



Expedition iconoclasts: Dan Chaney, Henry Cook, Mike Duckham, Chris Jones, Rob Sandham.

Arriving at Dan's place in Falmouth late on the 1st of October after a dire journey down allowed us all a few hours quality kip before catching the Scillonian III ferry from Penzance the following morning. A fine drake **Surf Scoter** was present in Mounts Bay over towards Newlyn harbour and was picked out with scopes before embarking on the boat on the 2nd Oct. The ferry journey was turbulent but that is to be expected on the endearing rust-bucket that is the Scillonian III. In amongst the crests and troughs a handful of birds were seen. This handful literally consisted of a **Sooty Shearwater**, **Balearic Shearwater**, **Arctic Skua** and **2 Great Skuas**, not bad going but the lack of common species was peculiarly evident. This year we were staying over at Tremelethan Farm on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, fantastically situated for early morning raids on rarity hotspots such as Porth Hellick, Higher Moors, the Airfield and Holy Vale in the (vain?!) hope of finding some unusual birds for which the area is famous in October. On the flip side, residing a mile away from Hugh Town, and therefore the quay, hamstrung us in twitching terms when a last minute boat was put on for a rarity off Isle. Still we were here to bird and that included some serious patching of the many bulb fields, elm woodland, pine belts, coastal heathland and grasslands around St Mary's.

Intriguing was a report of a Grey Shrike species over at Mount Todden. "Why hadn't the identity been confirmed thus far", was the main tone of conversation as Chris, Rob and I toddled over for a look soon after we arrived on the islands. News reached us along the way that the identity had been confirmed in fact as a **Woodchat Shrike**, ey?! Woodchats and Grey Shrikes hadn't previously registered as confusion species to us but upon relocating the bird near Pelistry Bay, the murky gloom of an overcast sky and a large greyish panel in the wing did hint a tiny bit (only a tiny bit!) of the situation prior to our arrival. It capably dispatched several butterflies which had no idea of the threat this butcherbird posed. Meanwhile Mike was watching a showy **Red-breasted Flycatcher**, bill-snapping small flies just above his head at Longstones cafe. Heading back from Pelistry we found a trickle of migrants about with a few **Pied Flycatchers** and a **Spotted Flycatcher** around the field edges of the east of the island before finishing off at Porth Hellick where a long-staying **Spotted Sandpiper** and **Pectoral Sandpiper** showed down to a ridiculous 3m or so from the seaward hide! Crucial plumage and structural details of the former tricky species were easily noted at this range, including the lack of notched tertials, strong supercilium, yellow-toned legs and a short-tailed appearance.



Pectoral Sandpiper, Porth Hellick, St. Mary's on 2nd October.



Spotted Sandpiper, Porth Hellick, St. Mary's on 2nd October

The next day we slipped into a trance-like state in pursuit of finding rarities. Well-meant questions from curious tourists were replied with a hypnotic grunt as all '*acros*', '*sylvias*' and '*phylloscs*' were actively grilled in search of that rare waif, in the midst of millions of **Chiffchaffs** and **Reed Warblers**. It was a large raptor that provided most interest and discussion that afternoon as I, Mike and Bob Flood (a resident birder) all independently got onto a **Honey Buzzard**. I was in Holy Vale at the time and was alerted to the bird by an altercation with a **Carrion Crow** in mid-air. The raptor glided on its way, unperturbed. Viewing conditions were hampered by the lush canopy of mature English Elm trees, obscuring a clear, uninterrupted observation. Bob was a couple of miles away on the Garrison where viewing could be described as 'distant' so it was left to Mike to elucidate most detail and opinion on the bird which confidently added up to it as a Honey Buzzard. An elusive **Yellow-browed Warbler** at the bottom of Holy Vale was the first of a few present during the week with a supporting cast of **1 Firecrest**, **1 Yellow Wagtail**, **Golden Plover**, **3 Greenshanks**, **7 Water Rails**, **1 Raven** and **2 Peregrines** around and about.

