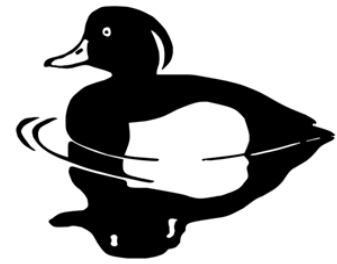


BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

Newsletter No 92

December 2023



Editorial

Iain Oldcorn bocmembershipsec@hotmail.co.uk

Welcome to our 92nd BOC Newsletter. As usual, Neil starts us off, this time with a plea for help in possible Thames surveys. SeanTM brings us recent news from the BTO and its Youth Representative Scheme. Not to be outdone Sally introduces her new inspiration, the Wildlife and Wetland Trust and then does Sean's job for him by advertising the BTO's hybrid training sessions. Elaine helps us tell the bird boys from the girls. Jane tells you what you missed if you didn't attend our latest AGM. BrianC and BrianC bring us the results of their Blackbird investigation to which many of you contributed one way or another. There's a boring membership update from me. But we have had zero reports about any of our Outdoor trips – perhaps the participants never made it back to base! However, the next best thing maybe, our local author Ray tells us that there are plenty of birding related books on his bookshelves, and maybe you should consider buying your own copies of some of them as Christmas presents for yourself and/or your family; and finally, another selection of Andy's excellent photos, this time of 2023 Birding Highlights!

From the Conservation Sub-committee – What's happening to Coots and Grebes on the Thames? A possible survey to try to find out more. Can you help? **Neil Bucknell**

Do you enjoy a walk by the Thames? If so, and you take your binoculars to do some birding, you may have noticed in recent years that two of the bird species we used to think of as being characteristic of the Thames (Coots and Great Crested Grebes) seem to have disappeared. This certainly is the case on the stretch west of Reading (between Purley and Streatley) where I do a lot of my birding.

To investigate this further, the Conservation Sub-committee is considering organising a survey this year to check the Thames for these species, and other waterbirds, to see if we can get more of a clue as to what might be happening.

We do have a baseline against which we can measure the current position, namely the results for the last (2007-11) Berkshire Atlas survey. There are about 50 tetrads (squares 2kmx2km) along the Thames and Jubilee River in Berkshire, so to replicate the 2007-11 survey we would be asking surveyors to count birds and record them by reference to the tetrad they are seen in. Don't worry – maps will be supplied! As with the timed tetrad visits for the atlas, two of these visits will be required, one in either April or May, one in June or July. To give a comparison, we will also ask for a small number of other waterbirds (Mute Swan, Mallard, Moorhen, Kingfisher and Cormorant) to be recorded and counted as well. Finally, we would also like surveyors to note disturbance from human activity during the survey, as this seems to be a possible factor in the declines.

If you are not able to commit to this, we also anticipate collecting casual records of presence or breeding activity from anyone who happens to be birding along the Thames, so that like the Atlas survey, we can supplement the main survey.

In order to progress this survey, we need volunteers! If you think you would like to volunteer for one or more of the tetrad counts, please contact me on the conservation email contact address (conservation@berksoc.org.uk) with your name, contact details and an idea of how much time you are prepared to devote to each visit (from arrival on site to finish, remembering that you will have to add to this whatever time it will take to walk back home or to your car or other transport).

As promised in the last newsletter, here's an update on the new BTO Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS) which has recently been launched. In general, gull populations in the UK and Europe have been declining but the factors involved are not understood. The UK is important for wintering gulls, but winter ranges are currently not used as features for defining Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The last national surveys were conducted in 2003/04 and 2005/06 so this new survey has the aims of providing new population estimates for the principal species that winter in the UK: Common, Black-headed, Mediterranean, Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Greater Black-backed. The survey will also assess the impact of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) and identify sites that might be important to be assessed as SPAs. The survey is planned to run over the next two winters with the first survey on January 21st, 2024, and the second on January 19th, 2025, although there are supplementary visits planned for the autumn of next year. Two categories of site are defined: Key sites, that are known to regularly support more than 1000 gulls; and Sample sites which have been selected at random from relevant inland habitats. The Berkshire region has six of the former and four of the latter. More details, including how you can get involved if interested, can be found at www.bto.org/wing. This site also includes a link to a map that shows where the Key and Sample sites are located.

