
sea bird colonies
© J. Heywood
SHETLANDS
60°
FAIR ISLE
Atlantic Ocean
ORKNEYS
OUTER HEBRIDES
INNER HEBRIDES
SKYE
Golspie
Moray Firth
Inverness
R. Spey
Aviemore
SPEYSIDE
Loch Garten
Cairngorm Mtns.
Aberdeen
North Sea
Great Britain
0 25 50 miles
Glasgow
Edinburgh
SCOTLAND
NORTHERN IRELAND
Belfast
Solway Firth
Lake District
ISLE OF MAN
Morecambe Bay
LANCASHIRE
YORKSHIRE
York
Blackpool
Leeds
Fairburn ings
Irish Sea
Dee Estuary
Liverpool
Peak District
Dublin
CHESHIRE
WALES
IRELAND
The Wash
Cley next the Sea
Norwich
Great Yarmouth
Ouse Washes
NORFOLK
EAST ANGLIA
Ely
SUFFOLK
Minsmere
R. Dovey
Midland reservoirs
Birmingham
Aberystwyth
Devil's Bridge
Tregaron
Cambridge
St. George's Channel
sea bird colonies
Oxford
Slimbridge Wildfowl Refuge
R. Thames
Cardiff
Bristol
Staines
LONDON
Stodmarsh
Canterbury
Lynton
Exmoor
AVON
SOMERSET
HAMPSHIRE
KENT
Dover
E. SUSSEX
Salisbury
Dungeness
Hastings
Rye Harbour
Chichester
New Forest
DEVON
Exeter
DORSET
Beachy Head
Brighton
Portsmouth
Dartmoor
Dawlish Warren
Exe Estuary
Weymouth
Bournemouth
Portland Bill
St. Ives
CORNWALL
Slapton Ley
Start Point
Plymouth
Prawle Point
English Channel
SCILLY ISLES
0°
50°

PLANNING A BIRDING TRIP TO BRITAIN

by Jane Cumming

Britain is one of the most heavily birded areas in the world, and there is a wealth of information available to the visiting birder—so much that it is hard to know where to start. This article is intended to provide a broad overview of the kind of birding you might expect in Britain. The references listed at the end will supply further information once you have decided upon a general plan of action based on the season during which you will be visiting the country, on your personal goals, and on the inclinations of any nonbirding companions who might have to be taken into consideration. I should explain that the areas described represent a personal selection from which many well-known places have been omitted.

Great Britain is about six hundred miles long and three hundred miles across at its widest point, but no part of it lies more than seventy miles from the sea. The highest mountain, which is in Scotland, does not quite reach four thousand feet. Its dense population of some fifty-five million puts immense pressure on the land, and a constant struggle is waged by environmentalists to preserve the little remaining wetland from drainage and development. Coasts and estuaries too are under continual threat. However, traditional mixed-farming practices and strict planning laws have maintained the country's varied and beautiful rural scenery, and most of it still delights the tourist.

Of the more than five hundred avian species recorded in Britain, about two hundred nest regularly; the majority of the rest are accidentals. The British Isles have only one endemic species, the Scottish Crossbill. Although the subject of much debate, *Loxia scotica* is now regarded as a species distinct from Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra,* known as Red Crossbill in America) and is also separated from Parrot Crossbill *(L. pytyopsittacus).* And there is only one unique subspecies, the Red Grouse, now considered a race of the Willow/Red Grouse (Willow Ptarmigan to Americans). Incidentally, I have used mainly British bird names throughout this article—you'll need to know them if you go there. If the same species occurs on this continent, the American common name is included in parentheses. Occasionally, where the European name might lead to confusion, I have added the scientific name and alternative common names. An annotated 1984 British (and western Palearctic) checklist and a 1988 article about expected changes in current British nomenclature are listed in the references.

