

Isles of Scilly

9-16 October 1999

Participants:

Alan Davies

Alastair & Jill Hepburn

Brian & Rita Mutter

Michael Pleasants

Graham & Mary Sparkes

Kevin Woodhouse



Leader: Vaughan Ashby

Picture: Chimney Swift

Day 1: Meeting at the heliport at Penzance, our helicopter flight time was 15.20. Unfortunately however, because of poor visibility, helicopters stopped flying at 13.30 and there were no planes from Lands End airport all day. Fortunately, the Scillonian 111 stepped in and ran a second sailing at 19.30 which, was fortunately quite calm. We therefore arrived at Mincarlo guesthouse at 22.30 tired but pleased to be on the islands. This was the first time in 20 years that I have experienced this kind of problem.

Day 2: After the usual substantial 08.30 breakfast with superb views over the harbour from the dining room window, we went straight down to the quay to catch a boat to the Eastern Isles. The reason for this was that for the past few days a **Short-toed Eagle** (the first British record) had been present. An earlier boat had located the bird on Great Ganilly and we had brief but good views of the bird on the eastern tip of the island. It was then seen again perched on the ground on the northern end of the island before flying over to St Martins mobbed by Ravens. We had more excellent views of the bird at Daymark on St Martins before retracing our way through Crow sound towards St Agnes. The weather was superb, warm with bright sunshine and the sea was a dazzling blue contrasting with the green islands and golden beaches. Arriving on St Agnes, we climbed to the highest point of the island, the old lighthouse, where a White's Thrush had been present for several days. It had not been seen since early morning however, so we contented ourselves with superb views of a **Red-breasted Flycatcher** in The Parsonage. Not far down the road a Monarch butterfly from North America was settled on a hedge allowing us prolonged close views of this magnificent insect. 1999 was an outstanding year for Monarchs who normally migrate from North America to Central America for the winter and were caught up in the strong westerly airflow. We then heard that there was to be an organised search for the White's Thrush at Troytown so assembling with several hundred people along the edge of a field we waited patiently whilst a volunteer slowly checked all the hedges. Unfortunately it was not to be so we all dispersed again to search the island. A **Siberian Stonechat** was on view close to Rose Cottage tearooms which was the only excuse we needed (ask Alan about the sticky toffee pudding!). Returning down Barnaby Lane to look for a reported Wryneck on Wingletang, all we had were brief flight views although, a flock of 14 European Golden Plovers were nice, cryptically blending into the heather. I then heard on my CB radio that the **White's Thrush** had been relocated closeby so we joined the crowds looking for it. Unfortunately it had flown into an unviewable area so whilst a large number of people followed it, I used my experience and local knowledge to stake out a position overlooking the area. Just as I expected, the bird flew again with all of the commotion, right in front of us, giving brief but good flight views including its amazing black and white striped underwing (typical of the *Zoothera* thrushes). Returning back to St Mary's on the 16.30 boat, we walked the one-mile to the airport to look for the **Upland Sandpiper**. We quickly located the bird, achieving excellent views of this peculiar wader and for good measure had another Monarch fly past! By now the 18.30 evening meal wasn't far off so we retraced our steps to the guesthouse with just 20 minutes to spare. The four course evening meal was as usual excellent and, was followed by a visit to the Porthcressa for the various bird stalls for rare bird photographs, books, pagers, optics and sculptures and of course, the bird log. The final part of the day was a celebratory drink at the Atlantic Inn for those with any energy left!

