

Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

Vol. 133 No. 2

Published 14 June 2013

CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chairman's message

The ninth Conference of the European Ornithologists' Union is being held in the UK at the Univ. of East Anglia in Norwich on 27–31 August 2013 (Tuesday–Saturday). The BOC will have a stand and I would very much like to meet any members of the Club who are attending, either at the stand or possibly at an informal get-together at a bar or other convenient location. I also hope that we will be able to recruit some new members during the event. If you are coming to the conference it would be very helpful if you could let me know in advance so that we can make arrangements. Contact me at helen.baker60@tiscali.co.uk.

At the time of writing, we have had our first evening meeting in the very comfortable upstairs room at the Barley Mow. Do join us on 24 September and 19 November.

We also had a very successful joint meeting with the African Bird Club (ABC) and Natural History Museum (see below). ABC arranged for Charlie Moores to produce a podcast containing interviews with the speakers. This is available on the BOC website <http://www.boc-online.org/meetings-past-2013.htm>. It lasts for c.1 hour and is well worth listening to.

The three supplements to the *Bulletin Avian Systematics and Taxonomy* (Vol. 112A), *Recent Avian Extinctions* (Vol. 126A) and *Why Museums Matter* (Vol. 123A) should by now be freely available on the Biodiversity Heritage Library website at www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639.

This is my last message as Chairman and by the time you read it we will have held our AGM and I will have handed over responsibility to my successor.

Helen Baker

The 972nd meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 26 February 2013 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE. Thirteen members and five non-members were present.

Members attending were: Miss HELEN BAKER (*Chairman*), Cdr. MICHAEL CASEMENT, RN, STEPHEN CHAPMAN, MARTIN GAUNTLETT, RICHARD LANGLEY, DAVID MONTIER, Dr ROBERT PRYŶS-JONES, ROBIN PRYTHERCH, Dr PETER RUDGE, PAT SELLAR, TONY STATHAM, CHRIS STOREY and MIKE WALTON.

Non-members attending were: Mrs MARGARET GAUNTLETT, Mrs MARY MONTIER, JAMES REYNOLDS (*Speaker*), ROGER WOOLVEN-ALLEN and LINDA WOOLVEN-ALLEN.

Dr James Reynolds (Univ. of Birmingham Centre for Ornithology) spoke on *Ascension Island and Sooty Terns: an ecological disaster or a smorgasbord in the eyes of conservation biologists?* Ascension Island in many ways is an ornithological outpost of the UK. It is one of several UK Overseas Territories and is 'off the beaten track' because of its remote location midway between West Africa and Brazil in the tropical Atlantic Ocean. Jim began by explaining the island's historical, geographical and cultural contexts, before describing its ornithological treasures as a major breeding ground for seabirds within an otherwise landless seascape of one million square miles. He has worked there since 2008, when he accompanied the Army Ornithological Society (AOS) as their scientific advisor. The AOS has mounted expeditions to the island since 1990, since when many seabird species (including Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*, Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Black Noddy *A. minutus*, Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* and White Tern *Gygis alba*) have been censused.

However, the focus of Jim's talk was the mainstay of the AOS's and his ongoing research. Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus* breeds on the island and work over the last 23 years has unlocked many of the species' secrets. For example, he provided empirical evidence from ringing-recapture efforts for its subannual breeding cycle; he documented the precipitous decline in the population size from as many as 3,000,000 birds as recently as 100 years ago to the current population of 340,000 birds; he described the major predation pressure from a meso-predator (rat) release event as a result of the eradication of the apex predator (cat) in 2004; and he explored the role of food availability in the tern's population biology. He finished by explaining how current state-of-the-art tracking technology is revealing movements of the species for the first time, bridging a major gap in our knowledge about where birds go post-fledging for up to the first seven years of their lives, about where they forage in the South Atlantic and how they spend the 91% of their lives when they are not on land.

Joint BOC, African Bird Club, Natural History Museum meeting, at the Natural History Museum, London, 6 April 2013

This was the second of a series of joint meetings held by the BOC and the NHM in conjunction with various regional bird clubs. This time it was the turn of the African Bird Club. The day's programme comprised six talks, three each either side of lunch. The morning started with Paul Donald speaking on the Liben Lark *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*, possibly the most threatened bird species in Africa. Paul was standing in for Bruktawit Abdu, who unfortunately had been unable to travel from Ethiopia as originally planned. Paul reviewed the species' taxonomic history with respect to other forms in the genus elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, and described research being undertaken to understand the lark's requirements and to conserve its habitat on the Liben Plain. He also revealed that another population of Liben Larks has been found 600 km from the Liben Plains, and that *sidamoensis* is synonymous with the poorly known Archer's Lark *H. archeri*, which name has priority (see also Spottiswoode *et al.* 2013. Rediscovery of a long-lost lark reveals the conspecificity of endangered *Heteromirafra* populations in the Horn of Africa. *J. Orn.* DOI 10.1007/s10336-013-0948-1). He was followed by a presentation on Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* in Libya by Abdulmaula Hamza, who explained that there are now three breeding locations known in Libya and that at each of these there has been an increase in numbers in recent years. Abdulmaula has carried out detailed research on the species' feeding requirements and has carefully analysed the fish species taken. He has also ringed a large number of chicks, c.20 of which have been recovered in different parts of the Mediterranean and West Africa. The morning session concluded with a travelogue about birds and birdwatching in Rwanda, Africa's most densely populated country, given by Jason Anderson. Jason described the country's various habitats and the different species of birds in each. His talk was illustrated with many great photographs and also accompanied by sound-recordings.

The lunch break was followed by the African Bird Club's AGM and then the talks resumed with a fascinating account by palaeontologist and artist Julian Hume of his work reconstructing the lost world of the Dodo and the extinct birds of the Mascarenes, from the fossil record and the scant historical documentation of the early settlers. Dr Siobhan Cox then spoke about her genetic work reconstructing a phylogeny for the *Zosterops* white-eyes of the African mainland. Her results indicate that traditional taxonomy is incorrect in many respects and that there are more species than currently accepted, with Montane White-eye *Z. poliogaster* being especially affected. Nigel Redman concluded the event with an account of his recent visit to the officially unrecognised Republic of Somaliland, a seldom visited self-governing country that is technically part of Somalia despite declaring independence in 1991. His talk focused on the endemic and near-endemic birds of the region, with particular attention paid to the taxonomic status and history of the larks, and was illustrated by numerous photographs of most species.

Attendance at the meeting was excellent, with well in excess of 100 people present, and there was enthusiastic support for the planning of future meetings with other regional bird clubs.

David Fisher