

# Reviews

## A Sweet Wild Note

By Richard Smyth

Elliott & Thompson, 2017

Hbk, 190pp

ISBN 978-1-78396-314-0; £14.99

While I was pondering on what to write about this book, a female Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* carried off the cock Blackbird *Turdus merula* whose visits to our garden I had been enjoying for weeks. The Blackbird had been a bit of a wimp when it came to seeing off the male from next door, but when it came to proclaiming himself and his patch, he was a virtuoso in song. His voice, I thought, was something I would really miss in the spring evenings. Of course, another male took his place very quickly, and he turned out to be a fine singer too. All this, I knew as a lifelong birder, was as it should be; but, because of this book, I did pause to wonder just what it is about the song of these birds – any birds, for that matter – that gives me so much pleasure.

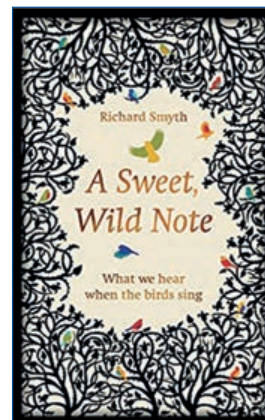
Richard Smyth wonders this too, and, to quote the book's subtitle, examines 'what we hear when the birds sing'. The how and the why of singing are briefly explained (succinctly and accurately), but the bulk of the book concerns our responses and reactions, which turn out to be very varied. The intriguing story takes us through music and poetry in some detail, and we find everything from what you might call 'background music' to some quite tortured soul-searching. There are such disparate stories as, for example, how the songs of Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* brought hope and some solace to soldiers in the hell of Great War trenches, and the famous 1924 recorded duet featuring Beatrice

Harrison on cello and a Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*. There is a lot more too, and lots of musing on what it all means.

It is difficult to sum up this book in a short review. I am going to have to read it again, at least once, to try and get my thoughts in order, but what I can say is that I am enjoying it and finding plenty to think about. If I have made any personal conclusions, they revolve around not just a fascination with the amazing sounds and music birds make but also around atmosphere, places, remembered situations and, yes, simple pleasure and contentment. Bird song is something that helps to take me beyond facts, figures and lists, and reminds me that, rather like Richard Smyth, I am basically an old-fashioned birdwatcher at heart.

For me, the book might have been even better if it had ranged a bit wider and brought in such wonderfully evocative sounds as Greenshanks *Tringa nebularia* calling in wild places, Buzzards *Buteo buteo* mewing high overhead, the noise of a Kittiwake *Rissa trydactyla* colony... But it is a very good little book, nicely written, and you should definitely read it.

Mike Everett



## Birding in the Bristol Region: a celebration 50 years of the Bristol Ornithological Club

Edited by William Earp, Bristol Ornithological Club, 2017

Pbk, 96pp; ISBN 978-1-5272-0506-2, £12.00 inc. p&p

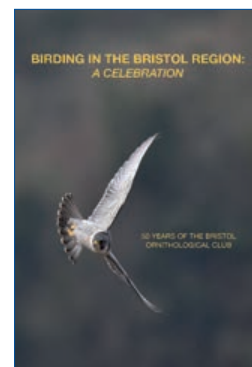
From William Earp, 4 Pitchcombe Gardens, Bristol BS9 2RH;

e-mail [william@wearp.wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:william@wearp.wanadoo.co.uk)

Can it really be 50 years since the formation of the Bristol Ornithological Club (BOC)? I left Bristol in 1976 having been a founder club member, and clearly a lot has happened to ornithology and the Club in particular since. And this new publication sets out to celebrate the 50 years of the BOC. The spur for the BOC was communication: no bird-line, no papers, no websites and no mobile phones

in 1967. Our thirst for news was satisfied then by the BOC monthly bulletin containing recent sightings. The excitement when the bulletin hit the mat was palpable; and it was so up to date that some birds were actually still around to go and see.

I searched back through my notebooks and in



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1967 it was 31st December when I recorded my first Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* of the year; it was a very scarce bird indeed in the 1960s. By 1988, breeding Peregrines had arrived in the Avon Gorge, just outside Bristol. By encouraging members to warden those Peregrines, the BOC has enabled more and more people to appreciate these birds and to get them involved in positive conservation work.

Club members and friends celebrate 50 species from the Bristol and district area in the publication, and each species account is accompanied by a high-quality colour photograph. The Club's symbol – a Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* – reflects the first British and European record, at Blagdon Lake, in December 1963. It was lovely to see John Martin's annotated field sketches of the

Severnside 'Fregetta storm-petrel' from 2009. Club member Richard Bland – who has dedicated his life to organising bird survey work, and enthusing others to follow suit – delivers a fascinating insight with his 'Fifty years of change'. Finally, 'Fifty ways to improve your birding' gives practical hints on how to enjoy your birding. Accompanied by some light-hearted vignettes, the advice reflects the way in which BOC members have contributed so much to the local birdwatching scene – from organising walks for beginners to high-quality productions (e.g. *Bristol Ornithology*) and, above all, cementing great friendships.

*Tim Cleeves*

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## The Northeast Passage

By Tony Soper

Venture Books, 2017

Pbk, 132pp; many colour photographs, 8 maps and appendices

ISBN 978-0-9553801-2-9; £13.99

Only recently have wildlife cruises traversed some of the most inhospitable coasts, seas and islands of Arctic Russia. This book is a fascinating narrative that takes you through the recently opened Northeast Passage, which is now briefly navigable during the Arctic summer. After a brief introductory section on the opening of the Northeast Passage, the bulk of the book is split into six chapters covering the passage west to east – Barents Sea, Kara Sea, Laptev Sea, East Siberian Sea, Chukchi Sea and Bering Strait.

The text is brought vividly to life with many excellent photographs of townships and settlements, habitats, birds, mammals and plants. It is not a large book and therefore some of the images are rather small, but they all help to complete the

picture. The main text gives many interesting facts about the various islands together with the birds and mammals likely to be encountered. The many seabird cliffs are mentioned but the state of the ice may limit access to some of them. Some 17 birds and 13 mammals are given further treatment in sections of text printed on pale green boxes.

The three appendices give, briefly, more information about the birds, mammals and plants with lists of the noteworthy species (scientific names and English, and additionally in Russian for the birds). Useful websites and charts are also listed. If you are contemplating sailing the Northeast Passage, then this book is a 'must have'.

*Robin Prytherch*

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## Britain's Spiders: a field guide

By Lawrence Bee, Geoff Oxford and Helen Smith

Princeton University Press, 2017

Pbk, 480pp; colour photographs

ISBN 978-0-691-16529-5; £24.95

This is another groundbreaking book in the WILDGuides series, combining an impressive collection of photographs with an informative and well-organised text. The extensive introduction will be particularly useful for those less familiar with this group and its diverse range of families and lifestyles. The species accounts deal with species from all 37 of the British spider families

and provide individual accounts for more than half of the more common or distinctive species (395 in total). Keen novices as well as more committed arachnophiles will find this volume indispensable.

*Ian Carter*

