

Scillies 2003



Red-eyed Vireo (photo: A. Lees)



Bobolink (photo: R. Addison)

Contestants: *Alex Lees, James Gilroy, Rick Addison, Mark Baynes, Andrew Holden, Vicky Turner.*

Many birders would have us believe that Scillies has been “slow” for the past decade – obviously slow is a relative term as the autumn of 1999 will not be long forgotten by those fortunate to be there. Various reasons have been invoked for the lack of Nearctic vagrants but downward population trends and a suggested shift in the North Atlantic storm-track, although the later was refuted by Elkins (1999). Another factor that may play a role however is both observer effort and apathy. Although there has been no published estimate of annual October “birder counts” there are at least half as many observers visiting the islands facilitated in part by the new systems of news dissemination. As a result many “A” list twitchers prefer to stay centrally positioned on the mainland and even those that make it to Scilly worry about going off-island in case they miss something. As a result it seems likely that many birds are missed. With this in mind a crack team of UEA birders and affiliates was assembled with the explicit aim of adding new birds to the Western Palearctic list (well, you can never aim to high..).

7th October

Ours was one of doubtless, countless thousands of “expeditions” launched from Norwich’s “Golden Triangle” and hence at about 8.15 pm I kissed the girlfriend goodbye and jumped into the back of James Gilroy’s trusty Fiat for the long journey south west.

8th October

Having made it to Penzance at some unsavoury hour we managed four hours sleep by the seawall at Marazion before the obligatory pre-Scillonian McNastyness. The boat-crossing itself wasn’t without incident; no boobies, frigates or tropicbirds but at least 7 **Leach’s Storm-petrels**, 3 **British Storm-petrels** and a **Pomarine Skua** along with the more regular pelagic fayre. Having arrived on St. Mary’s we pitched our tent on the long-staying **Hoopoe** on the Garrison and set about the serious business of finding rare birds. The first obstacle to the quest was the discovery that my phone was T-useless, leading to acute paranoia whenever I was out of sight of anyone. An hour, two Clouded Yellows and a **Blackcap** later we realised that there was very little evidence of migration on the Garrison and in a rare moment of weakness, I cracked and headed towards the American waders at the other end of

the island. A **Turtle Dove** and two **Whinchats** by the Incinerator seemed to be drawing a worrying large crowd, especially considering the presence of a second **Turtle Dove** at nearby at Nowhere and at least 10 other chats on the island! The **American Golden Plover** cowered from the strong winds on the Airport and the **Lesser Yellowlegs** was taking advantage of the newly managed habitat at Porth Hellick Pool. 46 “*tundrae*” **Ringed Plovers** and 6 **Dunlin** roosted on rocks at Giant’s Castle and a walk around Old Town Churchyard produced four **Firecrests**. Fish ‘n chips were followed by the first (of many) uncomfortable night(s).

9th October

A dawn perambulation on the Garrison produced a couple of **Firecrests** and given the number of despondent birders wandering around the decision was taken to do (St) Martin’s. The highlight of which was a pair of unidentified flyover **redpoll sp.**, 10 **Chiffchaffs**, 3 **Blackcaps**, 2 **Kingfishers** and a **Wryneck** we found at Higher Town. Back to Mary’s we broke camp and then met up with the rest of the team in Hugh Town: Mark Baynes, Rick Addison, Vicky Turner and Andy Holden. There followed much talk of the lack of rare but almost everyone cheered up with the discovery of a German Music channel featuring pop videos of a selection of honeyz in various states of undress.

10th October

After an uneventful stroll around the Old Town area, James and I took the boat to Bryher which owing to the low tide required an amphibious assault on the west side of the island. No pain, no gain. However, there appeared to be little migration in evidence, a **Reed Warbler** flushed from bracken along the Great Pool caused momentary excitement but otherwise 2 **Blackcaps**, 2 **Jackdaws**, a **Lesser Redpoll** and a **Grey Plover** were about the best we could do. Everyone else had stayed on Mary’s where Rick had won find of the day with a **Yellow-browed Warbler** in Holy Vale. Back at the digs before dark, the rest of the day was dedicated to GLTV (German Lovely Television).

