

# **Alderney 2007**

**Thursday 26 - Sunday 29 April 2007**

## **Leader**

Mike Stentiford – Jersey

After the short and mercifully uneventful flights – one from Southampton and the other from Jersey – the septet of Travelling Naturalists met for the first time at 10.30am in the small but perfectly adequate arrivals hall at Alderney Airport.

Following initial introductions and a short settling-in period at the very comfortable Belle Vue Hotel, a tentative outline of the four day programme of activities was explained.

Although bird-watching came high on the list of natural priorities, the inclusion of other diversions such as a brief botanical wander and a ‘spot the moth’ session provided a perfect opportunity to meet up with other local enthusiasts.

Despite its miniscule size - three and a half miles long by one and a half miles wide – the island of Alderney has much to offer by way of all round interest.

In this respect, every effort is made to secure the invaluable services of local naturalists and specialists and particular thanks must go to Roland Gauvain (Alderney Wildlife Trust), Brian Bonnard (author and botanist), and David Wedd, (a lepidopterist of national renown).

The success of any four day visit to a small island, of course, depends greatly on the weather and although we had to contend with periodic greyness and a constant easterly wind, the sun nevertheless frequently showed itself and any nearby rain was kept firmly and thankfully at bay.

Of major disappointment, however, was the abandonment of all thoughts of a boat trip, an event that in the past has always proved the highlight of any visit.

Sadly, our sole means of visiting the Gannet Rocks and the small island of Burhou, namely the good ship Voyager, was in dry dock undergoing urgent repairs.

But there, where there’s a will there’s a coach trip and at least tales of what makes the island tick – albeit very slowly – were delivered by the coach driver during a relaxing afternoon’s drive.

As always, the seabird colony of Les Etacs with its overcrowded residency of gannets remains an Alderney treasure and, migrant-wise, we didn’t do at all badly with a scattering of migrants sweeping through on a daily basis.

Like us, their visit was all too brief, but again, like the group, I trust it was equally as enjoyable!

*Mike Stentiford – April 2007.*

## **Thursday April 26**

Following the short taxi ride from the airport, bags were unpacked and introductions speedily made at the Belle Vue Hotel in St Anne's.

With half the morning already dispensed with, little time was lost in tasting Alderney's fresh maritime air with a drop-down walk into Braye harbour via a small copse of conifer and scrub.

It was here that an appreciative round of singing from Dunnock, Wren, Chaffinch and a highly secretive Garden Warbler clearly proclaimed that spring had definitely made its mark.

While becoming acquainted with Braye and its working harbour, a short detour was made to the pebbly bay at Crabby where an all round selection of gulls – Herring, Greater black-back and Lesser black-back – were duly noted.

From this location, small scatterings of Barn swallows and House martins were also seen passing over on their journey north.

Because of the early start for the TN group, lunch seemed the next important item on the wish-list and appetites were squarely satisfied in one of Alderney's oldest and most frequented pubs, the Divers.

Watching birds in tandem with a pint and a sandwich often proves quite successful and so it was that a fine group of Whimbrels stayed and displayed for us within metres of our dining table.

Now fully fed and refreshed it was off along the dune grasslands adjacent to the sands of Braye beach where better views of the eight Whimbrels plus a single Curlew were gained.

The grasslands themselves are often well worth a second look, a fact justified by the sighting of Wheatear and Pied wagtail.

Following the slight incline towards the impressive Fort Albert and the Hammond Memorial, the open vistas of the Island's east coast could now be appreciated.

This high-top area is a mixture of open fields, scattered hedgerows and bramble scrub, all ideal habitats for Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Blackbird, Skylark, Meadow pipit and Stonechat, all seen and heard to good advantage.

It was also from this vantage point, overlooking Longis Common, that the highly evocative call and distinctive 'droop-winged' pose of a Cuckoo provided a useful tick to the check-list.

Passing Corblet's Bay and Cat's Bay the offshore movements of Gannets were also well appreciated as too was a close-to-shore pair-some of Razorbills.

By now the morning's greyness had been replaced by blue skies and a distinct rise in temperature, a welcome addition to our walk back to St Anne's via Longis Common.

Nothing too much of note along this final stretch of terrain apart from ever present Pheasants, Carrion crows and Wood pigeons.

A wash, a rest, a bit of a brush up and a hearty dinner completed our very first day.

## **Friday April 27**

As a unanimous decision was taken to secure a packed lunch, this was to prove a testing day of concentrated stamina and earnest resilience.

However, because of the overcast conditions, plus enduring a bit of a wait for our prepared packed lunches, it seemed an ideal opportunity to explore the historical and social attributes of the island, namely the little Alderney Museum and the quite delightful town church.

