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Introduction

This newsletter goes out as part of the annual membership mailshot, which includes all the usual items, including the new programme card. This season's programme has great variety – please read Ray Reedman's taster item below for more about all the indoor meetings, and outdoor trips and excursions, And also check out the Club web site at www.berksoc.org.uk for further information about the events.

Can I also add my customary apologies to all of you who complete the Club garden bird survey as I have, yet again, failed to make much progress in analysing the results. I know that many of you do enjoy taking part and have included the latest winter recording form with this mailshot - hopefully I will be able to find a way to, at least, give some sort of feedback on how our local garden birds are doing.

I hope you have had a good birdwatching spring and are now enjoying the quieter summer months. If you have been away on birdwatching trips and holidays why not send me an account of where you have been and what you have seen - I'm sure other members would be interested to hear about it! Sadly, our planned spring trip to Rumania did not take place – it's quite a long story and I won't bore you with it but, suffice it to say, the term "senior moment" would be in there somewhere!

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 November, to allow them to be included in the winter edition late in the year.

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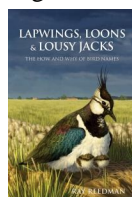
BTO Membership Offer

If your aren't a member of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), as a BOC member you can take advantage of the BTO's "Member Get a Member Offer", which gives a 6 months trial membership for just £1. Simply go to www.bto.org.uk/mgm for more information and to take up the offer.

Indoor Programme for 2016-17

Once again there should be something for everyone.

We start in October with a talk by Jeff Blincow on the Wildlife of Bhutan. He promises to reveal the dramatic scenery, superb wildlife and unique culture of this 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'. Visiting this small Himalayan country gives you a true flavour of the wildlife of the Himalayas. 70% of the forests still survive in this mountain kingdom giving many opportunities to see species that are difficult to find elsewhere. On his last visit Jeff gave us some marvellous insights into flight and demonstrated superb photographic skills.



This year I have put myself into bat, partly to celebrate the recent publication of my book, *Lapwings, Loons and Lousy Jacks*. This project grew from a short talk which I gave to BOC some years ago and developed into a much wider investigation of the aspects of language, culture, history and politics which lie behind English and scientific bird names. The facts are often colourful and there are many strange tales to tell.

In November, Matt Stevens, a specialist in raptor conservation at the Hawk Conservancy at Andover, will deal with problems facing raptors, which are frequently harmed by human actions, whether intentional or incidental. His organisation is directly involved in projects to save some of the most threatened species.

Chris Collins is another newcomer to BOC. He is a wildlife leader and photographer who will present the birds and other wildlife of the Russian Far East. The talk covers the Sea of Okhotsk, Sakhalin Island, the Kamchatka Peninsula and further north, and promises top quality images of many species including Tufted and Horned Puffins, Steller's Sea-eagle and Siberian Rubythroat. Chris also participated in a collaborative venture between major conservation groups to locate new populations of the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper and will tell us about that activity.



For the AGM talk, Natural History Museum expert, Hein Van Grouw, will discuss aspects of aberrant plumage in birds, explaining the science behind terms like albinism and leucism and discussing the strange phenomenon of white-speckled Ravens in the Faroes. Hein is already known indirectly to BOC via his wife Katrina, since he prepared the specimens which she drew for *The Unfeathered Bird*.

In December, BOC's President, Neil Bucknell, will take us into the mysterious world of *Belarus – Europe's unknown birding destination*, with its iconic primeval forests and wetlands, an area which is virtually unknown to birders from the west. Neil visited the area in 2015 and spent time with local ornithologists to gain an insight into the country's varied bird life, habitats and the risks and opportunities they face.

The Christmas Social and Quiz will take place as usual at Earley St Peter's Church Hall, when emphasis is on an enjoyable evening of chat and challenge, where you can both demonstrate your knowledge and learn quite a lot.

In January, David Lindo, the Urban Birder, has agreed to take time off from writing, filming and travel to recount some *Tales From Concrete Jungles*. David has visited over 270 cities worldwide in search of urban birds. During his travels he has found a surprising number of committed conservationists, interesting birding locations, and, importantly, many birds. Join him on his journey around the world in five cities.

