects are. Cowslip and primrose are the plants it needs for feeding. Interesting fact: In this species, the male has four functional legs, while the female has six.



14 January Butterfly of the day: Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*) ... This is the 175th BotD. My goodness! A species found only in but widespread through Europe, the Gatekeeper gets its name for its supposed habit of settling on gateposts and field fences during the hot days of late July and early August when the farmers notice them due to that month being perhaps

slightly less hectic right before the harvest. This is a butterfly that on one day is non-existent, then suddenly for a month it is everywhere and then it is gone just as swiftly. It really is a sign that summer is soon to peter out, just as the Orange tip (no doubt soon to feature on BotD) is a definite sign that spring has arrived. The butterfly in the photo is a male, and that is easily told in this species by the presence of those black marks on the upper wing, marks that contain scent glands known as *androconia*. As this species feeds on grasses as larvae and blackberry flowers as adults, it is widespread, and in August hundreds can be seen at a time on the margins between woodland and field.



15 January Butterfly of the day: Grayling (*Hipparchia semele*) ... Also known as the Rock grayling, supposedly for its wings' colours and how they meld effortlessly against a backdrop of rocks and, in my photo's case, tree bark, the Grayling is a species that has orange and brown outer-wings. These, however, are never seen, by anyone, well, hardly ever, the only photos of them being grainy, bad ones, or of dead ones displayed with pins, as all butterflies were seen, that is, "collected," in the Victorian era. Indeed, this photo is the only one of this species I have taken. They never settle and seem to be constantly conducting very important business. Scientists say adults will dry their wings and then fly directly six or seven miles with a few others of their species on some preordained route to find nectar and females. It prefers coastal areas that heat up nicely and quickly, and its numbers are declining everywhere, but certainly inland. Endemic to Europe, it is

now on lepidopterists' "concerned" list, and work is being done to boost its numbers. Added to all of those attributes that make it hard to find, it only has one brood a year, with eggs being laid in late August and adults emerging in early August. Do the maths. That is not long for slow humans like myself to catch up with one, not alone take what I humbly might say is a half-decent photo. I love this photo. Those swirling greys, jagged black lines and white washes, it looks as though it has emerged from the lichen on the bark of the tree.

19 January Butterfly of the day: Clouded yellow (*Colias croceus*) ...

Yesterday BotD took a day off due to it being Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so if you were enjoying a holiday in the US you did not miss anything. Rest assured! Do not lose sleep!! BotD comes back with the spectacular Clouded yellow, which along with the Painted lady, are the United Kingdom's star



migratory butterflies. Most butterflies do not migrate, or if they do it is for a mile or two, not hundreds and hundreds across continents and bodies of water, but this is one species that does, spectacular when you consider how much they weigh, next to nothing. The Clouded yellow is widespread across Europe from Turkey and Siberia in the east to the U.K. and

Ireland in the west, and in years of bounty it explodes in huge numbers, and the more there are in mainland Europe the more will fly over the English Channel to southern England, largely in a northeast-southwest line from Norfolk across to Cornwall. In some years I do not see any; in others, 10s and 20s of them, but one thing they have in common is that they never sit still, and if they do they will notice bumbling humans trying to coolly inch closer from about 20 feet away and take off immediately. Hurrah for huge camera lenses, this photo I took on Oare Marshes, Faversham, Kent, and in an area of that marsh that is not so visited, but an area that contains its principal food source, the nectar of clover. When it flies, the butterfly, that is, not the clover, its yellow is a yellow that I have never seen in nature except for the Great kiskadee, a bird of South and Central America and the West Indies, and the Yellow-throated warbler, a bird that I have seen on several occasions in New York City's Central Park. In the U.K. it is a colour that certainly lights up the sky.



20 January
Butterfly of the day:
Wood white
(Leptidea sinapis) ... A translucent beauty, almost ghostlike, certainly ephemeral, the Wood white is a very patchily distributed butterfly species of the southern part of the United

Kingdom. It exists across Europe and Siberia, but it needs the right conditions of woodland glades, wide-ish swaths of grassy area that are not too busy with other vegetation but also provide the grasses and foodstuff it needs at various stages of its life. The females breed only once, and that does not help its numbers, which have been in decline, but there are two broods a year, and that helps populations due to one of those broods probably having better climactic conditions to survive through to the next year. Some people might just see it as a white butterfly and lump it in with the Small white and Large white species that together are colloquially called Cabbage whites by gardeners, who think they exist solely to destroy their neatly tendered garden crops. The Wood white, like all White species, never sits still, and the one in the photo I think is a female that had finished its courtship and was awaiting renewed attentions from her paramour. I had walked three miles across some beautiful Surrey countryside to an area called Oaken Wood, which is its only home for many miles from where I live. I wandered into the wood from the far side from its car park. Walking along an area called Botany I soon saw my first of several Wood whites, which remain the only ones I have seen. After that jubilation I spent an hour walking up and down the glade slowly waiting for one to settle, thinking pretty soon that none ever would. That is a sight to behold, though, as their flight is quite slow, and you actually get to see a butterfly flutter its wings, not just speed by at breakneck speed. It is a fallacy that butterflies are slow. Most are very strong flyers, fast and direct.



21 January Butterfly of the day: Small tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) ... One of the most beloved British butterflies, the Small tortoiseshell has sadly suffered a decline in numbers in the last decade or so, which is not the result of a lack of foodstuffs, as its larvae feeds on the common stinging nettle, but most likely the successful populations of its predators, namely wasps. What a

beautiful thing it is, with its array of oranges, browns, blacks and yellows, and that row of blue, almost pearl-like droplets at the base of its hind-wings. My photo—taken in Dent, Yorkshire on the day of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee on 4 May, 2012—shows a particularly well-groomed individual, as butterflies are no mere wallflowers. A butterfly that has successfully bred will show scars for its efforts, as it fights other butterflies or narrowly evades predators such as birds (yes, I know!), the aforementioned wasps, dragonflies, even fish. There also is a species named the Large tortoiseshell, but it is exceedingly rare in the U.K. I have not seen one, but reports do come in that its numbers and colonies are increasing on my island. The Small tortoiseshell I did not see at all in 2019, but last year in lock-down I found three or four in my nearest decent area for butterflies, and that was a joy, a re-acquaintance with old friends, so to speak. It is one species distributed evenly around the U.K., so there is hope that a couple of mild years will see it bounce back to where it should be, settled on leaves in whatever direction you turn to look.



22 January Butterfly of the day: Common blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) ... This is as its name suggest the United Kingdom’s most common blue butterfly, a family that has nine U.K. members, maybe a 10th soon as one is beginning the colonisation of our shores, but despite its commonness it is a beautiful creature, especially on a sunny morning where sheets of blue can be seen flitting

over green grassy slopes. My photograph does show the female (above) and male in a tender moment, but it does differences in coloration to be shown. The male’s upper wings display far more blue than do the female’s, and the male’s thorax is bluer, too. Its Latin name *icarus* is evidently named for the Greek myth of Icarus, who together with his father Dædalus tried to escape Crete by making and wearing a pair of wings but, in Icarus’s case, flying too close

to the sun, which melted the wings' wax ... and we all know what happened then. This butterfly in my experience does not show such foolhardiness, going about its business quite successfully. Colonies have recently been discovered in Québec, Canada, the first outside of the Old World, which might mean it will reach the US at some point ... don't stay up, though, that might take some time yet.



25 January Butterfly of the day: Brown argus (*Aricia agestis*) ... Quite easily mistaken for a female Common blue butterfly, the Brown argus is also in that Blue family, despite being, well, brown. This is a gorgeous little thing, and when I see it, I know summer is here. You can see a sheen of blue on its thorax, and an adult in full splendour, newly dried

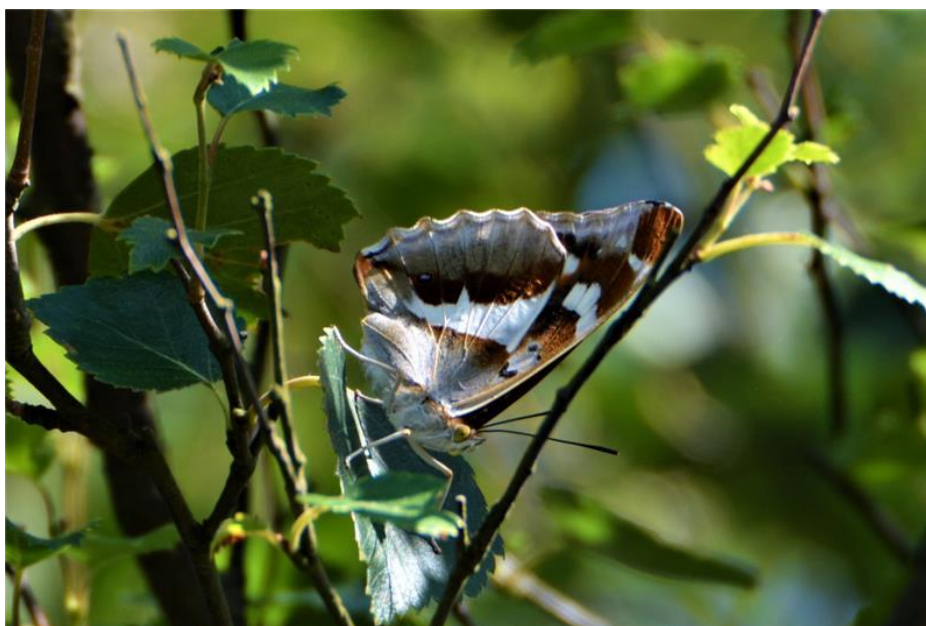
from the pupae, shows this blue admirably. As with birds, getting colour takes energy, and with the whole idea of an adult butterfly being to locate a member of the opposite sex pronto, with all of its flying around, battering into branches, being pestered by other butterflies of the same species, and others, and being attacked by various things wanting to eat you, well, all that is enough to see even the brightest colours dull fast. If you see its under wings then you would never mistake that it is not part of the Blue group. Another butterfly favouring chalk slopes and grassland, this species arrives every May at my favourite butterfly site of Hutchinson's Bank, where last year I also found Man, Early Purple and Bee orchids, much to my pleasure, as I was searching for it.

26 January Butterfly of the day: Orange tip (*Anthocharis cardamines*)

... Nothing screams "spring is here!!!" in the United Kingdom more than does the Orange tip, which one moment is non-existent, the next fluttering along rides and groves in profusion, little specks of white and (on males) orange filling the heart with joy. I have probably said this about other butterfly species, but



this is one that NEVER sits still, hardly ever. They have a liking for cow parsley, and the females' white and grey-green coloration make them very difficult to see when they do decide to sit tight for a while. Interesting! Research in the U.K. has shown that the 1°C change in average temperature over the last two decades has resulted in this species appearing 17.3 days earlier in the year.



27 January
Butterfly of the day: Purple emperor (*Apatura iris*) ... The Purple emperor is one of the United Kingdom's most spectacular butterflies, and has been given the nickname of "His majesty," rather annoyingly to be honest when one is seen and complete strangers shout out

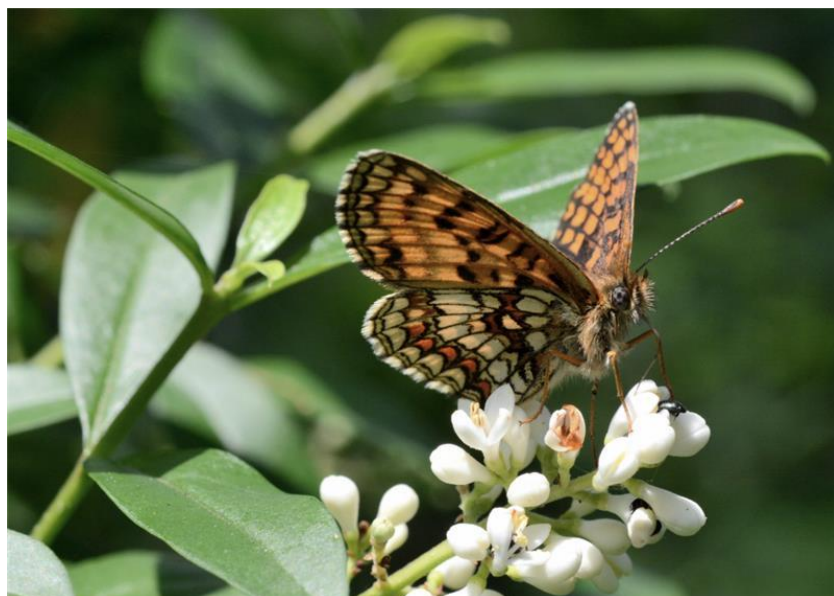
"His majesty has arrived" and, so I have seen, even bow. It is fine to be enamoured, respectful of and delighted by nature, but there are limits! This is a species that emerges only at the very end of June and in July, and people go to huge lengths to see them. The males have upper, fore wings of bright purple, but that often needs the sun to be shining on them at the right angle, which is difficult to see as they tend to fly all the time at the tops of very tall trees, known as "master" trees, only coming down to feed. The females are brown and orange and spectacular in their own way. They are attracted to faeces, please for you to excuse the reference, but there you are, and also to concoctions such as rich, Indian-cuisine sauces, tamarind, that kind of thing. This photo I took at the end of June 2020 when I was at a spot called Black Down, West Sussex, picking bilberries, what we call blueberries, although they are slightly different, ours being a wilder, tarter version, and delicious. They are backbreaking to pick, and they are small, and the day was the very hottest of 2020, so as I took a rest at the base of a tree, and as I did so I saw one float gently over and settle—the butterfly, that is, not a bilberry. This almost never happens to anyone, and I almost welcomed it as royalty ... but I resisted.



28 January **Butterfly of the day: Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*)** ... Utterly unique in the U.K. if both its colour and size is taken into account, this is a species that spends a lot of its time tucked behind leaves quite happy with its own company, or at least that is my experience. I find them relatively easily due to their size (about the size of a normal wristwatch face).

It is also one of our species that hibernates, that is, the adult does not die after breeding in the first calendar year

of its life. Instead, it feeds continually after the adults' emergence in the early summer, then after seven months or so it goes into hibernation and only then breeds the next spring. So it is a butterfly you can see most of the year. The Peacock and Red admiral are other U.K. species that lead this type of life, rather than the wham-bam-gone existence of most.



29 January Butterfly of the day: Heath fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*) ...

Known colloquially as the “Woodman’s follower,” the Heath fritillary is a butterfly species found across Europe and Asia from Japan to its westernmost reaches in the United Kingdom, where it is one of our more uncommon butterflies. Again, this is a species that has benefitted by human conservation but also suffered from our

activity. This photograph is from one of its strongholds, in Blean Woods near Canterbury, Kent, and from which we have just learnt the pandemic year of 2020 saw its numbers noticeably increase, which is obviously good news. It gets its nickname from its requirement for coppiced woodland, that is, the old practice of repeatedly cutting trees down to their stumps to encourage the rejuvenation of those stumps. The butterfly follows the axes and breeds in areas in which the lower-level woodland plants are allowed to grow due to there being more light thanks to that coppicing. Blean Woods also is earmarked for the reintroduction of the Eurasian bison to the U.K., some 6,000 years after it disappeared from England. This might not be the best idea, but time will tell, I imagine. The Duke of Burgundy (see BotD 13 January) is another species that requires this involvement.



1 February Butterfly of the day: Large blue (*Phengaris arion*) ... This beautiful butterfly, not surprisingly the largest member of the Blue family present in the United Kingdom, is a success of conservation, a butterfly reintroduced to the country following its extinction—a country-wise extinction is called an extirpation—in 1979, although in the 1950s there were 100,000 individuals. Large-scale agricultural practices and, probably, the use of certain, now-banned chemical fertilisers probably were the causes. Found across Europe and northern Asia, this species requires the presence of a species of red ant, which the caterpillar being chemically, even physically, similar to, tricks into being taken

down into the ants' nests, at which point when the larvae develop they have a ready-made food source. This is no different to the female adult of the Common cuckoo (see BotD 25 September) laying her egg in the nest of a host bird, such as a Reed warbler or Meadow pipit, to be fed by that host bird after the young, larger, stronger chicks have hatched and kicked out all the other eggs. This is so utterly incredible, but its existence also requires wild marjoram and thyme and a living space of large, undeveloped and similar territory, so all those needs inevitably reduce its homes and numbers, and it remains threatened in the U.K. The year 2020 is said to have been its best year since its reintroduction in the 1980s. The upper-side of its wings have large black splodges, even larger and more uniform than the ones you can see here in my photo and which make its identification obvious. Its one publicly open home in the U.K. is Collard Hill in Somerset, where I took this photo. That home is a very steep slope, so I just lay down at an impossible angle and waited for an individual to skip along the vegetation above me.



2 February Butterfly of the day: Peacock (*Aglais io*) ... One of the more instantly recognisable of British butterflies, the Peacock certainly has bold colours and design, and it is a species that can be seen all year, either on the wing or hibernating under the leaf, where they are decidedly hard to find. For all those crazy colours on the fore-

wings, its hind-wings, that is, its undersides are dark browns, blacks and greys, which help it blend in with the undergrowth of woods and hedges. There are American species that go under the names of peacocks, too, but they are not related to the one in the photograph. This also is the classic species in that its larvae needs stinging nettles, and its adults need buddleia, both of which tend to be abundant, and there are no concerns about its population numbers. They certainly brighten up one of those spring days in which the sun does not want to cooperate. The large circles in its design are thought to mimic eyes of owls and the like to scare off anything that might think it would be better served as dinner. I cannot remember where I took this photo, of what looks like a newly hatched adult, but probably I was checking the path so as not to step on something delicate.



3 February Butterfly of the day: Essex skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*) ...

The Essex skipper is one of about seven skipper butterflies species in the United Kingdom, and it is a Victorian discovery, or at least it became so then during first heyday of butterfly collecting and study when naturalists realised it differed from the Small skipper. This is a species found also in the US, where it is known as

the European skipper, after it was accidentally, or on purpose, more likely, released in Canada and from where it spread into other provinces and northern US states, where it is now abundant. The way to tell Essexes are from the solidly black tips to their antennae, not the easiest task when out looking for them. They appear—as do all skippers—fairly small butterflies, from their habit of folding their fore-wings half over their hind-wings when at rest. In the U.K. they can be found across southern England and not just in the county of Essex, famous for David Beckham. There is one skipper species in the west of England called the Lulworth Skipper, found initially at beautiful Lulworth Cove on the coast, that I have yet to see and looks almost identical, so that is an identification nightmare that awaits me, as it could look also similar to a Large skipper, which is not that much larger than a Small skipper. Skippers flit often but do also often stay at rest.



4 February Butterfly of the day: Purple hairstreak (*Neozephyrus quercus*) ... So called due to the bright purple coloration on its upper-wings, the Purple hairstreak makes up one-fifth of the United Kingdom hairstreaks, and I have only seen it the once in a reserve in Dorset in West England. One day I will get a photograph showing its full splendour, but the view I did get still

shows beauty, an odd purplish-grey to the under-wings, black and orange spots and that thin white line, the hairstreak, from where this family of insects get its collective name. I am studying Italian now, and those who endured Latin and its primers will know that “*quercus*” (“*quercia*” in Italian) is Latin for an oak tree, for that is the main foodstuff for this species’ larvae. Oak trees are tall, and because the adults whizz around the tops of oak trees, it can prove very difficult to pin down, just like the pluperfect subjunctive in Latin, even though

lepidopterists suggest it is our most common hairstreak! Find oak trees, and you stand a chance ... "*ex glande quercus*," from the acorn the oak, or the acorn never falls far from the oak.



5 February Butterfly of the day: Marbled white (*Melanargia galathea*) ...

On any one day in June one can be wandering through their favourite butterfly glade and not see a single example of this species, and then the very next day they are everywhere, lightening up the skies and bringing polar-opposite colours to the yellow ragwort and purple Viper's burgloss

and Devil's-bit scabious (flowers have great names, too, don't they?), three plants it seems to adore and sits on a lot. The Marbled white has good years and not so good years, so it is to be celebrated as it competes with a species called the Dark-green fritillary for full control of any particular June meadow. This is a member of the Browns family of butterflies, whereas BotD has mentioned before that the Brown argus (see BotD butterfly is a member of the Blues. In the United Kingdom it is an insect found in the very south, so where I live is its stronghold, and they are completely absent from Ireland. The photo is of a male, as the dark markings on a female's under-wings are more brown than black.



8 February Butterfly of the day: Silver-studded blue (*Plebejus argus*) ...

Another member of the Blues family that can be hard to identify, especially if one sees only its under-wings. The main ID factor is those silver bolts, or studs, from whence it derives its name, at the base of its hind-wings. Its under-wings look remarkably similar to those of

several species of Blues, and it takes an expert (not me!) to instantly see what species any individual is from a quick glance across maybe four or five different types of Blues. A lover of heather, as can clearly be seen in my photo, this species arrives as an adult in late June to mid-August and has—as does the Large blue (see BotD 1 February)—a symbiotic relationship with a species of ants, which protects it for most of its life, well, until it becomes able to fly. The ants protect the larvae from predators while feeding off a sugary substance

produced by those larvae. Fortunately for photography this is a species that decides not to fly a great deal, and once one has found one, the eyes quickly adjust and start seeing quite a number. I took this photo in Fairmile Common in Surrey, not more than 100 metres from the busy A3 road that connects the M25 orbital motorway to central London. This is one piece of the heathland that used to travel unbroken from almost the doorstep of London all the way down through Berkshire, Sussex, Surrey, Wiltshire and Hampshire and is a treasure trove of nature. Large areas, fortunately, remain, but it remains in need of protection. (Note: On 6 February I ran to and from Hutchinson's Bank nature reserve and after searching for a while found two webs of Glanville fritillary (see BotD 4 January) caterpillars, all snug under some leaves and out of sight of predators. The cycle of life is beginning again; and I got my first COVID-19 vaccination.)



9 February
Butterfly of the day: Silver-washed fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*) ... This is another United Kingdom butterfly to have the word “silver” in its name (yesterday, 8 February BotD featured the Silver-studded blue, and tomorrow we will have the Silver-spotted skipper), the Silver-washed fritillary being the largest of the three and identified from other similar

fritillaries, notably Dark-green fritillary, by those lengthy black dashes of colour going down the fore-wings. The literature says this species is not uncommon, but I always rejoice at coming across it. Maybe I just do not live in the right area for it to be one of the dominant species. Its under-wings show a pattern of white (or silver, as its name would suggest) and delicate green, which is as attractive as its upper-wings' bright oranges and blacks. It prefers woodland, not open meadows, and it moves incredibly quickly. How fast butterflies move is of constant amazement to me. Yes, they are delicate, but so strong, too, creatures that should never be underestimated. I found this one walking with a friend in a wood in Somerset, West England, where we went especially to find one, and the first butterfly we saw waft across the path was indeed a Silver-washed fritillary.



10 February Butterfly of the day: Silver-spotted skipper (*Hesperia comma*) ... The Silver-spotted skipper, as promised, is the last of the three butterflies of the United Kingdom with the word “silver” in its name, and as there are no “bronzes” or “golds” present, this is it for Olympic Medal butterflies. This skipper I tried to see in 2019, but as I visited Headley Heath, one of its

few homes close to London, in mid-July, I might have been a week or two too early, although on that first visit I did see my as-yet only White-letter hairstreak (this is to come in BotD). Then, during the pandemic when we were allowed to travel regionally, but not to stay anywhere, I returned, but I could not find the triangular, sloped area of land that I had considered the year before to be prime real estate for this small butterfly. I was looking at my map, trying to ascertain where that patch could be, and with maybe an hour of light left finally found it and very quickly saw what for me was a new species, made a little more difficult by there being two other species of skipper there at the same time. This butterfly is present in the US, where it is known as the Common branded skipper, but also as the Holarctic grass skipper, and, just to add to the confusion, the US also has a separate species to *Hesperia comma* that also is called the Silver-spotted skipper, although scientists would call that one *Epargyreus clarus*. Thank goodness for Latin names! The U.K. version, the one in my photo, is rare and can only subsist on chalk slopes, which means it is pretty much present only in southern England, but conservation efforts have increased its numbers by 1,500% over the last 20 years, with there now being about 300 colonies, up from a paltry 68.

