

BIRD HOLIDAYS

w o r l d . w i d e

WINTER 2012
NEWS

Hi Folks!

We trust that you all had a pleasant Christmas and New Year, and are now looking forward to an exciting year of birding and wildlife watching.

Last year we passed the milestone of 20 years of tour leading. We celebrated it with a double stand and new display at the Bird Fair. It was lovely to see so many familiar faces and our stand was packed from start to finish (but mostly when the free bar opened!)

We are thrilled to report that 2011 was our best year ever. Almost every tour ran full or nearly so. Best of all, we did not have to disappoint one single customer due to a 2011 trip being cancelled! All this, during some of the most challenging economic times for a generation.

Far from resting on our laurels, we have plans for new and exciting trips to Manitoba, South India, Tanzania and others. We are constantly striving to give you the best possible holiday experience; our aim is for high customer satisfaction leading to repeat business. Although some of our 2012 trips are full already, there is still plenty of availability to tempt you.

We look forward to seeing you soon....

Paul, Andy, Roger, Phil and John

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A good view of Paul's best side at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland last August



Early Booking Discount

There is still some availability on trips in the first half of the year. We have three places on our trip to China's Shaanxi Province to see the iconic Giant Panda in the wild as well as visiting Xi'an to see the Terracotta Warriors.

There are several places left on our popular Lake Kerkini, Northern Greece trip in early May. The Camargue and Corsica trip still has three places available. There are also two places on our Estonia trip in May.

We have extended the discount date for all these trips to 16th February 2012. Book before then to save hundreds of pounds.

Hungary in the Autumn

Due to a new route offered by airline Jet2, our ever popular Hungary trip can now be joined from Leeds/Bradford Airport. This is in addition to both Manchester and Heathrow departures. See page 48 of our brochure, or contact us for details.



Common Cranes in the Hortobagy (Phil Palmer)

Bird Fairs

The 2011 Rutland Birdwatching Fair was a great experience for us. It was a fun weekend, meeting old friends and making new ones. It goes without saying that we'll be back for 2012. Make a note in your diaries – **17th, 18th and 19th August 2012.**

In addition, we will also be at the Scottish Birdfair. We look forward to being part of this exciting new event, to be held in the spectacular setting of Hopetown House near Edinburgh on the weekend of **19th and 20th May 2012.**



Paul's son, Thomas, draws the winner of the prize draw on Thursday afternoon

Birdfair Prize Draw Winners

We ran a competition at the Rutland Birdfair last year, asking people to choose their favourite brochure cover from the last 12 years (all displayed on our stand). A name was pulled out of the hat each afternoon, and the winners got a signed Ivory Gull canvas print by Phil.

They were Donald Martin from Billingham, M Hall from Northumberland and Peter Cunningham from Beverley.

For the record, the favourite brochure cover, with 17% of the vote, was the 2012 Ivory Gulls. Here is how the voting went:-

2001 Tufted Puffin	8%
2002 Fairy Tern	3%
2003 Great Bustard	8%
2004 Canyon Wren	5%
2005 Shoebill	15%
2006 Jaguar	5%
2007 Black-bellied Sandgrouse	4%
2008 King Penguin	7%
2009 Diademed Sandpiper-plover	5%
2010 Crimson-breasted Gonolek	11%
2011 Little Green Bee-eater	12%
2012 Ivory Gull	17%



Donald Martin receives his Ivory Gull print from Phil (left) and Paul (right)

Look out for our new trips

The development of new tours is a vital part of our business, and one which is great fun at the same time. There is the anticipation of a new destination; the planning of a recce, scrutinizing maps, pouring over online trip reports, and then the recce itself... Will the destination live up to expectations? Of course, most destinations exceed expectation and we cannot wait to return with clients.

