

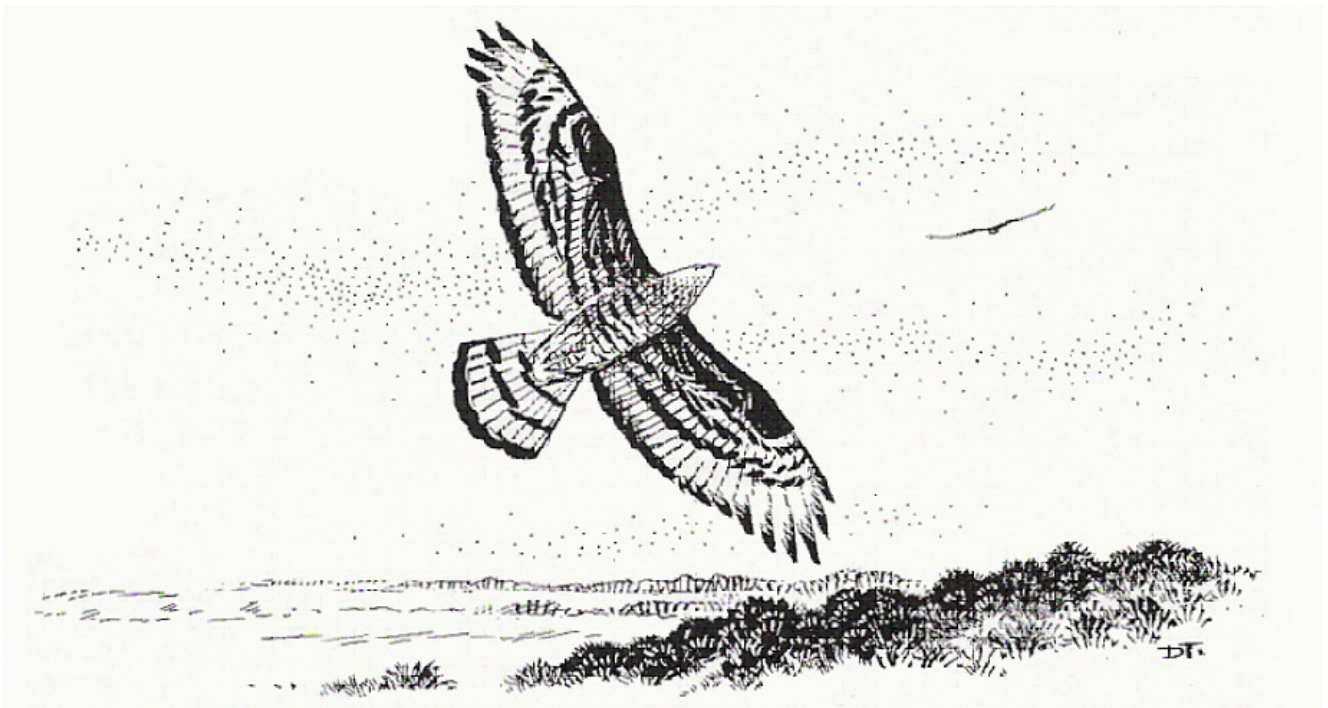


Birding by Bike:

The Hampshire Big Year

2005

for my beloved
JULÍA



Honey Buzzards over the New Forest
by David Thelwell

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Last but by no means least, this year would not have been possible, or half as enjoyable, without the support (sometimes physical/ thermal [I'm talking about the *soup!*], always emotional) of my long-suffering and incredibly patient wife, **Julia Casson**, to whom this book is dedicated. It's been a hell of a year for you, Julia, and the single best thing about it is that you're healthy and well again after your awful accident in mid-summer.

Prologue

In the dark, dank days of October 2004, it finally became clear – I was getting fractionally porky and a touch middle-aged. It's not that I was a complete lardball, or that I couldn't make it up the stairs – it was just that at the age of 34, you start to feel the chill wind of age and mortality!

There was nothing for it but to undertake a fitness drive. So, I put myself on a bit of a diet, set myself a target of running a cross-country race in under 35 minutes (I won't say how long the route was...), and did a few long(ish) bike rides.

Well, I ran the race (34m01s, you'll note), racked up a good few miles on the bike, started to feel fitter, and lost a few pounds. It was working!

But on one early November ride around the upper Itchen valley, cycling past the Naturetrek office at Cheriton Mill to be precise, I flushed a Little Egret from the water meadow. Now used to trying *anything* to block out the tedium of cycling (it really can be very boring), I thought 'bike tick!', and mentally started a new sub-section of my Hampshire bird list.

A few minutes later, a Bullfinch flew across the road. Now I got thinking. I counted a total of 33 bird species on that ride (Buzzard was the only other 'good bird'), and I had indeed

succeeded in making the outing a bit less dull – if not less painful.

So, in the inevitable hot bath afterwards, and that evening with my wife, Julia, over a bottle of wine (it's not all self-denial, you know!), the germ of an idea took shape. How many birds could I see, in a year, in Hampshire, without using the car, or trains, or buses? In other words, the Non-Motorised Year-list concept was born.

I put the idea on ice for a few weeks, and was hardly thinking about it at all when we set off to Sri Lanka for a birding holiday, on the infamous date of 26th December 2004.

Everyone knows what happened in Sri Lanka (and right around the Indian Ocean) that day, but it actually took about four days for the penny to drop with us. A combination of remote (inland) locations, no newspapers or TV, and sheer poor communication in Sri Lanka meant that the horror of the tsunami did not reach us until one dark night in a hotel (without phones) in Ratnapura, just after a great walk looking at the local barbets, bee-eaters and shrikes.

Our jaws dropped and we were left sitting in stunned silence when we finally watched a BBC World News report that night. Quickly, we realised that people at home might not have twigged that our arrival time in Sri Lanka put us right out of danger, and that we had headed inland anyway. And

yet the phones were down in Ratnapura that night – and the following morning.

So after a (planned) 0430 start and a completely rural drive to the Sinharaja rainforest, we spent the rest of the day in the field thinking how to get to a phone. It was surreal – we were thoroughly enjoying such mega specialities as Red-billed Blue Magpie and White-faced Starling, while a hundred miles away people were living in a nightmare, and a few thousand miles away people were worried sick about us.

That night, I managed to get a (two hour!) jeep ride off the mountain, and managed to place a phone call home – relief all round.

A few days later, our itinerary took us to the south-east corner of Sri Lanka. We were based in Tissamaharana, just 10km from the coast. We saw a near constant stream of aid vehicles and refugee trucks coming and going, and yet everyday life (and everyday birding) somehow carried on. It was surreally quiet. We were due to visit Yala and Bundala National Parks early in the New Year, but we had written them off – not only were they closed, but it seemed somehow wrong to go birding in the disaster zone itself.

But we met a British Foreign Office team in Tissamaharana, and they were insistent. We should go and see for ourselves – it was safe, we would not be in the way, and we should bear witness on our return home. Their advice was sound – it was a good idea

to visit both the town of Hambantota (or what was left of it), and Yala National Park, which reopened while we were in the area. It was actually easier to cope with the near miss we had had by seeing the places for ourselves, rather than letting them fester in the imagination.

Hambantota was an utter mess. Large sections of the town looked like demolition sites – in other spots, only foundations were left. Distressing fragments of everyday life were everywhere – a tinsel-covered Christmas tree scrambled in a pile of barbed wire, a plastic chair up a tree, saris hanging from thorn bushes. Only the Buddhist temple had survived, amazingly unscathed. The horror of the scene left us dumbfounded.



Yala was strangely dissimilar, yet equally terrible. Here, the force of the waves was no less starkly apparent, but the scene was oddly different. Most of the scrubland was untouched, yet along the shallow estuarine inlets great heaps of dead and dying vegetation were piled up and the bushes were strewn with debris, most of it organic detritus. And yet here and there were chilling reminders of the fifty or so people,

mostly tourists, who had died here – the lid of a suitcase, torn from its zip, a beach bag, a flip-flop, and most upsetting of all, a few pages from a bird book (matted, soaked and welded together) in the lee of a fallen tree. The message was stark – this could have been us. I still have those few pages – I have no idea what I should do with them.



Most awful of all at Yala, we visited the remains of the beach hotel by the lookout rock by the sea. The reinforced concrete pillars had been snapped off like matchsticks, and all that was left were the foundations, a few steps and a horribly crushed car. However, a Common Iora flitted amongst the ruins, collecting nesting material – life *was* going on.



And so it did for us. Undeniably shaken, and upset more than we had a right to be, we returned home after what can only be described as a rollercoaster of a holiday – death, mayhem, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Pied Ground-thrush, Kashmir Flycatcher, even Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, horror and distress.

January 2005 in England started off grim and wet, and there's no point denying that we took some time to recover from our near miss. But life *does* go on, and my thoughts soon turned again to my self-set challenge. What was a realistic bike year-list target in Hampshire?

Over a mug of tea I settled down to construct a 'shoo-in', 'probable', 'possible' and 'outrageous' list. Remember, I was not fit, and truly long bike rides were a thing of the future. I came up with an initial target of 150, thinking that 160 would be a pretty good measure of success, 170 would be very good indeed, and 180 would be outstanding. Were these numbers realistic? We would see.

I also decided to try and do just a little good for the people of Sri Lanka by my efforts. The school where I work, Winchester College, had rapidly set up a relief fund, targeted on a school rebuilding project in Matara, a town not far from the area we'd visited. Sponsored events, fund-raising concerts and whip rounds were raising hundreds of pounds. I gave a couple of illustrated talks about the birds of Sri Lanka and the tsunami – people were immensely

generous, with one colleague of mine putting a £50 note in the bucket, for instance.

So I invited people to sponsor my year-long effort – by species, dependent on my reaching a certain target, or an overall amount. There’s no point pretending that my ‘big year’ was simply a charity fund-raiser, but it sometimes made me feel fractionally less trivial! By buying this book, you have made your contribution too.



My next step was to set up an online weblog (or simply ‘blog’) of my exploits. While I could have simply posted to my existing website, I was keen to try out the then emerging technology of blogging, and this seemed like a good excuse! So, Zootherapy.blogspot.com was born,

along with a slightly pompous sounding alternative title: eZCEYL_2005, or the Zero Carbon Emissions Year-list.

The final spice was added in those early days of January by a long phone call with my very good friend, Chris Mills. Chris lives in Norfolk and enjoys a bike ride too, and he essentially ‘accepted the challenge’. He started his own blog (Birder on a Bike) with the same goal as me! Now, I was in no doubt from the very beginning that he would ‘win’ on sheer numbers – Norfolk is Norfolk, after all! But I reckoned that we could work out some kind of handicap system in December.

So, what were my rules? I thought long and hard, and came up with the following:

- 1) **All excursions must start and end from home (Winchester);**
- 2) **All species included in the main list of the county bird report would be countable, but not escapes;**
- 3) **Species heard only would be countable.**

Nothing too controversial there (though some geese would cause some problems). I was ready to begin.

What about equipment? My bike was a sturdy, reliable, but not very light Raleigh hybrid – steel frame, red, straight-handlebars, with ‘compromise’ tyres which would allow both riding on rough tracks and reasonable road speed. I recalibrated my wireless odometer, pumped up my tyres, fitted a water

bottle carrier, fixed my lights and prepared for action.

Notes: in the text which follows, **bold face** indicates the addition of a new species to the year-list.

Apologies if you don't like 'emoticons' – ☹ means a dip, ☺ means a good day, and 🌟* means an *explosively mega good day!*

January

The first 31 species are all a bit of a blur – I was not keeping day-by-day records of the birds in and around the garden, or those that flew over on my way to and from work. In the week from January 6th, when I returned from Sri Lanka, a wide range of common species made their way onto the list without a kilometre being put on my database of rides (or runs, for that matter).

There's nothing for it but to tell you, dear reader, what they were (in taxonomic order). I promise this is the only big list which will appear in this account!

Little Grebe, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Mute Swan, Gadwall, Mallard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Moorhen, Coot, Black-headed Gull, Feral Pigeon, Wood Pigeon, Collared Dove, Grey Wagtail, Goldcrest, Blackbird, Redwing, Song Thrush, Robin, Long-tailed Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook,

Carrion Crow, Starling, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch

Nothing too dramatic there, then! And already some obvious omissions – it was time to get moving.

14th January

32 species

My first *dated* year tick! While out refereeing football on a cold afternoon, a small flock of **Siskins** flew over, calling. I was under way. Winter 04/05 was a pretty dreadful one for Siskins in Hampshire – I would normally expect to see/hear them weekly in Winchester, but these were to be my only local birds this winter, and I had to wait until late March to record the species again. Even then, I had to go to the New Forest to see them.

15th January

42 species

Right – this was the *real* beginning. A small flock of Waxwings, precursors of a major invasion into southern England, had been found at Hedge End retail park – a classically unattractive but berry-rich location. So with a bit of time late on a Saturday morning, I piled on the wet weather gear, put the binoculars in my rucksack and hit the (very wet) road.

I was pleasantly surprised. Hedge End turned out to be a mere 45 minutes' ride away (40km round trip), and I scored with such climactic species (not) as **Pheasant, Common Gull and Herring Gull** on the way.

