

Letters

The origin of 'twitcher' Richard Porter (*Brit. Birds* 75: 537) has traced 'twitcher' back to 1968, but what were 'people who chase rare birds' called before that? My recollection is that before the Second World War they were known as 'pot-hunters', and after it were called 'tally-hunters'. Did anything come between tally-hunting and twitching?

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I am responding to Richard Porter's letter (*Brit. Birds* 75: 537). The word 'twitcher' derives from 'ticker', a term in common use at Cley in the late 1950s. A ticker (or 'tick-hunter') was a person who chased around after rare birds, recently published Peterson field guide in pocket, literally marking a tick (✓) against the species seen, in what was at the time the only pocket-sized list of species recorded in Britain. Quite when the transition took place I do not know, but a ticker had all the features of what is now a twitcher.

JOHN HOLLOWAY

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'Twitcher' is actually a John Izzard-Bob Emmett word which was coined in the middle 1950s to describe our good friend Howard Medhurst, alias 'The Kid'.

Birdwatching transport was very much a two-wheeled affair in those days. John Izzard and his girlfriend, Sheila, rode a *Lambretta*, whilst Howard rode pillion on my *Matchless*. The *Lambretta* had a unique luxury built into it: a back-warming, lap-warming dog, 'Jan', which used to travel jammed between John and Sheila. There was no such creature comfort on the *Matchless*; on arrival at some distant destination, Howard would totter off the back of my machine and shiveringly light up a cigarette. This performance was repeated so regularly up and down the country that it became synonymous with good birds, and, as we all felt a slight nervous excitement at the uncertainty involved in trying to see a particular bird, it became a standing joke, and John and I would act out a nervous twitch to match Howard's shiverings. This led us to describe a trip to see a rare bird as 'Being on a twitch'. Inevitably, this led to the term 'twitcher'. It was our association with the Portsmouth Group in the New Forest that extended the term into more general use. In the late 1960s, it became a derogatory term to describe unscrupulous tick-hunters (and as far as I am concerned it still

continued...

is). It is pretty safe to say, however, that Howard Medhurst was—in the nicest possible way—the original twitcher.

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R. E. Emmett's letter seems to document the derivation of the word 'twitcher'. The sequence appears to have been pot-hunter, tally-hunter, tick-hunter, ticker and twitcher. Unless readers have contrary evidence, this correspondence is closed. EDS

Twitcher bashing I was interested to read the latest addition to the now well established convention of 'twitcher bashing', by Mr James Wilde (*Brit. Birds* 75: 136). It raised several fundamental points which all ornithologists/birders should bear in mind.

First, to reduce the 'twitcher's' delight in seeing unusual birds to a 'crude pursuit for the purpose of one-upmanship' is obviously inadequate. One could equally say that any 'serious' scientific paper on ornithology was written with the intention merely of furthering the writer's status in an academic/ornithological world. Self interest is part of many actions, but to see it as the only motive is tantamount to cynicism.

Secondly, Mr Wilde's seizure of the 'River Warbler incident' as an example of universal twitcher bad behaviour is typical of the 'newsreader's' failure to discern what makes 'good news'. The River Warbler incident was extraordinary: it was an ornithological scandal, and that was why we all heard about it. Who wants to hear about the commonplace—the regular and orderly gatherings of hundreds of birders where no damage is ever done, no tempers raised and no social issues highlighted? The unusual and isolated 'River Warbler affair' was important as an example of bad behaviour because it brought home how seldom it happens.

Finally, when Mr Wilde asks 'Does it really matter to anyone with a genuine interest in ornithology that so-and-so had a trial run with so-and-so to see if together they couldn't "score" more than X number of species before breakfast?', could we not reply by asking whether it really matters to anyone if such and such a species breeds in this type of grass as opposed to that, and feeds on two particular types of insect that emerge only in June? Which I suppose is what he means by a 'genuine interest in ornithology'! In fact, does ornithology matter at all in the face of obviously larger impending social disasters? It matters only if you choose to think it matters. Ornithology does not have a strictly defined canon sanctioned by some omnipotent deity. It is a multi-faceted perspective on one branch of the natural world and it seems to me that *British Birds* has a right/duty to reflect as many of those interests as possible. If Mr Wilde finds some of these distasteful, then I suggest he exercises self-restraint and turns the other page.

P. M. COCKER

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A few lines are required in response to Mr James Wilde's somewhat hysterical correspondence on the subject of 'twitching' (*Brit. Birds* 75: 136).

He asks 'Who wants to know, for heaven's sake, what so-and-so's personal "score" is?' The answer is obviously not Mr Wilde, but, having been on quite a few 'twitches' ourselves, we know that many birdwatchers

do enjoy exchanging details about their personal lists. And why not, for heaven's sake?

