



RWE Thames Water is pleased to sponsor Reading Ornithological Club's Annual Bird Report. The occurrence and distribution of birds is a vital component of biodiversity and the information gained from bird records, such as those reported here, is a key element of understanding where to target protection. Many of our operational sites across the Thames Water region are recognised as internationally, nationally or locally important for birds whether for breeding, wintering or migration. The compilation and reporting of bird statistics can be used as indicators of the health of the countryside and to reflect other issues such as climate change which itself has important implications for water resources management. The compilation of bird records requires a great deal of effort on the part of birdwatchers and we endeavour to support birdwatching activity on our sites wherever possible. To this end we are planning to increase the opportunities for access to sites across our region. We have enhanced numerous sites to improve habitats for birds. Recently we planted reedbed habitat at Bracknell Millpond and Slough STW and continued sponsorship of the RSPB Wessex Downs and Chilterns Farmlands Birds project, which covers much of Berkshire."

Dr Brian Crathorne
Head of Environment.
Thames Water Utilities Limited

THE READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

(ROC) was founded in 1947. Its objects are to promote education and study of wild birds, their habitats and conservation in Berkshire. Membership is open to anyone interested in birds and bird-watching, beginner or expert, local patch enthusiast or international twitcher. The Club organises a full programme of events with indoor evening meetings and outdoor excursions. It publishes a quarterly Newsletter and *The Birds of Berkshire* annual report, which are free to members.

INDOOR MEETINGS are held during the winter season at the University of Reading on fortnightly Wednesday evenings. These are usually illustrated lectures by visiting speakers drawn from the UK's best-known ornithologists.

The Club holds a popular annual **PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION** with film and digital sections; it attracts outstanding work, which is judged by experts including the President, Gordon Langsbury.

SOCIAL EVENINGS are held at Christmas and occasionally during the year.

FIELD EXCURSIONS, held throughout the year, range from short walks to weekend visits to many top bird-watching sites locally and further afield. Recent trips have included weekends in Norfolk, Cornwall, Anglesey and the Lake District as well as many day trips in southern England. Regular midweek walks are arranged to many of the best bird-watching sites in the county. All members are welcome – beginners or experts. Suggestions of places to visit and volunteers to arrange or lead are always welcome. Joining an ROC

field excursion can be an excellent way to discover new sites, meet other birders and improve your bird-watching skills.



CONSERVATION of important local habitats and species is important to us: the Reading area contains a growing number of excellent reserves and projects that enhance the diversity of the region. Many ROC members are involved in practical conservation work with groups such as Friends of Lavell's Lake, the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group and Moor Green Lakes. The Club manages *The Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund*, which supports local bird conservation projects.

SURVEYS AND RECORDING. The Club organises local bird surveys and is affiliated to the British Trust for Ornithology, in whose surveys members are encouraged to participate, to assist conservation nationally. Members are encouraged to keep records of local observations and submit them, electronically or in writing, to the County Recorder for collation and analysis.

The Birds of Berkshire, published in 1996, is available to Club members while stocks last at £5. This excellent atlas and avifauna is the authoritative book on the status of birds in the county and is lavishly illustrated by Robert Gillmor and others. Work on a new atlas will start in 2007, for publication in about five years time.

For more information and the current programme visit www.theroc.org.uk or contact the Secretary Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA renton.righelato@theroc.org.uk telephone 0787 981 2564.

The Birds of Berkshire

Annual Report for the year 2003

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Introduction

We are pleased to be able to publish a new style county report this year with more colour and a better overall finish. This report has been a long time in coming but since we produced *Birds of Berkshire 2002* we have also caught up with some of our arrears and published the 1998/99 report. Work on the 2000/2001 report is also well advanced and once this has been published all our resources will be focused on producing an annual report every year in good time.

For the time being I shall remain as Managing Editor of the *Birds of Berkshire* but the technical editing, basically the enormous responsibility of ensuring a high quality interpretation of the 40,000 records received, will come from the recording team of Chris Heard and Derek Barker. This report is the last Peter Standley will complete as Technical Editor and it is my pleasure to record the considerable appreciation of the Reading Ornithological Club and I am sure, the whole birdwatching fraternity in Berkshire who have all benefited from his wise counsel and contributions to the ornithological scene over so many years.

This year the order of species accounts has changed. Following over 26 phylogenetic studies, many using DNA analysis published in recent years, a large body of evidence showed that the order of birds in the British list (reflected in Voous Order, (BOU 1977)) did not properly reflect their evolution. The BOU have accepted the recommendations of their Taxonomic Sub-Committee and changed the order which they urge report editors and publishers to adopt for their reports from 2003 onwards. Accordingly, this report has followed this new Order.

The thousands of bird records collected in Berkshire come from many sources and are combined in a database administered for us by Marek Walford. Work is currently under way to allow these records to be shared with Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre to enable them to provide quality data to Councils and Developers so planning decisions can be made in an informed way. This follows a national trend and should ensure birdwatchers records have high value in the years ahead, fighting inappropriate development and protecting important habitats.

Finally, in this introduction I wish to mention the Berkshire Atlas Group, a team who are planning a new County Atlas and Avifauna to follow the previous *Birds of Berkshire* published in 1996. Discussions are at an early stage but fieldwork will be linked to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) national atlas project for which some experimental pilot survey work was recently undertaken. Enthusiastic surveyors will be recruited soon to help with this project which is intended to combine both breeding and winter atlas data, making the most comprehensive atlas ever published for the County.

Colin Wilson
Managing Editor
June 2006

Acknowledgements

The production of a report of this nature requires the input of many people and none more than the contributors of bird records, a detailed list of those whose records have been used to compile this report is shown at the end of the systematic list.

The writing of the species accounts requires considerable commitment from a team of experienced ornithologists and we thank Derek Barker, Paul Bright-Thomas, Keith Chard, Brian Clews, Bill Nicoll, Chris Robinson, Ted Rogers and Marek Walford for their hard work in drafting accounts from the many thousands of records reviewed. The detailed editing of the accounts by Derek Barker is an enormous task requiring skill and diligence and we are very grateful for the dedication and knowledge of Berkshire's birds and geography he brings to this task. Peter Standley has completed final reviews and adjustments to the systematic list along with the Summary of Weather and Bird Highlights and the Report of the Berkshire Records Committee. Chris Heard has undertaken a final reading to ensure no technical errors remain. Keith Chard has undertaken a considerable amount of work in analysing, formatting and checking large volumes of typed text so the final article is of a high standard and special thanks go to him for this work.

This Report consists of much more than just the systematic list and we thank the writers and providers of articles for the work and time that went into providing them often involving considerable fieldwork or desk based study. Each article is listed on the Index page with their names alongside.

We are very grateful once again to Robert Gillmor for his beautiful painting on the cover of the Report. Other artists showing their considerable talent include Martin Hallam who has provided outstanding drawings for many years, and newcomers, Andrew Cowdell for his lovely Siskin family, Andrew Brooks, Tony Keene and Helen Chadburn for their much appreciated contributions.

Photography is now a widespread hobby not least for birdwatchers and we are very lucky to have some photographers in the County who have managed to capture superb images of rare birds seen in 2003. We thank Jerry O'Brien, Mike McKee, Dave Rimes and Gary Randall for allowing us to use their images on our pages.

Of course, the matter of sponsorship and advertising is vital to production of this Report. We are fortunate to have the continued support of RWE Thames Water and, for the first time, Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre about which an article appears later. Another valuable sponsor this year is Lafarge Group and we appreciate their contribution. The advertisers are often long term supporters including members who very generously assist us with meeting ever increasing production costs. We thank them and urge all readers to use their services and to mention this Report when they do so.

Finally, to anyone inadvertently omitted we apologise and offer our thanks to you and all those who have helped in ways large or small to produce this publication.

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County Directory

COUNTY RECORDER

Recorder tasks are divided between the County Recorder and Assistant Recorder as follows:

Recorder: Chris Heard, specialisation in bird identification. Chairman of the Berkshire Rarities Committee. 3, Waterside Lodge, Ray Mead Road, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 8NP. Telephone 01628 633828.

Assistant Recorder: Derek Barker, specialising in breeding birds in Berkshire. Secretary to the Berkshire Rarities Committee. 40, Heywood Gardens, Woodlands Park, Maidenhead, SL6 3LZ.

READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

www.theroc.org.uk

A Club for birdwatchers throughout Berkshire, with indoor and outdoor meetings, surveys and publications, including Birds of Berkshire annual reports – see page 2 for details. Collects bird records for the county and is responsible for the county database.

Secretary, Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, Berks RG1 5RA

Telephone 0118 926 4513

Email: renton.righelato@theroc.org.uk

NEWBURY DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

www.ndoc.org.uk

A Club for birdwatchers in the Newbury area with a recording area of 10 miles radius of the town. Offers indoor and outdoor meetings, surveys and publications.

Secretary, Trevor Maynard, 15 Kempstone Close, Newbury, Berks, RG14 7RS

Telephone 01635 36752

Email info@ndoc.org.uk

BERKSHIRE BIRD BULLETIN

Publisher of monthly newsletters of birds reported in the County with a news summary and detailed listings of sightings. Records are welcome for publication.

County Ornithological Services. Contact Brian Clews, Telephone 07071 202000 or email brian.clews@btconnect.com

www.berksbirds.co.uk

An independent website devoted to offering a free resource to birdwatchers in Berkshire and providing news, photographs and records of birds with additional optional information services.

BRITISH TRUST FOR ORNITHOLOGY (BTO)

Local representative for BTO matters including organising surveys: Chris Robinson, 2, Beckfords, Upper Basildon, Reading, Berks, RG8 8PB

Telephone 01491 671420

Email berks_bto_rep@btinternet.com

FRIENDS OF LAVELL'S LAKE

Conservation volunteers managing Lavell's Lake local nature reserve near Dinton Pastures Country Park, Wokingham. Bird walks, occasional meetings and newsletters. Contact Chairman Fraser Cottington at Fraser1947@hotmail.com or see

www.friendsoflavells.freeola.com/index.shtml

MOOR GREEN LAKES GROUP

Conservation volunteers who manage Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve near Eversley. Newsletters an annual report and access to bird hides.

Contact Membership Secretary:

Keith Littler, 316 Yorktown Road, College Town, Sandhurst, Berks, GU47 0PZ

THEALE AREA BIRD CONSERVATION GROUP

A local Club devoted to the conservation of birds in the Theale area, west of Reading. Indoor and outdoor meetings, annual bird race and survey work.

<http://tabcg.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/>

Contact Cath McEwan, Secretary,

Email Catherine@cmcewan.fsnet.co.uk

LOCAL RSPB GROUPS

Groups promote and represent the RSPB in the local community. Activities include indoor and outdoor meetings and fund raising events.

Further details from the RSPB or directly from:

East Berks Local Group

www.eastberksrspb.org.uk/

Reading Local Group

www.reading-rspb.org.uk/

Wokingham and Bracknell Local Group

www.wbrspb.btinternet.co.uk/

The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre in Berkshire

By Adrian Hutchings

What do we really know about the wildlife of Berkshire? There are some places in the County that are well known for the wildlife they contain, but when we look at the wider countryside we find that a large proportion of our wildlife is under recorded. For much of the wildlife in Berkshire we have very little idea where it is and whether it is increasing, decreasing or staying the same.

