



THE OBSERVER

SECOS Newsletter

Promoting and fostering the study of ornithology by observation, research and record keeping

Long Weekend - Dorset - 24-27 April 2026

This Newsletter describes the SECOS Long Weekend trip to Dorset from 24th to 27th April 2026. The trip was based on a scheduled itinerary. There were a couple of unscheduled local twitches. A species list is shown on the last page.

Weather

We were fortunate to enjoy fine, dry and sunny conditions for most of the trip, with temperatures reaching a pleasant 17–20°C on Friday, Saturday and Monday. Sunday brought a slight change, feeling cooler with light cloud and a moderate breeze, but remained perfectly suitable for birding.

Day 1: Friday 24th April

28 members booked the trip to Dorset, all travelling by car. Car sharing was encouraged, resulting in a total of 14 vehicles being used. This was the first SECOS visit to Dorset since April 2023, adding to the sense of anticipation as we set off. The journey south was uneventful, with a welcome breakfast stop at Strensham Services on the M5.

Radipole Lake RSPB – Reedbed Beginnings

Situated close to the centre of Weymouth, Radipole Lake is a well-known wetland reserve managed by the RSPB. The site has an interesting history, having originally been a tidal creek before being dammed in the 17th century to form a freshwater lake. In the 20th century, parts of the area were used for gravel extraction, before the RSPB acquired the land in the 1970s and began transforming it into the reserve we see today.

Now a tranquil expanse of reedbeds and open water within an urban setting, the reserve supports a wide range of wildlife. It is particularly important for birds, acting as a valuable stopover for migrants and providing essential habitat for both breeding and wintering species.



After a quick lunch in the car park, we were soon compiling our first tick lists of the trip. The pool behind the visitor centre provided a gentle introduction, with a familiar cast of water birds including Canada goose, greylag goose, mute swan, shelduck, moorhen and coot, as well as black-headed gull,

lesser black-backed gull and a single imposing great black-backed gull.

Setting off along the Discovery Trail, the hedgerows and reed-fringed paths were alive with song. Cetti's warbler burst from the undergrowth, while chiffchaff and whitethroat added their voices to a lively chorus of chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch, robin, dunnock and wren. Overhead, a small party of sand martins flickered through the air, joined briefly by a few swifts scything across the sky. From deep within the reeds came the unmistakable sound of a water rail.

From the Viewing Shelter, the scene opened out across the water, revealing water bird species. Mallard, tufted duck, shoveler and gadwall drifted across the surface, while great crested grebe, cormorant and grey heron added to the interest. Swallows skimmed low over the water in graceful arcs, and the rhythmic song of reed warbler carried from the reeds.

Continuing along the North Trail, excitement lifted a notch as two hobbies appeared, slicing effortlessly through the air as they hunted over the reedbed. At the North Screens, a marsh harrier quartered the reeds with measured, purposeful flight, holding everyone's attention.

Returning to the visitor centre, there was still time for a few final highlights, including a reed bunting passing through and two mediterranean gulls dropping in briefly for a quick bathe before continuing on their way.

We were always alert for bittern during our visit, but it remained elusive.



Mediterranean Gull

Lodmoor RSPB – Gulls, Waders, Terns and Egrets

Around six miles from Radipole Lake lies Lodmoor, another site with a varied and fascinating past. Originally a saltwater lagoon, the area was reclaimed in the 19th century and put to agricultural use. By the mid-20th century, it had been repurposed as a landfill site, before undergoing a major transformation in the 1990s to become the nature reserve we know today.

Lodmoor supports a rich mix of habitats that attract a wide range of birdlife, particularly waders, wildfowl and reedbed species. Like Radipole, it also serves as an important stopover for migrating birds.



We made our way towards the Saltmarsh Viewpoint, the “bandstand”, which overlooks the scrape in the southwest corner of the reserve. Here, the scene was alive with activity, highlighted by an impressive gathering of 17 mediterranean gulls. Among them were two common terns and six sandwich terns, while a single black-tailed godwit probed the margins.

Further out, a striking bar-tailed

godwit in breeding plumage stood out against the shallows. Nearby, a little egret moved delicately through the water, and above the reeds a marsh harrier circled with unhurried grace. Other notable sightings were common gull, little tern, grey plover, whitethroat and sedge warbler.

