

OSME News

Geoff Welch

OSME Summer Meeting, Saturday 16 July 2011

After last year's Middle Eastern weather, things were 'back to normal' for this year's Summer Meeting and AGM with overcast skies and torrential downpours! However, the programme of talks took the audience of 44 members and guests to the four corners of the OSME region. The first speaker was Phil Cannings (Plate 1) who gave an overview of his work advising on the development of a protected areas network in northern Cyprus. This has involved everything from identifying sites and developing the relevant legislation to preparing management plans and increasing local capacity through training staff and providing facilities and equipment. Seven priority sites have been identified and six are now officially protected. All bar one are coastal areas, the exception being the Kyrenia mountains site which is important for breeding raptors and is the only site in the EU where Egyptian Fruit Bats *Rousettus aegyptiacus* are found. Compared with most other coastal areas in the Mediterranean, the beaches of northern Cyprus are still

little developed and so most are very rich botanically and three of the selected sites are important turtle nesting areas. Because of its location, northern Cyprus is very important for migrating birds, especially in autumn, and the island has two endemic species, Cyprus Warbler *Sylvia melanothorax* and Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cyprica*, both of which are relatively common and widespread. Phil's work is ongoing with the next stages being the recruitment and training of additional staff, implementation of management plans and legislation and the integration of the plans into the wider planning process to ensure that Cyprus's important species and habitats are protected for future generations to enjoy.

From the Mediterranean, the focus shifted to the north with a talk by Jeff Gordon on the Manych wetlands and Caucasus area of Russia. Technically speaking, the Manych wetlands are just outside the OSME region but the area is of outstanding importance as a migration stopover site and wintering area for many birds either breeding or passing through the region. The wetlands are best known as an important stopover site for



Plate 1. Speakers at the 2011 OSME Summer Meeting, left to right: Geoff Welch, Phil Cannings, Guy Kirwan, Sal Cooke, Jeff Gordon and Andrew Lassey. © Ian Harrison/OSME

Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius*, with over 2000 birds recorded in 2009. However, Jeff also gave the audience a taste of the many other species using the site. Wintering wildfowl include 30 000 Greater White-fronted *Anser albifrons* and 1000 Red-breasted Geese *Branta ruficollis*, 4000 Scaup *Aythya marila* and up to 5000 White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala*, while breeding species include 2000 pairs of Red-crested Pochards *Netta rufina*, 200 pairs of Demoiselle Cranes *Anthropoides virgo*, Little Bustards *Tetrax tetrax*, Pallas's *Larus ichthyæetus*, Slender-billed *Chroicocephalus genei* and Mediterranean Gulls *L. melanocephalus* (20 000+) and over 100 000 Rose-coloured Starlings *Pastor roseus*! Very large numbers of waders pass through in spring and autumn and Black-winged Pratincoles *Glareola nordmanni* can be very numerous with, on one occasion, a flock of 22 000 birds. In contrast to the wetlands, Jeff also spoke briefly about the Caucasus region which includes the Elbruz mountains, the highest in Europe. Specialities of the region include Caucasian Grouse *Lyrurus mlokosiewiczii*, Caspian *Tetraogallus caspius* and Caucasian Snowcocks *T. caucasicus*, Guldensadt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus* and Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*. Four species of vulture and five of eagle breed and the area is important for raptor migration. For the visiting birdwatcher, accessing the high tops is relatively straightforward thanks to a ski lift which takes you to over 3000 m.

