

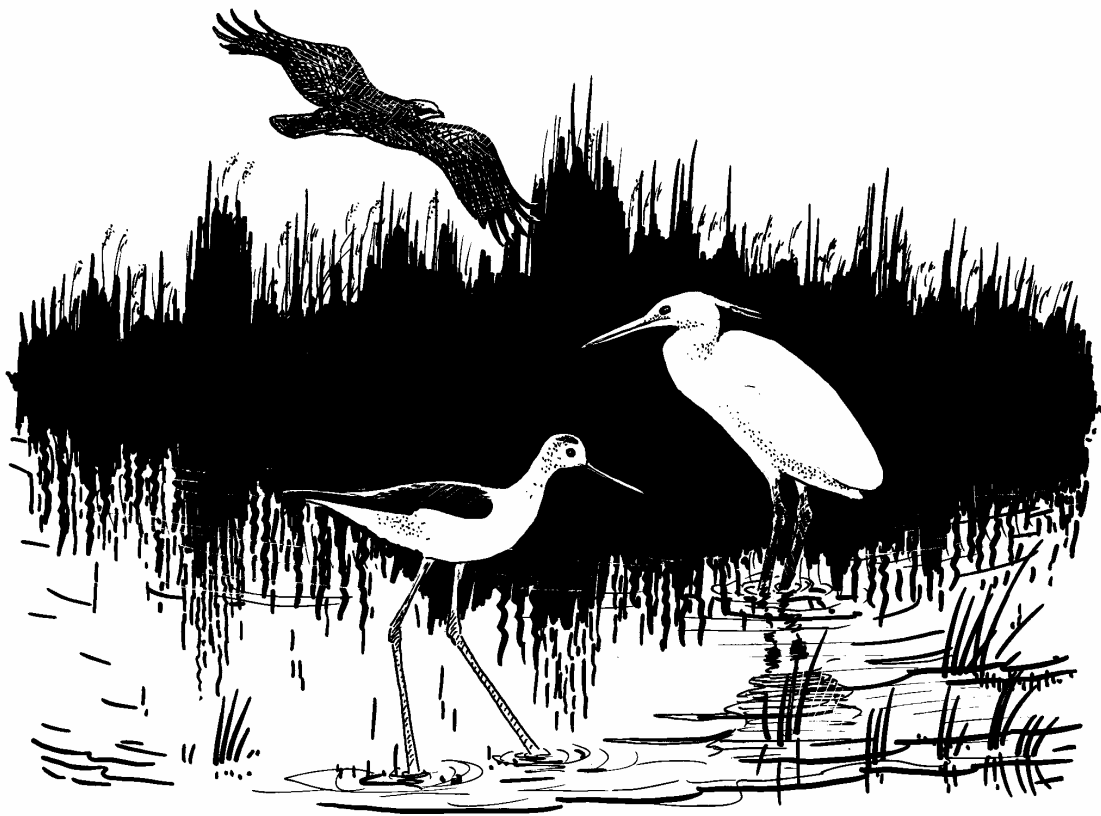
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



Easter in Mallorca
15 – 22 April 1995

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Joint holiday of the Norfolk and Suffolk Wildlife Trusts and Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays.

The group

Gwenda Cunningham

Mavis Stevens

Geoffrey Pears

Barbara Pears

Robert Lyndon

Ethel Lyndon

Sylvia Riley

Barbara Evans

Andrew Clews

Karin Clews

David Pass

Madeleine

Adrian Pass

Robert Maxwell

Enid Maxwell

Leaders

Graham Hearl

Chris Gibson

Report written by Chris Gibson, illustrations by Rob Hume.

Cover: little egret, black-winged stilt and osprey.

During the week the group was able to contribute to the conservation of the Wildlife we had enjoyed by way of donation of £375 to the Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa (GOB), made up of £25 per person in the group. With two other Balearic holidays in 1995 – to Menorca in the spring and Mallorca in the autumn – this was part of a total of £700 donated to GOB through Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays in 1995.

A total of £7,905 has been contributed by Honeyguide to conservation projects in Europe since 1991.

Saturday 15 April

A mid-morning flight took us from the murk of Heathrow to the heat of Palma by early afternoon, the journey enlivened by glorious views of the snow-capped eastern Pyrenees. After introducing ourselves to Graham and collecting the minibuses, we drove across the island to Puerto Pollensa and the Hotel Miramar, delightfully situated on the sea-front.