11 February Butterfly of the day: Adonis blue (*Lysandra bellargus*) ...

Yet another blue, one that can be told apart from Common blue (see BotD 22 January) by the thin black lines at the edges of its fore-wings extending into the white borders, but on a warm day, trying to keep one's balance on a steep chalk slope, as the butterflies whizz around and never settle, seemingly, ID can take a little effort. Finding them



often is a case of finding the flower Horseshoe vetch, a small, yellow-orangy thing (see

photo) that its larvae feeds on. In the photograph is a male, the females being a brown, with a decorative border of orange spots, not unlike the Brown argus (see BotD 25 January) , which as you surely know by now is a Blue, too. I found this one on Denbies Ridge, near Dorking, Surrey, looking for it, with as company the only other person on the slope, a man rather unsuccessfully trying to operate a drone, those very annoying things scattering interruptions into the July breeze. Yet another butterfly in which much conservation work has gone into, the species being pushed farther south in England, which, anyway, constitutes its most northerly home. That work is beginning to show good results.



12 February Butterfly of the day: Wall

(*Lasiommata megera*) ...

Also known as a Wall brown, this is a species that must be for me the most widely distributed of the rarer United Kingdom butterflies, as I have only seen four—one in Kent, one in north Norfolk, one in south Sussex and the last in Somerset. The markings on this species always fascinate me, the subtly different browns on the perimeters of its hind-

wings, the blacks and oranges punched with white dots. It loves the sun, and maybe its habit of perching on warm stone surfaces gives it its name. That is a sensible trait, given that it can warm itself up both by direct sunlight on its back and the heat emanating from stone, but also from sand dunes and bare ground. I saw the one in my photograph on a long run in Sussex, and as I came up a steep road, I saw it to the left and came to a sudden halt to take a snap on my mobile phone, and as you can see it is very much proving from whence it gets its name.



16 February Butterfly of the day: Dark green fritillary (*Speyeria*

***aglaja*) ...** The Dark green fritillary is a

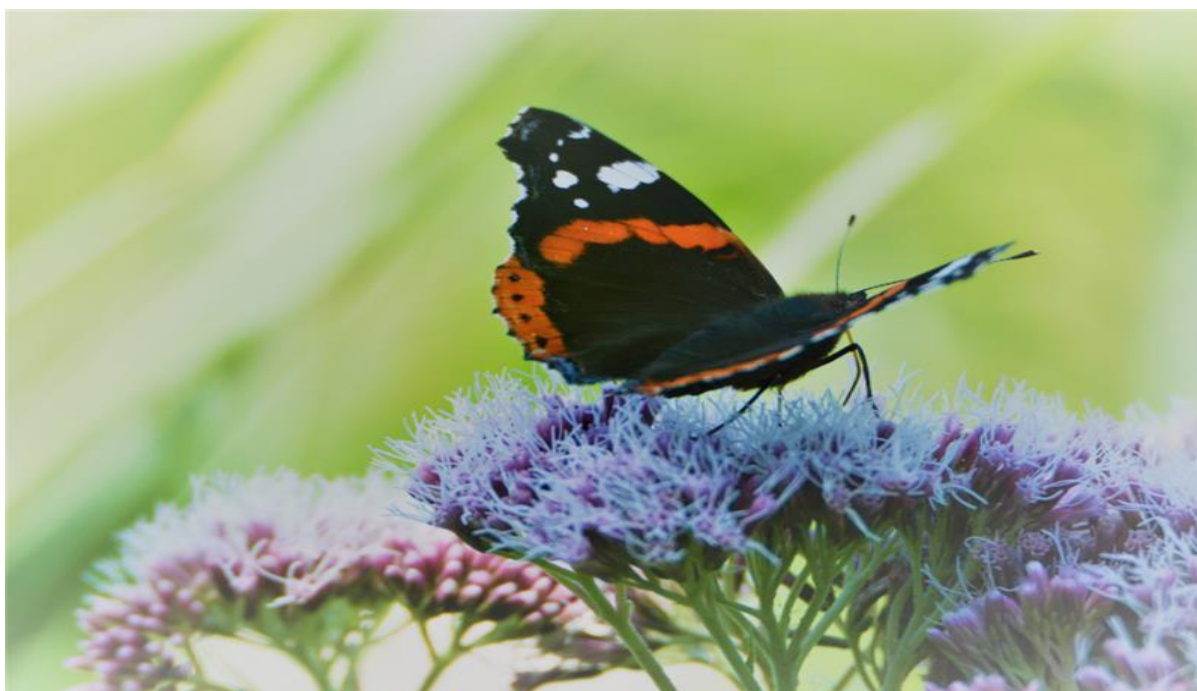
medium-sized United Kingdom butterfly that enjoys patrolling the meadow fringes of woodland, and inhabits areas of bracken across a large geographical range stretching from the U.K. all the way over to eastern Asia, as well as Morocco, no doubt using the narrow

Straits of Hercules between Gibraltar and Tangiers to orientate itself. The butterfly's upper-wings are all orange and black, with a neat, delicate row of white pearls on the wings' edges, but the under-wings display (as is shown in my photograph) large white spots that are quite delightful. Its name comes from the greenish colour of its thorax. Females are slightly less orange, and have pale, creamy white coloration to the tops of their upper fore-wings. I see this species quite often in late May and June, and this particular one I saw after I had seen my one and only Black hairstreak (see BotD 12 January), walking out of one habitat, entering a sunnier area of bracken and immediately seeing this fritillary, happily oblivious to the recent discovery in the area of the rarer hairstreak. I followed all of this with a pint at a local pub (remember that idea!) and a four-hour trip home due to a broken-down train.



17 February Butterfly of the day: Small white (*Pieris rapae*) ... Ready for more confusion, and the underlining of why Latin names are important? The Small white is present across Europe and Asia and also in North America, where it is an invasive species and known as the Cabbage white, but in the United Kingdom it is called that, too, along with its close cousin the Large white, which in turn is not

a butterfly present in the New World. Probably much more simple just to lump them together, with some people likely to regard them as pests. British people collectively call both species Cabbage whites for their caterpillars destructive bent on kale, spinach, cabbage and the like, and both whites are incredibly difficult to photograph in my opinion. They never stand still. My photograph I regard as a small miracle, because firstly it is in focus, secondly because it does, I hope, show off its beauty despite its mono-coloration and commonplace nature. It has two broods a year in the U.K., but I believe it breeds continuously in North America, and it adapts to nearly every environment, so it is here, or there, to stay. I still like its subtle yellowish-grey colours and dull black markings on the upper fore-wings.



18 February Butterfly of the day: Red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) ... One of the more common and recognisable of the United Kingdom butterflies, and also one of the few to hibernate as adults, this species can be seen all year, although in winter they tend to be hidden away, keeping warmer, or there are just simply fewer of them at that time, certainly in cooler climate such as England. In the Mediterranean this is a species evident most of the year, and scientists say that those that pupate early in the year after hibernating show bolder colours than those that become adults in the summer. Its striking red, white and black coloration, plus its relatively large size for a U.K. butterfly, means many people who know or care little about nature are familiar with it, perhaps because it feed on Buddleia, a plant that many people plant in their back gardens. It is also present in North America, even in Hawaii, and it migrates to and from many of its breeding locations.



19 February Butterfly of the day: Small copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*) ... The Small copper is not surprisingly one of our smaller butterflies, and I think one of our gentlest. At least to me, I always see them on warm days flying never too far from where I first spot them and alighting on the ground or on a low leaf for me to get a far better look. It is found across the Northern Hemisphere, and in North America it is known as the

American copper, or Common copper. Its orange-red is a more intense hue of those colours than those found on our fritillary butterflies (see BotD passim). It also is another butterfly that

loves chalk, so I assume in the States it has adapted to other environments, and the males are very territorial, and so across a small area, which might explain my previous comment. It might appear gentle to me, but to others of the same species probably not so. I took this photograph at the Minsmere reserve in Suffolk, England, when I had gone there to see a Purple swamphen, a bird that has only been seen once in the United Kingdom. I missed it. It had flown away the night before, and in birding parlance this is called “dipping,” and it is not a nice feeling, but wandering around the beautiful reserve I came across this fellow, which made up for the failed birding ... well, a little.



22 February **Butterfly of the day: Green hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*)** ... *Oh, my giddy aunt!* We have reached the 200th BotD today! The 200th!! If you want to see all 200 (of course you do!) I have put a new page up on my website, so please double-click on the photo on this page:

<http://www.terencebakertravel.org/bird-of-the-day--an-on-going-covid-19-series.html> The Green hairstreak is the only United Kingdom butterfly that has green wings, and as you can see in this photo (those who attended the nature talk I did would have seen this photo already) the green does get a little worn as the adult moves through its precarious last stage of life, trying to avoid being eaten, trying to find a mate, battling with other competitors in its own species. One of five hairstreak species found in the U.K., the first part of its Latin name completely ignores its bright, unique colour and means “beautiful eyebrows” for that white line that surrounds the eye, while the last part of the Latin name does not refer to the colour red at all (that would be even stranger) but to the blackberry plant, the bramble, which is one of its host plants. Found across Europe and Russia, this is a difficult little thing to find when it is at the height of its beauty in early spring, just because that green does allow it to hide effortlessly among leaves and the like.



23 February Butterfly of the day: Chalkhill blue (*Lysandra coridon*) ... The Chalkhill blue is a denizen of chalk hills, not surprisingly, short-turfed, thin-soiled landscapes with the minerals and plant food stuff it requires, which is Horseshoe vetch, and only Horseshoe vetch. Where it can be found it is often found in sizeable numbers. It has the most gorgeous antennae of white and black stripes tipped in yellow, and it has an equally smart perimeter of white, although the example in my photo (a female, which is browner than a male) has been through the wars, yet another butterfly in my collection to have done so. It has had identical chunks bitten out of its lower wings, so much so that the shape seen could be thought to be its actual shape, so symmetrical are its bodily losses. The first Chalkhill blue I managed to photograph was amazingly still, until I noticed it had a broken wing, poor thing, and usually they are a skittish species. They can be found across Europe and Asia Minor, but not in Scotland or Ireland.



24 February Butterfly of the day: Meadow brown (*Maniola jurtina*) ... An inhabitant of Europe, Russia, Mesopotamia and Northern Africa, there can be a week or two where nature-spotters see almost nothing else. On a trip to the Isles of Scilly, off Cornwall, a couple of years ago, I had a week in early September when there were literally carpets of them. I thought at the

time if I wanted to write a natural and social history of these beautiful islands, I would call it something along the lines of “Song thrushes, Meadow browns and honesty boxes,” the latter being a novelty in the United Kingdom of people making jam or growing vegetables, et cetera, leaving them outside their houses and farms along with a piggy bank and price list. I love them, and I genuinely think most people pop in the correct money. Its coloration varies a little from some butterflies to others, and novices can tell the difference between it and similar-looking Gatekeeper (see BotD 14 January) by the fact that it generally comes to rest with its wings closed, while the Gatekeeper leaves them flat and open to catch the sun.

25 February Butterfly of the day: Speckled wood (*Pararge aegeria*) ...

The Speckled wood is another common species in the United Kingdom, one that likes woodland rides of dappled light, in which males will roam up and down their own stretches in territorial splendour, casting out any intruders of their own species and any other. Some butterflies are fearless,



and it would not surprise me if a Speckled wood decided to take on a Bald eagle, that is, if we had that species over here. Females have been shown to choose males that are able to best keep their territories. This all sounds rather like *West Side Story*, and it probably is little different. The strongest survive, and everyone wants their genes to remain in the strongest pool. Speckled woods live in Europe and Africa, and they are brighter and more orange the further south one goes. Females tend to be browner overall. In the U.K. it is only patchily represented in Scotland.



26 February Butterfly of the day: Painted lady (*Vanessa cardui*) ...

Even the males are ladies in this superb species, a butterfly that migrates every year from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and from across the very top of Africa, in some years reaching very large numbers in the United Kingdom. In other years they might be hard to find. Two years ago was a bumper year, and as I walked from Hythe to

Blean Woods in Kent to see my first-ever Heath fritillary (see BotD 29 January) I walked

along one footpath through arable fields and hedgerows with literally an onslaught of them flying around me, at least 500 in a couple of miles. In North America, there is a similar but separate species called the American painted lady, although I think Americans have lost something now it is no longer called there by its former, wonderful name of the Cosmopolitan. 2019 also was a great year for the American species, with reports in California of there being more than a million on the wing at one point. The species that comes to the U.K. is yet another butterfly featuring orange, black and white, and the under-wings are greatly attractive, too, in their mottled greys, pale yellows and browns. That something so small can migrate so far is one of nature's miracles.



1 March Butterfly of the day: White-letter hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*)

... I am not sure the curiously spelled last part of its Latin name has a “w-” due to how the species gets its name, from the white lines on its hind-wings that appear to show the letter “w.” As you will remember from the Comma butterfly (see BotD 6 January), that, too, has the last

part of its Latin name similarly constructed, in its case, “c-album” (I shall have to do some research”!). The last of the five British hairstreak species to get its slot in BotD, this one also is a difficult species to see, spending much of its time at the tops of trees, preferably its favourite species, the elm. The demise of the elm tree in the U.K. due to Dutch elm disease that has been around for 50 years or so hindered this species’ numbers dramatically, but new strains of elm planted by horticulturalists have resulted in a partial rebound. I found this one, though, completely by chance in the open as I was searching, unsuccessfully on that day, for a Silver-spotted skipper (see BotD 10 February) that usually can be found in the open on low plants, so my eyes lit up when I found instead a White-letter hairstreak, Expect the unexpected, I guess, is the lesson, and do not believe you understand anything about nature.



2 March Butterfly of the day: Large skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*) ...

The Large skipper is the largest, not surprisingly, of the British skipper species, of which we have already seen three. “Large” is relative to other skippers, and it is only marginally so and much smaller than probably 80% of all U.K. species, skippers or not. A common butterfly that most likely is considered a moth by non-butterfly

types, it frequents sunny pieces of woodland and wooded edges, and its last name, from the Latin for green, that is, sylvan, underlines its chosen habitats, which stretch from the United Kingdom across Europe and Asia to Japan. This is a species that makes one immediately lean over to inspect the tips of its antennae, as that is the major ID point to separate four species in the U.K. The literature, however, tells the observer to look for the Large skipper’s “hooked antennae,” but out in the field this makes no sense, to me at least. Like Captain Hook from Peter Pan? Or does it mean the convex shape of the antennae as seen in the photo?

3 March Butterfly of the day: Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*) ...

Another common United Kingdom species, and even if its colours are not the most page-turning, I rather like the boldness of its circular marks, its ringlets, against its grey-brown set of wings and its narrow fringe of delicate white. Inhabiting northern parts of Europe and Asia, it is evidently a



butterfly that does not like it too hot. I started my interest in butterflies when I was in Scotland in 2014 and decided to climb one of its Munros (pronounced the same as Marilyn Monroe’s last name), that is, mountains of more than 3,000 feet in height. I was climbing one called Schiehallion (just a little more than 1,000 feet ... but do not allow that somewhat small height to fool you, if the mists come down, these are dangerous places to be) on a gorgeous day and someone I stopped to speak to was looking at a butterfly, a very close sibling called a Mountain ringlet. If you live in the south of the country this is one of the most time-consuming butterflies to find, for the geographical separation, so I have always enjoyed the idea that it was the first one I saw, as I have since seen none. The regularly named Ringlet is fond of woodland and blackberry bramble, which helps its numbers.

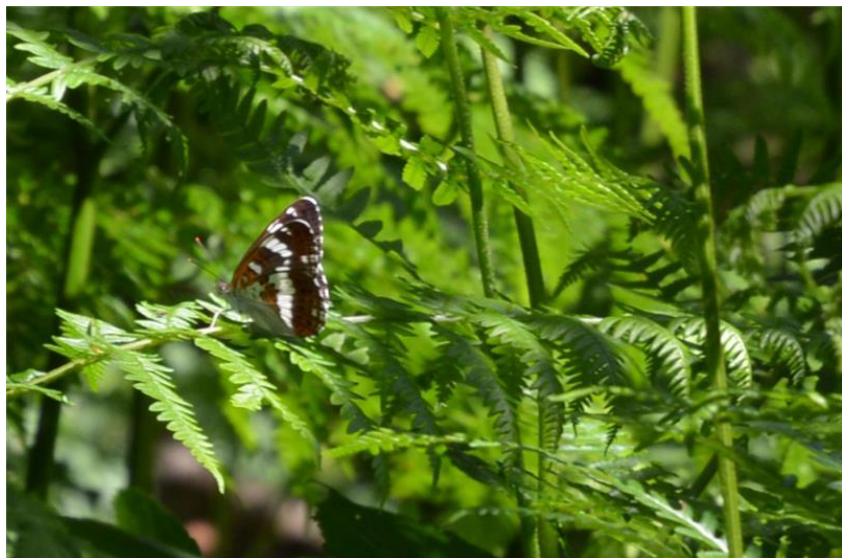


4 March Butterfly of the day: Small pearl-bordered fritillary (*Boloria selene*) ... The Small pearl-bordered fritillary is another of the small handful of butterflies that Europe shares with North America, which is no small feat considering how small butterflies are and how large the Atlantic Ocean is. In the US it is known as the Silver-

bordered fritillary, the idea being the same, to name it after the row of silver marks along the edges of the undersides of its hind-wings. Unfortunately it is a frequenter of grasslands, and as many consider such expanses as wasted farmland, it has suffered in its numbers, on both sides of the ponds. Estimates that 80% of its numbers have disappeared in the last 50 years is not good reading. In the United Kingdom, it is found in the west and the north, largely, and I saw this one at a spot called Ubley Warren in Somerset, an area of limestone pockmarked with remnants of former low-scale lead mining. I had no problem finding one, so much so that I considered it relatively common until I stopped coming across them. It has a closely related sibling called the Pearl-bordered fritillary, resident in the U.K., too, but rarer and which I have not seen.

5 March Butterfly of the day: White admiral (*Limenitis camilla*) ...

The second largest butterfly resident in the United Kingdom, the White admiral lives in the high tree tops and whizzes around like a maniac. Well, that are my excuses for offering only a so-so photograph of one, one I saw in Dene Woods as I was searching for a Purple emperor (see BotD 27 January), which



I failed to see at the time. The shot does show its size, I think, although that utterly depends on how small or huge the plant it is sitting on it, doesn't it? But anyway, the White admiral is also another butterfly that has a range extending from Western Europe across Russia and Asia to Japan, and its under-wings are more crisply delineated and memorable than its upper-wings, in my view. If you want to see one in the U.K. come to Southern England between June and August, so it really is a butterfly of the summer. Its larvae and caterpillars resemble bird droppings, remarkably so, which protects them against predation.



8 March Butterfly of the day: Small heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*) ... Probably our smallest butterfly with the longest Latin name, the Small heath is a butterfly of meadows and open areas of bracken, another species that when it appears does so in large numbers. The smallest member of the Browns family, it flies low to the ground across most of Europe, Asia and North Africa, where there is suitable habitat, and

always settles with its wings closed. There are several butterflies in the United Kingdom that have that trait, and it is always amazing to see a photo of one with its wings outstretched, so much so that you believe you are looking at a species completely new to science. Its larvae feed on grasses, its adults on ragwort and bramble, none of which thankfully is at a premium, and the species has multiple broods a year, so all in all a success, even though numbers have reduced. That is indicative of all butterflies worldwide, I imagine, and our relentless obsession with “taming” nature and natural environments. It also is notable for the aggressiveness between males searching for a female and for its habit of congregating in small areas to try and outperform each other for the attention of a partner.



9 March Butterfly of the day: Dingy skipper (*Erynnis tages*) ... It is possible some people regard the Dingy skipper as a bit, well, dingy, a relative mess of browns, blacks, greys and colours in between, but I always rather enjoy coming across it, although, if truth be told, not as much as I do the Grizzled skipper (see BotD 7 January).

Many regard its colours to a good suit of Harris tweed, which is something I have always liked the reference to. An inhabitant from Western Europe to Eastern Asia, this species has two broods in the southern parts of its range but only one in its northern homes. It also is able to colonise various landscapes from grasslands to sand dunes and woodland clearings to disused quarries and abandoned railway lines, of which there are quite a number in the United Kingdom now mostly used as recreational walking paths. It is attracted to the wonderfully named plant the Bird’s-foot trefoil. Butterflies have the grace and simplicity to always be better and remain better than COVID-19!



10 March Butterfly of the day: Small skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) ...

The last of the skipper butterflies to be portrayed in BotD (I have seen a couple of British species in this family), the Small skipper does have somewhat pointed wings, or at least oval-ish in shape, but my photo almost makes it look as though it is round. It is not the smallest skipper either, with four species being its

size or smaller. It also is another butterfly that cannot be found in Ireland, which is surprising considering Ireland has plenty of good habitat and is not far for most butterflies to migrate to and colonise. Ireland does, though, have one endemic butterfly of its own, the Cryptic wood white, a close relation to the Wood white (see BotD 20 January). Very much a summer butterfly, the Small skipper has expanded its numbers in the last decades. The two black marks coming from its thorax diagonally out across its wings are thought to be scent scales that have a role in attracting partners, and it can be told apart from the Essex skipper (see BotD 3 February) in that the lower side of its antennae are orange, not black.



11 March Butterfly of the day: Green-veined white (*Pieris napi*) ...

A very easy butterfly to overlook, the generally common Green-veined white looked sufficiently like “Cabbage” whites for most people to ignore. It inhabits all of the top of the world, from far Eastern Asia to far Western USA, where the “Mustard” and “West Virginia” white butterflies are considered to be the same species, so you are free to call it by

which name you prefer. There is a fourth sub-species, the Dark-veined white, so to see them all start booking trips post-pandemic. Again, just as with so many birds, maybe the four sub-species will be split into four distinct species. I believe the example in my photo is of a female, as I can only see one splodge of black circular markings, and the males have two. When they breed the males inject a compound called Methyl salicylate, along with their DNA, which repels other males. That’s pretty amazing.



12 March Butterfly of the day: Holly blue (*Celastrina argiolus*) ...

The Holly blue has a delicate shade of blue tipped with sort of a pixellated grey-black and with a bountiful supply of small black circles on its hind-wings, altogether an attractive little thing that usually can be seen in a mass of the same butterfly patrolling hedges of buddleia and other food stuffs. Silver-blue might be the best way of describing its coloration. It normally has two

generations of adults per year, in April and then late July into September. Exceptionally pleasant springs and summer might result in a third, and there are two sub-species in the USA, the beautiful named Spring azure and Echo blue. Its main enemy is the Ichneumon family of wasps, which is its parasite. A good year for wasps might well mean a bad year for Holly blues, but as we say in the U.K. that is all “swings and roundabouts,” nature finding its way of balance, as the Holly blue will be back to good numbers soon enough.



15 March Butterfly of the day: Long-tailed blue (*Lampides boeticus*) ... Well, we have reached the last United Kingdom butterfly that I have photographed (there are perhaps a dozen I have not seen), so tomorrow we need a new “B” for the titled BotD? Back to birds? Something else? The Long-tailed blue is the newest colonist to the U.K. from mainland Europe, getting a toehold on Southern England chalk scrapings and where lives its favoured plant, Everlasting sweet-pea. The first sightings of a small but significant number were in 2019, and they came back in 2020, in which they had to two broods, a very late one in September unlikely to leave any surviving adults, but the first brood does and speaks of warming temperatures and populations naturally expanding out of their former territories. I caught up with my only example following a 25-mile run across the South Downs Way from Hassocks to Lewes to Brighton’s Whitehawk Hill, preparing for

my now twice-postponed 100-mile run across the Downs, and I only had my mobile phone

with me, hence the poor photo, but as a recollection of a very rare creature that is making history, I am very happy with it. This is a female. Its “long tail” refers to two small protuberances at the base of its hind-wings.



16 March Botany of the day: Bee orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) ... Welcome to Day 1 of Year 2 of Working from Home, at least for most of the London STR office, and for everyone else it was not too long after that. My goodness! Well, birds will fly back into this space, but for the next three weeks or so it will be about botany (thus keeping a B in BotD!), or more accurately United Kingdom orchids, which are not the huge, splashy affairs of the tropics but more subtle, yet hugely alluring specimens largely remaining rare or localised. Whenever I come across them my eyes open in wonder. First off, the Bee orchid, perhaps one of the species more likely to be uncovered. This is one of our species practising mimicry, in its case its flowers resembling bees, which attract real bees to try and mate and in the process pollinating the flower, although this orchid does self-pollinate, too, so I guess it has a backup system. The species loves chalk (many orchids do, which is why the Southeast of England is such a hot spot for them; lucky for me as this is where I live), but it exists across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. It is my ambition this spring and summer to uncover a

few more species I have not seen before. I have been doing my research, and as we are allowed to leave our homes on 29 March, well, botany is the freshness and new life that will lift us all out of the era of COVID-19!



