

Berkshire Ornithological Club Conservation Subcommittee
7.30pm Wednesday 15th May 2019, 63 Hamilton Road, RG1 5RA
Draft Minutes

1. **Present:** Neil Bucknell, Fraser Cottington, Roger Frankum, John Lerpiniere, Ken Moore, Renton Righelato, Des Sussex. **Apologies:** Chris Foster

Des Sussex was welcomed and Chris Foster congratulated on his election to Newbury Council

2. **Minutes** of meeting of 6 February 2019: approved

3. **Matter arising**

- a. **Conservation Fund** The BOC Committee accepted our recommendations on the management of the Conservation Fund and BBAG has now closed its accounts and transferred its remaining funds (£4,516) to the BOC for the Conservation Fund. The total donation from BBAG is £24,516. Further income from Atlas sales will go to the BOC for the fund.
- b. **Downs LWS:** Neil has written to the landowner and manager of the proposed Bury Dow/Cow Down LWS asking if they would be happy to have the area designated but had no response. Des Sussex will contact David Carlisle about this. Des noted that there are currently no funds to facilitate new farmer clusters in the area.
- c. **East Berkshire Living Landscape:** Renton had sent feedback from the committee on the BBOWT plan to Hilary Philips, focussing on the opportunities for action on the arable farms in the EBLL area.

4. **Theale planning appeal**

Neil reported that the appeal hearing had recommenced on 13th May, dealing with dispute over the flood modelling. The appellant's ecological submission has yet to be examined. [We later heard that the appellant withdrew the appeal on 15th May.]

5. **Surveys progress**

- a. **Farm surveys:** Neil reported that the farmland bird surveys on Beeswax farms on the Downs was under way. Des noted that Beeswax was applying for a stewardship agreement and it was anticipated that the survey data would be helpful to Beeswax and Natural England.
- b. **Grebes** Neil has prepared a list of 126 water bodies in Berkshire (to be circulated with these minutes). Renton will map the survey data and records from the county database and berksbirds on to this to enable a focussed calls for records next year.
- c. **Firecrest:** In view of their apparent large increase in distribution and abundance since the last Atlas, Chris Foster has proposed a survey of breeding Firecrests. It was agreed that Firecrest should be put forward to Richard Burness as a priority species for 2020 and that a comparison be made of their current distribution with the Atlas records (Chris/Richard/Renton).

6. Aldermaston Gravel Pits SSSI

Des Sussex explained that BBOWT withdrew from their arrangement with NE to manage Aldermaston GPs a few years ago, following a risk assessment that made them uncomfortable about public access. They (NE) were now looking for alternative ways of managing the site and wanted to discuss it with interested groups. The committee agreed that this was an important site that had held a good range of wildfowl, warblers etc and was a recent site for Turtle Dove. Des will arrange a site visit for the committee and, as any involvement of the BOC would be likely to require volunteer effort, it was suggested that the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group be invited as they have a strong work party programme (Ken to contact Cathy McEwan).

7. Other Natural England points: in further discussion Des noted that:

- a. government policy aspires to a greater focus of farm support on payment for public goods, particularly environmental benefits. Monitoring will then become more critical, particularly if a payment by results element is built into the stewardship schemes.
- b. Funds may be available from the EA for control of exotics, such as Himalayan Balsam and *Crassula helmsii*.
- c. Designation of new SSSIs is difficult and NE will seek to use other measures to encourage protection.

8. Poors Allotment

Poors allotment is a 12 ha wet heathland site south of Ufton Nervet, for which, we have been given to understand, its trustees are seeking uses. Following an approach from a local birdwatcher, Peter Hickman and Cathy McEwan, Ken and Renton developed an outline proposal for managing the site to benefit heathland birds. This was agreed with the subcommittee in March and sent to the Poors Allotment trust. Trustees are interested in discussing the proposal and have invited us to their October meeting.

It was noted that there are likely to be conflicting interests, particularly on public access and dog-walking.

9. Heathrow expansion: biodiversity consultation

On behalf of the BOC, Brian Clews attended a presentation on the impacts of the Heathrow Expansion Project (HEP) on biodiversity and prepared notes that had been circulated to the committee. The presentation dealt largely with the surveys that had been done by a team of ecological consultants. As written summaries of their surveys were not provided, it was difficult to assess the quality of the work. A public consultation will open in June and, as this is a major project in an area of high importance to many wildfowl and wetland species, it was agreed that the BOC should make a submission. To do this we should get together a small team of people who know the area well. Renton to contact about this: Brian Clews, Richard Burness, ? Ness, Peter Newbound, Brian Crathorne.

10. **Swift box provision:**

60 boxes have been provided for c 30 sites. Ailsa Claybourn has been an excellent publicist and has arranged for SSE to install some using cherry picker in Tilehurst and hopes to do some in Hamilton Road, Reading, shortly. Cost to BOC so far £773; donations received in excess of £100. A further 12 boxes have been requested for suitable sites. The committee agreed to authorise purchase of up to a further 40 boxes (approximately £480). If SSE are able to bring in their cherry picker during Action for Swift's Swift Awareness Week (22-30 June), there may be an opportunity for publicity Renton to liaise with Fraser re Radio Berkshire.

11. **Site updates**

- a. **Padworth Lane GPs:** Chris is planning an entomological survey this summer. The management plan has been completed by Adrian Hickman and invoice paid (total cost). A meeting with the Canal & River Trust has been arranged for 17 June.
- b. **Wasing:** A helpful new estate manager is in place and has contracted Adrian Hickman to carry out surveys.
- c. **Lea Farm Lake:** The purchase of the lake by LWT trustee, Ron Bryant, has been completed and endowment to LWT planned. A grant (£42,000) for habitat creation and management has been awarded to LWT by Network Rail's "No net loss" biodiversity offset programme. The landscaping work will require consents from the EA and Wokingham Borough Council.
- d. **Fobney Island/Fobney Meadow:** There is a Nightingale territory on the river bank at Fobney Island (a new site). An entomology assessment is planned by Chris for this summer. The Friends of Fobney would like to establish a flood management programme for Fobney Meadow, which is proving to be an excellent wetland, but becomes too dry during the summer, when Lapwing, Redshank, Water Rail are trying to breed.
- e. **Theale/Burghfield:** Numbers of Nightingales and Sedge Warblers are well down this year. At Hosehill, Lapwing and Oystercatcher are doing well. Following a change in manager at Heron's Nest, Ken Moore's permission to monitor the site has been withdrawn and he may ask for BOC support to regain it.
- f. **Burnthouse Lane:** Ken showed a restoration plan for the gravel pits that has so far been implemented on part of the area. The plan removes pools and marsh that had been left at our request a few years ago. Ken believes the tenant farmer to be sympathetic to leaving some wetland. [A site visit will be made shortly].

12. **Date of next meeting:** Wednesday 7th August.