Probably because of the recent cool, dull weather in Britain, all were keen to make the most of the warmth and sunlight, so we quickly unpacked, recuperated, donned shorts, and headed off on a short stroll towards the mouth of the Bocquer Valley, the nearest of a series of valleys running through the northern coastal mountain range,

Just outside the hotel, screaming Swifts overhead vied for our attention with smaller birds hopping around in the date palms and tamarisks. Most were the ubiquitous House Sparrows, but there were a few migrants – Blackcaps, and at least three very confident, and presumably tired, Wood Warblers. As we progressed up the pine avenue, a sprinkling of other migrants started to show, including a stunning male Redstart. Here too, the Mediterranean flora began to become more obvious: white spikes of the bulbous *Asphodelus fistulosus*; spiny, variegated foliage and purple thistle-like flowers of *Galactites tomentosa*; the sticky, semi-parasitic Yellow Bartsia; and scented plants like Fennel (pleasant) and Stink Aster (awful). As usual, there was a range of plants from other parts of the world with a similar climate, a reflection of the long history of exploration amongst Mediterranean nations. Bermuda Buttercup (from South Africa) and Squirting Cucumber (from Central America) were just two elements of this multicultural community, the former remarkable by its abundance, the latter because of its dispersal habits. Whilst we got to grips with the more unfamiliar plants, a Clouded Yellow butterfly paid a visit and an insistent 'zit...zit...zit' told us a Fan-tailed Warbler was somewhere around.

Continuing further up the valley, as far as the *finca*, birds came more into prominence, presumably emerging from their midday lull. Migrants such as Redstarts, whitethroats, Pied Flycatchers and a Wryneck mingled with resident Stonechats and Sardinian warblers, and a late winter visiting Robin. Three Hoopoes, for many the epitome of the Mediterranean, poked around for insects, to fuel their onward migrations or perhaps even to feed their broods, already hatching locally.

This short walk had already whetted our appetites - for wildlife and for food! So back to the hotel, a short briefing session, a splendid meal and bed.

Sunday 16 April

It dawned cool with a little cloud, but Graham suggested we should head for the mountains, as it looked reasonably settled. The road was spectacular, winding its way through Holm Oak forests, giving views of the mountains and occasionally down to the north coast.

Our first stop was to see a colony of Long-spurred Orchids, but only two remained in flower after the dry winter and spring. A small group of Serins twittered in the distance, and a bird rattled in the treetops. 'Bonell's Warbler' said I, as Graham said 'Cirl Bunting', proving that the leaders are not always right. In this case, after much debate, we concluded he was!

Moving on, the second stop was at the viewpoint overlooking the Torrente de Pareis. Spectacular scenery and inaccessible plants, with *Narcissus tazetta* and *Viburnum tinus* (both familiar to gardeners), and our first endemic, *Hippocrepis balearica*, a shrubby horseshoe-vetch, growing on the rocky cliff slopes. Not for the last time were we able to use the telescope for botany rather than birds. Across the road, another special plant was rather more conveniently placed amongst the boulders and tree roots – *Cyclamen balearicum*, a near-endemic found only on the Balearic Islands and in one small part of southern France.

The twisty road continued up to the reservoir at Cuber, appearing bleak under leaden skies, and apparently home to little other than Yellow-legged Gulls. As we walked towards the water's edge,

another endemic plant *Astragalus balearicus* started to appear, in places becoming dominant. This is a veritable 'vegetable hedgehog', forming low rounded mounds, its whitish flowers protected within an armoury of radiating spines - a beautiful adaptation to surviving the attentions of too many goats and sheep. Similar in growth form, at least in its local endemic bushy variety, was *Smilax aspera*, more familiar in other parts of the Mediterranean (including lowland Mallorca) as a climber or scrambler. Between the spiny shrubs, there were a few other plants, such as spurges, which are chemically unpalatable, or rosette plants, which try to avoid browsing by hugging the ground. Were I in Crete or Cyprus, I would have had no hesitation in identifying one of the latter, a squat *Centaurea*, as *C. hyalolepis*, but later reference to the Flora suggested it is not known from Mallorca. It would not, however, be impossible, as it has apparently been recorded from Ibiza.