17 March **Botany of the day: Greater butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) ...** I have managed to see only two of this species, which tends to grow apart from others of its species. That's a very mysterious thing about orchids, with their complicated pollination stories and, on some occasions, symbiotic relationships with trees or fungi mycelium roots and networks. There is one species, the Ghost orchid, which is in the U.K. but has not been seen since 2009 that has a reproduction process that no one seems to understand, it popping up every 20 years or so miles from where it was last seen. Anyway, back to the Greater butterfly-orchid, which has a close cousin, the Lesser butterfly-orchid, which like the Ghost, I have not seen. The Greater is a resident of Europe and North Africa and flowers in June and July in unimproved grassland and chalky woodland that receives fair amounts of light between the trees. It is one of the most graceful of our orchids, I think.



18 March Botany of the day: White helleborine (*Cephalanthera damasonium*)

... Helleborines are a family of orchids that are as equally beautiful as full-blown orchids, but I say that with the actual knowledge of only ever seeing this one species of them. Again, this year I hope to see Marsh, Broad-leaved and Red helleborines, if no others of their type. I found this one, with several others, in an innocuous residential area near Dorking, Surrey, as I was on my way to see my first Adonis blue butterfly (see BotD 11 February), a square field really that seemed not to be a reserve, more the pride and joy of local residents. How it manages to avoid the baseness of local government authorities is anyone's guess, but it was a very pleasant discovery. Owner of a very long Latin name, the White helleborine is home in Europe and Asia. It never fully opens its flowers (what you see in my photo is pretty much it, but still, I think you would agree, beautiful, and it can be told apart from the very similar Narrow-leaved helleborine, apparently, by

looking down on both and inspecting how the stems holding the flowers radiate from the central stem. I am thinking this takes more practice than it initially sounds like it should do.



19 March Botany of the day: Pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)

... Purple, pink, mauve, these are the colours of the majority of British orchids, the Pyramidal, I think, instantly recognisable by its tightly held, cone-shape grouping of flowers. A relatively common species, large numbers of these can be found in their colonies, usually on southern-facing chalk hillsides, but also it

is a great coloniser of disturbed areas such as road verges, quarries and the like, even airport fringes. It is resident in a sweep of Europe from the U.K. largely southeast to the Mediterranean and over to Iran. It is pollinated by lepidoptera, that is, butterflies and moths, and its roots, its tubers, are an ingredient when ground up called salep, which is used in some forms of ice cream. If you ever have had Turkish ice cream, which is delicious and thick enough to stand up on its own, then you would have had salep, but thankfully the Turkish

government banned the export of it at the beginning of this century, a necessary move for the survival of several species of orchids as it is estimated it takes 1,000 orchid tubers to make one kilogram of salep.



22 March Botany of the day: Monkey orchid (*Orchis simia*) ... One of the United Kingdom's rarest orchids, the Monkey orchid has petals that do resemble tiny monkeys complete with legs and arms, even little feet and hands, and if you were to gently prise the lip of the flower over, what looks like little eyes and a pair of lips, but it is not to be confused with the South American tropical species named *dracula simia*, of which there are countless photos on the Internet—some real, some very faked. In the U.K. our Monkey orchid is known from only two places, but one of them is in Kent, my county, and examples are easily found in May and June. It is one of my favourites. Its existence in the U.K. appears a little odd, as elsewhere it is found in warmer parts of the Mediterranean, Eastern Russia and Iran, and it is thought its decline in the U.K. and other parts of Europe is due to uncontrolled agricultural practices. It is a close relative to the Military orchid, which I hope to see in May as one of the few places it can be found is close to my

brother's home, and we should be allowed out of lock down by then. Hopefully!



23 March Botany of the day: Southern marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) ... Also known as the Leopard marsh orchid for reasons I cannot fathom (something to do with changing spots?), the Southern marsh orchid is a strange botanical specimen in that it frequents cooler parts of Europe, from the United Kingdom across Northern Europe to the Baltics and also exists only in conjunction with fungi, the orchid receiving symbiotic help from fungi root systems known as mycelium. Isn't natural history wonderful? There also is a Northern marsh orchid that will be in BotD soon, resembles its Southern cousin very closely and is so similar that I do not think I could tell the difference unless I knew what part of the U.K. I was standing in. Literally the Southern species stops at a line vaguely crossing one of the narrowest stretches of England from just north of Liverpool and Manchester across to the top of the county of Lincolnshire.



24 March Botany of the day: Fly orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*) ... Another orchid with flowers that mimic an insect, hence the last part of its Latin name, *insectifera*, in its case a fly. This is one special orchid that can be so troublesome to find. They tend to grow alone from others of its species in the dappled fringes of woodland, along paths where the sun can penetrate, but they seem always difficult to spot. The first one I found was after I became convinced I would not find one, but then it just popped into my vision, and I stared at it in disbelief. It is only found in Europe, and in the United Kingdom in the south almost exclusively but also sparsely, dependent, so it seems, on birch trees. Birch is the tree of new life. It is the first tree species to grow if any area has been burned or cut back, and as you might know the English translation of Icelandic musician Björk's name is "birch." The Fly orchid is pollinated by species of wasps called Digger wasps, not flies at all, and the flower's design seems to be indifferent to that, too, as attracting the insects is a

pheromone released by the flower that mimics that released by female wasps. I sure they are guided to the "fly" flower even if they do not identically resemble the wasp.



25 March Botany of the day: Early purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*) ... To celebrate the freshness of comment and data at today's Hotel Data Conference, which I am covering, I present to you one of the first orchids to emerge every year, the Early purple. I am lucky to have a wood full of these very close to my home, in a spot called Frylands Wood, where tucked between the bluebells are even one or two very rare white forms, variants if you will, subspecies. This orchid emerges at about the same time as the Early spider orchid, which I hope to see over the Easter holidays as then we are allowed to travel more than five kilometres from our homes, even though maybe early April might be a week, even a few days too early. I will take my chances. Another native of Europe, with a few seeping into the Middle East, the Early-purple contains no nectar and is yet another orchid attracting pollination via insects, although what insect its flowers are meant to mimic I cannot see. Maybe you can?

Okay, now HDC's analysis of Europe is about to start, so back to the portal.



26 March Botany of the day: Common twayblade (*Neottia ovata*) ... This is certainly not our most colourful orchid. Common across both Europe and Asia, it is, as you might suspect, a species that blends in very well in its grassy and shrubby homes, with most people I am sure being blissfully unaware of its existence, and it does have beauty in its details. Its flowers attract a variety of insects to pollinate it, which the plant does by ejecting a substance called *pollinia* (from the word pollen) when an insect lands on its petals, which act rather like a fulcrum. The piece of the flower that does this (maybe a better explanation would be that the insect lands on one end of a seesaw, while the other end, in natural history known as a *rostellum*, which contains the pollinia, then springing toward the insect). It also has a symbiotic relationship in terms of its nutrient requirements with fungi, so all in all it is a clever little thing, and again if you look at its petals (in my photos, definitely the ones near to the base of the stem), quite gorgeous.



29 March Botany of the day: Lady orchid (*Orchis purpurea*) ... On the day after three months of full lockdown, the English, and Welsh, are now allowed to travel more than five miles from their homes, although the advice is to still stay at home. To “celebrate,” the Lady orchid is a jewel, with fairly large, robust spikes of flowers, each one representing a “lady” attired in a pink and white dress and crimson bonnet, and with dainty arms, which might be an decades-old image of fashion but was probably very accurate when the species was named in Victorian or Georgian times. This is another rare species in the United Kingdom, but there is a small forest of them in my county of Kent, in a place called Yockletts Bank, near the village of Stelling Minnis and reached at the top of a narrow footpath that opens up to a sunny bank. It is quite tall for an orchid species, but not as tall as a Lizard orchid, which will soon come to the pages of BotD. It gets its last part of its Latin name for its sepals and upper

petals that are purple, although there are numerous other species in the U.K. that certainly out-purple it. It is resident in Europe and some parts of Western Asia. I was very happy in that I walked my Mum slowly up the bank to find her this orchid at that Kentish site, along with Fly orchid and Greater butterfly orchid (both see previous BotDs), all of which she had not seen before.



30 March Botany of the day: Green-winged orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) ... This species is named for the tiny, thin greenish lines that travel vertically down its petals, but I admit they are not readily visible in my photo, which I took in the beautiful, small valley of Park Gate Down, yet again in my county of Kent, known as the Garden of England. The last part of its Latin names comes from the Latin for “clown,” with its green veins and pink spots supposedly reminiscent of a clown’s costume or makeup. Also, again, it is a plant found only in Europe and the Middle East, and it is closely related to the Early purple orchid (see BotD 25 March). It is a long-lasting orchid, too, with some individuals living more than 15 years. The orchid is now classed as vulnerable/near-threatened, mostly due to the use of fertilisers and other chemicals in agriculture, which mess around with the root systems of fungi, as this (as we have seen with several other orchid species) is dependent on a symbiotic relationship with toadstools and mushrooms.



31 March Botany of the day: Common spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) ... The Common spotted orchid is the United Kingdom’s most common and distributed orchid, which sometimes fills whole slopes of chalk and limestone hillside, its mauve spikes eclipsing the green of the grass and celebrating the summer. The last part of its Latin names hints of another flower of similar colour, *fuchsia*. I know of a field of this orchid in a spot called Chapel Bank that cannot be reached unless some degree of athleticism lets you climb a wall or wire fence, but once one is into it, possibly illegally, the scene does hint of an Eden, plus if you are able to get out the other side, made more difficult by thick bramble, a ditch and another fence, then there lies the White Bear pub in the hamlet of Fickleshole. Common, yes, but also quite exquisite, and it does have a couple of varieties, a much more purple-pink version and an all-white one.



1 April Botany of the day: Man orchid (*Orchis anthropophora*) ... We have had the Lady orchid (see BotD 29 March), and now is the time for the Man orchid, this species' petals and flowers supposedly resembling little men on the march down the pub, or somewhere, although the last part of its Latin name, *anthropophora*, suggests they are in the shape of non-gender-specific humans. Nonetheless, this is a species that elicits delight about orchid-searchers as it is very hard to find due to its pale colour and thin spikes. It enjoys living in well-drained, chalky soil, so thus often is found—if found it can be amid unobstructed grasslands—after a knee-painful clamber up the sides of hills. It is resident across Europe and parts of Asia, but southern England marks its most northerly range. There is a beautiful spot 30 minutes from me called Magpie Bottom, which was saved by developers by a couple in the late 1960s and who also saved an ancient grove of yew trees, which normally are found only in churchyards, a tradition that probably is pagan, not Christian. The

couple when they got older sold the Magpie site to the Kent Wildlife Trust, so today it is protected, and nine species of orchids can be found there. I plan on returning in June.



6 April Botany of the day: Bug orchid (*Anacamptis coriophora*) ... I apologise for not stating there was a very long weekend over here in the United Kingdom for Easter and that BotD was taking a break, and that I also was somehow writing this daily update on the Corporate Communications' Teams page, not the STR General one, so we are back where we belong. I had no luck yesterday trying to find an Early spider orchid (it's too early, apparently, to see them in Kent, even though they have been seen in Dorset in the West Country), so today we have the Bug orchid, a species I found in Puglia, Italy, as I stopped by the roadside to look at the map and on the other side of a low wall I saw this beautiful species staring back at me. We were looking for a small hotel called the Riposo del Vento, or "The resting of the wind," which comprised of "trulli," dome-shaped houses that look like bee-hives and are indigenous to Puglia, otherwise known as Apulia.

The word *Anacamptis* means "bent backwards" in Greek and refers to a family of orchids, which all do not smell particularly nicely, that scent, though, attracting its insect pollinators. This orchid is not found in the U.K., but I thought it was beautiful enough to sneak its way in to these pages.



7 April Botany of the day: Northern marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*) ... The northern version of the Southern marsh orchid (see BotD 23 March), this orchid is the species we see in the United Kingdom to the north of the country, in North England and Scotland (also frequent in Ireland), and it favours boggy, damp meadows, although it is tolerant of both acidic and alkaline soil. It is another orchid with the suffix “*purpurella*,” much along the lines of that of the Lady orchid (*Orchis purpurea*; see BotD 29 March)), a species with predominantly purple coloration. Apart from the U.K. and Ireland, it is only also found on Denmark, which makes it geographically speaking uncommon, although a better description would be that it is “locally common.” I found a large area of them as I pulled into a cottage called the Woodhouse on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, which is in the hamlet of Milovaig, literally the last lane off the last road on the final promontory of this beautiful place. Hundreds of orchid spikes dotted a squashy area of sheep tracks,

Cottongrass and rivulets pouring off a cliff facing the Outer Hebrides islands.



8 April Botany of the day: Lizard orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) ... This is the United Kingdom’s tallest orchid, often reaching a metre in height and producing myriad flowers that sort of look like little geckos, not that we have geckos over here. This orchid also is a serious rarity, but if one pays £7 to park in the beautiful Sandwich Estate in Kent, there it is seen quite effortlessly in May tucked behind the sand bunkers of the Royal St George’s Golf Club, where there have been played 13 Open Championships but which hikers and orchid-spotters have access across on three public footpaths. (Yes, one has to sort of come off the footpaths to get close to the orchids, but only by 10 feet or so.) I plan on going to see them next month, as last June (when our first lock down ended) the few I found seemed to be drying up, as might be evidenced in my photo. Their labellum, that is, the part of the petal that attracts the

pollinating insects, is long and twisted, coloured brown, green, purple and white, and combinations thereof. Supposedly it smells of goat, although I personally did not get that impression, but that seems a good point to leave the world of orchids as I have run out of photos. Tomorrow?



9 April Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) ... Back to birds, and I sincerely hope that one species will be the species to fly us back to our offices, for when I return to the Blue Fin, I will end BotD. The first bird back up for our avian friends is the spectacular Hoopoe, which can be found across Europe, Asia and North Africa but very rarely in the United Kingdom. The photo is of one I found in Harran, Turkey, but I do have one on my British list, from the Kentish coast at Dungeness. The photo of that is so bad, but at first I got a second-long glimpse of one distantly walking from behind one clump of grass to another, but that one second was wondrous, and I did get to see it far closer and for longer an hour or so later. When one arrives in the U.K., it is a superstar bird for its long crest and cinnamon, black and white plumage, plus the fact that often it does like to sit out in the open. One very cool thing about the Hoopoe is that it can open its beak

when that beak is wedged into the soil, so it can digest worms, insects and the like, rather than spearing them and pulling them out. In Ancient Egyptian mythology, the Hoopoe was sacred, while in Roman culture a Hoopoe painted alongside a name told others that the person was the successor and heir of his (yes, not her) father's wealth and property. Birds will continue to be the flight out of the dull spaces of COVID-19!



12 April White-throated sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*)

... Hot off the press, or at least from Saturday, a new species for me for the United Kingdom, but a species I am very familiar with from my years living in New York City. Apparently, there have been fewer than 50 records of this species accidentally landing on U.K. soil, so it generated much excitement. Driving south through London

at 5:45 a.m. is a joy, with no traffic, and I arrived at the spot this bird had been seen the day before at 7, joining another 10 or so souls, and we searched for an hour before this little jewel scurried through some white-blossomed bushes. It landed on the one picnic table set up in a very small reserve consisting of a small patch of woodland on both sides of a stream and

sitting in front of a large square of allotments, they being areas of land rented out at a peppercorn rent for people to grow vegetables. The sparrow duly performed for us for five minutes before flying off and not being seen again for four hours. This species has two forms, the one in the photo with black and white stripes on the head, the other with tan and black stripes, and birds of one type always breed with those from the other, which is presumably why collectively they are called “white-throated,” not “black and white-striped” sparrows. In North America they breed in Canada and New England and spend winter in the south and east of the US, which is why in New York I’d see them as they moved through twice a year.



13 April Snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) ... The Snow bunting is one of the hardiest birds of all, a species that spends all its existence in northern climes, breeding in such places as Iceland, Northern Siberia and Northern Canada. I have seen large flocks of them happily flitting around in snow storms in the

Icelandic town of Ólafsfjörður, where I was stranded (happily) for a day as the weather closed off the roads, and in the ruined Icelandic hilltop fort of Breiðabolsstaðir where supposedly a hero of one of Iceland’s epic sagas lived. Iceland is the only place, along with Western Alaska, that this species spends all year, and every winter a few examples reach the shores of the United Kingdom. Before they migrate they have to bulk up by 30%, and only those that have done so sufficiently will be able to make the correct decisions as to where to migrate, which is quite extraordinary, but which evidently makes for a stronger gene pool. I found the two in the photo on the beach at Reculver Abbey in Kent, England, on 3 January this year, just before we headed into lock down (now over!), and they are quite difficult to pick out among the pebbles, even if one can hear their distinctive chirping. The male is whiter overall than the female, and immature birds sort of sit somewhere between the two in plumage.



14 April Red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*)

... The Red-backed shrike used to be a breeding bird in the United Kingdom, but a nest has only been very rarely found here since the late 1980s. It does still breed in northern parts of mainland Europe, and it is not adjudged to be endangered as a species. Readers might remember we have featured three other shrikes in BotD, all in 2020, Woodchat (16 July), Great grey (20

August) and mega-rare, off-I-went-as-fast-as-I-could Masked (19 October), all of which are collectively known as butcher birds for their habit of impaling prey on thorns. The Red-backed shrike is startlingly beautiful in its male adult form, a red back (obviously) set against a grey head with a black eye stripe. The one in my photo is a juvenile but still, I think, exquisite, and you will see it has caught a wasp. This individual turned up on Wanstead Heath in East London, which is watched closely as a birding site due to it being in the city and is very close to the former and current stadiums of my beloved football/soccer team West Ham United. The word “shrike” derives from the Old English form of the word “shriek.” Once a shrike is found, it has the kind habit of repeatedly hunting and returning to the same perch, once in a while flying off to another close one.

15 April Little owl (*Athene noctua*) ... The Little owl not surprisingly is the smallest of the five owl species that inhabit the United Kingdom, and it also calls home a large area across Europe, Central Asia and North Africa. It was introduced into the U.K. in the 19th Century, and it has one of the most evocative Latin names. If any species of owl could be



said to be the origin of the family’s reputation for wisdom it is this one, named for the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena. The owl also in some parts is called the Owl of Minerva, who is the Roman goddess of wisdom and sometimes considered *to* be the same goddess as Athena. “Noctua” just means “night,” which is a little misleading as the Little owl is a day-hunting owl, although it is most happy, in my experience, in the two periods of twilight. The owl in this photograph turned up in Peckham Rye Park, South London, not known for its bird life,

although it was where I saw my first Long-tailed duck (see BotD 17 December). The owl in Peckham was happily perched three-quarters of the way up a tree, with most park-goers utterly unaware of it. In more mythology, it is also said that this owl's hooting was heard in the minutes before the murder of Julius Caesar on the steps of the Forum.



16 April Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) ... The Sanderling is a dear little thing, if I can be guilty of giving human characteristics to birds, a small wader, a sandpiper, that skips along the shoreline as though it is a little nervous of the gentle tide, probing for small molluscs and insects in the mud-line. This is where its name comes from, from the Old English *sand-yrðling*,

translated as “sand ploughman,” or as the Americans would write “sand plowman.” (The last part of that name points to Icelandic, or Old Norse; the last part of its Latin name means “white,” as in albumen, and also is a former name of the kingdom of Scotland.) Its broad bill helps in its ploughing. I do not see them as much as I would like to, considering they are not uncommon, although I am most likely to see them on their migration up and down the planet, most likely in winter. It is one of the world's truly global birds, breeding in the Arctic regions of Canada, Russia and Scandinavia and wintering as far south as South America and Australia. Some might fly 10,000 kilometres on migration, others 2,000 kilometres, with perhaps the latter ones deciding to stay off in England. I saw this one on 3 January in Kent. The two coasts of the US will see them also in migration, all of which is incredible for a bird that weighs on average 50 or 60 grams.

19 April Ring ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*) ...

This species, a species of thrush like the American robin, migrates to the United Kingdom in spring to breed on moorland (high plains with sparse tree cover) in the North of England, Wales and Scotland, thus, in my part of England is a bird only seen as it stops off to fuel. This one I found on Saturday in a small reserve on the edge



of the town I grew up in, Erith, literally the last place on the south bank of the Thames going

east but still technically in Greater London. Despite being in an urban setting, I only could alert one other birder to the find, and it was not found the next morning, so there you are, a bird that sort of belongs to me. This is a difficult species to see, in my experience. The males are black, thus setting off its white bib to more effect, but the browner females (as in my photo) still show that clash of colours. They winter in southern Europe, North Africa and Turkey. “Ouzel” is the old English name for the Blackbird, which this species resembles (minus the white coloration) and that is of the same family. The Ring ouzel in some parts is called a Moor blackbird, or Fell blackbird, fells being essentially moors, too. I enjoyed watching it in the company of four of another thrush member, the Song thrush.

20 April Red-knobbed coot (*Fulica cristata*) ...

This is a species that is exceedingly rare in Europe, and each of the few birds there are in the continent—as can be seen in my photo—is tagged very prominently with an identification band, which will not bother the bird in its daily goings-on. This is a species that mostly lives in North Africa, and its overall numbers

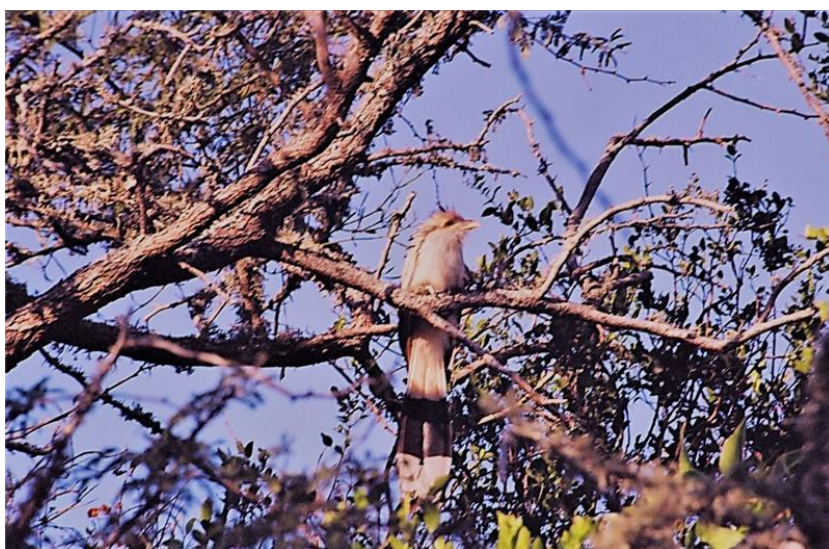


are not small enough to have scientists worried. It might look benign, but the coot family contains birds that are quite aggressive, squaring up to threats many times their size and also being very stern parents, so much so that many fatalities do occur between parent and chicks. That might seem strange in nature, although again maybe in the long run it strengthens the gene pool. I saw this individual in the Parc Natural de s'Albufera de Mallorca on the Spanish island of Mallorca in the Balearic Islands, and I knew they'd be a good chance of seeing one there. It still took some searching. Out of breeding season (and you can see this bird is in the process of collecting nesting material) this coot lacks its red knobs or devil horns, and as its distribution overlaps that of the Common coot, which looks near-identical in non-breeding months, identification can be tricky.



21 April Tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) ... Huge success last evening! The Tawny owl is the United Kingdom and Europe's most common owl, but try finding one, and you might just go mad in the attempt. Last September, when Francesca and I, and the three cats, Super-black, White and Pieball, stayed in a cottage in Somerset, we heard the hooting of one on several nights, but try as we might, we could not glimpse where the sound—the most classic

sound of all owls—came from. No such problems last evening when I was running through a local park, and my eyes just went straight to one, sitting in a tree, which I think most likely was standing guard over some unseen chicks. I went back a little later to take some photographs, but the light was poor by then, and I switched to black-and-white mode. (And just a few days after finding a Little owl—see BotD 15 April.) Maybe I will return, as I think it will be in the same place for at least until late May. There is a general code among birders that the locations of owls must never be publicly revealed. This is a purely nocturnal bird, hunting at night, hidden by day, and it is its ears that are its best help in hunting, rather than its eyesight, which is not as exceptional as myth suggests. It is also highly territorial, and often its fledglings get into trouble if they cannot find vacant territories at such time as its parents kick it out of theirs.