Immediately on arrival, sodden and mud-spattered, I joined a small group of car-based Hampshire birders ('the metal box crew', as Chris took to calling the motorised brigade) under the shelter of Jessops' porch, and settled down to watch a flock of some 18 or so **Waxwings** – scarce visitors to England from Arctic Scandinavia and Siberia.



This was only my third or fourth sighting of the species in the county ever, so it had to count as the first red-letter day on my year-list attempt.



Feeling smug, and already attracting some favourable comments from fellow 'HOSListers' (members of the county's online email bird discussion group), I rode off into the gathering murk, scoring six more on the return leg: **Dunnock, Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush, Jay, Goldfinch**, and the first of what

would turn out to be a great many **Bullfinches**. This last species is one which you simply see a lot more of by bike!

16th January **43 species**

Today a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** flew over the garden. Simple as that, really!

17th January **44 species**

More surprisingly, I had to wait until today to get **Wren** on the list. How had I not seen one before?

20th January **52 species**

☺ In the dark days of winter, I had to decide – go for easy 'list-filler' species, or aim for rarer species, on the assumption that I'd see the commoner ones *en route* anyway? The choice was easy really – I had to go for specific target birds. With the sun setting at about 1630 my time was very limited, so I had to maximise my strike rate.

So today, a Thursday, I aimed for the excellent (almost) local site of Bransbury Common, renowned as a winter raptor spot. Dusk was the right time to be there, but the weather wasn't great – low cloud, a stiff breeze, and cold! Nevertheless, I headed off shortly after 1400, and was on site in plenty of time.

On the ride there, I had my first **Buzzard, Lesser Black-backed Gull**, and very pleasingly, **Grey Partridge** – the latter is now a tough species in

Hampshire (sadly), and I hardly expected to see it before its much commoner cousin, the Red-legged Partridge.

At Bransbury Common, a few **Meadow Pipits** flew over, and I found a **Treecreeper** in the elder scrub before dark began to fall. In the gloaming I also added **Reed Bunting** to bring up the half-century, but I couldn't find any Stonechats – probably too windy. Next I settled in for a dusk watch. I had reached a numb state of disappointment – no owls to be seen. Then, just as I was about to pack up, a silhouette appeared over the marsh – yes! **Short-eared Owl!** It perched up in a large bush, giving reasonable if dim views before disappearing off into the shadows. Sadly, no Barn Owls showed up – one for another time.

Pretty happy with my haul, I rode off south, only to fluke a **Woodcock** flushed from a roadside ditch. While I was hardly sweating this species, at least seeing it in January might save me a nocturnal ride to a breeding site later in the year. I finished the day cold, rather alarmed by my first proper night ride along a busy road, but happy, and with a year-list of 52.

21st January **53 species**

Rather prosaically, a **Stock Dove** flew over me on my way to work today – 53 up!

22nd January **57 species**

Fractionally stung by being 'caught out' by a group of HOSListers at Hedge End today (I took Julia to see the Waxwings by 'metal box' – and I needed to buy a mobile phone and some thermal leggings for tomorrow!), I made my first visit by bike this year to Winchester Sewage Farm, a private site to which I fortunately have access. No big surprises awaited me, but I managed to add four new species, in the shape of **Teal**, **Shoveler**, **Lapwing** and **Green Woodpecker**, the latter being a relative rarity at the Farm.

23rd January **78 species**

☺ My first really 'big day' started cold and frosty – it was time for those thermal trousers, sixty-seven layers of wicking jerseys, two pairs of gloves etc. I even tried out some neoprene cold-resistant overshoes that someone had lent me. They weren't terribly effective!

Before dawn broke I was climbing the ghastly hill out of Winchester up to Badger Farm, then dropping down to Hursley via Port Lane, then cycling on to Romsey. Over the year this Test Valley town became a 45-minute marker from home – there's a garage with a deli counter there which does a mean pecan Danish. From Romsey, the road climbed over a steep ridge, and dropped down to Ower – an hour to Ower, in fact. And it was here that the first newbie fell – a **Pied Wagtail** in a horse field.

Still bitterly cold, I pushed on into the New Forest, via what I later worked out was the sub-optimal route of Cadnam, and approached the Bramshaw/Eyeworth area from the south, the ice cracking in the still shaded puddles under my wheels. I decided to head straight for Eyeworth Pond, as there was little passerine activity yet, and sure enough there were several **Mandarin Ducks** bobbing about – well, skulking in the shallows, actually! This is one of the most reliable sites in Hampshire for this feral resident species, introduced many decades ago from the Far East. Much less expected (and very welcome) was a **Peregrine** raking over the woods. 60 up already – how many more would I get today?

As the sun rose and temperatures began to climb (a little!), I pedalled across Ocknell Plain and towards the Avon Valley. A **Stonechat** on the open heath was slightly surprising – this species is very thin on the ground in the New Forest in winter – but a calling **Nuthatch** in the woods at the far end of the Forest was much less of a shock. My first ‘heard only’ year tick, too.



Now freezing, I dropped down into the Avon Valley, in search of my main

target for the day – and thanks to a generous scope loan from George Spraggs and Dave Wheatley (they knew who I was from my blog, even though we’d never met before!), I was soon looking at a small group of **Bewick’s Swans**.

My thinking was that these birds often don’t arrive until after Christmas, so it would be risky to leave them until December. It’s such a shame that this once sizeable flock has dwindled to single figures in recent winters. Will future Hampshire bike-listers get to see them at all?

Shortly my ‘support crew’ arrived. By this, I mean of course my wonderful and deeply supportive wife, Julia, carrying with her hot soup, coffee, blankets, a hot-water bottle and food! I sat shivering in the car for a good 20 minutes, trying to get warm with the heaters on full blast. OK, so I suppose that reduces the purity of my ‘zero carbon emissions’ plan a bit – but it was either that or frostbite!

We then proceeded to bird the gravel pits around Ibsley together (of course, I had to pedal ahead each time we moved along!), and added lots more year ticks: **Great Crested Grebe, Canada Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Pintail, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Goosander, Ruddy Duck** and **Great Black-backed Gull**. Getting all three of the scarce diving/sawbill ducks (bar Smew) was a real bonus. Sadly, we just missed seeing the Great White Egret that had been present in the area for a while.

My pager was telling me we had a shot at a real New Forest speciality next, so it was time for another hard half hour ride to the south-east, and a luncheon rendezvous at Vales Moor, near Burley. Just a few yards from the car-park a **Dartford Warbler** popped up (as they usually do – this national scarcity is quite common in the New Forest). No great shock there, and not our main quarry.



Increasingly hopelessly we wandered about the heath, eventually bumping into Alan Hayden, a Christchurch Harbour regular having a day out in the Forest. He was after the same bird as us and having just as little luck. But just as we were giving up, his mobile rang and the hot news we wanted came through – the bird was on a bush about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to the south of us. Peering into the



now hazy but quite bright sun, we could just make out a pale spot, and Alan's scope confirmed it – a very distant but very tickable **Great Grey Shrike!**

That counted as a major result – while Great Grey Shrikes are regular in the New Forest in the winter, they are very thin on the ground, and can be hard to locate.

I wanted to be at our final site in good time, and we managed to reach Blackwater Arboretum with over an hour to go before dusk. While we missed both Crossbill and Brambling, species which others recorded that afternoon, we did succeed with the main target here – a **Hawfinch** dropping in to this regular and traditional roosting site.



But a big bonus was provided by the shrill, unmistakable call of a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** as the light started to fail.

That was my 78th species, and my 21st new one for the day, a day which produced an overall haul of 67 species, which I thought wasn't bad.



However, the hard bit was yet to come, of course. I offloaded everything bar lights and reflective coat, took a deep breath and hit the road once more, in almost total darkness. The ride was not fun – a niggling pain developed in my right knee, it was ‘chuffing cold’, as they say, and it wasn’t much fun on some quite busy roads. But I got home safely – “never has a cup of tea tasted so good, or a bath been so welcome”, as I wrote in my blog that night – once my fingers had defrosted.

I’d ridden 119km, or about 73 miles, and I’d been in the field for almost 12 hours. The Iron Man was beginning to emerge.

26th January

79 species

After such efforts last Sunday, this one was a bit easier – a male **Blackcap** appeared on the fatballs hanging from the hawthorn in our front garden this morning!

27th January

87 species

Another day, another leg-bursting bike ride. The promise of not one, not two, but *three* really good birds in Gosport had me saddling up and ready to go at 1300. I had planned a good route for my first ride to the coast – Twyford (**Snipe** overhead!), Bishops Waltham, Wickham, Fareham, Gosport. I was pleasantly surprised to find I reached the M27 underpass near Fareham in exactly an hour, and was in Gosport not much more than half an hour later.

The first new bird here was **Brent Goose** – no big surprise there! Much more satisfying was an instant contact with the regular adult **Ring-billed Gull**



at Walpole Park lake – my rarest bird of the year so far. Ring-billed Gull was first recorded in Europe in 1973, but thanks to improved observer knowledge and a genuine increase in numbers, one

can now expect to see the species annually in Britain, and almost as regularly in Hampshire.

Slightly disappointingly Alver Creek turned up just three new birds – **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin** and **Little Egret** (another formerly rare British bird which you now see *every time* you visit the coast) – but I wasn't too concerned about missing the other common waders at this stage.



I decided I had enough time to cycle to HMS Sultan playing fields just a few kilometres away. Here I quickly found a small flock of **Golden Plovers**, and a rapid scan produced the desired result – the adult **Black Brant** was present among several hundred Dark-bellied Brent Goose.

Now this bird created a problem – a taxonomic problem. Is the very distinctive American/Siberian form of

Brent Goose, the 'Black Brant', a full species, or just a sub-species? My *personal* view tends towards the former. And yet it is not regarded as a full species by the 'birding authorities', most relevantly, the Hampshire Ornithological Society (publishers of the 'gold standard' Annual County Bird Report). So I had a decision to make! I consulted with Chris up in Norfolk, and we decided on a Unilateral Declaration of Full Species Status – these were *our* lists, after all! So, from here on in, if you don't think Black Brant is a full species, subtract one from all species totals I mention! For me, my total had now reached 87.

The ride home was miserable – cold, with a chilly headwind, and in the latter stages, rain. Grim! Oh, and did I mention the fact that I dipped the Iceland Gull that had been showing daily at Gosport for weeks? Still, two out of three isn't too bad, I suppose.

29th January

90 species

A non-bike day today, and a walk around St Catherine's Hill and the Morestead Down area – with a few 'easy' farmland species as special targets. Sure enough, we easily found **Skylark** and **Linnet**, though there was no sign of either Yellowhammer or Red-legged Partridge.

Back at home I remarked to Julia that I'd not seen or heard a Coal Tit yet – surprisingly, given that they breed within a few yards of our house. Within minutes, what appeared in the back

garden conifer? You guessed it – a **Coal Tit!**

January summary

Species total so far:	89
Species added this month:	89
Distance cycled:	272 km
Cumulative distance:	272 km
Road time:	12 hours
Cumulative road time:	12 hours
Distance per species:	3.1 km

February

2nd February **90 species**

☹ Dipping is a fact of life for the birder – but it's a real pain when you're using your bike, and when it's cold and wet!

I headed off north-west today in search of a semi-regular Greylag Goose flock in the upper Test Valley, which, reports suggested, might be carrying a White-fronted Goose, a scarce bird in Hampshire. Sadly my 68km round-trip resulted in no sightings at all. I even checked Anton Lakes Nature Reserve in Andover, a truly non-exciting little place, with very few birds present.

One of those I *did* see there was a totally untickable farmyard/Greylag type goose – with a prominent white frontal blaze! Could this have been the rumoured White-front? It seems not – an escaped *Lesser* White-front was reported a week or so later.

So today was a bit of a wipeout, really – I did see another Blackcap in the suburbs on Winchester, but where were the Yellowhammers and Red-legged Partridges?

6th February **102 species**

Another big day today – both in terms of species and distance! I headed off at dawn for the far south-east of the county, specifically Hayling Island. I reached the Hayling Bridge by about 0800, and quickly started seeing those missing common waders – **Oystercatcher, Curlew, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Redshank** – plus a few **Red-breasted Mergansers**, and better still, a distant **Black-necked Grebe**.



The short ride (from there!) down to the shore near Black Point put me in pole position to see several **Mediterranean Gulls** (*opposite*) – always exciting to find, even though they can now almost be expected on a trip to the Hampshire coast. I searched the Black Point area thoroughly for Razorbill, several of which were reputed to be wintering in the area, but I had no luck. Nor could I see the wintering Black Redstart, my main target for the day. A small flock



of **Sanderling** at their most reliable Hampshire site boosted my spirits and took me to 99 species. What would be number 100?

I had to wait until lunchtime and the western tip of Hayling Island for the century, but it was a good bird. A wintering **Sandwich Tern** flew by as I ate my lunch – ton up! Just a handful of Sandwich Terns spend the winter in Britain – most fly off to West Africa.

