



# ***Fylde Bird Club*** ***Lancashire***

## **CLUB NEWSLETTER FEBRUARY 2008**

This quarter we are fortunate to have the first part of another of Barry Dyson's excellent accounts of his foreign birding trips, I am sure you will agree this one is rather special and an enthralling read.

There is also a piece from Monty Myerscough on Barn Owl nest boxes and an appeal for optics to protect migrant birds in Malta, both very worthy causes.

Although thanks to Barry we are not short of copy for this newsletter if there is anything any of you can contribute in future it would be very welcome. Profiles of members, trip reports and good personal finds always make good reading for others.

Thanks as ever to Stuart for his tireless work on the recent sightings.

Good birding,

Stephen.



## South Atlantic Odyssey 2007, Barry Dyson (Part 1 of 2)

I first became interested in travelling to the South Atlantic in 1998 when I made enquiries with Curnow Shipping Limited to travel to South Africa on the Royal Mail ship, RMS St Helena. This ship sailed from Cardiff (now from Portland) calling at Tenerife, Ascension Island, St Helena and Cape Town. Return journey by air to Heathrow. If anyone is interested in this then you will need to do it soon as there is talk of an airport being built on St Helena by 2010 when the RMS ST Helena is being withdrawn from service. You can do the trip in reverse calling at St Helena, Ascension Island, Banjul in The Gambia, Vigo in NW Spain and Portland.

In the end I didn't go, but put the thought of doing so on the back-burner. Come forward 5 years and my interest was rekindled on reading the September 2003 issue of Birdwatch magazine. An article by Hadoram Shirihihi entitled Pelagic Odyssey whetted my appetite no end and I resolved to undertake the same trip when possible. On the 8/6/05 I sent my deposit to Wildwings for the 2007 Atlantic Odyssey voyage, the 2006 trip already being fully booked up.

Much correspondence and preparation ensued before the big day finally arrived. On the 2/3/07 I left home at 03.00hrs and arrived at Gatwick at 07.30. Here I joined up with 12 other birders including Tim Cleeves the Wildwings tour leader. The England cricket team were also there, on their way to the World one day series in the West Indies. I recognised the Captain Michael Vaughan and spinner Monty Panesar – pity they didn't perform. We left Gatwick at 11.20 and arrived at Madrid at 13.40. We were due to leave Madrid at 22.05, not at all satisfactory and made worse by the flight being put back to 23.30. We arrived at Buenos Aires on the 3/3 at 07.30 after an 11.5 hour flight with good leg room but poor meals. Thinking the worst was now over, with our onward flight to Ushuaia due to depart at 8.50am, I couldn't have been further from the truth. To cut a very long story short one of my bags went AWOL which I was finally re-united with 6 weeks later, and our flight finally left at 16.50 arriving at Ushuaia at 21.50. Some journey but of course completely dwarfed by the 29 days at sea it was going to take us to reach Ascension Island.

The 4/3 saw a trip to the Tierra del Fuego National Park marred by dismal, overcast conditions. Nevertheless we got off to a great start with 2 Magellanic Woodpeckers flying over, bringing the bus to a sudden halt. We were lucky as one of them landed on a broken tree trunk, out in the open, providing us with some good digital images. This massive black and white pecker with a full red head is some serious bird and one of our target species. A Black-chested Buzzard eagle perched close by gave even better views. The passerines too put on a good show with the smartest being the Thorn-tailed Rayaditos. Good numbers of Patagonian Sierra-finches and Black-chinned Siskins were supported by lesser numbers of Fire-eyed Doucans, Grey-flanked and Bar-winged Cinclodes, Austral Parakeet and single White-throated Treerunner, Magallanic Tapaculo and one of the world's largest kingfishers, Ringed Kingfisher. A group of Rufous-chested Dotterels on the shore, a party of Southern Lapwings and some displaying Great Grebes, not forgetting Flightless Steamer Duck together with several other duck/goose species made for a good day. Alas with the rain continuing to fall we had to make do without the magnificent Andean Condor, a major disappointment.

Monday the 5/3 was a wasted day queueing at Aerolineas offices for news of my 'lost' baggage and exchanging Argentinian currency ( as compensation for inconvenience ) into American dollars. Shopping for toiletries, clothing and essential missing item replacements took up a large part of the day and I was grateful for the help of Tim and Gerry Richards a much travelled Aussie birder. Wellingtons were almost impossible to find and I ended up with a garish yellow pair with as much tread as a nail file. Because of this I missed out on Chimango, Crested and White-



throated Caracaras, Turkey Vulture and 60+ White-rumped Sandpipers. By late afternoon we had joined the ship and at 18.00 hours the Professor Molchanov began to move off down the Beagle channel heading for the open ocean. As we moved down the channel our only Magellanic Diving-petrel of the trip was seen. Commoner were Black-browed Albatrosses, Southern Giant Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters and I was able to catch up with Dolphin Gull.

