

January 2011 This year, I am making s my monthly accounts shorter and only including highlights that I can illustrate.

This winter, one species has been high on the 'tick' list of every naturalist – the **Waxwing**. The superb portrait on the **right** were taken by my nephew, **Paul Rusher** who lives in **Suffolk**. However, more on those later.

By contrast, although less picturesque but of great interest was a bug (**Hemiptera**) that I found on our stairs on the **4th January**. As I could not identify it from any of my field guides, I e-mailed the photo to Ray Barnett of the Bristol Museum who identified it immediately as *Leptoglossus occidentalis* – a **Western Conifer Seed Bug**.



It is native to the **USA** which was introduced into Europe in **1999** and has since spread across southern England. The species has been recorded with increasing frequency in the **Bristol** area of late. This specimen may have entered our house looking for a place to hibernate.

9th January – another clear day forecast, so Sally and I drove over to Wales to visit the ponds at Goldcliff, near Newport.



The light was excellent and the birds resting on the islands – the tide had just turned and was on the ebb when we arrived – stood out sharp and clear. Between 500 and 1000 **Dunlin** lined the edge of one main island (see **above**). Also present were a half a dozen **Golden Plover** and a 1-200 **Lapwings**. **Mallard**, several **Pintail** and **Teal** were present on the pools.

Right: Pintail heading out into the **River Severn**. This species is the 'grey hound' of the duck world! On this occasion, I took my **Canon 300mm f2.8 IS** lens and had the B converter in my pocket.



As it was such a nice day, we cut our visit to the RSPB's reserve at Newport in favour of driving up to Llandeusan because Sally had never visited the **Red Kite** feeding station. We arrived with 10 minutes to spare. As usual, soon the sky was filled with these agile scavengers but they seemed reluctant to feed until some time after the meat scraps had been scattered in the central enclosure. By this time, the clear sky had given way to an enormous thundery shower cloud, and the light deteriorated for photography.



These pictures were taken while the sun was still gleaming through gaps in the cloud. **Red Kites** are being seen with increasing frequency in the Bristol area, but when will they nest in **Avon**.



However, there is no shortage of **Buzzards**, Indeed, the area around Bristol is virtually saturated with the species. According to the local authority on **Buzzards**, there is hardly any more room for further pairs to set up territories and breed around **Bristol**. The bird on the left is a Welsh one waiting patiently for food to be delivered for the '**Kites**'.

The **11th January** promised to be a beautifully clear day and so I spent the morning at **Slimbridge**. The Winter had brought in more **Bewick's Swans** than the Trust had seen since around 1990. Most of those had dispersed and would only come in to be fed during the late afternoon. The tide was also out, therefore there was little of interest on **the Dumbles**. However, the wet pastures in front of the hides were well stocked with wildfowl.

I took my **Canon 500mm f 4** to see if I could pick up any attractive flight shots. Again, the sharp low light meant good exposures and high shutter speed which are factors that operate in the photographers favour. A session in one of the hides proved to be very productive.

Right: Grey-lag Geese relocating.



Right: I seemed to have noticed a lot of **Pintail** this winter, and there were several flying backwards and forwards in front of the hide.





Above: Part of a flock of **Wigeon** settling onto the pool in front of the hide.

Right: And another party approaching splashdown – two drakes are whistling.

There were around 1500 **Wigeon** on the grounds, all busily grazing the pastures which are especially managed for them and the geese. The drakes are very attractive birds, with their rusty-red heads, yellow foreheads and pink breasts. And, as the photograph at the top shows, they have a striking wing pattern. If the light catches the drake's head in a certain way, the ear coverts have a green sheen as the centre bird on the picture **below** shows.





Left: A pair of **Wigeon** doing what **wigeon** do! Grazing. Unfortunately, they are in shadow. However, the fine details of the drake's plumage show up.



Left: A smart drake **Pochard** with a gleaming **scarlet** eye. Where has this bird come from? Russia perhaps? Some of them undertake quite long annual migrations to escape the hard northern winters. Most of the females travel even further south into France.



