

Histo Item 82.1

Tucker, J. (2021) BB eye. The value of historical county records. *British Birds*. 114(3):127-128.



British Birds

March 2021 • Vol. 114 • 125–186



Territorial behaviour
of the Hen Harrier in winter

The identification of
Northern Shrike in Europe

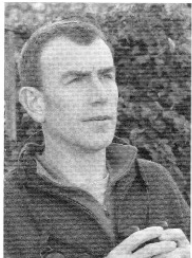
'Mandt's Black Guillemot' in
Lincolnshire: new to Britain



British Birds

Volume 114 • Number 3 • March 2021

- 126 Editorial
127 *BB eye*: The value of historical county records
129 News and comment *Adrian Pitches*
133 Territorial behaviour of the Hen Harrier in winter *Gerold Dobler*
148 The identification of Northern Shrike in Europe *Aleksi Lehikoinen*
166 'Mandt's Black Guillemot' in Lincolnshire: new to Britain *Dave Roberts*
167 'Mandt's Black Guillemot' in Lincolnshire: the BOURC assessment of the first British record *Christopher McNerny and Robert McGowan*
172 Notes 178 Letters 179 Obituaries
180 Reviews 184 Recent reports 185 My patch



It feels good to be signing off with an issue containing such a varied mix of content: a paper on the behaviour of Hen Harriers in winter, illustrated with the sort of photographs that we now take for granted but which add so much to the ability of an author to describe and illustrate bird behaviour; the identification of a species that is not (yet) on the British List but which will certainly be on the radar of rarity finders who work the east coast in late autumn; a little-known seabird, new to Britain; and a variety of notes, book reviews and other short items towards the end. I'm confident that there will be something in here for everyone.

Notwithstanding all the work that has gone into the longer items, I wanted to make special mention of the two two-page contributions that book-end the issue. John Tucker's *BB eye* on his long-term project to document the historical ornithological record in his home county of Shropshire has been a mammoth undertaking. It's not one that anyone would sign up to lightly but almost all other British counties will have similar untapped seams waiting to be mined. And then there is Toby Phelps' account of his term-time patch, the Tremough 10k. The idea of a local patch being defined by a 10-km circle from home (rather than, say, geographical features or parish boundaries) is a neat one, especially if you want to compare effort between patches, and perhaps also if you're contemplating a 'green' local patch. I really enjoyed it and am toying with the idea of a Virkie 10k for my retirement. In the same way that John's article shows what industry there is out there in county ornithology, Toby's piece gives me plenty of encouragement that student birders are doing good things when they're not in lectures (lockdowns permitting, obviously). It's a great way to finish the issue.

Roger Riddington



British Birds aims to: ❖ provide an up-to-date magazine for everyone interested in the birds of the Western Palearctic; ❖ publish a range of material on behaviour, conservation, distribution, ecology, identification, movements, status and taxonomy as well as the latest ornithological news and book reviews; ❖ maintain its position as the journal of record; and ❖ interpret scientific research on birds in an easily accessible way.



© British Birds 2021

The value of historical county records

Every county has an archive containing its recorded ornithology, typically consulted only during preparations for a county or regional avifauna or when establishing the historical context of rarities. Seldom is the archive examined in detail, at least with regard to common species. Recently, the entirety of Britain's historical ornithology was summarised by David Ballance (Ballance 2020), in a worthy successor to his *Birds in Counties* (Ballance 2000 and supplements).

The Historical Ornithology of Shropshire (<http://histo.shropshirebirds.com>) is believed to be the only example of a complete record of the entire ornithological literature of an English county. This online record, known within the county as 'Histo', contains in excess of 1,500 items, with a complete 15,000-entry Species Index. (Online Histo is accompanied by an annotated hard copy, occupying 22 lever arch files.) Work in compiling Histo began in 2007 and has involved scanning or photographing every page of every document relating to the occurrence and status of birds within the county (but avoiding ethology). The pages are scanned image files so, except in a few cases, items cannot be word-searched but the comprehensive index enables all species records to be tracked down. The material spans annual nature reports and academic papers, some with records back to Roman times; journal entries from *The Zoologist*, *The Field* and other less well-known nineteenth-century journals; local newspapers; and the pages of current journals and magazines, including *BB*. The compilation of Histo was brought to a close with all known records to the end of 2020.

Histo's core material is the records of the Caradoc & Severn Valley Field Club, from the 1880s, together with its successor the Shropshire Ornithological Society, from 1955. Further data have been added from multiple additional sources, notably two recently discovered county ornithological diaries, of Charles Gawen (Tucker & Tucker 2018) and the Meares brothers (Waddell 2017).

William E. Beckwith (1844–1892) was the leading nineteenth-century ornithologist in Shropshire and made his first appearance in the literature with a report of three rarities in *The Zoologist* in 1867. His next contribution was a bird species list for Shrewsbury in 1878. He went on to accumulate and publish, in instalments, the largest body of nineteenth-century ornithological information but died suddenly at the age of 48 without completing the book he was working towards. Histo was used to create the first single volume of all Beckwith's bird work (Tucker & Tucker 2017). From Beckwith's work we can begin to gain some idea of the county's nineteenth-century avifauna, providing the earliest ornithological baseline we have for Shropshire. This enables us to gauge the extent of the many losses (and few gains) there have been since then. A recent example published in *BB* concerned the Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (*Brit. Birds* 113: 178–179).

