

reola is not on the Dorset list, yet two were recorded at Christchurch Harbour in 1966. A great many records have disappeared into no man's land. I tried to locate all pre-1974 records for this area for a recently published book. While I wanted to follow the vice-county system, I decided to locate all the Christchurch records for scientific and historical consistency, since no Dorset county avifauna before or since has included these pre-1974 records. It wasn't easy. I have little doubt that similar experiences can be had elsewhere in the country. Future county avifaunas would be much easier to compile and more consistent in their coverage if they followed permanent boundaries.

In addition, the national Biological Records Centre, the 'sorting office' for all biological records, follows the Watsonian system, so an adoption of the system would presumably make their working lives easier. One can think of

many more reasons for adopting such a system. The following of ever-changing socio-political boundaries seems to be rather illogical and the only reason for its continuance is that it has become institutionalised. While the adoption of the Watsonian vice-county system would not only solve the current problems but also avoid future ones, there is a minor, albeit superficial, downside. For many recorders, a belated adoption of the system would be a headache, as some current recording areas would cease to exist (no disrespect to Avon or Cleveland) and a fair amount of records will need to change hands. However, it would merely need the full co-operation of fellow county recorders and their assistants to deal with this matter.

My plea to the powers that be is that we should bite the bullet and adopt the Watsonian/Praeger system of vice-counties, the boundaries of which will never change.

Stephen Morrison

9 Holt Road, Branksome, Poole, Dorset BH12 1JQ

The Cambridge 'Moustached Warblers'

When I arrived in Cambridge a couple of years after 'Moustached Warblers *Acrocephalus melanopogon*' were reported there (see *Brit. Birds* 99: 465–478), I interrogated every witness I could find about this strange event. At that time, Cambridge ornithology was divided into two parts, the pre-war rather dilettante generation, notably the behaviourists, and the first twitchers, who had yet to make their mark; and there was little communication between them. The reply from the first group was uniformly that the birds had been identified by the best observers, and that it was sacrilegious for young whippersnappers to question it, but those in the second group were usually incredulous. When I got to know these birds well, wintering in Cyprus, it rapidly became evident that by far the quickest way to identify them was by their habit of regularly sitting with their tails cocked, as reported by the late great B. W. Tucker in the

Handbook of British Birds; and since they appeared to overlap with Sedge Warblers *A. schoenobaenus* otherwise, I ceased to look at anything else.

It was therefore interesting to read, in the recent summary of evidence for the reputed British records, that the only person who seems to have wanted to know about this most distinctive field character was again Bernard Tucker, who seems to have been worn down by unanimous peer pressure to reluctantly accept that the birds cocked their tails just like any other warbler when alarmed. There is also little reference to this behaviour in *BWP*, although it is mentioned in Beaman & Madge (*Handbook of Bird Identification*, Helm, 1998). It seems that people should stop depending on long-winded but inconclusive plumage descriptions and start to look at the behaviour of live birds again.

Dr W. R. P. Bourne

Ardgath, Station Road, Dufftown AB55 4AX

Obituary

Michael John Rogers (1932–2006)

Mike Rogers, who died five days after his 74th birthday, was the engine room of the BBRC from 1978 until his death. Although as honorary secretary he was a non-voting participant, he played a central role in modernising the process of rarity assessment and ensuring that it kept flowing smoothly and efficiently during an era in which the volume of reported rarities mushroomed. Mike was a distinguished-looking figure, whose serious expression masked an extremely gentle nature, much personal charm and a considerable sense of humour. He was a meticulous correspondent, invariably courteous and reasonable (even when being perfectly frank), and had the rare talent of addressing young and old alike; it is through the letters and postcards sent on behalf of BBRC that the majority of Britain's birders will remember him. His modest ten-line entry in *Who's Who in Ornithology* (Pemberton, 1997) gives a misleading impression that there may not have been a great deal more to the man. It is more likely that this was a

reflection of the strong self-effacement evident through much of his adult life; he consistently shunned the limelight.

Born in Sutton Coldfield on 5th October 1932, the only child of the Head Brewer at Ansells' Brewery, Birmingham, Mike was at the forefront of the post-war birdwatching boom. Raised in the city's Erdington district, he was among the brightest of talented young birders who fledged from King Edward's School after the mid 1940s. He joined what is now the West Midland Bird Club (WMBC) in 1946; within a year, together with schoolmates John Rawsthorne and Alan Wolton, he was part of a young triumvirate known by adult members as 'The Kids' that cycled all over the region, their regular discoveries of unusual species earning them an early reputation. They were tolerated by the rather stuffy local senior birdwatching establishment; but sometimes they got up its nose.