The first speaker of the afternoon was Guy Kirwan who gave a fascinating presentation on the taxonomy of Socotran birds. Because of its extreme age, over 37 million years, Socotra has a very high level of endemism, with almost 50% of the island's 825 species of plant being unique, and its avifauna has a pronounced Afrotropical influence. Prior to the OSME expedition to the island in 1993, Socotra was little known and, of its birds, 6 species and 12, possibly 13, subspecies were considered endemic with the status of the Socotran Buzzard unclear. Nowadays, thanks to a combination of studies looking at morphology, vocalisations and genetics, it is accepted that Socotra has at least 10 endemic species and 4 endemic sub-species. The major changes as the result of these studies are that Socotra Buzzard *Buteo socotraensis*, Socotra

Scops Owl *Otus socotranus*, Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* and Abd al Kuri Sparrow *Passer hemileucus* are all now confirmed as valid species. The precise taxonomy of Socotra Cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus*, and the subspecies (?) of Somali Starling *Onychognathus blythii* and Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* on the island have still to be finalised. Many questions remain to be answered though. For instance what are the precise affinities of the scops owl? It sounds very similar to Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* from India but genetically is close to Seychelles Scops Owl *O. insularis*.

The fourth speaker of the day was Geoff Welch who stood in at very short notice for Rob Sheldon who was unable to attend. Geoff gave a brief account of the work of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL) in promoting the hima protected area concept as a viable alternative to official protected areas. The hima approach is based around sustainable management of natural resources by local communities. The approach dates back more than 1500 years and was widespread in the Arabian peninsula and lands bordering the Red sea. SPNL is promoting the hima approach at six Important Bird Areas (IBAs) covering a range of habitats from mountain forests to marine areas. An important element of the approach is the direct involvement of local community members throughout the process, from planning to implementation. Because community members have a direct stake in the site and receive direct benefits from successful management both protection and management should be sustainable. As the resources for the management of official protected areas become scarcer, it is important that conservationists develop alternative means of financing and managing sites and the hima approach has great potential for achieving this.

The final presentation of the day was a double act by Sal Cooke and Andrew Lassey on ornithological research in Kazakhstan. Andrew gave a resume of ornithology in the country and the important role played by the Institute of Zoology in Almaty. Many of the great names associated with species found in the region worked there—Peter Simon Pallas (gull, sandgrouse, warbler), EA

Eversmann (redstart, pale-backed pigeon), Nikolai Zarudny (numerous sub-species) and NA Severtzov (tit warbler) to name but a few. In 1946 over 300 scientists were employed in the Zoological Section of the Institute, today there are less than 10 many of whom are working in a voluntary capacity as there is no money to pay them and facilities are either totally lacking or extremely basic. The skins collection is in a particularly poor condition with no suitable storage facilities. Despite these hardships, research is continuing and the skins collection has played a key role in unravelling the Turkestan/ Daurian Shrike *Lanius isabellinus/phoenicuroides* complex, splitting Booted Warbler *Iduna caligata/rama* into two species, separating Pale Martin from Sand Martin *Riparia diluta/riparia* and ongoing studies of the Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* and Asian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella cheleensis* complexes. OSME has recently coordinated an international effort to provide the Institute with suitable specimen boxes which were surplus to requirements at the Natural History Museum, Tring; a small but significant start to safeguarding this unique resource. Sal then took over and gave a characteristically enthusiastic and humorous account of the practicalities of participating in an ornithological expedition to Kazakhstan. The hardships—a bed, privacy, ensuite facilities—dream on! The opportunity to see and compare *Phylloscopus* warblers such as Greenish *P. viridanus* and Hume's *P. humei* side by side. The stunning Himalayan Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis* makes Siberian *L. calliope* look dull! But most importantly, the breathtaking landscapes, the sheer number of birds at some sites and the camaraderie and dedication of the other expedition members.

During the AGM, held immediately after lunch, the following changes to the Society's Council were noted and approved. Richard Prior and Chris Lamsdell ended their terms of office and Richard Bonser resigned during the year due to pressure of work. All were thanked for their contributions to the running of OSME. After being co-opted in February, Helen Demopoulos was elected on to Council.

OSME would like to thank the British Trust for Ornithology, and especially staff members Dawn Balmer and Nick Moran, for

allowing the Society use of the facilities of The Nunnery for the day's meeting.

