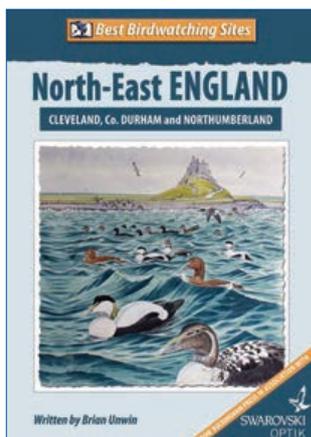


# Reviews



## Best Birdwatching Sites – North-East England

By Brian Unwin

Buckingham Press, 2012

Pbk, 308pp; maps and vignettes

ISBN 978-0-9569876-2-4 Subbuteo code M21389

£17.95 **BB Bookshop price £16.00**

It is thankfully rare when an author fails to see his book published. This unfortunately was the

case with Brian Unwin's eagerly awaited site guide in this series to birding areas in the Northeast, taking in Northumberland, Co. Durham and Cleveland. Brian died of cancer shortly after Christmas in 2011 at the early age of 66. As a founding member of the Durham Bird Club and with an encyclopedic knowledge of the whole area, he was well placed to write this site guide. Various friends and acquaintances ensured it was finished and published, including John Miles, Bob Coursey and Ian Kerr. The end product is a fitting testimony to Brian's character as it is eminently readable, often not the case with site guides as they can be quite bland. I had the good fortune to meet Brian on a number of occasions, most notably a chance encounter in the Harthope Valley in Northumberland when this jaunty chap with a straw boater introduced himself. His perky personality shines through this guide in the many snippets. My favourite is the idea of bagpipe players in the altogether at Skirl Naked and this image unfortunately stays with me. And who knew that Sir Walter Scott sat in the *Rose and Thistle* at Alwinton nearly 200 years ago brushing up on Rob Roy? Durham birders will undoubtedly be aware that there is a herd of bison at Bishop Middleham and that Billy Elliott was filmed mainly at Easington Colliery, but I am sure that many more will be enlightened.

The guide is split into sections for the relevant counties and, by using the end-paper maps, numbered sites can be found easily without having to refer to the index. Each site is covered in the same way with a useful key-points section providing a quick guide, a comprehensive map and a guide to what birds may be expected. Disabled access, where possible, is covered in detail. The bird

summaries for each area are split into target species, with percentage likelihood of finding, and other possible birds. These percentages, although largely accurate, will hopefully not lead people into thinking that they will definitely find a Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* in the Druridge Bay area with only three or four visits in prime conditions (marked as 30%). In addition, I do feel that the space utilised by the list of common birds would have been better utilised to include more sites. I expect that Malcolm Hutcherson, who has spent many years surveying the Berwick area, will be miffed to see that the whole section of coast from Holy Island northwards has been omitted. Likewise, it is perfectly possible to find many rare migrants in the section of coast between Craster and Amble. Perhaps Brian was trying to keep some of Northumberland's secrets in place!

However, this site guide admirably does what it says on the tin, as the best birdwatching sites are covered in detail with a nostalgic note of past major rarities and a highly readable summary for each area. It will inevitably be compared with the revised *Where to Watch Birds in Northeast England* by Dave Britton and John Day, published in 2004. Although both publications are well worth purchasing, I do feel that Brian's guide is the easier to use, and includes better maps and directions. It is also completely up to date with references covering recent publications even into 2012. Ian Kerr has helpfully added an end section that details the status of all species recorded in the area, which is an extremely useful guide for birders visiting the area and a source of reference to county birders in the region.

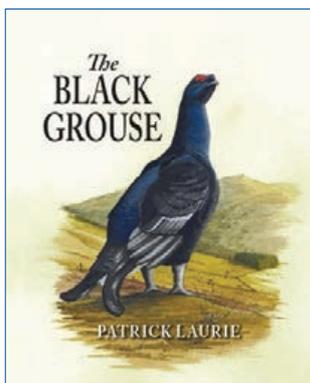
To summarise, I would heartily recommend purchasing this guide and I can see it sitting in many a birder's glove compartment as a reference source ready for the next mega that turns up at a little-known site!

