



The magnificent bird takes to the air above the saltmarsh at Wainfleet (pic: Steve Keightley)

## HUNDREDS HEAD TO COUNTY COAST TO WATCH RARE OWL

A Snowy Owl attracted strong interest from the media as well as from birders when it turned up this spring, first in North Norfolk, then in Lincolnshire Ben Ward's footage of the bird at Wainfleet was featured in weekly newspapers and on BBC regional TV. What made the sighting all the more fascinating was that the owl selected as its brief Lincolnshire home a site previously chosen by the first county record of the species almost three decades earlier. The report below has been compiled by Gibraltar Point warden Kev Wilson.

Having downloaded the morning's e-mails, about 30 of them, on March 21, I skimmed the senders and subject columns. Amongst all the usual work subjects, the label "large owl" caught my attention.

The message was from Friskney resident Andy Rayment. While walking his dog at Wainfleet Marsh, he had seen a large owl. Being familiar with Short-eared owls, he suspected this was a Snowy Owl.

Andy sent a short clip of video taken on his telephone. Though slightly distant and silhouetted against the sun, this indeed looked like a Snowy Owl. Surely this was the bird that had gradually moved west along North Norfolk until last having been seen at Snettisham on March 11.

I noted Andy's sighting was at 0915 and it was already nearly midday - could the bird still be around? I emailed Andy back with my telephone number to see if he would ring me with location details. I also contacted local staff and birders to see if anyone was close to the locality to check it out. No one was available, so Richard Doan, Ben Ward and I made the drive to the bottom of Sea Lane, Friskney, site of a former RAF bombing range.

Here, we were presented with a vast landscape of saltmarsh, tidal flats and open farmland. I left Richard and Ben checking to the north, while I headed south down the sea bank for about three km while scanning west and east.

It was amazing to think that on December 30, 1990, I had been in the exact area watching Lincolnshire's first Snowy owl. Today, however, I was having no luck and time was short, so I had to head back.

As I met back up with Richard and Ben, I received a telephone call from Andy who said that the bird had flown off but probably not gone far towards the foreshore. At that moment, a four-wheel drive vehicle drove quickly down the old MOD track out across the marsh. Fortunately this vehicle must have flushed the owl out of its hiding place because the next thing I heard was Ben exclaiming "I've got the Snowy Owl!" I thanked Andy for his call and then settled down to enjoy scope views of the bird as it took shelter from the wind behind a gate post about 150m away.

Mindful of the significance of the sighting for Lincolnshire birders, we quickly put the news out and there followed a sizable twitch. I returned for more views in the evening, hoping to see the owl in flight before dusk. The weather was grim and, although I did not see it fly, it had hopped up onto the gatepost and was showing in full view and being quite active.

The following day approximately 600 birders were on site. Frustratingly, the crowd of birders could be seen from as far away as Gibraltar Point - but not the owl!

The previous bird had come up to Gibraltar Point on March 17, 1991 after apparently having been flushed by a photographer, and I recall watching two Short-eared owls repeatedly dive-bombing it just over the sea bank.

Unfortunately, this year's owl decided to head south during the late evening of March 22 before taking up another temporary residence deeper into the Wash until its last reported sighting on about March 26.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *A pellet, thought to have been from the recent Snowy Owl, has been subject to analysis which will be reported later. The 1991 bird is thought to have been the same one later sighted on North Ronaldsay in the Orkneys. For superb photographs of the species in Iceland, see Graham Catley's blog: <http://pewit.blogspot.co.uk/>*

## STEVE'S STAR FIND IN REED-FILLED DITCH



A QUIET morning's birding on his South Humberside patch suddenly sparked to life for Steve Routledge.

As he was approaching Winter's Pond at East Halton on April 3, he was alerted by a scratchy song which sounded familiar. Could it really be a Bluethroat?

Indeed it was! Steve was quickly able to detect and identify the bird, singing in a reed-filled ditch.

**First shot of the bird in song** (Pic: Steve Routledge)

"I have seen Red-spotted Bluethroat on several previous occasions,"he says. "In the past, I have even found a few, but this was my first sighting of the White-spotted race. The fact that it was on my local patch inland on the Humber made it even more special."

Continues Steve: "Subsequently some 15 to 20 people saw it while I was still on site.

"As far as I'm aware, it was only present for the one day, though there was a report from one observer, unverified, that the bird was also seen the next day."



**The short-staying bluethroat often proved elusive but it was glimpsed by up to 20 birders (Pic: Steve Routledge)**

\* For more about his stunning find, see Steve's blog: <https://brachytron.blogspot.co.uk>

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## SIX OF THE BEST - IN UNDER TWO HOURS!

**The recent sighting of Snowy Owl prompted memories for Colin Casey who here recalls the challenge he then set himself 27 years ago.**

In January, 1991 I drove my Golf 16V GTi along the bank top to get a lazy view of the Snowy Owl. It was still there so we waited hoping it would fly closer.

Suddenly, from out of the gloom, a Short-eared Owl came along the bank towards us, so two species of owl in one 'scope view gave me an idea.

How short a time would it be possible to see all six of the UK's breeding Owls? No idea, but the race was on.

