



## BEESTON WILDLIFE GROUP

### We've got a Bob

As mentioned in my previous article, when twitching gets a hold of you, it becomes addictive. As your list increases, there are fewer birds to go for, but when one does turn up you are more desperate to see it. More often than not, they turn up on far flung islands and you want to get there as quickly as possible. Even though most rarities eventually turn up on the mainland, patience is not in the twitchers armoury. You've got to see it now! Travelling long distances by car becomes tedious and tiring, and ferries are slow, so you need another option. The best by far is to hire a light aircraft. In the 90s a group of us were lucky enough to find a pilot based at Sleaf Airfield in Shropshire, who owned a 6 seater Cessna Beech Baron. Bob was willing to travel anywhere at the drop of a hat, for a price.

Rare seabirds are always highly sought after. They are most often encountered in August and early September when birders flock to well known seawatching points around the coast. Sites such as Flamborough Head in East Yorkshire and Pendeen and Porthgwarra in Cornwall, regularly produce rarities, but birds are usually distant and can be difficult to get on and are easily missed. It can be very annoying to find out about birds you never saw, after the event. Another option which can give much closer views is to go on a pelagic cruise. Every year the Scillonian ferry was hired for this purpose, taking 350 birders out into the waters south of the Scillies. The big prize in the 90s was Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*. It's larger than European Storm-petrel, longer legged and the feet project beyond the tail. The feet have yellow webs, but this feature is difficult to see unless the bird is really close. It is a Southern hemisphere breeder visiting the North Atlantic in late Summer-early Autumn, but is hardly ever seen from the mainland. Going to sea is the only option. Five of us had booked onto the Scillonian, which sailed out of Penzance, for Sunday 15th August 1993.

We were relaxed and excited as the weekend approached, but that all changed dramatically on the Thursday when we heard about a Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*, on North Ronaldsay, an island to the northeast of Orkney. Resident in

Spain and North Africa and breeding as far east as Turkey, it resembles a much smarter House Sparrow with a chestnut head and black spotted flanks. It was only the fifth record for Britain, after the first on Lundy in 1966. It might not be there when we got back from the pelagic, so we had to go before we sailed. Some of us couldn't get the Friday off at short notice, so it would have to be Saturday. If we had possessed any patience, and had waited three more years, we could have seen one at our leisure, in Cumbria, that stayed for two and a half years. So long infact, that it opened its own B+B.

Frantic phone calls were made and we arranged to meet Bob at the airfield first light on Saturday morning. We didn't want to fly until we were sure the bird was still present, so as Bob wheeled the aircraft out of the hangar and did his pre-flight checks, we stared anxiously at our pagers waiting for news. Then it was confirmed. "It's there" we all shouted. We climbed into the Cessna and were suddenly aware of how little space there was. But we had to put our worries to one side as we were off, heading up the west coast, over Blackpool and the Tower, then cutting across the Lake District towards the east coast of Scotland. The weather was excellent and we all enjoyed the stunning views. In next to no time we were approaching Orkney, but there was a problem. The wind had increased and Bob was told he would not be able to land the Cessna on North Ronaldsay. We asked why not and were told that there was no airstrip on the island, you literally land in a cow field. Not a nicely mown flat landing strip, just a tussocky, cowpat strewn field. Bob's plane was too powerful and the wind was in the wrong direction to slow him down. Oh dear!

Our only option was to land at Kirkwall on mainland Orkney, and try to sort something out, otherwise the trip was over. But that's exactly what Bob did. He told us we would only be able to land on North Ronaldsay if he could find someone who owned a smaller, lighter plane that we could hire. Bob went off to ask around the airport and make some phone calls whilst we gazed out of the window at planes splattered in cow dung. We were all starting to think we had made a big mistake and wasted our money, when Bob returned with good news. He had managed to find someone who owned a four seater plane, and was willing to hire it out to us. But first he wanted to go up with Bob to make sure he knew how to handle it. This all took a couple of hours and we were growing increasingly anxious. Then it slowly dawned on us that six people couldn't get into a four seater, it would have to be done in two flights.

When Bob returned, we were asked our weights and told the three lightest would go first, get dropped off, then Bob would come back for the two heavies. I was on the first flight. Pete sat in the front with Bob, whilst Paul and myself crammed into the back, and I mean crammed. It was tiny and we were squashed up against the sides. It also looked incredibly tinny with just the bare basics. We took off and headed out over the sea. As we approached North Ronaldsay and circled over, we could see the line of birders below. We turned out to sea, then turned again and headed for the cliffs and the cow field. Our knuckles were white as we held on. The wind buffeted the plane as it dipped and rose like a paper bag, and the wave battered cliffs loomed closer. I looked at Paul, he looked at me and we just shook our heads.

We hit the ground with a bang, then were airborne again, before slamming back down. Bob had to do everything in his power to stop us colliding with the dry stone wall at the far end of the field, and he managed it with a few yards to spare. We climbed out and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Poor old Bob was going to have to do that landing twice more.

We watched the plane take off, then made our way over to the line of birders and after a few glimpses of the Spanish Sparrow, it finally moved closer with a flock of House Sparrows and we had excellent views. About forty minutes later, the sound of a plane signalled our time was up and we walked back to meet it as it brought in Ian and Font. It was just as nerve racking watching the plane land as being in it. We swapped places with the two ghosts who emerged, and Bob flew us back to Kirkwall, before returning for the other two. We then swapped the four seater tin bath for the spacious luxury of the Cessna and flew back to Shropshire. We were all on a high. We'd seen the bird and survived. We paid our money, Bob had definitely earned it, and said goodbye. Now for the pelagic. Was it asking too much to see a Wilson's as well?

After stopping off for a good meal, we drove overnight to Penzance. The Scillonian left early morning and we were soon scanning for seabirds. With so many birders on board, every inch of space was taken up. There were even birders up by the funnel! One major problem soon became evident. When a bird was called, if you were on the wrong side of the boat, there was next to no chance of getting to the other side quickly. This was incredibly frustrating as not all the birds would hang around. But we were lucky. After enjoying good views of Cory's, Great, Mediterranean, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters, Sabines Gull and up to fifty European Storm Petrels, the only

Wilson's Storm-petrel seen that day was found by a birder standing next to me. It showed very close to the boat giving great views and all the relevant features were seen well. We were all ecstatic. It had been an incredible weekend and we had pulled off a great double twitch, travelling over 2000 miles.

I went down below to celebrate with a coffee and a Mars Bar, and sat next to a group of birders. We were all discussing the days events when one of them said "There's a Spanish Sparrow on North Ronaldsay". "Yes there is, I saw it yesterday" I casually replied. "No, that's just impossible" he said, shaking his head. "Not if you've got a Bob" was my smug reply.

**By Sean Browne**



**Spanish Sparrow / Wilson's Storm-petrel**

*Photos kindly provided by Sean Browne. © Sean Browne*