No value judgements are imposed on the material or attempts made to validate records; Histo is simply a compilation of everything known. The Species Index is comprehensive and covers every mention with the exception of common species (colour coded in the index) in Annual Bird Reports since 1955. For example, there are 142 records for Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* and 123 for Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, both always popular with recorders although now, respectively, functionally extinct or rapidly declining. The Species Index has a Notes field, which can help in finding particular records and sometimes sites – there is no sites index. The Index highlights, in red, all records rejected by county or national adjudicators.

The compilation of the data since 2007 probably represents the equivalent of around three person-years' work. The additional work on the website, undertaken by my brother Peter, is impossible to quantify. It was Peter who first suggested making it available online and this was invaluable during the preparation of *Birds of Shropshire* (Smith 2019).

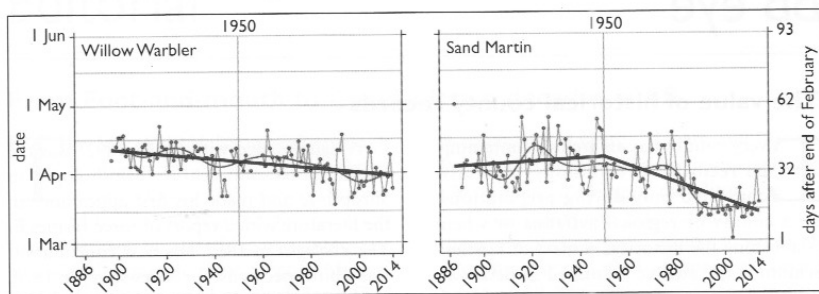


Fig. 1. Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (continuous trend to arriving earlier) and Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (broken stick). The graphs show annual arrival dates (joined unless gap in data), a decadal smoothing line and the 'best fit' model (in blue).

Another early application of the resource was in relation to phenology. Histo was examined to extract migrant arrival dates, the very first being a Cuckoo recorded by Beckwith on 9th April 1871. The outcome, after three months of data extraction and checking, was SMAD (Shropshire Migrant Arrivals Database; <http://pgt7.uk/sos/general/sos2016tuckerree.html>). SMAD currently contains close to 3,200 first-record dates spanning 130 years for 32 species of migrant birds. The annual data are virtually complete for Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* and Common Swift *Apus apus*, with only five and two missing dates respectively. They are more sparse for less familiar species and the series were curtailed for others as they either adapted to overwintering (for example Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*) or became rare or extinct in the county (European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* and Corn Crane *Crex crex*).

A recent paper on the results from SMAD used descriptive models to interrogate one of the longest datasets of its kind. It was remarkable that a small range of simple models revealed intriguing trends, which are presumably responses to climatic and environmental changes. Of the 32 species examined by Reese & Tucker (2020), eight showed no significant change from earlier arrival dates while 15 showed progressively earlier arrivals, for example Willow Warbler *P. trochilus*, by ten days (fig. 1) over the century. The remaining nine species fitted a 'broken stick' model, with different trends up to the middle of the twentieth century and thereafter. All three common hirundines showed

this pattern and the Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (fig. 1), even with its change in trend, is arriving 16 days earlier over the century. Three winter visitors (Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*, Redwing *T. iliacus* and Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*) were fitted by 'broken sticks' but are less clear-cut. The next steps are to reproduce, or debunk, the models we identified and to attribute some biological meaning to the patterns.

While Shropshire is perhaps unique to have assembled them, the county cannot be alone in having similar data in its county archives. For anyone with the time and inclination, the process of delving into their own county ornithological record, so diligently accumulated by our forebears, is a source of potentially rich reward.

Acknowledgments

I thank Peter Tucker for his work on the Histo website, Allan Reese for converting the SMAD data into something meaningful and Tom Wall and Roger Riddington for comments on a draft of this editorial.

References

- Ballance, D. K. 2000. *Birds in Counties*. Imperial College Press, London.
- 2020. *Avifaunas, Atlases & Authors*. Privately published.
- Reese, R. A., & Tucker, J. J. 2020. Descriptive models for first-arrival dates of migrants in an inland UK county. *Ringing & Migration* 34: 1–7.
- Smith, L. (ed.) 2019. *Birds of Shropshire*. Liverpool University Press.
- Tucker, J. J., & Tucker, P. G. 2017. *Beckwith's Birds of Nineteenth Century Shropshire*. Holbrook Design.
- & — 2018. *Journal of Field Ornithology, Charles Gawen 1888–1911*. Holbrook Design.
- Waddell, T. A. 2017. *Diaries of C. S. and D. H. Meares, 1892 to 1949*. Privately published.

John Tucker, e-mail john.tucker@lanius.org.uk