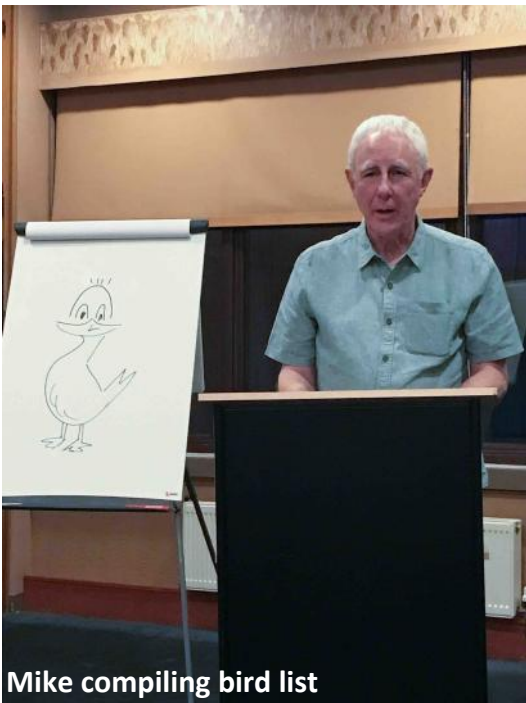
Continuing along the track, we paused to watch two ringed plovers busily feeding. Close by, fleeting glimpses of two “little brown jobs” had us momentarily puzzled, until they revealed themselves as dunlin in breeding plumage, their distinctive black belly patches clearly visible. Pressing on, we were rewarded with excellent views of around eight cattle egrets gathered in a field alongside grazing cows, a fitting end to a productive walk.

Hotel

The hotel we chose for our stay in Dorset was The Heights Hotel, perched high on the Isle of Portland in a commanding position overlooking Chesil Beach, Portland Harbour and the wider Jurassic Coast. Its elevated location, within a UNESCO World Heritage landscape, gives it a real sense of space and some truly spectacular panoramic views, making it an ideal base for exploring the area.



The Heights Hotel



Mike compiling bird list

After a pre-dinner drink in the bar, we had dinner in the spacious Bistro restaurant, with its fantastic views over the Beach and Harbour.

After dinner, we gathered in the Weston meeting room to compile a list of the day's sightings, and then retired for a good night's sleep.

Day 2: Saturday 25th April

Arne RSPB - Heathland, Harbour and Dartford Warblers

The Arne reserve lies on the shores of Poole Harbour, near Wareham, and is one of Dorset's premier nature reserves, covering a large peninsula of more than 500 hectares. Established in 1966, the reserve is recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is particularly valued for its extensive lowland heath, one of the UK's rarest habitats.

Most of the group chose to follow the Shoreline Trail towards Shipstal Beach on the eastern side of the reserve, while others explored Hyde's Heath or Coombe Heath.

Colin hired a tramper, which proved well suited to the terrain, although he later reported that six hours at the controls was quite a workout! He had the distinction of being the only member of the group to hear a cuckoo.

The Shoreline Trail led us through a varied landscape of oak, pine and birch woodland, past acidic ponds, and out onto saltmarsh, sandy shoreline and the open waters of Poole Harbour. Along the way, we recorded a selection of familiar species including chiffchaff, blackcap, blue tit, blackbird, song thrush, mistle thrush, pied wagtail, dunnock, robin, wren, jackdaw and carrion crow, along with a pair of stock doves. Nothing out of the ordinary, perhaps, but in such surroundings it made for a thoroughly enjoyable walk.



Colin on Tramper



Arne Birders



Harbour Hide

From the Harbour Hide, we watched a whimbrel probing the mudflats, and noted Canada goose, shelduck, oystercatcher, lapwing, black-tailed godwit, black-headed gull and herring gull.

From near the Purbeck Viewpoint, a white-tailed eagle was seen flying from the Poole Harbour area.



Dartford Warbler

Those who opted for Hyde's Heath were rewarded with two Dartford warblers, arguably the reserve's star attraction, as well as a displaying tree pipit and a passing peregrine.