Now – a confession. I cheated. Only a bit, and I forgive myself. The ferry crossing over to Portsmouth is about 75m, and takes five minutes – the alternative would be to cycle 55km round Langstone Harbour! I thought hard about trying to commandeer a rowing boat, or even swimming it, but there was no realistic alternative – I took the ferry.



I headed on to Southsea Castle, in what turned out to be a vain attempt at Purple Sandpiper (poetic justice?) – the tide was about right – but there were just too many people about. Ample recompense came, however, in the form of a **Razorbill** just offshore.

With the afternoon waning and with tired legs, I cut my losses and cycled north through Portsmouth and homewards. A few miles south of Winchester, I followed a hot tip, and turned off the main road near Colden Common, where, sure enough, a **Little Owl** was perched on an old shed, just where I'd been told to have a look.



And then, inevitably, it happened. Rear tyre puncture! At speed! Potentially nasty, and I had taken the chance of taking no repair kit. So, in gathering darkness, I had to push the last 6 miles home. *Surely* punishment for that ferry ride! Today was a 133km mega-ride – and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

10th February

104 species

A short afternoon trip today in search of finches at Emer Bog, near North Baddesley. It was a grim old day and there wasn't much bird activity, but I

did manage brief flight views of a calling **Lesser Redpoll** – another species which has become quite hard to come by in the county recently. On the ride back Port Lane (at last!) turned up the long overdue **Red-legged Partridge**, too.

16th February **105 species**

A short (just 30km) spin to the west of Winchester today – the highlight was actually a large flock (120+) of Pied Wagtails in a ploughed field, but they didn't 'count'. What *did* count was a **Marsh Tit** calling in Crab Wood – I didn't even have to get off my bike to add it to the list.

18th February **107 species**

Now it was at this stage that the cycling started to get serious. My trusty old Raleigh hybrid, while fine, was not as fast as I'd have liked, and I couldn't quite get the setup right to prevent niggling finger numbness and shoulder pains. So I had made a few trips to the Peter Hansford bike shop in Badger Farm, and George and Mark, the very excellent team there, had given me some advice. It was time to put my money where my mouth was, and today



I took delivery of my sleek (and if I may say so, rather sexy) new road bike – a Lemond Étape (aluminium frame, carbon forks). Not exactly top of the range, not absurdly expensive, but a decent 'proper' road bike, and pretty speedy too.

I also bought myself a carry rack which bolted onto the seat post, with a quick release bag – not quite big enough for a scope, but easily roomy enough for bins, lunch, repair kit etc.

Once I'd got the hang of the clipless pedals (I've only fallen off at traffic lights twice so far), it was time to give it a run, and I decided to ride over to see my parents in Lockerly, towards Salisbury.

No problems on the ride there, and indeed a year tick was had too – **Yellowhammer**. Filial duties done, I 'streaked' across the countryside to Eastleigh, where Simon Ingram had kindly agreed to try for Jack Snipe at a local spot he has for them in Lakeside Country Park. Julia met up with us, having brought the essential wellies, and we did an 'organised flush' of the marsh. No Jack Snipe, alas (just a few Common Snipe), but a squealing **Water Rail** was a new species.

19th February **109 species**

Stung by yesterday's failure, I rode to the Sewage Farm in search of the same, only to fail once again – though I did find both **Greylag Goose** and a wintering **Chiffchaff** by way of compensation.

20th February 110 species

On a bright, clear Sunday morning it was time to try Cheesefoot Head for finches, buntings and raptors. While I saw plenty of common finches and a single **Corn Bunting**, there were no Bramblings to be found, and precious few raptors either – sadly the hoped-for Raven didn't fly over either!

25th February 111 species

☺ Another attempt at the Sewage Farm today, in the light of 'Chunky' Ron King having succeeded the day before where I had failed. Wellies packed, I rode the short distance to the Farm, and proceeded to scour the wet area, ankle deep in slightly smelly swamp water. Within a few minutes I struck gold – a small snipe got up and flew a short distance before dropping down again, giving clear flight views – **Jack Snipe!** I soon found another one too, in amongst about 30 flushed Common Snipes. These were the first Jack Snipes I'd seen in the county for years – another benefit of doing a year-list is that one looks for those tricky species which so often elude you in 'normal' birding.

27th February 114 species

A new site ticked off today – Lower Test Marshes, 'just' an hour or so away by bike.

While I simply could not find the target species (Water Pipit), three new ones did get onto the list: **Cetti's Warbler**

(in full song), **Kingfisher** and **Green Sandpiper**.



February summary

Species total so far:	114
Species added this month:	25
Distance cycled:	429 km
Cumulative distance:	701 km
Road time:	19 hours
Cumulative road time:	31 hours
Distance per species:	6.2 km

March

6th March 121 species

Another cold, early start (0730), and another two hour ride south-east to Hayling Island, again looking for that pesky Black Redstart, and for a reported Red-necked Grebe.

I had a very easy year-tick from Hayling Bridge in the form of **Black-tailed Godwit** – how had I missed them last month? Down at Sandy Point,

I quickly found my second Razorbill of the year, but of greater value to the year-lister were several **Gannets** well offshore, and a very welcome fly-by **Red-throated Diver**. Amazingly, on checking my records back at home, it turned out that the former was actually a crypto-Hampshire tick – somehow I'd never put it on my database. Surely I had seen one before in the county – hadn't I?

However, despite the good sea conditions I couldn't find the grebe, and the redstart wouldn't show either. My toes were like blocks of ice – it was perishingly cold! Still, I did manage to 'tick off' Marcus Ward, a Lymington regular also looking for the Red-necked Grebe, and Barry & Margaret Collins from Thorney Island. It was always good to meet Hampshire birders who might have some useful gen later in the year!

The west end of Hayling was pretty much a repeat of last time – no Shag, but several Mediterranean Gulls to make up for it. Once again, I cheated slightly and took the foot ferry across the harbour mouth, and then cycled north to Baffins Pond to tick off the resident feral **Barnacle Geese** – sadly the very plastic-looking Chiloe Wigeon on the pond was hardly countable.

From there I went on to make my first visit of the year to Farlington Marshes – another possible site for Water Pipit. Despite help from Jason Crook and John Shillitoe on site, I couldn't find any. I had to make do with **Knot**, **Turnstone** and **Rock Pipit** instead, in

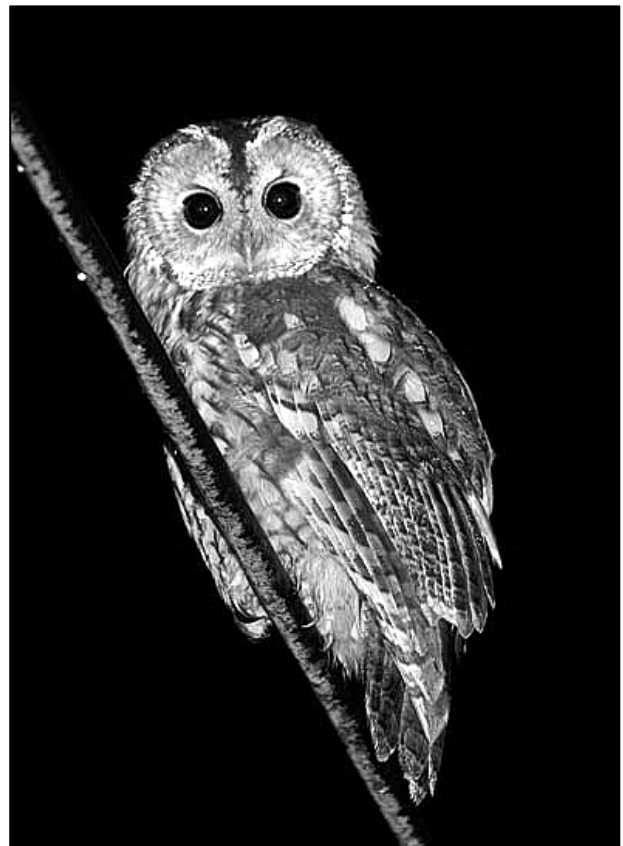
addition to plenty of the commoner waders and wildfowl.



I took the long way home via Curbridge, thinking that the lack of hills might make up for the distance – it didn't!

10th March

124 species



☺ Some days just make you glad to be alive – this was one of them. I decided to head west from Winchester in the

afternoon in search of owls, starting just west of Farley Mount, where I quickly managed to hear a **Tawny Owl** calling in daylight.

But then, very surprisingly, a familiar burst of song came from a ridge some ½ a mile from the road. Surely not? But it was – a **Woodlark**, miles from anywhere I'd heard or seen one before in the county.



Encouraged, I rode on to a traditional Little Owl site, and quickly saw a single bird – not new, but good for the day list. Still later, as dusk fell, I moved on to the Test Valley, and in the gloaming, sure enough, a white dot on a fence post resolved itself in bins into a fine **Barn Owl**. Mission accomplished. But all was not yet over – a shadow in the gloom appeared, and quickly showed well by the road – a Short-eared Owl too! Four owls in one afternoon – amazing.

The ride home along starlit country lanes was absolutely magical – as I said, it made me glad to be alive.



13th March

125 species

A true single-species twitch today – I rode for almost 1½ hours to a site ‘somewhere in the New Forest’ (many readers will know where I mean!), and set myself up alongside a few other birders to look for one specific raptor. After a couple of false alarms over Sparrowhawks, the genuine article appeared – I saw a total of three **Goshawks** over just half an hour.

This species has recently colonised western Hampshire, and is now breeding in the New Forest, but they are the very devil to see except in early spring, when they perform very public aerial displays over the woodlands. Also here were Woodlarks, Buzzards and a selection of common New Forest birds, such as Stonechats and Dartford Warblers.

14th March

125 species

I just managed to squeeze in a 2½ hour ride to Curbridge and back today, on the strength of a reported male Red-crested Pochard – but the tide was high, and I saw very little apart from a few Little Egrets.

16th March

128 species

☺ Again, I was very pressed for time – I could leave by 1315, but I had to be back from 1700 – and there were good birds waiting for me at Titchfield Haven!

So it was a real dash across south Hampshire today, at an average of 26.1 km/h (my fastest yet), and I was at Titchfield by 1445. Having quickly bought my ticket, I literally ran to the furthest hide on the eastern side of the reserve, to be rewarded with distant and typically feeble views of the roosting **Spoonbill**. Though increasingly common, Spoonbills remain scarce and exotic visitors to the south coast.



But that wasn't all! I ran back round to the Meon Shore hide, and sure enough,

there was a **Ruff** on the far bank – but no Avocet. So I had to run another 500m or so round to the last hide of all – and there it was – **Avocet** safely on the year-list. Phew!

By now I was running late, so I flung all my possessions (or so I thought) into the bike bag, and powered off through increasingly wet weather. I almost had to swim home in places, thus providing the complete bike-run-swim troika that is Ironman Triathlon.

Except I had forgotten something – on returning home, I found I'd lost my mobile phone! I called it, texted it, and called Titchfield Haven the next day – gone forever. Drat.

21st March

129 species

Spring finally struck today. Following reports of migrants on the coast, I took a short ride out of town and up onto Morestead Down before work. I was actually very surprised when the target bird showed up: a cracking **Northern Wheatear** in a set-aside field. Fantastic!



23rd March

130 species

Another day, another spring migrant – the pace of the year is really starting to hot up. This time, it was another very short distance trip to the Sewage Farm, where two **Little Ringed Plovers** were to be found on the exposed mud.



LRPs, as birders always call them, are among the earliest spring migrants every March.

25th March

132 species

On Good Friday I made a return ride to Lower Test Marshes, again in search of Water Pipits – via a hopeful but doomed attempt for an Osprey that had been seen at Marwell the day before. This is a regular wintering site for the species in Hampshire, but I have always found them pretty tricky to find. But now I had some specific information – high tide was best, and these birds were tending to stay well out on the marshy grazing land, under the pylons.

Armed with this gen, I searched the area – several Cetti's Warblers were singing, I heard numerous Water Rails, and there were Chiffchaffs and

Stonechats in evidence. Finally, after about an hour of searching, I heard two **Water Pipits** in flight overhead, and they proceeded to drop down some 250m away, joining a larger flock of some 19 birds in total, presumably all Water Pipits, from the look of them!

A real bonus moment next – a pair of **Ravens** flew overhead, croaking prehistorically. This was always going to be a slightly tricky bird for the Hants year-list – but here it was, under the belt. Ravens were until recently very rare indeed in Hampshire, but they have recently established a toehold in the county, and have even begun to breed!

No joy with some local Waxwings in Totton town centre, so it was back home again for lunch. A (car-based – shhhh!) trip to Titchfield Haven with Julia actually turned into the event of the day – I found my mobile phone! After nine days in a tussock of marram grass by the beach road, there it was, alive, working, battery so-so and with my desperate text message to myself staring out at me! One big advert for Nokia, I think.

26th March

132 species

☺ I gripped myself off successfully this morning, by taking a drive with Julia to the New Forest (let's call it a reconnaissance trip) – Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Woodlark, Brambling, Goshawk, Hawfinch, Siskin and a very early Redstart – so I thought my luck was in.