Day 3: As usual on Scilly, the day starts with a basic route plan based on the birds reported the following evening at the bird log. Today we started with a walk along to coast to Porthloo beach with its Sanderling, Turnstones and Dunlin. Whilst checking through the waders, we heard on the CB that the Short-toed Eagle had been seen flying over Tresco. As we could see Tresco from our position, we scanned the island and picked the bird up flying between Tresco and Bryher. Although being harassed by Herring Gulls, it was gradually gaining height and after one false start, headed rapidly south crossing over our heads and hopefully returning safely to France. We then walked through Lower Moors on our way to the airport again where a **Short-toed Lark** was seen together with the Upland Sandpiper again, a Whinchat and several Northern Wheatears. Crossing the end of the runway, we located a flock of 13 **Snow Buntings**, which, gave excellent views. Around Giants Castle and down to

Porthellick, where we spent some time trying to get decent views of a roosting **Black-crowned Night-heron**. At best however, we could see bits of its head and back when the wind blew the leaves! A **Red-backed Shrike** was conveniently showing close to Carn Veon tea rooms so after watching it for a few minutes at extremely close range, we stopped for a well deserved rest combined with some very unhealthy but yummy cakes! With beautiful warm sunshine, it would have been easy to spend the rest of the afternoon there but another Red-breasted Flycatcher had been found nearby at the sunken Garden so we went to see it before returning to town.

Day 4: With no significant new birds to look for, we started our day by walking out to Penninis Head where single Snow Bunting and Northern Wheatear were found. Dropping down to Old Town via the churchyard, very few common migrants could be found so we continued up to the airport where a Peregrine Falcon was the highlight. We then heard that the Black-crowned Night-heron was showing in the open at Porthellick Pool so we cut through Salakee Farm to the pool where the bird was giving amazing views before being chased off by a Grey Heron. Also present were Common Snipe. Just as we were about to head towards Carn Veon tearooms, a **Red-throated Pipit** was then reported on the CB back at the airport so we retraced our steps but got only frustratingly brief flight views. A **Richard's Pipit** also flew over whilst we were waiting. Eventually the Richard's Pipit was relocated close to the hangers where we all got good views. Again, we headed towards the tearooms when the Red-throated Pipit was also relocated causing us to retrace our steps yet again! We were rewarded with excellent views of a virtually summer plumage bird. Eventually we arrived at Carn Veon tearooms via Kitty Down at the third try! Our return route was via Maypole where we found a Pied Flycatcher. About this time, the news broke of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo on Tresco. There wasn't time to get to the quay in time for the boat however, so we continued our leisurely walk back to town via Town Lane, Telegraph, Four Lanes and Rocky Hill where, at the Lower Moors extension at Rosehill, most of the group had excellent views of a **Firecrest**.

Day 5: With the prospect of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, it had to be Tresco today. We didn't take one of the very early boats however, as the bird had been reported as elusive. As we neared the quay at New Grimsby, 12 Little Egrets were roosting on one of the rocky islets. Many people were looking for the cuckoo and we joined them at a vantage point close to the post office. Whilst we were waiting, we saw two Whooper Swans and a flock of 27 Common Greenshanks on the Great Pool. The cuckoo failed to show so we moved on to the Abbey Pool where, a Black-necked Grebe was a rare bird for Scilly as we ate our lunch. Also present were two Eurasian Wigeon and a Eurasian Jackdaw. The cuckoo had shown again so we returned to the David Hunt hide by the Great Pool where a large crowd was assembled. Several of the group then managed brief views but the bird promptly disappeared. We therefore continued our walk around the island. Passing the David Hunt hide again two hours later, there was still no sign of the cuckoo. We were just looking at two small rats unconcerned by our presence when an announcement came over the CB that the cuckoo had been relocated so we rapidly returned the 200 yards where we all had outstanding views of the **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**. In fact, as most people had given up by then and returned to the quay, we were privileged to see it in a relatively small crowd. Returning to Carn Veon quay in good spirits for the 16.30 boat back to St Mary's, we returned to the guesthouse early for showers etc., as there were no reports of anything new.

