

BIRD HOLIDAYS

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2009 NEW YEAR NEWSLETTER

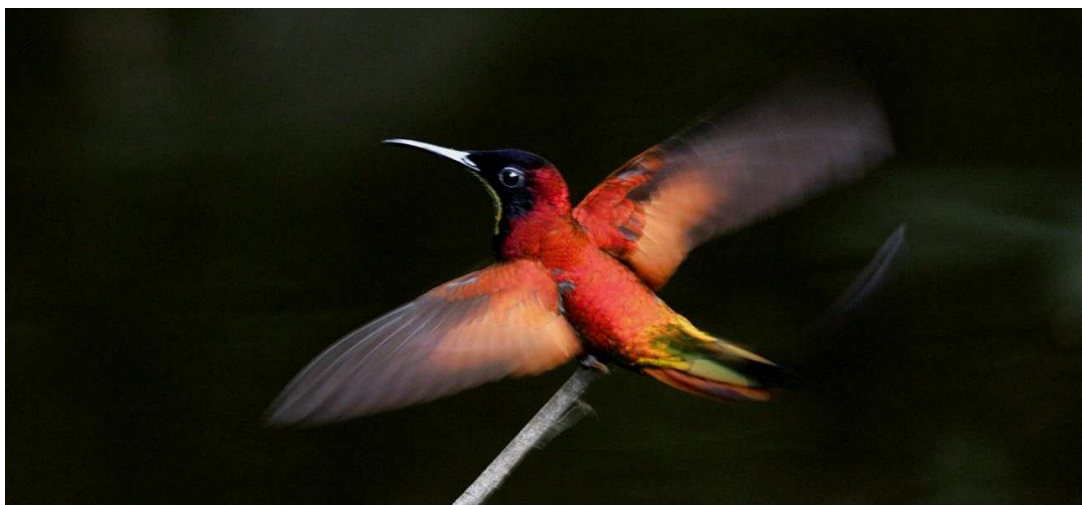
Dear Folks

2008 was an excellent year for Bird Holidays with some great trips and superb sightings. 2009 is promising to be just as good. In this newsletter, we launch a new appeal to equip local guides with optics and books. John McLoughlin tells you about joining our company and Diane Barnes has a section about 'Leaders' Wives'. Highlights from 2008 are mentioned and we also look ahead to some new trips. As always, there are masses of new photographs on our website. www.birdholidays.co.uk.

In the current economic situation, it is important to remind you that your money is protected by our ATOL licence. This is not a time to risk losing your money with people that are operating outside of a legal framework.

We look forward to seeing you on a future trip,

Paul, Andy, Roger, Phil and John



The Crimson Topaz Hummingbird was a star on our Guyana Recce (Phil Palmer)

Do you have any Old Binoculars and Field Guides?

Bishnu, our local guide at Gaida Camp in Nepal, wrote to us to say that his binoculars were broken and could we help. Last February, we took him a pair of good quality binoculars paid for by Bird Holidays.

Over the years we and our clients have helped several local guides in developing countries by passing on spare optics. Occasionally we have even clubbed together and bought some of our regular guides a better pair of binoculars.

In The Gambia, Lynn and Trevor Andrew kindly donated a pair of binoculars to an apprentice working with our local guide. Bob and Beryl Jackson magnanimously gave an excellent pair of binoculars away in The Gambia, too, whilst David and Annifer Lee did a similar thing on our Morocco trip. Geoff and Kay Preston gave binoculars to a local guide in Kerala.

We know of lots of deserving cases in the developing world where a second-hand pair of binoculars would really help.

So you know what is coming next...

If you can donate any spare binoculars, we can take them out on trips to give to deserving causes. We would also take a photograph of the happy recipient with his gift and send it to you and/or post it on our website. Even the most battered pair of binoculars would be a big improvement given what we have seen some would-be guides using!

Old field guides are also useful either for local guides or local schools etc. Anything donated will not disappear in to some black hole (or re-appear on e-bay!) but we will tell you exactly what we have done with it, usually accompanied by a photo. If you can get these things to us we can get them out to needy cases.

Birding in an Economic Crisis

2008 saw petrol prices soar and the economies of whole countries collapse. The doom and gloom merchants have been at work all winter, but the prospect of a Bird Holidays tour seems to be keeping your spirits high as bookings were up in the period prior to Christmas. In fact, we could have filled some tours three times over!

We are aware that many tours have been cancelled by other companies. In fact, just today, one gentleman who had never been with us before told us he had been let down five times recently! It appears that Bird Holidays are bucking the trend. Let us reassure you by saying that in 2008, we had to disappoint just one customer booked on a trip that did not run.