22 April Guira cuckoo (*Guira guira*) ... This species of cuckoo, rather a scruffy type, is found in southern South America and is termed an “opportunistic predator,” which I would guess is the same as any hungry meat-eater. Its Latin name suggests it is unique (where Latin names have the same name for both its Linnean classifiers that is likely to be the case), and

it frequents open areas and wetlands. I saw this one while horse riding (I am a very poor equestrian) in the superb Parque Nacional Iberá in North-eastern Argentina, when I came across two gauchos roping horses. The cuckoo perhaps was hoping that the boisterous churning of horses' hoofs might reveal some beetles and worms, or the like, as it was sitting on this branch with seemingly no care in the world. That park is well known to birders (but

very difficult to reach) for being the home of what might be one of my favourite species, the Strange-tailed tyrant, but unfortunately I was not able to get a photo of one of the three I saw. Unlike some other cuckoos, this species does not lay its eggs in the nests of foster birds, but does the right thing and builds its own.

23 April White-crowned pigeon (*Patagioenas leucocephala*) ...

The day after I received my second dose of AstraZeneca COVID-19

vaccination from a nurse called Matilda who said she was originally from St Lucia, a birding tale related to those sun-kissed islands of the Atlantic Ocean. The White-crowned pigeon is a pigeon living in what we in the United Kingdom



call the West Indies, our American friends the Caribbean, but its range just pokes into the US, into Florida, and probably only on the islands of Key West. I photographed this, I think, with a 300mm lens on film, and this particular image is a computer-scanned version of my photo. This particular bird caused great excitement. I was told by staff at the Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden on Stock Island, the last-but-one key before Key West itself, that this species had not been seen there since a hurricane ripped through the islands the autumn before. I was there the next spring. It was not such a piece of ornithological sleuthing on my part, just luck that the day I visited there were no other humans and that there after a kilometre of walking were three White-crowned pigeons happily perched in a tree that had decided that very day to come back, but it was very nice to report that I had seen them, for the bird evidently meant a lot to the staff. Considered near-threatened, this species nests in mangrove swamps. Most people, I think (I want to think), understand how important mangrove is as a protection against flooding and as an animal habitat, but it does not hurt me to remind people again.

26 April Botany of the day: Early spider orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes*) ... A return to United Kingdom orchids for one more day. I have long wanted to see an Early spider orchid, and I did search in April, with no luck, as while the weather has been nice here since the latest relaxation of COVID-19 rules on 12 April, March and the first two weeks of the cruellest month were cold and wet, so everything natural has been put back a little while. This weekend, though, success. When I say success, I mean I searched for more than two hours and found one orchid, and it having one flower only. As you can see from my photo, there are

unopened buds. It is also tiny, no more than four or five inches in height, so it takes some searching for it, I can tell you, but finally an example stared back at me. The U.K. has two orchids that come earlier than the others, hence their names, the Early spider and the Early purple (see BotD 25 March). More Early spider orchids will come soon, and I will go back, to look for some



genetic variations, too. The Early spider is named for those two tiny light green parallel lines at the top of the bloom that supposedly resemble spider fangs. It is a beautiful thing, with its flower displaying chocolate, purple, lilac, green and yellow. In the U.K., it is known from only a small handful of places, all on the edge of the southern coast, on chalk. This one is from Samphire Hoe, Kent, a reserve created by using the rock that came out of the Channel Tunnel to France. Instead of dumping it in the sea, they decided to build a reserve below chalk cliffs that extends the country a few hundred metres. This is the opposite of what usually happens, as annually we lose bits of Kent, Dorset and Norfolk, and other counties, to weather and erosion. Orchids in bloom are far healthier than meetings on Zoom!



27 April Cactus wren
(*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*) ... With perhaps the longest Latin name we have seen thus far in BotD, the Cactus wren is a desert and scrub specialist limited to extreme southwest US and northern and western Mexico. Baja California probably sees its largest population, but I found this one on top of a US road sign advertising Congress, Arizona, in Yavapai County, probably to the

most northerly of its range, but which is apt as it is Arizona's state bird. That might be an odd choice considering it is only found in a small section of the state, but who am I to argue? It is the US's largest wren species, and the subspecies found in Arizona—*couesi*—is the largest of the species' nine subspecies and noted for its pale belly, which can just be seen in my photograph and which might have been enhanced if the bird in question chose one of its favourite perches, the top of a Saguaro cactus. It is not considered threatened, but it has numerous predators, including snakes, foxes, coyotes and even Roadrunners, a species of cuckoo. Birds will stay in our dreams long after the pandemic is over!



28 April Red kite (*Milvus milvus*) and Common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) ... BotD provides a double-whammy today with two species not one, but both have fascinating stories. Out for a walk this weekend in Oxfordshire, I stumbled across a completely white Common pheasant. It is not technically an albino, for it had black eyes, whereas albinos would

have pink ones. Rather it is leucistic, that is, it lacks all pigmentation, but seeing one is still incredibly rare. The British Trust for Ornithology told me there can only be a very small handful around the country, and for a species that is reared and released into the countryside in huge numbers every year for that savage act of paid shooting parties. The chap from the BTO who wrote to me said he had seen only two in 45 years of birding. The Common pheasant usually is a warm brown-red colour, with golds, greens and purples, and the only colour this example retains is its rich red eyebrow. Pheasants are native to India and South Asia, and just into Eastern Europe, and the ones in the U.K. were first brought over by the Romans 2,000 years ago and more. My pheasant was being closely inspected by a Red kite, which 30 years ago in the U.K. was confined to one very small area of Wales, down to fewer than 10 individuals, but it has become a recent success story, following a reintroduction pretty much in that area of Oxfordshire I was walking around, the village of Nettlebed. Now it is not surprising to see them in most counties of Southern England. They are scavengers, like the American Bald eagle, and this one swooped down several times to within 10 feet of the pheasant, perhaps not knowing if such a white pheasant could actually be living and breathing. This was an incredibly blessed experience to have.

29 April Desert wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*) ... The fourth species of wheatear to grace BotD (Wheatear: 14 September; White-crowned wheatear: 22 October, and Hume's wheatear: 13 November) the Desert wheatear is a bird frequenting, not surprisingly, arid landscapes, the one I saw (a juvenile male; adult males are more striking in appearance) being in



the fabulous At Wathba Reserve in the United Arab Emirates' emirate of Abu Dhabi, perhaps the only recognised and preserved reserve there. If I arrive in the UAE at 6 in the morning (as is usually the case with Etihad Airlines) I hire a car and make a beeline straight for this place and start birding, jet-lag be damned! The reserve is notable for it probably being the only reserve that when you arrive, you have to sign in and then have to—courtesy and politeness, even international relations, requires it, I believe—sit down cross-legged on cushions, drink the cup of tea presented to the visitor and chit-chat about this and that in snippets of English and hand gestures. This species of wheatear has a huge breeding range across the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa and Western Asia into India, and, like the Old World flycatcher it is, enjoys sitting on posts or stumps to swoop down on beetles and insects it sees on the floor.



30 April Grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) ... The third United Kingdom wagtail to fly into the pages of BotD, following the Pied wagtail (1 December) and Eastern yellow wagtail (15 December), the Grey wagtail (its Latin name can loosely be translated as “Ashy tail-mover”) is a species associated

with rivers. It quite often likes to patrol weirs and canal locks, places where lengths of water have been arrested by human development and where a change in the water's course might churn up insects and flies. This is probably also where it chooses to build its nests. I have seen Grey wagtail in the concrete car park behind my flat and, as would be more obvious, along the Pool and Ravensbourne (where this photo was taken in February) rivers close to where I live, and it appears as quite an exotic species in the urban environment. Home is a wide area across Europe and Asia. Its yellows, greys and white eye-stripe, and its tail that wags up and down (some say to alert other birds that they are alert; others say to waft air across the hiding places of prey), produces a very beautiful thing to watch as it skips up and down rivers on stones and roots peaking above the water line. In the breeding season, males have a black throat. And good luck and fortune, Leigh Heath, in all your endeavours!



4 May **Speckled pigeon** (*Columba guinea*)

... Apologies for there having been no BotD yesterday. I believe I forgot to mention 3 May was a public holiday in the United Kingdom, the first of our two in May, and, of course, as is normal on such a holiday the weather was mixed. Off to warmer climes then for the Speckled pigeon, which also is known as the African rock pigeon and inhabits all of Africa south of the Sahara Desert. With such a huge range, there are subspecies, the one in my photograph being the Abyssinian speckled pigeon. These birds like to be close to humans, or at least their buildings. This was the species that was the first thing I saw on reaching what might be the most isolated place I have even been, the village of Sheikh Hussein, 130 miles (but five hours' drive) from Goba, which is at the base of the Bale Mountains where I had wanted to go to see the incredibly rare Ethiopian wolf, which is a wolf but appears

more like a large fox. Sheikh Hussein is also about 200 miles southwest of the city of Harar, but Google Directions does not allow a direct route to be made online, even though that is what we did. Sheikh Hussein is home to a tomb (my pigeon is sitting on the top of it) of a Muslim holy man of that same name, and once a year it receives thousands of pilgrims, despite their being no restaurants or hotels. No doubt the pigeons take advantage of crumbs being left by those masses.



5 May **Barnacle goose** (*Branta leucopsis*) ...

One of the United Kingdom's smaller goose species, the Barnacle goose derives its name from ancient naturalists believing that during the times of the year when it cannot be seen on our islands, this bird disappeared under bridges or in caves or on cliffs and hung upside down like limpets or barnacles,

rather like bats. How they were born was supposedly not from eggs but from pieces of floating wood adrift in the sea. These theories were written in the 12th Century and believed for many centuries, so preposterous was the idea that birds could migrate thousands of miles to another continent, only to return to the exact same places later on. It has three distinct populations, and the one that breeds on the Norwegian islands of Svalbard winter on the east

coast of the U.K., specifically on the Solway Firth that is the border on that side of the country between England and Scotland. There also is a non-migratory population, less than 1,000 birds, that have become wild but are believed to have been originally escapes that live in southern England, and the two birds in my photograph are most definitely two of them. These two showed up at the Crossness Reserve in the town I grew up in, Erith, and were quite the stars, having never visited there before.



6 May Black-headed ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) ...

The second ibis species to grace the pages of BotD (also see Sacred ibis, 2 November), the Black-headed ibis lives in the Subcontinent and Southeast Asia and migrates northeast to Mongolia, South Korea and Japan, among other places

in that general area. I found this one in an almost impossibly bright-green tea paddy in Sri Lanka, which takes its tea cultivation very seriously, amid colourful landscapes and the bright hue of the women employees' clothing, although seeing the hardships of tea-pickers takes some getting used to. It can be instantly recognised for being the only ibis species with a black head and beak and solidly white body, and it is distributed widely across its range, but nevertheless is considered a near-threatened species, with its Indonesian population now low in numbers. This was the only one I saw. When we were travelling across Sri Lanka we had a driver, who was a real sweetheart, and by the time we finished our four days with him I think he was stopping the car on his own whim if he thought he had seen something interesting and was becoming as excited about seeing birds as we were. Maybe he is still out there with a pair of binoculars? Ibises, along with herons and egrets, do not have calls, rather all they can do is make sort of a grunting noise, unlike cranes that have haunting sounds.



7 May Spotted redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) ... A close cousin of the Common redshank (see BotD all the way back to 27 March, 2020, when lock down first started), the Spotted redshank is the rarer of the two, although still considered common. It is a species United Kingdom birders love to find as they tend to—the bird, not the birders—stay on their own (well, perhaps birders do that, too), not even in small

groups. The bird in my photograph, which was taken in Oare, Kent, is in winter plumage, perhaps just starting to moult into summer plumage, where it becomes quite black with a white eye-ring. It is quite spectacular to behold then. The second part of its Latin name reminds those interested in nomenclature of the Eurasian robin (see BotD: June 8), which has the first part of its Latin name being “Erithacus,” which as with the Spotted redshank denotes the colour red (in the redshank’s case, not the robin’s bright breast coloration but its legs, its “redshanks.”) I have said before I grew up in a place called Erith, so this name always sticks in my mind. It breeds across the top of the world and winters in sub-Saharan Africa.



10 May Brown-headed barbet (*Psilopogon zeylanicus*) ...

Perhaps a strange-looking thing, the Brown-headed barbet is a species endemic to the Indian subcontinent, including Sri Lanka, where I took this photograph. A fruit-eater, it is happy in gardens and agricultural lands, as well as in open

woodland, so thus helping its numbers. Perhaps this individual was feasting up, knowing the weather was soon to change, for not long after I had seen it Cyclone Ockhi smacked into the island from the south, which I think resulted in perhaps 800 deaths, many of them fisherman but 27 of them on land in Sri Lanka. That all said, I saw people quite happily cycling through the hurricane and swerving around trees bending over in the wind; and this in one of the areas devastated by the tsunami in 2004. That night we asked if we could move down a floor in the small hotel we were staying in, and the staff was very happy to do that, so that my wife Francesca and I, and about 20 geckos that had taken shelter, could ride out the worst of the storm’s excesses. Next morning, all was calm, and I was greeted again by the sound of birds.



11 May Tree swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) ...

Indigenous to North America, but all of it, from the south of Mexico to the central middle of Canada, the Tree swallow is a boldly coloured bird of black, blue and white that migrates up through the US on the way to its northern US and Canadian breeding grounds. It is not as ubiquitous as the Barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), which is indeed the most widely distributed swallow species in the world, found in every continent save Antarctica, but it will

likely be seen by Americans as it flies north during spring and summer, and its most southernmost breeding grounds will be in Tennessee and the states along that state's longitudinal line. I photographed this one at Jamaica Bay Natural Reserve, which is in New York City close to John F. Kennedy International Airport and the unique community of Broad Channel, where residents are more likely to need a boat, rather than a car, and is, so the New York Times told me yesterday is the only part of New York City, apart from Staten Island, to have Republican representation. This is where the A subway train stops on the way to The Ramones' Rockaway Beach, and a walk of about a mile is required back north to the reserve, which is a wonderful outlet for nature. They nest in holes in trees, not in eaves of houses, and the like.



12 May Black-throated thrush (*Turdus atrogularis*) ... Yet another member of the thrush family, the Black-throated thrush is a bird of far-Eastern Europe and Asia, but joyfully one got mixed up with a flock of Redwing (see BotD 28 May) and somehow reached England. Where the flock decided to settle was quite comical, in the grounds of Whipsnade Zoo near Dunstable,

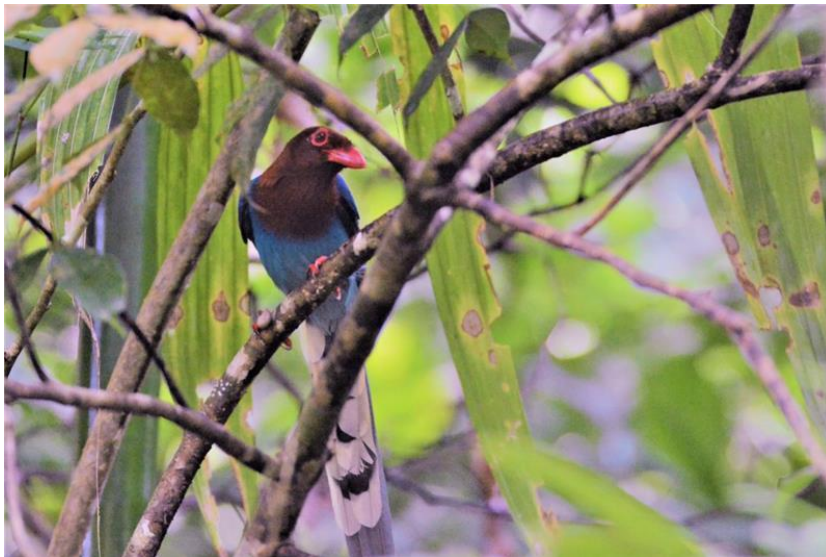
Bedfordshire, a few miles northwest of London. A visitor with some birding knowledge must have known that this visiting bird to the rock wallabies, anteaters and ocelots was rare, and soon the news got out to the birding community. I arrived on the first Saturday in December 2019 after it had been reported and queued up with 40 other birders all who paid their £20 entrance fee at the moment the zoo opened. The bird in question favoured one tree, and there it was. It did fly off, probably perturbed as to the numbers of people looking at it but was relocated on the bush in my photograph. The bird stayed for about a month, gorging on berries with its cousins, and the zoo apparently made £50,000 of much-needed income just due to those wanting to see this one rarity. Perhaps surprisingly, this species was lumped together with the now separate Red-throated thrush, only one of which has ever reached the United Kingdom. No, I did not see that one.



**13 May Reed bunting
(*Emberiza schoeniclus*) ...**

Very often overlooked, the Reed bunting is a common bird of marshes and reed beds, building its nest deep in the vegetation and popping up to the tops of those reeds to feed on seeds and sing their songs. I find the interesting thing with common birds is to try and photograph them in a way that says something new about them. Perhaps I do not

succeed, but I rather like this recent shot, with its neck feathers blown up behind its head, the solid green background and the bird seemingly looking far across the landscape. It makes me wonder what it is thinking? It lives across much of Europe and Asia, with the more northern birds migrating south in those continents for the winter but also with many staying in the same spot all year, which is the case with the population of Southern England. This is a male of the species, the females being more brown and with less obvious distinction between its shading. (I will add here that last evening on a run with my Dulwich Runners AC running club I saw my first Swift (*Apus apus*) of the summer, always a joyous occasion. I am not sure my running friends shared my elation, but there you go.)



**14 May Sri Lanka blue
magpie (*Urocissa ornata*)**

... This is the most colourful bird I think I have left in my files that has not yet graced BotD, apt, I hope, for the news that Hotel News Now has just won the US national silver prize at the American Society of Business Publication Editors' annual AZBEE awards for its series coverage of United Kingdom hotel group

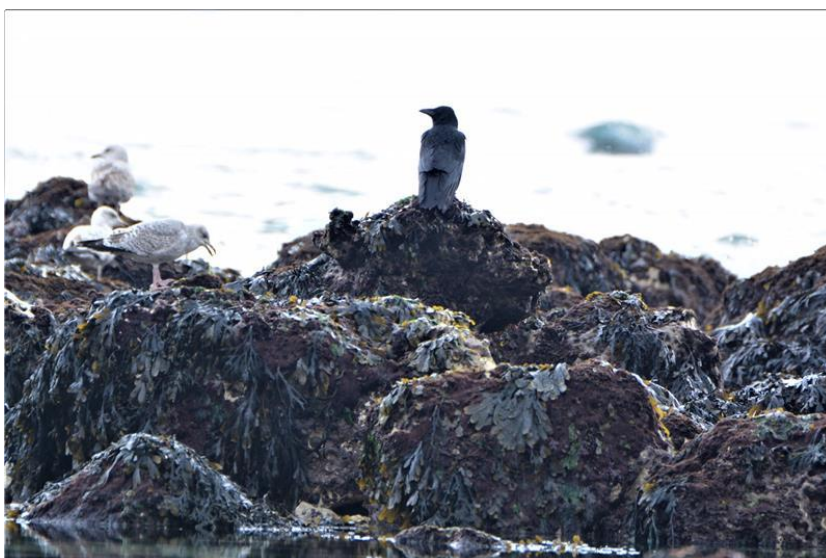
Travelodge, its changed operating model, reaction to that by its assets' hotel owners and how the entire situation unfolded. The series won the gold award at the regional level, and now silver at the national level; and my colleague Danielle Hess has been awarded Young Leading Scholar recognition, so it is a day to celebrate with one of the world's greatest birds. Despite its bold coloration, this is not an easy bird to find. Endemic to a wedge of South-central Sri Lanka and also gracing the country's 10¢ postage stamp, it is classed as vulnerable, that is, its existence is threatened, down to some 15,000 individuals. I saw it during a glorious 20 minutes watching a feeding flock, which is when numerous species come to one area to feed

but do so in a hierarchical manner, small birds coming in first, larger ones later, and always in an order, perhaps for other reasons unknown to us. It is thought they do so to have safety in numbers but also the size and numbers in such a flock help disturb insect prey, although not all the members will be carnivorous. The Sri Lanka blue magpie is known as the *Kehibella* in the local Sinhala language, written as කැහිඹෙල්ලා (my excuse for adding some swirling characters from this language.)



17 May Asian openbill (*Urocissa ornata*) ... I thought the Asian openbill would be a suitable bird for this day, today, in which United Kingdom hotels can reopen fully after the last four and a half months of lockdown, but whether consumers will open their billfolds (probably a bad joke less understood in the U.K.) remains to be seen, with the advice being to still eat outdoors if the weather

behaves. Currently, it is not. This species, a species of stork found throughout the Indian subcontinent and western parts of Southeast Asia, is a bird of open marshes and agricultural paddy fields and the like. You might notice from my photograph that it has a distinct gap between the upper and lower mandibles, which it is thought is an evolutionary adaptation to allow it to hold better snails and other shelled molluscs, also snakes and frogs, that are its principal foodstuffs. That gap also is where it gets its name. If it eats the Golden apple snail so much the better, as this is now a pest in many regions where it is not indigenous, yet again the fault of humans who for its pretty colours collected this species of snail for its aquariums.



18 May Raven (*Corvus corax*) ... The ultimate lord and lady of the crow family, the Raven is a bird mixed indubitably with myth, lore and legend, sometimes a harbinger of doom. Ravens keep to themselves, or in groups of two or three, magisterial across the Northern skies, a so-called trickster peering down inquisitively and judgmentally at Viking ships, the navies of Henry VIII, the fleets of

boats sailing to Dunkirk and the cod fisherman leaving the wild coasts of Britain. The rumour is that if the Raven leaves the Tower of London, then the United Kingdom will be invaded (it

helps then that those in the tower have their wings clipped.) I once saw four Ravens sitting on consecutive fence posts on the Isle of Skye, Scotland, just below the Cuillin Mountains, but all that happened to me when they flew off was that I had a very good dinner that night. In North-western US and Canadian cultures, of the Haida, Kwakiutl, Tsimshian and others, the Raven is one of the two chief moieties, along with the eagle, the spiritual ties to which all people belong. I saw this individual looking imperious at Samphire Hoe, Kent, when I went looking for an Early-spider orchid (see BotD 26 April), and they are becoming more common across the southern parts of the U.K., whereas not too many years ago they were confined to upland areas of moor and mountain.



19 May Siskin (*Spinus spinus*) ... Another relatively common species that often is overlooked, the Siskin is a bird that enjoys spending time dipping in and out of dense vegetation with the occasional strut on an exposed branch as it searches and makes short work of seeds on which it eats. It might often be the bird that attends to your garden bird-feeder that one

does not instantly recognise, perhaps mistaking it for a Greenfinch, a close cousin. In my photograph is a female, very attractive but a little less green overall than a male. This Siskin is a type of finch, one with two populations, the first across all of Europe, the second in eastern Asia and Japan, but these two groups do not differ discernibly in plumage. One oddity of this bird, shared by only a few other species, is that birds will regurgitate food for more dominant members of the flock, a behaviour known as “allofeeding.” Penguins do this, and it is thought it is a process in which social cohesion, solidarity and safety can be maintained and fostered. Birds will stay in our dreams long after the pandemic is over!

20 May Red-backed flameback (*Dinopium psarodes*) ... There are some wonderfully colourful woodpeckers in the world, and this one must make the Top 25, its bright red back and head marking it out among the tropical vegetation it inhabits in Sri Lanka, to which it is endemic, found nowhere else on Earth. And what a wonderful name it has to, the Red-backed



flameback. It has a white line, which in my photograph can be seen on the side of its face and just above the wing, that swirls down almost its entire body in an S-shape and looks like a decal on a 1970's soup-up Corvette, or some such motor car. I only saw one of this species while in Sri Lanka and it was from my breakfast balcony as I ate Sri Lankan hoppers and the yellow-most eggs I have ever seen. (Yes, sadly, I go to breakfast with my binoculars and camera!) Despite not being found elsewhere, this is the most common woodpecker species on the island. There were a fair number of birds in the gardens of the Little Tamarind hotel I stayed at near the town of Tangalle, caused by them seeking shelter from the cyclone that hit the day before and outlined in BotD 10 May—Brown-headed barbet.



