

The Carl Zeiss Award 2009

50 years of rarity photographs



Photographs have always been a part of rare-bird assessment and in the vast majority of cases they add a significant extra dimension to that process. The number of photographs submitted to BBRC increased slowly but steadily during its first four decades, but in the last ten years digital photography has been responsible for a quantum shift in the role of photographs in the Committee's work. In the 1960s and 1970s, a small proportion of rarity submissions were accompanied by (generally) small, grainy images. Nowadays, a rarity with no photographic evidence is the exception rather than the norm (although certain groups, most notably seabirds, still present a major challenge). The fact that good-quality digital equipment is now (relatively) cheaply available has brought about a sea change in our approach to birding, and the sight of birders carrying bins and camera rather than bins and scope has become commonplace. Whether this will improve observers' field skills (rather than their ability to identify a bird subsequently, on the back of a camera or at home on the computer screen with the aid of Photoshop) is a moot point and a debate for another time, but there is no question that photography has extended ID frontiers to another level.

In 1992, *BB* and BBRC first introduced the Carl Zeiss Award, which aimed to single out one photograph or a set of photographs that had been most instructive in the record-assessment process during a particular 12-month period. That award has continued to the present time, with sponsorship from Carl Zeiss, in the form of a pair of binoculars for the winner, being greatly appreciated. To mark BBRC's half-centenary, we wanted to do something slightly different with

the award, for this year only, something less 'scientific' or clinical. We wanted to celebrate 50 years of rarity photographs by looking back over the highlights during that period. How can we define the 'best'? We can't, of course – but with the help of a judging panel with a broad range of interests and experience, we hoped to come up with a shortlist of images that were memorable and iconic for a variety of reasons, and that together would be a worthy tribute to the Committee's first 50 years.

The judges

The judging panel comprised Colin Bradshaw (BBRC Chairman 1997–2008), Adrian Pitches (BB 2000 director and N&c compiler), Richard Porter (BB 2000 director and BBRC member 1981–84), Roger Riddington (*BB* Editor) and Andy Stoddart (BBRC member 1993–2001). We felt that this team provided a reasonable spread of ages and experience – both birding and photographic – but we shan't bore readers with further details.

The methods

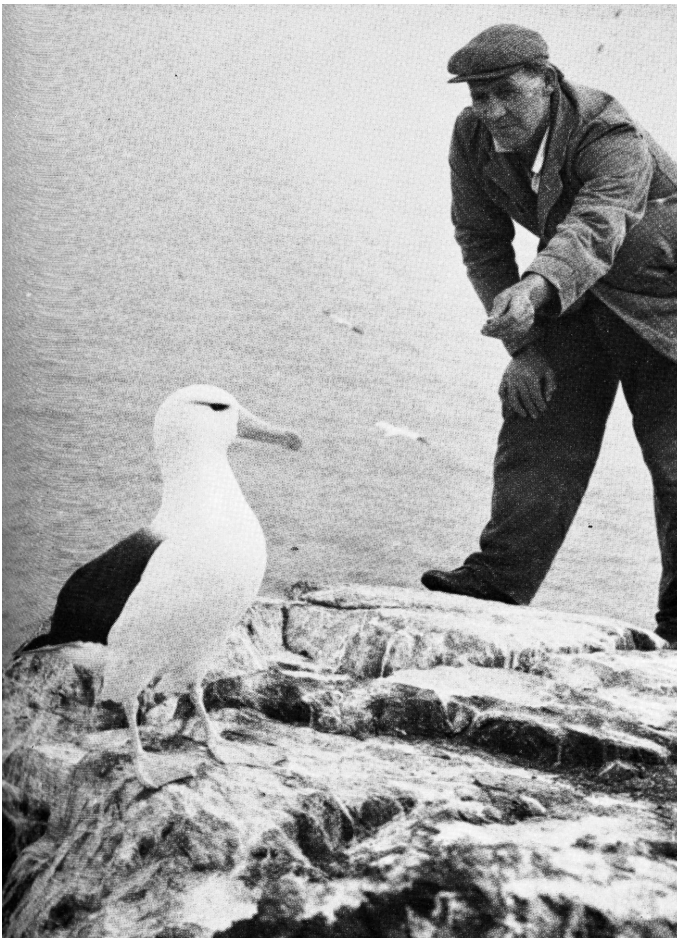
Our approach was to divide BBRC's first 50 years into five decades, with each judge being responsible for producing an initial shortlist of potential winners from one of these decades. To qualify for selection, the photograph(s) simply had to show a bird that (a) was a BBRC rarity at the time and (b) had been accepted by the Committee. The photograph(s) could have been published anywhere, not just in *BB*. The initial task was divided up as follows: Richard Porter took 1959–68, Colin Bradshaw 1969–78, Andy Stoddart 1979–1988, Adrian Pitches 1989–98 and Roger Riddington 1999–2008. With one

