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**Introduction**

This newsletter is going out with the mailshot for the new Club season, along with the usual inserts; including your membership renewal form, the new season programme card, the AGM papers and a copy of the garden bird survey form.

There is another great programme of events for the new season, both indoor meetings and field trips. The indoor meetings will feature some top speakers on a variety of bird topics – something for everyone - with almost all meetings taking place in our usual venue in the Palmer Building at Reading University. Outdoor excursions will take us to many fine birdwatching sites, both near to home and further afield – some by car and others using a shared coach. Most outings are day or half day outings, but there are a few weekend options as well. All trips have named contacts so please talk to them to find out more and check that the trip is taking place as advertised. **For weekend and longer trips please contact the leader well in advance to allow all the arrangements to be made.** The programme card contains information about both indoor meetings and outdoor trips, so keep it handy as a reminder.

On the subject of the Committee, Mike Turton has put together an item which gives an insight into the workings of this “august body” over the last year, as well as some suggestions where people can help out in the running of the Club. You don’t need to have any particular skills, just a willingness to get a bit more involved in the Club and its activities. Don’t be afraid to put yourself forward if you have a little time to spare.

As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get items for the next edition of the newsletter to me by the end of October.

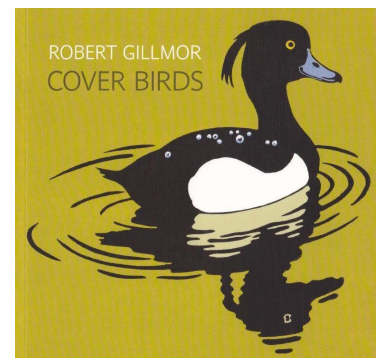
Ted Rogers (01344 883237)  
8, Ranelagh Crescent  
Ascot  
SL5 8LW  
Email: [ted.rogers@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:ted.rogers@berksoc.org.uk)

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

**Robert Gillmor – Cover Birds**

You will all be pleased to hear that our President Emeritus Robert Gillmor is recovering well from his recent heart bypass operation. I’m sure that many of you already have copies of his latest book “Cover Birds” but, if you haven’t, it is well worth getting hold of a copy. It is the story of his formative bird-watching and print-making years and includes images of his many covers of our “Birds of Berkshire”, produced for the Club over the years from 1949 onwards.

It is available from various on-line book retailers if you are interested. The cover price is £12.99, but you may well find it for less than that - I’m sure a few more sales will aid his recovery!



## Conservation News – August 2014

The areas of greatest bird (and bird-watcher) diversity in Berkshire are along the Kennet and the Loddon, where gravel extraction has led to a range of wetland habitats and dry gravel beds. Several of the gravel extraction and landfill areas of the lower Kennet valley have come to the end of their working life and are moving into their “restoration” phase. A few are being set up as sites for wildlife or public amenity, but often the planning agreements require conversion to intensive grassland. The BOC, particularly through Ken Moore and Tim Ball, have established good working relationships with owners and operators of several of these sites, protecting rare breeding species like Little Ringed Plovers and bringing conservation interests to the restoration plans. Here are two examples:

**Padworth Lane GP**, which has been notable for breeding and passage waders and wintering wildfowl is now no longer operating as an extraction site. Control of access agreed with the owner, the Canal and River Trust, has enabled Little Ringed Plovers to continue to breed this year, but the future is uncertain. We are working with the Trust to find a way to maintain this lovely site, which also has a large area of rare flooded woodland habitat, for wildlife - we need partner(s) to lease and manage it as a nature reserve.

**Burnthouse Lane**. The old gravel pits at Pingewood, which have been excellent for breeding and passage waders, are gradually being filled and converted to grassland. The first tranche was completed last year and Ken Moore negotiated the setting aside of a wet area to create a strip of marsh that this year has provided some of the best mud in Berkshire! This has already attracted a good spectrum of waders, including a spring plumage Spotted Redshank that stayed for a week in May. The area can be viewed from the footpath running NE across the road from the A.W.E. gate at SU688683. Managing scrape and marsh is not easy and will no doubt require a lot of volunteer effort – watch out for the appeals for help.

