

SCILLY 1983

The best of times, the worst of times

by John Rayner

Many birders will have visited the Isles of Scilly for a holiday, maybe even twitched a rarity there on a day trip, it has become somewhat commonplace. But back in my early birding days there was a real sense of adventure surrounding such a trip. The following describes my first visit to Scilly in 1983 and when written was aimed at both a birding and non-birding audience, so I hope experienced birders will forgive some fairly obvious comments. I have only recently re-discovered the original paper copy and re-formatted it electronically. This was my first visit to Scilly and I hope I have captured the very real anticipation and thrill of the moment.

21:00 hrs Friday 15th October 1983 and to say I was extremely excited would be an understatement. Shortly I would join two other birder friends, Brian Holmes and Julian Weldrick, and drive through the night to Penzance and thence by helicopter for my very first visit to the fabled Isles of Scilly, or simply Scilly (but never The Scilly Isles as sensitive locals are prone to point out).

The Isles of Scilly are a group of islands (5 inhabited) lying approximately 30 miles SW of Land's End. For American migrants they are often the first land sighted this side of the Atlantic and they also attract continental birds displaced on south-westerlies, or perhaps 'Sibes' displaced by easterlies and so on. In short, Scilly is always a good place for finding rarities and particularly so in October when bird migration often combines with successive depressions tracking across the Atlantic. And we certainly had typical weather back in October 1983. After a week of promisingly deep depressions there was forecast a severe low of almost hurricane-like proportions for that very evening. Great! As we drove past Exeter the wind lashed rain against the windscreen with increasing intensity but we didn't mind, we had a mental picture of all the rarities we *knew* were waiting for us.

Let me explain. In the days before mobile phones, pagers and birdline telephone numbers the nerve centre for Britain's bird news was a small unprepossessing café at Cley-next-the-sea in north Norfolk, run by the appropriately named Nancy Gull. Bird sightings were simply phoned into 'Nancy's' and entered into a log book. Conversely a quick phone call would interrupt somebody's egg, chips and beans and they would read out the latest news. So we already knew that Scilly held Cliff Swallow, Bobolink, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Red-eyed Vireo, Parula Warbler, Grey-cheeked Thrush and many other goodies (probably including Bill Oddie).

Sleep is never easy 3-up in an old Wolsey 1500 and with the wind screaming, rain battering and the car rocking like a fairground ride it is impossible. Never mind, we had parked ourselves next to Stithians Reservoir where a Lesser Golden Plover (not split in those days) had been seen only the day before. All we had to do was to wait until dawn. When we judged there to be sufficient light we reluctantly forced the car doors open and, braving the elements that almost took our breath away, we searched the shoreline. Naturally our quarry was sensibly sheltering along with most other forms of bird-life. All we saw was a Grey Heron that looked only slightly more miserable and bedraggled than ourselves.

So, we moved onwards and upwards to Penzance and the heliport. Now, just 3 months earlier a Sikorsky helicopter had crashed into the sea on this very same run and I seemed to remember that only the pilot, co-pilot and the four lucky passengers immediately next to the four emergency exits had survived. Serious stuff and I wasn't without a certain apprehension.

I should mention that the formula "October migration + October weather = lots of rarities" had been known to birders for many years and the popularity of Scilly had risen to the point where the so called 'Scilly Season' had turned October into the busiest tourist month of the year on the islands. If you wanted to visit in October then an early booking was essential because all accommodation would soon be snapped up. Nothing however, prepared this rookie for what I faced in the tiny terminal building. Yes, I had seen scenes like this before but usually fronted by a war correspondent in some war-ravaged refugee camp. Every available inch was taken up

by lost souls in camouflage gear holding telescopes etc and all showing the pale, drawn fatigue in their faces that comes with a night of complete sleeplessness. There was good news and bad news at the check-in desk. Helicopters were delayed but still flying (heaven knows how). However, because they were battling directly into the storm they needed to carry extra fuel and that meant fewer passengers per trip. Hence, the crowded backlog of birders in the terminal building. "We *might* be able to get you across in the afternoon", we were told. The only convenient alternative method of transport, the 'Scillonian' was hit by a seaman's strike and safely docked in Penzance harbour. So, we had no choice but to wait.

More good news! An American Redstart had been found recently in Nanquidno Valley less than ten miles away and we had plenty of time on our hands. Now it is a fact of birding life that an important birding target is always on the far side of the bush. And even when the bush is surrounded and the bird must be near the front for someone, many will be familiar with a conversation something like.

"Quick, it's out in the open"

Urgently, "WHERE!"

"Just above that dead leaf"

Frantic, "There's HUNDREDS of dead leaves!"

"Look, it's up at 10 o'clock now. Oh, it's gone - just dropped back to the right".