21 May Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) ... A large member of the Sulid family of seabirds, the Gannet is a distinctive species donning a yellow head, white body and black wing tips, which can be seen on the Northern Atlantic coastlines of both the Americas and Europe, where it can mass in huge colonies. When they do crowd together during breeding season, in

numbers approaching 60,000 pairs, the cacophony can be magnificent, and they also are known for their ravenous appetites, so much so that my Mum would always tell me off for eating like a gannet when I was shovelling in the food apparently too fast. They are also a joy to watch when they are fishing, fish being their main diet. A Gannet will fly so high into the sky before angling one wing down at an angle, after which the whole body descends like a weighted dart and punctures the water in a streamed line that gives the fish it has seen little chance of escape. This technique is permitted by its specialist nostrils that do not allow water to go the wrong way, eyes that can turn short-sighted in a second from being long-sighted so as to both see a fish from distance and close up under the water, a series of sacs that fill up with air, which can be transferred to the lungs, and oily sebaceous glands that waterproof feathers. All in all, another remarkable bird, all of which will stay in our dreams long after the pandemic is over!



24 May Green sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) ... The Green sandpiper is a long-awaited bird to turn up on British shores in the mid-summer to all the way around the calendar to March, its bobbing, jerky action as it hunts for insects in the mud always proving a delight. It only very, very occasionally breeds in the United Kingdom. Recognisable for the tiny dots patterned on its wings, it is not green at all really on first sighting, but it is legs and bill that give it its colourful

name. They even will be quite happy in former quarries and in sewage works. It appears to be quite nervous, and when disturbed it flies off in a zig-zag pattern. There is a myth in Scandinavian countries that the souls of departed men turn into Lapwing (see BotD 2 October), while those of departed women turn into Green sandpiper.



25 May Black-collared starling (*Gracupica nigricollis*) ... This species was the first bird I saw when I reached Hong Kong's famed Mai Po nature reserve, and I had no idea such a species existed, not even that a predominantly white starling would have a yellow face pattern, so it was a wonderful surprise. Its black collar is quite elegant, as though it has

dressed up for a glittering occasion, and the yellow is in fact bare skin, which is not an uncommon trait in birds. Endemic to Southern China and some Southeast Asian countries, this starling was perched on a pylon as I ambled along the lane to the reserve from the bus stop on a secondary road that soon ends at the Chinese border. I was jet-lagged, and as you need a permit to enter the reserve (which I had already due to a fortuitous meeting with the chief warden of the reserve when he and I separately both happened to be travelling in Sri Lanka) that meant I found myself wandering along a restricted road utterly alone, which can be done in crowded Hong Kong but seemingly I have discovered always requires a bus ride. This survival of this species is not considered a concern.



26 May Smooth-billed ani (*Crotophaga ani*) ... These jolly little things are Smooth-billed ani, members of the cuckoo family of birds and resident across much of the Caribbean and Central and South America, as well as in some parts of Florida. Communal birds, as can be seen in my photograph, they like open countryside, especially agricultural land, and they expand when sadly forests are deforested. Its bill is very noticeable, large and with defined grooves running along it from tip to base. A close cousin is the Groove-billed ani, where this feature is even more prominent. Like most cuckoos, Smooth-billed ani are not the best flyers in the avian world, and they are very happy hopping and running along the ground. I saw these ani in a coffee plantation just outside of Santa Ana, El Salvador, where I was the year before its volcano blew, displacing 70,000 people. One thing I remember from visiting this country is the

government rule that it is illegal to cover over political graffiti, even if any town's political persuasion has changed. I am sure this sharpens people's minds to remember the political nightmares suffered by this country and others, such as Nicaragua, during the 1970s and 1980s, with the hope the situation will not return.

27 May **Blue rock thrush** (*Monticola solitarius*) ... The Blue rock thrush actually is a species of chat, like the Stonechat (see BotD 24 July) and Robin (see BotD 8 June), not a thrush, such as the Redwing (see BotD 28 May, wow, a year tomorrow!). It looks more like a thrush, than a chat, or Old World flycatcher



(which chats are), but there you go. That out of the way, we can celebrate what a wonderful thing this is, a splash of blue (this is either a female or a juvenile and thus a little less blue) picking its way through rocks and on cliff sides searching for insects in the crevices and gaps. It is the national bird of Malta, which is nice as I have seen one there, but this individual I found on the Greek island of Kastellorizo, the farthest Greek isle going east, and pretty much half the way around the side of the south coast of Turkey. This island has one village, and the walk between the harbour and the cathedral on the small hill is one of the world's best and ends at a small restaurant on a square that is empty except for that restaurant and where two old women start cooking after mass has concluded. I hope they are still there, as there is only one child, and she says she cannot cook. This species inhabits a thin sliver of the world, literally across from Iberia, the Mediterranean, Middle East and South Asia, and it rarely ever finds its way to the United Kingdom.



28 May **Goldcrest** (*Regulus regulus*) ... Almost to the year in which BotD celebrated the Firecrest (see BotD 1 June) today we have its close cousin the Goldcrest, the two species sharing the accolade of the United Kingdom's smallest species. A bird that likes to flit swiftly between the branches of conifer trees searching for seeds, this bird is easy to find but often difficult to see well. Its Latin name, repeated, of "regulus" does not mean "regular" or "normal," but

rather from the Latin for “king,” or “royalty,” so it might be better known as king of all birds, *regulus regulus*, and it is a member of the kinglet family, which in the US is represented by the Ruby-crowned kinglet and Golden-crowned kinglet, at least the ones I would regularly see in New York City’s Central Park. The Goldcrest is a little less flashy than the Firecrest but instantly recognised by its golden Mohican haircut. This photograph, which I took on the same day I saw the mega-rare Masked shrike (see BotD 19 October), is the best I have managed of securing a shot, these little gems so restless it is hard to pin them down. Please note BotD will be back on 2 June, following the U.K. Bank Holiday and an extra day off. Enjoy Memorial Day. The barbecue is open, apparently!



2 June Yellow oriole (*Icterus nigrogularis*) ...
The Yellow oriole is named in English for its bright, dominant colour of yellow plumage, but the person who decided upon its Latin name homed in on its “nigrogularis,” that is “black throat,” which you can just about see in my photograph. What a stunning bird. There is a rare visitor to the United Kingdom (maybe 100 birds are seen every year, usually in May and June) called the

Golden oriole, and I think I have often dreamed of seeing one. The Yellow oriole is resident in only a relatively thin strip of the planet, the northern countries of South America such as Suriname and Venezuela and the southern Caribbean islands such as Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles, which is where I snapped this one, at the wonderful Lodge Kura Hulanda resort in Dorp Westpunt, where I fed on the island’s dining speciality, *Keshi yena*, which is a casserole stuffed in backed cheese. Yes, it might sound odd, but it is delicious, especially if you can eat while looking at Yellow oriole, Bananaquit and other birds. Its nest is a hanging basket-style nest that dangles from a branch on a lengthy rope of twine, all produced by the bird itself, of course.



3 June Meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) ... A species that can be overlooked (there are no bold colours popping out), the Meadow pipit remains a favourite for its habit of flying from tussock to tussock or post to post as it displays and views the landscape. In the south of England, I catch up with this bird in marshes and along seashores, but for the long weekend last weekend (in the United Kingdom it is simply called the

second May bank holiday) I visited Cumbria in North England, the bit of that county that borders the Yorkshire Dales. All is majestic bare mountain sides, known as fells, lonely farms, snaking, stone walls and cascading waterfalls. It is the breeding area for a few species that I might see in my neck of the woods probing for insects in the mud and living a solitary existence, but here they are active, notably the Curlew (see BotD 1 May, 2020), which is an increasingly rarer breeding species but of which I saw many. Many of these species are ground-nesters, which requires protected or managed areas. Much work has been done with farmers to alter their activities to help with bird numbers. The Meadow pipit, which breeds across Northern Europe into Russia and is resident all year in the U.K., has a bold, streaked chest and pale red legs, and I think overall it is quite attractive.



4 June Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) ... A member of the hirundine family of swallows and martins, the Swallow—more correctly the Barn swallow—is the most widespread of that family across the bird, and indeed it exists in both the United Kingdom and the US. This is the species of which we say, “one swallow does not a summer make,” although Francesca, my Italian wife, says the same saying in Italian uses “spring,” not “summer,” an indication of when these birds reach the Mediterranean, not the U.K., from their wintering grounds in Africa, which can be even at the southernmost tip of that continent. There is little better to do in nice weather than to watch swallows swoop up and down hunting for insects borne on the warmer air and then gliding into their nests built in house eaves and little-used buildings. Usually, it is my experience that I

only see Barn swallows sitting still in the autumn when they amass in large numbers to get ready for the migration south, but I saw this one at the close of the day (in the U.K. in June this can be 10:30 at night) perched in soft light, so I took advantage of the situation to take some photographs. What a beautiful combination of red, blue and white, with that fantastic, forked tail, although Francesca says it is odd to see me get very, very excited (I’d call it happy) when I see a Swift (*Apus apus*), which looks somewhat similar but is from a different family and usually arrives a month later and leaves a month earlier than the Swallow but soars around the sky with even sharper turns and pirouettes. I read that the Barn swallow is the national bird of Estonia, so this is a chance of saying hello to STR’s dear Nele Magi.



7 June Cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) ... The Cattle egret, a member of the heron family, is a very widespread species that breeds in the US and is now resident all year in the United Kingdom, whereas 10 years ago, even two or three years ago, it would have been considered a rarity. On a birding

app I subscribe to, birdguides, this species was 10 years ago given an M (mega) rating, last year a R (rare) rating but now a L (local) rating, and close to where my oldest birding friend Alex Carlisle lives on the Somerset Levels (where this photograph was taken) last year we counted 143 birds. It is very adaptive, as one would guess, and is present now in most parts of the world. I saw my first in the U.K. on the Rainham Marshes on the edge of London, but now birders glance at them less and less. The U.K. represents its most northerly range, and even now it is unlikely to be seen too far north in my country. Another species, the Little egret, which followed a similar U.K. trajectory, but 10 years previously, is not mentioned at all any more in excited birder conversation. The Cattle egret gets its name from its habit of following closely cows and the like, those heavy beast churning up the soil as they walk and exposing worms and insects for the egrets to eat. They also eat ticks and other parasites, so farmers like them, too, and some, juveniles and young adults, sport snazzy yellow-golden crowns.



8 June Vermilion flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus obscurus*) ... A New World flycatcher, the Vermilion flycatcher is the most resplendent of that family, a scarlet shock of a species that like most of its family loves to perch on the highest branch, repeatedly coming back to it after searching for food. I have seen three of these birds, I think, the first on the edge of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, in an area of seasonal ponds that now is a golf course (why!?), the

second in northern Argentina and the third, my only one in the US, at the Artist's Retreat (an artist lived there for almost two decades, and the family raised a son in it, a three-hour walk at least back up to the trail head and then another two miles to the North Rim Lodge Hotel, where the tourists go), which is five miles down the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and

where a friend and I were attempting to, and succeeded in doing so, complete a run across and then back across the largest hole in the world, a running feat known as the Rim to Rim to Rim. Actually, I saw more than 10 new species on that run, but as we changed from our cold-weather gear (May on the North Rim sees the last of the year's snow) to regular running gear (the canyon gets warm) a Vermilion flycatcher popped out to see what the strange humans were up to, half-naked humans with no other humans around for miles or hours at 5 in the morning. This species' Latin name essentially means "dark flamehead," which I like, and once again it is the male that sports all the grand coloration. Arizona marks the most northerly of its range, which stretches down Central America and most of South America.

9 June White-cheeked pintail (*Anas bahamensis*) ... This species of duck is confined to the West Indies and South America, the one I photographed here being on the island of St. Kitts, on its Great Salt Pond, close to where this small island has a ferry that goes to its even smaller sister island of Nevis. The road here gets narrow and climbs up and down some hills patrolled by Vervet, or African



green, monkeys, and the 12 kilometres' run there on a very hot day seemed a little too much to make the return jaunt on foot, so I hopped on the back of an open-back truck being driven to capital Basseterre by a friendly Kittitian. This duck, cousin to the (Common) Pintail (see BotD 21 July), also is known as a Bahama pintail, but I have no idea why that one island has the honour of being named. If one turns up in the United Kingdom it is an escapee, as this species is on occasion kept in private aviaries and zoos, especially an uncommon variant that is almost all white and silver but still with that splash of red on the base of the bill. That said, I like the normal coloration, the juxtaposition between its red, white and black of its head and somewhat leopard-skin patterns on its flanks. It needs salty water, well, brackish, that is, a slightly saline concoction of fresh and sea water, but it is happy pottering around coasts, where one assumes the water is normal sea water.



10 June Ceylon hanging parrot (*Loriculus beryllinus*) ... A tiny green parrot, smaller than a sparrow, the Ceylon hanging parrot probably resembles numerous other parrots around the world, but this one is unique to Sri Lanka. When I went on an organised bird trip in that country we stayed at the mostly terrible Blue Magpie Lodge, in the village of Weddagala, and immediately after arriving

we were all led to the garden to see our first Sri Lankan endemic bird species, which normally hang (as its name suggests) upside down in fruit trees. Birding is rarely that easy. Indeed, the next endemic species we saw, the Serendib scops-owl (see BotD 3 April, 2020) required a 45-minute climb up a rocky stream through thick jungle, with leeches and all. An exclusively fruit-eater, this parrot never will be seen on the ground, and it nests in tree holes. I think when I saw several of them it must have been during the breeding season, for outside of that point in time they usually are solitary birds, which goes against how often we think of parrots, macaws and the like as communal, chattering species, all colour and noise, squawking from the treetops and screaming across river courses.



11 June Rüppell's black-chat (*Myrmecocichla melæna*) ... I will not even try and pronounce its Latin name, although it looks wonderful. The Rüppell's black-chat is not considered endangered, but its range is very specific, a relatively thin, north-south rectangle through central Ethiopia and a small scrap of that country's northern neighbour, Eritrea. It has a conspicuous white patch on each wing, but that is hidden when it perches, as it is doing in my photograph, and I was told by a birding local that this is the one of the more difficult species to see in Ethiopia. It would come for breakfast, I saw, on three days I stayed at one overnight stay comprising accommodation huts high up in the Abyssinian clouds. The species is named for

Eduard Rüppell, a German ornithologist, who was travelling in Africa in the 19th Century and for whom also are named other species of flora and fauna, including a starling, a bustard, a vulture, a warbler and a weaver in the bird world, two plants, two bats, a species of ground lizard, a butterfly, a skink, a chameleon and a fox, which I have seen on the United Arab Emirates-Omani border. Birds will stay in our dreams long after the pandemic is over! **Please note BotD will return on Tuesday, 15 June. See you then.**



Extra lengthy one today.. Please read on ...
15 June Blackbird (*Turdus merula*) ...

One of the United Kingdom's most-beloved birds, this is the species of which Sir Paul McCartney sang when he aired "Blackbird singing in the dead of night; take these broken wings and learn to fly." **I feel I have flown this weekend, too.** Some of you were kind enough to sponsor me for my taking part in the 100-mile Centurion Running South Downs Way event in southern England that started at 5:15 a.m.

on Saturday, following postponements from June 2020 and November 2020 due to obvious reasons. I completed the distance—100 miles (160 kilometres), 12,700 feet of climb, 58 recognised hills, temperatures ranging between 75% and 85%, 450 runners, 150 of whom did not finish—in 24 hours and 41 minutes, beating the cut-off by five hours and 19 minutes. Gower Tan, who some of you might know from his many years at IHG Hotels & Resorts and my running and training companion over 24 months (we signed up in August 2019 (runners need to have completed at least a 62.5-mile (100-kilometre) event in the last three years)), and I wanted to run sub-24, but I am wildly happy with my time. Honestly, parts of it were nothing less than brutal, and I was close to dropping out at mile 46 when my shins were in terrible pain, but the adage among ultra-marathoners is "make sure you keep on moving. Never stop, one step after the next, as everyone will have a dark patch," and when I made my turnaround it was the time for Gower to have some bleak patches, but we dug in together, and thanks to aid stations, good friends setting up additional crew stations (one at 2:15 a.m.; thank goodness England is northerly enough to only have five hours of darkness in June!) and another friend who ran with us for 11 miles to get us to the last major aid station, well, these are the things that saw us shuffle to the finish line in Eastbourne Stadium and a final, emotional 400 metres around a track. Anyway, that Beatles' song has a more involved narrative, but the line that mentions the bird remains true, and there is a snippet of its song in the Fab Four's track. It is the species, closely resembling the rarer Ring ouzel (see BotD 19 April), likely to wake you up at 3 in the morning with its beautiful song. The reason it has what might be deemed a dull name is that in medieval times in the U.K. the word "bird" was only given to winged species of a certain size, while anything larger—larger than a blackbird, for sure—were called collectively "fowl," which now we give over only to birds we eat such as partridge, pheasant and the like, and as the blackbird was the only "bird" that was all black, it was the obvious name. A Carrion crow, 100% black, would not have even been in contention, although it could presumably have been named the "blackfowl." And now I say all that, I can add that the female blackbird is brown, not black, and both genders have a spectacular yellow bill and eye-ring. These are common birds, but I delight whenever I see them. Birds will stay in our dreams long after the pandemic is over!

p.s. if anyone would like to add to my sponsorship for the 100-miler (I have raised £1,750 (\$2,500) for a charity that puts those rescued from human and sexual trafficking, once safe and monitored, into six-month hotel-industry intern positions with job-placement and post-training help, I would be very grateful. It is a charity that STR has long supported. Thank you—

https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fundraiser-display/showROFundraiserPage?userUrl=TerenceBaker_100MilesforYouthCareerInitiative&pageUrl=3



16 June Egyptian vulture
(*Neophron percnopterus*) ... This is not the best photograph to grace BotD, but it is very topical, as one has turned up on the legendary birding site that is the Isles of Scilly, a group of islands off Cornwall in the Atlantic Ocean. This species, which lives from Iberia across North Africa to India, has not been seen in the United Kingdom for 153 years. There are only approximately 40,000 of them left in the wild, and my photograph

is from the United Arab Emirates, high up the Jebel Harat Mountain that overlooks Oman, my snap taken from the grounds of an Accor hotel, the Mercure Grand Jebel Hafeet Al Ain two-thirds of the way up that huge mound of rocks. As I write, the Scilly bird is on the remote island of Bryher, and there will be a mini-army of birders on route to these islands, which are difficult to reach in the first place. I will not be among them, but I am visiting in October. A creamy white bird with a yellow, hairless face and black wing tips (they often appear darker due to bathing in iron-rich sand), they are impressive and large, soaring around the thermals of warmth, and as with all vultures hugely important in terms of their scavenging and clean-up role in the natural world.



17 June Kentish plover
(*Charadrius alexandrinus*) ...

This is to my knowledge the only bird named for the country of England in which I was born, Kent, although there also is a species, the Dartford warbler, named for the town in Kent in which I was born. The

Kentish plover is now extremely rare in Kent (too crowded with people) or anywhere else in the country, my only sighting being in Dungeness (yes, but in Kent!). I had arrived very early in the morning at this recognised birding site only to see one other person who said he had just that minute discovered the bird and was off to tell the wardens. As it was another two hours before they arrived, we had the bird to ourselves for quite some time. This is the male, which shows the most bold coloration of the species, which inhabits North Africa, the fringes of the southern Mediterranean and Asia. They prefer to nest in areas of high humidity and moisture and far away from people. There has been calculated to be approximately 38,000 of this species in Europe, which represents 15% of its global numbers.

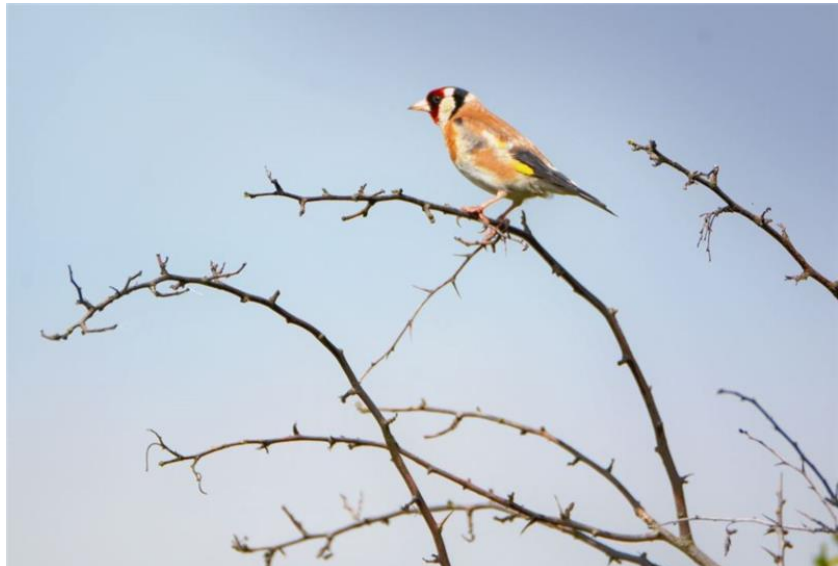


18 June Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) ... I have mentioned before that if asked what my favourite bird species is, I might reply the Redwing (see BotD 28 May, 2020), but the Rook gives it a very close run. The rook, a type of crow, is a largely black bird marked with a grey-white bill and lore, that is, the part of the bird that comes down from largely the area of the eyes to cover the top of the bill and which in its case is

featherless. Rooks nest in noisy groups in trees, and I can watch them for hours. A hierarchy of sorts appears to develop as some pop up into the air, make croaking noises and settle down again, while others fly in small circles around the trees. They nest close to farms, and their communities are known as rookeries. When they leave to feed they seem to float around in small groups of two or three, and I rarely see them in London. The one in my photograph was taken at Clayton Mills, Sussex, which just happens to be mile 68 of my recent run. I did not pause last Saturday to see if I could see another Rook, though. They are among the more intelligent of bird species, able to solve puzzles to get food, and the collective name for a group of Rook is a “parliament,” whereas many also know that the collective term for its close cousin the Carrion crow is a “murder.”

21 June Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) ...

Bird species will see rises and falls in their numbers across the decades via natural phenomena such as harsh winters or damp springs, but the Goldfinch is one species that seems to have done very well in the last few years. I see this colourful finch regularly now in the middle of London, and if a small flock of birds alights on a tree behind my flat if



it is not a family of Long-tailed titmice, then inevitably they will be goldfinch. With a bright red, black and white face and a characteristic slash of gold on its wing, this is a bright species for the urban birder. Native to Europe, North Africa and Western and Central Asia, the Goldfinch was a common cage bird, a practice that has utterly died out in the United Kingdom, I am pleased to say, and a campaign to stop this hobby, and the very real trade in

birds to satisfy it, was one of the very first battles the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, our beloved RSPB, waged. I have been a member of it for more than 40 years, and when I joined I could only be a member of the Young Ornithologists' Club, as adult membership was deemed too high for me. Goldfinches and its song often are intertwined in art and music of a sacred kind, due to its practice of eating thistles linking it with Christ's crown of thorns.



22 June Orange-breasted green pigeon (*Treron bicinctus*) ... One of the few species in which the Latin name is far shorter than the English name, this species is further proof if any was needed that pigeons are a very cool genre of birds and mostly detached from the drabness (usually, but not always) of the Feral pigeons we see in our urban streets. The Orange-breasted green pigeon

could quite easily be named the Yellow-winged lilac-necked pigeon, or a variety of other names. Indigenous to the Indian subcontinent and a small region of Southeast Asia, it is a fruit-eater and often sits perched as it peruses its landscape, of which it must surely be a count(ess) or a duke/duchess for its regal splendour and marvellous shades. Its favourite fruit, apparently, is that of the wonderfully named *Strychnos nux-vomica*, aka the Strychnine tree, which as its name suggests is toxic to most animals. Perhaps a count/ess would have an official taster to guard it from poison? I love the little white splash at the base of its bill, just visible in my photograph. With so many other colours why did evolution deem it necessary it has this, too, but I am very happy it does.