As we write, Roger is in southern India researching a new tour for January/February 2013. Using flights to Bangalore he is planning to visit Kabini River Lodge; Kokkare Bellur 'pelican' village; the famous palace town of Mysore; Ooty (Ootacamund); Mudamalai; Chinnar and other hill stations and wildlife reserves at the meeting point of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. His aim is to set up an exciting new south India trip. It will cover some fabulous areas in close proximity to each other with good accommodation in and around this globally important Biodiversity Zone. The birds, mammals, butterflies and forests of this region are wonderful.

A few years ago Andy went to Tanzania on holiday with his wife, Hilary. He plans to return again this summer, this time to do a comprehensive recce with the hope of setting up a new tour in 2013. Highlights should include the classic big game in the Ngorogoro Crater and the Serengeti, as well as a huge bird list. He also plans to fit in a visit to Croatia if he has time!

John has his eye on Georgia, where Caucasian specialities such as Caucasian Black Grouse, Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt's Redstart can be seen amid some fantastic scenery. He also plans to revisit Thailand, a country that he first visited on an expedition to establish the status of the critically endangered Gurney's Pitta.

Paul hopes to design a new Ecuador itinerary, focusing on the birds of the eastern Andean slope and Amazon.

Finally, Phil is still researching Papua New Guinea. Sometime soon he will put together an itinerary which will combine some of the most exotic and unusual birds on the planet with top class lodges.

Highlights of 2011

Picking out highlights is almost as tricky as answering what is your favourite bird or country. However we have all tried to think of a few things that spring to mind when we look back at 2011.

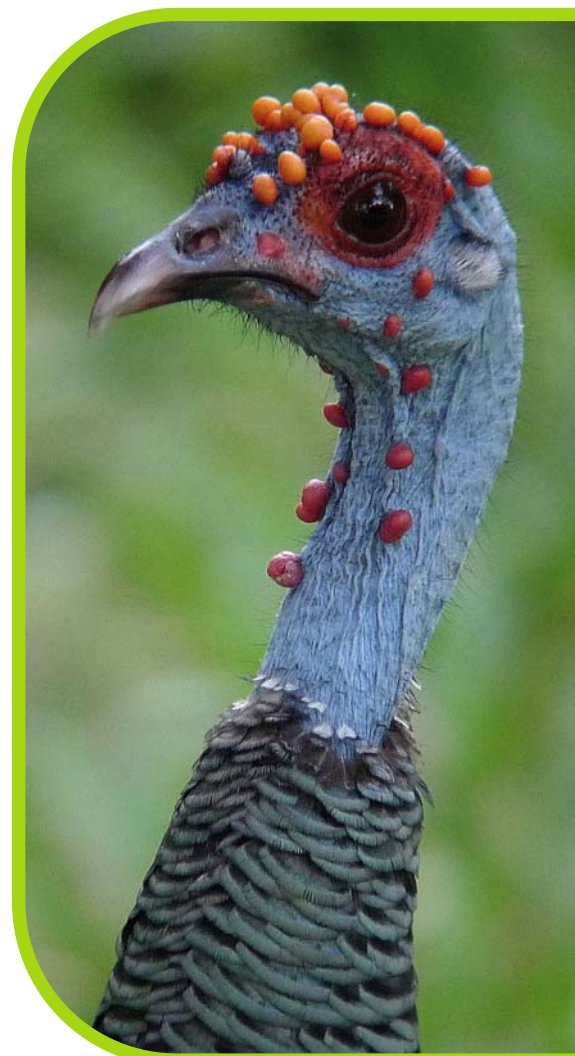
For the first time, **Paul** took his family on a recce in 2011. Belize was the destination; a mind-blowing experience for all. From the comfort of some of the best lodges in the world, he saw masses of birds and some good mammals too. Hidden Valley Falls was perhaps the best experience, with a pair of rare Orange-breasted Falcons flying around and five or six adult King Vultures giving great views.