The recent Atlas surveys found no breeding **Tree Sparrows** in Berkshire, following a rapid decline over the last 30 years. There have, however, been occasional winter records and there is just a chance that they are not yet extinct here as breeding species or can be enticed back. Successful recovery projects in Wiltshire and Oxfordshire have encouraged us to have a try this year, first with winter feeding projects at sites where Tree Sparrows have been found in the last three or four years. Likely sites are at Engelfield, Sonning, Remenham, Jealott's Hill. **We need a dozen or so robust feeders** suitable for the Tree Sparrow's preferred seed, millet. Squirrel-proof would be ideal. **If you can donate a feeder or a sealable grain storage container, do please contact me.**



Renton Righelato  
[renton.righelato@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:renton.righelato@berksoc.org.uk)

### **Help Needed to Run the Club**

The BOC is run by a small group of volunteers who put on an excellent series of walks and talks, produce a very informative newsletter and annual report, make sure the Club remains financially viable and manage the conservation work that the Club is increasingly becoming involved with. I'm sure you will all agree that the committee and other volunteers do a wonderful job, but there is a limit to how much they can do!

To do this we need (a) more members to support the work of the Club and (b) more help in running the Club and attracting those new members. Two of the ways in which we can let people know about the Club are through our website and by publicising the Club at events and through leaflets, posters and the use of social networks and the local media.

Further to the article in the last newsletter, we still have opportunities for you to help in these areas. In addition we are also seeking someone who could take on the development and maintenance of the Club website.

Ray would also like some more volunteers to help run the excursions. We may have to cut back on the number of trips because of a shortage of leaders.

Not all jobs involve being on the committee, so if you're not a meetings person, there are still things you can help with. However if you feel that you would be able to help run the Club as part of the committee, then please let me know. Also if you have experience of keeping tabs on the administrative side of running a charity, then there will be a vacancy for Secretary at the AGM in November - again please let me know if you think that you can help.

Mike Turton

### **Life on the BOC Committee 2013/14**

Who is on the BOC Committee and what do they do? The answer to both questions is on the website where you can find a list of committee members and minutes of the meetings. However to save you having to find it (and for the benefit of those members without internet access), here's an account of who is in the Committee and what the Committee gets up to.

The committee (following the 2013 AGM) consists of:

Neil Bucknell (President)  
Tim Ball (Chair)  
Mike Turton (Hon. Secretary)  
Bill Nicoll (Hon. Treasurer)  
Becky Thomas (elected committee member)  
Chris Foster (elected committee member)  
Iain Oldcorn (elected committee member & Membership Secretary)  
John Walker (elected committee member)  
Martin Sell (elected committee member)  
Robin Dryden (elected committee member)

These people are the Trustees of the Club and have certain legal responsibilities for overseeing the way that the Club is run. The President is elected by the Committee for a six year term (with an option for re-election at the end of that period) and the Chair and other elected Committee members are elected for a period of three years. The Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer are elected annually, but, in order to retain some continuity, there is no limit to the number of years they can serve.

There are a number of other (non-elected) Club Officers who are appointed by the Committee to carry out important duties in running the Club, helped by other Club members. These Officers attend Committee meetings and take part in discussions, but do not have a vote. They are:

Renton Righelato (Chair of Conservation Sub-committee)  
Ray Reedman (Chair of Programme Sub-committee)  
Ted Rogers (Newsletter Editor)  
Chair of the Editorial Board (vacant position)  
Publicity Officer (vacant position)

The committee normally meets four times a year (October, January, April and June), with any business between meetings being carried out by email. Meetings are held in Park House at the University (courtesy of Becky Thomas). Regular reports to the committee come from the Treasurer, Membership Secretary, the Programme and Conservation Sub-committees, the Editorial Board and Publicity (social media).

Meetings start at 7.30pm, are rarely boring – there are normally a wide variety of topics to be discussed – and are normally over by 10pm. The Club is not just about the indoor meetings – we are also responsible for the management of the county records database, production of the annual reports and an increasing involvement in bird conservation projects.

