



TOP 100 BIRDING SITES OF THE WORLD

DOMINIC COUZENS



B L O O M S B U R Y

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OF THE WORLD

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B L O O M S B U R Y
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Page 1: Scarlet-headed Blackbird
in Brazil Page 2: Osprey in Finland





CONTENTS

Introduction		8	Malaysia	Taman Negara	82
Nomenclature		11		Gomantong Caves	85
EUROPE		12	Bhutan	Limithang Road	88
			Indonesia	Bogani Nani Wartabone	91
			Philippines	Katanglad Mountains	94
			Sri Lanka	Sinharaja Forest	97
			China	Mai Po	100
				Liaoning	103
				Beidaihe	105
				Wolong	108
			Russia	Lena Delta	111
				Ussuriland	114
			Japan	Arasaki	117
Britain	North Norfolk	14	AFRICA		120
	The Outer Hebrides	17			
France	The Camargue	20	Morocco	Merzouga	122
	Organbidexka Col Libre	23	Mauritania	Banc D'Arguin	125
	Lac du Der-Chantecoq	25	Senegal	Djoudj	128
The Netherlands,			The Gambia	Gambia River	131
Germany & Denmark	Waddensee	27	Gabon	Ivindo	134
Spain	Coto Doñana	30	Ethiopia	Bale Mountains	137
	Extremadura	33	Kenya	Rift Valley Lakes	140
Italy	Po Delta	36	Tanzania	Serengeti	143
Norway	Varanger Peninsula	38	Namibia	Western Caprivi Strip	146
Sweden	Falsterbo	41	Uganda	Bwindi	149
Finland	Oulu	44	Malawi	Dzalanyama	152
Iceland	Lake Myvatn	47	Zambia	Bangweulu Swamps	154
Estonia	Matsalu Bay	50	South Africa	Sir Lowry's Pass	157
Poland	Bialowieza Forest	53		Mkhuze	160
Slovakia & Poland	High Tatras	56	Madagascar	Andasibe	163
Romania & Ukraine	Danube Delta	59		Spiny Forest	166
			Indian Ocean	Seychelles	169
ASIA		62			
Israel	Eilat	64			
UAE	Dubai	67			
Kazakhstan	Korgalzhyn	70			
Turkey	Pontic Alps	73			
India	Keoladeo Ghana	76			
	Goa	79			



AUSTRALASIA

172

Australia	Strzelecki Track	174
	Lamington	177
	New South Wales pelagic	179
	Kakadu	182
	Queensland Wet Tropics	184
New Caledonia	Rivière Bleue	187
New Zealand	Stewart Island	190
Papua New Guinea	Tari Valley	193
Fiji	Taveuni	196

ANTARCTICA

198

Subantarctic Islands	South Georgia	200
-----------------------------	---------------	-----

SOUTH AMERICA

204

Peru	Manu	206
	Abra Patricia	209
Colombia	Santa Marta	212
Ecuador	Galapagos Islands	214
	Tandayapa	217
Brazil	Pantanal	220
	Serra da Canastra	223
	Manaus	225
Argentina & Brazil	Iguassu Falls	228
Argentina	Ushuaia	231
Venezuela	La Escalera	234
	Los Llanos	236
Chile	Lauca	239

CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

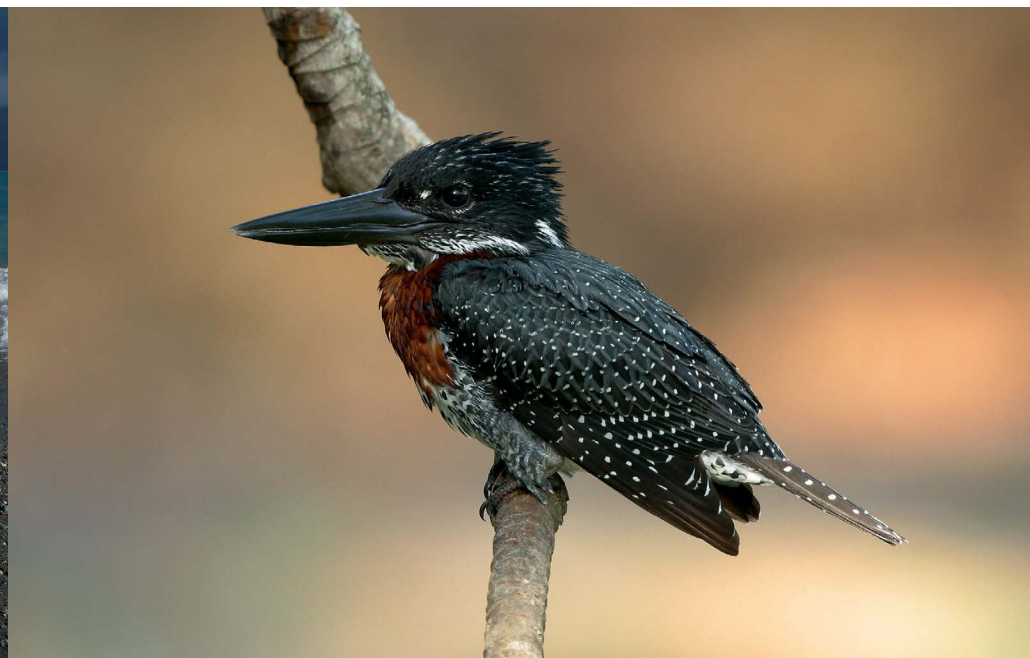
242

Guatemala	Tikal	244
Panama	Canopy Tower	247
Costa Rica	Monteverde	250
Mexico	San Blas	253
	Veracruz river of raptors	255
Trinidad & Tobago	Asa Wright Centre	258
Cuba	Zapata Swamp	261

NORTH AMERICA

264

USA	Bosque del Apache	266
	Monterey Bay	269
	Prairie Potholes	271
	Chiricahua Mountains	274
	Rio Grande Valley	277
	Olympic Peninsula	280
	Snake River	283
	Yellowstone	286
	Pribilof Islands	289
	Cape May	292
	Hawk Mountain	295
	High Island	298
	Everglades	301
	Alaka'i wilderness	304
USA & Canada	Niagara Falls	307
Canada	Point Pelee	310
	Churchill	313
Bibliography		316
Index		316



■ *Right: Andean Cock-of-the-rock is one of more than 1,000 bird species so far logged at the biodiversity hot-spot of Manu in Peru.*



Introduction

This book is a celebration of the world of birds, from the vast flocks of flamingos in the Great Rift Valley and the seabird colonies of Britain to the ‘river of raptors’ in Mexico and New Guinea’s birds-of-paradise. Through the description of 100 of the world’s top birding sites it gives an overall view of the variety and abundance of birds on this planet, something that I hope will delight and inspire readers. It is, therefore, essentially an aspirational book. It should not, as such, be taken as a site guide from which you can plot your way to see a huge number of species, although you can use it for this purpose. Instead, it is an introduction to what birds are found where on Earth, and to where one might have the greatest experiences looking for them.