Friskney Decoy Wood was next destination where the late great Alex Parker had a Tawny Owl, a quick call and there it was. Three down!

Then on to Hobhole Bank where a trio of Long-eared Owls were helpfully sitting out in the sun.

4 miles down the road a Little Owl perched in a tree at Wyberton brought the tally to five - just one to go.

We needed Barn Owl, but where can you see one at 10am in the morning? I checked out all my regular sites. Nothing! So it was off to Spalding to a secret site where an adult bird was perched at the entrance to its nest box.

How long had it taken to see all six?

I checked my watch! Just one hour and 58 minutes.

Doing over 100 mph for the last few minutes was a bit stupid, but, to be honest, it was worth it!

## **COUNTY BIRD REPORT:**

The annual Lincolnshire Bird Report for 2016 was published in March 2018 and all but a few copies have been distributed. Work has now begun on compiling the 2017 report for which all records are eagerly sought to ensure it is comprehensive. Please submit them as soon as possible before the cut-off date of August 10 to county recorders John Clarkson or Phil Hyde whose contact details are on the website.

## **GARDEN WINNERS:**

More than 6,600 people across Lincolnshire joined nearly half-a-million people nationally in taking part in the RSPB' Big Garden Birdwatch. Compared with last year, the county saw increases for goldfinch (14 per cent), greenfinch (three per cent), coal tit (seven per cent) and blue tit (two per cent). However, there were decreases for blackbird (18 per cent), robin (12 per cent) and wren 16 per cent). As last year, the commonest species was house sparrow, followed by starling, blackbird, woodpigeon, blue tit, goldfinch, collared dove, chaffinch, great tit, robin.

## **GODWIT SUCCESS:**

An upbeat note has been sounded on Project Godwit, a joint venture between the RSPB and the WWT to boost breeding numbers of black-tailed godwits in the Nene Washes. Under their 'headstarting' initiative, eggs were incubated in a laboratory, reared to independence, then released into the wild after being colour-ringed. It seems to have paid off because two young birds were sighted in Portugal. It is hoped they will return to the Washes and breed once they are two years old

## **EVENT AXED:**

The RSPB has scrapped its annual members' weekend, claiming it was running at a loss of "tens of thousands of pounds" as a consequence of falling attendances. Announcing the decision at the final one, held in Nottingham in April, chief executive Mike Clarke said: "We bust a gut to find ways to keep it going, but it has ceased to be viable - society resources and staff energy can be put to better use."

## **FARM WALK:**

There was a great opportunity to see typical farm species (and a fair few more) on Saturday May 19 when there was a guided walk around the fields of Vine House Farm in Deeping St Nicholas. It is run by Nicholas Watts, a supporter of the LBC and wildlife trusts. The farm is a major UK source of seed and other foods for birds. Earlier this spring, Nicholas saw a flock of no fewer than 38 corn buntings - the largest for almost 20 years. He is a big advocate of feeding live mealworms in gardens during the breeding season because it can increase fledging success by as much as 50 per cent.

## **BUTTERFLY WOES:**

Two declining butterflies - Grayling and Grizzled Skipper - suffered their worst year on record in 2017 after hopes of a butterfly revival were dashed by a chilly snap in spring and a gloomy, wet summer. Although butterfly numbers last year were generally up on 2016, they were still way below average with 2017 being the seventh worst year on record. Others hard-hit include Dingy Skipper and Marsh Fritillary, while even the Large White saw its numbers tumble by 19 per cent, continuing its long-term decline.

On the plus side, there were solid increases for Red Admiral, Comma, Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Small Copper. The data was jointly collated by Butterfly Conservation, the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, the BTO and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.



# THE MAGIC OF FAIR ISLE AND THE SHETLANDS



**Birders' paradise - Fair Isle and its observatory** (pic: James Gentle)

IN his 40 years as a birder, long-serving *British Birds* Editor Roger Riddington has been able to see (and often find) some memorably rare species.

His UK list includes the likes of such "showstoppers" as Siberian Rubythroat, Rufous-tailed Robin and White-throated Sparrow.

Many of these sightings were either on Shetland, where he lives now, or during his five years on Fair Isle where he worked at the iconic bird observatory - first as assistant warden to Paul Harvey, then as warden.

In a captivating hour-long presentation to the annual meeting of Lincolnshire Bird Club, Roger recounted many of his birding "adventures" in the most northerly part of Britain. But he evidently also retains happy memories of where his birding all started - at Willoughby, near Alford, in Lincolnshire, which he still visits as often as possible to see his parents. To this day, he has retained diary records as far back as January, 1979, when he had garden encounters with the likes of Woodcock and Fieldfare.

From 1982, Roger extended his birding range by means of a trusty drop-handle sports cycle on which he made regular day trips to Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory and sometimes as far as Cley in Norfolk where the youth hostel at Sheringham might be his overnight base. A highlight of one of these trips was his sighting of a Little Whimbrel at Blakeney on August 29, 1985.

In autumn of that year, Roger left Lincolnshire for Oxford University where he studied Geography, subsequently doing a postgraduate doctorate on movement and dispersal patterns of the Great Tit. It was also at this time that he trained to become a ringer.