*Tim Dean*

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## The Black Grouse

By Patrick Laurie

Merlin Unwin Books, 2012

Hbk, 223pp; colour and black-and-white illustrations

ISBN 978-1-906122-43-0 Subbuteo code M21435

£20.00 **BB Bookshop price £18.00**

With its chequered history in Britain and elaborate lekking displays, the Black

Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* is one of our most fascinating species. It is also one of our most vulnerable birds having suffered a prolonged decline and loss of range. Conservation efforts to date have, sadly, had only limited success and a recent run of severe winters has exacerbated the problems it faces, particularly for the fragmented population in the uplands of northern England. Its current scarcity makes it easy to forget that the Black Grouse was once widespread across much of the lowlands as well as in the upland landscapes where it remains today. I was fascinated to be reminded that it was once considered to be a significant pest in new plantations and was controlled by foresters to keep the numbers down. It would once have been a far more familiar bird for birdwatchers and hunters alike. While both groups will find much of interest in this excellent book, it appears to be aimed primarily at those with an interest in shooting.

The author is clearly an expert on the history of game shooting in Britain. He was spurred on to research this species in particular by thoughts of trying to encourage its return as a potential quarry species to his family farm in Dumfries & Galloway. Much of the book is taken up by discussions about the extent to which the Black Grouse was exploited by hunters in the past. For a time its spectacular plumage and rapid escape flights made it highly sought-after as a quarry species. However, a sustained decline in numbers as well as changes in sporting attitudes meant that it increasingly lost out to its smaller cousin. Rather than walking over expanses of open moorland to stalk birds, hunters increasingly preferred the less demanding option of waiting in a fixed position while groups of birds were driven towards them. Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* are ideally suited to this whereas Black Grouse are apparently fickle, unpredictable and difficult to drive. On some estates they even came to be seen as a nuisance for their habit of joining up with groups of Red Grouse and encouraging

them to fly strongly away from the guns.

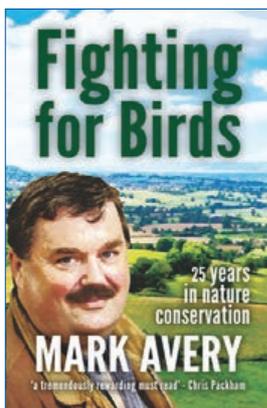
The book is perhaps less authoritative, though no less interesting, when it comes to discussion of conservation aspects. The views are largely personal opinion rather than backed up by other sources, though they are convincing and well argued in the main. Detrimental changes to the landscape through increasingly intensive farming methods are covered in some detail. And I was intrigued by the suggestion that competition with reared and released Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* might have been a contributory factor in the decline. Pheasants are a similar size to Black Grouse and there is likely to be a high degree of overlap in the diet so it is perhaps entirely plausible that there was some competition in areas where Pheasants were released in large numbers.

The author has some interesting views about how best to restore Black Grouse populations. As well as work to improve habitat quality, he suggests that reintroductions of captive-bred birds may have a role to play, while accepting that efforts so far have been very disappointing. He has very strong views about the role played by predation and believes that increasing populations of birds of prey have not helped the Black Grouse. Again, he provides little in the way of supporting evidence though he admits to finding birds of prey 'rather cold and sinister' and notes that 'we sometimes forget that when a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* performs a spectacular stoop and kills a bird, something dies.' As he is a strong advocate for country sports, I wasn't sure exactly what point he was trying to get across here.

The author's own sketches and evocative colour illustrations are used throughout the book. While this is very far from the last word on this enigmatic species, it is a well-written and thought-provoking book. It is particularly recommended for those with an interest in shooting or in the sometimes complicated politics behind the conservation of a bird held in high esteem by both birdwatchers and hunters.

*Ian Carter*





## Fighting For Birds: 25 years in nature conservation

By Mark Avery

Pelagic Publishing, 2012

Pbk, 336pp

ISBN 978-1-907807-29-9 Subbuteo code M21332

£12.99 **BB Bookshop price £11.69**

Quite early in chapter one, reading about Mark Avery's time as a deer researcher on

Rum, I came across the bizarre statement that 'our base... looked across Mull to Skye and the Cuillins...' and wondered whether this boded well for the rest of the book. I need not have worried; it must have been an editorial mistake. This is a marvellous account of one man's work for bird conservation, reflecting Mark's impressive birding and academic background as well as his sharp intellect, his sure grasp of strategy and his huge commitment to his vocation. His well-known sense of humour is there too, as is that enviable facility at communication which made him such a great asset to the RSPB.

You won't find much inaccuracy here, but you may find things that you disagree with, or that at least make you think hard. That is entirely intentional; the book frequently takes us down all manner of tortuous paths, involves us in contentious issues, challenges us with bold statements and even makes us wonder about our own morals. It gets complicated – forgive me for using the famous reviewer's get-out 'you must read it for yourself', but really you must.