It's true that there are lots of us out and about recording wildlife and many enthusiasts, particularly ornithologists, take the trouble to make a written record of what they see – but are we making the most of all this information?

Information can be an extremely powerful tool in nature conservation. Some groups and individuals in the County have done, and continue to do, excellent work collecting valuable data about wildlife and making that data work. Many environmental groups are using this data to assist them in managing land and habitats for wildlife, and increasingly Local Authorities are recognising the need for up to date and accurate information to help inform the decision and policy-making processes.

But it has long been recognised that more resources need to go into supporting and co-ordinating the collection, management and supply of wildlife information locally. With this in mind the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TV ERC) was set up in 2003 covering Oxfordshire and Berkshire. With funding from English Nature and all the Local Authorities in the two Counties the Records Centre acts to help people collect information and make good quality wildlife information more easily available.

TV ERC manages a large database of information and is a secure centre where groups and individuals can lodge copies of their own data and get access to data collected by others. Security of sensitive data is paramount to TV ERC. The Records Centre only uses data in ways which will benefit wildlife and for the purposes agreed by the owners of that data. The ultimate goal of TVERC is to see more wildlife information being used by a greater number of people and thereby enabling sensible and informed decisions about wildlife.

More details about TV ERC can be found on their website: www.tverc.org

The TV ERC Berkshire staff – Adrian Hutchings and Sarah Gorman – can be contacted at ahutchings@westberks.gov.uk, sgorman@westberks.gov.uk

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The Reading Ornithological Club gratefully acknowledges the financial contribution made by TV ERC towards the publication of this report.

A SPRING FLOCK OF POMARINE SKUAS IN BERKSHIRE

By Chris Heard

The up-channel movement of Pomarine Skua flocks is one of the highlights of Spring migration along Britain's South coast. One would not expect to witness any part of this in Berkshire but in April 2003 a migrant flock overflowed Queen Mother Reservoir and disappeared into the gloom...

On Friday 25th April I was manning Birdline South East, while my birdline partner Jerry Warne got an early start for the drive down to Dungeness - in the hope of seeing some Pom' Skuas! The morning was quite bright, with a blustery South-easterly wind, but a solid band of rain spread into East Berkshire during the afternoon (from around 2pm onwards). By early evening I fancied a break from the birdline and, hoping for a Whimbrel or other rain-induced wader, I visited Queen Mother Reservoir. It was still raining when I arrived - so I stayed in the car for another 20 minutes-or-so until it eased - and it didn't rain again for another 50 minutes.

Long-range visibility wasn't good (there was complete overcast) and halfway around the reservoir I'd noted nothing apart from an increase in Common Sandpipers when, casually looking upwards, my eye was attracted by a rapid movement almost directly overhead. A flock of gull-like birds, about 200 feet up, had made a sudden 'whiffling' descent - disturbed by an outward-bound jet from Heathrow - and, with the naked eye, their buoyant flight brought Little Gulls to mind. I put down my telescope and raised my binoculars... and found myself uttering some prime Anglo-Saxon! Almost directly overhead was an unquestionable flock of *thirteen* skuas - all of them with tail-streamers.

To be honest, I wasn't thinking about their actual identity at this point - I was too stunned - and the first thing I noted was the variation: 1 wholly dark bird, 1 barred and 11 light morphs. The light morphs had variable breast-bands but those with the whitest underparts had a clean cut-off between the belly and the dark undertail-coverts. They were clearly Common Gull-sized and had quite broad, but pointed, wings and as they circled and briefly hung on the wind I noted that the outer part of the wing (the 'hand') was held slightly depressed, recalling Hobby. There were magical moments as they evidently eyed the reservoir (and me?!) but then they quickly regrouped and continued overhead. Although I was looking straight up, these were quite good views and I could see that the tail-streamers were rounded at the tip - in fact none of them had sharp points to the streamers - and as they went over the tail projections looked more blob-shaped. They were now flying steadily away, in formation, and I realised it was time to get my telescope on them. They maintained a northerly heading with regular wingbeats and the tail-projections - which now looked more like the classic 'spoons' - actually appeared to bob on the downstrokes (making the body appear to undulate). I did wonder why the 'spoons' had not been obvious earlier and it was a while before I realised that the twisted tail projections, which are popularly compared to spoons when seen in a profile view, would not in fact be obvious from directly below.

There was still an hours light left but my mind was so preoccupied that I knew I had to head home. I kept replaying the sighting in my head - everything was right for Pomarine Skua (size, structure, plumage, flight action, even flock-size) but I had never heard of an inland sighting of a whole flock before! I had to speak to the UK's top skua expert, Dave Davenport... but it was a while before he returned home. When I did get through I said "I've had a flock of 13 skuas over my local reservoir: 11 light morphs, 1 dark morph...." and before

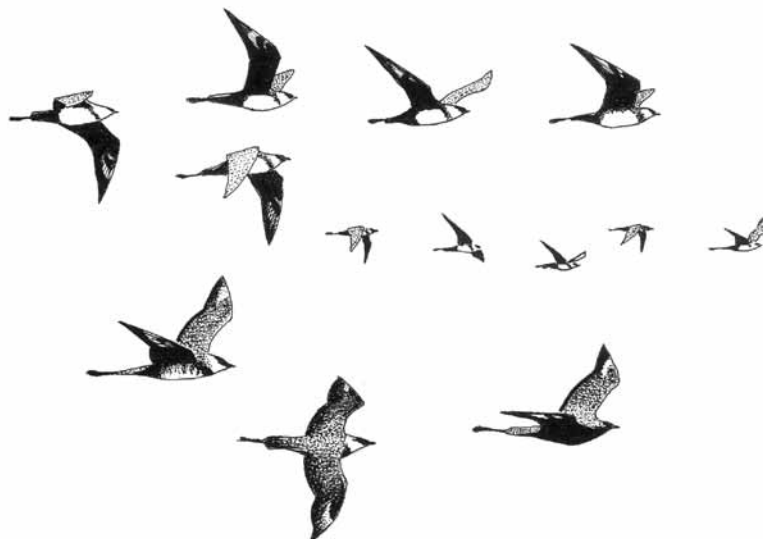
I could say anymore he said “They were Poms then”. He explained that the size of the flock and the balance of the plumage morphs “would be impossible for Arctic Skua” and that since the barred birds also had tail projections, they were just more heavily marked individuals [which also fits the probabilities - since 2nd-3rd summers are apparently unlikely before mid May]. He went on to confirm that a passage of Pomarine Skuas had been expected along the South coast that day but that very few had been sighted further East than the Isle of Wight - the rain had presumably impeded further up-channel movement. On a more philosophical note, I complained to Dave that I wished I’d had longer to enjoy such an amazing sight but he countered that I should be content with whatever views I got - I was very lucky to have seen this at all.

In fact, Pomarine Skuas may regularly overfly large continental land-masses (eg many sightings from the Black and Aral seas in Spring) and it has been suggested that much of the passage up the English Channel may continue overland across the European mainland (Davenport, 1975). In Scotland, Pomarine Skua flocks regularly head off overland from the Solway Firth but, to date (June 2006), I can find no other English sighting of an inland flock in Spring (but note that several small groups were seen inland during the late autumn influx in 1985; see Fox & Aspinall, 1987).

It is characteristic for Pomarine Skuas to pass rapidly through UK waters in the Spring - rarely resting or stopping to feed. The Queen Mother flock appeared to have come over from the South-east and they continued northwards without delay. They did not appear to be attracted down by the reservoir or the roosting gulls and, had they not manoevered because of the overhead plane, they might well have passed over unnoticed by me against the dull grey sky. Of course, such weather conditions are not uncommon but inland skua occurrences are notoriously unpredictable, especially in Spring: my last Spring sighting was of an Arctic Skua circling over Windsor Forest on a sunny May morning!

References

- Davenport, D.L. 1975. *Brit.Birds* 68: 461.
Fox, A.D. & Aspinall S.J. 1987. *Brit.Birds* 80: 404-421.



Pomarine Skuas (Martin Hallam)



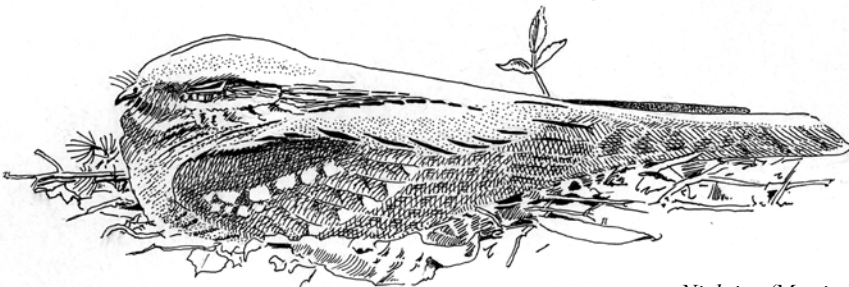
SNELSMORE COMMON – A REPORT

By Jonathan Wilding

Snelsmore Common comprises of 100 hectares (250 acres) of heathland, mire valleys, scrub and fringe woodland. The common is the largest tract of heathland remaining in Berkshire and accounts for one sixth of the total of this sort of habitat in the county. Because of its nature conservation importance, Snelsmore is designated a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). As well as the heathland the country park also has areas of grassland set by for picnics, bar-b-q's and family games. The site is managed by the West Berkshire Council who provide a range of organised activities throughout the year aimed at educating users of the site about its importance in the area.

Snelsmore Common (SU4670) is located 1.25 miles (2 km) to the north of Newbury along the B4494 road from Donnington to Wantage. There are good car parking areas set back from the main entrance, but well sign posted from the road. The car parks are locked at night, but signs give clear warning of when the locking times are, so it is worth checking these. There are toilet facilities by the main entrance, including a disabled facility accessed with a RADAR key.

The surviving original heathland at Snelsmore is of great value, containing as it does the most comprehensive and extensive examples of heathland vegetation in West Berkshire. Heathland is an ancient landscape, and a valuable part of our natural heritage. Its sweeping expanses of heather creates a beautiful wilderness which supports a richly diverse range of plants and animals including birds such as the Nightjar and Woodlark, the Green Hairstreak butterfly, the Emperor moth and Adders and Lizards.



Nightjar (Martin Hallam)

Without management Snelsmore Common would decline, as birch and bracken invade and kill off the heather. Of the 100 Hectares some 67 Hectares has been fenced to allow for grazing by cattle and ponies. As well as grazing there are a number of volunteer organisations which work on the site clearing birch, pulling bracken and helping to restore pathways and ponds. The objectives are to conserve and enhance features of the greatest conservation value by using a variety of different management techniques as close to those which originally created the habitat ie. grazing, cutting and controlled burning.

Purpose of Survey

Following his appointment in January 2003 the council's Countryside Ranger for Snelsmore Common, Keith Toomey was keen to establish a list of species for the common. He managed to enlist a whole army of naturalists in his quest and has built an impressive and very comprehensive list to date. In order to assist in this task the Newbury District Ornithological Club (NDOC) organised a team of four willing volunteers in order to perform a survey over the common. The survey comprised of one visit early in the breeding season and another later in order to record the visiting migrants. The results of this survey are detailed below. The NDOC are keen to continue this survey in order to build a detailed picture of the value of the site for breeding birds in West Berkshire.