After seven years in the city of spires, he was "desperate to get back to the coast" and, in 1992, he wrote to every UK bird observatory to check if any positions were available.

The only two to reply were Cape Clear and Fair Isle, and he decided to take up the offer of vacancy for assistant warden at the latter, starting on April 21, 1994.

Wardens work hard across a range of census, ringing and other duties. Monitoring the gannet colony is particularly challenging because ropes are often required to reach their nests - not quite abseiling but not far off it.

Highlights of Roger's first Fair Isle year, as assistant to Paul Harvey, included Bluethroat, Rustic Bunting and two real crackers - a Brown Flycatcher and a "magical" Paddyfield Warbler.

In subsequent years, there were more stars including Lanceolated Warbler and Pallas' Grasshopper Warbler. But Roger reckons he derived just as much pleasure from Little Bunting ("one of my favourite birds"), from seeing "carpets of Redwings in autumn" and from noting the steady annual increases in visits from Yellow-browed Warbler.

Since relocation to Shetland, home to Roger and his wife, Agnes, is at a place called the Pool of Virkie in a house which the couple were prompted to purchase partly because of its superb views and partly by what he took to be an omen on the second viewing - the spectacle of an Olive-backed Pipit rustling around among the irises in the garden!

Of Shetland's capital, Lerwick, he commented: "Like other places in Britain, it has its share of empty shops and charity shops. But you can buy a car or a boat - it has all the amenities of a big city like Horncastle!"

Nowadays, he reckons his enjoyment at "seeing" rare birds has, to some extent, been replaced by that of "finding" them.



A notable example was - a Ross's gull. "I'm not a great gull enthusiast but you can't beat a Ross's gull!"

Another, top moment came as he was driving in his van and encountered a Collared Flycatcher.

Other discoveries have included a Green-winged Teal and a Kentish plover - only the second record for Shetland.

Roger was thanked by LBC chairman Phil Espin for his witty and inspirational talk, and there was a rousing round of applause from the 57-strong audience.

**LBC chairman Phil Espin and Roger holding a copy of *Fair Island Through The Seasons* of which he is co-author**





# A TALE OF TWO OWLS - AND MORE BIRDS OF SRI LANKA

During January this year, Phil Espin visited Sri Lanka for the first time with wife Isabel, son Luke and daughter-in-law Fiona. It proved to be a memorable 10 days in which he saw more than 200 species, including some incredible rarities. Here is his account of a tale of two owls - and a great deal more!

ALTHOUGH this was not a 'hardcore' birding trip I did a fair bit of research to decide what birds I wanted to see in the limited time available to me and hired a guide recommended to me by friend Rachel Coombes, a birder from Suffolk with whom I have been on UK seabird surveys. Past experience tells me that to maximise the chances of seeing anything in a rainforest you need a good guide.



## *Egrets aplenty (Pic: Phil Espin)*

Having been to India, China and Thailand I've seen a few South Asian species already so I honed my targets down to 10 species I especially wanted to see and the endemics in the areas I would be visiting, basically the southern wet to arid lowlands characterised by Sinharaja National Wilderness Area, a UNESCO world heritage site in the south west to Yala National Park in the south east.

My reference source was the excellent 2012 Helm Bird Guide *Birds of Sri Lanka* by Deepal Warakagoda et al. This gave me a total target list of 43 species, the rarest of which was Serendib Scops Owl.

I contacted Susa Weerappuli, who Rachel had recommended, and he and Baur Travel, a Sri Lanka-based travel company put together an itinerary based on the target species I sent them.

The plan was for three days' heavy birding in Sinharaja, three days family birding/safari in

Bundala and Yala and the rest of the time travelling/ on the beach/by the pool.

Sri Lanka was a revelation. Fantastic birds, a superb guide, excellent food, friendly people, good roads, fabulous scenery and natural history. Don't understand why I hadn't been before!

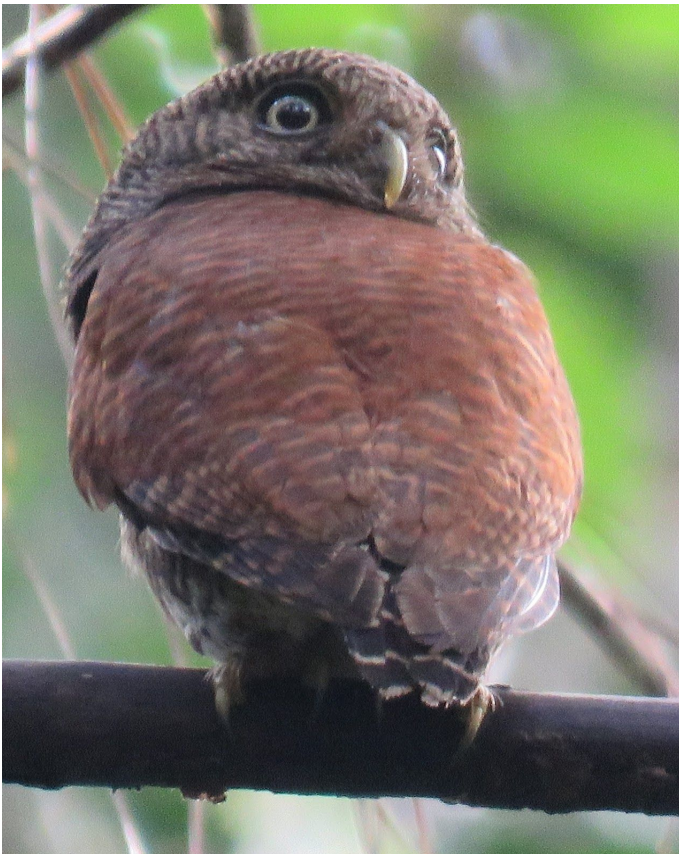
The island became a British colony in 1804 and its natural history was given a good going over by our Victorian forebears. The closest relative sharing Serendib's habitat, the Chestnut backed Owlet was described by the original 19th century giant of Indian ornithology Edward Blyth (of pipit fame) in 1846.