After a hugely enjoyable look at Mark's early days as a birder and researcher, we finally find him at his first RSPB job, in the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland, and quickly detect that the conservation bug is biting hard. Soon we are deep into a chapter asking: 'Is it ever right to be nasty to birds?' There is discussion of Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* control, among other things, and then of predator control – with a nice sideswipe I particularly enjoyed at the 'prejudiced drivel' RSPB staff often have to put up with from field sports people at events like the Game Fair.

Against the background of the RSPB's neutral stance on the ethics of shooting, Mark suggests that he can just about understand wildfowling, but is a bit more dubious when it comes to Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and is decidedly uneasy about grouse-shooting. This subject comes up again later in a hard-hitting chapter simply

called 'The Raptor Haters'. Some of this is about the widespread (and largely ill-informed) dislike of all birds of prey and some about the disgraceful persecution which still goes on, especially on grouse moors. I could see Mark getting angrier and angrier as he wrote, so it was no surprise to find him saying that, if it were up to him, driven grouse-shooting would be banned altogether.

We move on to a chapter on 'special places' where the RSPB has been involved in battles to save them – for example the North Kent Marshes and part of Lewis, threatened, respectively, by an airfield and a huge windfarm. After a highly informative chapter on farming and farmland birds, we look at reintroductions and then at nature reserves. Next comes another strong chapter, this time on climate change and its possibly sinister implications for birds – and, indeed, the whole planet – and here I have a major criticism. It would have been helpful to have some attempt to counter the much-publicised views of the doubters and deniers, whose assertions not only hugely confuse the issue but are influential and seem to meet with a good deal of public support.

Two chapters follow which address the political dimensions of the conservation battle and then advocacy issues, all heavy stuff but very well explained. Then, curiously perhaps, comes a little light relief as we are given a long series of 'snippets', often humorous and ranging across a whole range of subjects, from seeing Little Auks *Alle alle* from the office window, to watching 400 Red Kites *Milvus milvus* at a Spanish roost, to meeting Gordon Brown and Lee Evans (not together) and Keith Brockie saving the author's life.

The final chapters make no bones about the huge amount that remains to be done in bird and wildlife conservation and about the enormous difficulties involved. The challenge is for all of us to get stuck in and do as much as we can, and, especially, to persuade the rest of the population to do the same. Seeing the RSPB as a continuing prime mover, Mark wonders about its future direction, including, amongst other things, the possible ramifications of devolution. A 'Who's who' of

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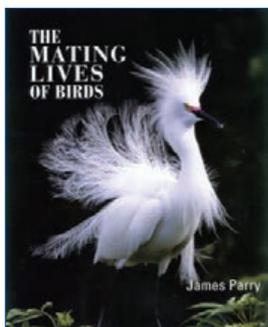


statutory bodies and NGOs involved in all aspects of wildlife conservation is largely about telling us who to join, lobby, pester and influence in every way that we can. What we should do as individuals is here too.

All in all, this is a hugely important book, and so much more than just a valuable history of a

hectic 25 years. It is controversial in parts, it is thought-provoking in others, and it should be used to make a lot of people sit up and take notice. I also hope that the publishers can somehow sell thousands and thousands of copies.

*Mike Everett*



### The Mating Lives of Birds

By James Parry

New Holland, 2012

Hbk, 160pp; 140 colour photos

ISBN 978-1-84773-937-7 Subbuteo code M21313

£19.99 **BB Bookshop price £17.99**

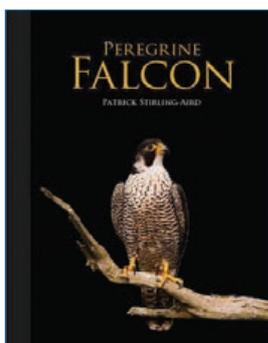
Given the scope of this book, the title is perhaps a bit misleading – after all, mating usually takes a few seconds, and this lavishly illustrated work covers everything from the establishment of a territory right through to the young becoming independent. In a very readable style, James Parry has identified all of the key stages and grouped them chronologically. Within each group he writes essays of around two or three pages to explain different aspects of the ways birds behave, and he answers all of the key questions. For example, what is a territory, and what does it need to contain to be of any use? How are territories defended and maintained? What use is song in this process? How do birds use their plumage and other physical features to attract a mate? These are all questions that most of us will have asked ourselves at some point. The essays are neither heavy nor light, but find a middle ground where information is provided in an engaging style.

