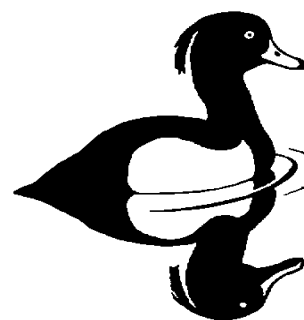


# READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

## ROC Newsletter

Spring 2003

No 21



### Introduction

I can hear one of my local Blackbirds singing as I write this – proving that Spring has truly arrived. If I was pushed to choose my favourite bird song I would have to go for the Blackbird - all those wonderful fluting notes followed by that apparently improvised, ever-changing flourish at the end.

On the subject on garden birds, later in the newsletter you will find more of the excellent work done by John Farnsworth on the Club's garden bird surveys. Also included are forms for the Summer Garden Bird Survey (sorry that they are a bit late) – I hope that many of you will take part. Speaking of surveys, don't forget that that the Berkshire Bird Index survey period is approaching – I'm sure that Chris Robinson (tel. 01491 671420) would love to hear from anyone willing to take part. I can assure you that it is well worth the effort and thoroughly enjoyable too! Volunteers are also needed to help with the production of the Berkshire Report – please see the item later in this Newsletter.

I'm pleased that more of you are opting to receive the newsletters via email – please let me know if you would prefer that method by sending an email to the address below. As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get contributions for the next newsletter to me by 21<sup>st</sup> June.

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Many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter. Illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

### Subscriptions – Gift Aid

The Club received a tax rebate of £288.96 from subscriptions paid as Gift Aid Donations. We have 106 of our 164 subscriptions paid in this manner; are you one of the 58 whose tax remains with the Government? All you need to do is sign an agreement and the Treasurer will do the rest.

John Roberts

### Upcoming Events

**Midweek Walks** - These will continue on the third Thursday of each month at 10 am, but arrangements for April, May and June have not been finalised. Anyone wishing to join these walks, which are a 2 hour stroll rather than a 2 hour twitch, should contact Dot Lincoln (on 0118 9427563) or John Roberts (on 0118 9482137). The April walk will take place on Maundy Thursday.

**Field Trips** - An interesting variety of trips continue into the Summer, details are in the membership card, but please note the following dates, venues and contacts.

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> April** – Aston Rowant & Cowlease Wood, Oxfordshire. Contact Colin Wilson on 01252 837411.

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> May** – Dungeness, Kent. Contact Bill Nicoll on 01344 455403

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> May** – Symonds Yat & Nagshead, Gloucestershire. Contact Colin Wilson on 01252 837411.

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June (Evening)** – Berkshire Downs. Contact Martin Sell on 0118 9471170.

**Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July** – Caesar's Camp, Bracknell. Contact Bill Nicoll on 01344 455403.

### The Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund

The profits from the sales of *The Birds of Berkshire* are held by the Club in a fund dedicated to bird conservation work. The fund now stands at £5,000 and the Club has invited proposals from local organisations or individuals for grants of not more than £1,500 to support bird conservation work in Berkshire in general and for projects involving wetlands in particular.

One grant has been awarded to the Newbury Ringing Group to help their work on bird populations in local wetland habitats. Further proposals are invited for consideration later this Spring. Applications will be judged by a committee representing the authors of *The Birds of Berkshire* and the Environment Agency, which provided support for its publication.

Proposals should state the work to be done, the conservation benefits that will be provided, the total cost and the contribution sought from the fund. Proposals should be sent by 31<sup>st</sup> May 2003 to the Secretary, Reading Ornithological Club, from whom further information can be obtained: Dr Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA; tel 0118 926 4513; e-mail [renton@righelato.net](mailto:renton@righelato.net).

### **Berkshire County Bird Report**

For many years, the Reading Ornithological Club (ROC) has been the sponsor and funder of the Berkshire County Bird Reports. Although ROC fund the printing of the Report, they are not responsible for its production, although many members have of course helped in production over the years. Responding to concerns about the timeliness of publication of the Reports in recent years, a sub-committee has now been set up to find a way forward.

Although he has had considerable help from others, responsibility for editing and much of the production in the past has fallen on the county Bird Recorder, Peter Standley. The work is really far more than a one-man job and while Peter will continue work on production of some of the unpublished years (1996–1999), he will not be able to take on anything beyond that. We have plans for 2000 and 2001 but in order to get back on track it is proposed that a separate effort should now be launched with the aim of producing an annual report for publication by the end of each following year. We would like to start work on the 2002 report immediately.