Duly enlightened by these visits the compass was then firmly set to the north and north-east thus taking us along the coastal stretches of Platte Saline and the upwardly immobile Zig-Zag pathways.

It was along this stretch of coastline that the ever present gannets were joined by numerous Shags, Oystercatchers, isolated sightings of Cormorant and a duo of Little egrets.

Despite a strong, cool breeze, lunch-packs were eagerly opened and consumed alongside the rather austere looking Fort Clonque, a Napoleonic fortress now proving very popular as a self catering unit.

At the top of the rather arduous Zig-Zag climb, the headland of the Giffoine with its fine views overlooking Les Etacs – the gannet Rocks – was finally reached and proved a just reward.

No matter the number of times I have sat, watched, listened and, depending on wind direction, even taken in the salty aroma of this wonderful colony of super-white seabirds, I remain totally impressed.

According to the Alderney Wildlife Trust, there are now over 6,000 pairs of these magnificent birds breeding on three separate offshore stacks and, apart from an intimate visit to the colony by boat, the Giffoine headland is by far the best place to simply sit and watch them.

Gannets, however, were not the only species to find their way onto the Giffoine check list - Raven, Guillemot, Fulmar, a solitary Swift and a highly appreciated migratory Ring ouzel all proved incredibly considerate.

For the afternoon cliff-path walk – in bright late sunshine – we had the additional company of AWT volunteers Lindsay Pyne and Mike Caiden, the latter a university student undertaking a survey of the island's Dartford warblers.

Sadly, during our brief visit, none were seen either by ourselves or by Mike but, thanks to Lindsay, a delightful walk (Spotted rock rose proved a speciality) and a diversion to a stunning bluebell wood close to the Sister Rocks on the south-west of the island was fully enjoyed.

The bonus along this stretch of coastline included Chiffchaff, Blackcap and, by way of a contrast, a bevy of butterflies with a Large tortoiseshell (Alderney's 5<sup>th</sup> record) gaining star status.

Another unexpected diversion presented itself on our way back to town with the hot news of a Hoopoe sighting close to the road by the airport.

Despite an arduous attempt to find this handsome speciality, however, the bird eluded all our efforts.

After such a long day out in the fresh air, it was with much appreciation, not to say great relief, that Roland and his trusty AWT vehicle transported us back to the Belle Vue Hotel.

## **Saturday April 28**

By way of a change, arrangements were made for the morning to be spent in the company of some of Alderney's very own naturalists.

Met at the hotel and guided once again by the botanically alert Lindsay, the group was taken, via some very pretty hidden winding lanes, tracks and pathways, down through Barrack Masters' Lane to the base of Essex Castle.

Here, we were met by David Wedd, a highly respected lepidopterist from the UK who has only recently taken up residency in Alderney.

David had kindly operated his moth traps the previous evening and took obvious delight in exhibiting his 'catch of the night'.

Included in this fluttery bonanza were various Pugs, Ruby tiger, Green carpet and the rather rare Splendid brocade.

Following a short question and answers session, the baton was then handed over to Brian Bonnard, the island's most respected author, historian and botanist.

Brian then led a short walk along the seashore via the Nunnery to Fort Houmet Herbe where a number of maritime plants were identified including a sprinkling of delicate Green-winged orchids.

On completion of this short botanical jaunt, we returned to St Anne where choice was given for a light lunch at any of the town's cafes and restaurants.

Having walked the walk for the past two days, the reassuring luxury of an east to west island coach drive offered all round appeal and, gathering at 2pm within yards of our hotel, we embarked with other visitors on a journey of discovery.

Straight from the driver's mouth came an avalanche of information ranging from island development controls to the high cost of electricity.

After this two hour deliberation, it was up to MS to attempt to secure a booking for a Sunday morning boat trip – alas unsuccessfully.

Despite a spate of telephone calls and attempting to sign up other potential passengers, the lack of a sea-worthy vessel sadly made defeat inevitable.

Nevertheless, one thing we could always be certain of was a fine three course dinner at the Belle Vue- always a treat!

## **Sunday April 29**

Our final day which, once again, dawned true to form with overcast and windy consistency although sunshine did manage to break through during the afternoon.

Following the usual hearty breakfast and with all bags packed and awaiting collection, the final few hours in Alderney were spent revisiting the eastern coastline: namely the Lighthouse and its environs and Longis Common.

Very often, the last day manages to pull something highly respectable out of the avian bag and today was certainly no exception.