As currently, as in previous years, general results of the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) are now available. So, this is from the surveys conducted by volunteers during the April to June period. In the Berkshire region, we had coverage of allocated squares across the county with an average of 91% of 67 squares covered for the early and late surveys. The most numerous (total number of individuals) species were very similar to the last few years results. So, in descending order we had: Woodpigeon, Jackdaw, Blackbird, Blue Tit and Robin. As measured by the number of one-km survey squares in which a species was recorded, the most widespread species across the county were: Woodpigeon, Blackbird, Blue Tit, Robin and Wren. Also, widespread (present in greater than 90% of squares) were: Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Song Thrush.

This year saw the running of the BTO led national Woodcock survey and, as mentioned in the March newsletter, there was a terrific uptake of survey squares available in Berkshire. The national survey is now closed (although the regular annual survey continues next year) and data is being processed. Regional summaries will be available in late November in the results section of the BTO Woodcock web page. Also, a county analysis should be available in late December or early January. I will provide an update in the next newsletter.

Finally, some good news from the BTO Youth Representative Scheme as Johana Simonova and Ramandeep Nijjar are the new Youth Representatives for our county, see:

<https://www.bto.org/community/regional-network/bto-youth-representatives>.

As our BTO Youth Reps, they organise inclusive and welcoming events for young people interested in nature. Both are very passionate about nature conservation and studying at the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Reading. Their first event was a huge success, creating a welcoming environment. For this, they led the Berkshire team for the Big Bird Race, where people of all ages, knowledge and skills came together to birdwatch and see how many birds they could see in a four-hour window. Furthermore, they have planned a Wildlife Photography Walk; but due to bad weather in October, this has had to be postponed until next year. Many more events are being planned now, such as the Nature Night on the 6th of December. For the future, they are planning more inclusive events that would make people feel like they belong and even help them develop nature-related skills. They hope to see you at some of their events! If you are interested in learning more, they can be contacted at: Johana.ssimon@gmail.com and Ramandeepnijjar@outlook.com.

I used to think of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) as being only Slimbridge. After moving to Reading and finding the London Wetland Centre, I realised I would be more likely to visit if I was a member. I only needed to go four times a year and I would save money.

I am so glad I joined, but not just because of the savings. I went to WWT's 76th AGM last week, mainly out of curiosity, and unexpectedly found it inspirational. I was hoping I would hear good news and I did.



Bewick's Swan at Slimbridge; copyright Sally Wearing

WWT has launched a new strategy, to restore wetlands and unlock their power. That might sound a bit pretentious, but, having listened to them and read about it, I see what they mean. Their new 'vision' has three ambitions:

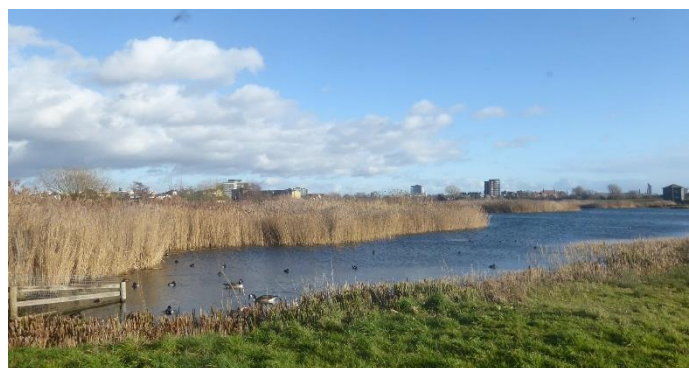
- restore and create bigger, better wetlands
- inspire more people to value, act for and benefit from wetlands
- be a thriving, sustainable and effective organisation.

The first one is the key. Wetlands are rare in two ways today: they are the globe's most threatened ecosystem AND they can help tackle climate change. They are one of the most biodiverse habitats on Earth; 40% of the world's wildlife depends on them. They store carbon, buffer us from floods and can help reduce the impacts of drought. What's not to like?

WWT has decided to create and restore over 100,000 hectares (about a quarter of a million acres) of wetlands in the UK by 2050, and work with others to restore one million hectares worldwide. The UK wetlands will not only be at their centres but also elsewhere, in both urban and rural areas. They already have projects underway around the UK, including one in Berkshire – Slough's urban wetlands. Working with the local community, they are bringing Salt Hill Stream back to life, improving water quality and helping wildlife return.