The 100 sites are fairly evenly divided between the continents in order to offer a fair spread of sites around the world. Each site has its own mini-chapter, with a description of the place, the habitat it encompasses, what birds occur there and, overall, why it is included in the book. Hopefully, the uniqueness of each place will come across, and the descriptions of what is found there will go well beyond a banal list of what has been recorded. I have been sparing in details about how to get there and where to stay because, as mentioned above, this is not a ‘where to watch’ guide in the usual sense. There are plenty of books that tell you that sort of information, and most of these are listed in the bibliography.

The book will stand or fall on the places it includes, and I expect to stir up some arguments and emotions by presenting this finished product to you. You will doubtless be appalled that certain of your favourites are excluded, and you will be even more aggravated by what is included instead – perfectly livid, indeed, when you realise that the sites are given a World Ranking. So some explanation about the construction of the contents might be useful here. A preliminary list of sites was initially selected by a small editorial team at New Holland Publishers, so I hope that they will share the blame with me. Incidentally, I acknowledge that even with 100 sites to choose from, there are well in excess of another 100 for which a good case could be made for their inclusion, and happily there are simply thousands of places on this earth which can, at one time or another, enthrall birders and ecotourists with the spectacle or variety they offer.

Nevertheless, a choice had to be made, and certain considerations soon became apparent. For example, although a huge list of species is instructive, it cannot be anything but a rough guide of how good a place is. Long lists of species recorded may reflect more about the attention given to them by birders than their intrinsic richness. Another point is that, if high lists were the only guide, this book would contain nothing but tropical forests, the majority of which would be in South America.

■ *Long-tailed Ground-Roller in Madagascar’s Spiny Forest.*



■ Right: Stellers Jay in the western USA.



So, once freed from the burden of working solely from numbers, other aspects of a place become important. Among these are: the sheer quality of birds to be found there (how rare, how beautiful, if they occur in spectacular numbers, and so on); how important the site is on a world scale for the conservation of the relevant habitat and/or species; the intrinsic beauty of the site; the degree to which a site is good for birds and birding all year round; the history and both ornithological and environmental significance of the site; the ease and comfort of birding the site, where relevant; the possibility of delighting in other features, such as other animals or natural or archaeological spectacles; and yes, perhaps, the fame and star quality of the place. On the negative side, where a site has become unwise or dangerous to visit in recent times (Afghanistan or Kashmir, for example), it had been deliberately left out.

In the end, despite all of this, the selection of sites was, of necessity and expedience, largely a matter of personal experience. To begin with, we picked the sites we knew ourselves, or had heard about. During the

research for the book, of course, many more places came to light, and a good number of these were considered sufficiently good to be included. However, there is no doubt that many places with at least a good claim as those that are included have been overlooked, and I apologize for this. If your favourite has been missed out, or if you think that the selections for a particular region are flawed, please do let us know.

Finally, it is important to state that all selections were made free from commercial pressure. In this book there are some sites that are profit-making concerns, but we have chosen to include them for ornithological reasons only; in some cases, it would simply be disingenuous not to. None will have known for sure that they have been included in this book prior to publication, and none paid for the privilege. Nobody offered or gave free accommodation during the research, either.

I hope, therefore, that you will enjoy this offering of the 100 sites which I believe offer the best birding experiences in the world.

Dominic Couzens, Dorset, UK, May 2008

NOMENCLATURE

The English names used in this book follow *Birds of the World: Recommended English Names* by Frank Gill and Minturn Wright (2006, Christopher Helm, London), with the following exceptions (in species order). Names with an asterisk refer to subspecies

Name used	Scientific name
Orange-footed Scrubfowl	<i>Megapodius reinwardt</i>
Caucasian Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus mlokosiewiczii</i>
Willow Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>
Common Pheasant**	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Japanese Green Pheasant**	<i>Phasianus versicolor</i>
Tundra Swan*	<i>Cygnus columbianus columbianus</i>
Bewick's Swan*	<i>Cygnus columbianus bewickii</i>
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
Black Brant*	<i>Branta bernicla nigricans</i>
Common Merganser*	<i>Mergus merganser americanus</i>
Goosander*	<i>Mergus merganser merganser</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
White-billed Diver	<i>Gavia adamsii</i>
Madeiran Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Great White Egret*	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Great Egret*	<i>Ardea alba egretta</i>
Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>
American Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>
Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Northern Harrier*	<i>Circus cyaneus hudsonicus</i>
Hen Harrier*	<i>Circus cyaneus cyaneus</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Rough-legged Hawk*	<i>Buteo lagopus sanctijohannis</i>
Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
Purple Swamp-hen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
Small Buttonquail	<i>Turnix sylvaticus</i>
Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>
Common Gull*	<i>Larus canus canus</i>

USEFUL WEBSITES

This list is not exhaustive, but only includes those that were used significantly during writing and researching.

World Sites

www.birdlife.org.uk
www.fatbirder.com
www.splatzone.nl
www.surfbirds.com

Europe

www.birdingnorway.no (Varanger)
www.donanabirdtours.com (Coto Doñana)
www.finnature.fi (Oulu and Matsalu Bay)
www.kilda.org.uk (Outer Hebrides)
www.matsalu.ee (Matsalu Bay)
www.skof.se (Falsterbo)

Asia

www.drmartinwilliams.com (Mai Po and Beidaihe)
www.ecotours.ru (Ussuriland)
www.eilat-birds.org (Eilat)
www.hkecotours.com (Mai Po)
www.jetwingeco.com (Sinharaja)
www.kazakhstanbirdtours.com (Korgalzhyn)
www.orientalbirdclub.org

Gill and Wright name
Scrubfowl
Caucasian Grouse
Willow Ptarmigan
Common Pheasant
Common Pheasant
Tundra Swan
Tundra Swan
Brant Goose
Brant Goose
Common Merganser
Common Merganser
Black Scoter
American Scoter
Red-throated Loon
Black-throated Loon
Pacific Loon
Great Northern Loon
Yellow-billed Loon
Band-rumped Storm Petrel
Horned Grebe
Great Egret
Great Egret
Yellow-billed Egret
Black Vulture
Gyr Falcon
Bearded Vulture
Cinereous Vulture
Short-toed Snake Eagle
Northern Harrier
Northern Harrier
Roughleg
Roughleg
Asian Imperial Eagle
Purple Swampphen
Kurrichane Buttonquail
Red Phalarope
Mew Gull

www.tommypedersen.com (Dubai)
www.wild-russia.org (Lena Delta)

Africa

www.africanbirdclub.org
www.birduganda.com (Bwindi)
www.gambiabirding.org (Gambia River)
www.gambiabirdguide.com (Gambia River)
www.natureseychelles.org (Seychelles)
www.sabirding (South Africa)

