

## **Kent Listing; a history. Geoff Burton**

I first began to pay attention to my Kent list in 1988 when I moved from Tonbridge to Boughton under Blean near Faversham. This was a more central location in the county with Dungeness now only 30 miles away and Sandwich Bay only 20. Bough Beech Reservoir, however, which had been my local patch for 18 years, was now about 44 miles away. My first addition after the move was a Baird's Sandpiper at Dungeness, ironically, the next was a White Stork at Fordcombe near Tonbridge and near the Sussex border, followed by the wader duo of Oriental Pratincole and Wilson's Phalarope at Elmey! In my first month after moving, I added four species to my Kent list. I reached 300 species with the Desert Warbler at Seasalter in November 1991.

Fast forward six years. Barry Wright had begun to collect Kent lists from several birders. I got involved and then, I don't remember exactly how or why, I took over. The top ten lists at the end of 1996 were:

Dave Gilbert	333
Don Taylor	330
Geoff Burton	327
John Cantelo	324
Mike Buckland	322
Marcus Lawson	322
Chris Abrams	321
Barry Wright	321
Chris Bradshaw	320
Martin Coath	320

I think that only four of these still live in the county and only three remain in the top 10.

In the early years, there was much talk about what the 400<sup>th</sup> species for Kent might be. However, with splits and lumps and re-evaluations, this milestone passed unnoticed. It would be difficult, but not impossible if anyone has the time, to calculate what the 400<sup>th</sup> species was!

### **Tale of the century**

The last year of the old century had been a particular good one for Kent birding. Pied-billed Grebe and Blyth's Reed Warbler were added to the Kent List and much sort after birds including Greater Yellowlegs, Slender-billed Gull, Canvasback, Little Bittern, Baillon's Crake and Sardinian Warbler, occurred.

And so, to the the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We chugged along at a steady pace adding, on average, one species to the Kent List each year. There were four blank years: 2000 itself then 2007, 2009 and 2017 and no more than two additions in any one year. Thus, by 2019 (year 20) we had added exactly 20 species to the list. Four of these, Audouin's Gull, Tufted Puffin, Acadian Flycatcher and Brown Booby were new to Britain as well. And then there was 2020! In an 86-day period between 17<sup>th</sup> October and 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021, no less than six additions were seen (and photographed). It is telling of the times that half of these were photographed by non-birders and identified later and, also of the times that they could not be twitched!

After the "Six in 86", the Kent List understandably calmed down with no new additions until 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022 when the now legendary Eleonora's Falcon was photographed over the restharrow scrape and re-found nearby at Worth Marshes the next day. The first twitchable Eleonora's in Britain, it remained until 27<sup>th</sup> to be seen by anyone who wished to see it. In contrast, the next surge, the "Three in 40"

were not so obliging. A Sand Plover, identified straight away from photographs as a Tibetan Sand Plover, at Cliffe Pools was only seen by four people, including only one of our listers during its short stay on 1<sup>st</sup> September. A Short-toed Eagle appeared over the South Foreland Valley ten days later and was seen, and photographed, by two observers but no listers were present. Later reports of the bird over the Ash Levels and Richborough have yet to be confirmed. Finally, a Yellow-browed Bunting was trapped at Sandwich Bay on 10<sup>th</sup> October. I understand that ten or more people saw the bird before it was released including at least three listers.

Last year, 2023, had been quiet with just a few listers finally adding Alpine Swift or Black Stork. Or it was until 19<sup>th</sup> September when a Cliff Swallow was found at North Foreland and then a Solitary Sandpiper appeared at Stodmarsh on 15<sup>th</sup> October. The Americanization of the Kent List!

So, what is the Kent List now? The KOS website says that it is 431 but that, quite rightly, does not include the yet to be accepted two recent additions referred to above. However, it also does not include species accepted by the BBRC at the time, and in one case by the BOURC as a new bird for the British List, but which have now been split. The Kentish individuals cannot, or have not yet, been assigned to any of the new split species. This applies to Little Shearwater (now recently accepted as a Barola Shearwater), Soft-plumaged Petrel and, presumably, Isabelline Shrike. Although Daurian and Turkestan Shrike are shown on the KOS's Kent List but not in detail. I think they can't just be dismissed. If we include those, and the two likely additions this year, we have a potential Kent List of 436.