Recorded below are details of the bird species seen or heard across Snelsmore Common, south of the Winterbourne road. All the records relate to two “BTO - Breeding Bird Survey” method visits made during the 2003 breeding season (March till June), by Jim Burnett, Pam Niblock, John Dellow and Jonathan Wilding. The total number of species recorded was 41 (34 resident and 7 migrant), plus two further species listed below from an evening visit, but excluded from the statistics.

Blackbird	R	Greenfinch	R	Robin	R
Blackcap	S	Green Woodpecker	R	Rook	R
Blue Tit	R	Jackdaw	R	Skylark	R
Buzzard	R	Jay	R	Song Thrush	R
Carrion Crow	R	Lesser Black-backed Gull	R	Stock Dove	R
Chaffinch	R	Lesser Redpoll	R	Tree Pipit	S
Chiffchaff	S	Linnet	R	Treecreeper	R
Coal Tit	R	Long-tailed Tit	R	Willow Tit	R
Cuckoo	S	Magpie	R	Willow Warbler	S
Duncock	R	Mallard	R	Wood Pigeon	R
Garden Warbler	S	Meadow Pipit	R	Woodcock	R*
Goldcrest	R	Nightjar	S*	Woodlark	S
Goldfinch	R	Nuthatch	R	Wren	R
Great Spotted Woodpecker	R	Pheasant	R	Yellowhammer	R
Great Tit	R	R = resident species; S = summer migrant; * = recorded on separate evening visit			

Visit dates when the surveys were performed were Sunday 5th April, Sunday 18th May. An evening walk, specifically to search for Nightjars and Woodcocks took place on Thursday 22nd May.

Findings

Percentage comparison between resident and summer migrant species expressed as singing or displaying males;

Resident Species	= 209 Plots	71%
Migrant Species	= 86 Plots	29%
Total	= 295 Plots	100%

Percentage comparison between resident and summer migrant species expressed as territories held;

Resident Species	= 101 Territories	81%
Migrant Species	= 24 Territories	19%
Total	= 125 Territories	100%

League table of breeding birds within the recording area

Resident Species	Territories	Summer migrants	Territories
Wren	20	Chiffchaff	10
Robin	17	Willow Warbler	7
Blackbird	13	Tree Pipit	5
Blue Tit	8		
Great Tit	7		
Song Thrush	7		
Chaffinch	5		
Wood Pigeon	5		
Duncock	4		

The table confirms the most common resident species as Wren and Robin but the least common resident species were Stock Dove and Goldfinch where no territories were found. Amongst the migrant species, most common was Chiffchaff and least common was Garden Warbler, which despite being found on both visits appeared not to hold a territory.

A34 Newbury By-Pass and it's effect on the birdlife of Snelsmore Common

Since opening the Newbury By-Pass in November 1998 it has had only a small impact on the birdlife of Snelsmore Common. Due to nature of the habitat at Snelsmore, with woodland running along it's southern edge, noise generated from the road is deadened – although not eliminated completely. Research carried out by Jim Burnett and myself in 2001 showed that by the roadside, peak noise levels reached 78dB, but only 100m back within the trees and the peak noise level had dropped to 58dB. Moving out of the trees and onto the heath proper, a distance of around 400m, and the peak noise level had dropped again to circa 45dB. In a control habitat to the north of the site, and in another woodland fringe the peak noise levels were recorded at between 41dB and 50dB.

The most noticeable impact on the birdlife was seen in the Treecreeper population. Birds that had previously been recorded on the southern edge of the common were, after opening the by-pass, no longer recorded. At no time since 1998 has Treecreeper been recorded in this location, although other locations on the common, away from the by-pass still have a healthy population. The only explanation that I can offer for this translocation of the population would be related to the bird's very thin and high pitched song and calls. With the increase

in traffic noise from 45dB to, up to 78dB it would make the females task of locating singing males difficult, if not almost impossible.

Most other species seem to be unaffected by the road, with one presumably juvenile male Tree Pipit, actually trying to establish a territory (unsuccessfully) on the roadside bank during the spring of 2000. This record relates to a yearly national high of Tree Pipits in 2000, as noted by the BTO.

THE GROWTH OF HERONS IN BERKSHIRE 1992-2003

By Chris Robinson (Berkshire BTO Rep)

2003 was the 75th anniversary of the world's longest running single species survey – the British Trust for Ornithology's Heronry Census and to mark the occasion, the BTO attempted to make a full count of all heronries in the UK. As well as arranging for counts from all their regularly counted heronries (there are about 500 of these in the UK) Reps were encouraged to seek out new or previously uncounted ones in order to maximise the coverage. Up until now I thought we had a fairly complete knowledge of heronries in Berkshire but some extra research plus a couple of tip-offs revealed one new and one rediscovered heronry!

The nett result is that we now know of eleven heronries in Berkshire varying in size from 2 to 23 nests and giving a grand total of at least 71 occupied nests in the county during 2003 although, in reality, this figure is known to be low as the eleventh heronry is in the grounds of Windsor Castle which it has not been possible to count in recent years.

As well as these traditional heronry counts, the anniversary effort also targeted a number of randomly selected tetrads (2km squares) which volunteers were asked to scour for any signs of hitherto undiscovered heronries. Of the four tetrads allocated to Berkshire, nothing new was discovered; in fact in the one I did, which was nearly 100% farmland, I never even saw a heron *let alone* a nest! Nevertheless, taken at a national level this was an essential exercise to measure how complete a knowledge we have of the UK's heronries.

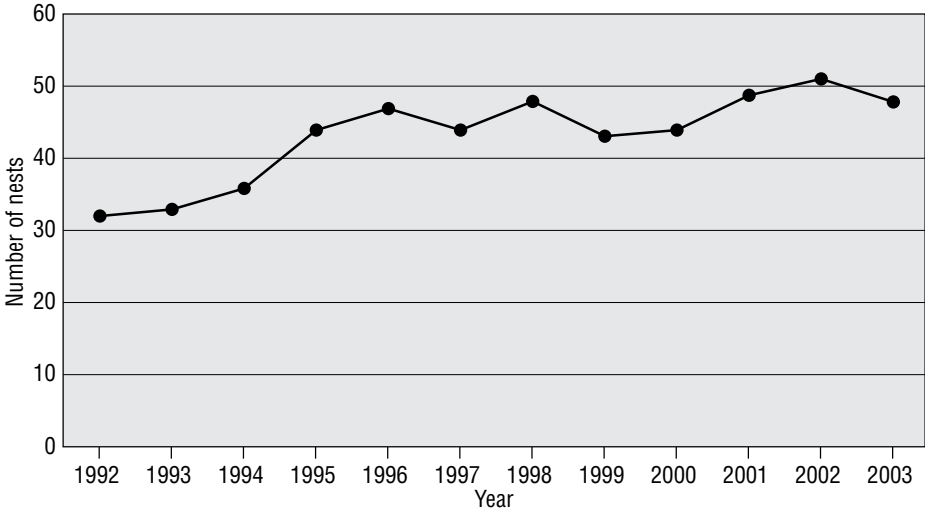
In the period 1992 – 2003 and during which I have been BTO Rep, four of the eleven heronries within Berkshire have been continuously monitored. Another six have been monitored for shorter periods of time due to their being either new or previously undiscovered. In the new category are the two small heronries on Theale Main Pit and the even smaller one at Heath Lake, while previously undiscovered ones have been found at Donnington (Newbury) and Bray Lock; the latter being one of the 2003 discoveries. Both these have up to six nests and according to local sources have been there for some time. The rediscovered heronry was the one at Wraysbury which has been there for many years but had eluded my early attempts to locate it either by searching or interrogation of birders who might have known its whereabouts.

The picture presented by the four regularly censused heronries is slightly mixed, as over the twelve year period, two have declined in size and two have increased. Taken together

however, there has been an overall increase of around 40%, somewhat higher than the national trend for England and Wales which for the 10-year period 1992-2002 was +15% [Marchant *et al.* 2004]. The reasons cited for the general (UK) increase include reduced persecution, improvements in water quality, increased feeding opportunities at freshwater fisheries and the provision of new habitat as new lakes and gravel pits mature. It seems likely that the latter may well be a major factor in Berkshire as the county is well endowed with such sites and this is probably the main reason for any increases above and beyond the national figures. It is significant that the two heronries which have had the largest increase in size over twelve years (Twyford and Searles Farm) are both situated on gravel pits which are now well matured.

The graph below shows the changes over twelve years in the combined total of occupied nests at the four sites (Aldermaston GPs, Englefield, Searles Lane and Twyford GPs):-

12 year trend in numbers of nests at 4 Berkshire heronries



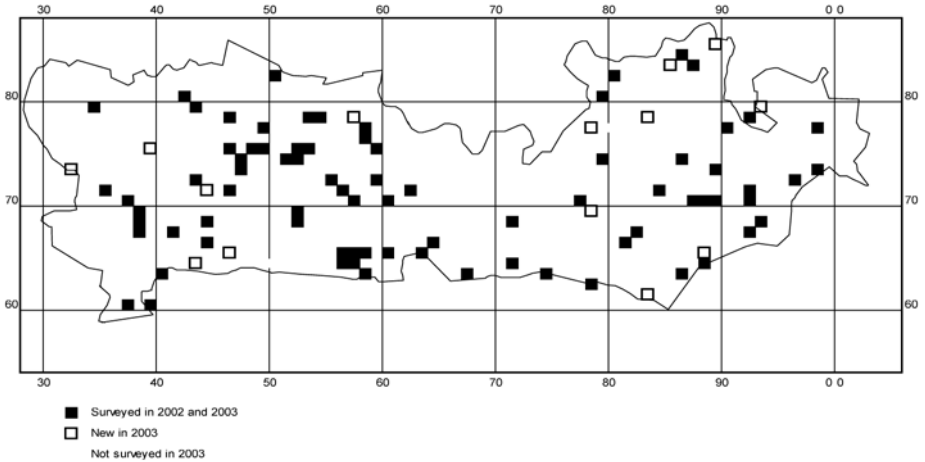
BERKSHIRE BIRD INDEX 2003

by Chris Robinson, with acknowledgment to Patrick Crowley

The Berkshire Bird Index (BBI) survey uses a similar method to that used by the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Surveyors walk two 1km transects across randomly selected one kilometre squares, recording all birds seen or heard during two visits during the breeding season. This survey method has been kept deliberately simple in order to attract a large number of participants and although it is relatively unsophisticated, it is possible to determine accurate population trends of many bird species over time provided there is a sufficiently large number of squares covered.

2003 was the fourth year of the Berkshire Bird Index (BBI) survey and, once again, there was an increase in the number of 1km squares which were surveyed. The previous year's

Distribution of squares covered in 2003



total of 84 squares increased by eleven to give a coverage of 95, a very satisfactory number and representing about 8% of the county's land area. The distribution of these squares is shown in the map above. Fourteen new squares were covered (shown as white squares) but three of the previous year's squares were not surveyed in 2003. This sort of change is inevitable, with some surveyors dropping out and new ones coming in to take on different squares but, as the survey uses randomly selected squares and coverage is fairly even across the county, these changes should have little effect on the results. The overall coverage of the county was good, and it is gratifying that four of the new squares surveyed were in the far west of the county, which in past years has suffered from a slightly lower coverage than the rest of Berkshire.

