

# THE BIRDHIDE

## Southern Exotics

By Will Wagstaff with photos by Bryan Thomas



During the last days of winter, our thoughts turn towards the spring and to wondering what will reach the islands this year. Will the Swallows be late; will the Common Terns arrive in numbers to breed and what surprises will there be get the pulse racing?

A spell of warm southerly winds between mid March and late May usually brings some spring migrants to Scilly. Pipits, wagtails and waders tend to be the first arrivals but, as many of these species over-winter, it is often difficult to say when any new arrivals reach our shores. Many of our resident birds have been singing since Christmas so cannot be considered a harbinger of spring. It is the arrival of the Swallows and Wheatears that, for many, is the first sign of migrants having crossed the open sea to Scilly. It is one of the sights of spring when a flock of Swallows zoom in low over the water to then spiral up over the cliffs as if to celebrate a successful crossing.

The islands have long been known as the premier migration site in Britain. This usually refers to the autumn months when vagrants from the new and the old world reach us to the delight of the many visiting birdwatchers. What is less well-known is that we can get some amazing birds during the spring, mostly of a southern origin during the first part of the season, with birds from the east arriving later on in May and June. Scilly is also a very good place to look for some of the exotic species, which although not major rarities, are very exciting birds to see, such as Hoopoe and Golden Oriole.

The Hoopoe is one of those species that looks like its picture in the bird book throughout the year, which cannot be said of all! The word exotic sums up this bird with its pink, black and white plumage topped with a showy crest, which it raises on landing or when alarmed. In flight they are even more distinctive. With their very broad rounded black and white wings, they fly in a slow bounding manner as if showing off to all watching. The bird gets its name from its soft, but carrying, "oop-oop-oop" song. It does have a variety of calls used when breeding but they are very rarely heard on migration. I have only heard one singing on Scilly and that was doing so in response to a Cuckoo that was calling nearby, one May day on St Martin's. Despite it being quite a large bird, roughly the size of a Blackbird and having very striking plumage, they can be very difficult to see. They seem to have the ability to walk

out of sight into a shallow depression in the ground never to be seen again! Although they have reached Scilly in late February, they are typically found between mid March and late April. Occasionally one or two are seen during the autumn migration but this is not an annual event unlike in the spring when between three and twenty have been noted. Their favoured habitat is open short cropped turf or sandy/stony ground with little cover. Here they feed by shuffling along, head down, looking for grubs and other insects. They are a Mediterranean and African species whose range extends to Asia but it is thought that those reaching Scilly originate from Iberia. Occasionally pairs have bred in Britain but it is very unlikely they would ever do so on Scilly. In recent years they have most often been noted individually but, in the past, up to six together have been seen. It is definitely a red letter day when one sees this amazing bird.

The second species for which the word exotic is often used is the Golden Oriole, which tends to arrive a few weeks later than the Hoopoe in late April and May. As was noted with the Hoopoe, it can also be seen in autumn in some years, but is best thought of as one of Scilly's spring specialities. The birdwatcher looking for a Golden Oriole will be listening to the call that is often described as 'cat-like'. It is not an analogy I like as it sounds more like a weak version of the call of a Jay to me, the latter a species not recorded on Scilly for some time. It is the song of the Golden Oriole that is heard in the more wooded areas of Scilly from the Abbey Woods on Treco to the Nature Trails on St Mary's. This melodious fluting song is usually heard at dawn with occasional snatches later in the day. When heard



Swallows and the Spotted Flycatcher.

Right: *Common Tern*.  
 Below left: *Red-backed Shrike*.  
 Below right: *Wheatear*.

Facing Page, top: *Hoopoe*.  
 Bottom left: *Short-toed Lark*.  
 Bottom right: *Snowy Owl*.



clearly, there is no other song like it on Scilly. Even the most virtuoso Blackbird cannot come close to a Golden Oriole when in full song. Sadly they seem to rarely sing from the same area two mornings running, making it difficult to follow up on someone else's discovery.

When singing they are often well-hidden in the tree tops and tend to be very stealthy when flitting from tree to tree. This makes them hard to locate, despite the adult males having bright yellow bodies with black wings and being a little bigger than a Starling. The females are a bright green colour with browner wings. The latter are often mistaken for Green Woodpeckers,

an extremely rare bird on Scilly. Young males can show some yellow in their plumage but are often more like the females. Even though they may be heard singing, they are much harder to see. Thankfully, for those wanting to see Golden Orioles on Scilly, these birds have a preference for feeding in gorse and as such can be easier to find. Last spring, up to five were feeding on the west side of Watch Hill on Bryher and were enjoyed by many visitors as they fed out in the open. Golden Orioles are shy birds and do not generally stay on view for long. They are most often seen in flight, zipping between bushes or away from one island to another. The long slender wings and streamlined body are very distinctive but they are rarely in view for long. A small number breed annually in Britain, most often in East Anglia.