Australasia

www.alanswildlifetours.com.au (Queensland Wet Tropics)
www.birdingaustralia.com.au
www.birdsaustralia.com.au
www.cassowary-house.com.au (Queensland Wet Tropics)
www.oreillys.com.au (Lamington)
www.outback-australia.info (Strzelecki Track)
www.sossa-international.org (NSW Pelagics)
www.stewartisland.co.nz (Stewart Island)
www.wettropics.gov.au (Queensland Wet Tropics)

South America

www.birding-in-peru.com (Peru)
www.birdvenezuela.com (La Escalera)
www.inkanatura.com (Peru)

mentioned in the text where the name differs from that in Gill and Wright. A double asterisk refers to a split where what was once regarded as a subspecies has been afforded full species status. The new scientific name of the split species is given in the second line:

Name used	Scientific name	Gill and Wright name
Herring Gull**	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Herring Gull
American Herring Gull**	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	Herring Gull
Caspian Gull**	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	Yellow-legged Gull
Yellow-legged Gull**	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Yellow-legged Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull**	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Heuglin's Gull**	<i>Larus heuglini</i>	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Common Black-headed Gull
White-winged Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	White-winged Tern
White Tern	<i>Gygis alba</i>	Angel Tern
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Parasitic Jaeger
Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	Long-tailed Jaeger
Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	Thick-billed Murre
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	Common Murre
Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>	Eurasian Eagle-Owl
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	Northern Hawk-Owl
Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>	Boreal Owl
Short-legged Ground-roller	<i>Brachypteracias leptosomus</i>	Short-legged Ground Roller
Scaly Ground-roller	<i>Geobiastes squamiger</i>	Scaly Ground Roller
Pitta-like Ground-roller	<i>Atelornis pittoides</i>	Pitta-like Ground Roller
Rufous-headed Ground-roller	<i>Atelornis crossleyi</i>	Rufous-headed Ground Roller
Long-tailed Ground-roller	<i>Uratelornis chimaera</i>	Long-tailed Ground Roller
Cuckoo-roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>	Cuckoo Roller
Steere's Pitta	<i>Pitta steerii</i>	Azure-breasted Pitta
Rufous Scrub-bird	<i>Atrichornis rufescens</i>	Rufous Scrubbird
Iberian Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	Iberian Magpie
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	European Crested Tit
Siberian Tit	<i>Poecile cincta</i>	Grey-headed Chickadee
Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Horned Lark
Japanese Bush Warbler**	<i>Cettia diphone</i>	Japanese Bush Warbler
Manchurian Bush Warbler**	<i>Cettia canturians</i>	Japanese Bush Warbler
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Winter Wren
Stripe-breasted Rhabdornis	<i>Rhabdornis inornatus</i>	Stripe-breasted Creeper
Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush	<i>Zoothera imbricata</i>	Sri Lanka Thrush
Semi-collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>	Semicollared Flycatcher
Narcissus Flycatcher**	<i>Ficedula narcissina</i>	Narcissus Flycatcher
Elisa's Flycatcher**	<i>Ficedula elisae</i>	Narcissus Flycatcher
Lapland Bunting	<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	Lapland Longspur

www.kolibriexpeditions.com (Peru)
www.manuwildlifecenter.com (Manu)
www.neotropicalbirdclub.org
www.tandayapa.com (Tandayapa)

Central America and the Caribbean

www.asawright.org (Asa Wright)
www.canopytower.com (Canopy Tower)
www.cct.or.cr (Monteverde)
www.guatemalabirding.com (Tikal)
www.pronaturaveracruz.org (Veracruz river of raptors)

North America

www.americanbirding.org
www.americanparknetwork.com
www.audubon.org
www.birder.com
www.birdinghawaii.co.uk (Alaka'i)
www.fws.gov
www.hawkmountain.org (Hawk Mountain)
www.houstonaudubon.org (High Island)
www.montereyseabirds.com (Monterey)
www.pc.gc.ca (Point Pelee)
www.sabo.org (Chiricahua Mountains)
www.shearwaterjourneys.com (Monterey)
www.texasbirding.net (High Island)

Europe

Europe has a phenomenal birding heritage, and the hobby has taken root as a national pastime in countries such as Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden. With only about 500 regularly occurring species, the continent cannot claim to have the most diverse avifauna in the world. However, few bird species have escaped detailed study, and Europe's habitats have been described and understood to an extraordinary extent.

Another important feature in Europe is how the relationship between people and birds has played out. Since there are almost no entirely natural and unspoilt habitats left in temperate Europe, monitoring the fortunes of the bird populations there is of great interest. Most of temperate Europe has been farmed, and the current trend towards the mechanization of the areas that had previously escaped this process (such as parts of eastern Europe) is a cause of great concern. Currently, Europe's most efficient farming areas are biodiversity deserts. The great forests that once covered the central sector have largely been felled, leading to severe declines in woodland species.

That is not to say that Europe lacks good birding areas – far from it. Many regions, from parts of the tundra and taiga to large temperate wetlands and vast intertidal reaches, are excellent, and the temperate climate means that the migration of birds can be spectacular in spring and autumn. One habitat that does deserve special mention is the Mediterranean scrubland known as maquis, which plays host to, among others, a delightful assemblage of Old World warblers from the genus *Sylvia*. Besides these, Europe is also rich in waders, wildfowl and seabirds such as auks and gulls.





North Norfolk

SITE RANK
55
Information



HABITAT Coast, mudflats, salt marsh, dunes, fresh water pools and marshes, shingle, scrub and woodland

KEY SPECIES [Dark-bellied] Brent and Pink-footed Geese, Red Knot, Dunlin, Pied Avocet, Bearded Reedling, Shore Lark, Twite

TIME OF YEAR Summer (June to July) is quietest; the rest of the year is superb

■ Below: every dawn and dusk in winter witnesses spectacular flights of Pink-footed Geese at sites along the Norfolk coast.

This magical corner of Britain must be one of the most popular birding areas in the entire world. In recent years, the tiny reserve of Titchwell Marsh alone has been receiving over 120,000 human visitors a year, exceeding the counts of all, or most of, the birds themselves. Britain has a rich tradition of birding and Norfolk, in most recent times, has been at

the hub of this increasingly popular hobby.

North Norfolk certainly has plenty to attract birders, with delights all year round, together with an excellent infrastructure and easy advice and help virtually on tap. It hosts some scarce breeding birds, impressive numbers of waders and wildfowl in winter, while the two main migration seasons, April to May and August to November, bring an almost bewildering variety of birds. More than 360 species have been recorded between the estuary of The Wash to the west and the town of Sheringham to the east, and there is seldom a day in the year when some rarity is not in the vicinity.

The winter season brings big flocks of both geese and waders, especially in the western corner, near to the village of Snettisham. On a high tide a substantial number of the waders using the intertidal mudflats of The Wash move to the small complex of gravel pits and islands here for roosting and, on a particularly high tide in season, up to 50,000 Red Knots, 11,000 Dunlins and 6,000 Eurasian



■ Right: Bearded Reedlings can be found in north Norfolk throughout the year. Good places to look include the reserves at Cley and Titchwell.