Stork-billed Kingfisher, India (Paul Willoughby)



Sword-billed Hummingbird, Ecuador (Phil Palmer)



Ocellated Turkey is one of the more bizarre sights on a trip to Belize. (Paul Willoughby)

Highlights of 2011 cont'd

SW Turkey is always nice, and this year we had lovely weather and some special birds. We chose a perfect day to go into the mountains for Red-fronted Serins and White-throated Robins, while at Bafa Golu we dropped onto Black-winged Pratincole, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope. Magic!

Paul has been to the Camargue more times than he can remember, but he still

enjoys every visit. This time we combined it with Corsica, and saw a great list of birds. Eagle Owl, Egyptian Vulture, Little Bustard, Citril Finch and the wetlands of the Camargue were special, whilst on Corsica we saw the endemic nuthatch very well.

Our first trip to Madeira could not have been better, with Zino's Petrels, Desertas Petrels, Madeiran Storm-petrels, Bulwer's Petrels and Barolo's Shearwaters all seen well. It was a lovely relaxed week, and we even saw the Western Palearctic's second ever Yellow-crowned Night-heron which has taken up residence in Funchal Harbour.

Another rarity was to be one of the highlights of our Tarifa trip for Bradford RSPB Members' Group. We found a Royal Tern, from West Africa, on the beach at Tarifa, but nothing could surpass the vast numbers of migrating raptors that we saw crossing the straits. It truly is one of the great bird spectacles of Europe. SE Brazil came up trumps with the critically endangered Brazilian Merganser leading a cast of rare and beautiful birds, including Black-and-Gold Cotinga, Shrike-like Cotinga, Bare-throated Bellbird, Cinnamon-vented Piha and Hooded Berryeater. Surpassing these was a pair of Swallow-tailed Cotingas building a nest from lichen at Caraca.

Paul's last trip was to Goa, one of his favourite destinations. A Savanna Nightjar and Tytler's Leaf Warbler were new, but lasting memories are of the more colourful Indian birds, Indian Pitta, Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher and Orange-headed Ground Thrush.

Butterflies too, were very spectacular. A new field guide enabled us to identify almost 40 species, including the spectacular Southern Birdwing, Malabar Tree Nymph and Malabar Banded Peacock.



Malabar Banded Peacock, Maem Lake, Goa (Paul Willoughby)

John's tours took him far and wide. His fourth tour to the Yucatan included his first ever visit to the amazing archaeological site at Calakmul. Here the group saw forty or more rather glamorous Ocellated Turkeys and a Mexican Antthrush attended an army ant swarm. However the sheer sight and sound, as well as the smell, of 10,000 American Flamingos at Celestun was exhilarating to say the least!!

A recce to Chile produced his first Diademed Sandpiper-plovers amid superb scenery. Then it was down to Patagonia for hors d'oeuvres of Magellanic Plover, Magellanic Woodpecker and King Penguins - in a word, 'awesome'.

Morocco was full of surprises with both Bar-tailed Desert and Hoopoe Larks found on the coast near Agadir. Inland he saw

the aptly named Thick-billed Lark on the Tagdilt Plain where on one amazing evening he counted at least 100 Cream-coloured Coursers.

Estonia 'part one' included a flock of 300 Steller's Eiders, a species that is getting more difficult to see. A White-tailed Eagle drowning a Long-tailed Duck was like watching something out of a wildlife documentary.

Estonia 'part two' produced more Steller's Eiders .. a smaller party of four birds. In the nearby forests some confiding Nutcrackers provided the highlight.

In Greece all went to plan apart from a lone Wolf which gate crashed the evening Eagle Owl session. Then in Mongolia more Wolves ... this time two speeding across the steppe on one amazing journey where

we also saw a McQueen's Bustard as well as witnessing a Nadam festival. A pair of performing Mongolian Ground Jays was an excellent discovery in the Gobi. But for John perhaps the overall highlight of a truly amazing year was finding a pair of elegant Siberian Cranes on an isolated marsh in north-east Mongolia.