11th October

Three **Skylarks** over the Garrison at first light were perhaps a portent for the start of migration and **Firecrests** were also more in evidence, a **Yellow-browed Warbler** on the Lower Broome was a nice find and after meeting up with James at the Old Town Café for brunch we headed towards the north end of the island. Meanwhile Rick and Mark found a **Richard’s Pipit** flying over Peninis. Walking north there was a veritable stampede of birders for a reported Icterine Warbler in Holy Vale and an hour later the crowds were hurtling back to Hugh Town for a Grey-cheeked Thrush on Tresco. This news, relayed by Andy had an immediate effect on James and I; we headed straight for Watermill to find a Blue-headed Vireo, or not as the case was. The rewards for our efforts were but a **Sedge Warbler**, 10 **Siskins**, a **Whimbrel** and a **Yellow Wagtail**. In order to save precious day light I had decided to avoid twitching anything out of way and all scarce migrants full stop (James was pretty much refusing to go for anything at all), but was even pretty surprised at my own lack of enthusiasm for the Thrush considering that I “needed it for world” and my own statement the previous evening of “being first on the boat when it breaks”. Heading back towards town with aching feet we managed to miss a Red-rumped Swallow – not having a pager was perhaps sub-optimal, and then news of a Red-eyed Vireo on the Lower Broome sent us scuttling towards the Dump Clump to try and replicate the feat with the last of the light – without success. Arrived back home to find everyone had seen two more American landbirds than we had, hmmm.

12th October

Feeling that it would be an insult not to pay homage to such a smart vagrant I managed to get brief views of the **Red-eyed Vireo** on the Lower Broome (James dipped and would have to wait a further 48 hours of not trying to see it) we (Mark, James and I decided Bryher (the closest place island to the New World) would be the place to be. There was certainly much migration in evidence with at least 40 **Chiffchaffs** of various shades of pale, 20 **Blackcaps**, a **Reed Warbler**, the first **Northern Wheatear** of the trip, **Bramblings**, **Yellow Wagtail**, **Common** and **Black Redstarts** but not the mega we were waiting for. By this point the gap in my world list between Veery and Swainson's Thrush WAS beginning to hurt and I managed to persuade the boatmen to let me off for an hour on Tresco. After much running I made it across to Borough Farm and found David Gray and two others watching the **Grey-cheeked Thrush** which had clearly not read the rules about being a *Catharus* and was feeding in the middle of a field with **Song Thrushes** and **Blackbirds**. Back on Mary's I decided to try Lower Moors for the Red-rumped Swallow but had to be content with **Merlin**, **Sparrowhawk** and 10 **Chiffchaffs**.

13th October

Arriving at the Swallow twitch in the morning to find the crowd looking at a **House Martin** was not the ideal start to the day, so a move to St Martins seemed the ideal tonic. James opted out along with Rick, Vick and Andy stayed on Mary's. Martin's was promising from the start with lashings of **Firecrests** (circa 20), **Blackcaps** (c. 15) and thrushes, Mark found the first good bird of the day a **Yellow-browed Warbler** at Higher Town and this was followed by a second being twitched by most of the day-trippers at Lower Town with a couple of **Black Redstarts** in between. All roads seem to lead inexorably to the shelterbelt along the ridge by the Seven Stones at Higher Town. Working back west I immediately found another **Yellow-browed Warbler**. In the most outrageous manoeuvre of the holiday we were passed by two birders heading in the opposite direction, whereupon we ran out of wood, made an immediate about turn, stalled them with the **Yellow-brow** and then set upon working the rest of the trees to the west of the pub. **A Pied Flycatcher** was my first of the trip but better was to come as a familiar shape tried to slip out of sight through the canopy ahead of me. "*****, **RED-EYED VIREO**", having physically shaken Mark until he got on it, I burnt the remainder of the film on my trusty Canon on the bird whilst Mark went back to the pub to oust the birders enjoying what would become a very swift pint indeed. The bird was joined by another **Yellow-browed Warbler** and gave outrageous views down to 15 feet. Smiles all round we headed back to Mary's and I even made it to the log to claim my free boat tickets!