For the technically minded the Professor Molchanov is an ex-research vessel from the Hydrometeorology Institute in Murmansk, Russia. She was built in 1983, in Finland, and was designed as an ice strengthened ship. She measures 236 feet in length, and 42 feet across the beam. She draws 15 feet which enables her to move into relatively shallow waters, has a displacement of 2,140 tonnes and cruises at around 12 knots. On this expedition she had a crew of 20 Russian officers, sailors, engineers and service personnel on board, and 50 passengers including support staff. About half the passengers were with 'Wildwings' some having joined at Buenos Aires and others at Ushuaia. Altogether including the Russians there were 14 different nationalities on board.

The official welcoming briefing was followed by a mandatory safety and lifeboat drill. The two lifeboats seated 40 people in each and were totally enclosed and described as unsinkable. They had enough diesel for 24 hours constant running, and enough survival food for 3 days. I have to say you would not want to be claustrophobic. Having recently seen the MV Explorer sink I was surprised to see their lifeboats were of the open type, and thought that had they been in the same sea state as we experienced in the Bransfield Straits, I would have feared greatly for their safety.

The 6/3, my passport to benefits birthday, was to be a day to remember or forget depending on your point of view. With a wind force 9 from the southwest, a sea swell of 8 metres, moderate visibility and air temperature 4<sup>o</sup>C many of us were sea sick, myself included. The Drake passage was living up to its reputation. Birdwatching was chiefly confined to the bridge but sea-washed windows were a hindrance. This poor weather was to haunt us for the following two days but luckily I had found my sea-legs by the following day. Sightings today included the first Wandering Albatrosses, the only Southern Royal Albatross of the trip, our first Light-mantled Sooty Albatross and first Antarctic Fulmar. Also seen were a variety of petrels including Southern and Northern Giant, Soft-plumaged, Cape, several difficult to identify diving petrels and Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels. Two Hourglass Dolphins were seen but unfortunately not by me. I retired to bed at 8.00pm without dinner and without attending the log. It's fair to say I felt rough.

My fellow cabin mate Dirk van der Wal from the Netherlands was not a birder but a traveller. Indeed his claim to fame was that he had visited every sovereign nation in the world, the last being East Timor. I guess he was now continuing with islands, an impossible task. We had been lucky in that we had booked one of the two three-berthed cabins and the remaining berth had not been taken up. Just as well, as there wasn't enough room to swing the proverbial cat around and the extra bunk gave us some additional storage space.

The following day the 7/3 gave much better visibility, but with a rather heavy swell, and the wind against us. Most of the same species as yesterday were present. In addition our first Grey-headed Albatrosses appeared today along with over 500 Antarctic Prions shadowing the ship giving close up views, but the swell made photography difficult. 3 Blue Petrels and an Atlantic Petrel were also firsts for the trip. 10 Fin Whales were seen but the 8 Hourglass Dolphins must have been seen when I retired for a coffee for this proved to be a bogey species for me. Having said that, many



of the recorded cetaceans were seen by only a few people each time, owing to their unpredictability and distance. Debates began over the difficulty of identifying prions and diving petrels and these lively discussions were to last for many days. Anyone thinking of going to Antarctica would do well to focus on these species to which I would also add the skuas. I ate all three meals today, and my belated birthday cake, which the chef had prepared the previous day.

The third morning in the Drake 8/3 did not bring any relief with strong winds and heavy swells pounding the ship as we approached King George Island – the northern most island in the South Shetland Group. We had intended to land on Penguin Island but as the wind picked up to gale force strength yet again, we were forced to head further south to the large Admiralty Bay where a number of countries have research stations. Here at last the sea conditions calmed down and it was great to see our first penguins, Gentoo and Chinstrap 'porpoising' beside the ship while others bulleted their way through the icy water leaving their own 'vapour' trails as they propelled themselves on to land. Good numbers of Cape petrels stiffened their wings like fulmars and showed off their striking, though smudgy wing patterning. 4 Antarctic Terns, squat, compact, energetic little fellows came close and an Arctic tern was also claimed. Our first Snowy Sheathbill flew across the bow and up to 10 Antarctic Fulmars were seen, not forgetting 40+ blond naped South Polar Skuas seen at close quarters. As we left the shelter of Admiralty bay our first White-chinned Petrel of the trip was seen and as we approached Bransfield strait we recorded our first Antarctic Shag. Tim said the only issue to consider was is this a form/race/sub-species of Imperial shag or is it a true species in its own right. Bloody certain I didn't know.

Overnight passage through the Bransfield strait was very rough and it took a long time to get to sleep. I felt like my whole body was moving up and down through my skin, as the ship moved from side to side. Weird, uncomfortable and unfortunately not the only time this was to be experienced.

