

# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our long-serving *Hon. Treasurer*, David Montier, has been looking for an opportunity to retire from the Committee for some time and I am pleased to say we have now identified a successor willing to stand. He is Richard Malin, a career banker, who has spent more than 30 years in commercial real estate finance, and much of the last ten years assisting business start-ups and with small business investment. Richard has recently established an invoice-discounting service for small companies. It is therefore proposed to hold a brief Special General Meeting of the Club immediately before the talk at The Barley Mow on 23 September 2014 to propose that Richard takes over as *Hon. Treasurer*. Formal notice of the meeting is given below.

### Special General Meeting

A Special General Meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club will be held in the upstairs room at The Barley Mow, Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE, at 5.30 pm on Tuesday 23 September 2014.

### Agenda

The Committee proposes that Richard W. Malin be, and hereby is, appointed *Hon. Treasurer* in place of David J. Montier. No other business will be conducted at this meeting.

*Chris Storey*

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The 975th meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 19 November 2013 in the upstairs room of the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE. Seven members and four non-members were present. Members attending were: Miss H. BAKER, MR K. F. BETTON, Mr K. HERON JONES, Mr D. J. MONTIER, Dr R. P. PRYS-JONES, Mr S. A. H. STATHAM and Mr C. W. R. STOREY (*Chairman*).

Non-members attending were: Mrs J. HERON-JONES, Dr C. IERONYMIDOU (*Speaker*), Mrs M. MONTIER and Mrs J. SENA STOREY.

Dr Christina Ieronymidou (BirdLife International) spoke on *Avian responses to land-use in Cyprus, and the potential effects of agricultural change*, which was the focus of her Ph.D. at the Univ. of East Anglia, Norwich. Christina began by describing the context of her work: the ongoing declines in farmland bird populations in Europe. One of the main drivers in the dramatic declines of species that used to be common in farmed countryside, such as Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* and Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union (EU). The original purpose of the CAP was to protect European Economic Community producers, partially by providing subsidies related to production. This led to agricultural intensification, but also made low-intensity farming more expensive, especially in marginal areas. The two opposing types of land-use change, intensification and abandonment, threaten farmland biodiversity, including birds. Since the 1990s, reforms to the CAP have introduced mechanisms to mitigate these threats, including agri-environment measures. Christina explained that in order to optimise these measures, we require an understanding of what land-use practices are most important to birds.

Cyprus, a recently acceded EU member state, still harbours significant populations of bird species that have declined elsewhere in Europe, as it possesses large areas of traditionally managed farmland. The overall aim of Christina's Ph.D. was to provide a first evidence base to inform and support agri-environment schemes for effective conservation of farmland birds in Cyprus, as a case study for the eastern Mediterranean. Christina carried out extensive field work across the island, surveying birds, habitats and land uses, to understand the relative importance of different habitat and landscape elements to farmland bird communities. Christina went on to describe the methods used to develop separate models of habitat association for 24 priority species for conservation, and illustrated the results from one example. She explained that across all species, a wide range of habitats and land uses were important and that habitat diversity was of key value. Farmland habitats, particularly viticulture and groves, and remnant scrub, were the most important, demonstrating the high value of heterogeneous farmland mosaics to breeding and wintering avian biodiversity on Cyprus.

The final part of the presentation focused on land-use changes that have affected the Cyprus countryside over the last 35 years. Christina demonstrated that land under agriculture has decreased substantially, with much of this attributable to declines in marginal low-intensity crops on which much avian biodiversity depends. Christina ended by emphasising that the complex farmland mosaic of Cyprus was created by traditional farming practices that are usually economically marginal today, and that, for effective

conservation of priority species and bird diversity, agri-environment mechanisms are necessary to support this heterogeneity.

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The 976th meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 25 February 2014 in the upstairs room of the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, London, SW1P 2EE. Twenty-one members and ten non-members were present. Members attending were: Miss H. BAKER, Mr K. F. BETTON, Cdr. M. B. CASEMENT, RN, Mr S. CHAPMAN, Prof. R. CHEKE, Mr D. J. FISHER, Mr M. GAUNLETT, MR G. M. KIRWAN, Mr R. R. LANGLEY, Dr C. F. MANN, Mr D. J. MONTIER, Mr R. F. PORTER (*Speaker*), Mr R. PRICE, Dr R. P. PRÝS-JONES, Mr N. J. REDMAN, Dr S. RUDGE, MR P. SELLAR, Mr S. A. H. STATHAM, Mr C. W. R. STOREY (*Chairman*) and Mr M. J. WALTON.

Non-members attending were: Mr J. BOORMAN, Mr R. BORELLO, Mrs W. BORELLO, Admiral Sir D. DOBSON, Mrs M. GAUNLETT, Miss B. HARRISON, Mr R. W. MALIN, Mrs M. MONTIER, Mr D. OWEN, Mr A. RANDALL and Miss J. WHITE.

Richard Porter spoke on *Birds of Socotra: populations and distribution*. A detached part of Yemen situated in the north-west Indian Ocean, the Socotra archipelago is rich in endemism: ten species of birds, 307 plants, 27 reptiles and 60 butterflies and moths, for example, make it one of the Middle East's biodiversity hotspots. A total of 221 birds has been recorded. Forty-four regularly breed (plus five probably do so), of which five are globally threatened: Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Socotra Buzzard *Buteo socotraensis*, Abd Al Kuri Sparrow *Passer hemileucus* and Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*. Only Egyptian Vulture is globally Endangered, but Socotra probably supports the highest concentration of this species in the world. Of the 175 or so migrants and winter visitors, most are rare or uncommon as Socotra is not on a natural migration route.

Detailed studies since 1999 have mapped the distribution of all breeding species. Surveys, including 384 km of line transects of fixed band-width (throughout all habitats, altitudes and geographic range), have determined their populations. The results were published in *Sandgrouse* (35: 43–81, 2013, and in press). The five commonest landbirds are Socotra Sparrow *Passer insularis*, Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*, Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*, Somali Starling *Onychognathus blythii* and Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*. All of the endemics have good populations with the two rarest, Abd Al Kuri Sparrow and Socotra Bunting numbering c.1,000 and c.3,770 individuals, respectively. Six seabirds have globally important populations, and the first breeding site of Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* in the world was discovered on Socotra in 2000.

Socotra's birds have been the subject of several taxonomic studies in recent years, amongst which the naming of the resident buzzard as *Buteo socotraensis*, the splitting of Abd Al Kuri Sparrow from Socotra Sparrow and the confirmation of the resident scops owl as a species *Otus socotranus* represent highlights. The main threats to wildlife are overgrazing, woodland destruction and unplanned development. There is now an active conservation and education programme to help combat these, including the identification of six biodiversity reserves and, in 2008, the establishment of the archipelago as a World Heritage Site. With a large UNDP-GEF conservation programme in the pipeline and the establishment of a branch of the Environment Protection Authority on the island, the overall outlook is optimistic.