Part of a large flock of **Lapwings**, their wing coverts showing well and justifying one of the names that the species used to be called, namely the **Green Plover**.

The **20th January** proved to be a red letter day. Fed up with not having seen any **Waxwings** this winter, I chased up a report that a few birds were still being seen in **North Vew, Redland**. With clear a clear sky and brilliant sunshine, I took my **Canon 500mm** and lurked around the top of the road and within 10 minutes **8 Waxwings** appeared. For several minutes, they perched on top of a large tree where they preened and sunned themselves before disappearing over the roof tops.



Going, going, gone! Half of the small flock in Redland before they flew off.



At least, it was a reasonable view of a species that I had never seen in **Bristol**.

On the **Bristol Ornithological Club's** website, I had noticed that a **Bittern** had been seen on **Backwell Lake**. I had never visited this nature reserve on the edge of the village so I drove over to it in the afternoon. Within 15 minutes of arriving, I had taken the photograph **below** with my 500mm lens of the bird as it launched from a reed bed that fringed the lake. A few days later, it was published in the **Western Daily Press**.





I was very lucky to obtain this series of photographs of this **Bittern**. As with so many things, I happened to be in the right place, with the right lens at the right time. Furthermore, with the sun, low in the sky and behind me, the light was excellent.



It flew across the water in front of me to the island in the centre of the lake, where it took refuge in the reeds.





23rd January. Wetlands and Wildfowl Trust reserve at Slimbridge.

Good to look at and good to eat! On the left, a cock **Ring-necked Pheasant** strutting his stuff in front of one of the hides. But he had a rival.

Right: The second bird crowed and rushed towards the cock pictured above, which made a rapid exit from the field into the hedgerow. Note: Both birds had quite a lot of white on their crowns. Cock **Pheasants** are, without doubt, handsome birds. We have the **Romans** to thanks for introducing this Asian species to **Great Britain**.

Below: **Wigeon** settle onto the wet pasture to feed.





By the time I arrived, it was high tide and the flock of **Lapwings** were joined by about 1000 **Dunlin** (above). The **Canada Geese** were also very active.

Below and right: A noisy gaggle of **Canada Geese** wing their way across a mass of feeding **Wigeon**.



Like **Pheasants**, these were introduced into **Europe**, but unlike them, are supposed to make indifferent eating.

Although it clouded over at lunchtime, I visited **Ham Wall** on the **Somerset Levels** to find the **Great White Egrets** or **Hérons** which have appeared on the **RSPB's** reserve.



It was a pretty miserable afternoon – dull with a chill wind – but using my **Canon 300mm f2.8 lens**, did manage to ‘snap’ in ‘long-shot’ possibly 5 out of the 6 birds. Should they stay in the area, there is a real possibility that they will attempt to nest.



This bird was colour-ringed. I e-mailed the photograph to the warden, **Steve Hughes**, who thought that it was one that had already been recorded on the levels. It was ringed at **Besne, Briere, Loire Atlantique** on **6th May 2009**. It seems that it is a very well travelled bird, flying from **France** to **Lancashire** (**24 Sept 2009**), then to **Wales** and **Gloucester**. It was finally reported in **Somerset** at **Catcott** on **27 April 2010**.

I stayed to witness the great **Starling** roost. Sure enough, the sky was filled them. It was reassuring that there were so many of this declining species within range of the levels to appear in such numbers. The light was not conducive for photography by the time they arrived and as there



were none of the spectacular aerobatics that the masses of birds often perform, I did not mind.



Left: A swirl of **Starlings** as they drop into the reeds.

In wide angle, you see the mass of birds already perched either on reed stubble or at the base of the stems. The sheer weight of them would certainly have caused the reeds to flatten (see **below**). I had the **Canon 50D** set on **2000 ASA** for the cropped shot below when it was really dark.



Time to go **Waxwing** hunting again. After a futile visit to the far side of **Bristol** on the **27th**, **Sally** and I visited the **Waitrose** car park in **Henleaze** where there had been reports of a flock of 11. The conditions were not particularly good, I kept a vigil sitting in the car in the car park, Sally went inside the supermarket to get a few things and she spotted the birds, while at the checkout, in one of the ornamental trees on the side of the main road outside the shop. Until she alerted me, I had been

oblivious to their presence to the rear of our car!