**The** bird to see in Sri Lanka is the enigmatic Serendib Scops Owl. Unbelievably it remained unknown to science until 23rd January 2001, just 17 years before my visit. It was the first new bird species to science discovered in Sri Lanka since 1867. I'd followed the story in the British birding press and knew it was incredibly rare (population 80) and extremely difficult to see. A nocturnal rainforest bird that calls very infrequently is never going to be easy. It is restricted to a narrow area of remaining rainforest in the wet zone of south west Sri Lanka. Although it is found in several areas of forest the largest contiguous area for it is Sinharaja. We have Thilo Hoffmann who saved the forest from logging in the 1930s, to thank for the birds continued presence and it is for him the bird is named *Otus thilohoffmanni*.

So Susa, my son, Luke, and I fetched up at the Bird's Paradise Resort about a mile from the entrance of Sinharaja NP, early afternoon 15th January and set out on what turned out to be a 12-km walk along a track along the edge of the park. It was hot, humid, up and down and as tiring a walk as I had done in a long time. We started to get to grips with a few of my target birds and had excellent views of Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill and Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot.

As the afternoon skies started to dim, we'd got as far as a garden where Susa explained the householder fed Jungle Spur fowl rice for breakfast which would be a certainty at dawn (06.00) the day after tomorrow if we didn't get them in the park tomorrow. It would however mean setting out at 04.30. We turned round and headed back and were thrilled to hear two separate Chestnut-backed Jungle Owlets calling as we walked along but in spite of Susa's efforts they didn't show.

After we returned to the road we had a further walk of 2-km uphill through a mix of plantations and rainforest. There had been plenty of tuk tuks around earlier but now there were none, so the ride I'd decided I would take as we trudged back did not happen.



Climbing up the hill, Susa, who was slightly ahead, flushed an owl off a branch about three metres to our right. I saw it land in the gloom in front of a trunk and vaguely made out a silhouette. It then moved again and we heard the distinctive krrro-krrro-krrro call of Chestnut-backed Owlet. Hanging around and listening we detected another bird calling further away to our left. Arguably tickable depending if you are Dutch or not, but plenty more time to see it and only 400m from our hotel. After some rice and curry we crashed out.

#### **Distinctive call - Chestnut-backed Owlet (*Susa Weerappuli*)**

Up at 05.30, after rice and curry for breakfast, a Jeep picked us up and took us to the park ticket office where we picked up a Forest Ranger. The park has 15 such Rangers and one must accompany all parties of visitors. They have variable skills but ours proved to be a good bird finder. You cannot book a guide, they go out on a rota basis, so no visitors no work. Susa chatted with the waiting guides, all of whom he seemed to know. We then set out in the jeep up the hill on possibly the worst jungle track I've been driven on in my life to a stake out for White-faced Starling.

We saw one bird and the guide pointed out a Sri Lanka Blue Magpie in a tree across a pool away from us. It had caught a large frog and was wedging it upside down in the fork of a tree branch. It then proceeded to eat the frog alive from its rear end relishing the frog caviar it was harvesting. A grisly sight I will not forget in a hurry. Nature red in tooth, claw and beak!

Finally, we reached the park entrance and set out on a 3.5-km trek on the Giant Nawada Tree trail. Early on the Ranger found a roosting pair of Sri Lanka Frogmouths, a superb sight. Later he picked up a male and two female Sri Lanka Spurfowl under a massive and noisy feeding party of Sri Lanka Scimitar Babblers and assorted other babblers. An early start saved tomorrow, bonus! Along came a Red-billed Malkoha, another hard to get endemic and, after about 20 mins of teasing us in the canopy, it gave exceptional views.



Looking down the slope at a small stream Susa picked up another endemic, Sri Lanka Thrush, a dark looking bird suited to the forest floor which had in the past been inexplicably lumped with White's Thrush. As we watched two more of these scaly thrushes emerged, hard to discern as they crept about in the undergrowth of the far bank of the stream.

Things were going great, then our Ranger disappeared. Susa explained he had gone off to search for a roosting Serendib Scops Owl in a nearby bamboo thicket. Anticipation mounted. Then Susa had a Spot-winged Thrush, a bird I wanted to see but got a rubbish view of. It was calling as it disappeared on foot. A low speed chase ensued through a damp forest floor churned up by wild boar. Perfect leech habitat but apart from one on my neck they weren't biting today.