Eric Hosking



261. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Hinton, Suffolk, November/December 1962.

Scottish Daily Express



262. Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*, Bass Rock, Lothian, summer 1967.

exception, of which more in a moment, it proved fairly straightforward to come up with a shortlist of 6–10 photographs for each decade. Having done so, each judge voted independently for a top three in each ten-year period, to give a decade winner. Taking those five winners, we then voted once more for an overall winner.

The criteria

We considered a number of factors when selecting our initial shortlists. Several of these overlapped to some degree with the criteria used to judge the more conventional Carl Zeiss Award: had the photograph made a difference to whether the record was accepted?; had it made a difference to the way we approach identification? Other factors were related to the 'quality' of the bird: just how amazing was the occurrence? And then we tried to take account of the indefinable – photographs of birds that simply have a 'wow' factor because of the bird itself or the situation or the circumstances (perhaps encompassing historical/behavioural/ social elements). And finally (see below), we also took into account how many photographs there were of the bird.

The first round of voting

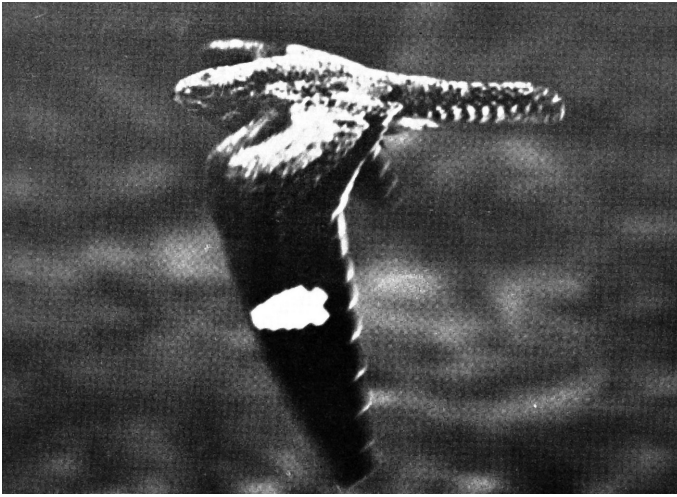
The shortlist of images for each decade is presented in table 1, with the 'score' being the cumulative number of points given by the five judges (three points for first, two for second, one for third).

This part of the process went smoothly until judges

Table 1. The shortlist of images for each decade.