It wasn't. I cycled all the way down to Gosport again (with a puncture *en route*) for nothing more than a female Wheatear, seven Mediterranean Gulls and a few Red-breasted Mergansers. No sign whatsoever of the Iceland (or was it a Kumlien's?) Gull.

28th March **132 species**

☹ This was supposed to be a day off – but a message from John Faithfull about the Curbridge Red-crested Pochard had me back on the road again – but not for long. On a Bank Holiday Monday, I punctured not a mile from a bike shop in Waltham Chase, but found I was carrying the wrong size of inner tube! There was nothing for it but to call my 'support crew' – sheepishly I loaded the bike into the car and cursed my way home.

I vented some frustration with a ride around the Downs on the trusty old hybrid – which was actually quite bird-filled. Peregrine, lots of farmland passerines, including several Corn Buntings, but still none of the 'hoped-for' large raptors.

30th March **133 species**

At last! At the third attempt, a trip down to Curbridge, this time with the right inner tubes and the right tide state, produced the required result – the male **Red-crested Pochard** was finally to be seen, hanging out with two Shelducks. In fact, I think he thought he *was* a Shelduck. Now, while this bird didn't look or feel especially wild – it fulfilled the criteria – the very same bird has

featured in previous HOS annual reports. So it's OML!

Today was also notable for my first Wood Anemones and Bluebells of the spring at this sheltered, waterside location.

I also made another bike kit innovation, by investing in a pair of bib-shorts (or "bub-shorts – good for showing off your pix to the ladies", as George, my South African bike shop adviser told me. I think he meant "pecs").

March summary

Species total so far:	133
Species added this month:	19
Distance cycled:	602 km
Cumulative distance:	1303 km
Road time:	24 hours
Cumulative road time:	55 hours
Distance per species:	9.9 km

April

1st April **133 species**

RESPLENDENT QUETZAL at Farlington! Nah – only kidding.

2nd April **134 species**

Today was a hybrid kind of a day – a bird trip, yes, but also a social/bike-nut outing with Julian McCarthy, a resident of Chandlers Ford who had kindly helped me out with my road bike purchase decision. We met up in central Winchester at 0630, and headed out

into the fog-covered north Hampshire countryside. It was a good ride – and I was surprised just how much difference slipstreaming made.

We headed north-east, into an area of the county I hardly knew at all, past Micheldever, and northwards towards the area north-west of Basingstoke. Here, at Ewhurst Park, we stopped, and I explained to Julian, a civilian, about what would happen next. I told him that we might or might not find the target bird, and that not finding it might take anything up to four hours. So he should be prepared to ride back on his own if needs be. No hard feelings.

I had just started carefully describing the bird's appearance, and the timbre of its call, when "BAEZZ, BAEZZ!", and there was a **Willow Tit**, right above our heads! Now that really was a result. Willow Tit has declined alarmingly in southern England of late, and it's a really tough Hampshire bird to find, though Ewhurst was still a regularly occupied site. With no other target birds present here, we enjoyed a quick walk in the woods, and then saddled up for the return trip.

Half way back, post coffee and pastry in Overton, I had yet *another* flat – what was going on? I dutifully fitted a new inner, only for the valve to blow out. Grrrr! More seriously, while we worked on the second inner, a riderless horse bolted past, straight across the road and into some fields. I headed off in the direction it had come from, rather fearful of what I might find. Thankfully, the rider was only shaken,

and hardly hurt – she was more worried about her horse than herself! All ended happily – but it was a nasty moment.

Poor old Julian managed to buckle his rear wheel on the final mile into Winchester – it seems we were mechanically ill-fated today.

3rd April

135 species

Yet more spring today, in the shape of a single **Sand Martin** at the Sewage Farm – plus a nice flock of Golden Plovers, presumably also about to head north. The real 'mega' today, however, was a very tatty Raven flying east over the Sewage Farm – not completely unexpected in these days of range spread for the species, but crucially this was a first ever record for the Sewage Farm, and so essentially gold dust.

4th April

142 species

☺ The forecast this morning was grim, and at 0530 I had to decide whether to roll over and forget it, or go for it. I made the correct choice, and I was on the road by 0600.

I had a nice Tawny Owl on a hedge near Hursley at first light, but then, as predicted, the rain started. And it got heavier. Riding into the New Forest via Furzley, I saw several Buzzards apparently feeding on earthworms on wet, grassy lawns, and scored with my first **Swallow** (*overleaf*) and **Willow Warbler** of the year at Half Moon Common. Better still, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was calling from roadside trees.



By the time I headed out across Ocknell Plain from Bramshaw, the weather was plain medieval – driving rain and a nasty headwind. But I persisted, somehow picking up Dartford Warbler and Woodlark *en route*, and finally reached Milkham Enclosure. A half hour thrash about in the pine woods and clearings produced the required species – two **Tree Pipits** and several **Crossbills**, plus many Siskins, some of them in song.

With spirits raised, and the weather improving fractionally, I rode on under the A35, and spent some time in the Bolderwood/Blackwater area, one of my favourite parts of the Forest. I



scored really heavily – all three woodpeckers, including three more Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers (two drumming), a **Redstart** in song, 50+ (quite late) **Bramblings**, many in song, two flyover Hawfinches, another daytime Tawny Owl, Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper – all that was missing was Wood Warbler, and not for want of listening! Perhaps I was a bit early yet.

Quite satisfied, I headed for home, unbelievably finding yet another drumming Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, this time at Bramshaw Wood (five contacts today), along with lots more singing Willow Warblers and Meadow Pipits in the improving conditions. I had covered 90km at a pretty steady pace, added seven species to the list, and was home by 1130. That made it one hell of a Forest morning, by any standards at all.

I also added several singing **Firecrests** to the list today as well – given that this species is a very rare breeder in Britain, I will go no further than to say: “somewhere in the New Forest”.

9th April

142 species

☹ 30km of cycling in the upper Itchen Valley this morning, but a surprising total lack of summer migrants. Where were they all?

10th April

143 species

In beautiful spring sunshine, I took a 77km 'mystery tour' of the downs north and west of Winchester, with one big

target species, and the hope of a few early migrants in the warm valleys. None of the latter at all (apart from a few Swallows and lots of Willow Warblers), but a big Hampshire speciality was nailed today in the shape of a pair of **Stone Curlews** at a traditional (but necessarily secret) site, where I also had two Grey Partridges.

Parts of the ride were incredibly insect-infested – big juicy black ones which were quite painful at 30km/h! I was glad I was wearing my sunglasses. I also saw my first Orange Tip butterflies of the year – unsplatted, for the more squeamish readers out there.

12th April **144 species**

A day of two halves! A 30km+ 'mystery tour' in search of another rare breeder turned up distant but tickable views of a **Red Kite** 'somewhere in central Hampshire'. Sorry, I can't say where. Too rare!

On my return home (and with a hot bath beckoning) I got a phone call from Simon Ingram down at Lakeside Country Park in Eastleigh – the Grasshopper Warbler he'd found this morning, and which I'd dipped on a brief car-based drop-in at lunch time, had been singing again at 1300. So I put my cycling kit back on (sweaty and horrid), and made the 15km journey down the valley.

He called again to say it was reeling at 1845 – I arrived at 1910, feeling pretty confident – and dipped horribly. I left after 2000, getting cold and with the

darkness closing in. Perhaps I would do a dawn ride tomorrow? I decided to wait for news before testing my legs still further!

I passed a big milestone today – 1000 miles clocked up in the quest for birds, at 7 miles (11.6km) per species.

14th April **145 species**

Another easy one bagged today – a singing **Sedge Warbler** at Winnall Moors, just to the north of Winchester town centre. Still a real lack of other common migrants, though. When will they arrive?

16th April **152 species**

☺ This weekend was going to be a big one. A good deal of planning had gone into setting it all up, and at 0800 I was ready to go....

...when breaking news of the reappearance of the “Longparish Chiffchaff” made me change my plans. I had missed this bird the previous week, as I was up in London, but it had now been relocated, and informed opinion seemed to be inclining towards Iberian Chiffchaff.

The Chiffchaff, a common and familiar European warbler, has recently been ‘split’ by taxonomists into three or four species, and one of them, the form breeding in much of Spain and Portugal, is an extremely rare migrant to Britain – there are fewer than ten accepted records, and none for Hampshire. I couldn't *not* go for it, really!

So it was off on a 40km ‘warm-up ride’ to the north of Winchester. I heard the bird immediately on arrival – and I have to say it didn’t sound quite right. It was pretty convincing for a while, but then slipped into pure ‘chiff-chaff’ song – at best, it was one of the dreaded ‘mixed singers’, or maybe a hybrid? Certainly an interesting bird, but my legs could have done without the mileage.

So after that false start, I set off (properly) just after 1100, and surprised myself by reaching Pennington in only just over two hours from Winchester. I spent the rest of the afternoon doing a long walk around Pennington, Oxey and Normandy marshes, with good results. After seeing a couple of Mediterranean Gulls, and a pair of very smart White Wagtails on the beach (sorry, can’t count *them* as a full species!), I scored my first new bird with a flock of 10 **Whimbrel**, plus the hoped for 4 **Spotted Redshanks**, the first of about 25 seen over the weekend. A moderate Swallow passage was also going on, with about 200 passing per hour mid-afternoon.



In quick succession, I had several **Little Terns** (at least 10 were around the

area), at least 7 **Greenshanks**, in addition to a few commoner waders, including the superb Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits, now in almost full breeding plumage.

I returned to my bike, and pushed it along the back lane to Keyhaven – sadly there was no sign of the drake Garganey which had been present until at least Thursday. But up at Hurst Beach, I scored quite quickly with a distant **Fulmar** and a couple of **House Martins** in off the sea. The light wasn’t great for other seabirds, so I kept my powder dry and headed for Milford-on-Sea. From the clifftop I had another (much closer) Fulmar, and better still, a pretty early **Swift** flew low over the houses as dusk closed in.



I treated myself to a slap-up Italian meal, and then pedalled up to Sway, to check in with Steve Keen, who had very kindly offered me a bed for the night. Once I’d been introduced to the family (including Barney the puppy), we went out for a beer or two at the local hostelry, but I crashed out soon after 2200, happy with my seven new birds in the bank.

17th April

163 species

☺ Up at 0545, and swiftly out into the field – as we got my bike out of the garage, a guttural ‘growk’ overhead had us both looking up and calling “Med Gull!” – a garden and Sway tick for Steve – a good start! On the way down to Hurst, in frosty and very calm conditions, I heard a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker drumming – they’re clearly a good bit commoner than you imagine sitting in a car.

I was in position at the base of the beach at 0645 on a truly glorious, flat calm morning. I had the place to myself for the best part of an hour, before first Phil Lord & David Thelwell, and later Marc Moody arrived for company and more pairs of eyes. I quickly connected with several flocks of **Common Scoter** milling about offshore, and there were many Gannets and a few Fulmars drifting past.

A tight flock of **Eider** heading east made a long-anticipated debut on the year-list, and we had three Red-throated Divers rapidly east too, though these were easily trumped by a close **Black-throated Diver** (a Hants tick for me), flagged up in advance by a phone call from Steve Keen up at Barton-on-Sea. Steve also successfully tipped us off on the position of the semi-resident **Shag** – “near the yellow buoy”!

A very few **Common Terns** also moved through, along with several Little and Sandwich Terns mooching about in the area. A hoped-for but not really expected addition was **Great**

Skua, with two migrating strongly east. Another Hampshire (albeit tart’s) tick in the bag. After the first I phoned Steve, who quickly got onto the second one – a Barton tick for him! It was nice to be able to return the favour.

Once things had dried up by about 1100, I headed back to Keyhaven, and stopped by the lagoon where two birders had their scopes up. Any luck? Yes! The drake **Garganey** was on show – result! Buoyed up, I headed on to the balancing pond area, where a Grasshopper Warbler had been in song at dawn – no joy, needless to say.



But a **Reed Warbler** grumbled away in the reedbed, and I heard and glimpsed several **Bearded Tits** over the *Phragmites* too, in addition to several quite showy Cetti’s Warblers and yet more Swallows appearing over the marshes. Finally for the coastal phase of the day, I connected with the singing **Whitethroat** near the jetty.

A speculative stop in the New Forest on the way home, hoping for a Wood Warbler, produced instead a singing **Garden Warbler** – a fitting end to a very good day and weekend, packed full of quality birds and the thrill of

migration time. The weekend had produced 18 new species for my list.

20th April **163 species**

☹ I made a speculative dawn run to Winnall in search of a Grasshopper Warbler – a species which was quickly taking on ‘bogey’ status. Spring migrants occasionally sing for a day or two at this site, but not today. Never mind. I heard several Cetti’s Warblers by way of compensation.

21st April **165 species**

Another very early start, and another chilly morning. I rode through thick fog to Casbrook Common, near Romsey, and was quickly rewarded with two singing **Nightingales**, one of which showed very well in the open. Also, at last, I heard a **Cuckoo** singing in the distance.