Barnacle Geese at Matsalu Bay, Estonia (Phil Palmer)

2011 held lots of great experiences for **Phil**. Seeing Giant Pandas and over 1,000 Siberian Cranes in China stand out among them, while a group of eight Spoon-billed Sandpipers there was a BIG deal for our customers!

A Jungle Cat and Indian Rhinos were the best mammalian highlights in Nepal as both were new for Phil, but watching the local guides in the spiny forest at Ifaty, Madagascar was incredible. Local boys have turned from hunting to bird-guiding and seem to have some hypnotic power over otherwise skulking birds. Seeing a Running Coua calmly stand on a track waiting for the boys to 'give it permission' to continue was unbelievable as the group had only seen moving shadows prior to this. The bird seemed to know that if it showed off for them, they would be happy and it could resume a shadow-loving existence once it had been seen.

Argentina was enjoyable for other reasons. There was a strike while we were there and internal flights were a 'challenge'. (That's tour-leader speak for 'cancelled!'). Phil calmly rearranged things in situ so that the itinerary remained unaffected. It is satisfying to read the comments from clients that say how grateful they were for the way it was handled. In this case experience was invaluable. Phil described how he had enjoyed the challenge of making a plan and seeing it all fall into place.

The joy on customer's faces as they saw swifts dive into the mighty Iguazu falls was as good as seeing the birds. Phil later took a small group to Patagonia where Paul's father saw his first really big glacier. Seeing him grinning all the way home after seeing 'solid water' as well as some smart birds, makes tour leading really worthwhile.

In Manitoba, Phil managed to find accessible places to see bears, beavers and bison. Combining this with the most gaudy of American wood warblers singing in the magical northern forests and dancing grouse made this one of his favourite places in North America.

Heading north to Churchill, the ice on the river was flowing into Hudson Bay. Thousands of geese, waders and cranes all pausing on their way north were the backing cast to displaying Pacific Divers and Bald Eagles. Feeding stations allowed amazing views of Pine Grosbeaks and a whole swathe of American sparrows, so that spring here was the perfect time for birding. Phil cannot wait to get back in 2013.

In a whole year of bird tour leading there are many highlights, but here is an extract from **Roger's** personal diary of one day in the Pantanal on the 2011 tour. The only censoring was to change a word to 'blooming'.



Many-coloured Rush-tyrant, Argentina (Phil Palmer)



Golden-winged Warbler, Manitoba Canada (Phil Palmer)



Monday
29th
August 2011

This extraordinary heatwave is continuing, so we made an early start to the woodland by the Rio Pixaim. It was worthwhile as it provided one of those mornings when you see special bird after special bird: Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Red-billed Scythebill, Mato Grosso Antbird, Planalto Slaty Antshrike, Buff-bellied Hermit, White-lored Spinetail etc. By 10am it was heating up and we returned to sit in the shade and watch the busy feeders, hoping the forecast of cooler weather to come would eventually prove accurate. In the afternoon we went to see a huge Great Potoo at its daytime roost – fabulous view. Our early dinner was another friendly affair - this is a nice group. Mammals can be blooming elusive in S America, and there aren't that many anyway.....so our night drive was truly exceptional with Brockett Deer, Crab-eating Foxes, Ocelot, Giant Anteater and Tapir, plus nightjars and perfect close views of Grey Potoo. Perhaps as a side-effect of the hot dry weather the animals were drawn to the roadside pools but, whatever the cause, the Pantanal gave up a lot of her secrets on this wonderful day. Note to self - this is what it's all about.

Highlights of 2011 cont'd

Andy had a very busy year for Bird Holidays, and here is his year told in his own words. "In January 2011 I went on a recce to Ethiopia and it quickly got converted into a holiday for the 2012 brochure. I loved the country, the people and of course the wildlife. We had several sightings of the Ethiopian Wolf and many endemic birds. The accommodation was far better than I had imagined and the wildlife was terrific. I can't wait to get back later this month and look forward to running it again in 2013.