A characteristic feature of these islands is that some common species over on the mainland are totally absent over here. The likes of Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Magpie and Jackdaw all get the local birders drooling and twitchy. These species are all on a par (in a local context) with a Glossy Ibis or something equally as rare back on the mainland. So at dusk, back at the cottage, imagine my elation when I had a **Jackdaw** flying over, going to roost, and then the rapid dismay with lack of back-patting or even faked interest from the others. They are 10-a-penny just 30 miles away back on the mainland!

Dan saw the **Jackdaw** at dawn on the 4th as it left its roost and flew back over the cottage but his thunder was quickly stolen by Rob who struck gold with a self-found **Red-breasted Flycatcher** between Porth Hellick Down and Deep Point over in the east of the island. Initially found in a small seaward quarry with gorse and bramble thickets, it flew out and towards an adjacent pine belt but sadly wasn't seen much after that. I only found out about five hours after the find due to the near-total lack of phone reception on the islands. Two dipped Red-breasted Fly's in two days; a Scillies CB Radio was suddenly looking like an attractive investment if I wasn't going to miss the mega that would hopefully turn up during our stay. It was generally a quiet day though in hindsight with personal totals of **1 Jack Snipe**, **1 Tree Pipit**, **1 Little Egret**, **4 Lapland Buntings** (up on Penninis Head), **1 Common Scoter**, **2 Whinchats**, **1 Sedge Warbler**, **1 Firecrest**, **1 Yellow Wagtail** and the **Spotted Sandpiper** still in residence. Quite unexpected that evening, whilst testing the local tipples, news came through of a Rustic Bunting present a few miles away on St Agnes. It was pitch-black outside so sadly no boats until the following morning. For Chris, Rob and I, it would be a lifer and so plans were made to wait for news in the morning before the boat set sail, and then head across to St Agnes whatever that news was!



The island of Gugh, joined with St Agnes at low tide by the Gugh Sandbar. The resident female Marsh Harrier was seen briefly beyond the white cottages on the 5th (Photo: Rob Sandham)

5th - A white-knuckle ride of a boat trip later and we jumped for our lives onto dry land at St Agnes. The strong West wind roaring in from the Atlantic had whipped the water into quite a swell so how no one fell into the water I don't know! We quickly bumped into North Wales birder, Paul Derbyshire, near the quay who delivered the news that the Rustic Bunting had been seen flying over that morning towards the coastguard cottages and into thick cover. And so began an exceptionally frustrating day. Operation Rustic drew a complete blank despite personally circumnavigating the island twice.

A flock of about **30 Lapland Buntings** vied for attention and got it from many of the birders present who'd long given up on the Rustic. Moreover, on my second lap of the island, Chris and Rob had been watching a **Wryneck** feeding on ants over at Horse Point and whilst there an **American Golden Plover** (AGP) flew over their heads! All jaw-dropping stuff, which St Agnes has a pleasant habit of doing. I made do with brief views of the resident female **Marsh Harrier** back at the quay with the assembled day-trippers as it quartered the cover on Gugh. Fully ready to drown my sorrows that evening, news filtered through of the relocation of the AGP on St Mary's airfield during the short boat journey back. Walking to the airfield became a race against the fading light but the **AGP** did the good thing and showed fairly well, feeding on the short-cropped grass, rescuing a good end to the day.



American Golden Plover at the Airfield on St Mary's on the 5th (Photo: Rob Sandham)



Wryneck at Horse Point on St Agnes on the 5th (Photo: Rob Sandham)

Getting back into the routine of patching after yesterdays drama was just the tonic. Slowly wandering the paths around Porth Hellick, Higher Moors, Carreg Dhu Garden and Holy Vale could take half the day if desired and this was the case on the 6th as we all went our separate ways to divide and conquer, to split up and seek out some good birds from different parts of St Mary's. The strong wind was swinging around to the SW and forecast to switch to the East within a couple of days so this was conceivably the last day an American passerine might make landfall during our visit. Out of all the sites I visited in the morning, only Carreg Dhu Garden was considerably protected from the wind and there were a couple of **Firecrests** present.

Whispers of several Ruff up at the airfield during the morning became shouts of **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** as the flighty waders were pinned down and identities confirmed. This re-identification made sense; Ruffs are rarer on Scillies than Buff-breasted Sandpipers! A single bird was still present up on the airfield when we arrived, showing exceptionally well and hiding in the lee of the larger AGP which was still present. American birds were evidently still turning up then.