Many of these 'twitchers', who are giving 'the name birdwatcher a bad smell', are taking a full part in breeding bird surveys and contributing many hours of their time to the BTO winter atlas project.

We are sure many birdwatchers will always want to see the rare Asian and Nearctic birds which find their ways to these shores. It will be a sad day indeed, when birdwatchers no longer show that entirely natural enthusiasm and wonderment at the extraordinary journeys of these frail creatures. ROY TRAVIS, ALLAN TURNER, ALAN KIMBER and IAN KIMBER
188 Smallshaw Lane, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire

Congratulations on your editorial reply to James Wilde's letter (*Brit. Birds* 75: 136).

I'm sick to death of people who seem to think that they are the only genuine birdwatchers and that everyone else should adhere to their viewpoint. Birdwatching is a hobby, and hobbies don't have to be useful, simply enjoyed, by each person in his own way.

ALASTAIR SCOTT
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These letters are shortened versions of those submitted. The subject is now closed. Eds

Good behaviour by birders From 30th August to 6th September 1982, there was a Little Whimbrel *Numenius minutus* present on farmland at Sker in Mid Glamorgan. Sker farm is immediately adjacent to the Kenfig local nature reserve of which I am warden. My assistant and I, aided by up to 20 committed volunteers, were in almost constant touch with the bird and with up to 1,400 birdwatchers who saw it during its stay.

The bird's presence on private farmland concerned us initially, and the possibility of an invasion of birders was viewed with horror by the farm-tenants. In fact, because of the setting up of an enthusiastic and helpful wardening service, and the fact that the bird could almost always be viewed from a public footpath, the huge number of visitors to the site resulted in no problems for either the birders, the farm-tenants or the bird. The one exception was a certain notorious twitcher, who walked over private land extensively during his visit to Sker on 31st August, in much the same way that he has done throughout Britain at other rare-bird sites.

Thus, the majority of the birdwatchers were patient, courteous and law-abiding. I realise it is unusual to praise people merely for keeping within the generally accepted code of behaviour, but those of us based at Kenfig feel that this letter takes a step towards redressing the balance, as it is normally only the very few unsavoury incidents which receive publicity.

S. J. MOON

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On behalf of the hundreds who travelled to see and enjoy the Little Whimbrel, we take this opportunity to thank Steve Moon, Wilf Nelson and the rest of the 'Kenfig team' for their viewing and wardening arrangements. Everyone will recognise that misbehaving individuals

could well threaten similar arrangements at future rare bird sites. We again urge that a blind eye is never turned to such misdemeanours. We understand that an on-site collection provided a small gift for the farmer, Rhys Evans, and his son Tony (as a token of thanks for their tolerance of the crowds) and a substantial donation to the Kenfig Watch Club, the local RSNCL junior group. EDS

Twitchers and rare breeding birds Reading the recent letters about twitching (*Brit. Birds* 75: 135, 136) and your comments on them, I feel that one important aspect is being overlooked. I have no wish to condemn twitching, especially where the species involved are migrants and vagrants. My particular concern is for the rare breeding species whose specific or general localities are known to and visited by many birdwatchers. In Norfolk and Suffolk, for instance, there is a well-trodden tour, undertaken annually by many birdwatchers in early summer, which covers the sites of a number of rare breeding species. In some cases, these birds are found on well-wardened reserves where visitors are welcome, so there is no problem. But some species have no regular protection. The visiting birdwatchers can cause problems which are bad for birds, make research difficult and create conservation and management difficulties. Those birdwatchers who do not keep to public footpaths, and trample the areas around nests, alienate landowners and disturb the feeding and nesting pattern of the birds which they have come to see. The extent to which this pressure is responsible for the further decline of species whose ranges are already severely restricted is a matter for speculation, but is, in my view, irrelevant: any avoidable disturbance should be condemned. Most birdwatchers would (and do) argue that they are careful and take efforts not to disturb habitat. While the presence of any one person at a breeding site for an hour or so need not result in damage or disturbance, the problem is that they are joined or followed by hosts of others, and this does result in disturbance. There must be a case for proposing that rare breeding birds should not be sought on a regular basis (except at reserves which invite visitors) and certainly not merely to collect an annual tick.

By comparison, the problems caused by sponsored birdwatches are minimal: usually they involve very responsible individuals and are (by definition) of short duration; participants should, however, always avoid territories of rare breeding birds, as an example to other observers.

MIKE JEANES

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We—and also the members of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel—agree wholly with Mike Jeanes's suggestions. EDS

Rare breeding birds We feel that we should enlarge upon the remarks made under Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* in 'Rare breeding birds in the United Kingdom in 1981' (*Brit. Birds* 76: 10).