23rd April **165 species**

☹ With a stiff south-easterly breeze and rain in the offing, things were looking good for a seawatch, and the three possible target species (Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Little Gull) had all been seen in the past 36 hours – so Stokes Bay it was! I set off at about 1600 and rode into a headwind all the way to Gosport – it took about an hour and a half.

On arrival, things looked quite bright, with several Bar-tailed Godwits, Curlews and Sandwich Terns migrating past, and a few hirundines in off the sea – but then I sat and had nearly two

hours of virtually nothing! Not even a Common Tern.

I felt thoroughly deflated, and my tyre decided to show sympathy by having a puncture along Browndown seafront....grrrr. Titchfield was equally deathly from the road – just two Cuckoos were of note, and certainly there was no sound of a singing Grasshopper Warbler, albeit in increasingly windy conditions.

Riding home via Flagpond Copse, I didn't even hear a Nightingale – so my return home at 2130 was after a 75km fitness ride with virtually nothing birdwise to show for it! Now up to 11.6km per bird.

28th April **165 species**

☹ In the last week I had done 116km and seen precisely *no new birds!* The latest failure was a cross-country hike in windy and cool conditions round Morestead Down on the hybrid – no Lesser Whitethroats or Turtle Doves, and nothing exciting at the Sewage Farm either. At least there were hirundines and Swifts in numbers by now, but still virtually no Whitethroats, and few Sedgies either. Worrying.

30th April **166 species**

After a very damp hour or so around Morestead Down in the early morning, I was beginning to think my target species had gone extinct. But a short afternoon ride in hot sunshine to Magdalen Hill Down provided that 'Ivory-billed Woodpecker' moment – a single singing male **Lesser**

Whitethroat, rattling away unseen in the blackthorn scrub – also lots of Green Hairstreaks and some Orange Tips here today.

April summary

Species total so far:	166
Species added this month:	33
Distance cycled:	677 km
Cumulative distance:	1980 km
Road time:	31 hours
Cumulative road time:	86 hours
Distance per species:	11.9 km

May

1st May

171 species

☺ 145km today, starting at 0530 – I remained "Iron Man"! Off into the dawn and south in stunningly beautiful weather through the New Forest, arriving at Keyhaven at about 0800 – in thick fog! Oh dear – not good for seawatching.

I gave it an hour or two around the marshes to kill time, bumping into 'the three amigos' (Tim Parminter, Marc Moody and Russell Wynn), and saw a few good birds – **Common Sandpiper** was new but hardly unexpected, but there were also two Garganey (a pair) behind the Fishtail Lagoon, a smart Golden Plover, Whitethroats and Sedge Warblers in abundance, and some (heard only) Bearded Tits.

The sun finally looked like it was going to win the battle, so I set myself up on

the beach, where I was soon joined by Marcus and Zoe Ward, although not before scoring big time with a pale phase **Arctic Skua** right over my head, looking pretty lost in the fog, and tailing a Whimbrel! Also new were six **Kittiwakes** moving east. Kittiwake is a surprisingly tricky species in Hampshire, so I was very pleased to score with this one.

Things continued to look bright, with a few Common Scoters and a Red-throated Diver east, but it then dried up, and we were left with just the local Little Terns to look at. But dribs and drabs turned up – the best of which was an **Arctic Tern** with a group of five Common Terns, inevitably migrating eastwards.

I packed in just after 1300 (whereupon another Arctic Skua – much more distant – flew by), and cycled north. I'd misjudged my fluids, and had to stop to rehydrate and rest – pounding headache! But I was OK after Brockenhurst, and I decided to try a speculative side-excursion to Mark Ash Wood. Literally within seconds of entering the wood, and without even getting off the bike – a singing **Wood Warbler** filled the air with its shimmering glissando (did I really just write that?!). A good finish – five new ones, with some decent quality.

Postscript: I also had a singing Firecrest 'somewhere in the New Forest' today.

2nd May

172 species

☺ More hot news on the Hampshire grapevine had me preparing for a completely new venture – a night ride. A singing Spotted Crake had been located in an area of wet swamp in the Test Valley, and had been heard singing for two successive nights. This would be a totally unexpected spring bonus if I could hear it, and would save me a long ride to Farlington in August/September.

So at 2200 I left home and pedalled through dark country lanes to the site. On arrival I had a feeling I was in the wrong place, so I called Phil Lord, who was clearly in the right place – I could hear the Crake singing down the phone!

A quick readjustment of position and I was set – Kelvin Pearce kindly walked back down into the valley with me, and very soon I could hear the distinctive, surprisingly loud “whiplash” of a territorial male **Spotted Crake**, with a Nightingale accompaniment. This was really good value – the species is all but unknown in southern England in summer, and a very rare bird nationally at this season. Even if it was a ‘heard only’, this was one of the best birds of the year so far.

The ride home was (unsurprisingly) dark and (thankfully) uneventful, and I finally crawled into bed at about 0030.

5th May

172 species

☹ On General Election Day I cycled to the polling station, and then took a

34km ride to the north of Winchester – no Turtle Doves were to be found at the formerly regular site of Micheldever, alas. Dingy Skipper, Common Spotted Orchid and Twayblade provided the only (non-bird) compensation.

8th May

173 species

It was looking pretty dire for Turtle Dove, so I simply had to undertake the very lengthy ride all the way to Noar Hill, near Selborne. I arrived late in the afternoon, just as a nasty set of squalls rolled in. I got rather wet – but no sound of my quarry. Finally, after more than an hour of searching, a brief purring song had me breathing a sigh of relief – **Turtle Dove** on the list.



The ride home into bright sun and a stiff headwind was profoundly unamusing, but I got there in the end – 64km for just one species.

13th May

174 species

Friday 13th was certainly *not* unlucky for me – a **Hobby** screamed over my house in central Winchester, causing hirundine mayhem. It was my first year tick from the garden since that Coal Tit way back in late January.

15th May

175 species

☺ My 'competitor' Chris Mills had been scoring very heavily this weekend up in Norfolk (Garganey, Montagu's Harrier, Woodchat Shrike and Stilt Sandpiper, no less!), so there was nothing for it but a bit of blind optimism, and the hope that the two Roseate Terns reported at Hill Head would extend their spring stopover to three days.

So 1½ hours of pedalling on a chilly morning saw me safely in place on the seafront at Titchfield Haven by 0900. It was low tide, there were plenty of Common and Sandwich Terns about, a single Little Tern flew past, and there were about 40 Eider offshore. But an early scan of the distant shingle banks produced just a 'possible' Rosie, which quickly got lost in a tern dread.

Pinning my hopes on the rising tide, Julia (who had joined me by car) and I worked the reserve – plenty to see, including 2 Peregrines, several Buzzards and Sparrowhawks, four Avocets, a few migrant Dunlin, the plastic Egyptian Goose and a completely wild and genuine Red-crested Pochard (the same one I saw at Curbridge, *and am counting* – it was still hanging out with those two Shelducks). We saw and heard many Whitethroats, Cetti's Warblers, Sedge and Reed Warblers too, plus a quick Hairy Dragonfly fly-by. The spring migrants might have been a touch late this year, but they were finally here in numbers. A relief.

Back to the shore – a check of some 30 Common Terns on a small island, and there they were – 2 **Roseate Terns** safely on the list. They were much harder to pick out in strong sunlight than on a grey autumn day, but were quite distinctive, and easiest to relocate when all the Common Terns displayed, and they sat there doing nothing.

Buoyed up, the ride home in warm spring sunshine was a genuine pleasure. 175 species up – well beyond my beginning of year expectations – and it was only mid-May.

20th May

176 species

More useful local gen from HOSList had me cycling up the Itchen Valley to Chilland, near Easton, where I duly connected with a **Spotted Flycatcher** on a rooftop. This summer visitor seems to get scarcer every year – the formerly regular pair which used to breed right outside my school's main office failed to return in 2005.

21st May

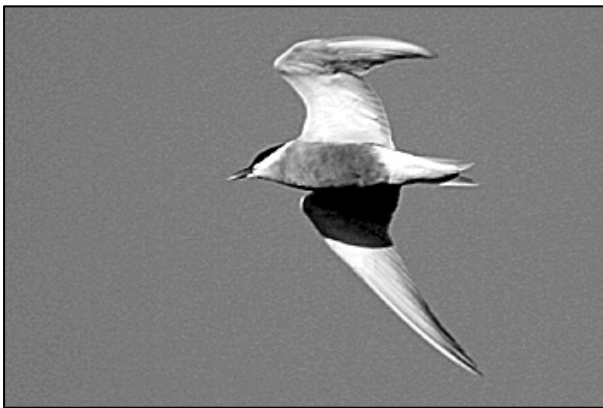
177 species

☼☺ Cup Final day, and an absolutely foul bit of weather. But news that a major rarity was still present in the north-east of the county had me setting off in appalling weather at lunchtime. I crossed my fingers – it was reported to be very mobile.

This was the toughest ride yet, despite it not being very cold and it not being the longest. I got freezing cold and utterly bedraggled as I cycled mostly uphill to Odiham. More positive news

from the pager steeled my backbone, and the uphill continued – at least the wind was behind me! Exhausted and very chilled, I reached Tundry Pond at about 1400 and ran (yes, ran) down the towpath – I was *not* going to dip for the sake of a lazy five minutes on foot!

Immediately on arrival – contact! The very fine adult **WHISKERED TERN** was still present with three or four Common Terns. This southern European marsh tern was a Hampshire tick, another British Birds rarity on the year-list, and what we birders call “a right mega” (that’s the clean version). I felt *so* smug alongside Simon Ingram and several other car-based Hants listers!



The ride home was pretty diabolical – OK, the ride was net downhill, but the ever-stiffening headwind made it *feel* uphill! Add in a slightly buckled and thus rubbing rear wheel and a slow puncture 10 miles from home (my hands were shaking so much I had trouble changing the tyre), and this Whiskered Tern was one bird I had surely worked hard enough to deserve.

22nd May

178 species

With much better weather today and the date just right, it was time to head for a secret locality in the New Forest for a spot of raptor watching.

The now familiar ride to the Forest via Romsey was well-rewarded with (after about an hour of waiting) an absolutely stunning sighting of a male **Honey Buzzard** lifting out of the very closest trees, circling and gaining height rapidly. It was within 40 feet at first, close enough to see every feather and the striking yellow eye – awesome. Honey Buzzards are nationally very rare birds (only about 40 pairs in Britain), and although the New Forest is one of the strongholds, they are notoriously difficult to locate and very hard indeed to see well.

Also near this site were a big fat female Goshawk, many Common Buzzards, singing Woodlark, Redstart and Cuckoo, and a Raven. Elsewhere on the ride there and back, I had my third singing Firecrest contact of the year – I didn't even have to get off the bike.

25th May

180 species

☺ The Nightrider rides again! Acting on yet more hot gen from the Test valley, I left home after work commitments (actually, a slap-up dinner – but it was work, honestly!) at about 2215, towards the end of extra time in the Champions' League final. The familiar 45-minute run was marked by a mighty Liverpool triumph (yes, I often plug in to my Walkman on these

rides) and warm, still night air. By 2300 I was on site in the valley. Past the squeaky juvenile Tawny Owls, my quarry was singing loud and clear – a territorial **Grasshopper Warbler**. At last – after several failures earlier in the spring – I'd finally got this very scarce bird (in Hampshire) OML.

I decided to press on for my other remaining nightbird, and reached Great Covert (Chandlers Ford) by about 2345 – and after a few minutes of silence a distant **Nightjar** churred in the distance, and made itself species number 180 – you'll recall that 180 was my 'oustanding' target back in January!

There was rather more (post-match) traffic than last time I did a night ride, and several drunken Liverpool fans to swerve around in Romsey, but I was still safely home by 0030 with two real good 'uns under the belt.

29th May **180 species**

☹ Another night ride today, this time in search of a singing Quail reported from a downland site near Winchester. I heard only Tawny and Little Owls – a mini-dip.

30th May **182 species**

☺ Julia and I drove over to the east of the county for a spot of insect and orchid hunting today. Just after a very pleasant picnic, pandemonium broke out when an adult male Montagu's Harrier flew right over us – we even got a photo!

Why do I mention this? Well, later in the day I saddled up and tried once again for the Quail – at a different site from the one Julia and I had visited together, and unbelievably connected with what was surely the same **Montagu's Harrier**, again heading north-east. The two sites were some 15km apart – could it possibly have been *breeding* in the area? I rather suspect not, but it was still a fantastic and very unlikely addition to the year-list.



Oh yes – and I did hear that **Quail** singing in a patch of set-aside, too!

May summary

Species total so far:	182
Species added this month:	16
Distance cycled:	615 km
Cumulative distance:	2594 km
Road time:	25 hours
Cumulative road time:	111 hours
Distance per species:	14.3 km

June

June is traditionally a birder's quietest month, and so it proved. There were simply no new species to go and see, so

I spent much of the month (between last minute A level revision classes) looking at butterflies, dragonflies and plants.

☹☹☹ The very end part of the month was dramatic, however, but for bad reasons. On 28th, Julia slipped and fell from a ladder, landed badly, and was in agony. I took her to A&E, and they had no hesitation in admitting her – the X-rays showed she had broken her back. It's this kind of thing which puts non-motorised year-listing in perspective.