Later in the month BOC's Renton Righelato presents *The Mata Atlantica*, a talk about birds in the most biodiverse zone east of the Andes. 97% of South America's Atlantic Rainforest has been lost, but conservation projects, often focussed on birds, are starting to bring it back.

In February Martyn Kenefick, on behalf of the Asa Wright Centre, will represent the joys of *Birding Trinidad and Tobago*, where birds of the South American avifauna can be seen alongside passage migrants on their way to and from North America. Nestling on a mountainside, with a balcony overlooking the dense forest, the centre produced almost seventy species on the first day of our 2006 visit – and it just got better. But let Martyn tell his own story.



A regular highlight of our March calendar is the Photographic Competition, at which professional judges cast a critical eye over the often staggering bird pictures taken by club members. However this is not just an event for photo-buffs, since it presents everyone with the chance to learn more about birds in general.

The last event at the University this season is a talk by Kate Risely of the BTO, who is in charge of the Garden Bird surveys. Readers of the popular bird magazines will also know that Kate writes with a lot of insight on wider topics, so we can look forward to an informative evening.

In April there will be a 'workshop' evening at Earley St Peter's Hall. For this I have put together an illustrated talk called *Waterside Birds*, which deals with the identification (and sometimes behaviour) of such as the grebes, rails, herons and egrets, with some attention to some of the scarcer and rarer species too.

All of these meetings are free to members, so do ignore the cold evenings, put your favourite TV programmes on to record, and come out to meet your fellow members. If transport is a problem we might be able arrange for another member to give you a lift, so feel free to contact one of the committee for advice.

Outdoor Programme for 2016-17

Once again we have put together a varied programme with the usual mix of weekday and weekend day tips by car or coach, and one or two longer weekend trips. We try to cover a variety of habitat types at appropriate seasons and it is fairly probable that anyone taking part in all the trips will find no difficulty in seeing 200 species in a year.

This year's offerings include some well-tested favourites, because we know they work, but there are some new ideas in there too.

One important feature of the programme is the coach trips, in which we collaborate with local RSPB groups. These trips are costly to run, so we need plenty of support from our membership to make them viable. They have the advantage of letting a professional driver do the work while we reserve all our energies for the actual birding. A September trip to Titchwell always looks a little ambitious, but it is practical, since it allows about six hours for the birding. I have done that trip several times and rarities have been frequent, so it is well worth the travel. Winter trips to Slimbridge and Elmley provide the chance to bag some quite difficult birds, especially wild geese, swans and raptors, while a spring trip to Pagham Harbour almost guarantees something special. The Bird Fair has been a fixture for some years. And if a starting point at Bray Wick looks difficult from the Reading area, then check with the East Berks organiser or with me to find out if a lift is possible to the starting point.

And that last point applies to all our outings: the leader should have some idea of who is planning to travel and from where, and may be able to coordinate lifts. We do strongly advise that if you plan to join a trip you notify the leader as a matter of course. Leaders may decide to call off the event if they have problems or if the conditions are all wrong. We try to notify changes on the web site or by email, but it is in your interest to stay connected.

Our ambitions are limited by the availability of leaders, and we still rely heavily on the generosity of some old stalwarts who deserve a rest, so new offers and ideas are always welcome –and my warm thanks to all the team who have offered their services again this year.

We put a lot of work into the planning and preparation of talks and trips and nothing is more disappointing for organisers than a lack of attendance or participation. I have a feeling that there has been some decline since we started sending out our annual programme in electronic form. E-mail attachments are easily lost, so my suggestion is to print off your card data immediately and then keep it to hand, or to store it prominently on whatever electronic device you use for such matters. Then run through the programmes at the start to highlight for your diary the events which most attract you.

Hope to see you there!

Ray Reedman

Report of Coach Trip to Slimbridge (January 2016) with the Wokingham and Bracknell RSPB

The forecast was not wonderful, either in terms of weather or spectacle, the latter because the ultra-mild early-winter had resulted in low numbers of incoming wildfowl. Ironically, it was snowing when we left, but further west it was just gloomy and damp.