	Score
1959–68	
Macqueen's Bustard <i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 56: pl. 61 (Eric Hosking) (plates 261 & 271)	14
Black-browed Albatross <i>Thalassarche melanophris</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 61: pl. 1 (<i>Scottish Daily Express</i>) (plate 262)	8
Snowy Owl <i>Bubo scandiacus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 61: pl. 18 (Bobby Tulloch)	8
Long-billed <i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i> or Short-billed Dowitcher <i>L. griseus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 54: pls. 57b & 57c (G. des Forges/Dick Bagnall-Oakeley)	-
Ivory Gull <i>Pagophila eburnea</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 55: pl. 68 (J. Peterson/C. J. Williamson)	-
Wilson's Phalarope <i>Phalaropus tricolor</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 60: pl. 63 (J. B. & S. Bottomley)	-
1969–78	
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker <i>Sphyrapicus varius</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 72: pl. 206 (David Hunt) (plate 264)	15
Common Nighthawk <i>Chordeiles minor</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 65: pl. 51 (David Hunt) (plate 263)	7
Pallid Swift <i>Apus pallidus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 71: pl. 135 (Jeff Pick)	6
Ross's Gull <i>Rhodostethia rosea</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 67: pl. 64 (J. B. & S. Bottomley)	2
Long-billed Dowitchers <i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 69: pl. 34 (J. B. & S. Bottomley)	-
Grey-cheeked Thrush <i>Catharus minimus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 70: pl. 115 (J. B. & S. Bottomley)	-
White-tailed Lapwing <i>Vanellus leucurus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 70: pl. 127 (Alan Dean)	-
Scarlet Tanager <i>Piranga olivacea</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 70: pl. 76 (David Hunt)	-
Semipalmated Plover <i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 73: pls. 227–230 (various)	-
1979–88	
White-throated Needletail <i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i> , <i>Birding World</i> 1: 186 (Pete Wheeler) (plate 266)	11
Hawk Owl <i>Surnia ulula</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 77: pl. 223 (Dennis Coutts) (plate 265)	9
Aleutian Tern <i>Onychoprion aleuticus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 74: pls. 238–244 (A. Ferguson, A. R. Taylor)	8
Long-toed Stint <i>Calidris subminuta</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 75: pl. 217 (Paul Doherty)	1
Gyr Falcon <i>Falco rusticolus</i> , unpublished (Pete Wheeler)	1
Little Swift <i>Apus affinis</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 74: pl. 190 (W. R. Hirst)	-
Cedar Waxwing <i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 93: pl. 353 (Clive McKay)	-
1989–98	
Pallas's Sandgrouse <i>Syrhaptes paradoxus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 84: pl. 262 (Larry Dalziel) (plate 268)	13
Golden-winged Warbler <i>Vermivora chrysoptera</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 85: pl. 270 (Paul Doherty) (plate 267)	12
Yellow-throated Vireo <i>Vireo flavifrons</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 87: pl. 98 (Tim Loseby)	2
Red-breasted Nuthatch <i>Sitta canadensis</i> , <i>Pitches & Cleaves</i> (2005) pls. 11/34 (David Cottridge)	1
Red-throated Thrush <i>Turdus ruficollis</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 88: pl. 173 (Dave Stewart)	1
Black Stork <i>Ciconia nigra</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 92: pl. 229 (Reston Kilgour)	1
Ancient Murrelet <i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i> , <i>Pitches & Cleaves</i> (2005): pls. 12/36 (Dave Atkinson)	-
Yellow-browed Bunting <i>Emberiza chrysophrys</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 88: pl. 190 (Rob Wilson)	-
Great Knot <i>Calidris tenuirostris</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 90: pl. 166 (Jim Pattinson)	-
Spanish Sparrow <i>Passer hispaniolensis</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 90: pl. 191 (Iain Leach)	-
1999–2008	
Yellow-nosed Albatross <i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 100: pls. 215 & 216 (Paul Condon) (plate 270)	13
Gyr Falcon <i>Falco rusticolus</i> with Little Auk <i>Alle alle</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 100: pl. 4 (Allister Irvine) (plate 269)	9
Red-billed Tropicbird <i>Phaethon aethereus</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 95: pl. 282 (Roger Barnes)	5
Fea's Petrel <i>Pterodroma feae</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 95: pls. 340 & 341 (Gary Bellingham)	2
Olive-tree Warbler <i>Hippolais olivetorum</i> , <i>Brit. Birds</i> 101: pls. 52–55 (Hugh Harrop)	1
Black Lark <i>Melanocorypha yeltoniensis</i> (various)	-
Long-billed Murrelet <i>Brachyramphus perdix</i> (various)	-

David Hunt



263. Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor*, St Agnes, Scilly, October 1971.