We are looking for a person or persons to help with the following editorial tasks:-

- Chairing of the Editorial Committee/Panel
- Receiving output from the recording database (COBRA), checking records and referring queries to County Recorder
- Organising team of account writers, providing data sources and guidance
- Editing species accounts with Editorial Panel
- Receiving and preparing Report articles for printing
- Arranging for preparation of (or preparing):-
  - Arrival/departure dates tables
  - Escapes section
  - Weather and Ringing report
  - Corrections to earlier reports
  - List of contributors
  - Contents page and Introduction
- Organising frontcover design
- Approaching advertisers and obtaining copy
- Approaching photographers/artists for appropriate material
- Assembling copy into format ready for printing
- Organising printing and proofreading
- Arranging distribution and sale of Reports

If you are able to help with any of these tasks we would like to hear from you! As soon as possible please, but by end of May 2003 latest.

Please contact any of the following:-

Mike Taylor Tel: 01635 248382

email: [mike@taylormj.freemove.co.uk](mailto:mike@taylormj.freemove.co.uk)

Marek Walford Tel: 0118 947 5202

email: [marek\\_walford@hotmail.com](mailto:marek_walford@hotmail.com)

Chris Robinson Tel: 01491 671420

email: [chris.robinson@hp.com](mailto:chris.robinson@hp.com)

Peter Standley Tel: 01344 623502

### **Black Redstarts in Reading**

The TABCG has been in contact with the Reading Environment Officer (Tina Gower), who is responsible for developing the Reading BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan). One of the suggestions was that the Black Redstart should feature in the plan and the idea has gained momentum and it has now become something of a flagship species for the area. In order to take the idea forward and look to provide and conserve suitable habitat and nesting sites more needs to be known about existing sites in the town. This is particularly relevant given the plans for development in Reading.

The birds have been seen at various sites, but more information is needed about precise locations and to that end some survey work will need to be done. The Council have promised to help, but there is an opportunity for local groups and birdwatchers to be involved in the work. Surveys are to take place early on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> April - if you want to be involved or know more about the project please contact John Lerpiniere (telephone 0118 9426225 or email on [johnle@sagainternet.co.uk](mailto:johnle@sagainternet.co.uk)) or Tina Gower on 0118 9513010.

### **News from the TABCG**

Recent work around Hosehill has included running repairs following the floods earlier in the year, including work to try and improve drainage around the site. Work has also been carried out on the reedbeds, island and tern rafts in preparation for the breeding season, although as always more work needs to be done and volunteers to help out are always welcome. Work parties take place every Saturday morning, meeting at Hosehill at 9am. Around the area existing nest boxes have been cleaned out and some new ones put in place, most notably on Bottom Lane where permission was gained to place some specialised Willow Tit boxes.(including some standard tit boxes to try and keep the Blue and Great Tits away from the Willow Tit boxes.

The final results of the Hanson Challenge are now in, with the Theale area pits coming a respectable 9<sup>th</sup> out of 12 entrants, with a good total of 131 species. The winner of the category was Rutland Water with 195 species.

There will be an extra emphasis on the group's survey work this year. Given all the proposals for large-scale development around the area, all help with surveys will be welcome. Please contact John Lerpiniere on 0118 9426225 if you can help.

This years Bird Race will take place on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May, with teams of 3 vying for the coveted prize. Please contact Andy Horscroft on 0118 941 6771 for further details.

The Theale Area Bird Conservation Group always welcomes new members and anybody who can help out at work parties - please contact Brian Uttley for further info. (tel. Work - 01189 783783, Home - 01189 832894)

Information courtesy of TABCG (with thanks to Cathy McEwan)

### An Extraordinary Sheppey Day – December 2002

There are three constants you can expect on any trip to the Isle of Sheppey: Rain, wind and birds. This trip had them all but it also had much, much more!

We all met at the Sea Wall on a mild but damp morning. (It has to be said a diversion for a Bewick's Swan, which turned out to be a farmyard Goose did not help the timing of the arrival!) Nevertheless, we immediately locked our eyes onto a Red-Throated Diver nice and close to the shore and, for a change, easy to identify. The waders on the beach and many Great Crested Grebes and Wigeon on the sea provided more interest while we warmed up for the day ahead.