Their second aim is based on nurturing a deeper connection between wetlands and people. They have set specific targets for increasing how many people engage with wetlands and the public understanding of wetlands. By 2030, they want to involve 400,000 people to take action, including to champion and help create wetlands. Their third aim is necessary to help them achieve the first two. They need to be more sustainable, financially resilient, and capable of delivering their plans at scale.

These plans are very ambitious, as they acknowledge. But even if they only achieve half of what they set out to, it will be a great improvement. And Aviva has given them a good boost to help get them started – £21 million to restore coastal saltmarsh in the UK.



WWT Barnes: Copyright Sally Wearing

As you can tell, they achieved their second aim, to inspire, as far as I am concerned! In addition to writing this article to help spread the message, I am going to explore other ways of getting involved.

I hope you will also get inspired. The AGM was a hybrid meeting, so you can watch a recording of it at <https://bit.ly/47YtpAY>. And see www.wwt.org.uk for information about WWT's plans and how they hope to achieve them, plus details of their current projects including the one in Slough.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic forced the British Trust for Ornithology to swap their training courses from in-person to online. They made very good use of online meeting technology and now offer a range of courses, aimed at helping us identify the birds we see and hear. Having done two of their courses, I reckon that moving online has had real benefits, especially in making the training much more accessible. More people can attend each session and no-one needs to travel.



I stumbled across them early this year while investigating what BTO has to offer. I have been doing BTO surveys for about ten years but, I am embarrassed to say, I had not taken a great deal of notice of the rest of the organisation. As soon as I found their courses, I signed up for a session about identifying Corvids. That turned out to be 90 minutes of fairly intense tuition, which I found instructive, enjoyable and engaging. It was also interactive. Their trainers encourage you to input your ideas and answers via the Zoom chat function, and incorporate these into the course.

In March and April, I moved onto songbird ID, perfectly timed for the start of the breeding season. Three sessions, with homework in between. All their courses are £12 per session, so this was only £36 – a bargain for about five hours of training. I found this course ideal; my memory for bird song is not great so I need to revise before each breeding season and this is the best way I have found of doing that. An online course means everyone can easily hear the songs and calls, plus the trainers provided plenty of hints and tips about how to remember them. And lots of quizzes to keep you on your toes and reinforce the learning.

Better still, after a course you can download recordings of all the sessions. So before next year's breeding season, I can replay the training as part of my annual revision and review the supporting written material. Looking at the bird ID help sheet that was part of the course has already reminded me how to identify Bullfinches – they are quiet Hugh Grant fans, whispering "Hugh, Hugh".

Some of the courses are less advanced, covering species that are common in the UK, while others are more advanced, tackling species that are more challenging to identify. They are not intended for complete beginners, but for amateur birders and volunteer surveyors (including, of course, anyone considering volunteering). You can currently book for their Raptor ID sessions which will be held in January 2024.

See <https://bit.ly/3NuWfkX> for an overview of the BTO training sessions. I am sure I will do more in the future and I'd be interested to hear what you think about them if you also take part!

We are all familiar with differences in appearance between males and females of certain bird species. This may be in colour, known as dichromatism, size and/or weight, or a combination of all of these. Raptors may display reversed sexual dimorphism where the males are smaller than the females, often by a significant amount. The Great Bustard has the most extreme sexual size dimorphism of any extant birds.

Increased chromatism and exaggerated traits, are thought to have evolved because females choose mates who can demonstrate their ability to survive, find food, and protect their territories despite the handicap of being more conspicuous, or having plumage or other features which could negatively impact their effectiveness. Females may be more cryptically coloured so that they are better concealed when at the nest. But in the Dotterel, it is the female who is more brightly coloured, and the male which cares for the eggs and chicks.

Studies have shown that there is sexual dichromatism in some birds which is invisible to the human eye. Birds have cones in their eyes which are sensitive to light in the ultraviolet range, and which enable them to see more differences in plumage (as well as other environmental clues which can aid survival, and that we will not go into here). As an example, the black abdominal stripe of Great Tits, when seen under ultraviolet light, shows that the male has a bright breast patch with dark throat and belly sections, whereas the female has a black breast patch with a pale throat and belly sections. There are also differences in the cap colour.

Research is still ongoing into the reasons behind some of these differences, and the genetic, and other, mechanisms which cause them, and this is only a tiny fraction of the information already available on sexual dimorphism in birds.

News from the Committee

Jane Campbell, Hon. Secretary secretary@berksoc.org.uk

Many thanks to those who attended the recent AGM, both at the university and on Zoom. The minutes of the AGM will be distributed soon.