David Hunt



264. First-winter male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*, Tresco, Scilly, September 1975.

Dennis Courtts



265. Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula*, Frakkafeld, near Lerwick, Shetland, September 1983.

attempted to vote on RR's shortlist. Healthy debate, most of it constructive, ensued by e-mail, the upshot of which was that we felt we had to acknowledge how many photographs of a particular bird there were. Few people would argue that the Anglesey Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis* and the Devon Long-billed Murrelet *Brachyramphus perdix* were two of the birds of the decade, the first because it is one of those 'mythical' birds that everyone has always dreamed of seeing/finding, the second because it is such an improbable record. However, both birds were widely twitched and enjoyed by hundreds if not thousands of birders – and there were heaps of stunning photographs. How could we realistically choose the efforts of one photographer above the rest? In this decade at least, we decided that we could not, and instead voted on just the five birds that were effectively photographed by only one person. The fact that both Gary Bellingham and Hugh Harrop had already won the Carl Zeiss Award for their pictures of Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* and Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum* respectively, plus the fact that we were looking at a broader set of criteria, helps to explain the placings. But it wasn't easy!

The second round of voting

Having finally established our decade winners, we voted one more time to find our overall winner. The results are given in table 2.

The winner

The process of going back through 50 years' worth of rarity photographs unearthed some real gems and brought back some happy memories. The fantastic photograph of the Bass Rock Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*, taken in 1967 with lighthouse keeper Duncan Jordan looking on, was one that none of us had fully appreciated before: utterly charismatic and what a contrast to the modern-day scene. The Bottomleys' domination of the late 1960s/early 1970s rarities photographs is another point of interest of the early years, while the Isles of Scilly, and David Hunt in particular, were equally prominent in the 1970s as a whole. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius* remains a bird that many people dream of connecting with in Britain.

In some ways the middle decade had the best selection of truly iconic birds: White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* and Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula* have more wow factor than most, Long-toed Stint remains one of the most sought-after of waders, and Aleutian Tern *Onychoprion aleuticus* would surely have been a shoo-in for the Carl Zeiss Award had it then been in existence. The fourth decade considered here had a collection of birds that few would have predicted, including Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*, Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis* and a super-market special offer on American warblers, the Kent Golden-winged Warbler *Vermivora chrysoptera*. Paul Doherty's unbeatable story (finding the bird on the way to post a letter – how good is that?!), and photographs, of the last bird stand alongside the Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* that spent a few days in Shetland, and which Larry Dalziel

Table 2. Decade winners.

Decade	Photograph	Score	Place
1959–68	Macqueen's Bustard, Eric Hosking	23	1st
1969–78	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, David Hunt	7	5th
1979–88	White-throated Needletail, Pete Wheeler	12	4th
1989–98	Pallas's Sandgrouse, Larry Dalziel	18	2nd
1999–2008	Yellow-nosed Albatross, Paul Condon	15	3rd



Pete Wheeler

266. White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*, Hoy, Orkney, June 1988.



Paul Doherty

267. Golden-winged Warbler *Vermivora chrysoptera*, Larkfield, Kent, April 1989.

Larry Dalziel



268. Pallas's Sandpiper *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*, Quendale, Shetland, May 1990.

Allister Irvine



269. First-winter Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* with Little Auk *Alle alle*, sea area Fair Isle, west of Shetland, February 2005.

Paul Condon



270. Immature Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Manton, Lincolnshire, July 2007.

captured so memorably, as our top choices for that decade. And then for the last decade, when the rarities have become even less predictable, we have unbelievable images of unthinkable seabirds, together with an improbably dramatic image of a Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* clutching a hapless Little Auk *Alle alle*.

In some ways, we regretted having to find a winner for the award this year, since everyone will have their own personal favourites. Nonetheless, that's what we set out to do. Perversely, given all of the advances in equipment that we discussed briefly at the start, we chose Eric Hosking's images of the Suffolk Macqueen's Bustard in 1962 as the ones by which to remember BBRC's first 50 years. None of the judging panel saw the 'Suffolk Houbara' (as it was then known) and very few of BB's readers in 2009 will remember it, yet we all know the photographs, we can all picture the bustard strutting about, the shot with a headlamp of a Rolls Royce (Eric's favoured mode of transport – he bought a 1936 Rolls in 1953, drove it for 20 years and then sold it for more than he bought it for!) in the foreground, the images of the early twitchers with their wooden tripods and improbable telescopes. Eric Hosking still had a fine camera but even so, bird photography was infinitely more challenging in the middle decades of the twentieth century than it is today.