We would certainly not want anybody to get the impression that the RSPB feels it should *automatically* be consulted about breeding Montagu's Harriers, or indeed any other rare species. Unless we are being asked to provide practical help or advice (we will always do our best to do so), or unless our experience in making suitable arrangements with farmers or

landowners could be of some use, there is really no need to get in touch with us. After all, although we have to run a number of protection schemes each year, it is broadly true that the fewer people who know about rare breeding birds the better.

Your otherwise excellent and, we believe, widely accepted 'Code for rarity finders and twitchers' Editorial last year (*Brit. Birds* 75: 301-303) unfortunately made no mention of rare breeding birds and we are therefore pleased that Mike Jeanes (*Brit. Birds* 76: 356) has raised this important subject. We would, however, go farther, and suggest that birdwatchers should exercise the maximum restraint and self discipline where any breeding species is concerned; with *rare* breeding birds, we hold the view that they should be left alone altogether, except where essential monitoring or survey work is involved, or where adequate wardening and viewing facilities exist.

Intentional disturbance of our very rare breeding birds (those on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981) whilst nest building or at or near a nest containing eggs or young is, of course, illegal except under licence; it is also illegal to disturb their dependent young.

Finally, we urge all birdwatchers to be careful about 'loose talk' and the all too easy temptation to boast or talk about breeding rarities. You never know who is listening.

RICHARD PORTER and MIKE EVERETT
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Tail moult of Forster's Tern The article on Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* (*Brit. Birds* 75: 55-61) was generally thorough and accurate. It managed, however, to imply, incorrectly, that the bird's tail is replaced only once per year, in the late-summer annual moult.

A moment's thought makes it obvious that, if renewed in late summer, the long tail-streamers would hardly be in their most presentable condition by the onset of the next breeding season. Actually, as in the cases of various other terns, the tail of Forster's is involved in both the annual (pre-basic or post-nuptial) and the spring (pre-alternate or pre-nuptial) moults. The winter outermost rectrices are not only much shorter than those of summer, but they are also substantially broader, especially towards their bases.

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Identification of Blyth's Pipit Having travelled over recent years in Nepal, India and Thailand and seen hundreds of pipits that would basically fit the description of Blyth's *Anthus godlewskii* as set out in the note by D. G. H. Mills and N. A. Preston (*Brit. Birds* 75: 381), I—and my companions—have assumed, I think rightly, that the vast majority of such birds are in fact referable to the small, sandy, small-billed local races of Richard's Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae*, often known as 'Paddyfield Pipit'. I am sure that DGHM and NAP would also have considered this possibility, so why are these small races of Richard's not mentioned in their note in comparison with Blyth's?

I hope that a definitive paper on the field identification of Blyth's Pipit is not too far away.

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S. C. Madge has commented as follows: 'As pointed out by WEO, the identification of large pipits in the Far East is far from easy, and greatly hampered by several small races of Richard's Pipits. As he rightly surmises, both authors of the note on the "Identification of Blyth's Pipit" were well aware of this problem, and indeed covered the issue in the first draft of their note. The problem of these small Richard's Pipits is, however, so complex that to give the space to do justice to the subject was beyond the scope of this journal, and the note was edited to suit the practicality of identifying Blyth's Pipit in the West Palearctic. These small races of Richard's are chiefly resident and highly unlikely to turn up in our region; to have included them would perhaps have caused even greater confusion on the large pipit problem, particularly concerning identification of Tawny Pipits *A. campestris*. Birders visiting India and points east get driven to distraction with these birds; no wonder so few really identify 100% *godlewskii* without the aid of nets (or guns!), although "Paddyfield Pipits" are perhaps more easily confused with Tawny Pipits, at least in India.' A paper on the field identification of Blyth's Pipit is in preparation, and we welcome comments on the problem from anyone with experience of the species. EDS

Binocular specification P. J. Grant listed three additional requirements in his favourable 'Product report' on Bushnell Explorer 10×50 binoculars (*Brit. Birds* 75: 574): an adjustable lanyard, a low close focal length and that a carrying case be an optional extra.

I should like to make two other suggestions: (1) a locking device on the 'self-focusing' right eyepiece, and (2) the objectives to be removable (water condenses there after use in heavy rain and may remain for days in cold weather; we can remove lenses from 35 mm cameras and replace them with great accuracy, so why not on a binocular?).

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In memoriam Recently, a chap who is well known to most birders told me he intended to include *British Birds* in his will. He would be embarrassed if I named him. His idea is to bequeath about £1,500 for a trust fund which would ensure adequate annual income in perpetuity to pay for an extra page, in memoriam, once a year. He rather liked the idea of thus being able to greet all his old friends and asking 'What's about . . .?' Perhaps others may like to live on in your pages in the same way?

M. J. ROGERS

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