Britain's island climate is more moderate at all seasons than that of New England—but don't forget your umbrella! The winters are milder, with little snow and few real freezes in the south and west; the summers are cooler and can be disappointingly chilly and wet for weeks at a time. Consequently, some of New England's summer species such as the Night Heron (Black-crowned Night-Heron) have a more southerly distribution in Europe and are rarely seen in

Britain; whereas many common winter visitors to Massachusetts such as the Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw) will be seen south of Scotland only in unusually hard weather, despite Britain's more northerly latitude. The list of species regularly occurring in Britain is shorter than the corresponding New England list, but Britain makes up the shortfall with rarities. Her geographical location on the western edge of the Eurasian continent brings strays to her shores from all points of the compass, and every respectable British bird list includes a good selection of vagrants.

It is very easy to bird in Britain. Violent weather is rare, dangerous animals nonexistent, and there is only one poisonous snake (the adder), which I have never seen despite having spent much of my life wandering the British countryside. Access is rarely a problem; rural Britain is blessed with a web of public footpaths protected by ancient common laws from closure by landowners, so you can usually find a legitimate way to wander any area that takes your fancy. Many of the most beautiful regions are protected as National Parks or preserved by The National Trust or by county and local naturalist organizations. The seashore is publicly owned below the high tide mark, and much of it is bordered by coastal paths that run unbroken for hundreds of miles. There is a network of bird observatories around the coasts at migration hot spots, most of them running very active record-keeping and banding programs. Some can provide hostel accommodations; most publish annual reports and research findings; and all of them are mines of information on current local bird news. They are also located at first-class migration-season birding spots.

Spring and Summer

Spring comes early to England, especially in the sheltered southwest where the coastal climate can be balmy by early March. Palm trees flourish there, and the Scilly Isles grow daffodils for the commercial market in January. Early migrants start arriving in the third week of March, but the main migration takes place in April and early May. Breeding is well underway by mid-May, and things get a bit quiet after the June equinox. Birdingwise, July is a dull month, here as in most places.

For the Massachusetts birder in search of typical European species, the best plan is to visit early in the breeding season during May or June. A tour of the major habitats and locations could easily be designed to include some general sightseeing in many of the prettiest regions of Britain, which will be handy if you are traveling with nonbirders. With two or three weeks and a reasonable travel fund available, I suggest starting on the south coast while the migration season is winding down in mid-May; move on to the East Anglian marshes; and once summer's warmth has reached the mountains, spend a June week in Scotland, looking for highland and island specialities and including a visit to at least one major Atlantic seabird colony. If you have the option, visit the south of

England in late April to early May, and keep Scotland for mid-June when the weather is likely to be at its best.

The South Coast. While migrant shorebirds and songbirds are still on the move, try some of the following combinations depending on which part of the country you would most like to visit.

Kent: Dungeness on a good migration day; Stodmarsh near Canterbury, when there is not much movement on the coast, for some excellent speciality marsh birds—Garganey, Cetti's and Savi's amongst the commoner warblers, and Bearded Tit. The last species, which is moustached rather than bearded and not a tit but a member of the babbler family, is listed in older field guides as Bearded Reedling. Remarkably, the new name suggested for it is Bearded Parrotbill!

East Sussex: The sea cliffs at Fairlight (near Hastings) or at Beachy Head for breeding Fulmars (Northern Fulmar) and passerine migrants, the pools at Pett Level for shorebirds, and the Rye Harbour Nature Reserve for shorebirds, migrants, and its tern colony.

Hampshire: The New Forest (it was new when William the Conqueror set it aside as a royal hunting preserve in the eleventh century!) for its speciality breeding species—Honey Buzzard *(Pernis apivorus)*, Hobby (a falcon), Woodcock *(Scolopax rusticola)*, Nightjar *(Caprimulgus europaeus)*, Wood Lark, Tree Pipit, Dartford Warbler, and Red-backed Shrike. The Honey Buzzard and Red-backed Shrike are highly endangered as British breeding species, so treat their breeding areas with great respect in the unlikely event that you find them. Be warned that this is one area of Britain where pressure from the twitchers (listers, in American birding parlance) has left the local birders notoriously disinclined to part with information on the whereabouts of the rarer breeding species, and do your homework beforehand. The whole coast south and east of the Forest is rich in tidal marshes, estuaries, and nature reserves worth exploring: try the harbours at Pagham (Chichester), Langstone (Portsmouth), or Poole (Bournemouth).