The first few days were extremely worrying, but after about a week it became clear that the cure would simply be bed-rest – and *six weeks* of it in hospital. We both took a deep breath, and Julia started to get on with it.

June summary

Species total so far:	182
Species added this month:	0
Distance cycled:	111 km
Cumulative distance:	2705 km
Road time:	4 hours
Cumulative road time:	115 hours
Distance per species:	14.9 km

July

We were due to spend three weeks of July in Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo – that clearly wasn't going to happen. We settled into a new routine. Julia's was simple – lie still! Mine involved daily visits (mostly by bike up a very steep hill – but I haven't included those

trips in my mileage totals), loneliness and of course worry. But all went well for her – it looked like she was going to be OK.

3rd July 183 species

With the birding year having turned, but no new species since May, it was time to nail one of my three remaining shoo-ins, and an evening ride down to Eling Marsh at high tide duly turned up five or six **Yellow-legged Gulls** loafing about. Hardly the most exciting way to start the autumn run, but they all count!

With autumn definitely in the air, my mind began to think about waders – what would be Pennington's 'mega' this year, following the recent Stilt Sandpiper and Lesser Sand Plover? Little Whimbrel, anyone?

28th July 183 species

☹ After a long three weeks of hospital visits and insect watching (and a short side-twitch to Anglesey for the Sooty Tern! ☺), I finally had a shout at a Hampshire year tick. A White-rumped Sandpiper had been found at Farlington Marshes.

The tide was unfavourable, alas, and there was no sign of the bird – just a Whimbrel, some Greenshanks, a few Sedge and Reed Warblers and numerous Little Egrets. Titchfield Haven, 'on the way' home (actually quite a big detour), was also disappointing – no sign of the Black Tern which would've been new for the list, nor any Roseate Terns – just a

single juvenile Mediterranean Gull as a consolation prize.

31st July **184 species**

At long last I finally saw a ‘proper’ new bird to add to the list, and finally it felt like autumn migration might be under way.

In what was turning out to be a pretty good raptor year, I connected with an **Osprey**, at Lower Test Marshes. After a false start, where I broke a spoke and warped the rear wheel within five miles of home (bizarrely, Chris did exactly the same thing today in Norfolk!), I went home, changed bikes and was at LTM by 1000.

Chunky and his son Simon were waiting glumly and not having seen anything, so it wasn't looking good – but at about 1020, all the gulls went up, and the Osprey cruised in from the south, circled, and perched in one of the dead trees. This may well have been the bird which had been in the general area since about May – it's a very rare bird in Hampshire in summer. So maybe not autumn migration after all!

July summary

Species total so far:	184
Species added this month:	2
Distance cycled:	215 km
Cumulative distance:	2920 km
Road time:	9.3 hours
Cumulative road time:	124 hours
Distance per species:	15.9 km

August

3rd August **186 species**

Today was going to be a day to look for two slightly dodgy (but nevertheless countable) wildfowl species in the north-east of the county.

It was a long but quite pleasant ride past Basingstoke, and on up to the gravel pits around Hartley Wintney and the Berkshire border, especially around Eversley.

First to be unblocked (after the totally plastic, close-ringed bird at Titchfield Haven) was **Egyptian Goose** – 19 of them looking completely unconvincing, but as wild as ‘Gypos’ ever look, on a small pond near Eversley Church.



There were two more (looking slightly less dubious) at Eversley gravel pit, but no sign of the much harder Snow Goose there. I checked various nearby waters, and scanned various farming

vistas without luck, and was thinking about giving up, when two white blobs in flight near Hartley Wintney resolved themselves into **Snow Geese!** They carried on and then appeared to drop, out of sight, into some distant fields.

I was pretty unhappy about adding both these to the list, really, but they do appear in the main section of the Hampshire Bird report, and rules is rules – so there! I also saw a Hobby and a Kingfisher at Eversley, birds I hadn't recorded often before in 2005.

The ride home was long and tiring, and into a headwind (as usual) – not much fun! Today's ride took me over both 3000km and 16km/species.

6th August **188 species**

☺ Having missed the species at the same site back in January, it was good to get a second bite at the cherry at Ibsley Water in the Avon Valley today – the **GREAT WHITE EGRET** was not too hard to find, wading about in a good looking muddy area with a few Little Egrets. Great Whites used to be very rare birds indeed in the UK, but they have recently become much commoner, and have been annual in Hampshire over recent years, so this was not really an unexpected addition to my year-list.

Another bonus bird today was a juvenile **Black Tern** over the same pit. Also around the gravel pits were three Green Sandpipers, a Little Ringed Plover, a few Common Terns and very

large numbers of Sand Martins, Grey Herons and Mute Swans.

11th August

☺☺☺ Julia came home today! The beginning of her long road to a full recovery.

19th August **190 species**

After a lengthy lull with not many birds about, a hot tip from Simon Ingram had me pedalling the half hour down to Lakeside Country Park in Eastleigh for my first **Whinchat** of the year – hardly a species I was worried about seeing eventually, but nice to get it under the belt and to keep the species total ticking over. Now only Yellow Wagtail remained on my list of 'shoo-in' or 'gimme' species!

21st August **191 species**

☺*☺ I was just about to enjoy a relaxed Sunday, when a hot pager bleep had me flinging on the hot weather kit and heading off for the coast. A record run to Farlington Marshes (1½ hours) and a quick run along the sea-wall, and there was the moulting juvenile/1st winter **WILSON'S PHALAROPE**, found by



Hugh Venables that morning, still showing very well on the main lagoon to the assembled crowd

It seems certain that this bird, just the sixth example of this North American wader to have been seen in Hampshire (I did see the 1998 bird at Pennington), was the same bird as the one found earlier in the week in Devon. That one disappeared overnight just hours before this one (my 190th bird) appeared.

Worth just as many 'points', but of course much less difficult, a **Yellow Wagtail** called in flight overhead, shortly followed by three seen distantly over the fields. Add in lots of waders (although none of the reported Curlew Sands, alas), and a bonus (but very brief) Spotted Crake, and this was a pretty good day out! I also saw a distant Whinchat – inevitably after having gone for one earlier in the week. I saved my legs and didn't walk round the reserve to try for the Garganey and Osprey that were also present. Ah! The luxury of having done the work earlier in the year!

The mileage count went over two grand today – 138 hours (or 5.75 DAYS!) in the saddle, at 17 km/species, just to mix up the units of measurement.

25th August

193 species

☺ More red hot pager news had me saddling up and heading south-west through squally showers to Pennington this morning – it really *is* a long ride (over two hours), but I was rewarded immediately on arrival with good views

of the juv/1st winter **Grey Phalarope** found by Russell Wynn on Butts Lagoon this morning.



While this (very) high Arctic breeding wader is an annual autumn visitor to the county, this was easily the earliest ever – most records involve storm-blown birds in September or October. So it was nice to get ahead of myself for once.

With a few Whitethroats and other migrants in evidence, I then headed quickly round to Normandy Marsh (via a Kingfisher and two Greenshanks) in the hope of a new migrant wader. It didn't take long checking the Dunlin flock to find a cracking juvenile **Curlew Sandpiper** right by the seawall – I did look for a Little Stint, but I think that was just greedy!



The ride home was pretty tough, but slightly wind assisted, and not *too* wet.

28th August **194 species**

☺ Another snappy response to the pager called for today, but it was with a sense of foreboding that I went off in search of the Wryneck reported at Farlington – it's a tricky area to work for passerines (and near-passerines!), and I've dipped the species before there.

On arrival – there'd been no sightings for over three hours. Oh dear. I worked the bushes with some success – a Grasshopper Warbler was a real bonus, plus several Garden Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats, and lots of Common Whitethroats. After about an hour of wandering around, I returned to the area where a few people were looking, and a distant wave and point suggested the bird had been relocated.

After just a minute or two I had brief flight views, and then a cautious approach resulted in good views of the bird perched warily in brambles and elders – **Wryneck** safely on the list!



Again, this is an annual migrant to Hampshire in very small numbers, but it can be hard to pin down, and as with Grey Phalarope, most records are rather later in the year.

Feeling pretty elated I pedalled home in bright, warm sunshine, feeling good. But I did ping two more spokes on the rear wheel somewhere *en route* – another respoking job required. And another downer today was that I managed to lose my pager in the bushes somewhere – an expensive and inconvenient error.

August summary

Species total so far:	196
Species added this month:	12
Distance cycled:	518 km
Cumulative distance:	3438 km
Road time:	22 hours
Cumulative road time:	146 hours
Distance per species:	17.7 km

September

3rd September **197 species**

☺ To my rather great surprise, the double century was now beginning to loom – just six more birds required. I had clearly underestimated the possibilities back in January, but nevertheless I felt I had worked pretty hard, and deserved to be in a position to break the mythical “200 species in a year” barrier – I'd never done that before in Hampshire, even using a car!

I'd been waiting for the last few commoner passage waders with increasing trepidation as September began, and at last information arrived of one of them at The Vyne, just outside Basingstoke. The bird was still present this morning! I headed north-east for the long, straight and rather boring ride to Basingstoke, and beyond the town to the flooded water-meadows where the bird had been reported. It didn't take long to find – **Wood Sandpiper** on the list! Many thanks to Martin Pitt for the very accurate local knowledge. I also saw a few Green Sandpipers, Snipe and a young Peregrine here, the latter panicking all the waders just as I was leaving.



But my plans of a return in time for a late lunch were quickly shattered by breaking news from Titchfield, via “Chunky” Ron King, who was kindly keeping me updated in the absence of my pager. A quick route planning session with the map, a very large gulp at the hilliness and distance of the route, and I was away. My legs felt empty on the ride south to Alresford, but a lunch injection and extra water intake did the trick there, and it was on (via some nasty hills I've been avoiding all year) to Cheriton, Kilmeston,

Droxford and down the Meon valley to Wickham.

From there I was back on a familiar route, and by mid-afternoon I was at the Haven. I saved paying for my ticket until after doing the hides (but I was honest!) – from the Meon Shore hide, the **Little Stint** was quickly bagged, but the news regarding the other target species was less good – it had apparently flown off “high up the valley” half an hour before.

Undaunted I trudged round to the next hide, and scanned the north scrape – the news sounded better here. After maybe ten minutes, I locked on to a scruffy brown looking wader among a group of maybe half a dozen Curlew Sandpipers – yes! **Pectoral Sandpiper** also nailed! While it is just about annual in Hampshire, this North American wader was never guaranteed, so I was well-pleased.



Elated but really shattered and dehydrated, I headed off (via the ticket booth and water refill), and sped (not!) the 1½ hours ride home – it was nearer 2 hours this time!

A huge 145km (or 90+ miles) covered today – and my legs are telling me about it – but it was well worth it. Three new species in a day at this stage of the year was pretty unexpected.

Unbelievably that was my only ride in the whole of September! While I *could* put it down to term starting again and lots of hard work on my part, or looking after the recuperating Julia, the truth is that there were rather few good birds and certainly no ‘big ones’ that I simply had to go for in the county. While my legs were grateful at times, it did mean that I was stuck on 197 – would October deliver the goods and let me reach the 200 mark?

September summary

Species total so far:	197
Species added this month:	3
Distance cycled:	145 km
Cumulative distance:	3583 km
Road time:	6 hours
Cumulative road time:	152 hours
Distance per species:	18.2 km

October

2nd October 198 species

☛☺ October started with a bang! After sweating it for three days before I could get out on the road, Pennington came up trumps again. I headed off early across the New Forest, and shortly after arriving at about 0930, locked on to the juvenile **BAIRD'S SANDPIPER** which had been present since Thursday.



This was yet another very rare American wader, and my first for Hampshire. Like the Wilson's Phalarope, this was the sixth for the county, and the first to stick around for any length of time since 1996.

It was a classic 'Weetabix-on-legs' job – long-winged, very smart and distinctive, if a little furtive in amongst the rushes and sedges at the back of the Fishtail Lagoon. I've plainly lost some form and/or am still suffering from last week's heavy cold – my legs felt incredibly heavy and useless on the way back, which was essentially a slow kill torture! Still, 198 up.

8th October 198 species

☹ Very hot news the night before from Trevor Carpenter had me ready to leave straight after work on Saturday, and I was feeling very optimistic when I set off in search of the Red-necked Phalarope found the day before at Lee-on-Solent.

The bird was still reported as present at 1100, and I had high hopes of

completing the county Phalarope grand slam for the year. No such luck! No sign of the bird at all, at a spectacularly grotty pond by a new housing development – just 2 Little Grebes and a bunch of gulls by way of compensation.

And to cap it all a (predicted) cold front arrived just as I gave up, and I got cold and wet all the way home. The only thing achieved today was the km/species count creeping up over 19!

17th October **199 species**

A fantastic stroke of fortune this morning – a year tick not 300 yards from home! I was out early, delivering some documents before work, with a few Redwings and Song Thrushes passing low to the west in the gloom, when a rasping chacking had me looking straight up at a **Ring Ouzel** moving with them! Not exactly crippling views, but quite unmistakable and firmly OML. Much more satisfying (and easier) than cycling for two hours to see a poxy American vagrant wader at Pennington!

