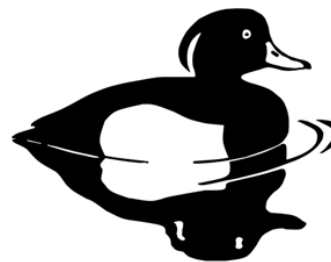


BOC Newsletter

Spring 2012

No 57



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Introduction

For those of you who spotted that I mistakenly labelled the last newsletter as the Spring edition (when it should have been the Winter one) I do apologise for any confusion. Be assured that you are probably no more confused than me (I blame it on the weather). Anyway, welcome to the real spring edition of the Club Newsletter, although it still feels that that spring has really yet to arrive, despite being well into June! Having said that, the early warm weather we had in March was enough to convince my local garden birds to start nesting and we now have a fair number of young birds around the area. Let’s just hope that the subsequent persistent wet conditions won’t have caused them too many problems.

I hope that you all have an enjoyable spring and summer. If you go on any birding trips why not write up a short account and send it to me for the newsletter – always a good chance to gloat about where you have been and what you have seen! And don’t forget that our field trips and excursions continue through the summer, including our regular coach trip to Birdfair at Rutland, led by Ray Reedman (see below for details). If you are interested in any trips please contact the leader for further information or to book a place when required. Ray has also been busy putting together next season’s indoor programme – see later item for further information about the treats to come.

As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get contributions for the Summer edition of the newsletter to me by Friday 27th July.

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

Birds of Berkshire 2006 & 2007

All members should, by now, have received their copies of The Birds of Berkshire Annual Report for 2006 & 2007 (i.e. combined report with a picture of an Alpine Swift on the front). If you have not received your copy please contact Mike Turton (on 0118 9694197 or via email at mike.turton@berksoc.org.uk)

British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water

A reminder that we will be taking a coach up to the Fair on **Saturday 18th August**.

Departures: Newbury (the Wharf) 6.30 a.m.; Reading (Whiteknights) at 7 a.m. and Bray Wick (Sports Club) at 7.30 a.m.

The cost has gone up a bit more than expected due to an increase in entry charges, the first in a number of years. The inclusive ticket is now £32.

However, it is always a great day out, with talks, exhibits and birds too.

To reserve a seat call **Ray Reedman (0118 9864338)** as soon as possible.

Birds of Berkshire Atlas – Photographer’s Opportunity

Work continues apace on this and we thank those providing assistance. The Editorial team has decided to consider photographs of birds taken in Berkshire for inclusion in the Atlas. Berkshire rarities are especially welcome, but common species particularly showing typical behaviour will be most welcome.

In the first instance send any images you would like to be considered to colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk but at this stage, they must be low resolution images so as not to clog up email systems! Please name the image with brief bird name, date and place and your initials before you send it. The quality of the images will need to be broadly comparable to the images shown as winners in the BOC Annual Photographic Competition, which you can see at :-

http://www.berksoc.org.uk/photographic_competition/index.shtml or
http://www.berksoc.org.uk/photographic_competition/2011/gallery.shtml

The deadline for submission is 30th June, but earlier would help. We regret that the budget for the book (which is primarily aimed at raising money for conservation in Berkshire) does not run to payment, but the photographers will all be credited appropriately for their work in the publication.

Any queries please, email Colin in the first instance.

The Indoor Programme for 2012-13

As always, we try bringing something to reflect the many facets of our interest in birds: the plans for next year include some well-tried formulae and a few new ideas.

Superb photography will be guaranteed in Mike Read’s talk on the birds of Corsica, while the work of Brian Winter, the winner of this year’s Photographic Competition, will be a major element in the talk by Colin Wilson and Ted Rogers on Catalonia.

Alan Davies and Ruth Miller will take us into the ultimate birding travel story with their account of the *Biggest Twitch*, a massive chase around the world to see staggering numbers of species. David Lindo, the well-known broadcaster and writer, also travels a bit in his quest as the *Urban Birder*, but he is a man who appreciates his local patch too.

The eminent ornithologist, Ian Newton, will cover the topic of his New Naturalist volume on *Migration*, while Douglas Russell, from Tring Natural History Museum will be talking about the importance of the egg collection, of which he is Curator.

A quite different angle on birds will be found in the talk by wildlife artist, Jackie Garner, on *Birds in Ancient Egyptian Art*, which will appeal to a wide range of interests: my hope is that you will bring some non-birding friends that evening, because Jackie’s talk is designed for historians and artists too.