Attendance at our indoor lectures has increased recently and it is wonderful to be able to chat and fight over the best biscuits. Please do continue to come.

We have two new committee members who replace Marek Walford and Andy Tomczynski who have both retired. I am sure Robin Dryden and Peter Driver will contribute greatly to the running of the club.

Our editorial group has just published the 2019 Annual Report so your copy should arrive with you soon. Postage costs are huge so if you can offer to distribute some in your area, please let me know. Of course, you can also collect your copy at a meeting.

The committee recently met two young birders who represent the BTO's youth scheme. Johana and Raman are students at Reading University and the BOC has given them a telescope and tripod for use at their events. A further tripod donated to the club will be sent to the BTO for them to distribute where needed.

If you love Robert Gillmor's art, and who doesn't, you will soon have an opportunity to bid for one of six original works. Peter Driver will be sending more details about this opportunity within a few weeks.

Blackbirds in Berkshire – Are They in Decline?

Brian Crathorne, Brian Clews



Blackbird: Copyright Mick Vogel

As a result of a growing awareness and concern about the apparently low number of Blackbirds that appeared to be around this Summer and Autumn, Brian Clews and I decided to undertake a short survey of members of the BOC and to review other sources of information to try to get a better understanding of the position. We therefore wrote an article that was circulated to members on 1st November 2023. At the same time, we asked followers of the 'Wild Maidenhead' and 'Wild Cookham' Facebook pages for their observations and also made contact with Rob Jaques at the BTO and asked him to extract information on Blackbird records from the Garden Bird Watch Scheme. We received an excellent response from BOC members (and others) and the results of the investigation are provided below along with some tentative conclusions.

Summary of Comments from BOC Members

The Table below summarizes the responses from BOC members to our request for their observations on the Blackbird population. Most of the comments refer to gardens but some also refer to the wider environment. The overwhelming majority of respondents report a decline in numbers. Summer 2023 is referred to as being particularly poor with many also noting that there was no evidence of successful breeding this year.

Type of observation	Summary of findings	Location
BTO Garden Bird Watch	Fewer than 2022	Emmer Green
Casual sightings	Very sparse in Summer 2023. No juveniles observed	Reading
BTO Garden Bird Watch	A reduction this year - perhaps not significant	Upper Buckleberry
Casual sightings	Significant reduction	Lower Caversham
BTO Garden Bird Watch	Significant reduction - observations since 2009	Arborfield
BTO Garden Bird Watch	Slight reduction in 2023	Reading
Casual sightings	Significant reduction. Records since 2005, 2023 the worst	Earley
BTO Garden Bird Watch	Significant reduction. No juveniles or evidence of breeding in 2023	Maidenhead
Casual sightings	Fewer observations in 2023. Poor breeding success	Cookham Rise
Casual sightings	Fewer observations in 2023. Poor breeding success	Sandhurst
Casual sightings	'About normal' – 1 pair raised at least 1 juvenile observed	Ascot
Casual sightings	Virtually absent during the Summer	Arborfield
Casual sightings	No evidence of breeding in 2023 and generally reduced numbers	Not specified
Casual sightings	None observed this Summer but some sightings locally	Reading
Casual sightings	Observations 'about normal'	Woodley
Ringing returns and casual sightings	Noticeable reduction in numbers since early Spring	Newbury area

Summary of 'Wild Maidenhead' and 'Wild Cookham' Facebook Entries

The comments taken from the two Facebook sites broadly confirm the position reported by BOC members. A general decline was noted with poor breeding success in 2023.

Postings on the 'Wild Maidenhead' Facebook page noted:

- Blackbirds normally nest successfully but none this year
- Regular 2 nests – none this year
- Fewer since Summer 2022
- Few sightings this year
- No obvious breeding this year
- Some observed but fewer
- No sign of any since April/May
- Reduction in numbers.