The plan had been to move south to Shellness next but the Sheppey rain decided to make its entrance! We headed off to the Harty Ferry road to watch from the cars for the appearance of raptors, including hopefully, Rough Legged Buzzard. While the rain fell intermittently we worked our way along the lane checking the bushes and fields for birds. Golden Plover were numerous and many Red-Legged Partridge were seen in the set aside ground at the field edges. Alerted by Alan Woods we also found a special bird which is becoming difficult to find – the Grey Partridge, the first in a couple of years for a few of us! A solitary Fieldfare worked along a hedge and Linnets were skipping over our heads in small but active parties. The area was obviously managed for game birds as the set aside land has feeding hoppers placed in the vegetation to encourage them. We were delighted to see a large gathering of House Sparrows feeding from the grain supplies at the top of the lane.

Having 'done the lane' we settled down at the off road area known as the 'Raptor Watchpoint'. Here the excitement really began. A swift sighting of a Short Eared Owl gave us some cheer before we had to run for the cars to escape another heavy shower. At the next break in the rain we saw the highlight of the day. A Merlin began the chase of a Meadow Pipit. We watched them chasing and ducking and diving in the sky, high, low, vertically, horizontally with few breaths in between until the Meadow Pipit finally ran out of gas and went to ground. The Merlin, not to be defeated, dropped on the wretched Pipit and lifted it up and away to a hidden plucking post! Many of us have seen Merlins and many have seen them chasing but this spectacle was truly one of the best I have ever witnessed. Thank you poor Pipit for putting up such a great fight and doing it so wonderfully in full view of all of us!

Further highlights of the Harty Ferry area were many excellent sightings of Marsh Harriers and thousands of Lapwing in the fields but no Rough Legged Buzzard. On Sheppey days we have to keep moving despite the richness of the birdlife as there is always somewhere else to find reward. The rain had stopped and the cloud had broken so we set off to the delights of the track to Shellness. The time had allowed the tide to run away from us so the normal wader flocks were spread over miles of estuary. The Wigeon flocks were truly impressive across the estuary and Shelduck showed beautifully as they dabbled, surrounded by Dunlin, creeping in and out of the ripples of mud.

Turning to return to the cars we were alerted to an Owl on the beach. Then there were two! They disappeared beneath the tussocks of grass and the sand bar. While we debated moving closer we resighted them but this time it was three, four, five, and then six birds - a full blown parliament of Short Eared Owls! Again this was a first for many of us. We had seen owls in pairs and sometimes two or three at a time but never six apparently hunting as a pack!



Time was marching on so we had to follow it. Off we went to RSPB's reserve at Elmley with the wind in our sails! It had turned much milder and the sun was shining intermittently now. Elmley always promises much and this day a highlight was a Peregrine Falcon, battling against the wind and finally stooping down to lower heights, sending hundreds of waders darting for their lives across the estuary. The pools at Elmley always provide plenty of birds and the large numbers of Pintail, Shoveler with a smattering of Gadwall and Teal were a pleasure to sit and watch with all the other birds for a while as the light faded. Geese are a speciality of Sheppey and we waited for their return to roost at dusk. Greylags were already in good numbers on the ground and we waited for the spectacle. When the birds came, they seemed to take an age. They approached and lost height, retreated and gained height again, headed South, then East and finally came in to roost in small Skeins. As they approached we had trouble seeing what they were although it was clear from the sounds that Greylags predominated. Once on the ground we began to identify White Fronts. Whether they were there already or arrived with the Greylags we did not conclude!

The walk back to the car park at Elmley is always one of the events of the day! It is generally only for the hardy (the RSPB only transport the disabled!) and is either aided by a strong wind or very much delayed by the same! It has been known to be a very wet walk also! On this day we had a spectacular finish to our birding trip. The sunset was wonderful, a rich pink sky flooding the scene before us as we trod our way back on a mild evening to the car park. I don't recall a more beautiful scene at Elmley than this one! This was a trip I am truly glad I did not miss – an extraordinary day!

Colin Wilson

### Bedgebury Pinetum – 9<sup>th</sup> February 2003

On a damp and dark day, reminiscent of Bank Holiday Mondays on Barry Island, eleven members gathered to search for hawfinches. Like all good leaders I allowed one of the group to spot the birds as they came to the roost, and we all had excellent views. Additionally we had an elusive brambling with some chaffinches, some goldcrests and about 10 other species! Not a day for a variety of birds, but an enjoyable one which achieved the aim of finding hawfinches. My thanks to all those who attended.

John Roberts