Continuing towards the dam, White and *flava* Wagtails flitted along the shore, and a Wren repeatedly carried food into a bushy oak, presumably to its nest. By now, the skies were clearing and we were able to see the summit of Puig Major, the highest point of Mallorca – unfortunately, as is all too often the case, disfigured by satellite dishes and other military/telecommunications paraphernalia. A distant speck across the reservoir resolved itself into an Osprey, which remained rooted to its perch for the remainder of our visit; eventually, we were all able to get very satisfactory 'scope views.

With the lifting cloud, hopes started to rise for a view of the local specialty, Black Vulture, despite Graham's warning that they had proved rather elusive recently. A single bird which floated along the mountain ridge led to a collective sigh of relief, but we were totally unprepared for the outstanding sight of one circling low above us as we got back into the buses.

And so to lunch, the first of our daily packed feasts, which we attempted to demolish by the lower reservoir, Gorg Blau. To compound our amazement, three more Black Vultures drifted over as we ate, followed by two Ravens. Then by the road tunnel, a brief stop gave excellent views of Crag Martins preparing to nest, floating in the air and gently bouncing as though on an invisible elastic thread.

For the afternoon walk, we decided to explore the wooded foothills of the second highest mountain, Masanella. The woodland consisted of Holm Oak, interspersed with Aleppo Pine, their branches festooned with epiphytic beard lichens. The diverse shrub layer included Tree Heath, both species of *Pistachia*, Rosemary (bearing remarkably deep purple-blue flowers), *Cneorum tricoccum* (with unusual, yellow, three-petalled flowers) and one of the most distinctive endemics, *Hypericum balearicum*, its small leaves with crisped margins setting it apart from all other St. John's-worts. Under the light shade, a few orchids were found, including Sawfly, Bug and Bertoloni's Bee, together with a lovely patch of Summer Snowflake. We saw few birds, just Crossbills and then mostly in flight, but the sun had warmed up enough to trigger a few insects into activity, notably a very obliging and unimaginably iridescent Green Hairstreak.

Monday 17 April

Again cool and cloudy to begin with, we headed along the Formentor Peninsula, to our first stop at Albercutx Mirador, overlooking the north coast. Single Osprey and Raven drifted north up the valley, whilst the sharp-eyed were picking out distant Blue Rock Thrushes and Peregrines perched on the skyline. The stacks at the end of the point harboured at least a dozen, apparently pure-bred Rock Doves.

The sun emerged as we continued on to Cases Velles, an oasis of pine woods and fig plantations, renowned for attracting migrant birds; today, a brief scan revealed just a sprinkling of Redstarts, Pied Flycatchers and a single Song Thrush. So on we went, to the Formentor Tunnel, where two Marsh Harriers drifted north, out towards mainland Europe. This is a classic site for three of the most famous Balearic endemics – *Senecio leucanthemifolius* ssp. *rodriguezii* and *Erodium reichardii*, both of which we found on the rocky road verge, and *Paeonia cambessedesii*, flowering in inaccessible spots both up and down the slope.

From here, it was just a short drive to the lighthouse, for coffee and cakes. Several *flava* Wagtails flew over, and Cory's Shearwaters and Shags were offshore. We had arrived just in time – as we left, the approach road was jammed solid with cars (it was Easter Monday), so it was with much relief we headed back westwards to find our lunch spot, overlooking Cala Figuera.

Another look at Cases Velles suggested that some new migrants had arrived, so we disembarked and located a few warblers and Tree Pipits. Following their 'chip' calls, we pinned down a family group of Crossbills, although as is typical with the *balearica* race, the male showed barely any red colouration. Sheep were penned under the pines, restricting the shrub layer to unpalatable species such as Dwarf Fan-palm and *Cistus monspeliensis*; nestled in a flower of the latter was a striking black and white chafer *Oxythyrea funesta* whilst a Hummingbird Hawk-moth hurtled down a woodland ride, unfortunately whilst most people were concentrating on the relative wing lengths of silent Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs in the treetops.