Panama continues to be very popular. It ran full last year and is running full with ten people again this year. (We already have some provisional bookings for 2013.) Some of the highlights for me were watching the Swallow-tailed Kites at close range at Altos de Maria and seeing displaying Three-wattled Bellbirds at Los Quetzales.

Bhutan has become one of my favourite countries and I know I am exceedingly lucky to be visiting for the fourth time this April. The 2011 trip gave us some tremendous memories. We had great views of the White-bellied Heron in the Po Chhu valley whilst the views of Himalayan Monal and Satyr Tragopan were incredible! We were so well looked after with a back up team of drivers, caterers, cultural guide and bird guide there were almost as many support staff as customers. Hot breakfasts and lunches were often taken al fresco amid dramatic scenery but with tables, chairs, cutlery, napkins etc!

I am running out of space to write about the Czech Republic (which is another favourite that we will be returning to in 2013), Extremadura and the Gredos (which gave amazing views of Bluethroats), Trinidad and Tobago (always tremendous boat trips and particularly good for lekking manakins in 2011) and Malawi and South Luangwa (three Leopards on top of an amazing bird list!)."



Sunbittern, Pantanal, Brazil (Phil Palmer)



Black-breasted Puffbird, Pipeline Road, Panama (Paul Willoughby)

MEET THE TEAM

Phil, how did you start birding?

I do not recall a time when I didn't enjoy birds and wildlife. I went through the catching stickleback stage to rescuing young rooks that local farmers would shoot from their nests each spring. They regarded them as pests in those days and so did my mother, who would have a fit when she opened my wardrobe to find half-a- dozen gaping mouths all caw-ing loudly!

I would slink off to the local marsh at every opportunity and a lack of binoculars meant that my early naked eye birding

We gave Phil a few questions in this regular feature on our leaders.

was very much biased towards flight views, jizz and creeping up on them to see all of their features.

When did you start tour leading?

I had led Wildlife Trust walks for school children around local nature reserves before meeting Paul in 1999 and tour-leading from there. My 'interview' was in Texas where I found wild Muscovy Ducks that were a tick for Paul. Something he would rather we kept quiet?

What are your other interests?

I have enjoyed a long involvement with my local Wildlife Trust and volunteering

with the RSPB Bridlington Pelagics. I have always got a big kick out of photography, music, drawing, old historical buildings, geology and chocolate; but not in that order!

Favourite non-bird critter

Weasels, polecats and stoats are just so sharp-eyed and playful that they really appeal to me. For intelligence, the Orca takes some beating, while the Marbled Rubber Frog and Jameson's Red Rock Rabbit have brilliant names.

Favourite birds

Pennant-winged Nightjar, Hooded Grebe and Shoebill. I thoroughly enjoy watching

bird behaviour, so a Galapagos Woodpecker-finch using a tool is equally incredible. Actually there are no bad birds, but I don't get such a big kick out of seeing the duller parrots.

What is your favourite country?

Impossible to answer as I return excited from many places I visit and know how privileged I am. I love the sea, the ice and desert habitats. In fact any large open tract of wilderness is hard to beat. The further away from large gatherings of people, the better.

I have a soft spot for the polar regions and Africa as the combination of good birds and large mammals appeals.

Where would you like to visit that you have not yet visited?

The world is a big place, and there are lots of places left that I haven't been, but Japan, New Zealand, Easter Island and the Lena Delta (Russia) are a big draw.

What bird would you most like to see?

Way too many to list but here goes Needle-tailed Swift, Junin Grebe, Wrybill, Pallas's Sandgrouse.....but the return of House Sparrows, Yellowhammers and all those so-called common birds that we are losing would surpass these.

Best birding moment?

A Red-necked Stint incubating four chicks in the palm of my hand in Siberia springs to mind. Finding my own Ibisbill in India, or Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Kamchatka were high on the list. Releasing two baby swifts that I hand reared for a month was perhaps more satisfying.