14th October

Feeling that any Nearctic vagrants ought to gravitate towards the south end of Tresco James and I headed in that direction whilst Rick and Mark did Bryher. Tresco was in fact rather quiet, the best passerines just 1 **Northern Wheatear**, 10 **Firecrests**, 1 **Pied Flycatcher**, 1 **Common Whitethroat**, 2 **Yellow-browed Warblers**, 1 **Willow Warbler** (a pale washed out *acredula*), 2 **House Martins** and a *Flava* wagtail (probably **Blue-headed** but with a certain easternness about it). The pools weren't much more exciting with the **Black Duck** accruing a crowd of appreciative and unappreciative observers along with a **Black-tailed Godwit** and a **Green Sandpiper**. The **Red-breasted Merganser** seemed to cause consternation on the way back on the boat where the Bryher crew informed us of their **Short-eared Owl** and of the news from Fair Isle. Needless to say, when we got back Andy wasn't very happy, having spent the day dipping my vireo and realising he had to leave for the Savannah Sparrow.

15th October

Rick and I were fortunate to be at Lower Moors (several **Firecrests** and **Jack Snipes**) when a Pied/Black-eared Wheatear was found at Old Tow Bay. Five minutes later we were watching a cracking 1st winter male **Pied Wheatear** which would soon pull off an impressive vanishing act to the chagrin of the 300(!!!!) people who went to St Agnes for Quail.... Further ambling around the south end of Mary's produced a **Yellow-browed Warbler**, 10 **Chiffchaffs** and a **Northern Wheatear**, and a sojourn to the north found a **Merlin**, 5 **Firecrests**, several **Black Redstarts** a **Snow Bunting** for Rick and a distant **tern sp.** in the roads. Meanwhile Vic and Andy started their journey to Fair Isle and James headed for the RSPB conference where he was due to speak the next day....

16th October

A solo walk around the Garrison produced flight views of another new **Yellow-browed Warbler** but cost me dear as I missed the first boat to Bryher and waved Mark goodbye at the key. Nonplussed I got the 10.15 boat across and without usable phone relied on radar to re-find Mark. Half an hour later I was working the dump when some breathless chap bleated something about his mates watching a Bobolink on the island somewhere. Realising this was likely to be the work of Baynes we hastened over to Fraggles Rock (!) and found 5 excited birders. Mark was already suffering from "finder's disbelief" so I was sent in after it. Two paces and... "*bink..... bink*", I was instantly transported back to the rough pasture of Seal Island, Nova Scotia **** **BOBOLINK!** Mark was unsurprisingly on cloud 64 and drifted in front of me over to the other side of the island to avoid the hordes who were soon on their way. Bryher was buzzing with birds with **Water Rails** running around the bushes around the dump and finches moving in off the sea at hundreds an hour. We managed 10 **Firecrests**, 20 **Chiffchaffs**, 1 **Willow Warbler**, 2 **Black Redstarts**, 10 **Siskin**, 1 **Reed Bunting**, 1 **Yellow Wagtail** (*flavissima*), 3 **Skylarks** and a **Lapwing**. Back On Mary's Rick and I had an **Arctic Tern** sheltering from the wind in Old Town Bay. The evening provided some typical Scillies farce when we found ourselves locked out of the house owing to the deadlock's decision to drop. There followed a series of phone-calls, a trek between various peoples houses, and then some more houses, before we located the owner on stage at a production of a local play. Cheerily enough he followed us back to the flat and broke down the door....

17th October

A return visit to St Martins was in order accompanied by Rick and Mark yielding both **Pied** and **Spotted Flycatchers**, 10 **Firecrests** and two **Yellow-browed Warblers** but will perhaps be remembered for longer by my unintentional surfing into the dump and subsequent rescue by tripod and for a rather belligerent farmer who did not respect the fact that I was lost in the gorse matrix that is much of the island. Rick almost imploded mid-morning when news of the Siberian Rubythroat filtered through from Fair Isle. Andy and Vicky would arrive on the island both a day late and a day just in time. Back on Mary's I ambled over to the **Tawny Pipit** which showed exceptionally well on Peninis Head.