It looked as though the tree had already been stripped of fruit. However the birds – only a few yards from us – were nibbling at the ends of the stalks (**left**).



This was the first time that **Sally** had seen this extraordinary looking species. So neat, you never see a tatty one. Although at the time, I thought that I had captured a perfect portrait, only when I transferred the images did I discover that its head was slightly obscured (see **below**).



If only the sun had been out and the sky other than peak white, the images would have been that much better. However that was to change, because the next day, I returned to **Waitrose** with my **500mm**.



28th January. Waxwings were in evidence as soon as I arrived in **Henleaze**. This was the first time that I had seen them perching on a TV aerial. There are 8 on this arm and another 3 on a adjacent aerial. They alternately perched on it and a tall elm tree beside **Waitrose's** car park. Just after 10.00hrs, they flew off and there was no sign of them again until 11.45. By then, the sun was occasionally shining and a few birds descended onto a **Rowan** tree by the **Christian Science Church**. Luckily, I was parked opposite it and fired off a few shots before a passing bus spooked them.

Below: The nearest I got to the classical **Waxwing** picture of one swallowing a berry (see page 1)





Left: The birds had already stripped the tree of berries except for those at the base which overhung the pavement.

Right: The **Waxwings** had barely settled before they were scared off by the traffic in this busy road. The bird on which I had focussed and of which I had a clear view snatched a berry or two then it was away over the houses.

However, my modest collection of pictures is as nothing when compared with the super photographs taken by my nephew, **Paul Rusher**, in **Suffolk**. He came across a flock feeding on rotten Russet apples in good light and close to the road on which he was travelling. The remaining **Waxwing** photos are his.



I wrote the following article for **The Link**, our **Parish Magazine**.

These charismatic birds, mostly from the forests of **Siberia** came in thousands and spread to every corner of mainland Britain. Most years, a few turn up, usually in Scotland but the small flocks rarely penetrate far from the east coast. However, every now and again, these birds 'irrupt' from their normal winter haunts in **Russia** and **Scandinavia** to cross the North Sea. **Waxwings** breed in the northern forests that border the tundra where they thrive on the abundant midges and mosquitoes. Then,



in autumn the birds turn almost exclusively to berries. Their appetite is heroic, consuming between

two and three times their weight in **Rowan, Rose hips** and other sorts of fruit each day. They are specialists at digesting berry pulp; their intestines are very short and they have relatively huge livers, perhaps for dealing with the toxins that many berries contain. The pips pass through unharmed and may emerge like a string of pearls, each one covered with a shiny, mucilaginous coat. In a normal year, these birds are able to find all the food they need to survive the frigid northern winters without



having to leave the continental mainland. However, every now and again, often following a good breeding season, the berry crops on which they depend fail. When this situation coincides with a hard winter, the **Waxwings** fly west to raid the berry laden bushes and trees in the **UK**. When this happens, they are often not difficult to find because our gardens and parks are often full of berry-bearing plants and just what the birds are looking for. I saw my first



Waxwings during the **Winter of 1965/66** in the middle of **Colchester** when a few birds dropped into my parents back garden to feed on *Cotoneaster* berries. Thankfully, so many **Waxwings** invaded the **UK** this year that decent numbers even arrived in **Bristol** around Christmas. By now, these smart refugees will be heading back to Siberia, fuelled by our berry crop.

And why **Waxwings**? Their inner wing feathers are tipped red as though dipped in sealing wax. Their scientific name is *Bombycilla* which means 'silken tail' refers to the bright yellow tips of the tail feathers.





And by way of finishing off the month, a cock **Brambling** turned up on the frosty lawn to feed with the **Chaffinches**. I had not seen them in the garden since the first few days of **January** when I photographed 3 together.



A small moth that turned up on our front door on the **4th January**.

This month our photovoltaics generated **67.38 Kw/hrs** (**40** and **27.38** from our two panels).

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