Oystercatchers may be using this tiny area at the same time. The sight and sound of them packing on to the islands and spits and flying about is incredible; and indeed, even on a modest tide, the Red Knots still make an impressive spectacle on the flats themselves. These birds are famed for their gigantic gatherings, the flock moving as one amorphous mass, its edges moving back and forth like plumes of smoke.

Remarkably, that is not the only splendour of Snettisham. At dawn and dusk between October and February, a large flight of Pink-footed Geese also passes over the reserve as the birds commute from their roosting grounds on the salt marsh to the inland fields, where they graze on

grain or potatoes. Indeed, this spectacle is repeated right along the coast as far as Holkham, some 30 km to the east. The geese fly high and their V-formations make handwriting in the skies, often to a backdrop of the rising or setting sun, while the merry *ang-ang*, *wick-wick* calls ring down on to spellbound birders. It is estimated that, at the very least, 70,000 Pink-footed Geese from Iceland winter in north-west Norfolk, along with nearly 10,000 Brent Geese from Russia, of the dark-bellied form *bernicla*.

Another of the attractions in north Norfolk is the presence of several scarce passerines that choose these wild, windswept coasts as regular wintering grounds. These include two species that breed primarily in the

■ Right: The Wash is a good place to see high concentrations of waders – these are Red Knots.





■ Above: Western Marsh Harriers are once again a familiar sight close to the Norfolk coast – the species recovered from the brink of extinction as a British breeding bird in the early 1970s.

high Arctic, Snow and Lapland Buntings, plus two birds that are mainly northern montane breeders in Europe, Twite and Shore Lark. All these species scour the dunes and salt marshes for seeds, and they can often be found together in flocks. The Snow Buntings are a particular favourite as they can often be seen in appreciable numbers (200 or more), and their flocks have the endearing habit of ‘rolling’ forwards, with birds at the back inter-

mittently overflying the leaders to get in front.

The breeding birds of north Norfolk are almost as impressive as the winter visitors, and include several scarce species. The farmlands are the English stronghold of the fast-declining Grey Partridge, while other birds that are also being lost from the rural British scene are also present, including Barn Owl, Corn Bunting and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Also important are the reed-swamp birds, with Bearded Reedling, Eurasian Bittern and Western Marsh Harrier all being widespread, if not common. Pied Avocets, close to the northern edge of their range, breed on some of the lagoons within nature reserves – some of which have been specially constructed for the purpose. Terns also occur, especially on offshore Scolt Head Island and on Blakeney Point; Sandwich Terns can number nearly 4,000 pairs altogether.

For many an experienced birder, however, it is really the migration season that gives Norfolk its almost magnetic attraction. Norfolk is one of the closest parts of the United Kingdom to the European continent, and it only takes some kind of easterly blow, with a touch of drizzle, to dump drift migrants unexpectedly on to these coasts. On a good autumn day the many bushes and trees may be alive with migrants, especially Willow and Garden Warblers, Common Redstarts and European Pied Flycatchers, and a thorough searching will sometimes reveal a rarity such as Eurasian Wryneck, Red-breasted Flycatcher or Barred Warbler. As the season progresses, Yellow-browed Warblers in October and then Pallas’s Leaf Warblers in November brighten the scene. Spring is also very good, with many of the same species as in early autumn, seen in their breeding finery. If conditions are right there might be a Bluethroat from the east or a Red-rumped Swallow or European Serin from the south.

Good numbers of waders are present throughout the year in the many pools and lagoons, and on a good day in September it is possible to see well over 20 species, including Curlew Sandpiper and both Little and Temminck’s Stints. The many hides on nature reserves such as Cley and Titchwell can allow exceptional views of such birds at close quarters.

The sea-watching scene is just as lively as the comings and goings on land. North Norfolk is excellent for wintering seaduck such as Common and Velvet Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Common Eider, while other inshore species include Red-throated Diver and Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes. Meanwhile, strong onshore winds in autumn bring skuas in good numbers, together with a few Manx and Sooty Shearwaters. Later on in the year a northerly blow can deliver good numbers of Little Auks from the Arctic.

Not surprisingly, the rarity list is long and includes some jaw-dropping encounters, some of which have gone down in the birding folklore that surrounds this place. For example, one spring both a Laughing Gull and a Franklin’s Gull turned up on the very same day, more or less standing next to each other, while many British firsts, including a bewilderingly unlikely Rock Sparrow, have graced this coastline. This is the modern centre of British birding, and its status is fully deserved.

The Outer Hebrides



HABITAT Rocky islands, grassland, marsh, coast, bog, moorland

KEY SPECIES Seabirds including breeding European and Leach's Storm Petrels, Northern Gannet and Atlantic Puffin and impressive skua passage, Corn Crane, breeding waders and wildfowl, rarities

TIME OF YEAR Spring and early summer (May to July) is best

■ Right: the moorlands on Lewis and Harris hold large populations of European Golden Plover.

Few parts of the world are more densely populated with birdwatchers than Britain. Despite this, the indigenous birdlife is not especially rich, and more than half the list of species for the whole country consists of rarities visiting from elsewhere. However, there are two outstanding exceptions to this generalization – breeding waders and, most outstandingly, the seabirds. Nowhere in Britain are these two groups of birds so prevalent, and found in more breathtaking scenery, than in the archipelago of the Outer Hebrides (which is also known as the Western Isles).

The Outer Hebrides lie, on average, about 50 km off the north-west coast of Scotland. The main archipelago measures about 200 km from north to south, while a great deal of bird interest also lies in a cluster of outlying island groups, such as St Kilda, 64 km further out into the wild North Atlantic. On the main island chain

■ Right: now exceedingly rare elsewhere in Britain due to modern farming practices, the Corn Crane is a relatively common in the Outer Hebrides and the population is increasing there thanks to conservation measures.





■ *Above: Leach's Storm Petrels are found in the turbulent waters around the Outer Hebrides during the breeding season; they wander the open ocean for the rest of the year.*

there is an intriguing grading of habitats from west to east: the west coast is rimmed with long beaches of shell-sand, often backed by dunes. Just inland of this is a unique habitat known as machair, which is grassland growing on a mixture of shell-sand and peat. The dry areas of machair are farmed in a traditional manner, while the wet areas provide low-lying rich pools. Further inland still, the land becomes dominated by peat bogs and moorland dotted with lakes until it reaches the rugged, rocky coast on the eastern side, where every few kilometres the coast indents to form an inland finger of sea, known locally as a sea-loch. It is estimated that, taking both saltwater and freshwater bodies into account,

there are some 6,000 lakes in the Outer Hebrides. On the whole, the land is low-lying, and the highest point in the whole archipelago is only 799 m above sea-level.

The peat bogs and machair form superb breeding habitat for waders, and the densities of breeding birds here are among the highest in Europe. As a general rule, the northern islands of Lewis and Harris provide the best moorland habitat, with large populations of European Golden Plovers, Common Greenshanks and Dunlins, while the southern trio of North and South Uist and Benbecula provide the cream of the machair, with high densities of Common Snipe, Common Redshanks and Common Ringed Plovers. Every year a few Red-necked



Phalaropes, extremely rare breeders this far south, turn up and sometimes they nest successfully.