On the Coombe Heath Trail, patience paid off at the southernmost viewpoint with a brief but welcome view of a Dartford warbler. On the return leg, a wheatear showed well, and another whimbrel was seen from the Middlebere Hide.

Elsewhere across the reserve, a wide range of species was recorded, including bar-tailed godwit, curlew, redshank, little egret, great white egret, mediterranean gull, sandwich tern, sparrowhawk, buzzard, kestrel, raven, goldcrest, firecrest, Cetti's warbler, willow warbler and stonechat.



Dartford Warbler



Day 3: Sunday 26th April

At breakfast, we congratulated Jean and Nick on their Ruby Wedding Anniversary.

Portland Bill – Sea-watching and Migrants

Portland Bill is a narrow promontory forming the southernmost tip of the Isle of Portland. Its exposed position makes it both dramatic and dangerous, with strong tidal currents and nearby reefs and sandbanks contributing to a history of shipwrecks. Over the centuries, multiple lighthouses have been built, beginning with a pair in 1716 and later replaced by the present lighthouse in 1906.

As part of the Jurassic Coast, Portland Bill combines geological significance and wildlife interest. The sheer rock faces attract a range of seabirds. In spring, the grasslands are a haven for passage migrants, offering a place to rest and refuel before continuing north.



Rock Pipit

We parked in the much-improved car park and made our way towards the rocky shoreline for some sea-watching. En route, rock pipits were noted in the grassy gullies between the rocks, and a raven drifted past the lighthouse.



Sea-watching

Once the scopes were set up and we had adjusted to the coastal conditions, the sea soon revealed its riches. Guillemots and razorbills were plentiful on the water, while careful scanning picked out stiff-winged fulmars gliding around a distant boat. Shags commuted to and from the cliffs to the west, and several groups of gannets passed eastwards, offering excellent views. Other species recorded included cormorant, great northern diver, kittiwake, manx shearwater and red-breasted merganser, along with a full complement of gulls – black-headed, lesser black-backed, herring and great black-backed.



After lunch, we walked to a small disused quarry. Two little owls had been seen here on our previous visit, but they remained elusive this time. Continuing towards the Old Lower Lighthouse, now known as the Portland Bird Observatory, we noted several singing linnets and a whitethroat. The Observatory gardens held a good mix of passerines, including goldcrest, blue tit,

great tit, chiffchaff, willow warbler, robin, wren, chaffinch and greenfinch.

Crossing Portland Bill Road, we followed the footpath up the hillside. A kestrel hunted over the slope, a skylark sang overhead, and both stonechat and wheatear showed well. There were brief views of a tree pipit in a small tree. Nearby, a large bucket feeder attracted around ten house sparrows, which were soon displaced by a noisy clattering of jackdaws, the sparrows sensibly waiting nearby until the coast was clear.

Portland Bill always delivers: seabirds on the move, migrants in the bushes, and just enough unpredictability to keep everyone scanning!

Chesil Beach & Fleet Lagoon – Shingle, Waders and Terns

Chesil Beach and the Fleet Lagoon lie at the heart of the Jurassic Coast. Chesil Beach itself is an immense shingle barrier stretching for around 18 miles from the Isle of Portland to West Bay, its sweeping curve and ever-shifting pebbles shaped by thousands of years of wave action.

On its landward side lies the Fleet Lagoon, a long, shallow body of brackish water, the largest tidal lagoon in the UK, sheltered from the full force of the sea by the protective ridge of Chesil. Together, beach and lagoon create a remarkable mosaic of habitats, from shingle ridges and mudflats to saltmarsh and eelgrass beds, supporting a rich diversity of wildlife.

This unique combination of geology and ecology has earned the area multiple national and international conservation designations. It is particularly important for birds, providing feeding and roosting areas for waders and wildfowl, as well as a haven for migrating species passing along the Dorset coast.



Chesil Beach Visitor Centre

On arriving at Chesil Beach, a whimbrel was seen briefly before being flushed by a passing dog walker. Picking our way slowly across the shingle, we encountered small flocks of linnet and a single wheatear. At the water's edge, sixteen dunlin and six ringed plovers fed busily, while a bar-tailed godwit stood on the far side of the lagoon close to the wall. As we continued, singles of turnstone, great crested grebe, curlew and oystercatcher were added to the list.