As the BBI had been going for 4 years it was thought that there might now be sufficient data for a trend analysis to be attempted so 2003 saw the first attempt to assess recent population changes for the commoner species. The same techniques and tools as are used for the BTO's Breeding Bird Survey were adopted for this analysis as these are capable of making allowance for missing visits/years and (for example) the fact that the data set for the Foot and Mouth year 2001 is much smaller than for the other three years. More detailed discussion of the method and results is given below.

The detailed numbers for all the species in the 2003 survey are shown in Appendix 1. These include the total number of birds seen/heard, the percentage of squares occupied and the percentage of 200 metre transect segments where the species were found. The 2003 survey recorded 119 species, the highest number in the four years of the BBI (c.f: 107 in 2002 and 106 in 2000). Birds recorded in 2003 but not in 2002 were Grasshopper Warbler, Nightjar, Ringed Plover, Teal, Water Rail, Wood Warbler and Common Gull, of which the first five were recorded for the first time. Birds not recorded in 2003, but which have been seen in at least one of the previous years, were Wigeon, Long-eared Owl, Snipe, Tree Sparrow and Shoveler.

The results from the last 4 years were analysed by the author (with much help from the BTO). The analysis is given in the form of percentage population changes from the previous year (2002-2003) and the 4-year trend over the period 2000-2003. The results are shown in the table overleaf.

Berkshire Four Year vs UK SouthEast Region Ten Year Trends

Species	Berkshire 4-year Change (2000–2003)			Berkshire 1-year Change (2002–2003)	National SE Region 10-year Change (1994–2003)
		LCL	UCL		
Goldfinch	+76%	21%	131%	+49%	+5%
Chiffchaff	+68%	23%	112%	+19%	+34%
Greenfinch	+29%	0%	58%	+24%	-1%
Great Spotted Woodpecker	+27%	-7%	61%	+65%	+76%
Woodpigeon	+24%	7%	40%	+26%	+12%
Dunnock	+22%	-3%	47%	+23%	+1%
Blue Tit	+18%	2%	34%	+14%	+8%
House Sparrow	+16%	-9%	40%	+16%	-29%
Pheasant	+16%	-8%	40%	+17%	+30%
Blackbird	+15%	3%	27%	+10%	+6%
Collared Dove	+14%	-17%	46%	+7%	+35%
Mistle Thrush	+12%	-26%	50%	+1%	-27%
Chaffinch	+12%	1%	23%	+10%	+11%
Whitethroat	+8%	-23%	39%	-25%	+44%
Blackcap	+5%	-15%	25%	+3%	+22%
Starling	+2%	-29%	33%	+2%	-46%
Song Thrush	No change	-18%	18%	+10%	+10%
Robin	No change	-12%	11%	-2%	+19%
Long-tailed Tit	-1%	-34%	33%	+75%	-20%
Wren	-1%	-12%	11%	+2%	-3%
Skylark	-2%	-18%	14%	+1%	-23%
Pied Wagtail	-5%	-39%	29%	+15%	+33%
Mallard	-5%	-34%	24%	-15%	+30%
Great Tit	-10%	-25%	5%	+6%	+7%
Jackdaw	-11%	-31%	9%	+2%	+16%
Swallow	-15%	-38%	8%	+14%	+5%
Maggie	-21%	-36%	-6%	No change	-2%
Yellowhammer	-22%	-40%	-4%	-10%	-36%
Carrion Crow	-24%	-39%	-8%	+23%	+2%
Green Woodpecker	-39%	-57%	-22%	-20%	+22%

Bold indicates statistically significant change.

LCL = Lower 95% Confidence Level, UCL = Upper 95% Confidence Level.

For the mathematically minded the population changes were assessed using a loglinear model with a Poisson regression, using the higher count from the early and late visit for each species on each square as our best estimate of the abundance of that species. The 30 species shown in the table all occurred in at least 49 squares; around 50 squares being considered the minimum requirement for statistical robustness.

As can be seen there have been a number of statistically significant changes (at the 95% level, shown in bold) but the margins of error are quite wide due to the short survey period so far and the relatively small sample size during the early years. These margins are shown as upper and lower confidence levels (UCL and LCL, respectively) in the table. Put simply, “95% confidence level” means that we can be 95% certain that the percentage change in population size is true, within the margins of error given. With time, the impact of any single year will be less apparent on the overall trend and confidence levels should increase.

So what conclusions can be drawn from these data?

- Firstly it is important to remember that our dataset is still a relatively small and somewhat patchy sample, gathered over a short time period and with one year's data (2001) significantly reduced by the FMD outbreak. Some caution must therefore be applied in interpreting the numbers but it does not mean that they cannot be believed. Note that trends for all but the commonest species have very wide margins of error which reflects the current limitations of our dataset. Even one of our commonest species (Chaffinch) which shows a 4-year upward trend of 12% \pm 11 which means that it could be up by nearly a quarter or virtually unchanged! Our data are therefore best viewed (as they are presented in the table) alongside the national trends which, being taken from a larger sample over a longer period, are likely to be more robust. The one obvious limitation in doing this is that, due to the difference in survey periods care needs to be taken in making direct comparisons.
- There is a marked difference in changes for some species over one year (2002-2003) and over four years (2000-2003), highlighting the importance of looking at changes over a reasonable period of time and the danger of reading too much into results from any single year. These sorts of differences are usually explainable by seasonal factors such as good (or poor) breeding success rates in the preceding year, weather patterns or food shortages.
- For 2000-2003 there has been a large, statistically significant, increase in populations of seven species. These are Woodpigeon, Blackbird, Chiffchaff, Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch. National trends for the same period are not available but if we compare with the 10-year trend for the SE Region we can see that all the increases bar one are of similar proportion to Berkshire's (once margins of error are taken into account). The apparent exception in Berkshire is Goldfinch which, with at least a 21% increase, is well in excess of any change in the rest of this region. The reasons for this are not yet clear but may be linked to the increases which have occurred in winter gardens or, possibly, the adoption of more bird-friendly farming practices
- On the minus side Green Woodpecker, Carrion Crow, Magpie and Yellowhammer have suffered the most marked reduction. However, when one looks at the trends for the whole of the UK for 1994-2002 (the duration of the Breeding Bird Survey), the former three species are doing well. Two of them are so-called pest species and may have been the victims of perfectly legal control but it is difficult to suggest why Green Woodpecker appears to be faring so badly in our county. The plight of the Yellowhammer nationally is well known so perhaps we should not be surprised to see the decline in Berkshire's population but at least one other farmland species, the Skylark, does appear to be doing slightly better here than in the rest of the Southeast. It is to be hoped that with the introduction in 2005 of the new agri-environment schemes we will start to see an improvement in these birds' fortunes.

Appendix 1: BBI Survey data for 2003.

Table showing all species recorded, in order of abundance

No.	Species	No. of Birds	% 1 km Squares Occupied	% 200 m Sections Occupied	No.	Species	No. of Birds	% 1 km Squares Occupied	% 200 m Sections Occupied
1	Woodpigeon	3336	100.0	74.4	61	Grey Wagtail	16	11.7	1.4
2	Chaffinch	1392	100.0	69.6	62	Little Owl	14	11.7	1.4
3	Blackbird	1256	100.0	62.0	63	Marsh Tit	24	10.6	1.6
4	Blue Tit	1093	96.8	53.6	64	Lesser B-b Gull	40	9.6	1.1
5	Robin	799	96.8	52.6	65	Grey Partridge	17	9.6	1.1
6	Wren	790	95.7	53.4	66	Spot. Flycatcher	11	9.6	1.2
7	Great Tit	576	95.7	36.2	67	R-n Parakeet	43	8.5	2.1
8	Carrion Crow	847	93.6	40.5	68	Little Grebe	12	8.5	1.0
9	Dunnoch	355	89.4	26.0	69	Blk-headed Gull	16	7.4	1.3
10	Song Thrush	310	88.3	25.4	70	Hobby	7	7.4	0.7
11	Pheasant	503	84.0	29.5	71	Common Tern	20	6.4	1.3
12	Chiffchaff	244	79.8	22.0	72	Sand Martin	14	6.4	0.6
13	Greenfinch	483	78.7	21.8	73	Reed Warbler	11	6.4	1.0
14	Magpie	375	77.7	24.7	74	Herring Gull	9	6.4	0.6
15	Blackcap	249	77.7	21.3	75	Sedge Warbler	38	5.3	1.4
16	Jackdaw	715	71.3	25.1	76	Greylag Goose	29	5.3	1.0
17	Skylark	484	69.1	28.5	77	Gt. Crested Grebe	22	5.3	1.2
18	Starling	901	67.0	19.3	78	Corn Bunting	16	5.3	1.1
19	Gt. Sp. Woodpecker	158	67.0	14.8	79	Fieldfare	408	4.3	0.6
20	Goldfinch	278	62.8	11.6	80	Crossbill	148	4.3	1.3
21	Swallow	303	61.7	12.7	81	Yellow Wagtail	19	4.3	0.7
22	Mistle Thrush	115	58.5	9.3	82	Redpoll	13	4.3	0.4
23	Green Woodpecker	88	57.4	8.5	83	Meadow Pipit	12	4.3	0.9
24	Whitethroat	135	56.4	10.4	84	Willow Tit	6	4.3	0.4
25	House Sparrow	580	55.3	14.7	85	Nightingale	4	4.3	0.4
26	Long-tailed Tit	228	55.3	9.0	86	Shelduck	9	3.2	0.4
27	Yellowhammer	176	54.3	13.7	87	Gadwall	6	3.2	0.4
28	Mallard	360	52.1	11.5	88	Redshank	6	3.2	0.4
29	Collared Dove	221	52.1	12.3	89	Turtle Dove	5	3.2	0.4
30	Pied Wagtail	91	52.1	7.1	90	Redstart	5	3.2	0.5
31	Jay	98	51.1	8.1	91	Tree Pipit	5	3.2	0.5
32	Swift	239	47.9	7.1	92	Kingfisher	3	3.2	0.3
33	Linnet	332	45.7	9.1	93	Tawny Owl	3	3.2	0.3
34	Rook	1579	44.7	14.9	94	Golden Plover	71	2.1	0.2
35	Lapwing	237	44.7	8.6	95	Egyptian Goose	9	2.1	0.2
36	Nuthatch	97	44.7	8.5	96	L R Plover	7	2.1	0.3
37	House Martin	297	43.6	7.0	97	Mandarin	5	2.1	0.3
38	Goldcrest	153	42.6	10.4	98	Brambling	5	2.1	0.3
39	Kestrel	51	42.6	5.1	99	Ls. Sp. W'dpecker	3	2.1	0.2
40	Stock Dove	107	40.4	5.5	100	Common Sandpiper	3	2.1	0.2
41	Willow Warbler	103	40.4	8.5	101	Quail	3	2.1	0.3
42	R-L Partridge	102	38.3	6.6	102	Teal	8	1.1	0.2
43	Buzzard	51	37.2	4.9	103	Siskin	4	1.1	0.1
44	Coal Tit	116	36.2	8.0	104	Whinchat	4	1.1	0.1
45	Cuckoo	42	33.0	4.3	105	Cetti's Warbler	2	1.1	0.2
46	Canada Goose	234	27.7	4.7	106	Stonechat	2	1.1	0.1
47	Moorhen	59	27.7	4.6	107	Curlew	2	1.1	0.1
48	Grey Heron	43	26.6	3.7	108	Nightjar	1	1.1	0.1
49	Treecreeper	35	24.5	2.9	109	Wood Warbler	1	1.1	0.1
50	Garden Warbler	46	22.3	3.8	110	Woodlark	1	1.1	0.1
51	Bullfinch	46	22.3	3.5	111	G'hopper Warbler	1	1.1	0.1
52	Coot	103	18.1	4.3	112	Woodcock	1	1.1	0.1
53	Feral Pigeon	152	17.0	2.2	113	Water Rail	1	1.1	0.1
54	Lesser Whitethroat	20	17.0	2.0	114	Ringed Plover	1	1.1	0.1
55	Mute Swan	62	16.0	2.9	115	Gt. B-b Gull	1	1.1	0.1
56	Sparrowhawk	16	16.0	1.7	116	Pochard	1	1.1	0.1
57	Cormorant	27	14.9	1.8	117	Firecrest	1	1.1	0.1
58	Reed Bunting	32	13.8	2.8	118	Common Gull	1	1.1	0.1
59	Tufted Duck	88	12.8	2.3	119	Wheatear	1	1.1	0.1
60	Red Kite	16	12.8	1.5					

RINGING HIGHLIGHTS 2003

By Brian Clews

NEWBURY RINGING GROUP

A slight increase over 2002 saw 3664 birds ringed, involving 47 species, none of which were new. However, the first Common Sandpiper since 1989, first Fieldfare since 1994 and 10 Barn Owl pulli were of note.