A topic of more current concern will be Simon Towers’ talk on Wildlife Crime, an area in which he has worked as a police officer. And for those of us who mutter about monocultures, chemicals and the decline of birds, Nicholas Watts of Vine House Farm will present the positive efforts that are being made to farm for wildlife. While, towards the end of the indoor season, the BTO’s Nigel Clark promises an informative and interesting evening with his talk *Waders, Estuaries and Man*.

One or two people have commented that last season’s was a strong programme and I hope that this one will be as good if not better. These talks are central to the BOC’s social activities, so we would love to see more of you there more often. Don’t forget that we may be able to link you up with a lift if getting there is a problem.

Champion’s League? No contest! Switch it off and come out.

Ray Reedman

PS For those of you who like to get things into their diaries, the indoor meeting dates for 2012 will be as follows: September 26th, October 10th, October 24th, November 7th, November 21st, December 5th.

Take a Break at Moor Green Lake

As a change from watching certain major competitive events on television this summer, why not spend a morning relaxing on a local nature reserve at Moor Green Lakes Group’s Open Day from 9am to about 1pm on Saturday 11 August.

Access is from the car park on Lower Sandhurst Road, Finchampstead (RG40 3TF).

You will be able to watch bird ringing demonstrations by Reading and Basingstoke Ringing from 9am to 11am and take guided walks onto the reserve to see butterflies, mammals and reptiles. All are welcome. For further details, contact Sue Dent of BVCP on 01252 331353. While no donations will be turned away, **entry is FREE!**

Red Kite Talk

“You’ve seen them flying majestically over your gardens, now find out all about them”

The Earley Environmental Group (www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk) are hosting a talk by Brian Clews on Red Kites on Monday 9th September, from 7.30 to 9.30pm.

The Oracle Corporation have kindly provided the venue in Building 550 Restaurant, Oracle Corporation UK Limited, Oracle Parkway, Thames Valley Park, Reading RG6 1RA. Located off the last roundabout at the very end of the 329M. Proceed to the next roundabout (TVP Security Lodge) and take the second exit. At the next roundabout take the third exit and enter the Oracle campus. Building 550 is the first building on the right. Enter the car park and park adjacent to the building. Follow the signs and enter the building via the main entrance and the front. The restaurant is located on the ground floor.



All are welcome – there is no entrance fee, although a contribution towards costs would be much appreciated

BOC Trip to Norfolk - February 2012

The 2012 club trip to Norfolk took a bit of planning. It is difficult to operate this trip year after year, as we do, without the content becoming to some extent repetitive, but certain nature reserves are so worth visiting that it is almost impossible to miss them. Also there is always a certain amount of pressure from some of the participants to search for the rarer birds that are reported on the all too easily accessible information services. As a result we largely followed last year’s plan, but with some worthwhile changes.

On the Thursday we went first to Minsmere, partly to break the journey and partly because it usually provides a fine selection of scarcer species. We spent the latter half of the morning there, but this year there were very few birds there – not a wader to be seen (apart from a few lapwings) and hardly any wildfowl. However there were at least 3 ‘redhead’ smew on the south scrape, perhaps seven red-throated divers on the sea (difficult to count because they were underwater so much), several marsh harriers showed occasionally in the reedbed and some of the group saw a bittern as it flew over the marsh but it was visible for no more than 15 seconds. In fact this set a precedent for the trip in two ways – quite a lot of species were seen by some of the group but not by others and bitterns were popping up all over the place so in the end everyone got good views.



After lunch (a swift sandwich in the hide) we moved north via Lowestoft Ness, where purple sandpipers were present in their usual place, to Hickling Broad where we took up position on the (rather crowded) viewing mound near Stubb Mill to enjoy the late afternoon raptor roost. We were not disappointed: probably 3 merlins came in early and one sat prominently on a bush in good light for at least 15 minutes before finding a less exposed roosting place, two common cranes flew almost overhead and a barn owl hunted nearby. Soon the marsh harriers started arriving in droves, sometimes 8 or 10 in the air at once, and as the dusk deepened two hen harriers gave poor views. In half darkness we almost missed two more cranes that came in low without the usual trumpeting as they dropped quickly into the roost.