What is your best find?

Lots of things come to mind as there have been many nice birding surprises. I find some rarities by just looking in the right direction at the right time (e.g. Cornwall's first Black Stork), or being in a place where no-one has ever birded (e.g. the first

Western Meadowlark outside North America, in Russia). Local patch rarities have been found by detective work (e.g. Richard's Pipits and Arctic Redpoll in Nottinghamshire), while other satisfying records are the most northerly Shelduck (in Spitsbergen), a Black-winged Stilt in Northern Kamchatka and a whole swathe of American birds in Arctic Russia.

I always wanted to find a bird at the North Pole. It seemed like the most impractical place to see a bird and getting there is not easy either! I had imagined that Ivory Gull would be a serious contender, but in the five hours that I spent there, I found a Sabine's Gull and a Fulmar!!

Most embarrassing wildlife moment...

Mmmmmh.....er...mmmmh....er....nope, can't think of anything. No, definitely never made any mistakes.Tee-hee.



Phil on the nesting grounds of Great Knot in Chukotka, Eastern Siberia

TRIPS WITH AVAILABILITY EARLY IN THE YEAR

CHILE

24th Feb to 12th March 2012

The last chance to join us on this Chilean adventure. We will go in search of hummingbirds and tapaculos in the High Andes and endemic seabirds of the Humboldt Current. There is a good chance we shall see the 'Seno Storm Petrel', probably a species as yet undescribed to science!

BELIZE

7th to 22nd March 2012

Experience the luxury of three of Central America's top eco lodges. An incredible 44% of land in Belize is protected in parks and reserves, and the country teems with birds and wildlife. From the coral cayes of the world's second largest barrier reef to the 100,000 acres of private nature reserve at Chan Chich, there will never be a dull moment.

CHINA'S SHAANXI PROVINCE

8th to 21st April 2012

The 2011 Panda tour was a great success. Not only did we manage two sightings of wild Giant Pandas but we also saw Flying Squirrels and Golden Monkeys too. Exciting birds were everywhere with Crested Ibis,

Rufous-breasted Accentor, Ibisbill, Three-banded Rosefinch and Golden Pheasant all seen well. Japanese Waxwing is a very tricky bird to see, so it was pleasing to pick one out among its commoner cousins at the Emperor's Palace in Beijing.

NORTHERN GREECE

28th April to 5th May 2012

One of our favourite tours based at a traditional Greek hotel with superb birding right on the doorstep. Relax, take it easy and let us show you the wildlife spectacle that is Lake Kerkini. Last year we saw a wolf whilst waiting for an Eagle Owl to depart its roosting site.

COTO DONANA AND ALENTEJO

30th April to 7th May 2012

Flights are available from Leeds, Manchester, Luton and Gatwick. We already have seven people which is one minibus full but we will take a second bus for four or five more people. There is a great range of birds available from Great Bustard and Spanish Imperial Eagle to White-headed Duck, Marbled Duck, Crested Coot and Spectacled Warbler.

CAMARGUE AND CORSICA

13th to 21st May 2012

We first ran a tour to the Camargue back in 1992 and it has run every year since. It is always a pleasure to be reacquainted with old friends, the pair of Eagle Owls not far from the hotel being a prime example. When combined with the rugged beauty and endemic birdlife of Corsica, this is a trip which will appeal to anyone who loves great wildlife spectacles in wonderful scenery.

ESTONIA

19th to 27th May 2012

Every spring is different in this small and attractive Baltic country. The forests resound to bird song providing a reminder of days gone by. In over a dozen visits to Estonia we have become rather modest experts at finding those special birds. Pallid Harrier, Steller's Eider, Nutcracker, Blyth's Reed Warbler and Citrine Wagtail were all found on last year's tour.

Citrel Finch, Mont Ventoux, photographed on our Camargue and Corsica trip, May 2011 (Paul Willoughby)



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