Dorset: Portland Bill is one of my favorite places for migrant passerines, spring rarities, pelagics, and alcids nesting on the sea cliffs; check the marshes on either side of Weymouth at Radipole and Lodmoor for shorebirds and marshland breeding species.

South Devon: Dawlish Warren, south of Exeter, for shorebirds; the Exe estuary for all kinds of waterbirds; Prawle Point, Start Point, and Slapton Ley on the South Devon peninsula for migrants; then up to Dartmoor to find Dipper *(Cinclus cinclus)*, Ring Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*, a thrush), and the western woodland species such as Buzzard *(Buteo buteo)*, Sparrowhawk *(Accipiter nisus)*, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Redstart *(Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, also in the thrush group), Wood Warbler, and Pied Flycatcher. Most of these can also be found in the New Forest in Hampshire.

North Devon: Beautiful Exmoor with its north-facing Devon/Somerset coast is an alternative to Dartmoor for the woodland and moorland species, with some fine coastal cliff birding around Lynton. The flowers and butterflies in this area are worth a look, too.

Wales. If your path north takes you through Wales, you will find some of the Dartmoor/Exmoor species in its wet green woods (try around the Dovey estuary), magnificent breeding seabird colonies on the cliffs and islands, and a few specialities such as Choughs on the sea cliffs (rare and local) and Red Kites around Devil's Bridge and Tregaron.

East Anglia. My choice, however, would be to head east to the Norfolk heaths and Suffolk marshes. Inland in Cambridgeshire is The Ouse (or Hundred Foot) Washes, an area of flooding between two rivers that is an internationally important wildfowl site. Minsmere, a famous reserve of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), is on the Suffolk coast. A number of continental species make it over to Suffolk, where you will find Spoonbills *(Platalea leucorodia)*, Marsh Harriers *(Circus aeruginosus)*, Avocets *(Recurvirostra avosetta)*, and many other wetland birds. Research beforehand should uncover a few good areas to check for some difficult breeding species, such as Stone-curlew, Golden Oriole, and Red-backed Shrike, which you are unlikely to find elsewhere. But again, don't expect too much help from the locals, and be very careful not to disturb breeding birds.

Scotland. As you move north through Britain, any of the higher and wilder areas will produce new breeding species; but if you can, go right up to the Highlands of Scotland where the magnificent scenery of the Cairngorms makes it well worth the climb in search of Ptarmigan (Rock Ptarmigan), Dotterel, and tundra-breeding shorebirds. Explore the Caledonian forest at Speyside for Capercaillie, Crested Tit, and the endemic Scottish Crossbill *(Loxia scotica)*. Check the pools for divers (loons), grebes, Goldeneye (Common), Red-necked Phalarope, and tree-nesting Goosanders (Common Mergansers). Watch for Dippers on the rivers and Ospreys around the famous Loch Garten reserve. One of the attractions of Scotland in June is the length of the birding day; at "closing time" (11:00 P.M., when the pubs eject their patrons), it is still light enough to read a newspaper.

After a few days in the Highlands, visit the Islands—perhaps the Outer Hebrides. Some of the best birding will be had from the ferry, traveling from Skye for a couple of hours across the ocean with Puffins (Atlantic Puffin) on all sides and Storm Petrels (British Storm-Petrel, *Hydrobates pelagicus*) following in the wake. On the islands, try calling the elusive Corncrakes out from the clumps of irises by drawing a penny across a comb; good luck! Look for breeding divers, eiders, shorebirds, and Golden Eagles. Alternatively, you might like to visit the magnificent seabird colonies in the Shetlands to see the famous half-a-pair of Black-browed Albatrosses! Very few albatrosses ever cross the

doldrums of the Equator, and this lone black-brow has waited in vain for a mate at the Hermaness gannetry every summer since 1972. The landbirds here are tundra breeders: shorebirds, Arctic Skuas (Parasitic Jaeger), Great Skuas, and in some years, Snowy Owls.