In such a watery habitat it is perhaps not surprising that wildfowl also feature strongly. The Outer Hebrides maintain an impressive population (300 pairs) of entirely wild Greylag Geese (the rest of the British breeding population consists of feral birds), and there are also significant numbers of Mute Swans, Common Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers. The lakes provide good habitat for both Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, making this a perfect place to compare their breeding ecology. Black-throated Divers breed by large lakes that provide fish on-site, while Red-throated

Divers nest on often minute, sterile pools and they commute back and forth from the sea to deliver fish to their young.

While a few seabirds breed on the cliffs on the north coast of Lewis, the really impressive colonies occur far offshore. Some of these are important nationally and internationally. Sula Sgeir, off the northern tip of the main archipelago, hosts 10,000 pairs of Northern Gannets, and is the only place in Britain where young Gannets are harvested for food. Each year, the hunters spend two weeks on this remote rock and collect up to 2,000 youngsters. In the last few seasons a misplaced Black-browed Albatross has also graced these inaccessible cliffs. Meanwhile, the fearsomely isolated North Rona, 71 km out in the Atlantic, hosts a major population of European Storm Petrels. The Shiant Islands hold a big colony of approximately 76,000 Atlantic Puffins (and also, curiously, Britain's only population of Black Rats) while the Flannan Islands, 32 km west of Lewis, provide breeding habitat for both European and Leach's Storm Petrels (several thousand pairs of each).

However, it is St Kilda, 64 km off North Uist, that is by far the most famous for its seabirds, and no wonder: half a million pairs of various species breed there. A world heritage site with a rich history, this cluster of four small islands is all that remains of a long-extinct volcano. Looming above the stormy waters of the North Atlantic, where the heavy swell blights the lives of seabird-counters forced to use a boat, St Kilda was bypassed by the erosion of the last ice-age, and stands proud as a towering lump teeming with cliff-dwelling birds. Indeed, the cliffs on the island of Hirta, the largest island, are a sheer drop of 430 m, the highest in Britain. Remarkably, this remote outpost has a long history of human settlement. People are thought to have made it here 5,000 years ago, and to have introduced the islands' unique breed of sheep. These Soay Sheep are still present today and are undergoing intensive genetic study because of their isolation. What is certain is that the islands were occupied for some 2,000 years, until being abandoned finally in the 1930s, leaving their ruins to breeding Common Starlings of the local race, and to the unique 'St Kilda Wren', a rare large island form of the Wren.

The numbers of seabirds are indicative of the huge importance of the Outer Hebrides. These islands hold the world's largest colony of Northern Gannets (at least 60,000 pairs – a quarter of the entire population), some 90 per cent of Europe's Leach's Storm Petrels (49,000 pairs), about 250,000 pairs of Atlantic Puffins (half of the British population), 62,000 pairs of Northern Fulmars, 22,000 pairs of Common Guillemots and 150 pairs of Great Skuas. Many of these numbers are necessarily approximate, because of the extreme difficulty of counting and the high numbers involved.

Another seabird spectacular of the Outer Hebrides is of a quite different kind – an impressive regular return passage of skuas, mainly in May. The numbers of Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas may sometimes run into the thousands during the short season.

The Camargue



HABITAT Large wetland including reed beds, lagoons and salt pans; limestone semi-desert

KEY SPECIES Greater Flamingo, Slender-billed Gull, Moustached Warbler, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse

TIME OF YEAR Any time, although in mid-summer much of the water dries up and crowds of tourists visit

horses and black bulls. It is a romantic and scenic region, steeped in history (the main town, Arles, was originally Roman), and it is dotted with marshes, lagoons, agricultural areas, beaches and, to the east, a large limestone semi-desert known as La Crau. Although much of its original area has been converted to agriculture, the Camargue is still ranked as one of Europe's finest wildlife sites.

One of the star attractions for birders is the very large colony of Greater Flamingos, mainly found on the Étang de Fangassier, a large saltpan in the central part of the Camargue, close to the sea. In the late 1960s the flamingos were at risk from the erosion of their nesting islands, so bulldozers were sent in to build new platforms for the birds to use. Since that time the population has more than doubled to nearly 15,000 pairs, and the flamingos are regarded as a major tourist attraction. They occur year-round, although only a quarter of the population remains

■ Below: Greater Flamingo is the Camargue's flagship bird species and almost 15,000 pairs breed.

The Camargue is a vast plain in the south of France. It is located between the Mediterranean Sea and the two arms of the River Rhone delta, the largest river delta in western Europe. It provides a large area (750 sq km) of fine wetland habitat for birds, and it is also famous for its free-ranging white





■ Above: a boldly striped neck identifies an adult Purple Heron; this species nests on the ground in dense reedbeds.

during the winter, the rest retreating to Spain and north-west Africa. In recent years these flamingos have been supplementing their normal diet of small invertebrates (from which their pink coloration is derived) with a new fad food, rice, which is grown locally.

Sharing the shallow saline waters with the flamingos is another pink-flushed bird, the Slender-billed Gull. Indeed, this elegant species is often found feeding at the feet of taller birds, fielding shrimps fleeing oddly-shaped bills. This specialized, long-legged gull is one of the few of its family that can run after prey through the water, sometimes gathering in lines to herd fish into the shallows before diving into the panicking mêlée. This scarce gull began breeding in the Camargue as recently as 1993, and there are now almost 1,000 pairs.

The saline pools suit other specialized birds, too. The Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt get their long legs

(blue and pink respectively) wet here, either scything their bills through the water (avocet) or picking delicately from the water surface (stilt). Both live up to the name 'wader', being able to use deep, saline water without swimming (although the avocet will swim if necessary). The Kentish Plover, on the other hand, keeps its feet dry, feeding by sight along the sandy edges of the salt pans and lagoons. It also nests on beaches, and benefits from being able to run about without the hindrance of stones or vegetation.

The very best time to visit the Camargue is perhaps during the winter, when the seasonal rains fill up the many ponds and lakes (which are dry between March and September) giving the whole place a lush, verdant look. Wildfowl are everywhere, and some impressive numbers have been counted in recent years: 13,000 Gadwall, 23,000 Eurasian Teal and 2,000 Red-crested



■ Above: Red-crested Pochard is resident in the Camargue; it both dabbles and dives to find food.

Pochard, for example, as well as 30,000 Eurasian Coot. This is the season when there can be a notable influx of raptors, including quite a number of rarities or oddities, such as Greater Spotted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard and Booted Eagle (usually a summer visitor to Europe). The winter period also brings a regular small flock of Pine Buntings, which are usually very rare this far west.