A wide range of topics have been discussed over the last year including:

- Finance – accounts and budget.
- Review of talks/outdoor meetings and discussion on the future programme.
- Membership structure and subscription rates. Ways of increasing membership.
- Links with the University Ornithological Society.
- Publicity and the need for more volunteers to help with this. BOC representation at events. Management of the BOC website.
- Progress on conservation projects. Discussion on future projects and conservation issues in the county.
- Progress on the publication of the Atlas.
- Purchase of a data projector.
- Progress on the publication of annual reports and improvements to the way that they are produced.
- Changes to the constitution regarding arrangements for the AGM and terms of office for committee members.
- The Quinquennial County recorder/ Berkshire Records Committee review.
- Approval of a Birdwatchers code of conduct.
- Introduction of swipe cards for QMR permit holders.
- Club archives

We are always on the lookout for new people to join the committee or to help out with running the Club in other ways. This year we need to elect 2 new committee members and a new Hon. Secretary so, if you would be able to help in any way with running this excellent organisation

Mike Turton - Hon. Secretary

## Jim's Jottings

My wife and I were recently enumerating, somewhat nostalgically, the various species of birds that shared our house and garden some forty years ago when we came to live in Reading. These included jackdaws with young in the chimney pot, two pairs of house sparrows that occupied the artificial nests (made in Germany for house martins), jay and bullfinch in the laurel hedge, goldcrests singing and nesting in our yew tree and occasional tree creepers that hunted in the oak tree. Nowadays nuthatches are still around and make their presence felt, objecting vocally when kites are on the prowl.

Some months ago, in late September, we were walking towards Fobney Lock. Apart from the occasional squawk of a moorhen, all was bird less until we became aware of a discreet, overhead high-pitched trisyllabic see-see-see from a large but loose group of at least 50 goldcrests calling from the tall riverside trees. They were all separately heading due west as if each individual had its own sat-nav tuned into the Scilly Isles!



More recently, in early November, we had an early-morning, unexpected visitor to our garden bird bath. It had been taken over by a female sparrowhawk which drank deeply before taking a long soak and splash. It was clearly trying desperately to clean its plumage of the sticky remains of a recent catch. Its goal was clearly to fly away, able again to kill when the opportunity arose. It was a moving performance and an elegant reminder of nature being "red in tooth and claw".

Jim Walling

## BOC Norfolk Weekend Trip - 6<sup>th</sup> to 9th February 2014

The dreadful weather of the first weeks of the year, which had already wiped out two events, left many of us with low expectations of this year's trip to Suffolk and Norfolk: in the event we got away remarkably lightly and were able to complete most of the outlined programme.

On Thursday, we met as usual at Ipswich for breakfast, sixteen hardly souls who had left home well before dawn. Our first test was to find Waxwings in a residential road there: the first arrivals were lucky, but the birds suddenly flew off. Next, the scenic underside of Sizewell power station lured us with reports of an (invisible) Iceland Gull, but an immature Kittiwake and a Grey Seal were some compensation. A vent pipe on the wall of the building housed a sleepy Peregrine, while two Black Redstarts played hide and seek under a wire fence. The main party then went a bit south to check North Warren, while three of us made a short visit to Minsmere, where a Merlin, a Sparrowhawk and Marsh Tits were the main rewards. The Blythburgh inlet then provided a range of roosting waders, which included Avocets.



Soon after this, a substantial wet front caught up with us, so the stop at Lowestoft Ness for Purple Sandpipers proved suitably unpleasant in torrential wind and rain. Fortunately five birds showed immediately and nobody needed to linger! Normally our next stop at Stubbs Mill roost is the highlight of the trip, but the idea of taking a real drenching simply defied common sense. Some of us decided instead to cruise the Horsey back-roads to try our luck. We had some success, in that two pairs of Cranes and some geese loomed out of the murk. I was lucky to make out a male Hen Harrier during in a lull in the rain, but this was truly desperate birding!

A dry and relatively calm Friday was something of a fragmented adventure... First, Mediterranean Gulls on Yarmouth beach, and then a long search in the dunes at the north end to locate some Shore Larks, but with an unexpected bonus of a flock of Snow Buntings too. An off-shore sandbank held a mass of seals, but it was impossible to see which species they were. Then we were off to the Waveney Forest to find the Rough-legged Buzzard, which was distant, but distinct, as were a Marsh Harrier and a Hare. Back up at Horsey, Pink-footed Geese were numerous and a ring-tailed Hen Harrier showed well in far better conditions. Some of us also spotted a Stoat. After that we set off for an unashamed twitch at the staithe near Martham, where we soon found the Glossy Ibis. A Two-barred Crossbill was feeding with twenty or so Common Crossbills at Hoveton Hall, and some of the group were able to make it out in the grey light of the afternoon.