The next morning 9/3 began with the best possible start. We were now heading into the Antarctic Sound with no wind, good visibility, overcast but with spells of sunshine breaking through, the first we had seen since leaving Ushuaia. Many tabular icebergs lay in line like battleships in formation. We cruised in between them, ploughing through a porridge of ice-floes to reach Brown Bluff, where we were to land on the seventh continent. Just before breakfast a young Emperor penguin was called out and the ship manoeuvred carefully towards it. It did not move, and as we got closer until we were looking right down on the bird, we could see that it had a gaping wound around its left leg no doubt inflicted by a Leopard seal. As the day passed by we were to experience 3 more Juvenile emperors, all fit and well.

The fastest breakfast ever, soon saw me back on deck where the Antarctic scenery was staggeringly beautiful and beyond my pen to do it justice. Such haunting beauty was a life enriching experience as anyone who has been there will testify.

The ice-floes and ice-bergs offered a multitude of life. All the likely species of Antarctic Seals were present: numerous Crabeater Seals, a few Leopard Seals and the occasional Weddell Seal were all hauled out on the ice as we passed by. Adelie Penguins along with Gentoos were scattered around while Antarctic Minke Whales were roaming the sound gorging on krill with their cavernous mouths. A small group of 4 engaged in a lot of social breaching showing algae stained under-bellies and a neat short curved fin. A Lesser Snow Petrel put in an appearance to the relief of many, for



you do not want to leave without seeing this most beautiful of birds. We need not have worried as a further 5 were seen on this memorable day. Such a strange high pitched falcon like call and fluttering bat-like flight made this bird one of the top 5 of the trip for me.

Finally it was time to make our first landing, but not before Rinie our expedition leader went through the procedures concerning zodiac operations. Safety was paramount and I have to say I felt in good hands with this Russian crew who had hundreds of years experience between them. The temperature was  $-1^{\circ}\text{C}$  so no worse than a winter Knott End to Fluke Hall winter wader walk. Brown Bluff is named after the massive sandstone cliff towering over the beach, topped by 'molar teeth' like formations with the colour of a Crunchie bar. There were a lot of Gentoo's to be found still moulting and even a few large chicks losing the last of their fluffy down. Only a solitary Adelie was still to be found on the beach where plenty of Antarctic Fur Seal bulls were loafing about. At the far end of the beach another penguin species was found, a solitary Chinstrap while nearby were Brown and Subantarctic Skuas. Snowy Sheathbill and Kelp Gulls were also present. As the temperature started to fall the zodiacs began a shuttle service back to the ship and a welcome lunch.

We were supposed to head for the Weddell sea in the afternoon but the Captain and Rinie decided that the risk of ending up in too much ice and becoming further delayed (the Drake passage had delayed us considerably) was too great. Instead we headed back where we came from seeing more of the same plus one special moment when an Emperor Penguin swam across our bows, while a Snow Petrel circled around us and a Dwarf Minke Whale played around the ship, surfacing only metres away from us. This was more than magic.

The next day the 10/3 will go down as one to forget if that is possible. I had been struck down the previous night with a mystery virus infection that laid me low for 24 hours, delirious and with dreadful diarrhoea. I tried to make it on deck, which I did but lasted only minutes before returning to my bunk. The ship's doctor and Rinie's wife the lovely Liliana did their best to help me but only time would make me feel better. We were travelling towards the South Orkney Islands and I am told we passed an iceberg estimated to be 5 miles long. Around the edge of the berg had been up to 80 Antarctic Petrels, a huge flock and this was the only day this species was seen. Also seen were 30+ Lesser Snow Petrels and over 50 Cape Petrels. Antarctic Fulmars had peaked with over 200 birds recorded and 3 Humpback Whales were seen. Bigger.

As it turned out 3 other people had also taken ill and Tim remained ill for the rest of the trip despite the doctor's best efforts. He must have lost close on two stone by the time he flew back to England looking only a shadow of the man I had met at Gatwick. I note he is no longer leading the next or future Atlantic Odysseys that he had signed up for.

Feeling a little better today the 11/3 as we approached the British territory of the South Orkneys also claimed by Argentina and known as Orcadas. Most of the group chose to go ashore at the Argentinean base on Laurie Island but still recovering I thought better of it and chose to stay on the bridge. Anchored not far from shore I was able to make out several Elephant Seals on land, amidst lots of Antarctic Fur Seals. Once again it was overcast but with good visibility and an air temperature of  $-1^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but fairly calm with little swell. With everybody back on board and lunch taken, we steamed out of Scotia bay heading north between Laurie island and Powell island and once again west to get a look at the largest island of the group Coronation island. The sleeping giant icebergs took on all shapes and



sizes. Some were, jagged, pointed, others smooth and streamlined. I saw one that resembled a huge bedouin tent, another shaped like an igloo. Some were gleaming white while others dirty grey. Perhaps the most spectacular took on an aquamarine colour as though they had been subject to a litmus paper test. These frozen wonders bejewel the icy waters and were to enthral us for some days to come.