As it was still only mid-afternoon, we decided to head south, past Puerto Pollensa, and check out the Albufereta Marsh – with excellent views of Audouin's Gulls on the way. A good range of wetland birds were showing on the marsh, including Marsh Harrier, Osprey, Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet and Cormorant, but the highlights were three obliging Whiskered Terns, at rest and hawking above the lagoons. Nor were the botanists unhappy, with a wide variety of species, including Tongue and Mirror Orchids, pink drifts of *Allium subvillosum*, several examples of the lovely lemon-yellow, dandelion-like *Urospermum dalechampii*, and the tall, dramatic, purple-eyed Arabian Star-of-Bethlehem. All this to the constant accompaniment of zitting Fan-tailed Warblers.

After dinner, several of the party headed to the Hotel Pollentia and Graham's regular birders' meeting; about 85 people turned up, a sign of the justified popularity of Mallorca and a prime opportunity for GOB to attract supporters and donations. Walking back in the dark, three species of bats were hawking moths under the street lights, although for passers-by the group of strange Brits huddled over a crackling bat detector was perhaps of greater interest than the bats themselves.

Tuesday 18 April

A bright, calm morning tempted me out of bed early, and my local walk turned up Wood Warblers, Hoopoe, Wryneck, a singing Grasshopper warbler and a chorus of Tree Frogs. The fine weather, coupled with some interesting information from last night's meeting convinced us to try the southern coastal trip today. A long, hot drive eventually brought us to the Salinas de Levante. Walking down to the Salinas, we disturbed a huge Moorish Gecko, looking prehistoric on its stone wall perch, saw Lang's Short-tailed Blue butterflies and several Short-toed Larks hovering and singing low over the fields.

The flora was rather limited around the Salinas, being primarily salt-tolerant species such as Shrubby Sea-blite. But the birds were excellent and confiding: Black-winged Stilts, Kentish Plover (with chicks), Blue-headed, Grey-headed and Spanish wagtails to name just a few. A Whiskered Tern circled one pool, dipping to the surface for its insect prey, and a Peregrine caused consternation (and nearly death) for its much larger intended prey, a Black-winged Stilt. The pale colouration of the Peregrine, characteristic of the predominantly North African race brooked showed to advantage as it made low-level stoops.

Eventually, on the final pool, we located the Greater Yellowlegs. This was the exciting bird reported at last night's meeting, which we had all been at least secretly hoping to see, although it can hardly be classed as a typical Mediterranean species: in fact, this constituted the first ever record on the Balearics. Our fears that it might have moved through rapidly were unfounded, especially as I understand it is still present at the time of writing (early August)., Feeling very happy with the albeit brief views, and struck by the almost metallic intensity of its yellow leg colouring, we turned to leave, only to turn right back again when a Collared Pratincole flew in and landed on a patch of gravel, only some 25m from us.

We moved on for lunch to the lighthouse at the Cabo des Salines. It was by now the hottest it got all week, and the still air was thick with the resinous scents of the Mediterranean. All sorts of plants were growing on the boulder-strewn upper beach (actually a fossil coral reef) and in the open pine woodland; two of the more interesting were numerous spikes of the Wild Gladiolus (the same species as found rarely in the New Forest), and the rather scarce white-flowered *Cistus clusii*. Here the group divided into two, the birders with Graham to search (successfully) for Stone-curlews, the rest to botanise more leisurely. Most, if not all, heard the rhythmical chatter of another Mallorcan specialty, Marmora's Warbler, and a few managed to get reasonable views.

Given the heat and length of the return journey, an ice cream break in Felanitx proved a popular option. As indeed did the after-dinner entertainment, sampling the local night life: Scops Owls (though just calling, and then only briefly) and rather more obliging bats and Turkish Gecko. The clarity of the skies made star, planet (Mars) and nebula watching equally rewarding.

Wednesday 19 April

Market day in Puerto Pollensa meant a 'free' day, for people to do their own thing. Nevertheless, most took the option of a late-morning start with the leaders, for a walk down the Bocquer Valley. By the time we set off it was hot and sunny, enough to keep most birds down, apart from three Black Vultures winging lazily over the western slopes. But the lack of birds didn't matter – the arid rocky valley, with extensive patches of 'hedgehog' shrubs, *Hypericum balearicum*, and Dwarf Fan-palm, several showing the evidence of spontaneous ignition, provided remarkable views, especially overlooking the bay, where the deep cobalt sea contrasted sharply with the glaring, sun-baked rocks.