By the spring, many of the breeding wetland birds are confined to the permanent lakes, such as the huge Étang de Vaccarès. This is a great place to see many of Europe's widespread marshland birds, including Purple and Squacco Herons, Western Marsh Harrier, Great Reed Warbler and Bearded Reedling. One of the few warblers to winter here is the Moustached Warbler, a bird that is able to pick smaller edible items off marshland vegetation than its competitors can – items that are more reliable year-round food than larger invertebrates. This bird sometimes has eggs in the nest by March.

On the eastern edge of the Camargue National Park, La Crau presents a picture very different from this abun-


dance. It is as flat as the rest of the Camargue, but permanently dry, the ground mainly dotted with pebbles and herbs; a few sorry bushes survive here and there. The old delta of the nearby River Durance, it is France's only semi-desert area, and holds several species that are rare elsewhere in the country, including a population of several hundred Little Bustards and about 150 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. These two species often gather together in flocks, since the sandgrouse use the bustards as lookouts. Birders should also look out for European Roller and also the Great Spotted Cuckoo, which uses the local Eurasian Magpie as host. However, both cuckoo and roller can be very difficult to find.

In contrast to the Camargue, most of La Crau is in private hands and therefore has no formal protection. Much is grazed, and the amount of habitat available to the special birds diminishes year by year through encroachment by agriculture and irrigation. The future of the sandgrouse, in particular, is threatened, because its population is isolated from others further south in Spain.

Organbidexka Col Libre

Information

SITE RANK
94



HABITAT Low mountain pass (1,440 m), forest

KEY SPECIES Raptors, especially Red and Black Kites and European Honey Buzzard; Black and White Storks, Common Wood Pigeon, White-backed Woodpecker, Lammergeier

TIME OF YEAR Mainly autumn migration July to November, but with light spring passage and some interesting resident species

Below: the Lammergeier is scarce in Europe but birds are seen regularly at Organbidexka.

The mountain chain of the Pyrenees, dividing France from Spain in western Europe, is a major barrier to post-breeding birds migrating to their wintering grounds in Africa. On the whole, travelling birds try to avoid high mountain crossings with their potential turbulence, cold and poor weather, so the Pyrenees present a problem to many millions of south-



bound migrants. In the west of the range, however, the mountains are very much lower than their counterparts further east, and a series of mountain passes, or cols, present ideal short-cuts for the birds to follow on their way south into Spain. The most famous of these, with an interesting history as well as a good birding pedigree, is Organbidexka, in the Haute-Soule region of Aquitaine.

Long before birding became a widespread pastime, the locals in this rugged, proud region were well aware of a massive movement of Common Wood Pigeons and Stock Doves through their cols in October and November every year. Indeed, they took advantage, setting up shooting points along prominent parts of the pigeons' route. Somewhat resourcefully, they noticed that the birds could be tempted down to land; if the hunters flung small white discs, known as zimbelas, into the air, the pigeons mysteriously landed and could be shot or caught in nets. This pastime became ingrained into Basque culture as 'la Chasse de la Palombe' (the hunt of the Wood Pigeon).

Over time, what was both a sport and a means of easy food began to take a toll on the migrants. The hunting of birds is very popular in parts of France and Spain, and unfortunately by modern times the many north-south facing cols became littered with small bunkers for shooting; hard to believe in such a sophisticated and modern country as France. Thousands of pigeons and other migrants, including birds of prey, were also shot indiscriminately and, to the shame of the countries involved, this slaughter continues today.

However, in 1979 a small band of ornithologists and conservationists became sickened by the carnage and began, in the face of local opposition from hunters, to rent their own bunker at Organbidexka. They declared it a 'col libre' (hunting-free zone) and began to monitor not just the migration itself, but also hunting activities. Just to give an example of what they and the birds are up against, they recorded a total of 25,360 gunshots in a single day in 1982. Nowadays, some 30 years later, the col libre is still in existence, and indeed is now the site of a bird observatory. Every year, between August and November, the watch point is staffed by enthusiasts who both monitor the migration and introduce members of the public to the wonders of birds and their movements. In recent years they have added more Pyrenean passes to their list of watch points, including the Col de Lizarieta, near Ascain, and Lindux, south of St-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

Despite its importance for pigeons, of which some 100,000 pass between late September and November, Organbidexka has in recent years become world famous for its raptor migration. The pass is a bottleneck for raptors avoiding the sea to the west and the higher peaks to the east, while being mountainous enough to enable birds to use updrafts for their journeys. In general,

■ Right: it was the huge numbers of passing Common Wood Pigeons that originally drew the attention of hunters, and then birders, to Organbidexka.



■ Below: September is the primary month for Montagu's Harrier passage.

mountain updrafts only exist some 300–400 m above the land, so the col is famous for affording quite exceptional low views of many of the passing birds.

The flight begins in mid-August, with the first Black Kites and European Honey Buzzards. These species are



the two most numerous here, with averages of 17,209 and 12,354 birds passing each season, often in large flocks. By September the variety increases, with Honey Buzzards increasing and Black Kites slowing to a trickle, replaced by Montagu's and Western Marsh Harriers (86 and 207 per season respectively), Osprey (138) and Short-toed Eagle (131). There is also a small passage of White and Black Storks, as well as innumerable Barn Swallows. By October the raptor mix has altered slightly, and includes what must be one of the largest Red Kite flights in the world (1,721). In this month, Hen Harriers (69), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (324), Common Buzzard (91), Eurasian Hobby (41), Merlin (27) and Common Kestrel (57) pass by in numbers, while remarkably for this far north, up to about 50 Booted Eagles may also be recorded. October is also excellent for the visible migration of passerines such as larks and pipits, while November signals something of a change, when up to 15,000 Common Cranes may pass over, in the last migratory flight of the year. In all, some 31,000 migrant raptors use the narrow migration corridor along Organbidexka during the autumn.

Apart from the regular species, it is inevitable that the watch point should record a few oddities, and over the years these have included Egyptian Vulture, Eleonora's Falcon and, bizarrely, one Spanish Imperial Eagle. However, at least 95 per cent of all the raptors seen are European Honey Buzzards and Black Kites. The area also offers species such as Lammergeier and White-backed Woodpecker, which breed nearby in the dense forests.

But perhaps the best reason to go to Organbidexka is not so much as a birder, but as a human being enjoying the phenomenon of migration. Your presence will add another note of defiance to those whose only interest is in senseless shooting.

Lac du Der-Chantecoq



HABITAT Large artificial lakes, farmland, meadows, deciduous and coniferous forest

KEY SPECIES Common Crane, White-tailed Eagle, Great White Egret, Bean and Greater White-fronted Geese, ducks, woodpeckers

TIME OF YEAR Most popular in winter, but excellent all year



■ Above right: a quiet corner of the Lac d'Orient.