On Friday we looked over Breydon Water (the big estuary inland from Great Yarmouth), where there were 1000s of miscellaneous waders before stopping at a roadside field that contained about 200 swans. There was some disagreement about whether they were mainly bewicks or mainly whoopers but eventually we decided that it depended on which side of the field you viewed from, so there were probably about 100 of each.

Next we made our way up the Yare valley, where Strumpshaw Fen, Buckenham Marsh, Cantley Marsh and several surrounding marshes form a continuous 10 kilometre complex of wetland reserves. The club had visited here in the past, usually quite briefly, but today we spent several hours there. I remember these reserves as bleak, inaccessible places without hides, footpaths or other facilities, but that has changed. They are now much more accessible than they used to be and Strumpshaw has nature trails, hides, a proper reception centre and helpful volunteers running it, while Buckenham at least has a parking place. Both reserves are still very bleak and windswept, but (fortunately for the wildlife) that is not going to change. The highlights there were a flock of bean geese (ssp fabalis) with a lesser white-fronted goose in attendance, a barn owl, a short eared owl, 2 peregrines and a dozen or more ruff.

Outside the reception hide at Strumpshaw several marsh tits made swift forays to the feeders but they were not often seen well as they were so quick, but in the end everyone had reasonable views. While we sat in the Fen Hide, a bittern flew low over the reeds and later a 'ring-tail' hen harrier flew slowly past at close quarters, before flying through a patch of scrub causing dozens of previously unseen pigeon and jackdaws to erupt in panic. On the way to our hotel in Hunstanton, a fortunate few found a great grey shrike that had been reported in a hedgerow near Fakenham but most either failed to see it or decided not to stop there.

On Saturday we explored the north coast 'backwards', i.e. starting at Kelling in the east and visiting Salthouses, Holkham and Titchwell during the day. We did this to ensure a low tide at Holkham and a high one at Titchwell, but it also meant we mainly avoided a fast eastward-moving band of heavy rain by driving through it. We saw too many good birds that day to list them all, but the best was without much doubt a bittern in the west marsh at Titchwell that moved about in the open, no more than 30 metres from the path for several minutes allowing all present the most splendid opportunity to examine it in detail. At Holkham, a small flock of shore larks were hard to see as the heavy rain started though one fortunate member who wandered off on his own saw them very well a short while later. Other notables (none seen by everyone due to difficult conditions or brief opportunities) included arctic redpoll, velvet scoter, long-tailed duck and spotted redshank. A big flock of snow buntings allowed us to watch them from as close as 3 metres while they fed on the shingle at Salthouses – wonderful!



Sunday, our final day, began with a bitterly cold and totally unproductive hour on the wind lashed beach and dunes at Holme. After a most welcome hot breakfast most of us made our way, by different routes, to Lynford Arboretum (north of Brandon, Suffolk), which I had almost decided to miss after seeing almost nothing there last year. It was a good thing that we did go because the first two people to arrive saw a two-barred crossbill (which all the rest missed) and later, in the area known as the paddock, a long wait was rewarded when a flock of perhaps 20 hawfinches flew into a leafless hornbeam tree, and posed for a minute in the branches before dropping on to the ground below where they fed for at least 15 minutes in the dense undergrowth, frequently popping out to give us a clear line of sight. What a nice way to end the trip.

As usual we saw a lot of birds of many bird species but the trip total of 142 (including two feral species) is misleading as everyone missed several of them due to the group spreading out, difficult viewing conditions or the birds showing only briefly. Also a small group made a special effort to find several rarities that had been reported, thereby inflating the total beyond that which the main group saw. Even so, most people saw over 100 species including most of the scarce ones.

It is also worth mentioning the various mammals we saw: there were the usual common ones including grey squirrel, rabbit, fox, muntjac and roe deer, but more notable were several common hares, two grey seals (at Minsmere and Titchwell) and a Chinese water deer at Hickling broad.

Bill Nicoll

Editor's Note: Bill's reference to a "swift sandwich" cannot, of course, be accurate as swifts are summer visitors to the UK and would not be found in Norfolk in February ☺

Nutcrackers to Stilts

We do not usually go on holiday to look at birds! But we do like to see what is around wherever we are. So we were delighted that two recent trips to foreign parts were productive on the feathered front. The first was to Switzerland at the end of September/start of October 2010, and the second to Southern Portugal in March 2011.