Taking in this view, we settled for lunch, only to be roused instantly by Bee-eater calls overhead; try as we might, we couldn't find it or them. Better luck though with the local Peregrines, which performed superbly over the bay, terrifying the Crag Martins. The wind, which had been funnelled briskly down the valley, suddenly dropped, and immediately the humidity rose rapidly. Straight away the larger insects responded, with a Southern Emperor dragonfly hawking past, and an Egyptian Locust (distinguished by its vertically striped eyes) disturbed from the grass in a flurry of legs and wings.

Back at the mouth of the valley, more small birds were in evidence, suggesting a fall of migrants had taken place. Redstarts, Woodchat Shrikes and Pled Flycatchers we had seen before, but half a dozen Spotted Flycatchers were certainly new. After dinner, another nightlife session was in order, but we again failed to see Scops Owl, despite hearing it calling well. It was a warmer night than last, so more moths were in evidence, and the bats put on a spectacle under the lights, with the detector picking up all sorts of interactions between and within species. What surprised many was that moths are not the 'sitting ducks' they might appear to be: the sonar clicks of a bat speeded up as it homed in on the prey but the moth could obviously hear this, and would often close its wings and plummet earthwards. In fact, only some 10% of chases we witnessed ended in a meal for the bat. The smallest species (a Pipistrelle) didn't emerge until 22.30, but its flight period was curtailed by a rising wind at 22.45: the moths disappeared almost instantaneously, then so of course did the bats. And so did we, pausing only to look at a large black ground-beetle *Carabus nemoralis*, and two geckoes where last night there was just one.

Thursday 20 April

A dull, overcast day, even chilly at times and threatening rain, so our planned trip to the Albufera Marsh seemed entirely appropriate, given the shelter we could find in the hides if necessary. The Albufera, one of the most important wetlands of the western Mediterranean, is the classic Balearic wildlife site, and one which all Mallorcan schoolchildren are required to visit each year. Fortunately they didn't all turn up on the day of our visit, although we couldn't really have complained at any demonstration of such an enlightened education policy.

But before we entered the reserve proper, a few peripheral slits merited investigation. At the Orange Bridge, hundreds of hirundines, held up by the bad weather, were hawking over the canal; a pair of Marsh Harriers quartered the reedbed; and a Cetti's Warbler gave an uncharacteristically open view. Further south, on the roadside pools, Grey and Purple Herons were feeding alongside Black-winged Stilts and Avocets. The female Avocet obviously felt it was time to get on with the serious business of raising a family, but despite all her offerings, the male simply wasn't interested.

A short walk in the woods at C'an Picafort revealed Bug Orchid and Wild Gladiolus but none of the hoped-for tortoises; clearly, though, they were there in good numbers, judging from the paths, scuffles and scrapes. On then to the Depuradora (water treatment works) and its hide overlooking the vast artificial pool. A few waders and wagtails around the margins, loafing gulls on the water, a few Coots and a lone (escaped) Shelduck were all there was on offer close by, but five Marsh Harriers and an Osprey over the marsh promised much more to come.

And so into the reserve, with its huge reedbeds, networks of open water habitats, and grazing marshes, complete with water buffalo and Camargue horses as the management tools. Although there were several interesting plants along the paths, including a large patch of Jersey Orchids, it was the sheer scale of the reedbed plants which left the lasting impression – Common Reed to 5m or more, Saw Sedge to 3m etc. At the Stone Bridge, a Purple Gallinule stripped the pith out of Reed stems, watched by its chick; this formerly extinct resident has been successfully reintroduced, and now appears to be thriving.

After lunch, we visited the Bishop hides, overlooking scrapes not dissimilar to those at Minsmere or Cley. Indeed, most of the birds would not have been out of place at home: 15 Spotted Redshank, three Greenshank, four Snipe – plus Spoonbill, Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt, a late Lapwing and a delicately beautiful summer plumaged Water Pipit, resplendent in pastel shades. Back at the Stone Bridge, there were now two and a half Purple Gallinules, an immature Night Heron (trying and nearly succeeding to merge into its reedy background), a singing Great Reed Warbler (if that is an appropriate term for such a guttural croaker), and for most, brief but sufficient views of Moustached Warblers. No one had any problems, though, with seeing the European Pond Terrapin sunning itself in the middle of a dyke, trying to warm up in the sun which was gamely struggling out from behind the clouds. And then on to the mound near the reserve centre, where a fish-trailing Osprey lumbered past, a Purple Heron showed well in flight and at rest, and two very late Starlings briefly set hearts a-flutter. From the Cim Hide, a male Garganey flashed its white supercilium but little else from the marginal vegetation.