### **The demise of Dungeness and the rise of the East**

In the first 20 years of the century, when 20 new species were added to the Kent List, no less than seven of these (Iberian Chiffchaff, Audouin's Gull, Paddyfield Warbler, Lesser Scaup, White-tailed Plover, Ross's Gull, and Acadian Flycatcher) were found in the Dungeness area. Since the Acadian Flycatcher in 2015, there have been 15 additions to the Kent List but no further contribution from what is, probably, the most watched area in Kent. In contrast, the East of the county (as defined by the KOS), has contributed nine species including the last seven.

### **The rise of photography**

In recent years, with innovations in camera technology, it has become an essential element in birding. Eyes, ears, bins, scopes and now the camera. What happened to the notebook? If we look at the last 15 additions to the list, they have all been photographed. Some by non-birders who knew only that the bird was unfamiliar to them, and in many cases, photographs have played an important part in the identification of the species and eventual acceptance.

### **Not on anyone's list**

There are 433 species on the KLC version of the Kent List. Of these, only 24 species have not been seen by any lister. A few predate any lister, a few are tainted by stories of suppression, and a few fell to non-birders armed with a digital camera. The Chough became extinct in the nineteenth century, the Tengmalm's Owl was shot in Dartford in 1881 and the Cream-coloured Courser was seen by H G Alexander in 1916,

“Suddenly I came on a bird which was so distinctive as to be immediately recognisable: it was a Cream-coloured Courser. It was quite tame. I watched it for some time ...”. That would make a good template for my next description to the BBRC on finding a Gray's Grasshopper Warbler at Swalecliffe!

The next two came in 1951 with an Ivory Gull and Rufous Warbler (that was what it was called then) followed by the last Little Bustard in the county flushed from a field of blackcurrants at Hadlow in 1958 by Jeffery Harrison. Pausing for a moment, I can see that these species are still being seen in the country if not the county. Wild Choughs from Cornwall, via Ireland, are straying closer and those from Wildwood closer still. There are recent records of Tengmalm's Owls from Shetland, as well as the notorious Spurn bird in 1983, a Cream-coloured Courser was in Essex in 1984, an Ivory Gull in Suffolk in 1999 and a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (that is what it is called now) in Norfolk in 2020.

More recent times and we begin to know the observers such as Dave Davenport's Pallas's Sandgrouse at Stodmarsh in 1964, and, 50 years later, Dave Walker's Ross's Gull in 2014.

### **When is it safe to leave the county?**

Obviously, you should not! However, if you're driven by your world list, chasing the latest incarnation of the Scops Owl perhaps, or your Western Palearctic list catching up with those seen elsewhere Nearctic passerines, or even your British list, when is it best to go to avoid missing a new species for Kent. There have been 33 additions to the Kent List this century. Surprisingly, none have been added in March or June and only one in April. Five have been added in January, although only two of these were twitchable, six in May and 18 of them during the months from August to November. You better wait until next year!

### **Our next-door-neighbour**

That is Sussex! Now the Sussex list is only 408 species so well behind Kent, but we do have an East Coast as well as a South Coast. However, their list includes 27 species not on our list and, with the earlier reference to Americanization, 16 of the species come from that side of the pond. Well, technically, it is nearer than Kent. This includes four wader species (Semi-palmated Plover, Killdeer, Upland Sandpiper and Hudsonian Whimbrel) and six passerines or near-passerines (Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Northern Mockingbird, American Robin, Buff-bellied Pipit, Baltimore Oriole and Black-and-white Warbler).

### **Other counties**

Kent cannot compete with Yorkshire. The current Yorkshire list stands at 469 species. The top lister (Andy Gibson) is on 414 species, there are 12 listers over 400 and 27 with lists higher than the top Kent lister. However, they have only 82 listers over 300, compared with over 100 in Kent. Norfolk would be an interesting county for comparison, but it does seem to be shrouded in mystery and intrigue. Perhaps, one of the many defectors to that county could shed some light on matters?

Inland counties are, of course, a very different matter. I have a particular interest in Berkshire for family reasons. The Berkshire total currently stands at 321 species and the top lister, Chris Heard, has a total of 276 species. My total is only 131 species which, apparently puts me in 73<sup>rd</sup> place. Much to do there! There are five records of species not on the Kent List, three over 100 years old, and two more recent records of Killdeer in 1984 and Buff-bellied Pipit in 2012.

### **List within lists**

Within the Kent List there are other lists. Patch birding has received a lot of interest in recent years, self-found list, year lists etc. Next time perhaps?