23 June Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) ... What a Latin name this one has, one worthy of it being the largest finch in the United Kingdom. Bold, noticeable and colourful, the Hawfinch most often is seen close to where I live in winter, but it remains a prized bird to catch up with. I saw the one in the photograph in the churchyard of St. Andrew's in Bramfield, just north of London, during what is referred to as an

irruption year, that being when a larger number of birds of a species move south from Scandinavia or other northern locales due to population increases or a scarcity of food due to inclement weather. Its huge bill offset against a black and orange-brown head, and its size,

mark it out as a fantastic thing, and the white on its wing and tail are most evident when it flies. In the U.K. it was a very rare visitor until the late 19th Century, and still it probably remains localised. The New Forest near Southampton, where our second king (at least of the modern era, that is, after 1066) William II, or William Rufus, was killed in a hunting accident, or at least that is what the cause of death was written down as. Over its entire European range (in summer it might migrate across Asia) it is not considered to be of concern in regard to its numbers.



24 June Brown-breasted flycatcher (*Muscicapa muttui*) ... Also known as Layard's flycatcher, which at least gives it a sense of mystery, the Brown-breasted flycatcher might not win any prizes at the Rainbow Games for Birds, but I think it makes it up by being small, compact, delicate and well put together. I took this photograph while staying at a semi-luxury jungle camp in Sri Lanka called

Ahaspokuna, where Peacock called from the branches of trees and on occasion elephants would get too close. From the open-air sitting area in our tree house, this little gem would alight on a branch and sing its heart out, and its call became the temporary national anthem of our stay. Also, I liked the fact that it breeds in China and Southeast Asia and migrates to Sri Lanka and Southern India, so like me it was a visitor. The car that took us to this wonderful place stopped in the middle of nowhere along a road, and out of the bush stepped a very regal gentleman with a cold flannel each and two bottles of water. We then walked two miles through the jungle to reach a small plateau, a lost Eden, if that is not becoming unforgivably poetic, where the camp was. And the flycatcher does have some colour—its legs are yellowish-orange.

25 June Blue titmouse (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) ... The United Kingdom's smallest titmouse, the Blue titmouse is another beloved bird, a frequent visitor to bird tables and feeders in urban gardens, where it will likely be seen hanging on upside down as it pecks at nuts and seeds. It is quite



happy just about anywhere, though. With its blue crown and primary feathers and yellow breast, it appears to be a species in a great hurry, whizzing to collect grubs or down for its chicks and nests. The one in my photograph clearly shows it with nest material at its nest hole. It also is essentially only a European species, although a subspecies does appear in the very north of North Africa. This species is called in my county of Kent a “pickcheese,” for its habit of feeding off wheels of cheese, presumably from the days when we made our own, not purchase them from the shops, although the most common nickname for it is the “tom tit.” Sailors love them, too, and it was a good day when one would settle on a boat as it meant land was not far away, that idea stemming from the bird’s tendency never to stray too far from home.

28 June Little gull (*Larus minutus*) ... The only gull to my knowledge with red legs and both a black and bill, the Little gull is the smallest gull species in the world, as its name suggests, breeding across Siberia and visiting the



United Kingdom and other coastal parts of Europe in the autumn and winter, where it lacks its solid head coloration. A dainty little thing, it is only a handful of centimetres larger than a plump sparrow. That all said, the first pair of Little gull successfully bred in Scotland, at a reserve of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, in 2016, and scientists have noted the species’ drift westward in terms of nesting. I believe also there is a population in Southeast Canada and Maine. I saw this one at another RSPB reserve, Rainham, and it was all on its own in the middle of a small lake where it was feeding on small insects found on the water’s surface. It is lumped in the Latin family *Larus*, to which all gulls belong, but another Latin name for it is *Hydrocoloeus minutus*, and it is the only member of that family, so for the time being until the eggheads can settle their differences it will just have to bear two Latin names.

29 June Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) ... Another beloved bird species in the United Kingdom, but one sadly that also has seen a decline in numbers, so much so that I am delighted when I catch up with them. Across its European home it is not classified as threatened. Known for its song that onomatopoeically sounds like “a little bit of bread and no

cheese,” the Yellowhammer, a finch, frequents arable fields and open spaces, and I am watching one right now (the one in the photograph; please excuse the odd finish to the photo, but it is an iPhone photo of the screen of my camera, as currently I have no way of downloading my camera’s memory card, but in some way it shows the essence of being in the field, a little distant from all the tech that weighs us down) from Black Cottage, a place we discovered last year in the countryside outside of the Sussex town of Horsham



that is surrounded by beautiful fields, hedges, trees and footpaths that lead after 20 minutes to the Black Horse pub in Nuthurst. We decided to stay here this year (no international travel after all) for three weeks, the first to work, the second two for a vacation (thus no BotD after 2 July until 19 July). The Yellowhammer is noted for being yellow, especially its bright head, and while there is the possibility of seeing it year round, one does tend to see it more when the sun shines in spring and summer and its sings from the tops of bushes and low trees, and in the U.K. we might see two of its three subspecies, *Emberiza citrinella citrinella* (most definitely the one in my photo) and *Emberiza citrinella caliginosa*. Some populations migrate, and for some very arcane, possibly silly reason it has been introduced into South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. As if those three countries do not have a wealth of interesting, beautiful and unique species of their own?

30 June Song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) ...

The Song thrush is the bird that will be the third species to wake one up in the dawn chorus, and its song for me is the most pleasant, a flute-like song that rises and dips and invites you to investigate the woods. It is equally happy in gardens, although I hear that this is a tendency in Western Europe, not elsewhere in its range. Where I am



staying this week, one every evening slowly trawls the lawn looking for worms, and when I was in the Isles of Scilly three years ago, in September of that year, I saw hundreds and hundreds, so much so that if I was to write a travel book on those islands I would title it “Song Thrushes and Honesty Boxes,” the last reference being (and I have mentioned these before) the practice in rural areas hereabouts of putting eggs, jam, vegetables and other homemade or farm goods in boxes in front of the relevant property for passers-by to buy and leave the correct money. The Song thrush is not rare, but it can be secretive at times. The

spots on its breast often look like little hearts, and it is closely related to another species seen in the United Kingdom and Europe, the Mistle thrush.



1 July White-tailed stonechat (*Saxicola leucurus*) ... A close cousin of the (European) Stonechat (see 24 July), the White-tailed stonechat, very similar in coloration, frequents the Indian subcontinent and Myanmar (Burma), where I was when I took this photograph near Lake Inle, a gorgeous series of lakes in which fishermen catch fish standing one-legged

on wooden canoes, with their other leg somehow wrapped around the boat's wooden rudder. This is now done, I suspect, largely for tourists, which of course have now disappeared following the purge against the Rohingya people and this year's full takeover (again) by the military and the suppression of democratic voices. That all might mean little to our friend the stonechat, who like all in that family enjoys sitting on prominent branches and posts as it busies itself singing and being seen. I think nearly everything, except a couple of white tail feathers (not visible in the photo; the bird might be a female, which is a little paler than the male and lacks those feathers), are identical to its European cousin, but that difference, and scientific breakthroughs in DNA analysis, have meant it and other birds now are treated as individual species, more and more so. Places like Myanmar might be temporarily closed to new study, but other places such as Colombia have opened up in recent decades, and new species are regularly brought to science's attention.



2 July Yellow warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) ... The Yellow warbler is a New World warbler species that might be familiar to STR's Tennessee folk. When I lived in New York City, this would be a regularly seen spring migrant, the birds having travelled up from South America and the Caribbean, where it lives all year (thus, some do not bother with all that migrating hassle) on their way to their northern

North American nesting sites. The male in his breeding finery sports russet-red stripes on its breast and a cap of the same colour (the bird in my photo I suspect is a juvenile). Its plumage

varies across its range, and there are up to 35 subspecies. There were more, but some were split into their own species, and some of those split birds have been split again, including the Barbuda warbler, endemic to the tiny speck of Barbuda, obviously part of Antigua & Barbuda, which I found on a break from a lazy lunch in the sun. The Yellow warbler has two subspecies that visit the US (they winter in Central America and South America), the California and the Sonora, and both are deemed threatened. Overall, the species is doing just fine. BotD will be taking a break for its Summer Holidays until 19 July. See you then!)

19 July Bullfinch
(*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) ... On the day the United Kingdom clears away most of its COVID-19 restrictions (some are calling it Freedom Day, others Freedumb Day), perhaps apt is a species that gets its name from its large, heavy, bull-headed head, which in the current landscape might be seen as being the confidence we need or the obstinacy or bullheadedness we are



showing despite rising cases. Anyway, I am back from two weeks off in the delightful Sussex countryside, and while notable birds were largely absent, at least the first four days of this week will show notable finds (two birds, two orchids). First up, the Bullfinch, the male (in the photo) showing a bright red breast and a black head, while the female is pinker. You really ever see a couple apart in this species, although that is what happened when I was away. I saw a female without a male on one day, and the next in a completely different area the male without the female, but likely the missing half was not very far away in both circumstances. It is the second-largest U.K. finch, slightly smaller than the Hawfinch (see 23 June). Found throughout Europe, its colours do not change across the seasons, although the red on the male might be a shade duller. I have seen numerous bullfinches over the years, but not so many that they are not a delight to catch up with again. They are protected by law, but



in decades past many would be culled as they posed a serious threat to fruit orchards, with the birds having a particular liking for pear and cherry buds.

20 July White-tailed eagle
(*Haliaeetus albicilla*) ... Well, BotD has had a few very rough photos, but I think today eats the biscuit, with a shot I took two weeks ago today of a White-tailed eagle, the largest raptor in Europe. The species was extinct in the U.K., but a 1980's reintroduction

project to Scottish islands such as Skye (where I have seen one, too), Mull and Rhum has resulted in a small but steady population, and in recent years a second project has taken part on the Isle of Wight in the English Channel. The bird in the photo, a juvenile, is from that second project, with birders online stating it is probably seeking out a new territory for when it reaches breeding age. That would be very exciting, as it would mean an example on the mainland of England, for I saw this one in Amberley Brooks, Sussex, maybe 90 minutes' drive south of London, and adding in traffic. The only view of the large Brooks area is from a bluff high up a hill, and there is a lot of ground to cover, much of it distant. There is only one footpath across the entire site, but a careful scan revealed a shape that did not look quite right (a birders' trick—do not always look for birds, sometimes look for things that do not look correct). I took a photo with a 600m lens and then enlarged the image until I could see what is in the photo, and then I took an iPhone shot of that pixellated image, complete with the sun's reflection, but one can see its enormous beak and eagle-shaped head. Juvenile birds lack the white tail that gives the species its name. It is a permanent resident across Northern Europe, and with a wing span of almost eight feet it is slightly larger than the largest Bald eagle.



21 July Botany of the day: Musk orchid (*Herminium monorchis*) ... Two orchid species for the next two days, and what orchids! Rare, very hard to find, secretly kept to those who find them and absolute joys, for while birds move, orchids either do not or do but without singing and chirping about

it. On my two weeks' holiday in the South Downs, a range of hills ("dun" is old English/British for "hill" and a word still seen in place names, such as Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales) in Sussex and Hampshire, I gave up two days to search for these little beauties, a task that had me bent over nose to meadow, searching for pieces of undisturbed, short-grass chalk land in which orchids can thrive if there is no competition from other species. Nine-hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand in July one will see Pyramidal orchid (see BotD 19 March) or Common spotted orchid (see BotD 31 March), but occasionally one gets lucky. I had seen photos of Musk orchid, but I was blown away when after three hours searching on both flat ground and steep slope I saw one and saw how tiny it was, half the width of a pinky finger and about as tall. After I saw one, I saw another, then another, about 10 in all, and on one occasion (see photo) two together, but if I had not looked in one particular small square of land, they would have remained hidden, especially as they flower only from mid-June to the end of July. Its name comes from the notion that its scent smell like goat musk, but I must say I did not get that impression at all. In the United Kingdom it is limited to Southern England, and sparsely so. Botany is about the little things harder to find that make life a continual discovery and marvel!



22 July Botany of the day: Frog orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*) ... The second and last of the rare orchids I found on my recent holidays, the Frog orchid is named because the heads of its blooms supposedly replicate frogs' heads, which they do on occasion. (Can that be seen in my photo? Yes, I think it can.) Its blooms do have reddish tints, which vary in redness (the one in my photo leans red), but often the orchid appears mostly green and thus hard to pick out amid thousands of spike of grass. That I found a group of nine sheltering behind a tiny patch of blackberry bramble near to Firle Beacon (mile 86 of my recent 100-mile run along the South Downs Way) was miraculous, and that I saw them at 7 in the morning when the only other person about was an inland kite-surfer meant no one else would know their location. Orchid theft unfortunately does occur, and there is a special, uncomfortable place in Dante's Nine Circles for such people. The Frog orchid is another chalk-loving species, but it also is happy in meadows, and in the United Kingdom it is

found more often in northern regions and not just the south. It simply remains rare wherever it is, or difficult to find, which is not quite the same thing, I assume. Chalk pretty much sums up my upbringing, growing up in Kent, which includes the North Downs, not the South Downs. Many kettles in the area have to be regularly de-limed due to the amount of chalk in the water and that coats the filaments, but doctors say this is good for bones and teeth, so the pluses and minuses abound.



23 July Horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) ... This species might take some unravelling. There are 42 sub-species of *Eremophila alpestris*, with the one in the photo being the main US species, *Eremophila alpestris*, and the main subspecies in the United Kingdom being *Eremophila alpestris flava*. Twenty-six of those are found in the Americas, with the majority having

range in the US. I have never seen the U.K. sub-species, but I have seen the principal US sub-species, the one on the photo, in the U.K., literally beneath the shadow of Heathrow Airport on the western edge of London. The hope is that I will see the U.K. sub-species, and one day

it will be split into a full species, but that could all take some time. In the U.K., it is known as the Shore lark (this US species U.K. birders would refer to as the American horned lark). *Eremophila alpestris flava* is a winter visitor to the East Coast, notably Norfolk, where it frequents stony beaches, hence its name. In the US its name comes from its two black head stripes that can be raised to look like horns. This is also true in the Slavonian grebe (U.K. name; see BotD 27 April, 2020), known in the US as the Horned grebe. That black face coloration, together with prominent yellow and white markings, instantly identifies the lark whatever its sub-species is. Birds are diving and swooping where the Delta variant surely will start to dwindle and succumb!



26 July Botany of the day: Broad-leaved helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) ... BotD does not usually jump so liberally from side to side, but I truly did not expect to find another orchid species until now unseen by myself. Helleborines are orchid members of two family groups, *Cephalanthera* and *Epipactis*, the Broad-leaved helleborine being from the latter. It blooms in July and August, and its flowers are delicate, small affairs on long stems, but the beauty is so apparent in its colours and shape. I got out early this Saturday, and I am glad I did as the rest of the weekend was a washout. Walking in an area I know, I decided to walk around a bushy shrub-tree off a small path, something I have not done before, as it requires tip-toeing through some meadow, but as I reached the far side of the bush I caught a glimpse of a long stem, and the flowers suddenly all said “hello.” Just the one plant, and there it will remain, quiet, hidden, secretive. There was no one else around on a misty July morning at 6 a.m., so I will return unobtrusively in a week’s time,

as I think then it will be at its glory. As you can see at least one bud remains tightly bunched. This species grows in Europe and Asia, and it has been introduced into the Americas. Its flowers do not always show the pinks and red inherent in my photograph, sometimes appearing green or yellow, and presumably even more hidden. It can self-pollinate, but also can be helped by wasp species. You might be able to see an insect in my photograph, but I have no idea if this is one of its pollinators. That would be nice, to take an image of it in the midst of it forming the next generation. Botany is the secret life that slowly, beautifully emerges amid what we consider are problems!



27 July Bonaparte's gull (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) ... As the last part of its Latin name suggests, this is an American species of gull, indigenous to North America and Cuba, but strangely, wonderfully, one has turned up for nine years in a row to moult on the North Kent, England, coast close to my home. I have seen it on several

years, as though revisiting a schoolchild friend who has moved a little farther away, and on one occasion (as shown in the photograph) it has still been in its summer plumage. Why it comes to Oare Marshes year after year to moult into its duller winter colours, and how it came there, even to the United Kingdom, in the first place remains a mystery, as also does where it remains for the rest of the year? Bonaparte's gulls are recorded in other U.K. spots (maybe two or three gulls get blown across the Atlantic every year), but I do not know if any of those other sightings are the same individual. Similar in appearance to some other gulls such as Franklin's (another US species) and Black-headed, it is distinguished by its black head, bill and wing tips and bright red legs, and it is named for Charles Lucien Bonaparte, who spent a decade as an ornithologist in the US and was the nephew of the Corsican general. It is also a graceful flyer (not all gulls are; actually, most are not) and is the smallest of the gull species, with the exception of Little gull (see BotD 28 June) and then Saunder's gull, which it also resembles. Birds will become more and more prized as free spirits as we slowly gain back our flying feathers!

28 July Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) ...

The Greenshank is a small wading species frequenting northern Europe and northern Asia in breeding months, southern Africa and southern Asia in non-breeding ones, and the last part of its Latin name hints at clouds or mist, *nebula*, due to it being at home in marshes and hazy, coastal estuaries and



deltas. Its English name comes from its green legs, that is, its shanks, even though that green is perhaps one of the lightest shades of green imaginable. They certainly are not red like those of its cousin, the smaller Redshank (see the fourth-ever BotD, on 27 March, 2020). Its identification is best confirmed by its bill, which has a slight upturn at the very end of it, and the great migration it annually takes is quite stupendous. A very close cousin, the

Nordmann's greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*) is very, very rare, perhaps down to 1,000 birds (no, I have never seen one). The last research team tracking this species were plagued by mosquitoes in the wilds of Siberia and required armed guards against wolves and bears. My regular (Common) Greenshank, the one in the photograph, is from the far more sedate Higher Moors pool on the Isles of Scilly, off Cornwall.

29 July Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) ... Another member of the British thrush family, the Fieldfare is like the Redwing (see BotD 28 May, 2020) a winter visitor, and in a London park it might be possible to see dozens and dozens of the birds of both species feasting on berries, although it must be said I have come across few Fieldfare in the last couple of years. I think this is



more of the case of me not going to the right places, rather than the birds not coming down annually from Scandinavia and Northern Russia where they breed. As with several species from those parts, the colder the winter farther north the more come down to the south of England and parts of mainland Europe of the same latitude. It is identified instantly by its grey head, yellow bill and reddish back, and I believe the second part of its English name is akin to the word "wayfarer," a traveller passing through, in its case through fields. The folklore of my county of Kent states that the earlier they arrive in late autumn, probably the harder the winter will be.

30 July Chinese pond heron (*Ardeola bacchus*)

... Found, evidently, in China and a few neighbouring countries, the Chinese heron is one of six pond heron species on the planet. I have seen them on the five occasions I have travelled to that part of the bird, but those times have always been outside of breeding season when its colours change from browns, tans, beige and



white to brown-purples, reds and dark grey-slate. Many species appear very different in and out of breeding season, but this one I think is one of the most transformed. It is not rare, and it is easily seen due to its daily activity of hunting for small fish, frogs and the like. Only the

yellows of its legs and bill, and the bill's black tip do not change. The one in my photograph is from the large Chinese town of Zhaoqing, which I reached from the Star Ferry pier in Hong Kong by pointing to the very farthest destination, one appearing to me in Chinese characters, being given a ticket, journeying for three hours amid cooking foods and noisy, seemingly almost violent mahjong games and hoping what I found was to my liking. It was. There was a lack of tourists, and just two kilometres' walk north of town was a sizeable park of sugarloaf-style hills called Seven Craggs dotted with bridges, temples, lakes and shrines. The town is on the Pearl River, and the birds abounded.



2 August White-rumped sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*) ... Another species hot off the presses. I drove Francesca, my wife, to Gatwick Airport yesterday, her first time flying in 18 months, and the first time she has seen her twin sister, who lives in Valencia, Spain, since the start of the pandemic (worryingly, she said not everyone at the airport was wearing a mask), so as I dropped her off at 6:50

a.m., I thought let's go and see some nature, and I was rewarded with a new species for me in the United Kingdom, a White-rumped sandpiper, an American species I know well from my days living in the US, although I would see them there whilst they were on passage from their wintering grounds in Patagonia in farthest-most South America to their breeding grounds in northern-most Canada and Alaska. Another of the world's long migrations! Its white rump is evident when it flies, and while I preferred it when it stayed still, which it did, and right in front of me for 10 minutes, I was happy when it did skittle away as I could then see its diagnostic trait, that is, its white rump. It can also be identified by its very long wings, the tips of which go back almost as far as its tail does, and its greyish appearance. This particular bird also is notable in that when the U.K. does see one, it usually is a juvenile, an inexperienced bird blown off course, but this example is an adult in full summer plumage.



3 August Iceland gull (*Larus glaucooides*) ... If you want to turn yourself slightly crazy, then decide to understand the vagaries of gull identification, and they are gulls, not seagulls at any time. A friend of mine would visibly redden if anyone called them seagulls, which I always thought rather an extreme reaction, but there you go. Trying to

determine Iceland gull from Glaucous gull is a good start to move closer to madness, but the bird in the photo is definitely an Iceland gull, identifiable by the long wings that go beyond the tail, which is pure white, and an overall whiteness, too, but other gull species might have some of those traits, and not all Iceland gulls are predominantly white, with some birds approaching adulthood showing more grey on their wings. A rounder head in the Iceland gull also might be a tell-tale sign, but when the wind is blowing, the feathers are moving, the birds are moving, my goodness, it might be enough to take up knitting instead. The Iceland gull breeds in Greenland and Canada and only visits Iceland in the winter. I saw this one (the bird to the right; the other gull is an immature Herring gull) in Dungeness, one of my favourite places on earth, and the bird is actually sitting on a roof of the site's nuclear power plant, which thankfully is just one small area of a vast reserve. Warm, hopefully clean, water comes out of the power plant and allows to live small fish and other aquatic life, which in turn attracts sea birds.



4 August
**Ceylon green
 pigeon**
*(Treron
 pompadora) ...*
 My goodness,
 today marks
 the 300th
 BotD! I really
 think we will
 all be fully
 back in our
 offices way
 before number
 400, and I'll
 then end the
 series, but on
 we go ... I have

chosen a colourful magnificent and more proof that the pigeon family is one of spectacular species. This is one of my favourite photos, taken from an uncomfortable angle from inside a rickety bus travelling through the Udawalawe National Park in Sri Lanka. I saw the two birds, the male to the left, and gently tapped the roof of the bus, as I was asked to if I wanted the driver to stop. What colours! That narrow yellow band on the wings, and a softly shaped head, well, it just all comes together in an amazing creature. The bird's diet is fruit, and they usually are found singly or in pairs, and I was told that to see them perched like this is a grand thing, as normally they are flying very swiftly between one part of the forest and another. This is less so a pigeon of gardens and parks.

5 August Cormorant
(*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

... Known technically as the Great cormorant, but to United Kingdom birders simply as the Cormorant, this species is a common occurrence along rivers and marshland, a consummate hunter of fish. To that extent, it was traditionally used by Asian fishermen instead of nets or rods, the birds having string tied around their necks so as they



could not swallow the prizes. I assume at the end of their fishing they would be then allowed fish for their own. All black with a patch of yellow on its throat, it flies along rivers low to the water, and I assume many birders give it little thought, but I liked it when I saw this one stretching out its wings. That is behaviour probably seen in cormorant species in hotter locations. In Norway, they can be hunted, but there also is a legend there that those drowned at sea whose bodies are not recovered turn into cormorants and inhabit the island of Utrøst, an isle that can only be occasionally discovered by humans on their watery peregrinations.

6 August Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)

... Once known as the Hedge sparrow, the Dunnock became the Dunnock because it is not a sparrow at all, but an accentor, a family of birds that usually inhabit uplands and mountains. The Dunnock does not. It likes lowland hedgerows, woodland and gardens, but somewhere it can disappear into deep cover when it feels threatened. If when walking along a country lane you see a shape you know to be a bird suddenly erupt across the lane or deeper into the hedge, it is likely to either be a Dunnock or a (Winter) Wren, a smaller bird. It is also the only accentor not to have the word “accentor” in its name.



Common in the United Kingdom, I am sure it is overlooked by many who would think it is merely a sparrow, but its grey head, brown facial markings and rich red-brown back, and the way it skittles around,

makes it attractive, at least to me. Its English name comes from its colour, brown, or “dun,” and that it is small, “ock,” a suffix used in words such as “hillock,” a small hill. They are not in the same family as the (Eurasian) Robin (see BotD 8 June, 2020), but they often behave in similar ways, especially in connection with their fierce territoriality.



