

Berkshire Ornithological Club:

2016-17 Chairman's Report for AGM

1. Membership

At the start of the 2017/18 season, the number of members stood at 288. The downward trends from last year therefore continue, showing a slow decline in both total membership and income from subscriptions. This has been caused by a combination of more members opting for "retired" status, fewer new members joining and an increase in the number of people not renewing their membership.

Members do not always keep us advised of changes to their email addresses in a timely fashion, thus making it difficult to keep in touch with them for purposes of the Newsletter, Programme changes and issuing of QMR Permits.

Once more the Membership Secretary and the Treasurer have spent time and effort to ensure that their separately held records are accurate and in line with members' wishes. A big thanks to both Iain and Eleanor for the work that they've done.

In the light of concerns at falling membership numbers and rising costs, particularly relating to indoor meetings, the committee asked myself, Jake Bishop and Adrian Lawson to carry out a review of the workings of the BOC and identify what the Club could do to address the situation. The group have made an initial report back to the committee, but the review is still ongoing. One issue that has been raised is that the Club is not very good at publicising its activities and that more volunteers are needed to help with this.

2. Programme – Meetings and Field Trips

Indoor programme

During the past year there have been 12 indoor meetings plus the annual photographic competition and Ray's ID workshop. The aim of the Indoor Programme is to present a mix of interest, information and entertainment. Travelogues open new vistas for some and old memories for others and we had several of those, taking us to Bhutan, The Russian Far East, Belarus, Brazil and Trinidad, and to a number of city centres, as well as to the Scillies. These talks bring a rich mix of geography and ecology, as well as an insight into some little-known habitats and species.

Input from top scientists was strong too, as we learned about bird pigmentation, seabird ecology, and the national garden bird surveys. Ray's annual ID workshop aims to reinforce ID skills; this year we looked at waterside birds.

We've had a few technical issues with the IT and projection over the last year, but have managed to scrape by. Attendance was slightly better than in 2015/16, increasing on average by about 10%. The highest attendance was, not surprisingly, for David Lindo's talk on urban wildlife. However there have been fewer

visitors at meetings than in 2015-16; we should all encourage non-members to come along to enjoy the talks, to find out more about the Club and (hopefully) to join.

A big thanks is due to Ray who, after organising many excellent talks for us over the last 13 or so years, has decided that it is time to step down. He has handed the baton over to Sue Charnley.

Outdoor programme

In 2016/17 there were a total of 20 trips.

In planning outdoor trips, we try to visit a range of sites and habitats to give members the opportunity to discover new places, to see a good variety of birds, to share their expertise, and to learn from others. Where possible we encourage car-sharing to reduce fuel consumption and spread the costs; there is usually a seat for someone without their own transport. Coach trips provide the best way to go further afield and also form a vital link with two local RSPB groups: without inter-club co-operation there would be fewer coach trips. Almost inevitably the success of the odd trip is curbed by the weather, but in general we have had some excellent outings and it is a rare day that does not provide some really interesting birding and some opportunities to look at other creatures apart from birds. Thanks to a nucleus of dedicated leaders we are able to deliver plenty of choice, but we do need some new input, as well as a new coordinator. We may be forced to cut back on the programme if more leaders don't come forward, so if you could offer to lead just one walk on a familiar patch it could make a big difference.

Numbers on the trips has been variable. The trips are organised for you, the members, so please make sure that you take advantage of the opportunities.

3. Annual Reports

We published the 2013 annual report at the end of 2016 and anticipate publishing the reports for 2014 and 2015 early next year. Our aim is to publish about 12 months or so after the year end - we are getting closer!

4. Recording

Our working group on recording has been looking at ways of making the Berkshire bird records database more useful and accessible. We have made the county birds records database available for searching on our website (except for a small number of sensitive breeding species), allowing anyone to research and analyse the data. This has all records since 1996 and is more up to date than the annual reports can be.

Thanks are due to the recording and reporting working group that has done this and more over the last year to improve the availability and usefulness of our records for science and conservation: Richard Burness, Neil Bucknell, Robert Godden, Marek Walford and Renton Righelato.

5. Conservation

Renton covered the Club's conservation activities at the members evening on November 15th, so this is a very brief summary. The BOC actively and successfully fought a proposed housing development on one of the UK's biggest Nightingale stronghold, at Theale and has been working to enhance the protection of a number of important bird sites elsewhere in the county. We ran a Water Rail survey in 2017 and are planning further surveys for next year, for Water Rail and for the rapidly declining Little Grebe. With the Canal and River Trust we are planning a new nature reserve in the Kennet valley, at Padworth.

6. Thank you

Finally a couple more thank you's. I want to thank Ted Rogers for the sterling work he's done on the newsletter for the past 20 years. Ted is passing on the editorship to Iain Oldcorn.

Neil Bucknell's term of office as president comes to an end in January. He has decided not to restand and I want to thank him for his support for the Club, particularly stepping in as chair for a while.

I'm pleased to say that the committee have appointed Renton Righelato as president. He is eminently qualified for the post. A biologist by training, his career has included research in food and pharmaceutical companies, serving on the boards of multinational companies and start-ups, visiting professorships, and appointments in UK Research Councils and with the European Commission. He is a Fellow of the Linnaean Society. A life-long bird-watcher, he has devoted much of the last twenty years to conservation: internationally as chair of the World Land Trust and locally with the BOC, as a past chair, working on Berkshire conservation projects and as coordinator and editor of *The Birds of Berkshire 2013*.