Very few of the world's best sites for birds are entirely created by human hand, but a complex of large reservoirs in the Champagne region of central France, about 190 km south-east of Paris, have this unusual distinction. The Lac d'Orient (23 sq km) was dug in 1966 in order to store floodwater from the River Seine, and was followed in 1990 by the 20-sq-km Lac du Temple just next door; a third reservoir, the 5-sq-km Lac d'Amance, which was also constructed in 1990, regulates the River Aube. Meanwhile, a few tens of kilometres to the north, the largest lake of the lot, the 48-sq-km Lac du Der-Chantecoq, was constructed in 1974 to hold back water from yet another river, the Marne, in order to prevent spring flooding in Paris. All in all, this massive creation of new freshwater habitat has completely altered the landscape of this sparsely popu-

lated, rural part of France, including the drowning of three villages, one of which gives its name, Chantecoq, to the largest lake.

It is not only the landscape that has been altered. Where once there were fields, there is now habitat for ducks, herons and cormorants. Where the ground was dry, there is now habitat for waders and gulls. Tens of thousands of waterbirds use the site in winter and on passage, while in the summer the lakeside marshes provide habitat for breeding species such as Eurasian and Little Bitterns, Gadwall and Purple Heron. Together with its surrounding farmland and rich deciduous and coniferous forest, the area as a whole has become one of the most important birding sites in all of France.

However, no single species has had more impact on birding in this area than the Common Crane. Cranes

■ Right: the deep waters of the Lac du Der-Chantecoq suit diving ducks, including Smew.





■ Above: the star bird of the region is the Common Crane; November and February produce the best numbers as the wintering population is swollen by birds passing through.

must always have overflowed or rested in the area on migration, but these days, with excellent feeding and roosting conditions available to them, they descend on the area in enormous numbers. It is estimated that almost the entire breeding population of cranes from Scandinavia and nearby Russia stops here on its way to Spain, some 60,000 birds in all. They don't all come at once, especially in the autumn when the migration period is fairly protracted, but on their return migration in the spring, especially in late February, the birds concentrate in impressive numbers, and counts on the roosts on the islands of the Lac du Der-Chantecoq have recorded 25,000 birds. In addition, a few thousand birds remain throughout the winter.

Cranes are marvellously exciting birds, flying with regal, slow wing-beats, moving in neat formations and uttering their extraordinarily loud, atmospheric calls. The far-carrying clanging is made by the elongated trachea, which actually winds around the bird's sternum and fuses with it to make a series of plates that vibrate and amplify the sound. The sight and sound of these cranes can be profoundly impressive, and on most evenings during the winter there will be birders perched on the western embankment of the lake, waiting for the inbound flight.

Not everybody in the area is a huge crane fan, especially those local farmers who lose large amounts of grain or potatoes to the birds every year. To combat this, a local farm has been acquired, the Ferme des Grues, where the birds can be protected and fed, and where they are entirely welcome; the problem is thus ameliorated, if not entirely solved.

Plenty of other waterbirds can be seen while you are enjoying the sight of the cranes, including a fairly new arrival into the area, the Great White Egret. These stately herons were once very rare in this part of France, but at least 30 to 40 now winter annually. In addition, there are plenty of ducks, and many hundreds of the usual common European species can be seen, such as Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall and Eurasian Teal. Some parts of the lake are deep, so diving ducks turn up regularly, including such scarcities as Smew and Velvet Scoter. Alongside these, there are always some divers and grebes about and the Red-necked Grebe, in particular, is something of a speciality.

The profusion of wildfowl, and waders too (up to 10,000 Northern Lapwings may be present in winter), is the main attraction for another five-star species. This is the only area in France where White-tailed Eagle regularly winters, and in a good year between three and five individuals may be present. Although surprisingly hard to find in this area, the eagles are always stylish and spectacular, and the pandemonium they can cause to the assembled throng of waterbirds is in itself an impressive performance.

No visitor to the region should overlook the surrounding countryside. The fields and hedgerows are good for species such as Brambling and Great Grey Shrike, while the mature woodlands, especially those around the three southerly lakes, are an excellent draw in themselves. A bit of diligent searching is likely to bag at least five species of woodpecker – Great, Lesser and Middle Spotted, plus European Green and Black, while to see the very scarce Grey-headed requires considerable luck. Other forest birds include Firecrest, Northern Goshawk, Short-toed Treecreeper, European Crested Tit and Hawfinch, the latter being a regular visitor to feeding trays in the area, such as at the campground at Larzicourt, on the north of the Lac du Der-Chantecoq.

Altogether, 273 species have been recorded in the region as a whole which, considering that this is more than 250 km inland in a temperate area, is a hugely impressive total. And happily, for once, one can reliably report that, without the influence of humankind, the list would never have begun to approach such dizzy heights.

Waddensee



HABITAT A long stretch of coast, including intertidal mudflats, salt marsh, dunes, barrier islands, freshwater marshes, grazing meadows and scrub

KEY SPECIES Huge numbers of wildfowl and waders, including Common Shelduck and Pied Avocet, gulls, terns including Gull-billed, raptors

TIME OF YEAR All year round

■ Above right: the band of intertidal ooze running the length of the Waddensee is, on average, 10 km wide.

■ Below: the shallow, saline conditions of the Waddensee are perfect habitat for Pied Avocets.

It seems hard to believe that three of Europe's most densely populated and industrialized countries could contain within their borders anything that could be described as 'wilderness'. And yet, incredibly, stretching along the North Sea coast from Den Helder in the Netherlands to the busy port of Esbjerg in Denmark is the Waddensee, 9,000 sq km of lonely, windswept, wild coastline where the footsteps of people cannot be seen

and where people have not yet come to abuse and destroy the environment. No human can live here, on the roughly 10-km-wide skirt of perilous intertidal mudflats and salt marshes that rims this 500-km stretch of coast and, miraculously, the greedy hands of developers have been largely kept at bay.

The Waddensee is of crucial importance to Europe's birds. In the German section alone, it is thought that



some 1.5 million wildfowl and up to 4 million waders, gulls and terns use the rich feeding grounds for at least some of the year, and if it were not for the food-rich, sheltered and safe waters of the Waddensee, they would be dispersed and depleted to an extent that is hard to imagine. Almost all the Common Shelduck in western Europe congregate on the Waddensee between July and September in order to moult. Hundreds of thousands of waders use the estuarine ooze for refuelling on migration flights, or for sustaining themselves during the winter months. Without the Waddensee they would struggle to find the resources they need.

The sheer numbers of birds using the site are staggering. Counts of waders using the German section as a staging area on their migration include 463,000 Eurasian Oystercatchers, 400,000 Red Knots, 628,000 Dunlin, 192,000 Bar-tailed Godwits and 97,000 Eurasian Curlews. The Schleswig-Holstein Waddensee National Park, just one section of this, holds winter populations of 26,000 Barnacle Geese, 150,000 Common Eiders, while 133,000 Brent Geese, 104,000 Northern Pintails, 19,000 Curlew Sandpipers and 15,000 Sandwich Terns pass through on migration. In the Danish section, the Vadehavet area sees 35,000 Common Scoters, 10,000 Pink-footed Geese, 43,600 European Golden Plovers and 365,000 Dunlin pass by, while in the Netherlands a highly impressive total of 15,000 Pied Avocets has been counted on passage, along with 29,000 Grey Plovers. Not surprisingly, since the Waddensee is a huge site and the birds are constantly moving, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get complete counts for the whole area. However, for Common Shelduck the situation is

slightly different because most of them congregate in the Schleswig-Holstein National Park. Here 150,000 of these bold black, white, bottle-green and chestnut ducks while away the late summer, feeding in these rich, shallow waters whilst they exchange old flight feathers for new ones. Interestingly, this gathering does not include the youngsters, who remain in the breeding areas, initially under the care of a small number of selected adults.