Other major sections look at display, personal

relationships, nests, eggs and young. It is hard to think of an aspect of breeding that has not been covered – including the murkier side of breeding, with unmated male Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* mating with paired females when the territorial male is away, and Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* killing the young from a nest where the original male has disappeared, before taking up with the female and building another nest. There are plenty of useful examples of activity such as role reversal in breeding, monogamy, polygamy and polyandry and also speculative nest-building.

The book is liberally illustrated with great photos to back up the situations being explained, and many of these are full-page images and double-page spreads. This is an excellent book for someone who wants to understand the processes of breeding, and is looking for an approachable text that explains the facts without becoming too engrossed in detail.

*Keith Betton*



### Peregrine Falcon

By Patrick Stirling-Aird

New Holland Publishers, 2012

Hardback, 128pp

ISBN 978-1-84773-769-4 Subbuteo code M21285

£14.99 **BB Bookshop price £13.49**

When I was a boy, seeing a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* always seemed more difficult than it described in the books! In those days they were still pretty rare, slowly recovering from the effects of DDT, and invariably miles away on a muddy estuary.

Today, they are hard to miss, and it is a delight to see them breeding in our towns and cities.

Few books have been published on Peregrines in recent years, so this volume by Patrick Stirling-Aird, secretary of the Scottish Raptor Groups, is most welcome. It is an informative and relaxing read, and has numerous stunning colour images,

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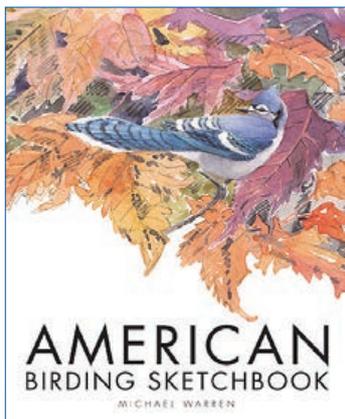
from the intimate scene of a pair mating to a parent delicately feeding its chicks. I particularly like one showing three chicks on a ledge; it seems that you are peering into their lives.

In the introduction, fascinating topics such as taxonomy and evolution are discussed in simple terms, making it easy for those delving into this subject for the first time to understand something of these complex topics. Now I know how the Peregrine came to be! Nine chapters discuss a range of subjects ranging from distribution to interactions between Peregrines and other species. I was surprised to discover that this falcon often nests in association with Canada Geese *Branta canadensis*, which warn of approaching predators. The relationship between humans and Peregrines, from falconry to persecution, is explored, and past and present threats are discussed. The book also covers those who have written about and celebrated the Peregrine, and includes the poem by Sir Walter Scott published in 1810.

A large proportion of the book is devoted to the Peregrine's breeding cycle – the period in which Peregrines are most active, and also that which enthusiasts and ornithologists most enjoy studying as it shows the more intimate side of this falcon's life. The book wouldn't be complete without a review of this renowned predator's varied diet, and the aptly named 'Homes and Meals' chapter discusses much of their recorded prey and hunting behaviour, including reference to my own work discussing their night-hunting habits (*Brit. Birds* 101: 58–67). The final chapter explains how to see Peregrines and what behaviours to look and listen for at different times of the year.

The final image, on the index page of the book, is a brilliant montage showing a juvenile Peregrine dropping through the sky in a stoop dive. It sums up the species well, and shows just why we may want to discover more about the fastest bird in the world.

Ed Drewitt



## American Birding Sketchbook

By Michael Warren

Langford Press, 2012

Hbk, 144pp; full colour throughout

ISBN 978-1-904078-47-0 M21402

£38.00 **BB Bookshop price £34.00**

Maybe it is just me, but sometimes when I pick up a book, I just know that I am going

to enjoy it. I appreciate that it is partly clever design and marketing of the dust jacket by the publisher, and the cover image of a Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* is certainly a stunner. Nevertheless, the feeling was there telling me that this is my kind of book, and within lay the joys of handling something real, with pages and its own smell, as opposed to a piece of plastic with words on it. Put simply, *American Birding Sketchbook* is an avian celebration, and turning every page revealed a spread bursting with colour and vibrancy. My instincts were confirmed – this is a happy book!