The first of the precious ticks came at Braye Bay where a ten-some of Bar-tailed godwits and a quartet of Dunlin conveniently presented themselves at very close range.

Half the godwits and three of the dunlins were all in prime breeding plumage and the TN's unanimously agreed that the shorebirds really were a fine sight to see.

Another acceptable tick popped up from a field alongside the Hammond Memorial where a couple of horses disturbed enough insects to attract a splendid pair of canary Yellow wagtails – the most pristine of species.

By now, lunchtime and departure were both fast approaching and, with a minibus conveniently booked to pick the group up from Longis, the former was unhurriedly dealt with in the Boat House Restaurant at Braye Bay.

Following collection from the hotel, farewells were exchanged at Alderney airport and on the dot of 4pm, the flight back to Southampton received official lift-off.

With such a fine sunny end to the afternoon, I hope that everyone enjoyed a safe and pleasant journey home and that some pleasant memories will forever remain of Alderney.

Indeed, I trust that this report will rekindle pleasant thoughts of a very small island with a rather big heart.

My best and kindest wishes to you all.

***Mike Stentiford***

***Jersey – Channel Islands***

***April 2007.***

## SPECIES LIST

### BIRDS

1. Northern Fulmar - *Fulmaris glacialis*
2. Northern Gannet – *Sula bassana*
3. Great Cormorant – *Phalacrocorax carbo*
4. European Shag – *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*
5. Grey Heron – *Ardea cinerea*
6. Mallard – *Anas platyrhynchos*
7. Common Kestrel – *Falco tinnunculus*
8. Common Pheasant – *Phasianus colchicus*
9. Common Moorhen – *Gallinula chloropus*
10. Eurasian Coot – *Fulica atra*
11. Eurasian Oystercatcher – *Haematopus ostralegus*
12. Bar-tailed Godwit - *Limosa lapponica*
13. Eurasian Curlew – *Numenius arquata*
14. Whimbrel - *Numenius phaeopus*
15. Dunlin - *Calidris alpina*
16. Herring Gull – *Larus argentatus*
17. Lesser Black-backed Gull – *Larus fuscus*
18. Greater Black-backed Gull – *Larus marinus*
19. Razorbill – *Alca torda*
20. Common Guillemot – *Uria aalge*
21. Feral Pigeon – *Columba livia*
22. Wood Pigeon – *Columba palumbus*
23. Eurasian Collared Dove – *Streptopelia decaocto*
24. Common Cuckoo - *Cuculus canorus*
25. Common Swift - *Apus apus*
26. Skylark – *Alauda arvensis*
27. European Sand Martin – *Riparia riparia*
28. Barn Swallow – *Hirundo rustica*
29. Yellow Wagtail – *Motacilla flava*
30. Pied Wagtail - *Motacilla alba yarrelli*
31. Meadow Pipit – *Anthus pratensis*
32. Rock Pipit – *Anthus petrosus*
33. Winter Wren – *Troglodytes troglodytes*
34. Hedge Accentor (Dunnock) – *Prunella modularis*
35. Common Blackbird – *Turdus merula*
36. Song Thrush – *Turdus philomelus*
37. European Robin – *Erithacus rubecula*
38. Common Stonechat – *Saxicola torquata*
39. Northern Wheatear – *Oenanthe oenanthe*

40. Willow Warbler –	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
41. Garden Warbler -	<i>Sylvia borin</i>
42. Common Whitethroat -	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
43. Common Chiffchaff –	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
44. Blackcap –	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
45. Great Tit –	<i>Parus major</i>
46. Blue Tit –	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
47. Common Raven –	<i>Corvus corax</i>
48. Carrion Crow –	<i>Corvus corone</i>
49. Eurasia Jackdaw –	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
50. Common Starling –	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
51. Common Chaffinch –	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
52. European Greenfinch –	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
53. European Goldfinch –	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
54. Common Linnet –	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
55. House Sparrow –	<i>Passer domesticus</i>

## **MAMMALS**

Rabbit – *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

## **BUTTERFLIES**

Small white  
Peacock  
Red Admiral  
Common Blue  
Large tortoiseshell (5<sup>th</sup> Island record)

## **MOTHS**

Brimstone  
Pale prominent  
Chocolate-tip  
Green carpet  
Early tooth-striped  
V Pug  
Common pug  
Oak tree pug  
Hebrew character  
Common quaker  
Knot-grass  
Early grey  
Early thorn  
Scalloped hazel  
Shuttle-shaped dart  
Muslin moth  
Ruby tiger  
Least black arches  
Cypress carpet  
Common wave  
Red-barred twin-spot  
Pine beauty