Heading north to South Georgia we set a new day record for us of 100+ Black-bellied Storm Petrels and also disturbed a flock of c. 300 South Georgia Shags, another taxonomic puzzle as *P. georgianus* is in the same super group as Antarctic Shag and might well be an Imperial Shag. Confused, I was. Moving further away from the South Orkneys we stretched our vision and were treated to some distant whale sightings of 2 Sperm and one Southern Right, apparently unusual in these waters.

The next day 12/3 saw a return to a rougher sea state with the ship rocking and rolling along in a force 6 and the temperature still at  $-1^{\circ}$  C. That said, albatross sightings increased, with Black-browed's recovering to 30 and our first Wandering Albatross for 5 days. Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, another top 5 bird, increased to a new high of 10 and a solitary Grey-headed also showed. We had not seen any Soft-plumaged Petrels since the rough weather in the Drake so a single bird today was great as were 2 Kerguelen Petrels of which more about later. Blue Petrels numbered 10 and Antarctic Prions came back in abundance, buffeted about in the strong winds. Fifty White-chinned Petrels were also seen along with the more usual Cape and Giant Petrel, the latter looking quite evil as they creased their eyes against the wind.

The conditions on deck were atrocious and it was too cold and dangerous to be outside for any length of time, while the salt-caked forward windows on the bridge were a hindrance. Down in the bar, you never knew when the chairs, cups, food and people would go crashing about and it put paid (not for the first time) to the afternoon lecture on Sea-birds due to the less than stable slide-projector in the ever rolling seas. I was beginning to relate to William Whiting's Royal Navy hymn 'FOR THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA'. Beverages and bottled water were free of charge, but pouring out cups of coffee/tea was a delicate balancing act not always achieved. Spirits and beers you had to pay for, and when no one was in attendance were trusted to make an entry on a schedule as to what you had taken. Today the keen photographers once again played their part in solving a difficult ID problem. Their images were crucial in separating 2 Sei Whales from the similar Fin Whale, as they had done with the equally difficult Dwarf Minke Whale. Everyone seemed to have a high-powered lens with many having brought their lap tops with them. Downloading was a daily exercise, perhaps twice daily for some, who would rattle images off with pre-defined multiple settings. Not having a lap top I stuck to deleting obvious crap from the several 2 GB memory cards I had brought with me. A single Orca, the only one of the trip was seen by one lucky person but I finally caught up with Hourglass Dolphin which was just as well as this was the last day they were to be seen. No sign of Tim all day.

The next day 13/3 saw us approaching South Georgia first sighted at about 11.45 still 50 miles away. As expected bird numbers and diversity increased as we drew closer. This rugged, mountainous, snow covered island, 106 miles long and up to 18 miles wide, was shrouded in cloud only slowly revealing its majesty. Huge swarms of reddish-brown patches of krill abounded as we drew nearer to the continental shelf of this fantastic island. Two more penguin species were logged with some 40 Macaronis and 10 Kings. Black-browed Albatrosses exceeded 100 birds but the Giant Petrels were causing concern as the younger birds in particular were difficult to separate into Southern/Northern



hence over 50 being designated as 'sp'. The white-phase Southern's of course presented no such difficulty. Over 5,000 Antarctic Prions were logged whereas the first Fairy Prions totalled just 5. White-chinned Petrel and Black-bellied Storm Petrel both exceeded 100 and this was our best day for Blue Petrel with over 20 recorded. 5 Albatross species were seen including an early Sooty Albatross.

Emerging from the depths was a dead 'nematine' or giant sea worm which can grow to several metres long. Unlike most dead marine creatures which sink to the ocean floor, they do the opposite and float to the surface. As we approached the southern tip of the island we finally turned into the Drygalski fjord for a ships 'cruise'. It was a spectacular sail into the calm turquoise waters of the fjord, surrounded by jagged snow covered mountain peaks, and only falling short of the Risting Glacier by a few hundred metres. Here many Antarctic Terns and Wilson's Storm Petrels were feeding at the edge of the glacier as the glacial melting creates an upwelling of nutrients and therefore a high abundance of food for the birds. Slowly we returned and once again headed for the open sea. Grytviken was our next destination and a slow sail would take us there by morning.

However we were not yet done with the 13/3 as after dark a number of diving petrels were attracted to the ship's lights. We were able to examine 4 South Georgian Diving Petrels in the hand. Some characters I was told - including leg colour - however did not match up with the text in Shirihai (2002) so more work needs to be done on this difficult group. Also found on deck were several Antarctic Prions which were released the following day.