By taking advantage of our early booking discount, you have enabled us to obtain the most appropriate flights and accommodation. Early booking is very important as it keeps the cost of flights down and ensures we get the flights and hotels we want.

Towards the end of 2008, both the US Dollar and the Euro strengthened against the Pound. This had profound effects for us. For example, it meant we ran our Argentina trip but we did not make any profit.

Many companies are already levying surcharges. **We will maintain our current brochure prices but we will be reviewing the situation on 1st April. Bird Holidays is proud of its record of *never* having made surcharges to clients and we are reluctant to do so now!**

Early Booking Discount

On the plus side, lower fuel prices have meant that some flights are cheaper than they might have been. As such we are extending the discounted prices for Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Camargue and Pyrenees until the end of 10th March.

Failing this, we can book a shuttle flight to connect with the tour.

Insurance

Recent legislation has meant that travel agents and tour operators are no longer able to sell

travel insurance unless they have a qualification from the FSA. At present, we ask that you do not send money for insurance with the booking form. However we can direct you to a reputable company if you need insurance. If you have *already* purchased insurance with us, you need do nothing as you are fully covered.

Photographs of 2008

In 2008, our website began to bulge with pictures taken on your trips. This helps us to cut down the cost of brochures and newsletters as colour reproduction is not cheap.

It is worth checking our news page regularly to see what is happening at Bird Holidays! This year, we have put up photo-essays from Guyana, Poland, Spitsbergen, the North Pole, Argentina, Siberia, Brazil, etc. Trip members have been busy too with photo pages from Malawi, Zambia, Oman, Spain, Gambia, Florida and others.

When comparing our tours with those of our competitors, it is worth checking the credits on photographs. On other websites many are simply bought from agencies. The beauty of our website is that the pictures are taken by customers or leaders, on the tour itself or during a recce.



Grey Potoo calling to the moon, Argentina. (P. Palmer)

Please take a look at our website if you have not done so recently. www.birdholidays.co.uk. If you want to send us some pictures or even write an article, we would be glad to hear from you. Why not make our website your homepage? You can then see new photographs as they are posted.

RSPB Tours

We ran more tailor-made private tours than ever in 2008. These were for small parties of friends and several RSPB groups including York, Doncaster and Leeds. One of these was a tour to Poland, a place we had not visited for some years. We logged all the avian specialities that you would expect, as well as mammals, such as Wild Boar and Raccoon Dog.

In 2009 we will be taking Doncaster RSPB to Bulgaria and Leeds RSPB to Hungary. York RSPB are already planning their 2010 trip to Greece with us.

Other 2008 highlights

There are special moments from each tour such as feeding worms to three species of antpitta in Ecuador or getting repeated views of Pel's Fishing Owls in Malawi! In Argentina, Phil located our brochure cover bird; the Diademed Sandpiper-plover. Yet again, they had bred successfully and it was tending a chick.

An incredibly close Wallcreeper stole the show on our inaugural tour to **Transylvania** in 2008. There had been a massive crop of beech mast and the bears chose to stay deep in the forest. That said, everyone still managed to see one. As the year progressed, the bears proved more reliable and we are hoping for a good show in 2009.

We enjoyed a male Pallid Harrier in **Transylvania** and another in **Bulgaria**. This scarce species is now so regular on these Bird Holidays tours that perhaps it should not be a write-in again?

We found bats in Dracula's castle grounds roosting inside a woodpecker hole. Our guides enjoyed a very productive year preparing for our first **Bat Tour** in 2009 with at least 17 species found on one night! There are still a few places on this trip if you want something really different.

2008 was the first time we had run a trip to the **Czech Republic**. Andy was confident things would go down well having done a thorough recce in 2007. It actually exceeded expectations and with local knowledge the group was able to catch up with several rarities. However, the great joy of the Czech Republic is seeing and hearing birds once common in the UK. Corncrake, Woodcock,

Turtle Dove, Cuckoo, Wryneck, Skylark, Whinchat, Red-backed Shrike, Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting are all still common here.

Superb accommodation in a prime location meant we had birds such as Black Stork, Black Woodpecker, Nightingale, Savi's Warbler, Ruddy Shelduck and Garganey as 'garden' birds. Pre-breakfast local walks turned up Red-footed Falcon, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Grouse, Icterine Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Collared Flycatcher and Great Reed Warbler. Scarce birds included great views of Bluethroat, Saker Falcon, Barred Warbler and River Warbler.