There were two Goldcrests in the bushes by the bus-stop as we waited, so the contrast could not have been greater when we spotted three huge Cranes in a field as we arrived at Slimbridge. Anything between those two extremes would be good from then on.

At Rushy Pool, there were good numbers of birds, including several dozen Bewick's Swans, but we immediately fell to searching through the myriad Tufties, Pochards, Pintails, etc. to find the two reported female Greater Scaup. That was not so easy, since several of the female Tufties bore deceptive white facial patches similar to those of the Scaup. Eventually we did find them at the back of the pool.



Out on the Tack Piece, the tiny star was a Little Stint among Dunlin, Redshanks, Golden Plovers, Lapwings, Black-tailed Godwits and Curlews. Many ducks were there too: Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal, Pintail, Mallard and Shelduck, with more Bewick's Swans and Mute Swans. A Peregrine sat silhouetted in a tree at the far side. Three Cranes arrived (probably those we had seen earlier) and we were thrilled to see two of them perform a short bonding display, with stretched necks and long, slow, elegant strides. Later there were three more from the Holden Tower, this time a long way down towards the west.

Apart from a few Greylags, geese had been conspicuously absent from the Tack Piece, but from the tower we found a flock of perhaps over a hundred Barnacles on the Dumbles and a smaller number of Canada Geese. As we waited a flock of perhaps 200 White-fronts flew up the estuary to settle to the east of the hide, but too far off to identify any of the Greenland form reported to be among the mainly European birds. These at least were true wild birds. There was a conspicuous flock of a dozen Great Black-backed Gulls, but other large birds, mainly Shelduck and Rooks, were scattered widely. Two corvids, wading in a flooded corner, drew my attention because they were at least as big as the Shelduck near them: we confirmed that these were in fact Ravens.

At the feeding station by the path back we found a Water Rail which made a short excursion into the open. There were surprising numbers of House Sparrows there too.

A hot snack made a welcome break from the damp cold, but the afternoon session was a little less fruitful, with just a Treecreeper and a Buzzard added to the list. Of two Herring Gulls in a field, one showed the much heavier-streaked head and neck of the Scandinavian race.

Inevitably, the collection was a distraction as we passed through, with all the birds in superb plumage at this time of year: the American species in particular provided some useful lessons. Try this one >>>>

Back at the Tack Piece briefly, we added Ruff to the list in the failing light and watched a brief murmuration of about 600 Starlings, but the flock made one circuit and dived straight into the reeds. The floodlit feed was an impressive melee, but it contained the smallest number of birds I had ever seen there: WWT reported that large numbers of Bewick's Swans were wintering this year in Greece. However, a winter trip to Slimbridge is always a good day out.



This was a Wokingham and Bracknell RSPB event, which was well-supported by BOC members. Thanks to Ian Payne for organising it.

Ray Reedman

And just for fun, another crossword

(Courtesy of Ray Reedman – solution in next newsletter)

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	
	8						9	10
11								
					12		13	
				14				
15	16			17				18
	19		20					
21						22		
23				24				

Clues Across....		Clues Down....	
1	Flag up this bird?	1	Snapped at one bird to get another. Boom! Boom!
7	Ex-bird halfway to a party.	2	Woodlark
8	Our location for the Garden Bird Survey?	3	Septentrional
9	A place we objectively can find Nearctic birds	4	Somewhere beyond the taiga
11	This bird is (almost) petrified	5	Gives a class for flies and beetles
14	Nimbus could make a difference to a day's birding	6	He might reveal a proto-bird
15	An artistic him or a her confused in S.America	7	The colour of <i>Prunella modularis</i> or of <i>Calidris alpina</i>
17	Markers look like a crazy deer	10	Tuppence a bag?
19	Wander to almost the highest room in the house. Irruption is like this.	12	Write on it that there are forty-nine other shades
21	Hawk-Eagle out of scorn ate well.	13	An oystercatcher might need this to open a sound-alike
22	Stallone's vulpine character?	16	A rather old Ardea
23	What you might get into when identifying a wader	18	Most birds do and many eat them
24	Quotes an International wildlife law	20	An owl might get supper at dusk
		21	It's all right to slip in this little clue