No luck. We made our way back to a beautiful small rainforest river and I glanced to my right and saw a bird bathing on a bend in the stream. I raised my bins and had an excellent view of the spotty wings of a Spot-winged Thrush. The bird flew after 30 seconds or so but we relocated it in a tree perched up shaking its feathers out and preening. Crippling views and a real high! We saw four more later. Meeting up with the Ranger at a prearranged stop, we were deflated that he had not located a Serendib but there were two more stake out possibilities on the way back.

After a packed lunch, always cheese sandwiches, we set off for the Giant Nawada Tree, while the Ranger went on ahead to the next Serendib stake out. The Tree was up a steep slope but suitably large and impressive and the biggest tree in the forest. We made our way down the trail and met up with the Ranger who had lucked out again. Strike two! I have to say the rain forest was fascinating for its spiders, lizards, flowers and trees as well as the birds, but my fingers were tightly crossed for the third stake out.

The Ranger went ahead and we trudged back to the gate where we were to meet him. Eventually an hour or so later one look at his crestfallen face told me all I needed to know. It turned out he had located a roosting Serendib in a bamboo thicket but had flushed it as soon as he set eyes on it and despite extensive searching had not been able to relocate it. But hey we had a great day and I had never really expected to see it so I gave him a good tip and we returned to the Lodge for 15.00.

The day had been much less humid than yesterday and cool under the trees and despite our exertions I was ready for more a couple of hours later in the afternoon. So we repeated the previous afternoons trek but did the road bit in the van. A Green-billed Coucal was a good result but we could not relocate the two Chestnut-backed Owlets we had heard the previous evening. Returning to the spot where Susa had flushed a bird the previous evening we heard two birds calling but could not see them.

The final day at Sinharaja we'd planned breakfast at 08.00 which would have meant a good lie-in following four early starts. Did I mention the successful Indian Pitta hunt at dawn at Udawalawe the day we'd travelled to Sinharaja? Ever optimistic, Susa suggested a final try for Chestnut-backed Owl so I was up at 05.30 though Luke laid in.

We went to the spot 400-m away and again heard two birds but could not see them. Two pairs of spur fowl calling at each other from either side of the road was a cacophonous bonus but we couldn't see them either. We then set off up the track and tried the other two sites without luck but good views of a Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike was worthy compensation. Walking back down the track we bumped into a forest ranger and Susa and he exchanged words. Susa turned to me and explained he had spoken with this Ranger yesterday and asked him if he could locate a Serendib outside the park. The guy had spent all yesterday looking and had located a roosting pair only 300-m back down the track. The birds were in a tricky location and it would mean being late for breakfast and I would have to show my appreciation in the usual way but did I want to see them, Did I? Yes!

We walked swiftly back down the track to a steep slope covered in bamboo thickets. There was a vertical rock about 2-m high with a half metre wide track above it going up into the bamboo. The guide nimbly scrambled up and then pulled me and Susa up. We then inched our way up the 45 degree slope for about 50 metres when we came to a stop and the guide pointed out two horizontal bamboos about five metres away.

Susa was straight on to them but there was only one spot you could see them and he was in it! We switched places and I saw the small ball of dead leaves they were pointing at. It was around 08.00 and still quite gloomy but as I focused in I saw an alert eye staring at me.

The Serendib Scops Owl was facing me partially obscured by leaves and adjacent to it huddled against it was its mate facing in the opposite direction. What threw me was the dead dried leaf sandy-brown coloration of the feathers that came down from the crown between the eyes to just above the beak.

**Incredibly rare - Serendib Scops Owl (*Susa Weerappuli*)**



The half-oval effect looked uncannily like a dead leaf and diverted attention away from the rest of the bird. Shifting my head about I could see its pale ivory claws and half-feathered legs. Fantastic cryptic camouflage and not shown in any of the pictures and photos I'd seen up to that point. No wonder the bird was undiscovered until 2001. The thicket was massive. How the Ranger found those birds I will never know but he fully deserved the appreciation I showed.

I have often found local rainforest guides to have superhuman powers of bird detection but this one deserved the gold medal. As did Susa for putting him on the job.

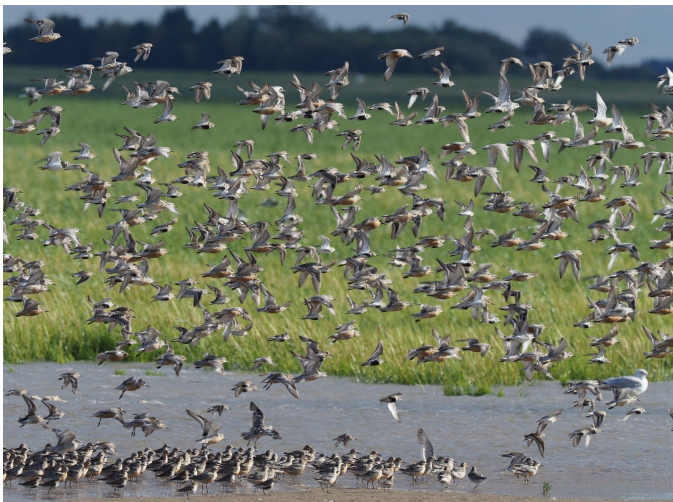
So there's my tale of two owls. The relatively common Chestnut-backed Owlet that I had marginal views of and Serendib Scops Owl, one of the rarest birds in the world that I never expected to see, though I'd dipped and then had an unforgettable look at, in the most 'serendipitous' way.