9 August Black-and-white warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) ... We are down to the last handful of bird species, maybe three more weeks of them, as first I am off to the International Hotel Investment Forum in the very first few days of September and then London STR is back full time into the office (so the most current guidance goes) on 6 September, although nothing, of course, is black and white, except, that is, the brilliant Black-and-white

warbler. This is one of my favourite US species, one of the first warbler species to reach New York City during spring migration, and a little creature that acts more like a Nuthatch (see BotD 6 April, 2020) or Treecreeper, scuttling up and down tree trunks probing for insects in the cracks and crevices of bark. A species of New World warbler, it winters in the Caribbean and South America and breeds in Canada and the northern US. Males have a black throat and heavier black streaking when in breeding plumage than do the females, and all have a very long hind claw that helps them forage in woodland.



10 August Western reef heron (*Egretta gularis*) ... A member of the family that contains egrets, too, this heron frequents marshes, lakes and parks across distinct sections in southern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, but such is the distance between each grouping obvious differences have led to the classification of five or so subspecies. The one in the photograph is from the

United Arab Emirates, from Yas Island, metres from the Formula 1 racing track that I have—obviously during permitted times—run around, and it is surprisingly hilly for what looks like a flat course when shown on the TV. Adding to the confusion is that this species has two distinct morphs, one with the attractive shade of purple-grey seen in my photograph, another with all-white coloration, which can be easily confused with other egret species, such as

Little egret, and it has been known to hybridise with that other species. Slowly but slowly, scientists believe it might soon breed in the Americas. Some are seen in the US as they wander around, and the first breeding pair is expected to arrive in Brazil at some point in the not-so-distant future. Keep your eyes peeled, and then check all the ID pointers to understand what it is you are seeing. This species can be a muddle.

**11 August Alpine swift
(*Tachymarptis melba*) ...**

The Alpine swift is a breeding bird of the Mediterranean and Red seas, a fast-moving aerial hunter that on very rare occasions is seen in British skies. I have not seen one in the United Kingdom, but I was delighted to find a whole colony of them on the Greek island of Chalki,



an island on which I had not seen any up to that point, or since. The last part of its Latin name has nothing to do with peaches, or peach melba, but is a fusion of Latin words for black (from the word that gives us melanin) and white (from the word that gives us albumen). They need craggy, dark caves, rock faces and abandoned stone houses in which to breed, and the almost entirely destitute but wonderful village of Chorio on the island was perfect for them. This photograph is taken there, but the people who lived there were all taken, or went themselves, to Tarpon Springs, Fla. The only settlement now on Chalki is the coastal village of Chalki, also known as Emporio, or “market.” It is divided into two parts, both hugging the rocky shore, and one person told me that he knows of inhabitants from one side who have never been to the other. I am not sure if this is just not a colourful line to tell visitors. The Alpine swift is told apart from the (Common) swift by its white belly.



**12 August Rufous-capped
babbler (*Cyanoderma
ruficeps*) ...**

A species of somewhat limited range, stretching across Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Eastern China, the Rufous-capped babbler is happiest in semi-tropical jungle, where it flicks and flits very quickly through the understudy. Well, that’s my excuse for a far-than-sharp photograph of the one I saw in the hills of

the Tai Po Kau Nature Reserve on Hong Kong Island. This reserve is reached by the one bus service out of all of them that looked like it had been started five minutes before, with just a red number painted on breeze blocks to signify where it might—possibly, if the bus driver

could be bothered—let you embark. The terminus was behind the subway station in the town of Tai Po, which has Hong Kong’s principal university. I was there in November 2019, and the subway station was literally awash with anti-China political posters, which I am sure have been swept away now, along with a few students, no doubt. The Rufous-capped babbler, obviously getting its name from its russet-brown head, but also with a yellow belly and a wonderful flash of white on its wings, is a species that feeds in mixed flocks that journey from one bit of the forest to the next, in numbers that provide safety. I saw other species zip through, too, but there were all too fast to identify.



13 August Purple sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*) ... Yes, I realise it is not purple, and that is because this is the female of the species. Yes, so sexist, but the yellow of this bird is very attractive, as is the shape of the bird, with its curved beak relatively long to its body size, although that full curvature is not quite apparent in my photograph that I took in the Vietnamese national park of Thung Nham, one of the few

places natural sites that has not been destroyed in that country, unfortunately. In Vietnam, this bird is known as “Hút mật hòng đen,” and I know this as my guide wrote it down in my notebook. Sunbirds are the New World equivalents of hummingbirds, which generally have thinner, longer bills but live only in the Americas, and like hummingbirds, sunbirds feed on nectar which they take on the wing by flapping furiously to keep delicately, majestically, in the same position. It is a cousin to the Tacazze sunbird (see BotD 20 November), but their ranges do not coincide. The males, as I hinted, have purple heads and stomachs, but their wings, like those of the female, are brown in colour.



16 August Botany of the day: Violet helleborine (*Epipactis purpurata*) ... Back to orchids, most likely for the very last time, but yesterday, 15 August, walking through a Kent woodland I saw in a shaft of light a helleborine facing me from some 10 metres away. I could easily have missed it, but on closer inspection I realised it was the rare Violet helleborine, not the more common Broad-leaved helleborine that was the subject of BotD on 26 July. (Also, see White helleborine, BotD 18 March.) Its blooms are quite similar to that of the Broad-leaved, but its main identification is its purplish stem, as is hinted by its Latin name, and after I saw this first one, on looking around I found a further 19 spikes. I was in a wonderland, and

there was not another soul around for the 45 minutes or so I remained with these little prizes, which bloom in late July through early September, perhaps only through late August. This was likely being given the keys of Narnia, all the Turkish delight one could hope for and the Wicked White Witch having decided to end her reign of terror and enter a monastery. Its flowers are so delicate, and it prefers shade, although not the dark. It is very localised in where it decides to live, and it is only found in four countries—the United Kingdom, France, Serbia and Slovenia, but from what I read its ability to be pollinated but also to self-pollinate and live via a dependence with fungi root systems, known as mycelium (see Greater butterfly orchid, BotD 17 March), seeing as many spikes as I did still does not lessen the unlikelihood that one seed managed to find the right type of fertile ground and then develop. Joy of joys, is my final opinion. Botany is the cool breeze across the forehead of health.



17 August Common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) ...

Another bird species with a repetitive Latin name, the Common buzzard is a mid-size raptor whose numbers have increased noticeably in the United Kingdom in the last two decades. When I first started birding, the only raptors one would see with any degree of normalcy was the Kestrel (see Botd 16 April, 2020),

but other raptors have joined them in sufficient numbers, which might be an indication of improved farming techniques and local authorities not moving every inch of grass 10 times a year. The Buzzard, as it is known, is now a regular sighting, although I always have not had any luck photographing one until last weekend, when I was at Cliffe in Kent successfully finding a Spoonbill (see BotD 17 July, 2020). The Buzzard is a bird whose range spreads across Europe and Siberia; there are some individuals that summer in the southern part of Africa, likely to be those birds that breed in Southeast Europe and Southern Russia. Others stay put. It is a big-headed bird (the size of its head, not its image of itself), and its coloration varies from dark individuals to lighter ones, such as the example in my photograph, at least on their under-wings. What utterly beautiful markings this bird has! I have seen images, though, of those living in the Alpine regions of Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland where they appear white, almost snowy, on their heads and backs. Its closest cousin in the Americas is the Red-tailed hawk, the species made famous by Pale Male that lived, well, at least when I lived in New York City, on the window ledge of the apartment of comedian Mary Tyler Moore. Birds have the graceful wing feathers that will take us all air-borne to the clearer skies beyond.



18 August
Herring gull
(Larus argentatus) ...

The Herring gull is the large, ubiquitous gull of beach, landfill and city, the one that might swoop down and steal your sandwich if you place it on a picnic table or the top of your ice-cream if you leave

it uncovered by your hand. They can be as large as cats, and they make that wonderful haunting noise as they follow fishing boats back to harbour and in the early mornings as seaside towns wake up. I like this photograph as it was the last one I took after I had been out in a boat 10 kilometres from the Isles of Scilly off Cornwall successively looking for rarer shearwaters and petrels. Its drop of blood red on a bright yellow beak is attractive, and if this was rare birders would rave about that, but once again familiarity breeds contempt because the Herring gull is not rare. Increasingly on British beaches and river edges it can be mistaken for Yellow-legged gull. Chances are, though, it will be this species, but while here in the United Kingdom we see it as abundant, its distribution is small, from the U.K. along Northern Europe to Scandinavia and north-western Russia and the Baltic Sea. Of course, there is confusion in all of this, as the American herring gull (*Larus smithsonianus*) is sometimes called the Smithsonian gull and is not recognised by some US birding organisations as a full species, so if that is the case the Herring gull has a range right around the top of the world.



19 August **Chestnut-naped francolin**
(Pternistis castaneicollis)

... Also known as the Chestnut-naped spurfowl, this bird is a large, ground-loving bird endemic to Ethiopia and Somalia. Weighing up to a kilo of more, its plumage has all kinds of different variations on brown, black and white, with stripes, scallops, twists and streaking, along with a small red bill and red legs. To some it might look like

dinner, I suppose. Its belly is white. When I was camped in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia, I noticed a small flock of this species would always be there when I woke up and stuck my head into the world, so one morning I crept along the ground (no doubt looking foolish) to

where they were, camera ready, but I still was only able to take a so-so photo before they hopped down the seemingly un-hoppable slopes of the mountain we all were perched on. I think in this photo you can kind of sense it making all the calculable decisions as to exactly where and how it its going to leap into the void. The Bale Mountains is a huge land mass that appears as a different planet from the Rift Valley plains that surround it. In 2020, the Black-fronted francolin was named, formerly the same species as the Chestnut-naped, but now a full species and one that can only be found in the southernmost edges of Ethiopia. Another trip perhaps?

20 August White-eared bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*) ... Bulbuls are superb flashes of colour amid the oases and sands of Arabia, and its range also extends across India and into Southeast Asia. There are several species of bulbul, but the White-eared is among the more common, with both males and females possessing an evident yellow patch known as a vent. It has adapted from woodland to the gardens of towns and cities. I



found this one in the middle of a roundabout (the colour in the background essentially is the Sahara Desert) in the dusty town of Al Manama in the United Arab Emirates' emirate of Ajman. There is hardly anything there, but I had wanted to go because when I was a child my stamp collection had a series of stamps from this specific place, which originated in a 50%-50% business deal between an American businessman, Finbar Kenny, and the area's government, the idea being that stamp collectors would want to collect stamps from there due to their oddity. Why the stamps appeared to come from Al Manama and not Ajman, I do not know. Perhaps Al Manama sounded more exotic. In the 1960s, Kenny was in charge of department store Macy's stamp-collecting wing (yes, I guess it then had one), and he made a habit of striking deals with cash-strapped governments to release stamps, and a lot of stamps, although he became involved in a scandal in the Cook Islands in the Pacific Ocean, which saw him found guilty of bribery, and everything came crashing down. As one website on the matter said, "today, collectors generally ignore them," that is, these "special" stamps. I certainly did not buy any at that age, so I have no idea how they came into my possession. Anyway, the bulbul is a pretty thing with its black and white head.

23 August Black stork (*Ciconia nigra*)

... This is a new bird for me to have seen in the United Kingdom, this Saturday, and it is a very unusual visitor to our shores.

Breeding in Spain, Eastern Europe and across the central band of Asia, as well as a distinct population in Southern Africa, it is the rarer stork species of Europe, with the White stork the one

usually seen nesting on churches in Spain, Portugal and parts of France. I was up very early on Saturday (3 a.m. anyone?), and the stork took some finding after first being reported the day before. I saw frustrating glimpses of a head as it worked its way very, very slowly along a dyke hidden by reeds, but later on as I was searching for other birds suddenly it flew over my head, and I took this photograph. The light was not good, but to also capture an Avocet (see BotD 30 April, 2020), which took exception to the stork, evidently, was an extra prize and shows off the size difference nicely. Black stork is far more shy than is the White, and while it is not considered endangered it is sparsely spread out across its range. In other words, it is a good find wherever it is seen. White stork is being reintroduced into the U.K. at the Knepp Estate, but even though I made a journey to see those this summer, and how wonderful they are, they cannot be added to a birder's U.K. species list until at least four generations have successfully been reared. Yes, a little nerdy, but there you go. This is a juvenile bird and lacks the glossiness of the adults, but it is still a very fine thing.



24 August Pacific golden plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) ...

Another new species I saw last weekend in the United Kingdom is the Pacific golden plover, a sort of an El Dorado bird for the golden specks on its back, which do glisten in the sun like an Incan horde newly discovered after heavy rains peeping out of a



Machu Picchu slope. There are three full-species varieties of Golden plover, the Eurasian, which congregates in winter in notable numbers, and the American golden plover, which as it hints is the New World variety but that I have also seen in the U.K. Seeing the Pacific variety got me the full swoop. Fans of Latin will see the first part of its Latin name hints at “rain”—“lluvia” in Spanish, “piovere” in Italian—as it was (is) believed the birds gather together when it is due to rain, perhaps as cows are supposed to lie down on the grass when it is to pour. The Pacific golden plover differs from the Eurasian by being a little more slender and longer-legged, and the white stripe against its black face although quite striking is shared by the other varieties to some different degree. It breeds across Northern Russia and the west coast of Canada into Alaska, so it has to be blown way off course to reach my tiny islands. I kept on circling back to look at the one example (the one in my photograph) that had been found, and it hardly ever moved from a small muddy puddle of water, but after I had experienced the joy at seeing the Black stork (see BotD 23 August), for, yes, both rarities had the common sense to be in the same place, the plover had neared the sea wall, the closest I could get to it. Its beauty could be seen now much closer. It is very rare now I get to see two new species on the same day, and as the Frampton Marsh reserve was so full of other birds, it was a glorious day.

**25 August Collard dove
(*Streptopelia decaocto*) ...**

A very nice-looking, prim dove, with a gentle cooing that has one note less than that of a Woodpigeon, the Collared dove is often overlooked here in the United Kingdom as it is not rare and is also a relatively recent coloniser of our islands, the first one being seen in 1953, the year the Queen had her coronation, and the first pair to successfully breed



being in 1956. This species has also been introduced into the US, and I have it on my US list as one day walking out of the office where I worked in Garden City, Long Island, I could not believe my eyes when in front of me was not a somewhat similar Mourning dove, common in the US, but this type. In England, I might not glance twice at one, but in the US it was an exciting find. The same bird, two different emotions. The second part of its Latin name, which means “eighteen” comes from a Greek legend in which an employee wanted the gods to make a sign that would remind everyone how poorly she, and perhaps others, were paid by their bosses, and the gods came up with the idea of the Collared dove. I cannot see how this would have shamed the ruling classes, but there you go, I am very far, far, far from being a Greek god.

26 August Grey plover
(*Pluvialis squatarola*) ...

In the same family as the Pacific golden plover (see BotD 24 August) the Grey plover is known as the Black-bellied plover in the US and this replicates other jointly held species such as the Grey phalarope that in the US is known as the Red phalarope.

Why the dramatic change in names? Solely because of when those

different geographies see these birds. The Grey plover is thus named in the United Kingdom because we see it in winter, when it has lost its breeding-season black belly, and it is the same notion with the phalarope, Americans, if lucky, seeing it with fantastic red coloration to its head and neck. In the U.K. we see the Grey plover when it migrates south during the winter, as it escapes harsher climate to the north of Scandinavia, Russia and Greenland where it breeds. During winter and early spring it can be seen across a large chunk of the world, and I saw the one in my photograph in Abu Dhabi. I only saw this one, but that was enough to make me marvel at how such tiny creatures can travel such huge distances and, by good fortune, then stand in front of me and my camera. Younger birds of less than one or two years do not migrate but stay in the vast regions of cold, which means they either have amazingly thick down and feathers to keep away icy conditions or it is just instinct not to migrate and thus, perhaps, have younger generations be at less risk from predators, fatigue and adverse weather. A miraculous bird, I think.



27 August Whimbrel
(*Numenius phaeopus*) ...

The Whimbrel is a species of North Europe that can be confused with the Curlew (see BotD 1 May, 2020). The two species can be told apart by the Whimbrel's shorter beak, slightly smaller size and the three stripes on its head, the central one being a russet-brown verging more on brown that allows the paler eye-stripes to stand out.

Such identification is a case of experience, for one can look at every picture in the guide book, look at pictures of Whimbrel and Curlew together, but out in the field things become often just far more difficult. The Whimbrel is a species of curlew, just not the Curlew, which is properly known as the Eurasian curlew, although no one in the United Kingdom would call it as such. A few years ago the Hudsonian whimbrel was split from the Eurasian whimbrel (as

that is what it is properly known as). My oldest birding friend Alex went all the way to the tip of Cornwall to see the Hudsonian subspecies. Actually, he went to see a Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), a mega-rare species in the U.K. that might be reintroduced (a very slow process) after an absence of 2,000 years. Anyway, he saw both species, and then one day a couple of years ago sitting at home he saw news that the two species, Hudsonian and Eurasian, had been split. He thus could say he had seen one more species in the U.K., and to nerds this is known as an “armchair tick,” or “armchair check,” I imagine it’d be called in the US. In the U.K. it breeds only in the very northern Scottish islands, such as the Orkneys, Shetland and Lewis, and its name derives from the supposed sound of its call. I took this shot in Dubai, where I was more excited to see it than I was the Greater flamingo (see BotD 2 April, 2020) around it and which can just be seen in my photograph.

30 August Red-tailed wheatear (*Oenanthe chrysopygia*) ... I believe this is the fifth or sixth species of wheatear to appear in BotD, a wide-ranging and adaptable family. The Red-tailed wheatear also is known as the Persian wheatear, which might be one of the only few examples of birds called a Persian-something or other. I like that, and it also



used to be a subspecies of the Kurdish wheatear, “Kurdish” being a term I see attached to birds even less; and it is also called an Afghan wheatear, although on second thoughts that now has made it worryingly into perhaps a pawn in a deadly game of Middle Eastern chess. I saw this one on the rocky slopes of Oman’s Khor Najd, an impossibly beautiful bay reached only by a sandy, 10-kilometre road that requires slow driving (still possible in a regular car) and a head for heights. I did not drive down to the bay, though, but after having reached a viewpoint was more than happy to pop out of the car, sit on a rock, pour some coffee from a thermos and watch the splendour in front of me, which included this wheatear. This one is a male, which can only be told from the female for that little patch of grey-black between its eye and bill. As it lives between 1,300 metres (4,000 feet) and 4,000 metres (13,000 feet) above sea level, it is not always the easiest bird to track down, but it is not considered rare.



31 August Ring-necked duck (*Aythya collaris*) ...

A North American duck species that people of Tennessee and New York, for instance, will be very familiar with, it is named for the black ring around its neck, but as its head and lower part of its neck to its breast, indeed, also its breast, are black, too, that identifying trait cannot always be seen. It is far easier to recognise

for the white sliver of colour that runs close to its eyes but down from top to bottom of its bill, but that is on the male, and on the female the only light stripe on the bill is also shared in the female of the Tufted duck, which is very common in the United Kingdom. If a female Ring-necked is seen in the U.K.—and I have seen three—a better sign is the light eye-stripe running across its head. The first of the three I saw in the U.K. was a fleeting glimpse of a male between clumps of vegetation, the second more distant but also more in the open, which allowed me to say, yes, I have seen one in the U.K. Then last December the female in the photograph showed up just south of London, and it seemed quite happy to parade up and down before me on a small pond in a small nature preserve that I think was created as part of a housing development. As it breeds across Canada all the way east to Newfoundland, a fair number do get blown across to the British Isles, the first land they would see going east and across a distance that is far closer than say New York City is to the U.K.



1 September Rock pipit (*Anthus petrosus*) ...

With a Latin name like *Anthus petrosus*, one knows this has to be a rugged, tough little bird, and it is. In the United Kingdom, we have four pipit species (if rarities that on occasion are blown in are not counted), and the Meadow and Rock versions probably are the easiest to see. The Tree pipit unfortunately has seen a decline in numbers, and

the Water pipit is a ghostly, pale phantom of a bird that likes wet marshland and migrates to us in the grey days of winter, although a nearby reserve to where I live, Rainham, seems to have them regularly visit each year. The Rock pipit, as its name suggests, patrols rocky coastlines and river edges, picking out insects amid the seaweed and stones, and it remains in the same territory throughout the year. The bird in the photograph, however, is an example of the *Littoralis* subspecies and does migrate to the U.K. from Scandinavia, so it was very nice

to find it, and also at Rainham, on a part of the River Thames that looks across the river to Erith, where I grew up and my parents still live. This is a bird that cares not a hoot for driving rain or toe-curling cold. Everest expeditioners should study it for survival tips, I think, certainly as its main population lives and breeds in Norway. Norwegians are great explorers, and they have regularly been in competition with Brits to reach distant destinations and high peaks. I was once at a lecture in Dubai by famed explorer Ranulph Fiennes, related to actor Ralph, and he refused to answer a question about his next expedition, despite being 75 at the time, in case there were any Norwegians in the audience.



2 September Red-wattled plover (*Vanellus indicus*)

... This desert bird often is seen as a bright bundle of colour in the sandy browns of relative nothingness. My experience of them is that they will let you get quite close to them, but one step too near and they will fly off to a point that was the original distance between you and it when you first saw it, and never far from water. Like most

plovers it cannot perch. Yes, it can stand, but it is not able to pop up on a post or strand of barbed wire. Its black head and throat, its white flanks and belly, red bill and yellow legs allow it to be recognised instantly and effortlessly. It is present from across Arabia to Southeast Asia, and in India there is a belief that it sleeps on its back with its legs in the air, which has led to an expression that someone who appears as if they have the weight of the world on their shoulders must be related to the species, for the idea is that on top of the sleeping plover's legs, in that position sticking straight up in the skies, rests the rest of the planet. So, next time someone is moaning at their workload, you can equate them to *Vanellus indicus*.



3 September Tufted titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*) ... To celebrate the end of my first work trip in 18 months (several STR folk are in Berlin, Germany, for the International Hotel Investment Forum), today we have a little bird of white and blue-grey, with wonderful rosy-orange flanks. Tufted titmouse measure no more than 15 or so centimetres, tiny things that I have fond memories of watching during winter days feeding from the bird feeders placed in New York City's Central Park's The Rambles, where it would take turns with the American goldfinch and, on occasion, White-breasted nuthatch to get to the seeds placed out for it. As all know, bird feeders should only be used during the cold months when birds can struggle to find food, never in warmer months in which young birds need to learn from

their parents how to feed themselves and, in turn, their own young. It is a common bird throughout the Eastern parts of the US, but its numbers west of the Mississippi are far fewer and extend only into a part of that range. This is the bird that chips "peter, peter, peter," the

best way of knowing it is around and similar to other members of the titmouse and chickadee families. It does not resemble the European species the Long-tailed titmouse (see BotD 24 April, 2020) but it acts in the same way in that its young stay with their parents into their second years and even might help out with the raising of the family that comes along during their first year of life. They are not turned out after a few months of being fledged as some bird species are. The Tufted titmouse stores food as would a squirrel. The Black-crested, or Mexican, titmouse (*Baeolophus atricristatus*) was considered the same species as the Tufted until 2002, when it was split (the two were, I think, lumped together some decades before that, for initially they were separate), and one now needs to visit Texas and regions of bordering states to see one of those, and also be lucky. Mexico provides more chance.



7 September White-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*) ... This is a goose that floats down out of seemingly nowhere to suddenly cover fields of marshland across North America and North Europe during winters. So-called because of the white splodge on the upper part of its beak, this species is known as the Greater white-fronted goose in the US, but also as the Specklebelly in some areas for the mottled coloration on its front. It is not

a given that one will find these geese every winter as they are quite happy being far from where humans are likely to walk sitting in the greyness of an early morning, head bent down probing for food. I saw these ones on the Isle of Sheppey in North Kent as I walked from the small car park at its very eastern tip, Shellness, into a mat of foggy air particles that swallowed me full. It was quite beautiful, one of those days you feel you have the world to yourself. That was not true, as I did see one other person, who was also looking for the flock. One hundred metres away from them, and they were ghosts, a slight chirruping all that could be sensed of them. I think the beauty, or murk, depending on one's view, can be seen in my photo. Adding to the mystery is that in the north of England and Scotland one sees the Greenland variety of the species, while in England and Wales we see the Russian version. Those seen in the US come from Alaska and Northern Canada.