By the time you do catch a glimpse of the bird, you've guessed it, and it's at the back of the bush again. All this is on a normal day but when the rain has just eased to stair-roads and you are having difficulty standing up you begin to wonder what else can go wrong. Easy, your binoculars can fill with water for a start. Now I knew that an American Redstart was a little jewel because I had seen a proper one the previous year at Gibraltar Point but I have to admit that all I saw that day was a misty silhouette flitting through a grey bush against an even greyer sky. I still counted it though – desperation was setting in early!

Back at the heliport a second and apparently brand new (and untested?) Sikorsky helicopter was wheeled out of a hangar and the backlog of passengers was slowly clearing. I'm usually a good traveller but the weather was beginning to get to me and this was my first helicopter flight so I wasn't prepared for the noise level that assaulted my ears at take off as I cowered in my seat (which just happened to be next to an emergency exit). It sounded like half a dozen road drills pounding simultaneously just above my head – even the crew instinctively ducked. The normal 20-minute journey was taking 40 minutes today, hence the extra fuel, but eventually the island of St. Mary's loomed out of the murk. Unsurprisingly the weather here was exactly the same as on the mainland and a short bus ride took us to our guest house in Hugh Town. It was noticeable that no birders (or locals for that matter) were out and about.

My friend, Mike Passant, had already been ensconced on the island for a week and had 'cleaned up' all the rarities. Birders rarely pass an opportunity to gloat, however discretely, but Mike was insufferably smug as he revelled in the task. "The Cliff Swallow", a first for Britain and present all week, "was breathtaking". Another 'Yankee' the Parula Warbler, "was a little gem", the Bobolink, "performed beautifully at ridiculously close range". (This is genuine birder speak. Birds perform. Sometimes in a Charlie Caroli outfit and juggling three blackberries, but I digress). In essence Mike just fell short of saying, "Should have been here last week mate!"

It was impossible to venture out until early evening but the 'banker' Bobolink, seen in Hugh Town that very morning, had gone, as had the equally easy Tawny Pipit at Porthloo. So, in fading light I eventually found myself at ... Hugh Town rubbish tip. Birds, and hence birders, always end up at rubbish tips, sewage outfall pipes or sludge beds – well known fact! This was where the Cliff Swallow had 'performed' each evening for the past seven days – but not tonight. "Probably all blown away in the hurricane", chortled the irrepressible Mike. I went to bed cold, tired, birdless, with a blinding headache, a wardrobe of soaked clothing and even wetter optics drying out on a radiator. Surely dawn would herald a better, brighter, birdier day. You bet it would, but not before things got WORSE!

Next morning the rain had abated but the wind was as strong as ever and gusting violently. But, as they say, hope springs eternal and I was up well before dawn still searching for the local Bobolink and Cliff Swallow – I drew another blank.

An emerging facet of birding at the time (1983 remember) was the increasing use of CB tranceivers, owned by the wealthy few. For the rest of us information was relayed to the Porthcressa Café in Hugh Town and then chalked up on a blackboard outside. This was how I learned of a rumoured Upland Sandpiper near the airport. St. Mary's is only about 2 miles square and criss-crossed by a maze of small roads, so a brisk walk soon found me on the exposed cliffs surrounding the runways. It had gone of course. Here I hit an all-time low when an extra strong gust blew my tripod over snapping the telescope/tripod mount and causing my telescope to roll rapidly down the slope towards the cliff edge with me chasing frantically behind. This was turning into the sort of holiday the SAS could use to break the will of prospective recruits, but such is the roller-coaster of birding.

“Cliff Swallow showing *now* at Holy Vale”.

That made me sit up in a panic and consult my map of St. Mary's. Straight through Salakee Farm seemed to be the quickest route. Now, nobody had told me about the track past Salakee Farm – six inches of mud on a good day let alone after 24 hours of torrential rain. I was picking my way as fast as I could through a sea of glutinous mud, desperately trying to stay in contact with my wellies, when I met Geoff Lightfoot (Mr Adswold Tip) coming the other way with the unwelcome news, “No need to rush the Cliff Swallow's gone”.

However, I eventually joined the small throng at Holy Vale and, after a short wait, it re-appeared – a mega bird that was at the time a first for Britain. Oh! Such relief can only be imagined.

In addition, rumours of the Upland Sandpiper still abounded and, after another chase around the island to Four Lane Ends, this too was ‘under the belt’. I was not to know it then but this bird, although completely wild, eventually took up residence in the field adjoining ‘Belmont’, my B&B, and stayed there the whole week; it was even photographed down to 2 feet taking worms from the hand. Other birds that day included my first ever Rose-coloured Starling and jigsaw puzzle views of a Grey-cheeked Thrush. This called for a celebratory meal and a couple of pints in the Bishop and Wolf. I slept much better that night I can tell you.