Further along, three common terns were seen in the distance alongside a group of around twelve little terns. The size difference between the two species was striking, with the little terns appearing noticeably more delicate beside their larger relatives.

[Collins Bird Guide quotes lengths: common tern 34-37cm, little tern 21-25 cm]

Above the narrow strip of grassland between the busy Portland Road and Weymouth Bay, several skylarks were in full song – perhaps unexpected given the narrowness of their chosen habitat.

Day 4: Monday 27th April

Ham Wall RSPB – Bittern Booms, Glossy Ibis and Hunting Hobbies

Ham Wall lies within the Avalon Marshes on the Somerset Levels, near Glastonbury. Once an area of extensive peat extraction, the landscape was reshaped in the 1990s when former workings were flooded and replanted to create vast reedbeds and open water.

Today, the reserve is a thriving mosaic of habitats – reedbeds, lagoons, wet woodland and grassland – carefully managed to support a remarkable diversity of wildlife. It is especially renowned for its birdlife, playing a key role in the recovery of species such as the bittern, while also supporting a host of other wetland specialists.



Ham Wall & Glastonbury Tor

From the visitor hub, we followed the Ham Wall Loop, a scenic route along a former railway line, with Glastonbury Tor rising prominently on the skyline. Along the way, a fine selection of warblers was encountered. Cetti's, garden, reed, sedge, chiffchaff, blackcap and whitethroat all contributed to a lively chorus.

At the viewing platform, a glossy ibis was picked out at the far side of the water. Initially partially obscured by reeds, it soon emerged into the open to feed, allowing good views. Other wetland species included grey heron, great white egret, cormorant, tufted duck, shoveler, gadwall, teal, great crested grebe, lapwing, snipe, black-tailed godwit and whimbrel.



Glossy Ibis



Avalon Hide

Continuing around the loop, we crossed the canal and followed the grassy path to the Avalon Hide. Here, the deep, resonant boom of a bittern carried across the reedbed, and a bittern flew towards the windmill. A great white egret showed well; although usually dark-legged, this individual displayed reddish tibias, indicating it was in its courtship period. On the water were three pochard (two

males and a female), and a crane flew across in front of the hide. Seven hobbies hunted low over the reeds, giving excellent views, particularly of their distinctive reddish 'trousers'.

Shapwick Heath NNR – Quiet Corners, Quality Birds

A few people chose to visit the adjacent Shapwick Heath, and were rewarded by views of a bittern, three black-necked grebes from Noah's Hide, and a male bearded tit just past the bridge.

Swineham and Littlesea – A Tale of Two Twitches

A few people successfully twitched a splendid male red-spotted bluethroat at Swineham GPs. An osprey was seen carrying a fish, as well as a possible honey buzzard.



Red-spotted Bluethroat

An attempted twitch for a Bonaparte's gull at Littlesea proved unsuccessful, although some compensation came in the form of a little gull.