To say I was well chuffed would be an understatement. I saw all 43 of my target birds and had 73 lifers and 209 species in total plus some great mammals like leopard, jungle cat, elephants, wild water buffalo and wild boar. If you'd like a brief itinerary and list of what I saw there is one at this link.

Hopefully the reader will go away with the impression that Sri Lanka is a great birding holiday destination with a family; it is! For any trip to the tropics my number one tip is get a good guide and, for Sri Lanka, there can be none better than Susa.

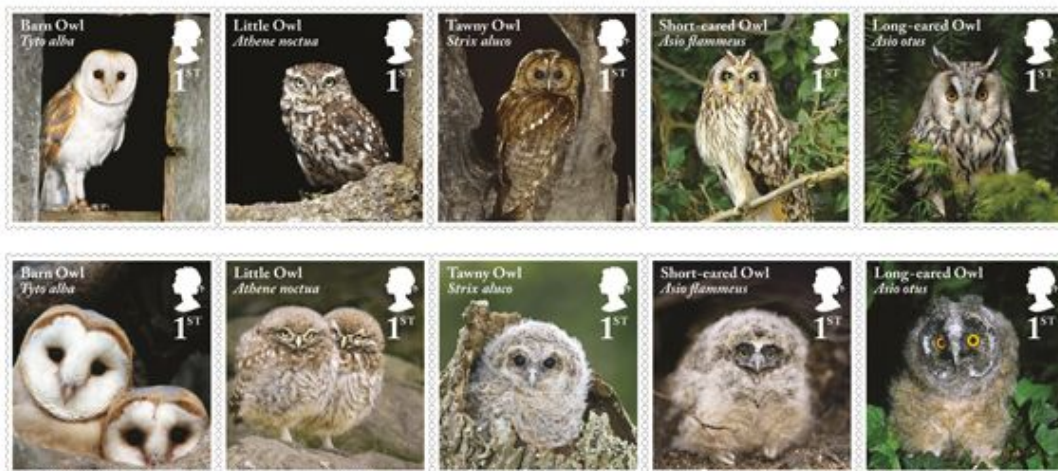
It should be said, too, that Susa is also an ace bird photographer who took the shots of the two owls on earlier trips.

He can be reached on [susabirdspotter@gmail.com](mailto:susabirdspotter@gmail.com). Ø **Phil can be followed on: Twitter @philespin**





## BUT BACK TO THE OWLS . . .



**BRITAIN'S** five species of breeding owl have received the official stamp of approval. The Royal Mail has announced that they will be set of y featured on a set of postage stamps this summer. They were due to go on sale at post offices on May 11 2018.

## AFRICAN ISLES SERVE UP A FEAST OF STUNNERS

In January this year, Phil Hyde travelled to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe with a party of eight birders, all booked on the African Bird Club conservation tour organised by Bird Quest. São Tomé and Príncipe constitute an African island nation close to the equator, and it is part of a volcano chain featuring striking rock and coral formations, rainforests and beaches. This is a periodic event arranged by one of the commercial sponsors of ABC which is a UK registered charity which raises money for conservation projects in Africa. Below is Phil's report.

Quest for endemics - from left, David Randall, one of our five guides and Marc van Bieer (*Pic: Marc van Beirs*)



OUR tour was led by Mark van Beirs, an excellent and very experienced Bird Quest leader who helped us to find 25 out of the 28 endemic species which live on these islands.

The highlight of this short trip was without a doubt the cracking observation of the only recently discovered and, as yet, undescribed 'Príncipe' Scops Owl.

The discovery of this owl is so recent that it pre-dates the organisation of the trip and was a very pleasant and unexpected bonus for all of the participants.

**Offering a wealth of exotic bird life - the two islands lie close to the Equator**



To get to grips with this owl, we had to camp for one night in the primary rainforest in the south of Príncipe. We also had one night of camping on São Tomé.

Camping out in an extremely humid equatorial rainforest with the temperature never much below 30°C was, for me, more of an endurance test than enjoyable camping, but needs must!

The biggest single bonus of these two nights out was the absence of rain, so no more complaints.

Nine tour participants convened on the afternoon of January 13 in a hotel near the airport of the island of São Tomé. The birding started the following morning on the verdant northern slopes of the massive, non-active shield volcano. We walked up from the Botanical Gardens through nice farmbrush country towards the montane forests of the Obo National Park which covers about 35 per cent of the island.

Our first endemic was spotted as soon as we got out of the minibus - an unobtrusive Príncipe Seedeater showed well. In spite of its name this unassuming species is one of the few endemics that occurs on both islands.

Soon, we encountered several endemic Island Bronze-naped Pigeons and well-camouflaged São Tomé Green Pigeons, while we flushed the distinctive local form of Lemon Dove off the trail. Good numbers of São Tomé Spinetails darted over the patches of forest and provided excellent sightings, while São Tomé Orioles whistled in the canopy, where they played hide and seek.