Top six species were Blue Tit (855 – 16% down), Great Tit (572 – 7% up), Chiffchaff (293 – 62% up), Reed Warbler (284 – 20% down), Greenfinch (207 – 47% down), and Blackcap (134 – 3% down).

Other interesting species included 11 Cuckoos, 12 Kingfishers, 21 Cettis Warbler and 1 Willow Tit.

Recoveries of interest included:-

Cormorant – Ventjagersplaten, Holland, 10/6/97 – Lower Farm GP 18/10/03 (392km, 6 years)

Herring Gull – Bristol 2/7/99 – Lower Farm GP 13/10/03 (89km, 4 years)

Reed Warbler – Thatcham 14/8/99 – Dinton Pastures 28/5/03 (27km, 3 years)

Reed Warbler – Guildford 18/7/01 – Woolhampton GP 8/7/03 (46km, 2 years)

Reed Warbler – Tring 28/7/01 – Thatcham 3/5/03 (59km, 279 days)

Reed Bunting – Icklesham, E Sussex 7/10/02 – Brimpton GP 24/2/03 (140km, 140 days)

Reed Bunting – Litlington, E Sussex 4/10/03 – Brimpton GP 17/12/03 (114km, 74 days).

The last two items indicate an interesting community of interest between East Sussex and Berks for this species. The total number of birds ringed since 1967 stood at 183205 at the end of 2003, a significant effort.

DINTON PASTURES

A total of 250 birds were ringed at Dinton Pastures, the top 5 species being:-

Long-tailed Tit (47), Blackcap (27), Chiffchaff (22), Bullfinch (21), Dunnock (20) and Blue Tit (17).

Highlights included 2 Cetti's Warblers, 2 Treecreepers and a Siskin.

HUGHENDEN RINGING GROUP

Work continued at Jealott's Hill with 419 pulli of 22 species being ringed. Top six species were:-

Chaffinch (142), Yellowhammer (56), Blue Tit (40), Reed Bunting (37), Great Tit (28) and Greenfinch & Dunnock (each on 20).

Interesting species caught were 2 Water Rail and 10 Brambling. In addition, 91 birds were re-trapped or recovered, including 19 Blue Tits, 17 Chaffinch, 17 Reed Bunting and 4 Yellowhammer.

Thanks to Mick McQuaid and Jan Legg for the information summarised above.

Footnote: Regrettably on this occasion Runnymede Ringing Group were unable to offer all their data but propose to make this available for future reports. Some details for individual species appear in the species accounts

WINTERING GULLS IN THE THAMES VALLEY

By Paul Cropper

Between July 2003 and December 2004 a study of wintering gulls in the lower Thames valley was undertaken. The main aim of the project was to evaluate any changes in risk to air traffic from gulls, should non-lethal bird deterrence be enforced on the landfill at Wapsey's Wood, near Gerrard's Cross, Buckinghamshire (known to birders as 'Hedgerley Tip').

To this end I set out to study all of the major gull feeding sites within 30 miles of Queen Mother Reservoir (the main roost for gulls from Hedgerley), 30 miles being the maximum range that gulls will travel each day in search of food. We were particularly interested in landfills for domestic or commercial/industrial waste which provide ample food for gulls, and thirteen of these were identified in the study area. Four of these were in Berkshire, at Sutton Lane (Colnbrook), Lea Farm (Reading), Burghfield (Reading) and Hermitage. The location of these landfills, and reservoirs that support the main gull roosts, are shown in Fig.1 below:

During the study gulls were observed exploiting many new sources of food including urban refuse, bread put out for other birds, sewage works, and searching for worms on playing fields, as well as more natural food sources such as live fish, shadowing diving duck to pick up disturbed particles, and invertebrates such as swarming ants.

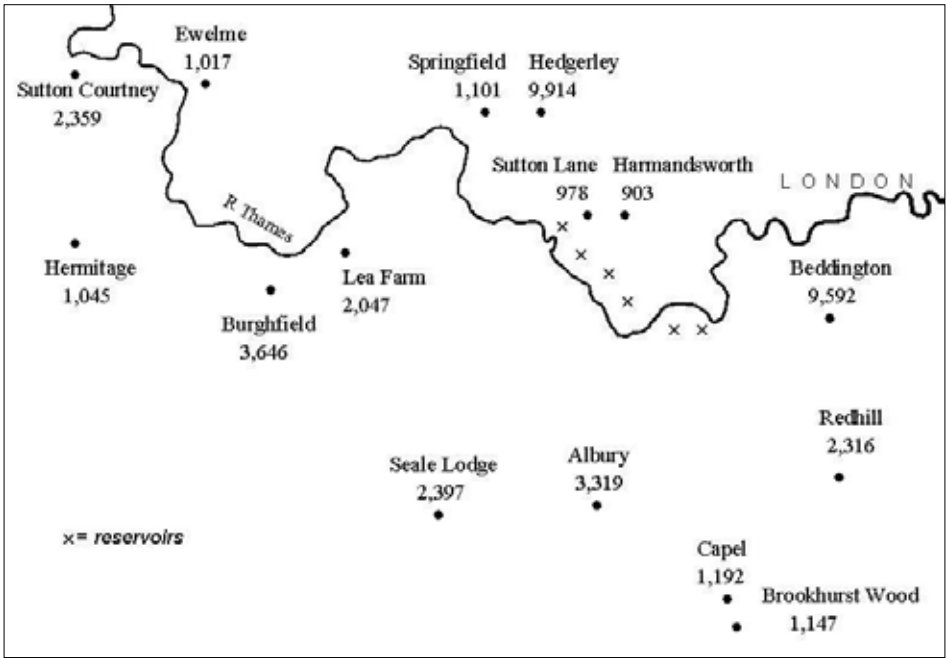
However three food sources appeared to be most significant: the tidal mud of the Thames, which attracts many thousands of Black-headed Gulls; worms from agricultural land, particularly during ploughing which may occur anytime from autumn to spring; and landfill sites, which offer very easy pickings.

To study the birds' movements we trapped, ringed and dye-marked a total of 1,175 gulls at Hedgerley as well as attaching radio-tags to the tails of 10 Herring Gulls. The main flightlines between feeding and roosting sites were identified and counted. The ringing results showed a very rapid dispersal of all species around the region, but with a particularly strong link between Hedgerley and the tips at Lea Farm and Burghfield.

The radio-tracking was a great success and we followed the signals from eight of the Herring Gulls at Hedgerley for several weeks after the release in November, reducing to two by the following February.

During the first week after release, two of the radio-tagged birds roosted at Queen Mother Reservoir, and three at Broadwater (5 miles east of the tip), while one bird alternated between both roosts. However the final week of November 2004 saw dramatic changes as Queen Mother Reservoir dried out almost completely, and Broadwater became the main Herring Gull roost; unsurprisingly, six of our radio-tagged birds now roosted there. The next change came in the third week of December when night-time temperatures dropped below freezing and Broadwater was threatened by ice. Three of our six remaining tagged birds now 'disappeared', with no signals from either Hedgerley or any of the usual roosts (although one of them returned in January). The other three continued feeding at the landfill but abandoned the diminishing Broadwater roost in favour of Wraysbury and KGVI Rsvrs.. Curiously they did not go back to using Queen Mother Rsvr until January, despite the fact that it had largely refilled by mid December and they were presumably flying over it every day on their route between Wraysbury and Hedgerley.

Fig.1 The landfills studied, showing maximum gull counts



The peak in gull numbers in the Thames valley came in late December / early January. During February birds began to depart for their breeding grounds, some of the most obvious movers being Common Gulls which formed huge flocks before departing en masse. The most dramatic changes occurred over the weekend of 13th – 14th March 2004, when gull numbers of all species at Hedgerley crashed from 6,300 on 12th to 1,600 on 19th, a change reflected around the region. The reason for this mass departure was probably that the winds between 12th Feb – 11th March had been chiefly easterly, but then switched to westerly for the next fortnight, making it easier for gulls to depart towards their main breeding grounds on the east coast and in Scandinavia.

Unexplained Phenomena

Perhaps the most curious phenomenon was the geographical distribution of large gull species in the Thames valley over the winter. During August-September, the Lesser Black-backs were the commonest large gull species, dominating on 9 of the 13 landfills. They then went into a steep decline between October and December, while at the same time Herring Gulls increased in number. The evidence points to a gradual westerly drift of the Lesser Black-backs during autumn and winter; this movement is quite often visible on autumn evenings, when lone Lesser Black-backs can be spotted circling steadily westward, regardless of the direction of other birds heading to roost.

By November, the pattern for the winter had been established: west of a line running north-south through Reading, Lesser Black-backed was the dominant large gull. At Burghfield at least 75% of large gulls were Lesser Black-backs, while on the five landfills west of here they

comprised 89-100% of all large gulls over the winter. By contrast, on eleven landfills east of this line, Herring Gull was the dominant large gull species, comprising 45-100% of all large gulls (with the exception of Seale Lodge landfill where the figure was 20-38%). There is no obvious explanation for this east-west divide.

Another puzzle is why Black-headed Gulls do not take more advantage of the easy pickings at sewage and water treatment works. The works were only popular when they happened to be underneath flightlines, or during severe weather, when gulls that normally fed on nearby fields move in seeking food (observed at Bracknell and Sandhurst works). Even works such as Chertsey, a mere 5 miles from the largest gull roost of all (Queen Mary Resvr), were shunned by the gulls. The reason may lie with the algal bloom that periodically covers the surface of the tanks, preventing the Black-headed Gulls from picking food off the surface. The algae thrive during times of peak flow at the works, which usually occur during the winter. Thus it tends to appear just at the time of year when the gulls are most in need of food.