The third of the colourful trio that reach Scilly on an annual basis is the Woodchat Shrike. This species is more usually found in southern Europe but has reached our shores often enough to be demoted from rare status to being a scarce bird. A largely black and white bird with a chestnut crown, it usually stands out perching on the top of a hedge or an isolated bush. From a distance, the round white breast often reminds me of a white tennis ball stuck in a hedge. This close relative of the Red-backed Shrike is a predator of lizards, bees and a wide variety of insects, but it is the bees that seem to be their particular favourite on Scilly.



They sit and wait until one flies by, before sallying out after them, catching it with an audible crunch. The spring birds that arrive in April and May most years are very striking. The autumn juveniles, which can arrive anytime between August and October, although much drabber birds are equally dynamic when feeding. The male Red-backed Shrike has become a much rarer bird in recent times but the red-backed, grey-headed male is a super bird and well worth looking for when one has been located. As with Woodchat, the autumn juveniles are nowhere near as colourful as their parents.

From the same point of origin, the Short-toed Lark cannot be described as colourful. It is a mix of grey, brown and buff and is often likened to a cross between a Skylark and a House Sparrow. It is not a species to get one's pulse racing. The fact that this lark is the commonest lark on Scilly during the spring is a sad reflection of the decline of the Skylark that had been a widespread breeding species on all the main islands but last bred on St Mary's in 1999. Migrant Skylarks do appear every autumn, some of which over-winter, but all have left by the time another breeding season comes around. Short-toed Larks are often portrayed as a birdwatcher's bird as they are a drab brown shuffler. Away from Scilly and Shetland they are still a major rarity so it is always nice to come across one on the open heaths and paths of the archipelago.



In amongst all this talk of exotic species some of our British breeding birds such as Pied Flycatcher and Common Redstarts stand up well in comparison. The males of both of these species are some of the most attractive of our spring migrants. The same can be said for the male Wheatears when they hit Scilly in mid March and a Swallow is another worth a second look as they swoop in front of us or perch on an overhead wire or branch.

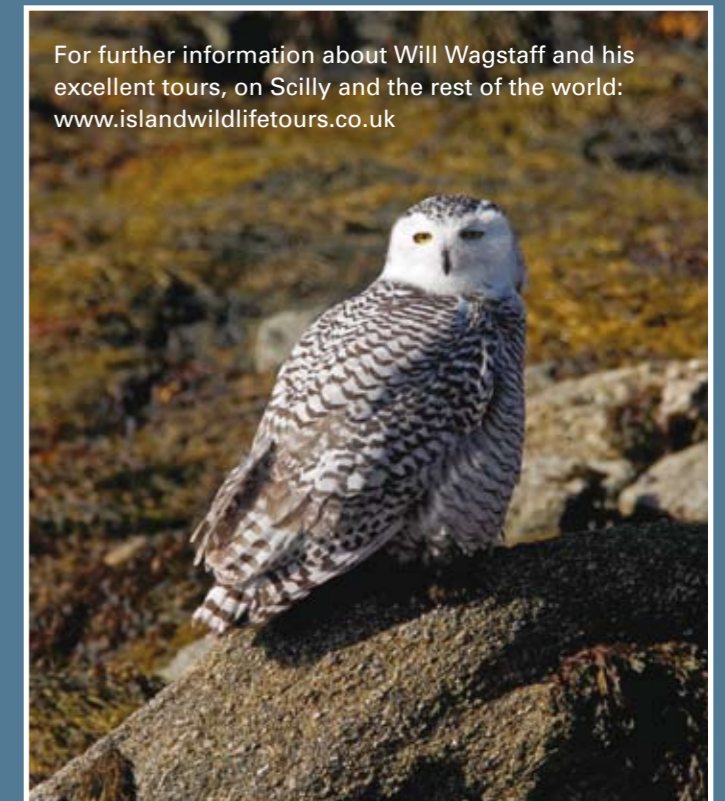
So when walking around the islands on a warm spring day with a light southerly wind blowing, hopes are always raised as there is the chance of a magical bird appearing as if from nowhere to remind us that Scilly is indeed a special place.



#### STOP PRESS

In the last article I commented that it would be nice to see a Snowy Owl on the islands as there had not been one for many years. As that edition went to press, a superb Snowy Owl was initially seen on Gugh before reaching St Mary's, where it was seen by many. Thankfully, it stayed around until I came back from holiday although it must be said it was not the easiest bird to find despite being a huge, mostly white owl!

At the risk of pushing my luck in predicting birds, how about a Little Bustard for all to see next spring? There have been just three records and the last one in 2002 was seen only by a handful of observers. ❄️



For further information about Will Wagstaff and his excellent tours, on Scilly and the rest of the world:  
[www.islandwildlifetours.co.uk](http://www.islandwildlifetours.co.uk)