

An exceptional arrival of thrushes on the east coast of England in October 2012

On 22nd October 2012, an exceptional fall of thrushes and other migrants took place on the east coast of England. The two accounts presented here, one from Blakeney Point, the other from Spurn, give a flavour of the conditions and the numbers of birds involved at two sites where a team of observers attempted to make systematic counts of the arrival. Published accounts of spectacular arrivals such as these are surprisingly hard to find and we were encouraged to put these together by Ian Newton, who commented that, when writing his *New Naturalist* volume on bird migration (Newton 2010), he found very few descriptions of such events in the literature. One notable exception is the famous 1965 fall in East Anglia, described by Peter Davis (Davis 1966).

Blakeney Point, Norfolk

The weather forecast for Monday 22nd October made it clear that this was a day to get out early – we did so and were not disappointed. From 08.00 hrs to dusk, JM, RFP and AMS walked the 6-km length of Blakeney Point from Cley Coastguards at the east end, while the western end was covered by

Paul Nichols and ES. From the outset, thrushes were everywhere: on the beach and the shingle ridge, in the *Suaeda* bushes, on the dunes and in the saltmarsh – and also arriving overhead (plate 80).

Thick fog lay over the Point throughout the day, with visibility rarely more than 300 m, often less. Consequently, the Point would have appeared like an island to the birds arriving, and with no hinterland visible to fly on to they were effectively trapped. We counted as systematically as we could over the 3 km² of the Point and our conservative totals for the day for thrushes were: 25,000 Redwings *Turdus iliacus*, 4,000 Fieldfares *T. pilaris*, 3,000 Song Thrushes *T. philomelos*, 3,000 Blackbirds *T. merula* and 30 Ring Ouzels *T. torquatus*. In terms of other species, we estimated 400 Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla*, 280 Robins *Erithacus rubecula*, 80 Goldcrests *Regulus regulus*, 25 Common Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* and five Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros*, together with both Long-eared *Asio otus* and Short-eared Owls *A. flammeus* and other migrants in smaller numbers.

Many of the thrushes were actively



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80. Thrushes on Blakeney Point, 22nd October 2012. The Lifeboat House is just visible to the right of the picture.

foraging, apparently searching for invertebrates in the plants on the shingle or around the base of the *Suaeda* bushes. On the few grassy stretches they were pulling up the carpets of lichens, and Blackbirds especially had demolished a stand of mushrooms in search of any insect larvae. While the numbers of birds seemed to remain pretty similar throughout the day, there was some local variation, with more Redwings at the eastern end and more Fieldfares on the western 'points'. As the afternoon progressed there was a noticeable arrival of Robins and Chiffchaffs; on the return (eastward) journey at dusk, Robins were actively feeding along the tideline and inner edge of the beach.

On the following day, 23rd October, visibility was even worse but Redwing numbers had dropped to around 10,000, Fieldfares and Blackbirds to 1,000, Song Thrushes to 500 and Ring Ouzels to 20. By 24th, in somewhat improved conditions, only 4,000 Redwings, 500 Fieldfares, 400 Blackbirds and 350 Song Thrushes remained. Even though conditions did not greatly improve until 24th, it was clear from the decline in numbers over the three days that a majority of birds had drained away from the Point during the night following the main arrival.

The weather maps for the period (see fig.

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Spurn, Yorkshire

At Spurn, the weather forecast for 21st and 22nd October looked promising and local observers were eagerly anticipating a large arrival of birds from Scandinavia. On 21st, however, the expected weather was delayed; it was the afternoon before the wind turned into the northeast and the only new arrival was a Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*. Counts of winter thrushes, Robins and Goldcrests were only in single or low double figures.

With pressure high over southern Scandinavia, drizzle and fog were forecast overnight on 21st. Such conditions often mean that

1) help to explain this exceptional fall. A high-pressure area became established over central Scandinavia on 21st, turning the wind easterly across the southern North Sea during the day. At the same time, a warm front associated with an area of low pressure over France began its approach from the south. During the morning of 22nd this front moved north across the southern North Sea bringing low cloud, light drizzle and thick fog to coastal areas from Kent to Yorkshire, accompanied by a light easterly wind.

Such conditions are exceptional but are noted for their ability to ground large numbers of migrants in poor visibility. Near-identical conditions prevailed on 16th October 1988 and 18th October 1990, when similarly large falls of thrushes and other migrants occurred. On both these previous occasions it was difficult to make accurate assessments of the numbers of birds but, as in this arrival, many thousands were involved (Stoddart & Joyner 2005).

References

- Davis, P. 1966. The great immigration of early September 1965. *Brit. Birds* 59: 353–376.
 Newton, I. 2010. *Bird Migration*. Collins, London.
 Stoddart, A., & Joyner, S. 2005. *The Birds of Blakeney Point*. Wren Publishing, Sheringham.

birds arriving at Spurn fly 'straight over the top' and continue inland. Nonetheless, anticipation was high that night and on the morning of 22nd everyone was up early. I stood on the doorstep at Kew before it got light and could hear Redwings, Fieldfares and Bramblings calling as they dropped into the trees around Kew and the Crown & Anchor car park. As the light started to increase, the radios began to crackle with news of large flocks of Bramblings coming in off the sea and continuing across the Humber, northwest towards Kilnsea or south along the Spurn peninsula. But quickly thick fog rolled in, making it difficult following the flocks.