The social dinner after the meeting was a great success and OSME seemed to have taken over the Dolphin for the evening. It was good to see so many people there taking the opportunity of renewing old friendships and making new ones. Nick Moran's bird walk on the following day, Sunday, was a new departure and again was very successful. Those who participated had good views of Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus* and Woodlark *Lullula arborea*, Breckland specialities, although the weather was a little too windy to get good views of Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*.

Further changes to Around the Region compilers

Dawn Balmer has recently stood down as co-compiler of Around the Region, a role she has carried out since 2001. OSME would like to take this opportunity to thank Dawn for the tremendous amount of time and effort that she has put into compiling this important feature of each issue of *Sandgrouse*. Andrew Grieve has taken over the A-K section. Luckily we will not be losing Dawn's knowledge and enthusiasm completely as she has kindly agreed to continue to compile News & Information.

News from the Bird Fair 2011

The 2011 Bird Fair was a great success for OSME, giving us a chance to catch up with members, many of whom are resident outside of the UK, promote OSME's work, give talks on recent bird research and take part in the annual Bird Brain of Britain quiz. This year the OSME stand was situated next to Birdwatch Turkey in Marquee 6, giving us a chance to talk more with our Turkish colleagues. Amongst new people visiting the stand was David Lindo, author of *The Urban Birder*, who decided to join (Plate 2).

There were several important talks given at the Bird Fair based on work carried out within the OSME region: the first by Dr Azzam Alwash from Nature Iraq about the fantastic work to restore the marshes of southern Iraq; the second on 'Visiting the Celestial Mountains', a talk on the birds and



Plate 2. Nick Moran (left) with David Lindo, new OSME member, at Bird Fair 2011. © John Warr

culture of Kazakhstan by Andrew Lassey and Sal Cooke (OSME members); and the third by Rob Sheldon from RSPB (and OSME Council member) on the migration journeys of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius*. All of these talks were informative and inspirational, showing the importance of this region for bird conservation.

OSME came a very close second in the annual Bird Brain of Britain quiz, winning £500 thanks to Oscar Campbell, a long-standing member of OSME. His specialist subject was 'Breeding Birds in the UAE'. There was also a game where members of the public could win an OSME wrist-band by correctly matching a selection of the special birds of the OSME region with the countries they breed in—a fun way of making people aware just how important the OSME region is for bird conservation.

If you would like to help at the OSME stand at the 2012 Bird Fair, please contact events@osme.org. (Contributed by Helen Demopoulos)

OSME Raffle 2011 and 2012

The winners of the 2011 raffle to raise funds for the Conservation and Research Fund were:

- 1st prize H Brown—Opticron Imagic BGA SE 8x42 binoculars (value £419)
- 2nd prize D Marshall—Naturetrek voucher for £250
- 3rd prize John Warr—Country Innovations New Venture Waistcoat (value £65)
- 4th prize Andy Musgrove—Birdguides Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic (value £75)
- 5th prize G Ridley—Birdguides BBi: British Birds interactive (value £75)
- 6th prize A Cotton—Helm Reed and Bush Warblers (value £65)

Congratulations to all of the winners, thanks to the sponsors for generously donating the prizes and thanks to everyone who purchased tickets.

We are running the raffle again this year and the proceeds will go towards conservation work on White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala* in Central Asia. Tickets are enclosed—so try your luck and support OSME!

OSME Summer Meeting and AGM 2012

Following the success of last year's Summer Meeting, the 2012 meeting and AGM will again be held at the BTO Headquarters, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU on Saturday 7 July. There is ample free parking. The bus station is about 10 minutes walk away, and the railway station 15 minutes. Road access is via the A11 London–Norwich road, connecting with the A14 from the north and Midlands. Trains operate regular services on the Birmingham–Norwich line, and also to Cambridge and London Kings Cross. Full details of the day are given in the enclosed programme.