Lesser Kestrels and La Crau

Back in the 1960s, there were a hundred or so breeding pairs of Lesser Kestrels Falco naumanni along the Mediterranean coastal strip each side of the mouth of the Rhône in southern France. With the rapid changes in agricultural practices that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the abandonment of traditional stock-raising and increasing use of pesticides, numbers crashed to just three pairs in one corner of the stony semi-desert of La Crau. Elsewhere in Europe, there has been a similar decline, estimated to be as much as 95% over the past 30 years. French naturalists and bodies such as the Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO) with its Fonds d’Intervention pour les Rapaces, have been studying and protecting the last few pairs with a certain amount of success. The birds nest in holes in the piles of stones that dot this strange landscape, as well as in the stone buildings used by the shepherds. In addition to protecting these sites, nestboxes have been positioned in strategic spots to assist the existing pairs and to encourage new colonies to form. Thanks to these efforts, the number breeding has gradually risen to around 60 pairs today. The European Union, under its LIFE programme, as well as other local and national funding bodies, has agreed to support further conservation efforts, not just for the Lesser Kestrel, but for the unique habitat and ecosystem that is La Crau. Contributions from the public are also needed, and to this end the LPO has recently launched a special ‘Lesser Kestrel’ fund.

All donations will be acknowledged with information about the species’ current status. It is hoped that the result will be better protection for an area where Pin-tailed Sandgrouse Pterocles alchata still breed and which is one of the most important, if not the most important, in France for breeding and wintering Little Bustards Tetrax tetrax. The address to write to is LPO, Corderie Royale, BP 263, 17305 Rochefort cedex, France.

(Contributed by Ken Hall)

Woodcock and Snipe

In 1979, Wetlands International held the first woodcock Scolopax and snipe Gallinago workshop in Denmark. The success spawned further workshops in Great Britain (1982), France (1986) and Germany (1992). The proceedings of the fifth workshop, held in Poland, have now been published: Fifth European Woodcock and Snipe Workshop: Proceedings of an International Symposium of the Wetlands International Woodcock and Snipe specialist group 3-5 May 1998. For further details, contact Wetlands International, PO Box 7002, 6700 CA Wageningen, The Netherlands; tel 00-31-317-478884; www.wetlands.agro.nl

The Birds of Norfolk

Following the success of the initial publication of the book The Birds of Norfolk last October, a reprint containing some amendments and additional information has now been published by Pica Press. This soft-back version, with a cover price of £25, is available from local bookshops and the Visitor Centres at the reserves of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust and the RSPB at Cley, Holme, Hickling, Minsmere, Ranworth and Titchwell.

The royalties arising from the sales of the first edition totalled £4,100. This sum has been distributed to the RSPB for use on the Berney Marshes Reserve (£1,900), to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust for its ‘Securing the Future Appeal’ (£1,900) and to the How Hill Trust (£300). It is hoped that buoyant sales of the reprint will result in further sums becoming available for conservation projects within Norfolk. For further information, contact Dr Moss Taylor on 01263 823637.

Writing a field guide

Two new field guides have recently appeared on the other side of ‘The Pond’. The Sibley Guide to Birds by David Sibley is a classic birders’ guide, which the experienced birdwatcher can sit and drool over and use to great effect when studying North American birds in minute detail. The second guide – Birds of North America – is a very different animal, and its author, Kenn Kaufman, has written a fascinating article in Bird Watcher’s Digest (22: 14), a North American magazine that is probably little read on this side of the water. He describes how he went through the process of deciding for whom the guide was being written: those who are ready to tackle the identification of Empidonax flycatchers, or the other 99.9%. He then asks questions relating to taxonomic order, common/rare species, subspecies and subtle identification. He concludes that the serious expert birder may label the book as ‘stupid’, but that the other 99.9% will be happy. The theory is good, but we have all seen the 99.9% at bird fairs, reserve shops, etc., buying what they have been told by experienced birders are the ‘best’ books, binoculars, etc.: not necessarily those that will help them the most. We hope that Kenn Kaufman’s book sells to a wide North American audience. With the thought that went into its production, it deserves to.