The Future of Gulls in Berkshire

In 2003, within a 40-mile radius of Queen Mother Rsvr., there were twenty-two landfills that supported gulls. Between the beginning of the study in 2003 and writing this article in 2005, seven have closed for domestic waste tipping and no longer provide food for gulls. A further three have upgraded their bird deterrence procedures, thus reducing the amount of food available for gulls, whilst there is increasing pressure to reduce and eliminate food waste going to landfill.

All these changes will certainly have an impact in our county. The central importance of landfills was highlighted by an extensive study of the gull population around E Berks and W Surrey by Horton, Brough & Rochard (1983). They discovered that whenever a landfill closes, there is an immediate reduction in gull numbers at other nearby foraging and loafing sites. Thus we should expect a general decline in gull numbers, and particularly in the larger species which have fewer alternative food sources.

It is interesting to examine what happened at Burghfield, which used to be the third busiest landfill for gulls within my study area. In October 2004, bird deterrence by falconry was imposed here. Over the next few days, there were reports of a sudden increase in gull numbers at other sites – Springfield, Hedgerley and Sutton Lane, possibly displaced from Burghfield. However, two weeks later, everything seemed to have returned to normal; numbers at the nearest alternative landfills (Lea Farm, Hermitage, Hedgerley) were comparable with the same date the previous year. Roughly one third of the original landfill flock remains in the area, outside the tip on Smallmead gravel pit.

This paper has been written to provide a ‘snapshot’ of the gull situation in the Thames valley and as a thank you to all those who submitted ringing data and counts during our study.

A full version of this document with ringing recovery data and flightline map is available on: www.birdmanagement.co.uk

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ROC GARDEN BIRD SURVEY

The First Ten Years (Winter 1994/5 – Summer 2004)

By John Farnsworth

In the mid nineties the ROC decided to introduce an annual Winter (October – March) Garden Bird Feeding Survey not only to complement its other data collection activities but also for the benefit and interest of those Club members not easily able to attend indoor meetings or participate in Club outdoor events. Birds present and feeding in gardens were recorded on a weekly basis using two quarterly forms hence providing data over the chosen 6 month winter period.

The survey method was modified from the winter of 98/99 by using a single 6 month recording form and bird species present but not necessarily feeding were also recorded, the survey subsequently being simply referred to as the ROC Garden Bird Survey. Following members' interest in GBS winter recording, starting in 2000 the survey was extended to also cover the intervening summer periods (April – September). The 6 month forms make provision also for notes including garden type (urban/suburban, rural), size (large/small), presence of pond, supplementary food/water provided, nearby presence of a significant water body, presence of trees/shrubs if garden generally organic and (optionally) the maximum number of any one species occurring at any time during the recording week.

Gardens surveyed are not limited to those in the county of Berkshire nor exclusively to Club members, although they do reflect generally the geographic location of members. Being centred on Reading, most gardens surveyed are in fact within Berkshire.

The ROC GBS completed its tenth winter period in March 2004 and its fifth summer period in September 2004 during which time 101 bird species have been recorded. Details of the earlier winter surveys were reported at Club indoor meetings. More recent summary results have been published in Club Newsletters. The following Table recapitulates for the first ten years the occurrence of the 58 species recorded in 10% or more of gardens (all garden types combined) in any of the winter or summer periods, expressed as a percentage of the total number of gardens surveyed during the relevant 6 month periods. This (non-dimensional) number is a fairly broad indicator of the status of garden birds and can be used e.g. for seasonal comparisons. By looking across the Table for a given species, trends in percentage occurrence (the "O" figures) over the years can be appreciated. The order of the species in the Table is initially that reported for the first winter (94/95) survey, the more commonly occurring species at the top of the Table tending to the generally less common further down, additional species being added as they first occurred during the subsequent surveys. Species in **bold** in lines tinted ■ are of high conservation concern (Red-listed)*, species in *italic* in lines tinted ■ are of medium conservation concern (Amber-listed)*.

Garden species in the Table whose occurrence appears to have declined in recent years taking into account both winter and summer periods include 4 Red-listed, 3 Amber-listed and 2 Green-listed species. Using as an example for comparative purposes the BTO/JNCC/RSPB population trends 1994-2004* for the South East region (includes Berkshire), the apparent ROC GBS declines in occurrence for Red-listed **Starling**, **Bullfinch** and **Marsh Tit** reflect the SE regional population declines; that for **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** is in line with the earlier suggested decline for Berkshire*. The apparent ROC GBS decline for Amber-listed *Mistle Thrush* reflects also the regional decline; *Goldcrest* and *Swallow* were increasing regionally, the reasons for the (modest) GBS apparent downward trend may be more complex.

Period	Winter (Oct – Mar)							
	1994/5	1995/6	1996/7		1997/8			
Urban/suburban Gardens	34	19	16		15			
Rural Gardens	23	11	7		8			
Total no. of gardens	57	30	23		23			
Total no. of species	39	58	56		53			
Coefficient	0	0	L	0	L	0	L	
Blue Tit	100	100	97	100	98	100	95	
Blackbird	100	100	92	100	93	100	90	
Robin	100	100	95	100	91	100	87	
Greenfinch	100	97	69	100	96	96	69	
Chaffinch	100	97	79	100	89	96	87	
Collared Dove	100	100	66	100	81	91	74	
Great Tit	98	100	82	100	89	91	82	
Dunnock	97	97	83	100	79	96	74	
Magpie	97	93	62	100	74	91	69	
Woodpigeon	97	100	63	100	73	87	66	
Starling	95	97	76	100	75	96	70	
Long-tailed Tit	95	100	41	78	39	78	33	
Wren	93	87	38	83	19	78	29	
Coal Tit	93	70	39	91	55	74	42	
House Sparrow	90	100	89	96	84	91	77	
Song Thrush	81	97	39	100	33	74	25	
Jay	79	50	14	70	24	39	12	
Siskin	77	40	4	57	18	78	31	
Nuthatch	68	43	22	61	30	52	24	
Goldfinch	68	47	17	78	35	65	28	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	65	87	21	83	30	65	36	
<i>Goldcrest</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>13</i>	
Carrion Crow	54	60	18	70	19	52	19	
Sparrowhawk	52	40	6	43	6	57	7	
<i>Mistle Thrush</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>4</i>	
Bullfinch	49	33	5	35	5	30	5	
Pied Wagtail	44	57	16	52	17	35	7	
<i>Redwing</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>87</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>12</i>	
Blackcap	37	50	16	49	12	70	7	
Jackdaw	28	17	4	13	3	17	2	
Treecreeper	23	27	3	13	5	35	4	
Rook	23	20	5	13	3	17	2	
Pheasant	19	27	-	22	8	22	6	
Feral Pigeon	18	17	10	22	9	17	9	
<i>Fieldfare</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>3</i>	
Marsh Tit	14	17	6	17	8	9	4	
<i>(Lesser) Redpoll</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	9	10	-	-	-	13	1	
Reed Bunting	5	20	2	9	1	13	2	
<i>Green Woodpecker</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>6</i>	
Black-headed Gull	30	5	13	2	-	-	-	
Brambling	13	1	17	3	48	9	-	
Linnet	13	1	4	-	4	-	-	
Grey Heron	10	-	9	2	22	3	-	
Chiffchaff	10	1	9	-	13	2	-	
<i>Kestrel</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
Mallard	3	-	13	-	4	-	-	
<i>Grey Wagtail</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
Buzzard	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Little Owl	3	-	4	-	4	-	-	
<i>Stock Dove</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
<i>Red Kite</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
<i>House Martin</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
Garden Warbler	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Whitethroat	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
<i>Willow Warbler</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
<i>Swallow</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	
Swift	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

Note: ■ = Species of high conservation concern. ■ = Species of medium conservation concern

Winter (Oct – Mar)						Summer (Apr – Sep)					
1998/9	1999/00	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	
32	32	35	35	30	32	22	29	23	27	29	
16	16	15	14	12	15	12	17	13	13	9	
48	48	50	49	42	47	34	46	36	40	38	
62	65	64	67	60	64	65	67	61	59	65	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
100	100	98	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
98	100	98	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
100	100	98	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
94	100	90	96	95	96	100	91	92	98	97	
100	100	98	98	98	100	100	96	100	95	97	
90	96	94	98	98	80	97	96	97	95	97	
100	98	94	100	100	100	100	100	97	100	100	
100	100	98	100	100	100	100	100	94	100	97	
94	87	96	92	90	91	88	91	92	90	92	
98	98	98	100	95	98	97	87	94	100	100	
92	98	92	96	98	83	88	93	100	100	87	
83	93	94	96	90	94	88	83	75	80	63	
90	93	96	94	93	89	82	83	89	88	66	
86	83	88	92	90	91	85	76	83	83	74	
85	91	94	90	95	81	91	98	100	98	92	
75	89	88	90	95	98	85	78	83	98	82	
75	61	60	71	50	68	50	52	50	68	53	
42	57	40	18	48	60	18	11	28	15	21	
50	52	68	54	50	68	53	61	67	58	53	
83	83	86	84	79	70	76	65	72	80	71	
73	63	68	67	69	70	71	74	75	75	66	
46	65	70	49	60	38	50	30	36	43	37	
73	67	68	65	74	64	68	76	64	70	63	
56	52	62	49	52	66	53	50	47	40	55	
42	39	30	41	36	23	41	33	19	15	8	
33	39	36	27	31	17	38	39	42	45	26	
54	52	40	49	36	30	32	26	19	33	16	
58	43	28	43	60	38	-	-	-	-	-	
44	61	60	54	60	62	38	48	50	48	42	
29	41	30	35	33	30	32	50	42	50	39	
18	35	18	35	10	6	15	13	42	5	5	
10	15	8	22	21	15	15	20	19	13	11	
29	26	24	20	33	30	-	7	14	15	11	
2	6	2	6	7	9	9	4	8	5	5	
15	33	26	29	29	26	-	2	-	-	-	
21	20	20	18	14	4	12	13	6	10	3	
4	20	-	4	2	9	-	-	-	-	5	
4	2	-	-	5	-	6	4	-	3	3	
4	15	10	6	12	6	3	9	8	5	5	
33	50	30	41	29	43	44	37	42	48	29	
21	13	10	10	7	11	3	2	-	-	-	
25	35	8	35	7	23	18	2	6	3	13	
6	6	6	2	2	4	12	9	14	10	8	
18	26	12	12	14	28	6	22	3	10	13	
15	28	22	16	38	28	59	48	67	45	53	
4	2	4	4	12	6	-	9	-	3	5	
8	4	6	6	2	6	6	4	8	13	16	
13	11	12	8	10	13	15	2	3	5	5	
-	2	-	10	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	
2	2	4	-	-	13	6	4	-	-	-	
4	4	8	6	7	6	15	7	8	13	13	
-	-	-	4	5	13	-	-	-	10	18	
-	2	2	4	5	2	29	39	28	30	21	
-	-	-	-	-	-	9	2	11	5	5	
-	-	-	-	-	-	15	2	8	5	5	
-	-	-	-	-	-	21	17	25	10	18	
-	-	2	4	-	2	24	28	20	18	13	
-	-	-	-	-	-	35	35	36	33	29	

Garden species whose occurrence appears to have increased in recent years include 2 Amber-listed and 1 Green-listed species. The apparent increase for Amber-listed *Green Woodpecker* reflects the regional trend, that for *Red Kite* is probably due to the success of the recent Chilterns reintroduction project. The apparent increase for Chiffchaff (winter periods) reflects the regional trend and may result also from wintering migrants normally summering in continental Europe.