Both males and female São Tomé Paradise Flycatchers regularly showed very well in the mid storey and São Tomé Prinias performed their distinctive aerial displays while uttering repetitive songs. Flocks of attractive, endemic Black-capped Speiropses flitted from tree to tree, together with several unpretentious, endemic Newton's Sunbirds. Beautifully marked São Tomé Thrushes kept to the mid-canopy where São Tomé Weavers crept along branches in a nuthatch-like manner.

We found a number of Chestnut-winged Starlings of the endemic, nominate race in the highest tree crowns and were amazed to see how heavy and long their bills were compared with the mainland birds. The distinctive calls of African Emerald Cuckoos emanated through the forest, but remained a voice for now.

In late morning, we entered the forest proper, but things had quieted down and we didn't really find anything different. On our return walk we noted several Yellow-billed Kites, Laughing Doves, African Palm Swifts, Little Swift and Southern Masked Weavers. A couple of ruddy-coloured Noack's Roundleaf Bats were seen flying about in the middle of the day.

In the afternoon, we visited an area of open grassland surrounding a brackish lagoon near the northern coast. The mud (somewhat surprisingly) held Whimbrel, Common and Wood Sandpipers and a Common Greenshank. A Harlequin Quail was observed in flight, as were Red-headed Lovebirds.

The seeding grasses held an excellent selection of seed eating species in breeding plumage: Red-headed Quelea, Black-winged Red Bishop, Golden-backed Bishop, White-winged Widowbird and Pin-tailed Whydah. All of these gems were in bright breeding attire and were displaying and showing off at length.

The very smartly dressed Golden-backed Bishops, an introduced species, especially held our attention. These Angolan endemics are usually only seen in their modest non-breeding plumage on Angola tours. On returning to the hotel, we could admire dozens of African Straw-coloured Fruit-bats feeding in the flowering coconut palms.

After breakfast next day, we drove to the southeast of the island of São Tomé skirting the palm-dotted coast. The scenic drive took us past beautiful bays and rocky promontories. A stop at a sandy beach produced both white and dark morphs of Western Reef Heron and a cracking Malachite Kingfisher of the distinctive São Tomé race.



Not much further an impressive two-metre long black snake was slithering on a muddy verge. Until recently, it was thought that the “cobra preta” (black snake) had been introduced from the mainland, but herpetologists have now decided that this snake is a São Tomé endemic, bearing the name Sao Tome Cobra (*Naja peroescobari*).

Eventually, we drove inland through a large oil palm plantation until we reached the trailhead at the southern edge of the Obo National Park. In the distance we could admire the dramatic needle-shaped Pico Cão Grande which rises to over 300 metres above the surrounding terrain.

While the porters and the guide organised the tents, food and water, we observed several elegant White-tailed Tropicbirds overhead and noted a couple of rare Sao Tome Olive Pigeons in flight, showing off their obvious yellow bill and dark maroon plumage. We also obtained good looks at a couple of Sao Tome Orioles before we started hiking up the forested hills.

It was quite hard work and rather sweaty business as there was no real trail, but the walk took us through beautiful, quite open primary forest. After two-and-a-half hours of slogging, we reached the open, flat campsite in a splendid tract of forest. We recovered from the hike, drank coffee and paused for a while in the heat of the day.

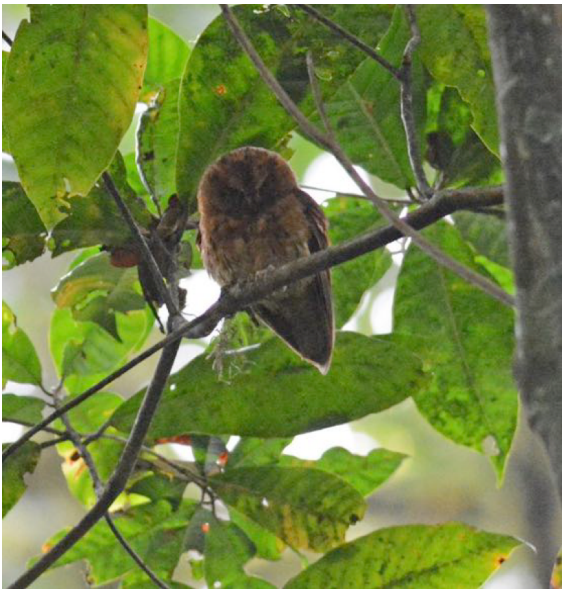
Later, while the crew started erecting the tents, we explored the surroundings. At the base of a rather steep streambed we heard the high-pitched calls of the endemic São Tomé Shorttail, and soon we all managed great looks at this unusual-looking critter, which is now believed to belong in the pipit family. Its gait on the forest floor, or even on low

branches, definitely reminded us of a pipit. We flushed a São Tomé Ibis from the forest floor, but only obtained rather brief looks. A São Tomé Scops Owl started calling nearby and was whistled in for excellent views. The scope revealed

all the details of a rufous morph of this tiny endemic nocturnal creature. The attractive Giant Begonias, which can reach three metres of height, drew our attention here.