Autumn

The dedicated twitcher (lister) may prefer a fall trip since this season is likely to produce the highest species count. Good autumn birding is concentrated on the coasts, peninsulas, and islands, some of the best of which are described here in no particular order. The later you visit, the fewer regular migrants and the more rarities you are likely to find. The Scillies are becoming popular right into November, and the Fair Isle Observatory's accommodation is fully booked through the peak migration season for years in advance.

Seawatching. Unfortunately, pelagic trips are almost unheard-of in Britain, so you must go to Cape Clear in southwestern Ireland for the best seawatching, although I am told that a few pioneers are starting to explore off the west coast of England too. This all changes, however, whenever a Caribbean hurricane follows the storm track up the Gulf Stream and hits Britain with a major gale. Then, seawatchers flock down to St. Ives in Cornwall to see the spectacular flights of storm-driven pelagic species streaming back south down the Atlantic coast. Thousands of Gannets (Northern Gannet) and Kittiwakes (Black-legged Kittiwake) are accompanied by Pomarine (Pomarine Jaeger), Arctic (Parasitic Jaeger), and Great skuas, divers, shearwaters, petrels, and alcids—a birding sight that has to be experienced to be believed.

Dungeness, Kent. The barren shingle ridges hide tangled hollows full of migrants. The Observatory is in one of the cottages. *Photo by J. Cumming*

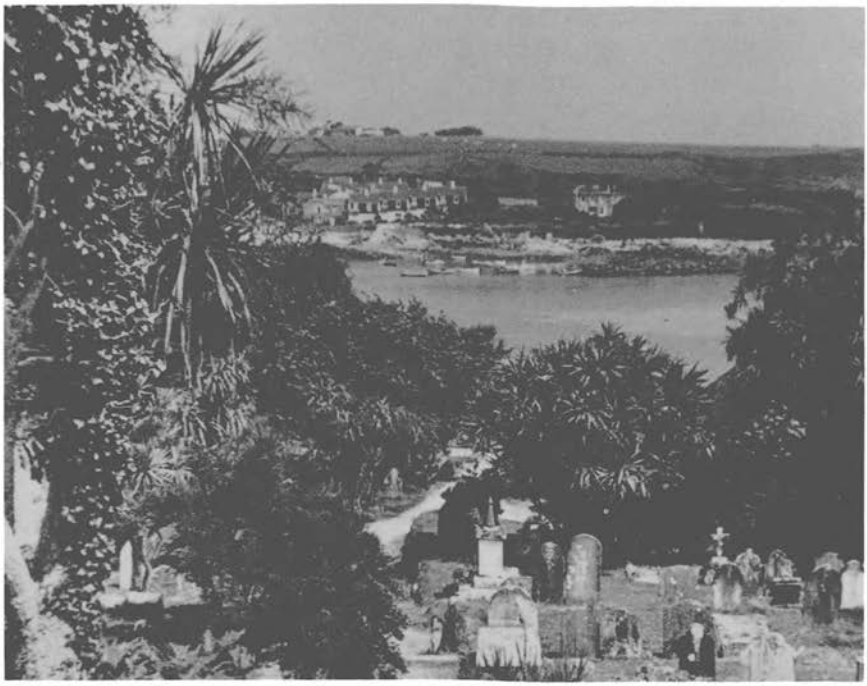
Norfolk. From August onwards, East Anglian attention switches to the north coast of Norfolk where Cley next the Sea is one of the most enthusiastically birded areas of Britain and with good reason. Many northern and eastern species pass across this corner of the country on their way south, and Siberian rarities are discovered here when the wind has been blowing consistently from the northeast. Shorebirding is excellent, and the visible diurnal migration of common passerines can be witnessed in October as tired flocks struggle in off the North Sea and drop hungrily into berry-laden bushes near the coast.