A Spotted Crake was found at Porth Hellick pool that evening just before dusk, mere seconds before Dan and I crept into the hide, it had just done a vanishing act back into the Phragmites though. A **Jack Snipe** and **6 Water Rails** showed well as we patiently waited for it to reappear. We remained in the hide till well after dark, eventually not being able to see the reedbed at all, never mind a tiny crake at the base of it. Plans were hatched to try again the next morning.



American Golden Plover joined by a Buff-breasted Sandpiper on the Airfield, St Mary's, 6th (Photo: Rob Sandham)



Dotterel on the Golf Course, St Mary's, 7th (Photo: Rob Sandham)

A timeline of Mike's events on the 7th involved waking up mid-morning feeling a little worse for wear (I should imagine), eventually heading out of the cottage and going on to grab the best find of the week for the group in the form of a **Little Bunting** up at Green Farm near Pelistry. It flew towards Mount Todden but couldn't be relocated during the day. It was eventually refound along with a further two of its congeners a few fields away at Carn Friars, just after our departure from the islands. Other species seen on a generally quiet day included **2 Yellow-browed Warblers**, **2 Siskins**, **5 Stock Doves**, **6 Snipes**, **1 Little Egret**, **1 Kingfisher**, **1 Turtle Dove** (found by Rob) and a **Pomarine Skua**. A **Dotterel** was reported in the afternoon up on the Golf Course which revived my waning concentration levels. It went on to show superbly, running up and down the 8th fairway. After taking far too many photos and soaking up the atmosphere of this scarce wader against a stunning backdrop of crashing waves and rocky islets it was time to head off to the 19th hole. With a distinct sense of Déjà vu we got wind of another rare bunting over on St Agnes that afternoon, this time a **Black-headed Bunting**. A boatload had successfully seen it before dark but without news reception and no radio we missed the opportunity so it was a case of waiting for news in the morning once more.

Another pre-dawn stakeout in the Porth Hellick Sussex hide on the 8th and I finally got views of the **Spotted Crane**, be it briefly. It was Rob and Chris's last day on the islands today and there was just enough time for them to have a few hours on St Agnes to search for the rare bunting. I don't like Déjà vu so didn't join them on the trip. The bunting didn't show but there was another Rob special; a **Common Rosefinch** by the Tennis Courts which is a very scarce bird on the Scillies. This find was part of a good fall of migrants with the overnight rains and easterly winds. Between the three of us remaining back on Mary's we racked up **1 Wryneck**, **15 Pied Flycatchers**, **1 Spotted Flycatcher**, **c20 Whinchats**, **8 Skylarks**, **3 Redstarts**, **1 Black Redstart**, **1 Yellow-browed Warbler**, **1 Yellow Wagtail**, **1 Reed Bunting**, **1 Snow Bunting**, **1 Common Swift**, **1 Turtle Dove** (a second bird), **1 Common Sandpiper** and the female **Marsh Harrier** viewed flying over Annet. Of note, Dan saw a tiny accipiter which had been seen sporadically over several of the islands and touted as a possible Sharp-shinned Hawk. Chris and Rob had also seen this bird on the deck a few days previously but views were excruciatingly inconclusive to confirm this potential first for the UK. It is certainly a vagrant to be on people's rarity radars over the coming years.



Hugh Town harbour on St Mary's with Tresco and Bryher in the background.

Our final day all too soon arrived on the 9th but the Scillonian III doesn't leave till mid-afternoon giving us a good half day's birding to squeeze in. Bird wise it was a quiet because of the continuing wind. Another couple of **Firecrests** and a flyover **Mistle Thrush** were all. Wandering the coastal path at the far, east end of the island my new gadget radio (acquired from the Scillonian pub) kicked into gear and things went berserk over the airwaves. Crackled snippets of a message were soon relayed around the island and it became clear a **BLACK-EARED WHEATEAR** had been found on the Garrison, the other end of the island. Time to jog! I only had bins on me but even so this was a serious workout. Upon climbing the small summit on the Garrison to the Star Castle hotel, I located the twitchers where at least 70 people were stood but obviously not looking at the bird. It had flown and been lost to view although no one knew in what direction. After about 15 minutes I stumbled on a plain-faced buffy-orange petite wheatear right down on the boulder beach near the Doctors Keys rocks, this was the bird. With circa 200 birders viewing it, I began taking copious field notes in the absence of camera, and discussion on site hinted that this was a **WESTERN BLACK-EARED WHEATEAR**. At this point Mike and Dan hadn't seen it and I had no clue as to their whereabouts. It was a crazy last couple of hours logistically on the island as I raced to get all the bags to the quay and attempted to find the guys but somehow we all saw the bird and made it onboard the boat with a few minutes to spare, phew!