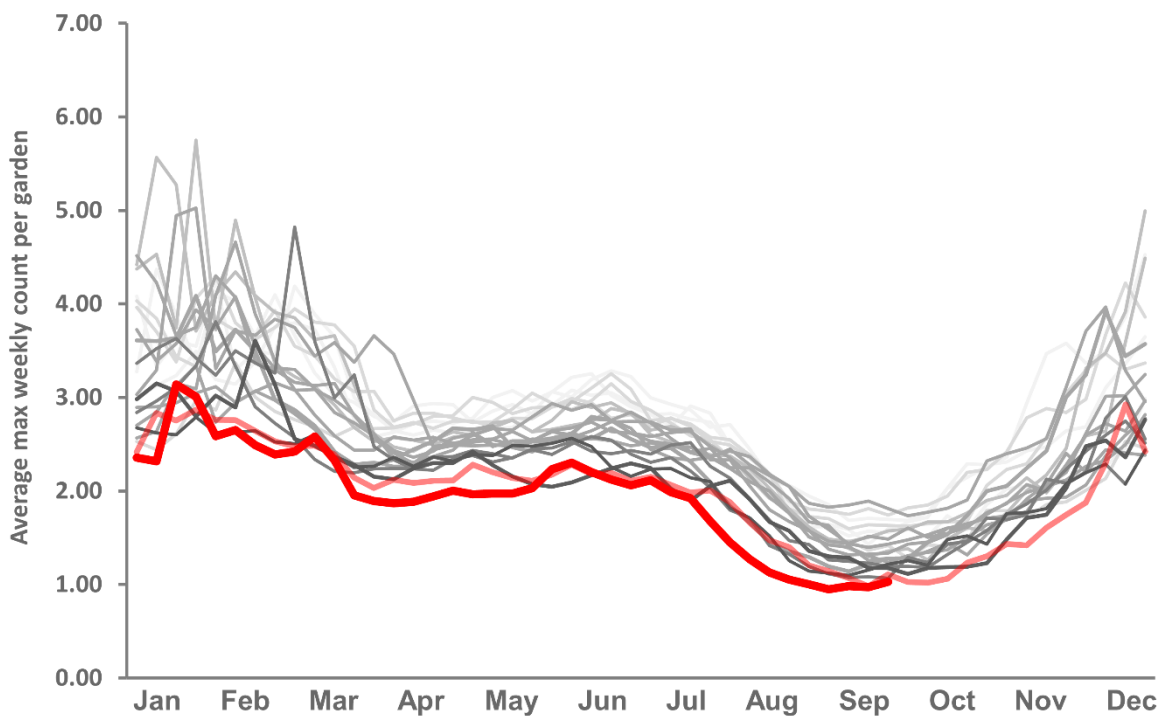
Wild Cookham Facebook postings included:

- Fewer since 2021
- 1 breeding pair but no fledglings seen
- No sign of usual nesting pair this year
- None seen in the garden during Summer 2023
- Some blackbirds seen
- 4-5 regular but none this year

- Occasional sightings
- Early Spring observations but few since
- A poor year
- None seen since July
- Fewer this year
- 2/3 pairs normally seen but none this year.

BTO Garden Bird Watch Data

As part of the investigation into Blackbird numbers we contacted Rob Jaques from the [BTO Garden BirdWatch](#) for information on the relative rate of reporting for the species. Rob kindly extracted the information shown in the graph below. This shows the average weekly count of Blackbirds per garden over the last few years. The heavy red line shows the year 2023 to date, the pink line 2022, with previous years represented by grey lines – growing paler the further back the data goes. These data are taken from the national scheme rather than just Berkshire; it seems likely that it is also representative of the position in the county.



Summary and Tentative Conclusions

Although this has been a relatively quick and unsystematic investigation, based on a mixture of hard data from BTO Garden Bird Watch participants and casual observations from a variety of locations within our county, the overall picture that emerges is clear. There has been a decline in the Blackbird population over several years and 2023 appears to be particularly poor, with low breeding success reported by many observers.

In a recent Garden Birdwatch E bulletin, Rob Jaques noted: 'We have received many emails in the last two months, asking about the lack of Blackbirds seen in gardens. To a certain extent this is quite normal, and we have talked about the autumn lull in recent editions of the newsletter. However, our data has shown that the drop in Blackbird numbers is much greater than in a typical year. Average garden counts have dropped by a larger amount in south east England, though most areas have seen lower counts than the average for the time of year.'

The fact that Blackbird numbers appear to be in decline should perhaps not be a surprise given that this is also the position with many other species across the country. However, since this investigation refers

largely to Blackbirds in domestic gardens which, in comparison with the open countryside, would not be subject to the same issues with respect to loss of habitat and other threats, the apparent observed decline is of concern.