As we were nearing the end of the holiday, I took the opportunity before dinner of presenting Graham with a cheque for £375, made up of the contributions of the group, to support the sterling work of GOB. Without their efforts, we probably would not have been able to witness the delights of the Albufera, or the drama of Black Vultures overhead in the mountains.

Friday 21 April

All the sites on the itinerary visited, where to go now? Graham outlined the possibilities, and the consensus was for a new site, the Arta Peninsula in the far east of the island. Lower and drier than the northern range, it provided quite a contrast, with stark, skeletal mountains, bleak and windswept. But first, a coffee and cognac (traditional breakfast!) stop in Arta town, allowing some the time to explore its fascinating architecture.

From the desolate mountain tops above the Ermita de Betlem, the view should have been superb, to the Alcudia and Formentor Peninsulas, but they were lost in the mist. The strong winds kept most birds down, although a brave Booted Eagle was seen briefly from one minibus on a hairpin bend, whilst both Thekla Larks and Tawny Pipits gave excellent views as they perched on rocks and boulders. Apart from the showy spurges, especially *Euphorbia biumbellata*, most interesting plants in this inhospitable place were tiny ground-huggers, like Rock Milkwort and Sand Crocus.

Down the hairpins to the Ermita, we then set off to a clifftop overlooking the coastal plain for lunch. Several Marsh Frogs around the edge of a water tank proved difficult to pick up, even through the 'scope, as was a lovely male Cirl Bunting in the gardens. The dinnertime vantage point gave us distant views of an Egyptian Vulture, followed by a Booted Eagle being mobbed by a Kestrel. Closer to our feet and equally fascinating were the ants *Messor Barbara* trooping to and from their nest holes, many carrying seeds and other items many times their own body weight.

The north-facing cliffs appeared to be of considerable botanical interest, although unfortunately inaccessible, at least from above. They certainly held a strong population of the endemic hawk's-beard *Crepis triassii* and the beautiful tiny pink campion *Silene pseudatocion*. The latter was especially interesting; the Flora states it to be found at just one site (presumably this) on the island, it being the only European locality for an otherwise African species. Most tantalisingly though, a binocular search of the cliffs revealed a large, blue/purple flowered Geranium species; no such species is depicted in the Flora, but there were no accessible plants to take a specimen for identification.

The clouds gathered as the afternoon progressed, until eventually they burst with an almighty clap of thunder; Fortunately, by this time, we were back at the minibuses, and ready to leave, albeit rather more cautiously around the bends as the deluge continued.

To make the most of the last day, we made several stops on the way back. First, near Arta, a very brief pause at a 'purple patch' by the road allowed its identification as *Coris monspeliensis*, a very attractive Primrose relative. Then, back to the Depuradora, and finally the Abufereta, neither of which added much bird-wise to our previous visits. A last look at a passing Audouin's Gull, and we headed back to the hotel for the last time.

After dinner, Graham hosted the second of the week's birders' meetings, again well attended, although understandably our party was otherwise occupied. I went along, not just to hear the same jokes for a second time, but to re-present Graham with the cheque. Our hope was that other tours and independent birders would realise that at least some of the visitors are prepared to pay seriously for the privilege of enjoying Mallorca's natural riches, and follow suit.

Saturday 22 April

Packing; a last stroll in the sun; and away to the airport. All too soon, it was back to reality, with suntans as evidence, and stores of happy memories.

Thanks to everyone for making it such an enjoyable experience, both for the leaders and, I hope, for each other.

Finally, sorry for the late arrival of this report. All my good intentions went out of the window with the glorious weather we had this summer. I hope you will understand the attraction of my moth trap as compared with sweating over a hot word-processor!

Dr Chris Gibson
September 1995

The printed report also had 13 pages of wildlife lists that would have been very difficult to scan with OCR (Optical Character Recognition).