Swissish Sweeties

I am lucky enough to have a parent living in Switzerland, so we had comfort and excellent cooking at my father's home in Bern (or Berne to the Francophiles among you). Public transport in Switzerland is excellent, so we bought a couple of Swiss Passes, which provide free travel on trains and buses, and discounted travel on private transport such as cable cars. Apart from during our trip to the Oeschinensee - a lake 1600 metres up in the mountains above Kandersteg - where we saw our only snowfall of the trip, the weather was sunny and not particularly cold (except on the mountain tops).



We didn't have binoculars with us, as the holiday was to be a mix of hiking, visiting tourist spots and high mountains. But we still managed to see plenty of less familiar birds well enough for even us to identify them. For example, Willow Tit in a garden in Köniz (the Bern suburb where we stayed), and - on our final day - what sounded like a Savi's Warbler singing in regenerating woodland not far from there. In Bern itself there were Crag Martins, which you could watch from above by climbing the Minster tower.

Redstarts (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) were common in many of the grassy alpine valleys, but especially at Kandersteg. We also saw Alpine Choughs (our first!) in several places: near Zermatt; at the Schilthorn (where George Lazenby's James Bond battled evil Telly Savalas); and at the Jungfrauoch observation platform, above the glaciers at 3800 metres, where these beautiful birds were tame enough to take food from our hands. Other mountain birds included Ravens and - another first for us - Nutcrackers, which were very common in the pine woods 1200 metres up between Zmutt and Furi, just south-west of Zermatt.

We were also lucky to see some beautiful flowering plants, such as yellow and summer gentians, autumn crocus, harebells and alpine alliums. There were some good fungi too in the Könizbergwald (Köniz hill forest) close to where we stayed. And we even saw wall lizards warming themselves among path-side boulders near Zermatt.

Portuguese Pretties

In the 3rd week of March 2011, Ian's brother kindly let us use his villa, which is in the millionaire's garden-village of Quinta do Lago, on the edge of the Ria Formosa natural park. There are many habitats: salt marsh, mimosa groves, stone pine heathland, salt pans, open sea (Atlantic Ocean), and the park-like gardens plus golf courses around the mansions. For an idea of the place, take a look at <http://felinos.com.sapo.pt/quinta/>.

Each day we walked in a different type of habitat, all within a few miles of the villa, none requiring a car to reach or anything heavier than trainers on the feet. After a few hours walking, it certainly felt good to cool one's feet in the Atlantic - but it was way too cool to swim in!

This time we had binoculars, but no bird identification book (Doh!). However, we still managed to identify about 80 species. As with Switzerland, many were familiar (though, some - such as Robins - were "rare"), but there were literally dozens of species that we had never seen before. Some of the birds were summer visitors and some were winter visitors, with a few in winter plumage despite temperatures above 20C!



There were many species of wader on the tidal mudflats, including Avocet, Kentish Plover and Black-winged Stilt; as well as Spoonbills and Greater Flamingos. White Storks were common, frequently using the mobile telephone masts as nest sites.

Common garden birds included Azure-winged Magpies, Serins (very noisy!), Common Waxbills, Hoopoes and Wrynecks, as well as the more familiar Blackcaps and Blackbirds. On the main lakes were Purple Gallinules, Red-crested Pochard, and even a pair of Black-headed weaver bird (*Ploceus melanocephalus*)!

In the low scrub near the coast (the "Garrigue") there were many types of warbler that were totally new to us, such as the Fan-tailed (or Zitting Sisticola) which "zipped" at the top of each loping wing beat. Taller scrub was home to Sardinian and Subalpine warblers, and to Woodchat Shrikes, with their striking chestnut heads. Closer to the sea were Larks (either Thekla's or Crested, we wouldn't like to say), and an assortment of gulls, which we're sure included Little Gull, but we're pretty lousy at separating the "less obvious" species. Aside from a kestrel, the only raptors we saw the whole time we were there were some Black Kites rising on thermals, and a single, male Marsh Harrier. We may have seen a White-rumped Swallow, but - not being expert birders - we wouldn't put much money on it.

The ponds were full of European pond tortoises, stripe-necked terrapins and noisy pool frogs. The stone walls home to lizards, and there were Moorish geckos in the bird hide and around the villa. Spring flowers were in full bloom, showing how fertile the sandy soil can be. All in all, a great place for nature lovers.