The 43 species recorded in less than 10% of gardens (all garden types combined) in any of the winter or summer periods are Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, *Mute Swan*, Canada Goose, *Shelduck*, Mandarin Duck, *Merlin*, Hobby, Red-legged Partridge, Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Moorhen, Coot, *Lapwing*, *Snipe*, *Woodcock*, *Common Gull*, *Herring Gull*, Ring-necked Parakeet, *Cuckoo*, Tawny Owl, *Kingfisher*, **Wryneck**, *Sand Martin*, *Meadow Pipit*, *Yellow Wagtail*, Waxwing, *Black Redstart*, Whinchat, Wheatear, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, *Dartford Warbler*, Lesser Whitethroat, *Firecrest*, **Spotted Flycatcher**, Pied Flycatcher, **Willow Tit**, **Tree Sparrow**, Crossbill, *Hawfinch*, **Yellowhammer**, Peacock and Pekin Robin.

The data available also allow (amongst others) a measure of the length of occurrence (the "L" figures in the table) to be calculated for any 6 month period (see Appendix), representing the average time for which a species occurred, averaged over all garden types. The table shows the "L" figures for the winter periods 95/96 to 97/98 for Blue Tit down to *Kestrel*. Hence some conclusions on length of occurrence ("L") compared to percentage occurrence ("O") can be drawn:

- the interannual trends in the "L" figures generally follow the trends in the "O" figures;
- the "L" figures are always lower than the "O" figures;
- for high "O" figures (generally the more common species), the "L" figures appear to give a clearer understanding of occurrence;
- a relatively high "O" value coupled with a relatively low "L" value can indicate:
 - feeding method (e.g. Sparrowhawk, Grey Heron);
 - migration/dispersal tendency (e.g. Blackcap, Chiffchaff).

Some examples from the table of particular species are e.g. for winter 96/97:

- Robin occurred in 100% of all gardens, for 91% of the time.
- **Starling** occurred in 100% of all gardens, for 75% of the time.
- **Song Thrush** occurred in 100% of all gardens, for 33% of the time.
- **Bullfinch** occurred in 35% of all gardens, but only for 5% of the time.
- *Green Woodpecker* occurred in 55% of all gardens, but only for 6% of the time.

ROC GBS data collected will also allow weekly variation throughout the year in species occurrence to be calculated. It is intended that future analysis will be carried out on this theme and in particular for species of conservation concern. As the value of such analysis depends on the quality and quantity of garden bird records submitted, please carry on recording. My thanks to all the participants who have contributed to this survey.

Appendix

By adding up the number of weeks in which a species was recorded for each and every garden, then dividing by the total number of recording weeks for the 6 month period for which each and every garden was surveyed, a non-dimensional number is obtained which is less than 1.0 but effectively represents the average time for which that species was recorded, averaged over all gardens. This decimal fraction is then converted into its equivalent percentage value ("L") which can be used for e.g. seasonal comparisons. By being non-dimensional the "L"

numbers are better (seasonal) comparators than e.g. simply comparing the number of “bird-weeks” in the different 6 month recording periods.

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ROC Garden Bird Survey (Oct 94 – Sep 04)

APPARENT ATTEMPT BY RAVENS TO BREED IN BERKSHIRE AFTER 143 YEARS OF ABSENCE

By Bruce Archer

For a couple of years prior to 2002 a pair of Ravens had been seen regularly in southwest Berkshire. In 2002 in addition there were several reports of 2 juveniles in the area but to the best of my knowledge no nest site within Berkshire had been reported, the last confirmed record of breeding being in 1860 in Hamstead Park, 4.5km west of Newbury (The Birds of Berkshire, Berkshire Atlas Group 1996).

During reconnaissance for a Breeding Bird Survey in a 1km square near Enbourne on 15 April 2003 I spoke to various landowners and interested parties, including Andy Pocock who has shooting rights to much of the area being surveyed. I also met his sister, Julie Pocock who mentioned that Ravens had bred in Hamstead Park that year. At that stage I was not aware of the status of Raven in Berkshire but made a visit to the Park on 24 May to explore the area. I found a rather run-down area of parkland that held several large pine and cedar trees, which might provide a Raven nest site, and plenty of sheep (Ravens feed their young on sheep carrion and placental remains). After discussing this breeding claim with Chris Robinson (Berks BTO Rep) and Peter Standley (County Recorder) the importance of following up the report became clear.

Julie Pocock had been working with Wendy Maxwell who was the gamekeeper for the Park until late April 2003. I eventually made contact with Wendy on 14 June 2003 and the following report is based on our phone conversation and follow-up visits to Hamstead Park.

There is no doubt that Wendy could recognise Ravens having seen them in Wales. She described the physical features in comparison with Rook and Crow and mentioned the distinctive call and flight “tumble”. She had first seen Ravens in the area of the Park in 2002 but with no signs of breeding. They developed a habit of drinking from one of the water troughs (presumably for the sheep), always the same trough. They had also been seen at that time in ‘The Wilderness’ according to a fellow keeper.

In 2003 Ravens were initially seen in the Park during February. In early March (date not recorded but a very windy day) they were first seen carrying twigs and sticks to the top of an old Cedar tree. This continued for some time until a nest was built with the birds apparently un-perturbed by the presence of people in the Park (the Cedar is the third tree on the right of the drive from the Enbourne church entrance with the nest on a bough at the back of the

tree as seen from the drive). However, Wendy did not see any evidence of young present in the nest before leaving the Park in the third week of April (when incubation might still have been in progress?).

On 15 June I visited the Park and inspected the tree concerned. There was an evident nest in the tree described but it did not appear to me to be big enough to have held a clutch of Ravens and it is possible that the nest was never completed for some reason. Pictured below are the nest tree and the nest as seen from beneath.

The evidence available appears to support the attempted breeding of Ravens in Berkshire in 2003, apparently the first such attempt for 143 years and in the same location as the last breeding record in 1860.

Note by Recorder.

Ravens have regularly nested in adjacent Wiltshire for some years and juvenile birds seen in Berkshire may well be from that source. As they are normally an early nester (February to mid March is usually given with a 3-week incubation period) if eggs were indeed laid there might reasonably have been an expectation of some signs of young by mid April. A degree of tolerance by gamekeepers would also be necessary in the presence of breeding Ravens where stock protection might be an issue!



Top: Raven's nest

Below: Raven's nest tree



SUMMARY OF WEATHER AND BIRD HIGHLIGHTS IN 2003

By Peter Standley

JANUARY

Weather The month started with local flooding and ended with snow. East and northerly winds from 4th brought overnight frosts and mostly sunny days but culminating in 2cms snow on 8th, which lay until 10th. It remained cold till 13th when dull, wet conditions arrived, 20th being very wet and windy. 24th to 27th were very mild (15C) but north winds returned on 28th and remained to the month end, bringing 4cms snow on 30th. *Birds* Rollovers from 2002 included a wintering Red-necked Grebe, several Med Gulls, Caspian Gull and on the downs Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl (numbers increasing to 8). New arrivals included 5 Red-breasted Mergansers, Little Gull, the returning Iceland Gull to Queen Mother Reservoir (QMR), Water Pipit and Waxwings. As usual with our now generally mild winters there were several reports of both Chiffchaff (a minimum of 23) and Blackcap (min of 26). Among wintering duck there was a notable count of 576 Wigeon at Moor Green Lakes.

FEBRUARY

Weather A predominately dry, cold month with winds mostly from the east and many grey, raw days. 17th to 21st were bright with overnight frosts and from 22nd it was milder, reaching 13C on several days in the last week. *Birds* First of the more unusual species to be reported was a Red-throated Diver at QMR on 10th but the bulk of such records were concentrated into the period from 17th to 25th following the change in the weather pattern mid-month. These included Great Grey Shrike on 17th, Glaucous Gull on 20th, 17 Bean Geese on 24th and 5 on the 25th when there was also an Avocet at QMR and a Great White Egret at Theale (the first for Berks). A flooded Forbury meadow attracted Caspian Gull and a high count (for Berks) of up to 150 Pintail. In spite of it being a cold month nesting activity by Long-tailed Tits was reported.

MARCH

Weather No statistics were collected in March due to holidays but the dry conditions appear to have continued, with easterly winds bringing cool nights and warm days in the last week. *Birds* Passage migrants included Common Scoter at Lower Fm GP, 9 Cranes entering Berks airspace from Bucks (only 5th county record), two more Avocets, Spotted Redshank and Water Pipit. Ten summer migrants had been reported by the end of the month with early records of Little Ringed Plover (on 3rd), Wheatear (6th), Sand Martin (8th), Tree Pipit (16th, the earliest for Berks), Willow Warbler (23rd), Yellow Wagtail (25th) and Sedge Warbler (29th). The remaining arrivals were Swallow, House Martin and White Wagtail. Also notable was a large influx of Bramblings and good numbers of Crossbills. Long-eared Owls were reported from two sites.

APRIL

Weather A generally warm, dry and sunny month. Unsettled for the first few days but becoming sunny with northerly winds on 7th and snow in the wind early on 10th. By 16th temperatures reached 27C with heathland and woodland fires in Scotland, Wales, Dorset and Surrey. Only 2mm of rain fell between early March and late April but the last few days of the month saw some sharp showers locally. *Birds* A quiet start with few highlights, the only notable passage record in the first ten days being 10 Kittiwakes at QMR on the 3rd and a Ring Ouzel near Lambourn on the 4th. Then after 2 Temminck's Stints at Lower Fm GP on the 11th, another

Glaucous Gull record at QMR also on the 11th and a Little Tern at Dinton Pastures on the 15th, there was an influx in the third week with Eider on 21st, an unprecedented inland passage of 13 Pomarine Skuas at QMR on 25th (4th county record) and a Marsh Harrier at Lower Farm GP on 26th. After Nightingale on 6th there was a surge in summer visitors with Cuckoo, Redstart, Reed Warbler, Garden Warbler and Whitethroat in the three days from 12th to 14th followed by Grasshopper Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Wood Warbler in the four days from 21st to 24th after a rise in air temperatures. Spotted Flycatcher on 29th was early. Other April highlights included 3 records of passage Osprey, a passage count of c2500 Golden Plover over Hungerford and strong passage of Little Gull, Sandwich Tern and, surprisingly, Ring Ouzel (with 6 records from 21st to 25th which included a party of 9 at Inkpen Hill). Survey results included 3prs of Black Redstart in Reading and at Thatcham a count on the 6th of 17 Cetti's Warblers (13 in song).

MAY

Weather Nationally a dull and wet month but Berkshire escaped much of the wetness. Only 2nd and 17th were wet but locally heavy showers developed on 11th and 25th. In the final week an anticyclone moved north east to Scandinavia with temperatures reaching 29C on 31st. *Birds* Wader passage included Black-tailed Godwit, Little Stint and Knot (all at Lower Fm GP), Bar-tailed Godwit and Wood Sandpiper. There were two records of late passage Great Northern Divers (on 2nd at Theale and on 17th at QMR), a Marsh Harrier over Wraybury GPs on 6th and 2 Spoonbills over Finchampstead on 7th (13th county record). Black-headed Gull breeding pairs reached 82 and Common Terns about 70.