The next day at 06.30 we headed into East Cumberland bay towards the anchorage at the old whaling station of Grytviken. I think most of us were to spend the morning reflecting on the exploitation and scale of the whale processing that had taken place here between 1904 – 1964. We landed close to the small graveyard where we paid our respects to Sir Ernest Shackleton. Shackleton's explorations are well known but travelling in these waters made you appreciate the enormity of his incredible story, his leadership and heroic efforts in achieving what he did. From the graveyard we made our way past many Antarctic Fur Seals young and old and very inquisitive. We however gave a wide berth to the 3 Southern Elephant Seals loafing nearby and resembling massive garden slugs or even Jabba the Hutt. Beyond the seals, the Norwegian whaling station lay rusting away, with three whale-hunting hulks beached on the shore. Most of the buildings had been removed in the interests of safety, laying bare the great machinery they had once housed. The place was a living memorial to the whales which had perished in such huge numbers and you could not help but be moved by it all. I made my way through snow flurries to the small white church at the back of the deserted settlement and was touched by the numerous tributes found inside including one to 'Nan Brown – An Antarctic housewife 1954-57. Selfless unto death. She enriched so many lives. She loved this Antarctic island and rests here for eternity.' I pondered on what sort of a life it must have been and felt humbled.

From there I visited the museum which was attractively laid out, full of interest and manned by helpful staff. I bought a few souvenirs before walking on to Shackleton's memorial at the entrance to the bay which had been erected by his comrades. Along the way I passed more Fur Seals, some small groups of King Penguins, Kelp Gulls and saw a few of the attractive South Georgia Pintails. These ducks are unusual, if not unique, in that they are carnivores, eating carrion from dead penguins. It was good to see some green vegetation at last. Tussock grass, ferns, wild flowers and lichens brightened up the sunlit views and together with the smell of seaweed perked me up from the morning's solemnity. A Light-mantled Sooty Albatross flew right over my head lifting my spirits even further.



The afternoon saw us on our way to the second stop of the day at Fortuna bay a little further to the west. With albatrosses, petrels and penguins always in sight we landed in wintry weather close to hundreds of fur seals and close on 1,000 Gentoo Penguins along the shore and in the sea. I wandered along the beach where up to 20 Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses patrolled the cliff sides. Some were in tandem, displaying as only they can on their long narrow pencil thin wings, so flexible so manoeuvrable, appearing stiff then almost floppy as they arch under the bodyline. Made for air currents they cut their way forward effortlessly, dreamily, floating on air as only seabirds can with their biometrically made to measure wings enhancing their performance. I could have watched them all day as they wheeled in figure of eight patterns no more than inches apart. I was in heaven. This state of bliss was to continue in the days ahead.

I walked back along the pebbly beach, on to the shingle and made my way to the King penguin colony estimated to hold 7,000 pairs. Some birds were still incubating eggs, and some were brooding small young, while the large brown fluffy juveniles, looking like woolly bears, were waiting their moult. King Penguins are oh so curious and confiding, as if wanting to be handed something, while their comical flipper balancing gait never fails to amuse. Not so amusing were the Southern Giant Petrels on the look out for easy pickings.

50+ Reindeer did not look out of place here. They had been introduced by the Norwegians between 1911-25 for sport and as a diet supplement for the whale meat. Towards the end of the landing news broke that Rinie had found some Light-mantled Sooty Albatross nests. They were nesting amongst the tussock grass, no higher than 30 feet on the side of hillocks. I managed a few images and felt immensely privileged to see this magnificent bird at such close quarters. The sky was constantly changing and the surrounding jagged peaks looked unclimbable, but I suppose man's intrusion had only come recently and the albatrosses had chosen to continue nesting where they had always done. It had been an unforgettable day in one way or another but there was still plenty more excitement and spectacle to come.

The next day 15/3 at 08.00 saw us approaching Salisbury Plain in the Bay of Isles. Air temp was 1<sup>o</sup> C with high cloud and some sunshine, good visibility and occasional snow showers. The main aim here was to see the King Penguins at one of their most impressive rookeries and we were not disappointed. The scenery was breathtaking and fitting to hold an estimated 150,000 – 200,000 of the second largest penguin in the world. We landed in excellent sea state about a kilometre from the hill side where an estimated 60,000 pairs plus their young were gathered in the rookery and on the plain below, with thousands more along the sea shore. We wandered at will for the best part of 4 hours, constantly entertained by the antics of the penguins and capturing their every move. Their prehistoric webbed feet seemed at odds with their soft shoe shuffle. Sitting down often brought curious, fearless, Kings right up close pecking at your rucksack and anything else you may have left lying about.

It was also a great place to observe the large number of fur seals. South Georgia is probably the most important breeding ground in the world for this seal species, where at least 4 million spend the summer. At this time of year the fur seals remaining are small pups born this year, now playing around the beaches before leaving the bay. A few females with slightly younger pups, still suckling, were also present. Most males had returned to the open sea. They



made easy and pleasing subjects to photograph. Brown Skuas feeding on seal carcasses and penguin eggs were also easy to photograph.

Just beyond the rookery in shallow pools in the tussock grass we came across some more South Georgia Pintails, 10 in total. As I was watching them a Giant Petrel flew over me, perhaps 10 feet above. Had it wanted to I felt sure it could have knocked me over.