The reasons for a decline in any animal population are usually complex and difficult to ascertain. However, loss of habitat and a reduction in food supply are often cited as major contributing factors in the decline in bird numbers. Given that garden habitats should be relatively stable, it is tempting to conclude that a change in food supply is an important part of the problem. Certainly, with respect to the poor breeding success observed in 2023, several contributors have mentioned that Blackbirds (and other garden species) struggled to cope with the hard ground conditions in April and May. Also, conditions in Spring 2021 and 2022 were not conducive to producing an abundant supply of insects. Thus, the recent decline may well reflect the cumulative effect of a number of 'poor years' with respect to insect and other invertebrate populations. This is speculative and more data and analysis are required to understand the position better.

With respect to the obvious question of what should (or can) we do to improve the position then things get much more difficult and complicated. In the first instance however more data are needed to confirm the position and to help identify potential causes.

Blackbirds are normally such a common species that we almost take their presence for granted and, consequently, there are very few records for the species on the BOC database (<https://www.berksbirds.co.uk/Index.asp>). There are therefore insufficient data to confirm whether local anecdotal evidence for a decline in the population is supported by hard information. Thus, it would be useful if everyone could report Blackbird sightings on the BOC database.

The BTO Garden Bird Watch scheme is an extremely valuable source of data and the more people that participate, the better the quality of information. We would therefore encourage all BOC members to take part and help improve the quality of the data in the scheme. A link to the Garden Bird Watch website is given above.

Our thanks to all BOC Members that supplied information in response to our request for data.

Finally, we will look to repeat this exercise, perhaps in Autumn 2024, to see if there have been any obvious changes over the next 12 months.

Membership Matters

Iain Oldcorn

Sadly, once again I have to advise that the number of active supporting BOC members is declining. While we continue to regularly attract a few new members, over recent years we have lost more than we have gained; and at present just under 40 members out of about 270 that supported us last year have yet to do so this year – hence the decline this year may be rather significant.

So, I say again, if you enjoy your membership of the BOC, why not encourage your family and friends to join you and us by becoming members?

Details about joining can be found on our website: <http://berksoc.org.uk/about/club-membership/>

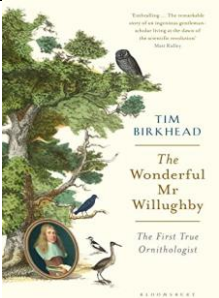
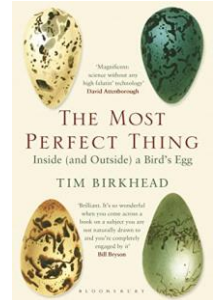
Please also remember that once again we did not increase our subscription rates at the start of our financial year on 1st October!

We still have around 15 members that have not supplied us with an email address; with increased costs of printing and postage it is very expensive to send them AGM material plus three Newsletters a year, and it is quite impractical to send out to them ad hoc invitations to our indoor and outdoor events. If you are one of these individuals, please consider providing us with an email address and then we will have more money available for our conservation work.

Books are a vital part of my life. I enjoy their presence in my home and am always pleased to obtain a new one. Below are my appreciations of some bird-related books that I have enjoyed over the past few years. There might be something here as an idea for your Christmas list. The order of presentation is totally random. I have not quoted any prices, because some are now out in paperback and several are available second-hand. Happy reading!

Tim Birkhead: The Most Perfect Thing - Inside (and outside) a bird's egg. Bloomsbury

I wonder how many people had the sort of English teacher who required the class to write an essay about an egg. A nightmare! It obviously takes an academic to write a whole book about the topic and this is great science, well explained and very readable. It even had me chuckling in places. A fair amount of space is devoted to the mystique and history of the iconic Guillemot's egg. You may be surprised to know that this was deservedly one of the top bird books of 2016.

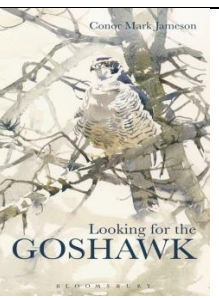
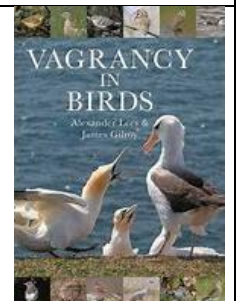


Tim Birkhead: The Wonderful Mr Willughby. Bloomsbury

As the guillemot section in the previous book shows, Tim is really pretty good at history too. This book tells the story of a much under-appreciated 17th century gentleman-ornithologist and his close friend and collaborator, John Ray. After all, someone had to coin the name Honey Buzzard! Sadly, Willughby died prematurely, but Ray saw that his pioneering work was not forgotten. For a time at least the Yellow Wagtail was known as Ray's Wagtail, but poor Willughby had no such accolade.