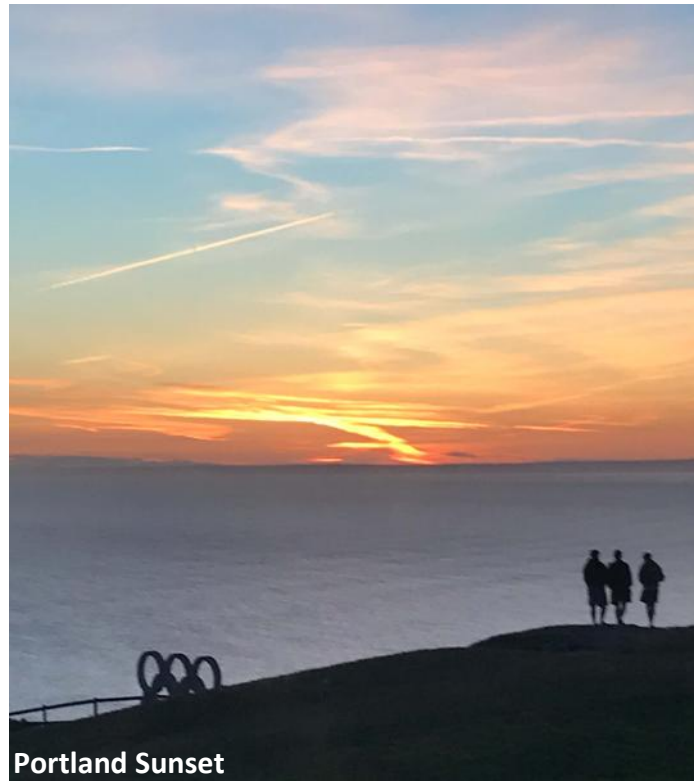
Hotel – Before Breakfast Birding



Some people took advantage of the early hours to explore the area around the hotel and nearby King Barrow Quarries Nature Reserve before breakfast. Species recorded included great black-backed gull, gannet, buzzard, meadow pipit, grey wagtail, whitethroat and stonechat. A cuckoo was seen and heard.

After breakfast, we posed for group photos.





Credits – Images & Narrative

Radipole Lake Visitor Centre - David Roberts*

Mediterranean Gull - Tom Davies

Lodmoor - Andrew Bone*

The Heights Hotel - Ian Capper*

Mike compiling bird list - Sylvia Jarvis

Colin on Tramper - Colin Lythgoe

Arne Birders x 2 - Anthea Gater

Harbour Hide - Derek Harper*

Dartford Warbler x 2 - Tom Davies

Rock Pipit - Nigel Henderson

Sea-watching - Anthea Gater

Narrative: Mike Tonks

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Portland Bill Observatory - Mike Smith*

Chesil Beach Visitor Centre - Becky Williamson*

Ham Wall & Glastonbury Tor - Michael Day*

Glossy Ibis - Rhododendrites*

Avalon Hide - Hugh Venables*

Hobby - Tom Davies

Red-spotted Bluethroat x 2 - Tom Davies

Early Morning Birding - Tom Davies

SECOS Group x 2 - Sylvia Jarvis

Portland Sunset - Sylvia Jarvis

Thank you

A big thank you to everyone who took part in the Dorset trip. The combination of fine birds, lovely places and great companionship made for a truly enjoyable weekend.

Species List



116 species were seen/heard during the trip.

Green text indicates 30 new species that have been added to the 2026 SECOS Field Trips Total, which is now at 148 species.

Canada Goose	Bar-tailed Godwit	Cattle Egret	Blackcap
Greylag Goose	Black-tailed Godwit	Grey Heron	Garden Warbler
Mute Swan	Snipe	Osprey *	Whitethroat
Shelduck	Redshank	Sparrowhawk	Dartford Warbler
Shoveler	Turnstone	Marsh Harrier	Firecrest
Gadwall	Dunlin	Red Kite	Goldcrest
Mallard	Little Tern	White-tailed Eagle	Wren
Teal	Common Tern	Buzzard	Treecreeper
Pochard	Sandwich Tern	Kestrel	Starling
Tufted Duck	Little Gull *	Hobby	Song Thrush
Red-breasted Merganser	Kittiwake	Peregrine	Mistle Thrush
Pheasant	Black-headed Gull	Jay	Blackbird
Swift	Mediterranean Gull	Magpie	Robin
Cuckoo	Common Gull	Jackdaw	Red-spotted Bluethroat *
Stock Dove	Herring Gull	Rook	Stonechat
Woodpigeon	Great Black-backed Gull	Carrion Crow	Wheatear
Collared Dove	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Raven	House Sparrow
Water Rail	Razorbill	Coal Tit	Dunnock
Moorhen	Common Guillemot	Blue Tit	Grey Wagtail
Coot	Great Northern Diver	Great Tit	Pied Wagtail
Common Crane	Fulmar	Skylark	Meadow Pipit
Great Crested Grebe	Manx Shearwater	Sand Martin	Tree Pipit
Black-necked Grebe	Gannet	Swallow	Rock Pipit
Oystercatcher	Cormorant	Cetti's Warbler	Chaffinch
Grey Plover	Shag	Long-tailed Tit	Greenfinch
Ringed Plover	Glossy Ibis	Willow Warbler	Linnet
Lapwing	Bittern	Chiffchaff	Goldfinch
Whimbrel	Little Egret	Sedge Warbler	Siskin