Eric's three children, Margaret, Robin and David,



Eric Hosking

271. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Hinton, Suffolk, November/December 1962.

accepted this award on behalf of the Eric Hosking Trust and will be using the prize to further the aims of the Trust (to sponsor ornithological research through the media of writing, photography, painting or illustration). David commented that: 'I know my father would be very honoured by this award and most interested that of all the records of the last 50 years the bustard should be number one. The fact that the prize is a pair of Zeiss binoculars is most fitting as Eric had a long association with Zeiss and these pictures were taken with a Zeiss Contarex camera!' The story of the Suffolk Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* was recounted in *BB* quite recently (Jobson & Small 2004) but we feel that it is worth repeating Eric Hosking's thoughts on the 'event' (see Appendix 1).

Roger Riddington, Colin Bradshaw, Adrian Pitches, Richard Porter and Andy Stoddart,
c/o Spindrift, Eastshore, Virkie, Shetland ZE3 9JS

We hope that readers have enjoyed this short article and the pictures it contains. We accept that the analysis was subjective rather than scientific but we feel that our winner is a worthy one, and look forward to the coming years of rarity photographs immensely. What would you have chosen – and why?

Acknowledgments

Harry Scott kindly provided digital files of several of the photographs that were taken in Scotland.

References

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Appendix 1. Extract from *An Eye for a Bird* (Hosking 1970).

'The Houbara was feeding in a field of mustard, which the farmer had generously refrained from ploughing in while the bird was there. I met Bert [Axell, then Minsmere warden] and arranged for him to drive my car across the frozen field

while I attempted to photograph the bird from the car window, using a 400-mm Novoflex lens with the Contarex camera. Unfortunately the light was bad and it was raining, but the next day the weather had improved so we decided to

make another attempt. But it was a Sunday and news travels fast – no fewer than eighteen cars were parked by the edge of the field and hordes of bird-watchers with every possible size and shape of binocular and telescope were observing the bustard's every movement. Obviously photography was out of the question.

'We made another attempt on Monday. A hide was erected along the edge of the field most favoured by the bird and I was just about to go into it when a press photographer arrived from London. He hadn't a clue about bird photography and imagined he could just walk up, take his pictures and rush back to London. I could not convince him that he would get nothing with the apparatus he had unless he concealed himself in some way. But he was too old a hand to take any advice from an amateur like me and set off across the field. Before he got within 200 yards of the bird it leapt into the air and was away. Sheepishly he came back full of apologies, realising for the first time that he had spoilt my chances of photography as well as his own. As I had a spare hide with me, I suggested that this should be erected by the side of mine and that he should sit in it and keep absolutely quiet until the bird returned, not attempting to take any photographs until it was well within range of our cameras.

'I think he must have suffered from St Vitus's dance or something because there was hardly a moment when I could not hear him moving –

striking matches to light cigarettes (he was a chain-smoker), making the wooden box on which he sat creak, playing with his camera, etc. After about an hour I saw the Houbara alight by the far edge of the field and start to walk slowly in our direction.

'As so much noise was coming from the other hide I whispered: "The bird's coming."

"What did you say?" answered a loud voice.

"The bustard is approaching your hide, from the left," I replied.

"Where? I can't see it," he shouted.

"For goodness' sake keep quiet!"

'There were a few seconds of silence and by now the Houbara was within five yards of our hides but at such a sharp angle to me that I decided to wait until it came by the front of the hide. Not so my impatient friend. In trying to turn his camera lens round sufficiently to focus on the bird, the wooden box collapsed with a crash and the Houbara took off!

'The press photographer returned to London without getting a single picture and I was beginning to think that I would be equally unlucky. But as Bert and I drove along the narrow country lane we could hardly believe our eyes – there was the Houbara in the road walking steadily towards us! We pulled up. I focused the camera and fired the shutter when the bird came to within eighteen feet. The result was published in *The Sunday Times* on 16th December 1962.'



Eric Hosking

272. Bert Axell (right) and A. N. Other (perhaps the photographer described in Appendix 1?) discussing the 'Suffolk Houbara', Suffolk, November 1962.