8 September Crested lark (*Galerida cristata*)

... This perky little bird can be found across Mediterranean Europe and Africa and over to China, with occasional lost birds seen in the United Kingdom, and it loves dry, open spaces in which it hunts for insects. It has the grand habit of racing into exposed areas such as the greens of golf courses and places that some might look at as

abandoned but in reality provide critically important areas for wildlife, and there it lifts its crest up as though on high alert. The lark family of birds is an extensive one, and sand-colour species predominate. I found this one at a market on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi that sold carpets, but sadly cheap, Chinese imports, not the wonderful creations that we're led to believe are everywhere in the Middle East and can be haggled for at great expense of cash and time, but hopefully with a wonderful experience. I have a smallish Berber carpet from Tangier, Morocco, I bought in the souk there in 1989 and then sat on as I had tea with American composer and novelist Paul Bowles, who wrote "The Sheltering Sky" and other novels and lived there for most of his life (I hinted at this in BotD 13 May, 2020). He would receive guests with the expectation that British tea bags would be left. I cannot remember a single word he said to me, or me to him, if he talked to me much at all, and I probably just mumbled something stupid about enjoying his novels, but that was all a very long time ago. The Crested lark has a whooping 33 subspecies, but I think you will be happy if I spare you the details. It is easily confused with the Skylark (see BotD 30 June, 2020).

9 September Black-throated diver (*Gavia arctica*) ...

While the Black-throated diver is quite a bold bird in winter, in its summer breeding plumage it is spectacular, but to see it then I need to travel to remote lochs in the northern parts of Scotland.

Living in London

I am far more likely to see it as shown in my photograph, which was taken in a small lake in



Shoeburyness, Essex. Usually we'd see them flying low over the sea from our coasts, and trying to determine what species of three, maybe four, divers it is proves difficult. As I have mentioned before, a "diver" is its genre in the United Kingdom, "loon" in the US, where this species is known as the Arctic loon, although the only place it might be seen in that continent is Alaska, and if lucky. This one I saw was so content sitting on a still pond maybe 20 feet from its edge I thought it might have been sick, but a couple of days later it flew off to do whatever it is divers do in winter. In Europe it only breeds in Scotland and Scandinavia, but it also has all of Siberia to raise families. And yes, the Black-throated diver has a white throat in winter, but what a spectacular bird it is even then, with that powerful head and grey-black beak, white dots on its wings and that gentle speckling of brown-grey down its head, and when it takes off from water (these birds never are seen on land) it runs along the surface for a number of metres before becoming airborne.



10 September Bird of the day: Great reed warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) ...

As members of the Old World warbler family are concerned, the Great reed warbler, as its name suggests, is a monster, measuring some 20 centimetres in length. Yes, that is not huge, not as large as, say, the average goose or swan, but considering the Reed

warbler, a close cousin, measures approximately 13 centimetres, the difference is quite stark. That helps in identification, and the initial impression for a United Kingdom birder is that you are looking at a freakishly large Reed warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*), and then—that is, if you are lucky to see another one—that might lead you instantly to know you have seen a Great reed warbler. The fact is, though, that the example in my photo is the only one I have seen, and it is a rarity here. I saw it at the Crossness Nature Reserve close to where I grew up and that I have mentioned in relation to the species Ring ouzel (see BotD 19 April, 2021) and Barnacle goose (BotD 5 May, 2021). It was mostly hidden in some reeds in a closed-off part of the reserve that now I have access to after becoming a member, paying an annual due, but I and a small handful of others could only see it if it flew across a very small viewing area as we craned our necks from behind vertical steel fencing. I have a poor photo of it perched and this poor photo of it flying away. It breeds across much of Europe, but not in the U.K., and it winters in Southern Africa. To reach it, a necessity before I succumbed during the second lock-down to buy my first car in something like 30 years, I needed to jump on a 122 bus for 40 minutes, a train for 10 (one came immediately, which was fortunate) and a sprint for two kilometres, and as I saw it within two minutes but not again, well, I was very lucky, but I think by now you probably understand my passion for birds and wildlife.

13 September Bird of the day: Red kite (*Milvus milvus*) ...

The Red kite was a mythical bird for most British birders when I was growing up, a very rare species confined to a couple of small areas of Central Wales, but since the 1990s it has made a spectacular comeback with a reintroduction programme in the Home Counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. These are scavenger birds, and thus

like vultures have a critical role in tidying up carrion. In Medieval times, there were reports of Red kites circling over London, polishing up dead animals, and that image has returned, albeit on an occasional basis. Soon, I think, it will be there year-round. On my train journeys to the west, I used to see Red kite just upon leaving the station at Reading, some 20 miles from London, but now I see them on the other side of the city. On one recent walk to the village of Nettlebed, Oxfordshire, I must have seen 30, and a tile mural of the village's name and major sites has an image of a Red kite in it, testament to its appeal and commonality. I saw my first one on a return visit to England in, probably, 1997. Living back here now, I see them regularly, and in countries quite distant from their reintroduced areas. And they are magnificent things, with that orange-red colour, forked tale and pale head. Its home is across Western Europe and into parts of Northern Europe, not a huge range, but its numbers are deemed stable now, and long might that be the case in this hopefully more enlightened age of the banning of insecticides and far less poisoning of raptors and other animals wrongly seen as a threat. They also are starting to recolonise Ireland.



14 September Bird of the day: Isabelline wheatear (*Oenanthe isabellina*) ...

Yet another wheatear species to be featured in BotD, the Isabelline wheatear is happiest in scrubby desert, flicking between acacia bush and stone wall as it hunts for insects from a perch. Once thought to be a species of thrush, it lives in the drier vastness of Arabia and Southern Russia into the Stans, the former possessions of the Soviet

Union, and on very rare occasions one turns up in the United Kingdom. Perhaps 25 have made it somehow over to my little islands, but it is quite easily misidentified as a female

Northern wheatear (see BotD one year ago exactly, 14 September, 2020), so the opposite might also be true, that an Isabelline has shown up but been misidentified, perhaps not given much of a third, if not second, look. It is also very similar to the Desert wheatear (see BotD 29 April, 2021), so much so that I hope I have identified both correctly, with the Desert variety having a smaller head and less white on the tail. (As one would say, all mistakes are the author's own.) This one I photographed being extremely tolerant of my presence in Oman, in a small encampment where I took tea with locals and that I have mentioned before. Scrub is invaluable for birds, so much so that the latest ecological thinking is that "scruffiness" is conservation's best friend, not managed reserves that might be constructed to look after the fortune of one species, or just a few more. Let nature be nature is the general thinking. This wheatear displays white on its rump when it flies, and I particularly like that faint orange-tan band across its sandy-colour breast. A neat little thing.



15 September Bird of the day: White-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) ... This species is quite the bully of Asian marshlands, apparently, perhaps an unfair description, for perhaps that reasoning derives from it being one of the few members of the rail, or "rallid," family that is not secretive, hidden away in the reedy depths, but out in the open, croaking away noisily,

especially in the breeding season. It is deemed to be crepuscular, that is, it feeds and is active in the two periods per day of twilight, but I saw this one quite out in the open, slowly feeding along a muddy channel of water, during the middle of the day. Then, as my photograph suggests, it took a swim across a wider stretch of water, after which it disappeared, perhaps to be furtive and secretive again. It is all black, except for its white breast, from whence its name derives, and red and yellow bill. So loud can it be that a number of its local names are onomatopoeic, that is, its name reads like the bird's call. That also means on numerous occasions such birds prove frustrating as they croak away but constantly out of sight. The Yellow rail and Black rail, both present in the US, are notorious for this trait, both species being very nocturnal and rarely seen. Actually, I believe they are also rarely heard. The White-breasted waterhen lives in India, Southern China and Southeast Asia, and this one I saw in Vietnam, but they adapt well, and there are reports of them living more than 1,500 metres above sea level, if there is the right habitat, and also being early colonisers of new lands masses, perhaps those popping up from volcanic activity.

16 September Bird of the day: Blackspotted pufferfish (*Arothron nigropunctatus*) and (Wo)Man (*Homo sapiens*) ... Not much of a description today as I know very little about fish, even probably less so about my fellow humans, but instead a sincere note of farewell from BotD. Today is the first day I am back in the office on a five-work-days-on, five-work-days-off basis, as we all are here at the Blue Fin in London, so a series that started organically from a comment on Teams about a bird in a garden in Tennessee comes to an end after 329 birds, butterflies and orchids that I hope you have all enjoyed reading and marvelling about. I hope you enjoyed



following this series as much as I have enjoyed writing it, and I would like to thank you for your comments, questions, interest and kindness over more than 19 months. Nature is stupendous. That Blackspotted pufferfish in this last entry I saw in the waters of Koh Lanta in Thailand, and it is the only photograph in this entire BotD series I did not take, as that is me in the scuba equipment captivated by the underseas world. The last three divers in off the boat (myself included) on that day were very happy we were slow off the mark, last to enter the water, as we were the only ones to see a Leopard shark (*Triakis semifasciata*), which we spotted immediately on reaching the sea bed and after slowly equalising our pressure. If anyone wants the full list of BotD entries since 23 March, 2020, please write. It is obviously a large document, and I will try and edit a little in terms of how the photos interact with the text. It can also be seen here: <https://bit.ly/3tqrJwZ> ... Birds, butterflies, botanical specimens and beasts—they are all just very cool!

18 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Buff-breasted sandpiper (*Calidris subruficollis*) ...

BotD is back for a two-week, 10-day, fortnight special covering my trip in early October to the famed Isles of Scilly off the coast of Cornwall, a three-hour ferry trip (the sea can get choppy; we sailed in 40-kilometre-per-hour winds, which was fine as two days



before that meteorologists had predicted 65kmh) from Penzance that starts to offer good birds from the moment it leaves the port of Penzance, including my first-ever Balearic shearwater. Each day I will give a little flavour of these islands, and of course a bird that I saw in my week there. First up is the wonderful Buff-bellied sandpiper that I and my friend Alex (we have been birding together since we were 11 or 12) found on the isle of Bryher, one of the five inhabited islands in this chain. This bird, which had been reported in the days before we

arrived took some searching for among several expanses of heather and moorland where there are any number of places it could hide. It is a rarity in the United Kingdom, and it is rarities that draw birders to these isles, as well as to other fringe U.K. island groups such as the Shetlands and Orkneys, where it is hoped a combination of migration and strong winds blow birds off their usual courses to land on our green shores. This sandpiper, one of three *Charadrius* wading birds to feature in the upcoming 10 BotDs, is a North American species, breeding in the tundra of Alaska and Canada and usually migrating to South America for the winter, but there it was waiting for us. It is I think a juvenile bird, for it lacks extensive buffy coloration to its breast, but its yellow feet, black bill and reddish head are memorable. My birding history dates back to a date decades ago when my uncle, seeing I had an interest, took me to a marsh in my home county of Kent, and unbeknownst to us there was a rarity present there—yes, a Buff-breasted sandpiper. I had not seen once since that day until this latest trip. Birds will continue to fly back into your lives again and again.

19 October Bird of the Day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Dotterel (*Charadrius morinellus*) ...

There are not the number of birders going to the Isles of Scilly in October that there were in the 1980s and 1990s, of which legendary tales are told of friction between birders and locals, gaggles of birders sleeping whether they could lay their heads and other shenanigans,



but there do remain numerous birders here every year. Most base themselves on the main island, St. Mary's, which is where regular boats go to the other four islands. There is some danger in this. Say you took a boat in the morning to Tresco and then a rarity is found on another isle, it might not be possible to get from Tresco back to St. Mary's and out again to, say, St. Agnes to see it. Then there is a nervous evening spent before the boats resume the next morning, all the time having to hear excited accounts of the bird being seen by others and whose smiles and excitement appear to never end. The happiness is palpable. So is the worry. Will the bird still be there tomorrow? Perhaps for a mega-rarity the boat captains might schedule one-off sailings, but they cannot be assumed. The Dotterel, not a rarity but a superb thing, is a bird I had seen once before, but with poor views, so the chance to see one 20 feet from us was too good a chance to miss. They breed in remote spots of Scotland, and they migrate south back to Africa and the Middle East. We had been on Bryher for the Buff-breasted sandpiper (see BotD 18 October) and the Dotterel was on Tresco, and these are two islands that are joined by a ferry heading back to St. Mary's as they are almost in touching distance of one another. It is, I believe, the only exception to my comments above, and even this option only allows for two hours to troop up the hillside and onto another moor, locate the bird, watch and enjoy it and get back down to the ferry. Thankfully these islands are small. When we located the bird, we then set about looking like idiots crawling through the heather, stopping every once in a while for the bird to feel comfortable with our presence, in order to take photographs. It is a bird that does allow close proximity, though. Indeed, its

Latin name suggests a “fool,” someone or thing too trustful, and the word “dotterel” has the same root as the insult “dotard,” which I doubt is used any more in anger, except perhaps at Oxford or Harvard.



20 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) ... A close cousin of the Stonechat (see BotD 24 July, 2020), the Whinchat is a summer visitor to the United Kingdom, unlike its close kin, so it was on the Isles of Scilly feeding up before it commences south through mainland Europe and onto Africa. Recognised by its

pale or white supercilium above its eye, it too perches on gorse and twigs as it hunts for insects. I saw this bird as I was searching (in vain as it happened) for what I now consider my “nemesis” bird, the Common rosefinch, which in the United Kingdom is anything but common. I was on the isle of St. Agnes, which I visited twice on this trip but I missed out on when I came for the first time to the Isles of Scilly in 2018. St. Agnes is the most westerly, inhabited place in England. Next land, the US of A! It has a population of 85, but it does have a very good pub, the Turk’s Head, at the harbour. There are no roads, merely paved tracks, or dirt tracks, and it is delightful. I was walking through the island when another birder introduced himself and said that we followed each other on Twitter. Indeed, the camaraderie between birders there is high, and almost as soon as a rarer bird is found, birders throughout the isles, and beyond, will know about it very soon. The Whinchat gets the “whin” part of its name from that being Old English for gorse, a prickly, dense bush-like plant.

21 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Buff-bellied pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) ...

This bird was the real find of the trip, an American rarity that in the US is called the American pipit and often is referred to in the United Kingdom as the American buff-bellied pipit, although as there is no other bird named thus,



that seems rather a redundancy. It used to be considered the same species as the Water pipit, but its eye ring differentiates the two species and so does the richness of its buffy-ness. This

was found on the isle of St. Agnes, and when birders first came to the Scilly isles in the 1960s and 70s, St. Agnes was considered the only place to be. For some reason it was thought that if a rare bird would show up, it would show up only there and not on the other four isles, but perhaps there were just far few birders looking and they all stayed there? The Isles of Scilly have hundreds and hundreds of islands, some of them being mere rocks, others more extensive but uninhabited and largely off-limits. There are two houses on the isle of Gugh (pronounced “Goo”), which can be reached from St. Agnes by a sand bar that disappears at high tide. I did visit, and I had my lunch by a menhir, known as the Old Man of Gugh, a 3-metre-high stone placed there by our Bronze Age ancestors. There are numerous tumuli, stone tombs and other prehistoric ruins dotting the islands. The pipit was busy feeding along a track by the coast, and it could be watched as one sat on a large rock by the coast, although unfortunately we also saw a dead, young Grey seal pup who must have got into problems in the storm that also greeted our departure from Penzance on the mainland two days before.

22 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Great skua

(Stercorarius skua) ... Commonly known as a Bonxie, the Great skua is the pirate of the oceans, a large gull that often gets its food by harassing smaller species to give up their catch. It is extremely good at this. This skua was the first notable bird we saw on a six-hour pelagic, that is, a dedicated birding trip in a boat that goes out into the open sea outside the shelter of



the islands to search for seabirds, often trying to lure them in with chum, a foul mixture of unused fish parts and other matter. Some “chum-makers” swear by adding tamarind and other spicy sauces. Whatever our mixture was, we were quite successful. Pelagics off the Isles of Scilly are best in August, while October it is better for birds that dwell on land. We did manage to see also Arctic skua, only my second;

Razorbill, Guillemot; Manx shearwater; Sooty shearwater, a Common dolphin and even two Puffin, which should have long departed areas close to land. You simply do not know what will turn up, including some mega-rarities from the Southern and Middle Atlantic Ocean. The Great skua is a chunky bird, a good middleweight boxer, that is, if birds understood the Queensbury Rules, and it is recognisable for being all brown across its back and head and with two pale stripes along its underwing, clearly seen in my photo. In the US birds of the genre “skua” are known as “jaegers.” It breeds in northern European spots such as Scotland, Norway and the Faeroe Islands and will attack other birds if it feels they are threatening in any manner. Birders in the far North know to wear a hard hat if they are walking through a Bonxie area, as they can draw blood if they swoop down and give out a stern calling card.



25 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) ... The Glossy ibis has a prehistoric look to it. I have seen three Glossy ibis in the United Kingdom, so when a possible fourth sighting offered itself literally minutes after coming off the Scillonian ferry I jumped at the chance. This is the closest I have seen one. It is likely to be a

species that colonises the U.K. very soon, and reports of them are becoming more frequent. The first one I saw was in the early 1980s, with a pair living in Kent for a number of years but not, as far as I know, reproducing. It was a mega-rarity then. This one was on the Porth Hellick pool on St. Mary's, the main island, and that is probably a swift 30-minute walk from the harbour. As some of you might know, I run a little bit, so I jogged there and was lucky to see it fairly quickly, lucky as it proved frustratingly elusive for some. Porth Hellick pool and marsh lie close to a beach of the same name off which (the Isles of Scilly is practically a litany of shipwrecks) drowned the wonderfully named Sir Cloudesley Shovell, who at the end of his life was Admiral of the Fleet and who also was the Member of Parliament for the city of Rochester (you could probably buy an MP's position back in those days) in my home county of Kent, also until his death. His boat struck some rocks, and approximately 2,000 seamen were drowned. There is a small, weathered plaque commemorating his passing on the beach there, and both times I have come to the islands I have visited. All shipwrecks belong to the Crown, but shipwrecking on such remote islands as the Isles of Scilly (they are less remote now, but still isolated) was until the end of the 19th Century a lucrative trade, and there are rumours that a half-dead Shovell was helped along in the process, but of course that is the stuff of legend.



26 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Pectoral sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) ... The second of the rare *Calidris* sandpipers we saw on the islands, albeit the least rare. In fact, 2021 has proved a good year for this species to land in the United Kingdom. I have now seen this species four times in the country, with three of that number since this August. One even

showed for a few days in the London Wetland Centre just to the west of the very centre of the capital. It is a slim wader, with an attractive brown half-moon of brown speckles on its breast. On the Isles of Scilly, I saw it twice at Porth Hellick pool, and on the second time it snuggled up to a Common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) for a few seconds as though they were best friends (the sandpiper is the one to the left). It has particularly attractive patterns on its wings, sort of a scalloped, turtle-shell design. If a bird possessed a brighter, more pronounced supercilium then maybe identifying it as a Pectoral sandpiper might be wrong. Identifying rarer sandpipers can be a challenge. Porth Hellick is very close to the only café farther up the island, and we now know that crab migrate to deeper waters in October, which meant the establishment was no longer serving crab sandwiches, which came as a bitter disappointment, certainly as when we searched for another lunch spot the Turtle dove (see BotD 23 July, 2020) we had been searching for reappeared and gave fantastic views. You cannot win them all. This sandpiper breeds across most of the top of the world, in suitably remote boggy areas, and migrates south to South America, as well as to Southeast Asia and Australia, that is, it covers the globe, although if a bird breeds to the Northwest of the world it probably will migrate down south to the Southwest. I also read yesterday that the islands' one bank branch, from Lloyds Bank, is to close down. This is a problem throughout the U.K., even in London, but on a small island this will pose considerable challenges, no doubt. Savings before people, would be a critic's view.

27 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Pink-footed goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) ...

Finding a Pink-footed goose that one knows does not come from a dubious source, such as a private zoo-collection or a bird-conservation reserve, and that is enjoying some freedom as an escapee, is not always so easy, and discussion can rage as to



their origin and whether they can be viewed as being truly wild birds. Some say that might not matter, but I think it adds to the enjoyment of finding and seeing a species if one knows that it has flown there on migration, or because it is lost. If two Pink-footed geese arrive on a small island, as is Bryher on the Isles of Scilly, there likely will be no further argument. One can always visit the English county of Norfolk in winter, when up to 150,000 gather. Then the fun might be trying to pick out the one zoo escapee! This goose species can be recognised from various others that look similar, such as Greylag, Tundra bean and Taiga bean goose, by its tri-coloured bill, a grey-black stripe separating a pink base and a pink tip. Two were gently paddling around a small pool called The Pool, named because there are only two pools on the isle and the other one is tiny. The pool is next to the famed Hell Bay Hotel, probably the finest accommodation in Scilly, which certainly must be a great place to finally reach for it requires several modes of transportation to reach and then a 15-minute walk. (Adjacent Hell Bay gets its name from having notorious reefs and rocks that have shipwrecked many boats.) Pink-footed geese breed in Greenland, Iceland and Svalbard, all very northern, icy locales, and nearly all winter in the U.K., so it is a species we Brits can call our own.

28 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Willow warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)

... The hope of all birders coming to the Isles of Scilly in October is that they will get to see warblers, notably Siberian or American species. British birders will crumble at the knees if they happen to see an American warbler species such as Chestnut-sided,



Black-and-white (see BotD 9 August) or Wilson's on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and it does happen. We want the winds to be strong at some point, winds blowing eastward, but without causing difficulty for the ferry from the mainland, so we can get to the islands, and then we want those winds to die completely, thus leaving those rare, waylaid birds in the same place we are. I was lucky to see two American species, the Buff-bellied pipit (see BotD 21 October) and Buff-breasted sandpiper (see BotD 18 October), but on my week on the isles I saw precious few warblers foreign or domestic. I did see this very common Willow warbler, which despite numbering in their millions in the United Kingdom rarely in my experience allows for any opportunity to photograph it. I saw this one as I saw movement in the bushes and was hopeful it was a rare Rosefinch, the bird I was looking for and failed to find. The Willow warbler is very, very similar to the equally common Chiffchaff, named for its call, with the difference being it has black, not pink, legs and has a different call. Birds call less or not at all in the autumn, and it is difficult to see leg coloration as birds flit through the branches of densely packed trees. It is a pretty little thing with its yellow-cream and black eye-stripes. This was on the isle of St. Agnes where I bumped into a birder I know from London with the real, fantastic birder's name of Jamie Partridge, who was the one to have found the rare Buff-bellied pipit that I saw four days before.

29 October Bird of the day (Isles of Scilly Fortnight-long Special): Western sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) ... I hope you have enjoyed this bonus section of BotD.

The last day in which Alex and I were on the Scillies we spent on the main island, just because we needed to get the ferry back to the English mainland later in the afternoon. It was the only day it rained, albeit somewhat short-lived on that occasion, and we sheltered under huge rocks overlooking the wild Atlantic Sea. The ferry crossing back was as



though we were going over a pond, and we saw a Minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) during the crossing. That evening, we stayed in a hotel in Cornwall before driving back to Alex's house for lunch, after which I, having left my car there, drove home. Stopping for petrol, I looked at my phone and saw that a mega-mega-rare Western sandpiper (13th for the United Kingdom) had been found in Hampshire, which was only a little out of my way in terms of my drive home. Off I went, so the rarest bird I saw all week was not on the Isles of Scilly at all, but it was a tremendous week of birding and visiting those beautiful, calm, joyful islands. The Western sandpiper, the third of the three *Calidris* sandpipers of the week, is very common on the Western shore of the US, probably the most common species of its family there. It breeds in western Alaska and summers in the south of the US and in Mexico, so Americans will generally see it on passage, but we Brits will hardly ever see it at all. British birders had a dilemma, though, as in Yorkshire, some 250 miles to the north, at the same time was found a Long toed stint (*Calidris subminuta*), also a *Calidris* wader, that was the fourth ever for its species in the U.K., the first one that birders had access to in 40 years and a bird that has not spent more than six or seven days ever on British soil, so off went northwards a huge flock of birders. So it was left to maybe a dozen birders looking through hundreds and hundreds of Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), yet another *Calidris* species, also similarly plumaged, to pick out the smaller, greyer and (yes) slightly thicker-billed Western sandpiper, but we did locate it, and I even managed to capture it in flight (see photo), which might well turn out to be one of the few, if not the only, such photos of this species in the U.K. I shall investigate, and also do some more birding. We are planning to return to the Scillies next October. Until next time, birds will continue to fly back into your lives again and again.