At an early age, already showing signs of the bird-



Richard Chandler

23. Mike Rogers, in the early 1980s.

record-analysis skills that were to be his forte in the final third of his life, Mike compiled a map of selected species in Sutton Park and then, in 1948, a detailed CBC-type map of the breeding species at Minworth. By 1951 he was a member of the WMBC's research committee, which compiled the prototype of breeding atlases in Britain (and was referred to as such in the introduction to *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*; Sharrock, 1976). Meanwhile, on reaching their mid teens 'The Kids' expanded their travels, with frequent visits to the north Norfolk coast, where they spent much time with legendary birdwatcher and illustrator Richard Richardson. Mike fondly recalled the effect on a literature-starved 17-year-old birder of first setting eyes on a full set of both Dresser and *The Handbook* in Peggy Meiklejohn's living room in 1949; and also that Richardson was a regular visitor to Meiklejohn's house, appearing every Tuesday evening for his weekly bath – 'the only time one would see him not wearing his army beret!' Richardson and Meiklejohn were two of his mentors in that early period, along with senior figures in the West Midlands, including Horace ('H. G.') Alexander (the latter clearly had a particular impact on Mike when he found a Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* at Northampton Sewage-farm in 1951).

One of Mike's already prodigious field skills was not just being able to identify bird calls but also to mimic them. A current senior WMBC member, Alan Richards, remembers being much impressed as he brought a flock of Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus* to the ground before them just by whistling a perfect rendition of their flight call.

It was the demands of National Service that eventually broke up 'The Kids'. After he resigned from the research committee in September 1951, Mike's route is unclear. He did not go to any university and, with no surviving close relatives to offer any clues, the next seven years are now almost a total blank to his friends. Wolton recalls that Mike spent part of that time in the Army Intelligence Corps, based at Trieste on Italy's Adriatic coast, at the southern tip of the Iron Curtain at a difficult period of the Cold War. He was married in 1957, but he and his wife Betty were not together long and there were no children. Eventually, they were divorced and Rogers was informed of her death, after progressively deteriorating health, in 1998.

The next phase of his life, from 1958 to 1981, was spent as an officer of the Metropolitan Police. As with his army days, he revealed little to friends, but they managed to glean that for much of the time he was a Special Branch officer and at some point became a detective sergeant. During his off-duty visits to the Sussex coast, fellow birders would occasionally hear him refer briefly to surveillance work at Heathrow or Gatwick, or to carrying out embassy protection. Once, in a letter, he mentioned checking passengers leaving a plane from Teheran before the 1979 Islamic Revolution and being surprised to see that they

included an old girlfriend 'just as gorgeous, even though that plastic surgery to her nose went all horribly wrong. She was married, had three kids... and five Mercs!' In a darker and more intriguing mood, he moaned on another occasion that other duties led to him becoming 'too close' to Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson; and that his reward was to end up as little more than a switchboard operator. Towards the end of his career he was seconded to the London Bomb Squad during a period of sustained IRA inactivity. He spoke of the boredom of sitting by a phone, waiting for a call to action that never came. It was then that his time became increasingly involved with ornithological work.

In 1978, he became not only the Sussex Ornithological Society's Recorder, but was also appointed BBRC Secretary, and it was the latter role that dominated the rest of his life. Soon, descriptions of rarities were pouring into his home in Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, and the volume was set to increase as the interest in rare birds multiplied in the 1980s and 1990s. Few people realised just how much work this involved. The receipt and circulation of 1,000+ claims per year was in many ways the straightforward bit. Before circulation, each record required a statement on the observer and the circumstances of the observation, and at the end of the process each required a conclusion – accepted, rejected or, rarely, pending. This in turn had to be communicated to the observer, before the outcome was filed, coded and stored. Some 20,000 of these processed files lived in cardboard boxes in Mike's house. One of the many improvements he introduced to improve the efficiency of how BBRC worked was a simple scoring system to assess the likely ability of individual members to judge records. This was the ABC system: A if you knew the species well; B if you'd seen it; C if you had no experience. However, he hadn't bargained for Keith Vinicombe who, on receiving the Mottled Swift *Tachymarpis aequatorialis* file, wrote 'D: never even heard of it!'

After Mike retired from the police force in 1981, BBRC became his new full-time occupation. Showing an unrivalled capacity for coping with mountains of data, he continued as Sussex Recorder until 1983, while he was also the Recorder for Scilly between 1982 and 1990. He had been an integral part of the Scilly birding community before moving to the islands, and took great pride in having constructed the Lower Moors hide in his backyard in Sunbury-on-Thames, and later erecting it on site. Following that, he built the seaward hide at Porthellick in situ, and then designed and installed the David Hunt hide on Tresco; yet he claimed that 'I am not, nor ever have been, a skilled carpenter'! It is appropriate that his memorial fund, being co-ordinated on Scilly, is intended to provide another hide at Porthellick that will look towards one of the older, but still functional, hides that Mike helped to place there*.