We returned to the ship for another delicious lunch while the ship relocated and re-anchored ready for the second landing of the day. There are few places in the world where one is permitted close access to nesting Wandering Albatrosses and here we were at Prion Island to do just that. We had hardly set foot on shore when we saw the first of 7 South Georgia Pipits seen that day, affording great photographic opportunities as they searched among the rocky shoreline for food items. More Fur Seals, Giant Petrels and Gentoos were also present. Our group split up into smaller units of no more than the regulatory 11 per guide and made our way up the muddy, slippery gully to reach the plateau. It was good to see some of the Russian crew, including the waitresses also showing a genuine interest. The ground was covered with the remains of Antarctic Prions, presumably skua victims and we had to run the gauntlet of Fur Seals hidden in the tussock grass on either side.

The first breeding birds we saw were Southern Giant petrels. The almost fully grown young, waiting to be fed still wore downy plumage and their green-tipped tubenose looked enormous at close quarters. The Wandering Albatross race here is the 'snowy' albatross – *Diomedea exulans exulans* with a wingspan of 11 feet, truly magnificent birds. Several nests were brooding tiny downy chicks with proud parent. We watched in awe at the courtship displays of the younger birds known as 'gamming', where groups of 3 or 4 birds would spread their wings out to face each other, stretch their necks skyward and emit sounds like a donkey braying. Bills were vibrated and clattered with would-be partners or rivals. All this was set amongst glorious scenery and the criss-crossing of Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses above us. Two hours never went quicker. Prion Island is now the only island in South Georgia where visitors are allowed to visit. It has been strictly monitored since 1995 when some 230 pairs nested on the island. Today only 190 or so pairs breed here and I think we all know why that is.

At 16.00 we were all back on board after another unforgettable day. With great memories and peace of mind we set off on our 1,400 nm journey north eastwards to Gough Island but not until we had celebrated our successful stop in South Georgia with hot Gluhwein in the bar. Dinner followed with spring rolls, then New Zealand Guinea fowl on a bed of sweet potato and asparagus tips, followed by Chocolate mousse. It would have to do.

The next day 16/3 started with snow showers and a layer of snow on deck. It was 1<sup>0</sup> C and overcast but later in the day it became sunny with excellent visibility. Massive icebergs were all around the ship but here they were far smoother in shape, owing to the warmer waters and the length of time they had been at sea since 'calving'. Some looked like melting ice creams. Shapes included an inverted mug with handle, that from a different angle resembled an elephant's head and trunk. It is what memories are made of. Sadly this was to be the last day that we saw these doomed monoliths.



Little bird life was seen in the morning but it picked up later with up to 250 Soft-plumaged Petrels, 40 White-chinned and our first Grey Petrel. Black-bellieds were still showing well but it was to be our last day for Blue Petrel and Southern Fulmar. Our first Sooty Shearwater for 9 days was a welcome sight as was our first of the trip Great Shearwaters which we were to see everyday for the next 9 days.

Cetaceans were seen by the lucky few, with six distant Fin Whales and a pod of 30-40 Long-finned Pilot Whales coming straight towards the ship at speed. I was told it was a brief encounter, all over in a minute and which I had missed by seconds on coming back on deck from having a coffee and muffin break. It is impossible to see everything but they would have been nice.

The 17/3 saw a welcome rise in temperature to 4<sup>o</sup>C with following winds reaching near gale force and the sea swell up to 6 metres as we surfed the waves and made good speed. This was to be our last day for seeing Black-bellied Storm Petrels only to be replaced by its congener the White-bellied Storm Petrel of which we saw over 80 today. It was also our last day for Cape Petrel and Macaroni Penguin although we still had one more penguin to look forward to. Great Shearwaters with over 300 seen replaced the White-chinned Petrels with only 3 seen today. Wandering Albatrosses declined to 2 but Grey-headed's increased to 7 and Soft-plumaged Petrels remained at a healthy 90 or so. A memorable vertical sighting was seeing a Soft-plumaged Petrel, above a Kerguelen Petrel, above a Great Shearwater all in line. Mind blowing.

An influx of 40 Kerguelen Petrels made compelling watching, for this bird ran a close second to the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross for me. They are medium sized petrels, slate grey in colour with silvery linings on their underside primaries when seen in sunlight. I could have watched their aerobatics all day. Some stayed with the ship for some time, often in front. They were just so marvellous to watch as they rocketed skyward with rapid wing beats, then stalling and shimmying as though correcting their flight before diving, roller-coaster fashion, sometimes. Their flight was incredibly fast and versatile, and I was never sure what they were going to do next. They were true masters of the air as they put on a show to remember.

### **An appeal for unwanted optical equipment to aid migrant birds in Malta.**

My name is Peter Grice and I am a fully accredited, full-time volunteer with the Wildlife Section of Lancashire Constabulary, working directly for the Force Wildlife Officer, Duncan Thomas. My speciality is birds of prey. During September 2007, several colleagues and I attended a Birdlife Raptor Camp held on the island of Malta. We were there to observe the illegal shooting of birds (with special emphasis on raptors) as they passed over the island.