Day 6: With nothing specific to look for, we decided to visit the airfield for another look at the Upland Sandpiper. Just as we had located the bird by the windsock, a CB message came through 'Blue Rock Thrush on Porthloo beach'. After 5 seconds of total disbelief, we rapidly headed back down to Old Town then through Lower Moors to Telegraph Road where we joined another stream of people heading down Porthloo Lane. At the beach the scene was amazing, several hundred people gathered viewing the **Blue Rock Thrush** feeding on the bushes and rocks about 400 hundred yards away. With the bird giving such good views it was all very civilised with everyone offering late arrivals views through their telescopes. Although the distance was quite large, the light was excellent and a full adult male Blue Rock thrush through a 60x telescope is unmistakable! Almost overlooked was a Common Redstart with it! We decided to celebrate with a cup of tea at Juliet's Garden but so had a hundred other people so we decided that Carn Veon was a far better bet and so it was, we had the place to ourselves! Returning via Maypole we saw several Redwings whilst a Peregrine flew over Borough Farm. Newford Duck Pond was tranquil but devoid of wild birds so we continued along Pungies Lane where we found a Northern Lapwing. Continuing along MacFarlane Down to Bant's Carn, we had a brief look at the Bronze Age village before searching for a **Wryneck**. Eventually we found it and everyone enjoyed excellent views of this cryptically camouflaged bird. We returned to town via the golf course and Porthloo Beach again but the Blue Rock Thrush was out of sight on Taylor's Island.

Day 7: We visited Porthloo Beach again first thing in the morning but the Blue Rock Thrush had become more elusive. Along Porthloo Lane a Reed Warbler was found at the duck pond. Continuing on to Porthellick Pool, Water Rail & Common Snipe showed well although **Jack Snipe** was more elusive. There had been a report of a Radde's Warbler on Penninis Head so we headed up through Salakee Farm to the airfield where 100+ Fieldfare flew over. By the time we got to Old Town another **Radde's Warbler** had been reported so we headed for the one that was showing best at Penninis Head. The bird performed admirably for nearly half an hour allowing everyone to take in its identification features. Returning along Penninis track we stopped off to see a male **Ring Ouzel** before stopping off at Mincarolo to eat our lunch. The next report on the CB was a **Black Redstart** on Porthcressa Beach which, within 15 minutes we were watching. By now the Blue Rock Thrush had returned so we strolled back to Porthloo Beach to see it again, also seeing a male Common Redstart, White Wagtail and Eurasian Curlew. We then climbed Rocky Hill to Four Lanes where a **Yellow-browed Warbler** was reported. Unfortunately it was rather elusive and only showed to a few but nevertheless, it had been another excellent day so we returned to the guesthouse.

Day 8: With just 3 hours after breakfast before the airport bus arrived, we 'hung loose' at the guesthouse. The only report of interest however, was a Little Bunting on Penninis head but by the time we got to the hospital it had already disappeared. The return helicopter flight was on time at the end of one of the best birding weeks for many years on Scilly. Unfortunately, an hour after the group had left and before the second group arrived, a **Common Rosefinch** gave outstanding views for 10 minutes by Carn Gwarvel School with just Alan Davies who was staying for two weeks, seeing it.

Footnote: As stated above, 9-16 October 1999 was one of the best weeks on Scilly for rarities for many years, there was however, a shortage of common migrants. The week 16-23 October was slightly quieter with the highlights being **White-rumped Sandpiper, Chimney Swift, Pallas's Warbler** and **Ring-necked Duck**. Some good birds remained from the previous week however, including Whooper Swan, Black-necked Grebe, Black-crowned Night-heron, Upland Sandpiper, Richard's Pipit, Short-toed Lark, White's Thrush, Yellow-browed Warbler, Wryneck, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Firecrest, Ring Ouzel, Black Redstart and Snow Bunting. In addition, Little Stint, Spotted Redshank, Long-eared Owl and Lapland Bunting were new. Regarding the best time to go to Scilly, that is really the \$64,000 question. In 1998 I arrived on 10 October, two days after one of the best birds of the autumn had departed (Olivaceous Warbler) and left on 24 October two days before the arrival of another of the best birds of the autumn (American Robin)! This year a Common Nighthawk arrived the day after we left but most people managed to see a Red-flanked Bluetail in Cornwall on the way home! Anywhen in October is therefore good for birding with some rarities turning up in late September or early November, so unless you can spend six weeks on the islands you will always miss something!