Heidi Bailey & Ian Saunders

Editor's Note: If nothing else this should act as a reminder to take your binoculars AND a good field guide with you when travelling!

Olé! Isn't Spain just Wonderful

As I sip my breakfast *café con leche* in the Hostal Legido bar in Daroca some 80 kms SW of Zaragoza in N Spain (as one does) I feel very moved to record just some of the amazing recent sightings of tens and tens and ---- of thousands of Common Cranes migrating gracefully northwards along the river Gallego valley, calling that very evocative k-r-r sound. As I have now been occasionally travelling in Spain (mostly with Fiona and earlier working as a bachelor professional musician) over some fifty years I cannot think of a nicer surprise to effectively celebrate my Spanish big FIVE Oh (!)



Initially on 9/3/12 at about 10.00 hrs I was working my way up one of the rocky ravines near the church at Riglos (NW of Huesca) observing Black Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, Blue Rockthrush, European Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Humming-bird Hawkmoth and other species, when I heard and soon located (and decided to try and estimate numbers migrating) wave after wave of loose V-formation Common Cranes moving northwards. Based on a precise count of individuals in part of a V, but then estimating as accurately as possible the total number of such parts for each V then for all waves/Vs over a period of at least ¾ hr, I eventually arrived at a staggering (n.b. estimated!) number of at least seventy five thousand individuals, with later stragglers still moving northwards in the afternoon.

Occasionally a group would appear over the ravine ridge as a spiral circling around, presumably utilising any thermals developing in the morning sunshine before developing their V-formation (numbers then being estimated as above) bearing in mind the Pyrenees are only some 70 kms distant from Riglos as the Crane flies. I also tried to estimate their average elevation along the Gallego by reference to local hilltops (including the *Riglos Mallos*) and main road A132 through the valley, arriving at an estimated +1100m, this still being appreciably below the lower pass elevations in the central Pyrenees. I also attempted to estimate their average flight speed by reference to the local 1:400 000 map and timing an estimated distance travelled, resulting in an average speed of about 50kms/hr (little wind at ground level). Based on local anecdotal evidence the Cranes would probably have rested at least overnight in the vicinity of the Sotonera reservoir (*Embalse de la Sotonera*) some 30 kms to the S of Riglos.

The following morning 10/3/12 I was strolling around the lightly wooded hills near Loarre Castle (*Castillo de Loarre*) not far from Riglos again at about 1000 hrs when I heard and then located an additional 3-4,000 Cranes over a period of about an hour again flying northwards along the Gallego from the general direction of the Sotonera reservoir.

On 12/3/12 at about 100 hrs I was driving just S of Sotonera reservoir eastwards from Piedratajada along a minor road then crossing the Gallego (single-width bridge) just N of Marracos towards Tormos. After an unexpected, but delightful sighting of a Fox trotting smartly across a field next to the road I came across at close range several groups of Cranes in the next field at a slightly higher elevation, estimated at some 2,000 individual, most of which appearing to show juvenile plumage characteristics and may have been feeding before detecting my arrival. There was evidence of some recent irrigation nearby and a tractor was working over the other dry ground (despite being close to the Gallego). I had only recently become aware of the serious drought especially in N Spain, no rain/snow for more than 3 months following periods of below average rainfall.

Having eventually arrived in Daroca the night before, on 13/3/12 I drove to Lake Gallocanta some 20 kms to the SW on road A2111 then on surfaced minor roads around the lake arriving at Hostal Allucant in the village of Gallocanta, locating only a single group of Cranes of about 100 individuals. The Hostal however has a copy of the official census of wintering Cranes in the area, some figure repeated below (rounded by myself, but with acknowledgement to the official census).

Date	No. Present	No. Migrating	Total
17/11/11	28,000		
27/11/11	29,000		
9/2/12	18,000		
16/2/12	14,000		
1/3/12	18,000	14,000	32,000
13/3/12	100	-	100

Although my earlier estimate of 75,000+ passing Riglos on 9/3/12 might seem to be on the high side, I have never witnessed such an amazing spectacle of Common Crane northwards migration. Olé!



S. John Farnsworth

PS I had previously made a provisional arrangement to meet up with Jeremy Brack (ROC Secretary 1969-1974) who has a second home in the Lake Gallocanta area, on his return from searching for Red-breasted Geese in Romania (apparently -26 degrees C during Feb 2012!), but our paths didn't quite cross (hopefully next time!)