JUNE

Weather Mostly warm and dry apart from heavy showers around 22nd. *Birds* Surveys of breeding birds produced population estimates of 50-70 Woodcock, at least 60 Nightjar, over 110 Skylark in the Kennet Valley at Englefield, 92 Reed Buntings in the Theale/Burghfield GP area and on East Berks heaths/woodland 70 Firecrest and 29 Spotted Flycatcher territories. Barn Owl records involved 20 birds at 12 sites, there was evidence of several Siskins having bred and at least 3 pairs of breeding Shelduck. Perhaps a portent for the future, there were several summer records of Herring Gull. Passage migrants included two Mediterranean Gulls and an early Osprey (at Marsh Benham on 17th, perhaps summering in southern England?).

JULY

Weather Another warm and dry month, with temperatures reaching the low 30'sC between 13th and 16th. The only appreciable rain was on 25th. *Birds* Early passage movement included 14 Black-tailed Godwits at Eversley GP on 1st and 10 at Lower Fm GP on 6th and there were several Osprey sightings from the 17th. An early cause for some excitement was a Red-footed Falcon at Pingewood GP from the 4th to the 17th (the 7th county record) but a Fulmar escaped live observation being found freshly dead at Newbury on the 9th (the 4th county record). The month ended with an early returning Pied Flycatcher at West Woodhay Down on the 30th.

AUGUST

Weather Another hot, dry and sunny month. No cloud or wind at the start of the month culminated in a temperature of 38C/100F at Heathrow on the afternoon of 10th. The rest of the month was mostly in an East or Northerly airstream, bringing early cloud and sunny afternoons. There was only one day of rain which, although steady, brought little relief to the parched conditions. *Birds* A Red-backed Shrike at Greenham Common from the 3rd to 6th (the first in W Berks since 1978) got August off to a good start. After a Wood Warbler at Dinton Pastures on the 9th, easterly/northerly winds from the 10th produced records of Marsh Harrier (on 10th and 16th), Spotted Redshank (13th) and Long-tailed Skua at QMR (on 17th

and only the 2nd county record). Also at QMR there was a total of 70 Yellow-legged Gulls on the 11th. Not too surprisingly Red Kites were suspected of having bred in W Berks and there was a juvenile Raven at Combe on the 30th. The peak 2003 count for Ring-necked Parakeets occurred on the 20th with 227 in the Bray area.

SEPTEMBER

Weather The warm, dry weather continued for much of the month with the only appreciable rain falling on 22nd, with 4mm. Temperatures reached 28C around 17th but a north westerly airstream from 22nd brought a taste of autumn. *Birds* Apart from no less than 3 records of Wryneck (on 11th, 14th and 27th) and a Rock Pipit on 26th this was a quiet month. Counts of note included 67 Egyptian Geese in the Cookham Rise area, a party of 17 Stone Curlew on the downs and a peak of c22,000 Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the Theale roost on 23rd. The long staying Bittern at Lavells Lake was sadly found dead on the 16th wearing a French ring.

OCTOBER

Weather Months of consistently dry and warm weather came to an end with occasional days of heavy showers bringing rainfall to near normal. In between, mild sunny days kept temperatures up and with light winds resulted in one or two frosts. Many trees were still in full leaf at the end of the month with a wonderful display of colour. *Birds* Late passage included 2 Knot at QMR, several Little Gulls, an Arctic Skua at QMR from 18th to 20th (13th for county), Water Pipit at three sites, a Yellow-browed Warbler at Theale GP on 30th (only the 2nd county record) and Lapland Buntings at QMR on the 4th and Widbrook Common on 6th. Low water at QMR resulted in a count of c1480 Cormorants on the 31st. Late departing summer migrants included Sedge Warbler on 5th, Redstart on 10th, Reed Warbler on 11th and Sand Martin on 24th. Winter arrivals included Bramblings from the 11th and the first Caspian Gull of the winter on the 28th.

NOVEMBER

Weather Generally mild and dry early in the month but the last 10 days turned colder as a series of depressions moved north east over SE England, bringing up to 90mm(3½ ins) rain in places between 20th and 23rd. Definitely a washed-out weekend! More rain and strong winds followed on 25th and 26th. *Birds* With the month's top three rarities choosing to prolong their stay observers were provided with the opportunity to extend their county species list. At Eversley GP a Pectoral Sandpiper was present from 1st to 7th (the 13th for Berks), re-appearing at Dorney Wetlands from 12th to 13th, and low water in QMR encouraged first a Spoonbill to stay from the 2nd to the 25th (14th county record and second for the year) and then a Grey Phalarope from 15th to 20th (24th county record). Other highlights included 9 Avocets at QMR on 29th and a roost of 42 Red Kites on the downs. There was a late Swallow on the 16th and an influx of Chiffchaffs (minimum of 34). Now a rarity in Berks there was a report of Tree Sparrow on the 27th in East Berks.

DECEMBER

Weather Rainfall rather above average in the south this month and with several days of strong winds. Otherwise a mixed bag of mild (13th) and frosty (8th) days, with snow showers on 28th. *Birds* QMR continued to figure prominently with a Storm Petrel and a Snow Bunting on the 2nd (the former falling prey to the local Peregrine!). Apart from three records of Kittiwakes the remaining notable records were of passerines with the first December record for Berks of a Yellow Wagtail (at Wokingham Sewage Works on 17th), a Bearded Tit at Theale GP from the 30th and on the last day of the year a count of c200 Corn Buntings at Sheepdrove Farm near Lambourn, the highest since 1979.

Our thanks go to Runnymede Ringing Group for the use of weather information from their monthly Newsletters.

REPORT FOR 2003 BY THE BERKSHIRE RECORDS COMMITTEE

By Peter Standley

RECORDS COMMITTEE UPDATE

Since publication of the 2002 Berkshire Bird Report Ken Moore has joined the BRC which now comprises Chris Heard, County Recorder and Chairman, Ken Moore, Peter Standley and as Secretary to the Committee, Derek Barker. We continue to examine all descriptions submitted and any other records for which descriptions would normally be required but for which they have not been received. Where the bird will have been seen by a number of observers the record may be found acceptable without the need for details, although this should not be assumed, as if no one provides a report and the sighting has conflicting elements it may not be possible for the BRC to give the record unqualified acceptance. A considerable number of reports of rare or unusual occurrences are still unsupported by descriptions and in most cases the BRC has had no alternative but to omit these until some supporting details are provided on which an assessment can be made.

The list of species for which descriptions/notes are required has been extended by the addition to the Category 3 list of the following species in view of the infrequency with which they are now recorded in Berkshire:

Additions to Category 3 from 2003 -

Wood Warbler

Tree Sparrow

As already reported in the 2002 Bird Report, during 2003 the British Birds Rarities Committee accepted a record of a Great White Egret, a new addition to the County Checklist, bringing that total to 310 species (301 in Category A and 9 in Category C). Including that record a total of 216 species were recorded (including 8 breeding and 2 non-breeding feral/released species). A well above average year.

REVIEW OF 2003 RECORDS

The following report on the outcome of the BRC's consideration of rare or unusual Berkshire records for 2003 follows the pattern of the BRC's report for 2002 except for the omission of a listing of accepted records, the details of which can be found in the Bird Report/systematic list.

2003 Records which the BRC have not been able to accept

In many cases the information provided in support of these records was insufficient for the BRC to reach a judgement as to their acceptability and therefore to be sure of correct identification. All records listed are of single birds unless stated otherwise. An asterisk (*) indicates that no details were received by the BRC. Where a record for a commoner summer or winter visitor has not been accepted because of an unusually early or late date this is indicated by "(date)" after the record. These will include some from Birdtrack which lack observer details.

Red-necked Grebe	QMR 21.1*
Slavonian Grebe	QMR 27.1*
Shag	R Kennet Reading 15.4*
Scaup	1m1f Kindersley Centre 1.5*
Common Scoter	4 Lower Fm GP 8.3*; Thatcham GPs 30.10*
Smew	48 Wraysbury/Horton GPs in Jan, 21 in Feb and 40 in Dec
Honey Buzzard	Woodley 10.5*; Crookham Com 4.6*; Pingewood GPs 31.8
Black Kite	Woodley 25.4*
Marsh Harrier	Lower Farm GP 26.4*; Cockmarsh 25.8*
Goshawk	Burghfield GPs 9.2*; Wokingham 31.3*; Catmore 17.4*, 29.4*, 11.11*
Common Buzzard	34 or 35 over Reading 13.7
Rough-legged Buzzard	Sonning 20.9*
Golden Eagle	Thatcham Marsh 13.4*
Merlin	Theale GPs 12.1* and 13.4*; Mid Berks 22.1.*; Wokingham 10.4*; Greenham Common 4.8 (data error); Charvil 30.11*
Hobby	Snelsmore Common 29.3* (date)
Crane	Dorney Wetland 3.4*
Avocet	4 QMR 25.2 (data error); 10 over Caversham 8.8*
Spotted Redshank	Lower Farm GP 18.4*; Lea Farm 15.5*
Wood Sandpiper	Eversley GP 28.4
Ring-billed Gull	Wraysbury GP 25.1*; RThames, Henley 29.11*; Lower Farm GP 5.12*
Common Gull	12 Lake End 8.5, 15 on 2.6, 1 on 21.6 (dates); AWE Aldermaston 14.6 (date)
Yellow-legged Gull	9 Lower Farm GP 25.1*
Caspian Gull	QMR 31.1*; Pingewood 19.3; Dinton Pastures 21.4; QMR 31.10* and 19.12*
Kittiwake	Lower Farm GP 30.3* and 14.12*
Little Tern	2 Dinton Pastures 28.6*
Bee Eater	Cookham 20.8*
Swift	Thatcham 1.4 (date)
Swallow	2 Lower Fm GP 8.3 (date)*
House Martin	5 Lower Fm GP 8.3 (date)*
Tree Pipit	Dinton Pastures 3.4*
Water Pipit	QMR 9.3*
White Wagtail	Twyford GP 19.2 (date)*
Wheatear	Sheepdrove 1.2 (date)*
Ring Ouzel	Lake End 20.4*
Garden Warbler	Snelsmore Common 23.3 (date)*; Wraysbury GP 5.4 (date)*
Yellow-browed Warbler	Sandhurst 25.10 and 27.10*; Theale GP 31.10*; Tilehurst 14.12*
Willow Warbler	Dorney Wetland 11.10*; Eversley GP 18.10*
Wood Warbler	Swinley 16.4; Lavells Lake 25.4*
Firecrest	Theale GP 21-22.2*; Cookham Rise Cemetery 8.6*; Winnersh 18.11*
Spotted Flycatcher	Upton Park, Slough 29.4* (date)
Bearded Tit	Thatcham 1.1*
Golden Oriole	Binfield 30.5*
Red-backed Shrike	3 Cockmarsh 21.6
Great Grey Shrike	Wargrave 11.5*
Raven	Eversley GP 2.6*; Lambourn 25.6; Lavells Lake 24.9*
Tree Sparrow	2 Hambridge 28.3*
Serin	Lake End 26.4* and 7.6*
Mealy Redpoll	Dinton Pastures 17.11*

2003 Records still under consideration

None remain under consideration by the BRC