

David Lewis Davenport
16th October 1946 – April 27th 2008
Chris Wheeler



In April 2008 Kent lost one of its most respected and knowledgeable ornithologists. David might have chuckled at being called an ornithologist but somehow the term 'birdwatcher' doesn't seem to fit because David was much more than that. He had a remarkable analytical and intuitive mind which he used to great effect in understanding movements of birds and this led to a long list of published papers and articles. He also had a prodigious memory for dates and figures which he used to great effect when writing and editing publications such as the Kent Bird Report.

I first met David somewhere on the Medway estuary on a cold January day at the height of the 1962/63 cold winter when he would have been 16 and we became good friends, often birdwatching together and sometimes travelling to different countries finding new and interesting things to see. He and his two brothers were among those encouraged by G. B. Rimes the Latin master at Gillingham Grammar School whose love of natural history influenced so many pupils at that time. One of my most memorable days with David was at the end of 1964 when he and I together with his brother Llew saw the Pallas's Sandgrouse at Stodmarsh and it was David who first spotted this strange bird. His eyesight was very sharp and it remained so and this was to be a distinct advantage in his studies of skua movements which were to become his specialty.

David's involvement with the Kent Bird Report which lasted nearly 50 years will be sorely missed. His name first appeared in the list of contributors for the 1960 Report and this was the beginning of an involvement with the publication right up to the time of his death in 2008. He became a Recorder for the North Area between 1968 and 1971 and wrote part of the Report every year from 1972 acting as Assistant Editor from 1976 to 1982. His reviewing of the whole of the systematic list in the Report prior to publication was a valuable check for errors and misinterpretations. It was this meticulous attention to detail coupled with his amazing memory for dates and numbers that made his contributions so valuable. He was also one of the three co-editors of *The Birds of Kent* which was published in 1981 and he had even drafted some of the species accounts for the yet to be published new book on the Birds of Kent.



Seawatching at Cliffe in 1968
From left: Bob Hutchings, Len Batchelor and David Davenport.

The study of migration became his main interest almost to the exclusion of other aspects of ornithology and he gradually lost interest in foreign travel. From his initial interest in autumn sea bird movements in the Thames Estuary he developed a passion for Pomarine Skuas and studied their spring movements in the English Channel off Dungeness. Prompted by an earlier report of some Pomarine Skuas in May 1971 at Balranald North Uist he began pioneering research into the spring movements of skuas around the British Isles particularly off the North West coast. He travelled mainly to Balranald on North Uist to test out his theories of spring migration between 1976 and 2002 but he also made three trips to Slyne Head in Ireland between 1979 and 1981. He witnessed some impressive movements at Balranald, the best being 1,250 Long-tailed Skuas in 7 hours in 1993 and 962 Pomarine Skuas in 2002. He had worked out the necessary weather conditions that should produce a visible passage and would only travel up to North Uist if those conditions were forecast, often leaving Kent at the drop of a hat, so to speak, after studying the weather maps. He became an authority on skua migration writing at least 10 papers for the *Kent Bird Report*, *British Birds*, *Scottish Birds*, *Irish birds*, *Birding World*, and the *Dungeness Bird Observatory Report*. He was invited to write the species account for Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas in the new *Birds of Scotland* (Forrester and Andrews eds. 2007, SOC) and fortunately he was able to see this massive two volume work just before he died. His last article "Identification of Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas" was published in *KOS News* just after his death.

David had his idiosyncrasies which made him the character that he was. He was always good company to be with and he had a great sense of humour which made a day in the field with him such good fun but I don't think he liked crowds when out birdwatching. He was however very sociable and had a great reputation for dropping in on friends unannounced sometimes at mealtimes, but he was always welcome. He loved the North Kent Marshes and if you happened to find him at one of his favourite sites such as Shellness on Sheppey he would be quite happy to chat and share the latest news. He never used a telescope and tripod preferring high powered binoculars instead, and he would not adapt to the emerging tools that most of us have succumbed to over the years such as mobile phones, pagers, cameras or even a home computer (even though in early employment he was a computer operator when none of us had home computers). He would however spend a lot of time on the phone comparing notes with other correspondents on various bird movements at migration time so he was always up to date with events. One criticism perhaps is that he could be rather dogmatic at times but I usually found that if I had disagreed with him over a particular subject he would generally be proved right.

David never married and his social life revolved round his church and his passion for pub quizzes which he enjoyed with a circle of friends; no doubt his memory for facts both important and trivial helped here. He was a very caring person having at one time worked at a care centre helping disadvantaged people and subsequently doing voluntary work helping elderly residents in the locality where he lived. He was a rather private person and many would not have known that he battled with ill-health for most of his life but I do know that his Christian faith and the support of his church family helped him through the difficult times. The end came rather suddenly. He had been suffering from severe back pain and some wonderful friends had been dropping in to do what they could to help but it wasn't until he had been admitted to hospital that an aggressive form of prostate cancer was diagnosed.

He is survived by his younger brother Maurice, his elder brother Llew having died less than a year before.

I learnt a lot from David and I will miss him.

Memorial at Aird an Runair, Balranald, North Uist
(Richard Bonser)