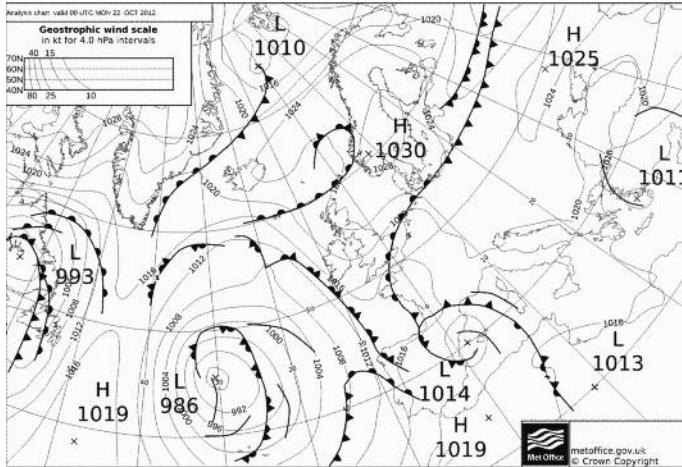


Fig. 1. Surface pressure chart for northwest Europe at 00.00 hrs, 22nd October 2012. Note the light easterly winds across the southern North Sea and the warm front lying across East Anglia. That front moved north during the day on 22nd, bringing low cloud, light drizzle and thick fog to coastal areas.

Observers were well spread (see map at www.spurnbirdobservatory.co.uk/map/): Lance Degnan just north of the Crown, Paul Collins ringing at Kew, Ian Whitehouse and Pete Wragg in the Triangle (the triangle of land between the reserve gate, the Blue Bell and the Crown & Anchor), Andy Hanby north of the Warren (the observatory), Adam Hutt, Jack Ashton-Booth, Timmy

Jones and Steve Exley at the Warren, Rob Hopson and Andy Bunting between the Narrows and Chalk Bank, RT at the Lighthouse and Barry Spence and AR at the Point. Initially we were counting large flocks moving through but soon fogbound birds began to land and stay put. The main species involved in the first few hours were typically the strong flyers: Woodcocks *Scolopax rusticola*, thrushes and Bramblings (plate 81). Fortunately (!), no rare birds were found early on, which meant that all

observers could concentrate on counting and recording.

The fog never lifted and by late morning the arrivals of thrushes and Bramblings had almost ceased. However, smaller birds continued to arrive – Robins, Black Redstarts, Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla*, Chiffchaffs and Goldcrests all became much more obvious. Driving down the peninsula at dawn, RT saw



Ian Smith

81. Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla* in fog at Spurn, 22nd October 2012.

only a handful of tired Robins along the road. Driving back about three hours later, RT counted over 100 Robins along the roadside! Robins and Goldcrests in particular were concentrated along the coastline itself. In this area, they created a moving 'magic carpet' of tired migrants, which had obviously made landfall immediately after clearing the waves breaking on the beach.

As birders moved inland during the day, the number of small migrants, at sites such as Sammy's Point, was much lower, although the strong fliers such as thrushes and Bramblings reached these areas in large numbers. One of the most memorable sights of the day was a flock of around 600 Bramblings feeding on the top of the Humber beach south of the Warren. During the afternoon, as different and more inland areas were covered, a few scarce migrants were found – single Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*, Siberian Chiffchaff *P. collybita tristis*, Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* and two Hawfinches.

The daily log that night was fascinating and took more than an hour to complete. Since we were not able to see where flocks were going because of the fog, we were cautious not to duplicate counts and not to over-estimate. Our conservative totals of migrants for Spurn that day, including the area up to Easington, were as follows: 32 Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus*, 23 Woodcocks, 12 Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, 32 Skylarks *Alauda arvensis*, 785 Goldcrests, 35 Chiffchaffs, four Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus*, 15 Blackcaps, one Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, 57 Ring Ouzels, 1,270 Blackbirds, 10,100 Fieldfares, 885 Song Thrushes, 21,070 Redwings, 11 Mistle Thrushes, 1,100 Robins, two Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula hypoleuca*, 20 Black Redstarts, one Common Redstart *Phoenicurus*

phoenicurus, one Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, eight European Stonechats *S. rubicola*, two Northern Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe*, one Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, 2,675 Bramblings and a Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*. A grand total of over 38,000 birds.

An interesting footnote to the story is that for most of autumn 2012 there had been a team of scientists from the Central Science Laboratory in York with a mobile radar based at Spurn (on the coast, ESE of Kilnsea, by the borrow pit). The recordings from 04.00 hrs on 22nd October show large dots approaching from the east. Each dot represents a flock of birds, containing on average perhaps 100–200 individuals. The flocks can be seen heading towards the coast, from Easington south to the Warren and from Chalk Bank south to the Point. Many of these flocks continued straight across the Humber without stopping, but also there was a typical passage as birds followed the land northwest past the Crown & Anchor or followed the peninsula south after crossing the coast at Chalk Bank. Then, at around 06.00 hrs, before we were even counting any birds, there was a sudden change in the birds' behaviour. About 3–4 km offshore, the flocks turned abruptly south and continued south, without making landfall at Spurn. This presumably corresponds to them meeting a large fog bank, which forced them to turn south. A small proportion of the birds continued in a westerly direction and these were obviously the ones that we recorded that morning. Were these birds higher than the others and thus above the fog?

We can only imagine how many birds we might have recorded at Spurn had there been no fog and just drizzle. Nonetheless, 22nd October 2012 must go down as one of the great days at Spurn.

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