After that came the long run over to Hunstanton, during which it seems that most people found a hunting Barn Owl or two. We went via Cley to see the storm damage, and had a bonus close-up of Brent Geese feeding in evening sunlight.

On Saturday morning we braved the cliff at Hunstanton in a howling SW wind to see the Fulmars and a few waders and then were off to Titchwell in bright light. Waders and ducks were plentiful in the pools, with most of the expected species noted, including Avocet and Ruff, but with one unexpected Greenshank. The off-shore wind was very strong, but the dunes gave some shelter for sea-watching: there were numerous Goldeneyes and several moderate flocks of Common Scoters, which included one or two Velvet Scoters, easily distinguished at that distance by their white wing-patches.



The ditch by the visitor centre provided a real treat for Colin, in the form of a Stoat in full winter ermine. Later the same area provided some of us with a close Water Rail, while the visit concluded with sightings of a partially-hidden Woodcock by the path to the car park.

Three of us spent the late afternoon at Holkham, watching a large flock of Pink-feet and Wigeon. We later found a further large flock of Pink-feet and another of Brent Geese to the east of the drive. Meanwhile the others had dispersed to try other spots. There was some limited success at Salthouse, with an elusive Richard's Pipit in the dunes, and others managed to find the Parrot Crossbills at Holt. Two car-loads of us spent a bleak, grey dusk at a much-altered Thornham Marsh, where we were rewarded by two Marsh Harriers and a Peregrine, but no owls. I have to say that the warmth of the Lifeboat Inn was very welcome after that!



On Sunday, pre-dawn saw some of us braving another big blow at Holme beach, with limited success -a couple of Fulmars, both scoters, and one or two Long-tailed Ducks rocketing past in the wind. Two Red-breasted Mergansers were just off the beach, with a number of Curlews at the strand-line. Others went to a woodland site, with some success in the shelter of the trees.

The route home took in the Sandringham "triangle" where some were lucky with a Golden Pheasant. We saw three or four Fallow Deer cross the road as we left the area. The next stop was the village of Fritcham, where Tree Sparrows eluded all of us but the sharp-eyed John Lakin, but where a massive flock of Chaffinches and Bramblings was well worth seeing. Two Grey Partridges and another Hare were a bonus, as was the Barn Owl which we spotted in an old oak in the Abbey Farm reserve. Later, Linford Arboretum failed us for Hawfinches, while a large flock of what appeared to be Siskins and Redpolls was frustratingly distant. Other small woodland birds were easy at the feeders and the odd Treecreeper was also noted.

After that it was the homeward road and a great sense of relief that the rain had held off for all but those few hours on Thursday. Yes, the trip-list, at about 130, was a bit lower than average, but it included some species which had not been listed on previous trips. Conditions were not ideal, but in the circumstances we had done very well. Thanks to Colin Wilson's hard work, it had been a great success in the end. Not least, we had all appreciated the great service of the staff at the Comfort Inn at Yarmouth, and of our hosts at the Burleigh, Hunstanton. And thanks must also go to the drivers who kindly ferried the rest of us around.

Ray Reedman

### **And Finally - Forensic Ornithology – "The Riddle of the Dead Crows"**

Researchers for the Ministry of Transport found over 200 dead crows near Greater Manchester recently, and there was concern that they may have died from Avian Flu. A Bird Pathologist examined the remains of all the crows, and, to everyone's relief, confirmed the problem was definitely NOT Avian Flu. The cause of death appeared to be vehicular impacts.



However, during the detailed analysis it was noted that varying colours of paints appeared on the bird's beaks and claws. By analysing these paint residues it was determined that 98% of the crows had been killed by impact with lorries, while only 2% were killed by an impact with a car.

Ministry of Transport then hired an Ornithological Behaviourist to determine if there was a cause for the disproportionate percentages of truck kills versus car kills. The Ornithological Behaviourist very quickly concluded the cause: When crows eat road kill, they always have a look-out crow in a nearby tree to warn of impending danger. They discovered that while all the lookout crows could shout "Cah", not a single one could shout "Lorry"!

(Editor's Note : Just to say that the Editor does not necessarily take any responsibility for published items ☺)