Our remit was twofold: to monitor the raptor migration and to liase with the ALE (Administrative Law Enforcement) and the local Police with regard to illegal shooting incidents. It soon became apparent that the Law Enforcement Agencies were woefully ill equipped and especially suffering from a lack of decent optical equipment.

We intend to try and remedy this in 2008 by asking people if they would kindly consider donating any spare optical equipment they may have. This will be taken out or posted to the Birdlife Malta officials who will in turn pass it on to the various Law Enforcement Agencies based on Gozo and Malta.

Thank You.

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## **Farming for wildlife**

### **Barn Owl nest box scheme 2007 report**

The scheme has now been running for fourteen years and the area covered extends from River Ribble to the south and Churchtown and Fleetwood to the north. The densest concentration of boxes and by far the most number of Barn Owls is around Lytham, Wrea Green, Moss Side and Ballam area of mossland. An area favoured by Barn owls until their decline in the 1950s and 1960s. They are gradually spreading into other area but with limited success. The further north and east you go, the less Barn Owls there is.

Like many other farmland birds, Barn Owls have had a lot to put up with, and their high dependency on one particular food source, small mammals, especially field voles, have meant that they have fared rather worse than most.

Nest boxes have solved one of the problems facing Barn Owls, namely lack of nest sites, but they face even greater threats in the future. Loss of habitat due to urban spread, new road schemes, land drainage, land being taken out of farming altogether, barn conversions, a total lack of understanding by local authorities involving anything to do with wildlife conservation.

Oh, and you must have noticed the great swathes of maize that are springing up all over the place. The benefit to wildlife of such a monstrous and alien crop is nil, unless you happen to be a Hirundine looking for somewhere to roost, and then hope that it isn't cut out from under you, before you're ready to move to warmer climes.

Anyway getting back to the subject of this report, 2007 breeding season is going on record as being an average one for Barn Owls, twenty pairs breeding is exactly the same number as last year with some new sites being occupied, but balanced out by established sites being vacated. Why? Very fickle things these Barn Owls.

As usual there was no synchronisation with the Barn Owl breeding population and at the beginning of June some pairs were still on eggs, while others had young of at least 3-4 weeks old. This makes checking them a bit tricky when they are spread out over a large area and you want to keep disturbance to a minimum at critical times.

Despite the atrocious weather through June and July, most of the breeding Barn Owls had larger than average clutch sizes, with nearly all the eggs laid hatching, a rare phenomena in my experience. Some pairs managed to raise five chicks to fledging and three or four being about average. Double clutches are also in evidence this year and without going into detail, there is a pair currently with three chicks and four eggs, which must have laid again with the original four young two or three weeks from fledging. This means that if the attempt is successful, they will still have young in the nest at the end of November. I have taken it upon myself to help them out by putting out 4-5 day old chicks close to the nest site every day, at least until I check it again in about three weeks.

Monty Myerscough



## **RECENT SIGHTINGS**

**COLLATED BY STUART PINER**

### **November 2007**

For the second consecutive winter the Fylde hosted a national rarity – unfortunately, it was the same one as last year! The (very) long-staying Glossy Ibis hopped over the River Ribble from Marshside RSPB on 11<sup>th</sup> and resided at Warton Marsh into December. Warton Marsh also produced Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier and Short-eared Owl during the month.

Purple Sandpipers were perhaps the most significant feature of November - at least three commuted between Rossall Point and Fleetwood Marine Lakes and one was noted at Starr Gate. Ravens also put on a good show – two were at Mythop and Cockerham Moss Edge and singles were at Poulton-le-Fylde, Rawcliffe Moss, Wesham and Warton Marsh.

A Cetti's Warbler at Marton Mere from 14<sup>th</sup> was perhaps a bird returning to winter at this site. The reserve also held three Bitterns and two Long-eared Owls during November.

At the northern limit of the Fylde, two Yellow-legged Gulls - an adult and a third-winter - were at Glasson on 3<sup>rd</sup> (with the adult lingering until the 20<sup>th</sup>). Nearby three Scaup continued to commute between the Conder Pool and Glasson Basin

A Pale-bellied Brent Goose was on the sea east of Rossall Point on 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> and another was with Pink-footed Geese in Pilling on 16<sup>th</sup>. Seawatching highlights at Rossall Point included a Great Northern Diver on 6<sup>th</sup>, Little Auk on 8<sup>th</sup>, Leach's Petrel and Shag on 11<sup>th</sup> and two Velvet Scoters on 12<sup>th</sup>.

Other notable sightings included an Avocet on the Ribble Estuary at Lytham on 10<sup>th</sup>, a Black Redstart at Blackpool North Shore on 22<sup>nd</sup>, Mandarins at Pilling on 19<sup>th</sup> and Fairhaven Lake 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, Short-eared Owl at Agglebys Pit on 26<sup>th</sup> and a Snow Bunting at Fluke Hall on 30<sup>th</sup>. Up to four Ring-necked Parakeets continued to linger at Lytham Crematorium.