We enjoyed our camp spaghetti dinner and spent a rather rough and uncomfortable night, as the mattresses were a bit too thin. Throughout the night several São Tomé Scops Owls serenaded us. This was the first of our two owls. There are no other night birds on either island.

#### **Serenaded by São Tomé Scops Owl (Pic: Nik Borrow)**



We flew mid-morning from São Tomé northeast to the not very distant, much smaller island of Príncipe. On landing, we transferred to the famous Bom Bom Resort at the northernmost tip, where we prepared for our bout of camping in the hill forests of southern Príncipe.

At the resort, we obtained good looks at a Malachite Kingfisher (of the distinctive Príncipe race). We then boarded a fair-sized canoe that took us south along the west side of the island. On the journey we could admire the fantastic scenery with the many, often virtually inaccessible tepui-like peaks and wondered what other wonders Príncipe might harbour.

The famous Pico Mesa (Table Mountain) showed well through the haze and in mid-afternoon we reached a secluded rocky beach where we disembarked. We were met by our local guide and several porters and set off into the foothills of the National Park. We had to cross a fair-sized river, where slippery rocks underfoot caused a bit of a delay, but soon walked through fine-looking open primary forest where Blue-breasted

Kingfishers were calling.

The further inland we moved, the larger the trees became and in late afternoon we reached “Philippe’s” campsite, where Belgian ornithologist Philippe Verbelen discovered a new, endemic Scops Owl in July 2016. Only three Western birders and a few researchers had ever seen this undescribed night bird, so after pitching camp, we played the only

existing tape of the owl. Before long, there was a strong response and eventually we all managed brilliant views of this cute-looking species perched not too far above us. Glorious moments! The bird was a rufous-brown morph and showed its bright yellow eyes well. Another two birds were heard calling nearby. We were obviously the first ever bird tour group to lay eyes on this beauty! The bird is being described at the moment, so the official name will soon become available. Tired and very happy we returned to our tents and slept well, as we had doubled the number of mattresses!

**The newly discovered “Príncipe” Scops Owl which has yet to be named formally (Pic: Marc van Beirs)**



On our final morning we observed lots of Timneh Parrots flying about in the gardens and obtained excellent scope views of endemic Principe Starlings, sitting side by side with the rather lookalike Splendid Starlings. The different colour of the breast and the difference in size was quite easy discernible. We also had very nice looks at a pair of Dohrn's Thrush-Babblers. A beautifully coloured, endemic Elegant Worm Snake (genus *Typhlops*) showed very well near the reception. Our mid-morning flight to São Tomé was delayed for several hours because of inclement weather, so it was after lunch when we finally boarded the plane. Upon arrival at São Tomé, our ways parted.

The islands are reached via a flight to Lisbon, followed by touch-down in Accra (Ghana).

This is an abridged version of the original trip report authored by Marc van Beirs, to whom grateful thanks are due. If anyone is interested in the full report, contact me on [philhyde55@gmail.com](mailto:philhyde55@gmail.com).

This successful tour yielded £2,000 for the conservation fund of the African Bird Club.

Ø Phil can be followed on: Twitter @PhilOpus

## CYPRUS BIRD-TRAPPER STUNG WITH HEAVY FINE

FEWER songbirds than in previous years have been shot or trapped so far this spring on the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus.

That is the encouraging update from the Bonn-based Komitee gegen den Vogelmord (Committee Against Bird Slaughter) whose volunteers are at the forefront of efforts to stop the illegal killing.

Says Chief Executive Alexander Heyd: "So far, this spring is the quietest we have experienced in the Mediterranean for the last 20 years. The tendency for poaching to diminish in response to our presence at the key hotpot areas is more apparent than ever."

However, incidents are still occurring, so there is no complacency from Alexander and his team who are based at seasonal 'bird protection camps'

He continues: On the main island of Malta, it was quieter than ever. "There were hardly any kills of protected species and only two active trapping nets were found - one trapper was arrested. A hunter was filmed shooting a Turtle Dove and images of the incident picked up by national media.

"On the small neighbouring island of Gozo, a CABS team conducted field investigations together with police and the nature conservation authority. We closed 18 illegal trapping sites: seven cage traps for Turtle Doves, one cage trap for Starlings, seven small cages for finches and three Quail nets.



“In total, 10 Turtle Doves, eight Starlings, two Quails, one Greenfinch and one Hawfinch were released.”

According to the committee, there have also been fewer poachers on Cyprus than last year - not least because of the deterrent effect after one was fined 8,000 Euros after having been arrested in the possession of being 87 limesticks

Says Alexander: “Many birds had been caught on his sticky traps. Thankfully, 28 of them - for instance, warblers, a Black Redstart and a Wryneck - could be released immediately. Since mid-March, we have found 141 limesticks and six nets in Cyprus. By way of comparison, during the spring operation of 2017, there were 1,800 limesticks and 19 nets across the six-week operation!”

The committee has now turned its focus to Southern Italy with operations on the islands of Ponza and Ischia and on the Sorrento peninsula plus the Strait of Messina.

The aim at these locations is to halt the illegal killing of Whinchat, Common Redstart, Wheatear, Quail, Turtle Dove and Honey Buzzard.





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