18th October

An early walk on the Garrison was notable for a fair movement of thrushes in off the sea and one of the long-staying **Yellow-browed Warblers**. Another day on Bryher was prescribed with just Mark and myself in attendance, Again there was plenty of evidence of migration with lots of finches on the go including 10s of **Bramblings** and **Siskins**. One **Snow Bunting** called as it headed south and three **Ring Ouzels** were

the first of the trip for me. Other assorted migrants included a **Woodcock** by the dump, a **Jack Snipe** flushed from bracken on Shipman Head, a **Tree Pipit**, 2 **Black Redstarts**, 1 **Willow Warbler** and 1 **Lapwing**. A pure **Hooded Crow** was also a bonus although it had evidently been around for some time. Another day on the island also passed without me seeing (or paying too much time looking for) the **Rose-coloured Starling**, indeed out of the whole team, only James and Mark would actually see one of the four or five birds present on the islands! Back On Mary's, I met up with Andy (back after some outrageous networking from Fair Isle, and in what he would later describe as a "triumph of professionalism" (!) we would walk/run to the other end of the island at last light to arrive at a *Swarovski* scope pointing at a very smart **Rustic Bunting**, which would never be seen again.

19th October

Another day on Martins but try as we might we couldn't find anything mega. Thrushes were still arriving, but of the small fry, 30 **Chiffchaffs**, 6 **Firecrests**, 10 **Blackcaps**, 2 **Black Redstarts**, 1 **Willow Warbler** and 1 **Yellow-browed Warbler** (sheltering on a wall) were the best we could manage although near gale force winds did not help matters. The **Magpie** blew past us again (having seen it a few days previously) and a movement of **Barn Swallows** included 1 **Sand Martin**. The flocks of newly arrived **Sanderling** on the beaches also played host to a somewhat incongruous looking **Purple Sandpiper**.

20th October

Scillies wouldn't be the Scillies without one headless chicken moment, my personal favourite being the twitch for the Pechora Pipit on Tresco in '94 when I seriously considered riding my (hired) bike over the pier into the first boat-load of departing birders. This year would be no exception and lethargy was rewarded when news of a **Little Crake** on Porth Hellick broke. Andy and I were out of the building, his possessions strewn in his wake whilst Rick (with his first chance of a tick this trip) went down the shops to buy some fags. Andy and I hurled ourselves into a minibus crammed with those who were in too much of a hurry to walk and were outside the hide in 2 minutes flat. Rick bought his cigarettes and lucked out on a taxi too, so all's well that ends well. After a 15 minute wait the bird reappeared and showed well but distantly at the back of the pool. The bird would only be available for another couple of hours before vanishing as sublimely as it appeared, my first crake there since the '91 Sora.... To celebrate this bird Rick and I then went down to the museum to drool over the Eskimo Curlew and other infra-mega of days of yore. The rest of the day was spent mooching round St Mary's, the highlight of which was the flock of at least 600 **Barn Swallows** that arrived in the evening, pushed out of the SW by the icy northerlies.

21st October

About three o'clock in the morning I dreamt I was experiencing acute gastroenteritis and promptly woke up realising I had. Spent the next 12 hours being very ill and rather stupidly decided that I'd feel better trying to twitch the Swainson's Thrush on Bryher. This had "dip" written all over it, not that I really cared and a **Spoonbill** (which was initially ticked by many flying over the Hayle Estuary before giving another better flypast) was little consolation for the masses. Mark having gone to St Martin's came down with the same illness about six hours later and spent most of the day asleep under a hedge.

22nd October

Still not feeling rosey, I had a wander around Tresco which was fairly quiet, 2 **Water Pipits**, a **Jack Snipe**, 4 **Barn Swallows** and 6 **Firecrests** withstanding. Andy and Rick spent some time dipping the thrush and Mark stayed in bed. James made the mistake of re-visiting "Hell Hole" on shore leave from his week on Agnes with the RSPB. Not the best of days.

23rd October

Rick went down with the bug in the early hours of the morning to the horror of James and Andy. Most of us had lost the will to live by then but Andy managed to see both **Olive-backed Pipit** and **Daurian Shrike** whilst James went back to Agnes (hoping he wasn't a vector) and Mark sat around drinking hot-drinks. Rick made a spectacular recovery and after surviving the Skybus flight managed to drive us back to civilisation.

Will we back next year? No.

Alex Lees, November 2003.