Visiting a few old Falmouth haunts back in Cornwall on the 10th produced an unexpected rarity when a **Red-throated Pipit** at Argal Reservoir emerged out of the grey, gloomy clouds flying south over our heads and calling loudly. Even with three years of patching this reservoir behind me, without a doubt this was the best bird I've had there and was part of a noticeable influx of this species into the South West in subsequent days. Several **Kingfishers** and **2 Common Sandpipers** were present but after that piece of action the place returned to its typical serene and sleepy self. Leaving Dan in Falmouth, the 11th was largely a travelling one as we headed back up to Manchester. Along the way we were thoroughly distracted by the lure of rarities, detouring to the 'Lost Gardens of Heligan' near Mevagissey where the first-winter **GREEN HERON** was showing down in the lost valley. As if this wasn't enough action for one day, we also called in at Black Hole Marsh, Seaton in Devon to see another extremely rare bird in the form of a **SOLITARY SANDPIPER**, which duly showed excellently alongside a **Green Sandpiper** for close comparison.



Green Heron at Lost Gardens of Heligan, Cornwall and Solitary Sandpiper (below) at Seaton, Devon on the 11th Oct.



Overall, Scillies had experienced a much better start to October than the year before (popularly derided as the worst October for many a year for the island group). The fortnight after we left 1 Red-eyed Vireo, 1 Grey-cheeked Thrush, 1 Red-flanked Bluetail, 2 Subalpine Warblers, 2 Red-throated Pipits, 1 Pied Wheatear, 1 Radde's Warbler and 1 Olive-backed Pipit were also found; a good haul by any standards. Apart from the duo of rare Buntings moving on before we saw them, it had been a very enjoyable week. Moreover, it was a thrilling and energising feeling to have some of the best sites of St Mary's to yourself for the first few hours of the day whilst those based back in the town gradually filtered out to birdwatch. Thanks to all the guys and particularly Rob for lending me lots of photos for this report.

A few notes on costs:

Some of the main costs are very flexible depending on what kind of accommodation, food plus extras one would be willing to spend.

Of the fixed costs, the boat is £95 for any length of stay over a day. It is £80 if booked a long way in advance. Day trips from Penzance are usually £35 but have come down to £25 in late season offers in the past, making this option popular with quite a lot of twitchers over the last few years. The other methods of reaching the islands include Helicopter or the Skybus plane but both are really expensive for what they are; effectively just a c30 mile flight! Inter-island boats for return fare day-trips are £7.50 when bought from the quayside.

Accommodation on St Mary's ranges from camping (£7 per night), B+B's (£35-50 per night), Self-catering (£300-1000 per week, usually around the middle for October when considered partially out of season) and Hotels (£50-150 per night), so pretty much the full range offering a wide range in price but generally at the higher end. On the whole, prices for food and accommodation are more expensive than on the mainland but that is to be expected on a small island where everything has to be shipped across. You could easily find yourself paying £20 per person for a good meal out in the evening including drinks. For a budget approach I'd recommend either camping or a self-catering cottage and taking some food across with you from the mainland, as from experience, you are allowed 2 medium-large bags in the hold and they don't ever weigh them.

When you add it all up, with a few luxuries thrown in, the total cost can approach that of a short foreign holiday what with such cheap flights at present. That seems to be largely the reason not so many birders visit in October any more, but it's fantastic fun and in terms of British birding it still offers one of the best chances for finding and seeing rare and scarce birds as I hope I got across in my report.

Till next year!

Henry Cook, October 2010

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