Next day dawned and I was thinking of island hopping. My friends and I knew, via the Porthcressa blackboard, that there was a lingering Rose-breasted Grosbeak (another wind-blown Yankee) on St. Agnes, the most westerly of the inhabited islands. How to get there, that was the problem. The wind was still so severe that no boats would sail. None that is except the ‘Gay Buccaneer’ captained by a genial, chunky-sweatered seafarer with bright red nose and cheeks that suggested just a little too much yo-ho-ho the previous evening. Oh yes, the ‘Gay Buccaneer’, a name to be remembered (and perhaps avoided) if you are ever to make the crossing. As I sit here and reminisce I like to think there was a headcount on the number of passengers, but then again it wasn't very evident. After all, this *was* the first inter-island sailing for at least 4 days and *everyone* wanted to be on board. As already mentioned all the other boatmen had refused what was obviously going to be a very lucrative journey until the weather improved – we should have known better! These boats are about the size of a large through-lounge and having been on many of them since, where the captain actually does a headcount, drawing the line at about a hundred and ten, I'm certain there was a greater number that fateful day.

I had already been warned to avoid the seats in the bows. Here one receives a wave-smacked bucket of freezing cold water down the neck every thirty seconds or so. Two of the unfortunates that day were a young couple who decided to giggle their way through it. Most others aboard tried to present a minimum surface area by assuming a head-between-the-knees foetal position. If anyone had bothered to look at the seascape it was truly spectacular as we made steady progress through quite mountainous seas. Roughly half way across the worst happened; an extra large wave pitched over the side amidships and completely flooded the engine, which succumbed with a sickeningly loud, grinding groan. The silence was uncanny, broken only by our intrepid captain who spun from the wheel with the cry, “S**t what was that?”

Have you seen Australian sheep-farm workers walking across the backs of densely packed, bemused animals? That's exactly what our captain did, leaving the wheel and reaching the engine in a few strides. Without direction the boat began to pitch and roll quite dramatically whilst the continuing silence was now broken by the giggling woman who (I kid you not) was now shouting "I don't want to die" in a genuine hysterical panic. The face of the man opposite had literally turned as green as his anorak and the captain didn't inspire confidence as he rushed back to the wheel and, with shaking hands, tried to remove a plastic cover from a red emergency button.

"Could be a scene from a Hammer film" observed my colleague drolly. The red button (which I had naively thought to be a may-day alarm to the coastguards) brought the auxiliary engine reluctantly spluttering to life and, accompanied by a ragged cheer, we phut-phutted slowly to complete the crossing. With hindsight this was a very scary incident with not a life jacket to be seen for many a mile/knot, a little longer without power and we could have been making the headlines that week. The other boats eventually turned out to help, the 'Gay Buccaneer' was towed back to St. Mary's and, after paying our respects to the Grosbeak, we made other arrangements for our return from St. Agnes.

Another tale of the sea occurred later in the week but this time I was merely an observer. We were now on the island of Tresco, which is served by 2 landing stages, one or the other being used according to the height of the tide. New Grimsby is the quickest way to the north end of the Great Pool and Appletree Banks serves the south of the island. On this particular day my luck was in. I was searching for a Solitary Sandpiper when a Sora (a small American crake, very rare!) was found at the southernmost tip of the Great Pool and the identification process unfolded before my very eyes. In birding parlance this is known as jamming in on a bird, however, the majority of visitors were not so fortunate being stranded on St. Mary's. Hordes of birders were shipped in a flotilla of small boats but time (and daylight) was running out; landing at New Grimsby wouldn't leave enough time to yomp down the island to rendezvous with the Sora; and the Appletree Banks landing stage at the south end of the island was inaccessible due to the tide. The solution was for the boats to get as near to the southern shore as possible whilst droves of birders went over the side in a now legendary Normandy-style landing. Here they waded ashore with tripods and 'scopes held high above their heads, commando fashion – a remarkable sight and, with the Sora safely ticked, I could afford to be very smug indeed. I managed good views of the Solitary Sandpiper too!

The remaining days passed without major incident. I saw many more good birds including my first Swainson's Thrush, Icterine Warbler, Lapland Bunting and Red-breasted Flycatcher. As I reluctantly boarded the returning helicopter I knew I was hooked. The Isles of Scilly had surpassed all my expectations. I have revisited these magical islands many times since and each visit is carefully logged in a year book. More memories flood back. The great American year of 1985 with Yellow-billed Cuckoo one morning and Black-billed Cuckoo the same afternoon. Predicting, in 1987, where an Eye-browed Thrush *might* be re-found and then re-finding it. Or simply standing alone on a St. Martin's headland one cloudless October day and surveying the spectacular, jagged Eastern Isles as they punctured a peaceful blue-glass sea, when I could be forgiven for believing I was the only person left in the British Isles.

If you haven't already been to these beautiful and remote islands then a visit is recommended. If you have visited you will know exactly what I am talking about. In any season you will not be disappointed.

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