The premise of the book evolved from sketches and notes amassed by Mike Warren during the 1980s and 1990s, when various projects involved visits to all 50 states in the USA! For years the notebooks lay largely dormant, but not forgotten. It is apparent that the author had been itching to

work on this task and when the opportunity arose he pulled out all the stops. The majority of the states are given a double-page spread, packed to the rafters with birds, foliage and scenery, providing a sense of place and atmosphere. Where there has been more to describe, a few birds have flitted over onto extra pages. With a cast of thousands, it is difficult to pick out any one favourite and with each reread new birds seem to have arrived on the pages, but I now know that I *really* want to see the Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus*.

I freely admit that I admire Mike's work and I love painting American birds. So I shouldn't be surprised at my own reaction to this book. But in my view, it shows some of his most relaxed work to date; he obviously took delight in the process of putting this folio together. It might be a cliché, but if you relish top-quality wildlife art, this large-format tome will make the perfect Christmas indulgence. It will definitely be joining the others on my shelf marked 'comfort reading'.

Dan Powell

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## Burridge's Multilingual Dictionary of Birds of the World Volume II – English

Edited by John T. Burridge • Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008 • Hbk, 253pp  
ISBN 978-1-84718-517-4 Subbuteo code M21408 • £39.99 **BB Bookshop price £35.99**

This is one of a set of books for which the eventual aim is to provide a comprehensive dictionary, in about 50 languages, of the vernacular names of the c. 10,000 species of bird in the world. With minimal introduction, the bulk of this volume is a long list of bird names. Each species gets a unique reference number, followed by its English name, taken primarily from the *Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World* (Dickinson 2003), with names from other mainstream sources such as *The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World* (Clements 2007) listed when these differ significantly. A quick search finds 19 volumes currently available: Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Latin (*sic*, presumably scientific), Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. Each gives the vernacular names of every species in that language, indexed by their unique numbers for referencing across

volumes. At £40.00 a time, these books are massively overpriced, though presumably only libraries are going to consider purchasing the full set – most individual ornithologists can restrict themselves to 'Latin' and the languages of interest to them. That is, if they need the books at all; much of the information is available on the web and a glance at samples of the non-English volumes betrays a heavy reliance on the freely available Bird Studies Canada 'Avibase' (<http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org>). Publishing in book form prevents flexible updating of taxonomy, inclusion of many alternative vernacular synonyms, or any reaction to the publication of the IOC World Bird Names (Gill & Wright: [www.worldbirdnames.org](http://www.worldbirdnames.org)). Frankly, this type of list is what the internet was made for, but some ornithologists might find the books to be a useful reference.

Martin Collinson

## Butterflies of Britain & Ireland

Narrated by Nick Baker and others • BirdGuides, 2012 • 2 DVDs (3+ hours in total)  
Subbuteo code V60073 • £30.00 **BB Bookshop price £27.00**

This double DVD set introduces viewers to each of the 59 British and Irish butterflies. After loading, which is quick and simple, viewers are presented with a pictorial menu that leads to each family or group of related species. Navigation through the menus is straightforward to reach the individual species accounts. Each species is introduced by Nick Baker, who provides a clear and concise commentary. Interviews with experts, including Richard Lewington, Richard Fox and Jeremy Thomas, provide an insight into the more fascinating aspects of the life-cycle of some species.

Species accounts typically last 2–4 minutes, although the commentary on the Wood White complex lasts for over five minutes, but this deals with Wood White *Leptidea sinapis*, Réal's Wood White *L. reali* and the newly discovered but as yet undescribed Cryptic Wood White, amalgamated into a single account. Details of habitat, behaviour, comparison with similar species including side-by-side images, anecdotal background information, extinctions and threats, and the egg, caterpillar and pupae stages are documented in amazing detail. Some of the more complex survival adapta-

tions are discussed at length. Close-up images include feeding, and courtship and mating, while more distant sequences feature butterflies in their typical habitats – for example, Purple Emperor *Apatura iris* and Purple Hairstreak *Quercusia quercus* in the upper canopy, and Mountain Ringlet *Erebia epiphron* flitting low over its moorland home – each providing a feel for the distinctive flight of the species which enables their rapid identification, essential when surveying over large areas. A 10-km-square distribution map is provided for each species and it is here that most of the range changes and extinctions are discussed.

A short section deals with ten former breeders and vagrants, and another covers five of the many diurnal moths that are sometimes mistaken for butterflies. The brevity of these sections is at odds with the more detailed species accounts.

There is much here for those taking their first foray into the world of butterflies, and for experienced butterfly enthusiasts too.

Peter Kennerley

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