Birding the Waddensee is, not surprisingly, very rewarding, and not just for big numbers. Right across from the Netherlands to Denmark there are superb locations hosting an excellent variety of species throughout the year. In Denmark, for example, at the very northern tip of the Waddensee, the sandy peninsula of Skallingen is the location for one of Denmark's most famous bird observatories, Blåvandshuk. A superb migration watch point, it attracts ducks, geese and waders like much of the rest of the area, but also, at times, seabirds including skuas and even storm petrels. Further south, a group of barrier islands lie along the coast right down to the German border, including several that are excellent for birds. Romo, like many of the sites on the Waddensee, has freshwater marshes as well as saline habitats, and here birds such as Red-necked Grebe, Eurasian Bittern, Spotted Crake, Bearded Reedling and Eurasian Penduline Tit breed. In the marshes, heathland and dunes a trio of harriers, Hen, Montagu's and Western Marsh, all breed, and gorge themselves on the plenty. In winter, Rough-legged Buzzards and even White-tailed Eagles patrol the general area.

Another good barrier island is Fano, to the north. About 20,000 ducks, geese and waders use this 16-km-





■ Above: one small German section of the Waddensee alone holds 104,000 wintering Northern Pintails.

■ Below: huge flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits use the site as a refuelling stop before they continue their northbound migration.

long island as a staging post on migration. In addition, it hosts a number of species that are especially attracted to the peculiar nature of the Waddensee, and are thus widespread throughout the area. These include the Kentish Plover, which is drawn to flat, sandy beaches, and the Pied Avocet, which relishes the shallow, saline water. Throughout the Waddensee, low shingle and beaches provide excellent breeding habitat for terns, including Common, Arctic, Sandwich, Little and Gull-billed. Fano is also a noted area for visible migration, not just for waterbirds but also for passerines such as pipits and finches.

At the other end of the Waddensee, in the Netherlands, there is another set of barrier islands, offering

similar habitats to those in Denmark and Germany. The most famous of these is Texel, which holds a superb variety of breeding birds, including Eurasian Spoonbill and Black-tailed Godwit, and even provides a little woodland for such species as Short-toed Trecreeper, Hawfinch and Long-eared Owl. It is a superb place for observing migration, including passerines. Visitors include 'regular' rarities such as Yellow-browed and Pallas's Leaf Warblers.

However, Texel is far removed from the core part of the Waddensee. In truth, the value in this remarkable area is in its lonely flats, beaches and dunes, where the birds can feed for days, or even months at a time, without being seen or disturbed by a single human being.



Coto Doñana

SITE RANK

39

Information



HABITAT Seasonally flooded marshes (marismas), salt flats, woodland, scrub, dunes, beach

KEY SPECIES Herons and egrets, Red-knobbed Coot, Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks, Purple Swamp-hen, Spanish Imperial Eagle

TIME OF YEAR All year, although July and August are poor for waterbirds

■ Right: about seven pairs of the endangered Spanish Imperial Eagle breed each year in the Coto Doñana.

This wild, unspoilt corner of south-west Spain, at the mouth of the Rio Guadalquivir, can be said to have been a nature reserve for at least the last 400 years. Back in the 1600s it was in the hands of the Dukes of Medina Sidonia, who enclosed it as a private hunting area and discouraged any kind of settlement or development. Every so often they would invite the incumbent monarchs for a seventeenth-century knees-up, and royalty would come with their massive entourage (reputedly up to 12,000 people) and shoot a few head of game and compliment the current Duke on

■ Right: the seasonal marshlands in this part of Spain are known as marismas.



his fine estate. Thus, the area remained safe in the hands of generations of complimented Dukes, and escaped the bulldozed fate of much of the rest of southern Spain. These days it still survives, almost intact, as a huge

national park covering an area of 1,300 sq km.

Even in 1953, this was still a remote area. In that year a team of naturalists, led by the late distinguished British ornithologist and conservationist Guy Mountfort, visited Doñana and carried out scientific research, including counts and descriptions of the birdlife. The resulting account of this and subsequent expeditions, *Portrait of a Wilderness*, with its evocative descriptions of a lost world not so far away from enraptured readers, where the sun shone and the only mode of transport was on horseback, became something of a bestseller. This entrenched the Coto Doñana's reputation as one of the most exciting places in Europe for birdwatching, and gave it something of an aura. Happily, and emphatically, in the 50 years since, it has maintained its reputation, and is almost as good as it ever was.

The Coto Doñana is what you might call a failed delta. In sluggish old age, many a river breaks into dozens of small channels as it lurches towards the sea. However, owing to the action of ocean and wind, all but one of the Guadalquivir's routes to the sea have been blocked by a large system of sand-dunes that, over the centuries, has built up on the coastal side. Thus, these days, there is but one river mouth, and a vast area of flat land hemmed in by the dunes is seasonally flooded by winter rains, usually to not much more than 1 m in depth. The resulting marshlands are known as marismas, and provide an enormous area of bird habitat. Together with the dunes, salt-flats, patches of Mediterranean-type scrub formed

by various aromatic plants, and with woodland on the higher ground, these marshlands provide a patchwork of rich habitats attracting an astonishing variety of birds. Up to 2007, 380 species have been recorded, of which a staggering 150 regularly breed.

With so much shallow water about, it is hardly surprising that the heron family does very well here. Several species maintain populations in the hundreds of pairs, including the Purple Heron (minimum 300 pairs), Little and Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night Heron. Squacco Heron and Little Bittern are present in lower numbers, but can be easier to see here than in many other parts of Europe. Most of these species breed in mixed colonies, often in the cork oaks in the woodlands, but Purple Heron and Little Bittern are solitary breeders. In recent years the Great White Egret, so mysteriously rare in Europe as a whole, has become a familiar sight in the area.

The herons don't hold the monopoly on long-legged wading birds in Doñana. An increasing population of Glossy Ibises is present, along with about 400 pairs of Eurasian Spoonbills, often mixed in with the breeding colonies of herons, while there are always some non-breeding Greater Flamingos about in the shallow, saline waters. White Storks are abundant, and the largest colony in Europe, 400 pairs, is found in the north of the reserve. Meanwhile, both Black-winged Stilt and Pied Avocet are a familiar sight on the saltpans or saline pools, with thousands of pairs breeding. It might be stretching the point to call the Purple Swamp-hen long-legged, but these 'big-

■ Below: the vast wetlands of the Coto Doñana are predictably superb for herons, including Squacco Heron.