This was only my fourth Winchester record of this scarce migrant thrush, after a winter bird back in 1985, a couple of spring males in 1987, and another male (on a back lawn) in May 1993. This one was easily the best value, however!

One to go for the 200 – severe weather was forecast for midweek, so maybe it would be a Sabine's Gull or a Little Auk?

THE BIG DAY ARRIVES!

27th October **200 species**

☺☺ At long last, I today achieved what I thought would be pretty much impossible back in January – **200 species in Hampshire in a year, by bike and on foot.**

I had cycled 3827km (or 2378 miles), I've been in the saddle for just shy of a week, and the average distance per species was 19.1km (or about 12 miles).

The magic species finally fell after a pretty agonising five day wait – it had been found the previous Sunday, but I was in Cornwall (Wryneck, Yellow-browed Warbler, Grey Phalarope, Hawfinch, Chough, Black Redstart all *self-found*), with a day trip to Scilly (Blackpoll Warbler, Sora Crake and a vast dose of seasickness in SW6 winds). And with Titchfield Haven only open Weds-Sun, I had to wait.

I arrived at about 0930 and decided to check the floods just south of the village first, as this was where bird had been reported on and off the day before. Within a few minutes – there it was! The superb first-winter **LESSER YELLOWLEGS** provided a suitably rare and spectacular 200th bird.

My joy was complete when Julia arrived a few minutes later to share the bird (her first significant drive since her accident), and we happily headed off down to Haven House for tea and cake before trying our luck on the reserve.

There was little around – a Dartford Warbler and a late Swallow were the highlights, plus Clouded Yellow, Common Darter and a single Migrant Hawker – no sign of yesterday's Grey Phalarope.

But in highly unseasonable warm sunshine, and with a warm southerly breeze, who cares? Mission accomplished – though there were still nine weeks of birding to go before the end of the year!

29th October **201 species**

☺ And still they come! Red hot news came through this morning of a confiding Hampshire tick near Titchfield – but I couldn't get into the field until mid afternoon. Would it stay?

The answer was a resounding “yes”! After a windy ride to the coast and meeting up with my 'support crew' once more, I walked the ¾ mile west along Brownwich cliffs, to be rewarded with point blank views of a really crippling **Lapland Bunting**.



This species, while a scarce migrant along English coasts, is a really rare bird in Hampshire – only about 60 or so

have ever been recorded, and nearly all of the recent ones have been ‘flyovers’ at coastal migration watchpoints. So to have a chance to twitch one was highly unexpected. Stunning stuff – a real Hampshire blocker nailed, and a superb bird too.

October summary

Species total so far:	201
Species added this month:	4
Distance cycled:	312 km
Cumulative distance:	3896 km
Road time:	14 hours
Cumulative road time:	166 hours
Distance per species:	19.4 km

November

5th November **202 species**

☺* Remember, remember the 5th of November – well, I certainly will after this year! While I was half-expecting to visit Gosport once more this winter, probably in search of the returning Iceland Gull I dipped all those months ago, little did I expect to be making the mad dash down there today to see a first for Hampshire – but that's exactly what happened.

At 1330, the news broke, and after (not much) umming and ahing, I was off. After a record-breaking 1 hour 22 minute ride I was on site, and immediately had flight views of the 1st winter **LAUGHING GULL** (*see inside front cover*).

Stunning stuff! The bird proceeded to fly up and down the sea wall a few times, to the delight of the gathered and seemingly almost complete Hampshire birding fraternity. There was much air punching, back-slapping and general good humour.

Deeply happy, and with several adult Mediterranean Gulls to add to the day list, I 'streaked' home in a rather slower time, especially as I punctured near Waltham Chase. Luckily it happened close to a bike shop.

What a day!

10th November 204 species

I set out for a winter afternoon's ride into the New Forest, in search of two species I really *should* have seen before – and scored with both!

The first was a real slice of luck – I fluked a **Merlin** hunting Meadow Pipits by the road at Half Moon Common – rakish, flickering wings, all speed and panache. Brilliant.

The second was more predictable, but just as welcome. I met up with Julia at a “well-known site” in the northern Forest, and together we walked a couple of miles to a viewpoint overlooking a deep valley. Would we have any luck? Oh yes – at about 1600 a ringtail **Hen Harrier** quartered the heath to the west of us.

Well satisfied, albeit with a very low day-list, I headed off back into the darkness for the long, lonely ride home.

The year really is beginning to turn full circle. But I'm on 204!

12th November 204 species

☹ Yesterday (Friday), a juvenile Sabine's Gull was found on the shoreline of Hayling Island, and showed well all day. This would be a Hampshire and (of course) a year-tick for me.

I simply could not travel for it (work commitments), so it was an overnight sweat. At about 0900 on Saturday, the pager news came through: "no sign of the Sabine's Gull".

Now, this went to the very core of what this year's been like. How did I feel? Disappointed? Frustrated? No! I felt (to be honest) *relieved*. It's enough to drive you crazy, this nonsense.

[Sad addendum: the Sabine's Gull was found dead by George Spraggs, some six days later. See below....]



13th November 206 species

A true anecdote (you'll have to take my word for it): about a month ago, when contemplating the likely autumn cycle rides, I casually mentioned to Julia that it was amazing Hayling Island never

seemed to get *really* rare birds. I reckon it'd be good for a Desert Wheatear in late October or November, I said.

☀️😊 Fast forward to today, a freezing cold morning after a clear, starry night. Frost covered the cars and the watermeadows as I pedalled off to the south, departing just after 0700, my face chilled by the cold air. My target for today was Black Redstart, which had become a bogey bird after two long-distance dips last winter, both at Hayling Island. George Spraggs had reported to me that a first-winter male had been in residence for about a week and was being site-faithful, so I decided to go for it, especially as there were some other possible year-ticks (e.g. Great Northern Diver, Velvet Scoter, Red-necked Grebe, Little Gull, Long-tailed Duck) which might just be on offer.

The familiar ride to the furthest, most south-easterly corner of the county took me just over 2¼ hours – my feet felt like blocks of ice once more. But it was with optimism that I started combing the seafront houses, though with no luck in the first twenty minutes. Then I bumped into Andy Johnson, who gripped me off with a report of a good passerine vis mig session at dawn, including a Snow Bunting.

After a minute or two, he remarked, “That looked like a Wheatear”, pointing his bins in the direction I'd just come from. I scanned, picking up first a Pied Wagtail and then a brown, vaguely variegated passerine on the beach. I

directed Andy to where I was looking, and to our mutual delight (we were both thinking the same thing, I am certain) he spoke the fateful words: “**DESERT WHEATEAR!**” (see inside front cover) My knees turned instantly to jelly – joy unrivalled, delight unparalleled, maximum adrenaline rush. Awesome, awesome, awesome.



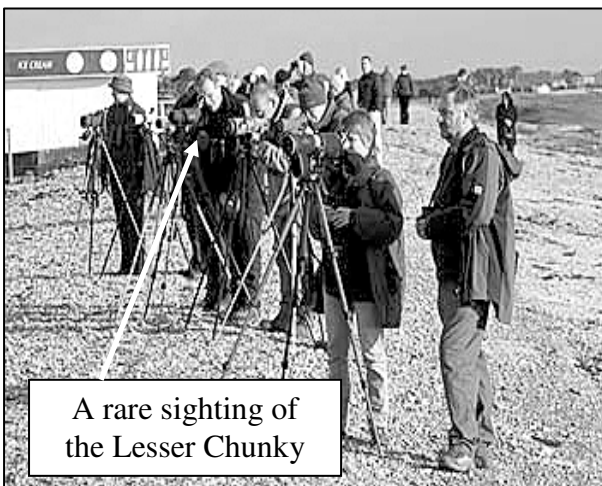
This was only the second record for Hampshire (the first was way back in November 1961) and a British tick for me. And here I was, just off my bike, watching it, right now! Desert Wheatears are normally found in the deserts (you don't say!) of North Africa and the Middle East, and a very rare vagrant to the UK – generally no more than two or three are seen each year. This was only the third of 2005.

My mobile rang that instant – Julia had just arrived by car. Better still! I ran down to the road to fetch her, but (fatefully) returned briefly to see the bird again while she got organised – while we watched it and phoned the news out, it ‘flicked’, as passerines sometimes do, and neither of us could see where to! Julia arrived – no Desert Wheatear.

Soon the Hayling birding cavalry arrived – but, despite 1½ hours of scouring the beach, there was no Desert Wheatear. Long faces all round. For me the morning was completed by a great view of the **Black Redstart** on one of the houses – the target bird, remember!

But still no Wheatear – Julia and I had what we call a “White’s Thrush moment” on our hands (after an agonising half hour on St Agnes in 1999 when she had seen it but I hadn’t!). We decided to leave the crowds (now getting on for a hundred strong) for a bit, searching first Black Point, then moving up to the oysterbeds at the north of the Island to look for the Long-tailed Duck. We didn’t see it – but Black-necked Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers and lots of waders and gulls made up for that – a bit.

Pager alert! The Desert Wheatear had been relocated at Beachlands car-park, a full mile and a half west of the initial spot – clearly the bird was working along the beach. So we scurried back to the shore (by car, yes), roared to a halt in the gravel car-park and joined the crowd – no bird! It had moved west



A rare sighting of the Lesser Chunky

again. So we walked west for a few tens of yards – and then Julia connected. We spent 20 minutes enjoying stunning views of this “right crippling mega” in excellent light. It was a *life* tick for Julia, too!

Another look at the oysterbeds area produced no Long-tailed Duck again, so we packed it in after a late lunch, and I then rode home in a record slow time with a slightly tweaked hamstring. I also lost my rear light in Twyford – smashed, then immediately run over by a car! Did I care? Not a lot! What an unbelievable day.

November 14th 206 species

☹ While I did see the *rarest* Hayling bird of the last week, it was still quite gripping to hear that Andy Johnson continued his 'purple patch' today by finding a Hoopoe at Sandy Point. Absolutely no chance of me getting down there to see it, however!

November 15th 206 species

☹ Nor any chance of getting to see the Little Auk which Andy found today, either!

November 17th 206 species

Today I was finally able to combine my personal year-list pursuit with the best bit of my job – taking some of my students out into the field to see birds. The Winchester College Natural History Society was founded in the 1860s, and ever since has had a small but keen following.

My colleague Hugh Hill drove a party of boys down to Farlington Marshes at lunchtime where I met them, having set off at about noon on my bike. On a cold and frosty day and with a good high tide, we expected to be able to show them plenty of birds, and no-one was disappointed – there were stacks of newly arrived Brent Geese, lots of common wildfowl, a Goldeneye, a Kingfisher, tons of waders, two Dartford Warblers, several Stonechats, a couple of very elusive Bearded Tits and a Merlin. I also saw a very late Migrant Hawker dragonfly.

One of the young lads (a potential squeaker in the making) was very keen, despite knowing next to nothing about birds – he wanted to *see* that Robin which we glimpsed as it shot across the track, and spent five minutes stalking it! He's even started a life list (he's on about 25), despite my grave warnings about where such dangerously obsessive leanings can lead!

So there was no sign of the Langstone Harbour Long-tailed Duck or any other year-ticks for me, but it was a thoroughly excellent afternoon out for all concerned.

November 20th 208 species

☺ Another bitterly cold morning, but I overcame the little demon saying 'stay in bed', pulled on my alarmingly kinky, brand new neoprene overshoes, and pedalled off into the sub-zero dawn.

This really was the coldest yet, and I simply could not feel my feet by the

time I reached the New Forest. I jumped up and down to restore a bit of feeling in my toes!

Frostbite notwithstanding, I reached Lower Pennington Lane by about 1010, and stepped off the bike for my customary look at the flooded fields by the last bend in the road. Three Meadow Pipits flew up from my left, accompanied by a larger bird – Song Thrush, I thought. But it dropped down with them on the right of the road in a wet field, hovering momentarily before pitching. Blimey!

Sure enough, a quick glimpse was enough to confirm it was a large pipit, and although I can't say I had feather-by-feather views, its strident flight call when it shortly flew off strongly to the west had me in absolutely no doubt – **Richard's Pipit** OML! This is a rare bird indeed in the county (only some 25 or so previous records), although nationally it is one of the commoner Asian vagrants each year, with November records not being at all unusual. Surely my luck would run out soon, however?

Not yet! Julia arrived a few minutes later, and we walked off towards the Normandy area, via a big and very attractive flock of Golden Plovers. We met Marcus and Zoe Ward coming the other way – no sign of the Snow Bunting, alas. We chatted for a bit in the glorious sunny (and now a bit warmer) weather, and then carried on in our opposite directions – for about five seconds! "Simon!", called Marcus urgently – we spun on the spot and

there was the superb male **Snow Bunting** flying towards us, tinkling away.



Snow Buntings are scarce autumn and winter visitors to lowland coastal Britain, but they are really very scarce in Hampshire – this was only the third one I'd seen in the county.