Fair Isle, a barren rock between the Orkneys and the Shetlands, is Britain's best magnet for lost Siberian vagrants. Nowhere else do you stand the same chance of seeing such exotics as Pechora Pipit, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Lanceolated Warbler, or Yellow-breasted Bunting, quite apart from the transatlantic vagrants that also make landfall here.

The Scilly Isles, at the diametrically opposite end of Britain, are famous for autumn rarities, the majority of which are North American species. You may not envision spending your precious hours of foreign birding rushing to see such common Massachusetts species as American Robin or Bobolink, but to a European birder these islands are pure magic. My relatively humble British list owes much to the Scillies, which supplied it with American Black Duck, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Blackpoll and Black-and-white warblers, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, amongst others. You may observe from this that the prevailing winds help far more Nearctic species to Britain than European species to the New World and that the more northerly breeding American species are the most likely to follow a migration path out over the ocean that can carry them right across it. I have seen more Buff-breasted Sandpipers in Britain than in Massachusetts, and many American gulls and shorebirds are annual not only on the Scillies but also throughout mainland Cornwall. Less regularly, Siberian species may appear in some numbers, and a good easterly wind will bring in a scattering of central Asian pipits or east European warblers. Quite apart from its concentrations of common migrants, the Scillies always offer the hope of a spectacular vagrant from almost anywhere.

Winter

A winter trip to Britain will not offer the New England birder large numbers of new species, but the quality of birding remains good, not least because the climate, though damp, is rarely bitterly cold. Winter birding can be surprisingly good as long as freshwater habitats remain open and people keep stocking the feeders in their gardens. Highlights are the freshwater ducks, waterbirds in the coastal bays, shorebirds on the estuaries and mudflats, and the resident garden and woodland species that become steadily tamer as the search for food grows



Old Town churchyard, The Scillies. A favorable wind can pack these palm trees with migrants and exotics. *Photo by J. Cumming*

more demanding. Most New England backyards produce only a handful of winter residents, but my mother's garden in Britain boasts more than twenty species. Thrushes and titmice, pigeons and crows, woodpeckers and a Nuthatch *(Sitta europaea)*, a Wren (Winter Wren), a Tree Creeper *(Certhia familiaris)*, and a variety of finches come to bird tables for food while farmlands still hold Sky Larks, Red-legged and Grey partridges, Lapwings, Corn Buntings, and Yellowhammers. A good day at a southern reservoir should produce a dozen or more species of freshwater and bay ducks, often including a Smew or even a Ring-necked Duck. Most British raptors are resident, too.

Check the high tide shorebird roosts on the Exe Estuary or along the Hampshire coastline. Black-tailed and Bar-tailed godwits, Grey (Black-bellied) Plovers, Dunlins, Sanderlings, Turnstones (Ruddy), Curlews (Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*), and Knots (Red) gather in considerable numbers waiting for the mudflats to reappear. Look along the shoreline for Brent Geese (Brants) and Shelducks *(Tadorna tadorna)*. The bays hold divers and grebes, but not the variety of sea ducks that you would expect in Massachusetts.

Reservoirs everywhere in the southern half of the country are excellent for ducks, gull roosts, and generally a good selection of common passerines. Try the Avon/Somerset reservoirs, Staines Reservoir west of London, Fairburn Ings in

Yorkshire, or the Midlands reservoirs near Birmingham. In the West Country visit the Slimbridge Wildfowl Refuge to see several thousand White-fronted Geese (Greater White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons),* and hundreds of Bewick's (Tundra) Swans.