The tour targeted migrants so the timing was late for owls and woodpeckers but we still managed nine woodpecker species. This included great views of Syrian, Middle Spotted and Three-toed Woodpecker and several very close Wrynecks. We saw four species of owl including extremely close Pygmy Owl and a Tengmalm's Owl at the nest.

We visited some amazing places to birdwatch such as the palace grounds at Lednice and Valtice and the superb medieval towns of Ceske Krumlov and Telc.

One hotel is converted from a Lichtenstein family hunting lodge. The old Austrian border runs through the middle of the hotel (marked by a line on the floor!). Our hotel in Trebon, is in the medieval square near the Golden Canal and several of the famous fishponds. The countryside is unspoilt and very attractive, but many of the towns are also beautiful. The local beers are legendary and the local wines are very good too. We visited a wine cellar for our evening meal one night and had a wine tasting session. Something we are definitely planning to repeat this year.

As you can see this is an unashamed plug for this year's trip as Andy is keen to return. We are extending the discounted deadline until the 10th March.

New Tours

In 2008, many of you enjoyed a fabulous programme on the BBC about **Guyana**. This amazing country retains almost all of its rainforest intact! The government is keen to conserve it, by encouraging eco tourism. Phil spent a month there last year and is keen to help. He met the Prime Minister and UK Ambassador as well as finding some amazing birds. These included Harpy Eagle and the endemic Guyana Cock-of-the-Rock, as well as Giant Otters and Giant Anteaters. We will lead our first tour there in 2010. Judging by the interest we got from the Rutland Bird Fair, there will be no shortage of clients. You can see his pictures on www.birdholidays.co.uk by going to our news page.



Guyana Cock-of-the-Rock. (Phil Palmer)

Andy is doing a recce to **Bhutan** to run a trip there in April 2010. It will combine birding with cultural sites. Our regular customers will have already heard him droning on about it, and that's before he has been! Paul has just come back from a recce to **Madagascar** and is planning a trip there for autumn 2010. Watch this space....

Leader's Wives by Diane Barnes

Roger took a group to **Taiwan** for the first time in 2008. The trip was full and his wife, Diane writes about her time there...

Being the wife of a Bird Holidays' leader has advantages. You have to cope without your man for long periods of time but you also get the opportunity to accompany them on recces and trips.

I have enjoyed many such adventures with Roger but none more enjoyable than the recent trip to Taiwan, which knocked Kerala, my previous favourite, into second place. Roger had told me of the marvelous birds and scenery, and the Taiwanese people must be one of the friendliest around. We were welcomed with beaming faces and open arms and encouraged to visit their splendid temples. We were ushered to the front to get better views and the best photographs.

Away from the coastal plains, the landscape was gorgeous with every bend in the road suddenly revealing a scene reminiscent of Japanese water colours, complete with natural bonsais. Glistening lakes and mist shrouded mountains; I am beginning to sound like a tourist office DVD but it WAS that beautiful. We were treated to very close views of some wonderful birds. I won't forget swooping Formosan Magpies, secretive Swinhoe's Pheasants, or the resplendent Mikado Pheasants so close to the bus.

Thus, Taiwan produced cultural interest, gorgeous scenery and an amazing bird list.

Our guide Simon was as determined as a Jack Russell to make sure we had the best time possible, with an accent that made his pronunciations hysterical at times; what a guy.

As a wife of a leader, a bird trip is not always a 'holiday' as you can't see much of your man when he is working... however, Taiwan was a holiday for me. I came home enthused, revitalised and sodden with images and experiences.

Hot News

Roger has only just got back from Kerala as we write this newsletter and he says it was especially good this time. The birds included Indian Pitta, Black-and-orange Flycatcher, Legge's Hawk-eagle, Black Baza, five species of cuckoo and eight species of owls and nightjars. Nineteen species of mammals seen included Asian Wild Dog and three families of otters. We are already taking bookings for 2010 for this trip.

Johnny Mac has led occasional trips for Bird Holidays in the past and is now coming to work for us (part-time initially). Until recently he had been working for In Focus, so is something of an expert on optics. He has just completed a ten year stint on the *British Birds* Rarities Committee so feel free to test him on any challenging identification problems with the exception of gulls!

John has a strong background in bird conservation and is currently engaged in projects relating to the development of renewable energy. He currently monitors Black Grouse numbers in these areas so feel free to contact him about his private Black Grouse Safaris.

He is looking forward to acquainting himself with clients both old and new.



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