Much encouraged we moved on towards Salterns, via a smart Spotted Redshank. Casually ambling past Eight Acre Lake, I saw what I assumed was a buffy-grey Black-tailed Godwit, oddly sat on a gravel island. On raising my bins, however, it became more serious – it was a first-winter **LAUGHING GULL!**



Once we'd taken a second to check the ID (especially eliminating Franklin's Gull, outrageous though the idea was),

we quickly called Marcus, who said something rude over the phone and hared back round from home to see the bird. He, Pete Durnell and Russell Wynn all connected, plus a few rather bemused semi-civilians who happened to be passing.

It's impossible to be absolutely certain, but it seems very likely that this was the same individual bird as the one at Gosport two weeks ago – not that that detracts from the excitement of finding a pukka British Birds rarity by bike!

We were thoroughly elated and enjoyed a further couple of hours in the field, seeing a Dartford Warbler, three Kingfishers, numerous Little Egrets, stacks of roosting small waders, and lots of Great Crested Grebes on the sea – although sadly no Red-necked Grebe! You can't get too greedy.

The ride home was fine – it's funny how some red-hot birding can take the weight out of your legs and the chill out of the air!

November 30th

211 species

☺ With a full service of my bike completed, new brake pads/cables and a new chain fitted, I was ready for a pretty serious undertaking – a mega-early (0530) start and off into the sub-zero Hampshire countryside, heading for Portsmouth. The temperature on departure was -2.9°C , which gave a windchill 'real feel' of -10.5°C at 24 km/h! Brrrr! So it was on with the full thermal gear, plus two pairs of gloves, waterproof Merino socks, neoprene

overshoes and a beanie hat under my helmet.

I rode in total darkness all the way down to Gosport – and it was a chill, grey dawn for the first hour after that. I took the foot ferry across to Portsmouth, and cycled on to Southsea Castle. A Rock Pipit and a Turnstone welcomed me on the seaweed covered rocks, but within a few minutes, I had found my main target – a **Purple Sandpiper** feeding unconcerned at just a few metres range. This is the only regular Hampshire site for the species, and it was a real relief to get it OML after failing earlier in the year.

Unexpectedly, a **Guillemot** also added itself to my list, in almost exactly the spot where I'd seen a Razorbill back in February. Bonus bird!

It was now 0815, so I headed back across the ferry, and cycled on towards Hill Head. I went via Gosport, where I did not see the regular Ring-billed Gull (in the briefest of searches), and HMS Sultan fields, where there were lots of Brent Geese and Golden Plovers.

I arrived shortly after 0900, and immediately connected with Chunky, Robin Turner and Malcolm Dixon by the beach huts. They were scanning for sea ducks – but had unfortunately only had Eider so far.

I warmed up with a welcome cup of coffee 'à la King' (see under 'Chunky' in the Glossary!), and we continued searching. There were two sizeable rafts of Eider, totalling about ninety

birds, and several Great Crested Grebes. Chunky found a female-type Common Scoter – but my main quarry was nowhere to be seen.

Chunky had to go 'on duty' at Titchfield Haven Nature Reserve, but he very kindly lent me his scope, and I set off along Brownwich cliffs with Robin and Malcolm. We set up an observation post after half a mile or so, and scanned the Eider flocks once more.

Result! I quickly picked up a slightly smaller, black coffee coloured duck, which I was sure showed a small pale cheek patch. It put its head up, and sure enough, I added **Velvet Scoter** to the list.



This Arctic breeder is a very scarce winter visitor to the Hampshire coast, and was never guaranteed on the year-list.

With time pressing, I returned the scope to Chunky, and pedalled off northwards, getting back home with just enough time to shower before returning to the classroom and teaching a lesson – appropriately enough, the topic was the windchill factor!

November summary

Species total so far:	211
Species added this month:	10
Distance cycled:	579 km
Cumulative distance:	4475 km
Road time:	25.4 hours
Cumulative road time:	191.6 hours
Distance per species:	21.2 km

December

December 6th 213 species

☺ Today I was due to go flying with a colleague, to gather some photos for the Geography Department, but sadly we had to cancel on account of low cloud.

So I took the opportunity to get back on the bike, and again to ride south to Hill Head/Brownwich, on the eastern shore of Southampton Water. I completed the ride in record time – 1 hour and 22 minutes.

But even by 1455, when I arrived, it was getting dark and gloomy, and it was clear I wouldn't have much time to search the sea for my target species. So I lay down (prone) on the beach with my scope, and started scanning.

After about ten minutes, a distant dot swam a bit closer, and resolved itself into a smart **Red-necked Grebe**. These north-east European breeders are only scarce winter migrants to Britain, and have become rather rare in Hampshire

in recent years – although I had already missed at least two earlier in the year!

Pretty happy with that, I continued enjoying the Eider flock, several Red-breasted Mergansers and lots of Great Crested Grebes. But then my eye was drawn to a lumbering bird flying south past Fawley refinery, very distantly towards Lepe. Brent Goose? Cormorant? No – **Great Northern Diver!** I knew one had been in this area earlier in the week, but I didn't really expect to see it.



Thinking my luck was in, I cycled down to Titchfield Haven for a dusk vigil at the reedbed, in the vain hope that a Bittern might fly by – one didn't!

A Kingfisher brightened up the gathering gloom, and a Cetti's Warbler sang briefly from dense cover. But it was now well and truly dark, and I set off for the now familiar ride home, in absolute blackness. The Nightrider has returned!

December 7th 213 species

While up in London on business, I received hot pager news of a Radde's Warbler, a first for the county, present

today at a private/inaccessible site 'somewhere near Basingstoke'. Whether further news would be released, and whether access would be possible, remained to be seen....

December 8th 213 species

☺ Well, I got hold of the necessary gen, having negotiated the minefield of Hampshire birding politics, and set off for Basingstoke at about noon. I found the site OK, and spent the next two hours or so wandering about forlornly, stringing Dunnocks and Wrens for all I was worth, but failing to see the Radde's Warbler. Never mind.

Scant compensation came in the form of at least three Lesser Redpolls – only my second contact with this species all year. The ride home was cold, fast and not very pleasant on a main road in the dark!

December 23rd 215 species

☺ Last week I took a rather risky week off in the sun in the Canary Islands (all currently recognised and marginal endemic species seen, plus Blue-winged Teal, Houbara Bustard, Cream-coloured Courser, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Trumpeter Finch etc.). The downside was a bad ankle sprain on the last day on Fuerteventura, forcing me to take an extra three days off cycling – luckily no 'megas' appeared! I hoped today would be one last ride to Titchfield Haven. Bitterns are regular at this site, and up to two had been seen intermittently this winter.

I rode down early in the morning, bought my ticket, and headed straight for the Suffern Hide. I settled in, with a text message telling me Julia was also on her way down by car, and scanned the reeds. Almost at once, a dark brown shape appeared off to the right, flapping unsteadily over the Phragmites! Bittern? No! It was a first-winter **Marsh Harrier**! This was a species I had pretty much given up for lost – while they are regular spring and autumn migrants in Hampshire, they are really pretty rare in the county in winter.



Much scanning from the Suffern and Meadow Hides failed to turn up the Bittern – plenty of other birds to see, including Kingfisher, lots of ducks and some waders. Gripping news appeared in the form of a report of a 3rd winter Iceland Gull over the reserve early morning – surely the Gosport bird of last winter having returned?

Over a coffee and cake, I decided to postpone the Bittern hunt for a few hours, and to ride off along the coast to Gosport on an Iceland hunt. I followed the shore as closely as possible, checking every group of gulls – but there was no sign, even way down at

Walpole Park in central Gosport. I did find at least five Mediterranean Gulls en route, and better still, a male Black Redstart by Workhouse Lake. A Christmas bonus!

Back at Titchfield by 1500, and a final hour in prospect in the hides. I chose the Meadow Hide, since the Bittern had indeed been seen that morning, but well up the valley – this was perhaps my best chance. And so it proved! After just ten minutes, a much more promising brown shape appeared over the reeds, and the heavy, almost owlish flight confirmed my suspicions: **Bittern** safely OML! What a relief – to be honest, I thought I had little chance of the bird at the start of the day. After just 10 seconds, it dropped back down into the reeds, and vanished.



The ride home was once more in darkness – the highlight was getting stopped by a police patrol car. "Your back light is too dim." We examined it, and he changed his mind. "True, it's OK. Well, it's not bright enough for a following driver." Eh? We agreed there was not much I could do about it. "You are putting your life at risk." Meek

smile, Happy Christmas, carry on home. Two more in the bank.

December 26th

216 species

With a belly full of Christmas dinner and a bit too much booze, I crawled into bed after Eastenders and set the alarm for some illegal time in the morning – Slavonian Grebe and Scaup were calling!

By 0745, I was away into the freezing darkness. It was indeed a slow and toe-numbing ride south through the New Forest, and almost 2½ hours later, I finally reached Pennington, where my support crew shortly appeared with the traditional hot water bottle and warm socks.

We had just two targets today, and we headed straight off towards Normandy, where we scored easily with the first-winter male **Scaup** bobbing about on the pool with the local Tufted Ducks. Scaup are true Arctic ducks, and just a few of them penetrate as far south as the English Channel each winter – they're by no means easy in Hampshire, though luckily they do tend to stick around for a while.

The tide was very, very low – good for excellent views of waders (including Greenshank, 5 Spotted Redshanks and stacks of the commoner species), but not so good for our other target bird.

All the sea-ducks and grebes were a long way off, and despite diligently scanning all the way back to Pennington, we simply could not find a

Slavonian Grebe among the Goldeneyes, Great-crested Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers and others – which did include two female-type Common Scoters. We also scored with two Kingfishers and at least two Dartford Warblers, plus a Peregrine, Golden Plovers and lots of common wildfowl.

A bit disappointed, I finally headed off for home at about 1430 – the ride was less cold, but even more tiring – at one point I even stopped to check my wheel wasn't buckled and slowing me down! No – just my own poor performance.

But I did see a couple of good birds *en route* – a Hawfinch just south of Brockenhurst, and a Woodcock flushed from the roadside near Hursley.

December 29th 217 species

☺ Acting on a nice little snippet of information gleaned from HOSlist, I set off in temperatures of about -4°C at 0830 – it never got above freezing all morning, making this certainly my coldest ride of the year.

I reached Roke Manor (a Siemens research centre near Romsey) in good time for my rendezvous, and successfully met up with Richard Cheater, who had kindly agreed to arrange access to the Manor grounds to see 'his' flock of Redpolls.

Very quickly, we located the flock – there were rather more than he had thought! Estimates are always hard, but there had to be 150+ birds present,

sometimes giving exceptional views in the trees right over our heads. Nearly all were dull, buffish Lesser Redpolls, but as hoped, there were four or five bulkier, much whiter, bright pink-breasted birds among them, and close scrutiny through Richard's scope confirmed that they were indeed **Common (or Mealy) Redpolls!**

This Scandinavian redpoll form has only recently been officially split from the commoner Lesser Redpoll, and it is a very rare visitor to southern England. Indeed, it constituted yet another Hampshire tick for me – a hell of a way to finish the serious birding for the year!

Also in Richard's nice stubbly field were two Stonechats, at least 10 Reed Buntings, a dozen Skylarks and plenty of other finches and thrushes.

Very pleased indeed, we enjoyed a warming cup of coffee at the security desk, and then it was back off onto the icy roads for the one hour burn back to Winchester. Port Lane one more time....

Another major mileage tick today – 3000 miles up!

December 31st

217 species



♪ ”And so, the end
is near...” ♪

With the cold snap gone, only to be replaced with gloom and low cloud, I made one last, largely ceremonial outing, around my favourite local 22km (one hour) loop, up to Cheesefoot Head. There was a Rough-legged Buzzard there once (in 1975, actually), and you never know....

No RLB! No surprise there, but I did flush a Brambling among a Chaffinch flock at Lane End Down, and I did see several Bullfinches, which I hereby nominate as the "bikiest" bird of the year - I have seen them on well over half of all rides!

It was sad to think of eZCEYL_2005 disappearing into the ether come midnight tonight. But then again, I always have a Hampshire bike LIFE list to maintain..... Iceland Gull, anyone?

December summary

Final species total:	217
Species added this month:	6
Distance cycled:	244 km
Cumulative distance:	4868 km
Road time:	17.1 hours
Cumulative road time:	208.7 hours
Distance per species:	22.4 km

"You thought that was it?
No it ain't - just like Dracula,
Just when ya think you's safe,
I come back and bite ya."

(a little bit of hip-hop there, yes indeed...)

January 3rd 218 species (LIFE)

Seriously, honestly, truly: I wrote the last paragraph of 2005 on New Year's Eve. And what happened today? A phone call from Chunky at the Sewage Farm – **ICELAND GULL!** What?!?

Julia and I drove (oops!) up there to see it, but after just a short time, I raced home, flung on my muddiest kit and pedalled back, just in time to see the bird, an ultra-pallid 3rd winter, sailing off high to the south-west.

The irony is rich – my longest (double) dip of 2005, nailed in the first week of 2006! Well, life goes on....