The fens of East Anglia also hold big flocks of Bewick's Swans and ducks. Snow Buntings, Lapland Buntings, and Shore Larks—to give these familiar American birds their British names—haunt the Norfolk beaches. Divers, grebes, Brent Geese, and shorebirds will be found offshore or in the huge bay of The Wash.

Try Golspie in the extreme northeast of Scotland for real northern birding—only for the hardy, or the foolhardy, but quite an experience. Britons consider it worth the journey to search for King Eiders and Surf Scoters amongst the flocks of Eiders (Common Eider), Long-tailed Ducks, and Velvet (White-winged) Scoters. Glaucous Gulls are common, and you should also find Twite and Brambling. Be warned that snow is very likely; the January day can be over in less than six hours; and the east winds are bitter. Also famous for its winter concentrations of geese and sea ducks is the Solway Firth on the western edge of the Scottish border, and it is a lot more accessible than Golspie. In northern England, Morecambe Bay (Lancashire) and the Dee Estuary (Cheshire) are notable for their huge flocks of wintering shorebirds.

References

British Birds. 1984. *The 'British Birds' List of Birds of the Western Palearctic.* This is a checklist of Europe that includes species on the official British and Irish lists, the birds' scientific names, and their status in Britain (resident, summer, winter, migrant, vagrant, absence of a valid record, and records under consideration); available from the British Bird Shop, c/o Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ, England.

British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee. 1988. "Suggested Changes to the English Names of Some Western Palearctic Birds," *British Birds* 81(8) August 1988: 355-77.

The BOURC suggests 351 name changes in the 1984 list above, 142 of which concern birds that occur in Britain. These changes will be voted upon sometime after October 1989.

Ferguson-Lees, J., ed. 1975. *A Guide to Bird-watching in Europe.* London: The Bodley Head, Ltd.

Gooders, J. 1986. *The New Where to Watch Birds.* London: Andre Deutsch.

Parslow, J., ed. 1983. *Birdwatcher's Britain.* London: Pan Books Ltd.

I highly recommend this book; it includes information on trails and distances together with detailed maps and directions. Also for each birding site described, advice is given on the time of day and season to visit, the location of habitats for specific birds, and numerous

identification tips. John Parslow, the editor, is a leading authority on the distribution of British and European birds, author of Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland *(Poyser), and coauthor and cartographer of the field guide,* The Birds of Britain and Europe *(Collins).*

Redman, N. and S. Harrap. 1987. *Bird Watching in Britain.* London: Christopher Helm.

Information Sources

• AA (The Automobile Association), located at Fanum House, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2EA, England, publishes a variety of touring atlases and map books, available through booksellers in the United States.

• Natural History Book Service Ltd: 2 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN, England; Tel. 011-44-803-865913 from U.S.; 0803-865913 in England. *Call or write for their extensive free catalog.*

• The Post Office in Britain sells (over the counter) Ordnance Survey maps of several varieties, including 204 Landranger maps (1.25 inches to 1 mile). Perhaps more useful for the birding tourist are the Motoring Atlas, a Routeplanner map, Routemaster maps (9 maps for the whole of Britain), or Tourist maps (11 selected areas).

• Royal Society for Nature Conservation at The Green, Nettleham, Lincoln LN2 2NR, England, cooperates with 44 voluntary organizations, the local Nature Conservation Trusts, which manage 1300 nature reserves in Britain. Membership in RSNC or any local trust permits birdwatchers to visit many of these reserves.

• Royal Society for the Protection of Birds at The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, England, telephone 0767-90551, is Europe's largest voluntary wildlife conservation body and manages a number of reserves, some of them staffed to provide advice, checklists, maps, brochures, and educational material. The RSPB publishes annually a wallet-size *RSPB Diary* that includes a checklist, addresses of national and local bird organizations, societies, and clubs, a list of Bank Holidays, suggestions about behavior at reserves, and other information that is helpful to a visitor. RSPB membership includes permits to visit their preserves.

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