### **December 2007**

A Firecrest in Cottam was an excellent discovery on 2<sup>nd</sup>, joining Yellow-browed Warbler and Willow Tit on the list of scarcities found by Steve Jones in the urban greenery on the outskirts of Preston.

On 30<sup>th</sup> a Hooded Crow appeared on Knott End beach, where it remained into the New Year – yet another great bird found by Chris Batty from his window.

The Glossy Ibis continued to inhabit Warton Marsh throughout the month – a Hen Harrier and two Ravens also featured at the same site during December. Marton Mere hosted up to two Bitterns and four Long-eared Owls during



December, but best of all was a one-day Black-necked Grebe on 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Snow Bunting (first found in November) remained at Fluke Hall until the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Three Scaup were on Glasson Basin throughout the month. A Short-eared Owl hunted over Lytham Moss on 11<sup>th</sup> and on 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> a single Waxwing was at the new regular location of Stocks Road, Ashton-on-Ribble.

On 22<sup>nd</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> an adult Greenland White-fronted Goose was with the Pink-footed Geese at Mythop. At Pilling Lane Ends a Pale-bellied Brent Goose was with Pink-footed Geese towards the end of the month, along with a couple of Barnacle Geese. Two Purple Sandpipers were again noted at Rossall Point on 30<sup>th</sup>.

## January 2008

When the Glossy Ibis first arrived on the Fylde in October 2006, nobody would have predicted that it would still be strutting around on Fylde turf in January 2008 – but it was. Ibis spotters at Warton Marsh also logged Hen Harrier, Water Pipit and Short-eared Owl during the month. The Hooded Crow discovered late last year lingered at Knott End to the end of January and other regulars included up to six Long-eared Owls and a Bittern at Marton Mere and three Scaup between Conder Pool and Glasson Basin.

Raven sightings comprised a single over Preston Dock on 9<sup>th</sup>, two north over Glasson Marsh on 11<sup>th</sup> and singles at both Windy Harbour on 27<sup>th</sup> and Myerscough Quarry on 30<sup>th</sup>. Two Water Pipits were noted at The Heads on 13<sup>th</sup>, Short-eared Owls visited Cockersand, and Eagland Hill (3) and a Great Northern Diver flew past Starr Gate on 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The only goose highlights were a party of three Eurasian White-fronted Geese at Fluke Hall and Pilling Marsh on 4<sup>th</sup> (two adults remaining until 6<sup>th</sup>), a Dark-bellied Brent Goose in Granny's Bay on 22<sup>nd</sup> and Barnacle Geese were recorded at Pilling Lane Ends, Fluke Hall, Cockerham Moss Edge and Preese Hall.

Jackdaws showing plumage features indicative of the Scandinavian and Eastern European form *monedula*, 'Nordic Jackdaw' were recorded from a few locations during January. An unusually high number of Jackdaws displaying Nordic characteristics have appeared in Britain this winter, suggesting an influx of eastern birds into the country probably occurred in the autumn. The most striking plumage characteristic shown by this form is an obvious pale collar. On the Fylde, birds exhibiting this feature were noted in Catforth (2), Lytham (2), Starr Gate and Fairhaven Lake.

The month ended with a juvenile Glaucous Gull at Cocker's Dyke and a Ross's Goose in Stalmine on 31<sup>st</sup>, but birders did not set eyes on the latter until early February...



**An appeal for unwanted optical equipment to aid the struggle against  
persecution of migrant birds in Malta.**

My name is Peter Grice and I am a fully accredited, full-time volunteer with the Wildlife Section of Lancashire Constabulary, working directly for the Force Wildlife Officer, Duncan Thomas, dealing with all aspects of wildlife issues. My speciality is birds of prey.

During September 2007, several colleagues and I attended a Birdlife Raptor Camp held on the island of Malta. We were there to observe the illegal shooting of birds (with special emphasis on raptors) as they passed over the island on their way South.

Our remit was twofold: to monitor the raptor migration and to liaise with the ALE (Administrative Law Enforcement) and the local Police with regard to illegal shooting incidents. It soon became apparent that the Law Enforcement Agencies were woefully ill equipped and especially suffering from a lack of decent optical equipment.

We intend to try and remedy this in 2008 by asking people if they would kindly consider donating any spare optical equipment they may have. This will be taken out or posted to the Birdlife Malta officials who will in turn pass it on to the various Law Enforcement Agencies based on Gozo and Malta.

If anyone has any queries with regards to any of the above or would like further information with regard to shooting issues on Malta, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Thank You.

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***Fylde Bird Club Business in Brief***

- AGM Jan 08: All Officers and Committee re elected with the addition of Stuart Piner to the Committee. No further increases to Membership Subscriptions, (rise at previous AGM embodied for 2008).
- Club earns £400 from two transactions for the supply of bird records from its database to environmental consultants.
- Sponsored Christmas Bird 'Hunt' records 130 species in the Fylde between Christmas and New Year.
- A free telephone texting service for major local rarities will be introduced soon. It will be run by the Club for members.