Alexander Lees and James Gilroy: Vagrancy in Birds. Helm

This book presents a panoramic review of how and why birds go astray. It is breathtaking in scope and is organised in modern taxonomic sequencing by family. It is truly comprehensive, and sometimes detailed down to the very bird you might have seen (including my own once-in-a-lifetime Snowy Owl). It is written in an easy and jargon-free style and beautifully illustrated in colour. On the negative side, the print element is not easy to read in some lights.

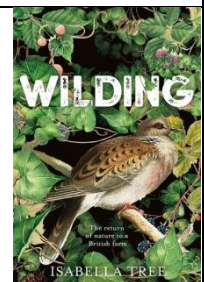


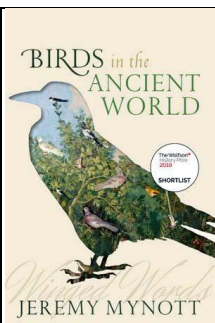
Conor Jameson: Looking for the Goshawk. Bloomsbury

A very readable exploration of the history and status of an enigmatic species that was long missing from Britain. Conor quickly persuades us that we should have been looking closer (which may convince a few local birders that they were not so daft after all) but there is so much more to this well-told story. The Goshawk is certainly not cuddly: we learn that the smaller American one attacks human intruders. That is now designated as a separate species, but has been recorded in Britain.

Isabella Tree: Wilding - The return of nature to a British farm. Picador

This is a good way to persuade your other half that lawn-mowing is undesirable. This is a very readable book and you will learn a lot about livestock, soil and plants as you trip over Nightingales, Turtle Doves and Purple Emperors. So very easy to read, yet packed full of good science and an enviable vision. And don't forget that the site of the wilding project can easily be visited at Knepp, near Horsham, complete these days with breeding White Storks.



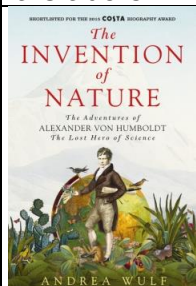
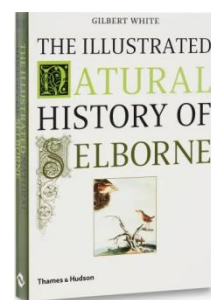


Jeremy Mynott: Birds in the Ancient World. Oxford

If you are seduced by quality of presentation, this book is a beauty, well illustrated and crisply printed. Mynott combines the enthusiasm of a keen birdwatcher with a profound knowledge of history and Classical culture. Alongside discussions of birds as auguries, as symbols, or as the subject of art, we learn about how birds were eaten or kept as pets – and a great deal more. You don't need to have studied Latin and Greek to find this a fascinating book. Have you heard the one about the barber's pet jay?

Gilbert White: The Illustrated Natural History of Selborne. Thames and Hudson

This is not a new book, but is best weighed by the fact that it has not been out of print since its publication in 1789. It is the work of the archetypal parson-naturalist who set us all an example by wandering around his Hampshire parish with open eyes and an enquiring mind. He sorted out the small warblers, popularised the local name Chiffchaff and wrote an exemplary monograph on House Martins. Selborne is just 30 miles south of Reading. His house is now a museum and you can still walk some of the tracks where he walked.

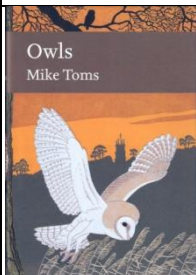
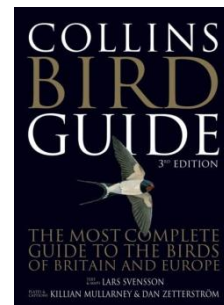


Andrea Wulf: The Invention of Nature - The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the lost hero of science. John Murray

The achievement of this book is as big as its title, as it teases out the history and importance of its hero, a giant in his day but somewhat eclipsed by the vagaries of history, in spite of having a major ocean current named after him. The book tells of his adventures of exploration, of an age of political and social experiment, and of how this largely-forgotten man visualised the natural world as no-one had done before.

Lars Svensson et al: Collins Bird Guide - The most complete guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. Third Edition. Collins

This edition upgrades a great deal of information. Its excellent illustrations have increased and the supplementary pages are much richer. From that point of view it is a magnificent work and one I value for its clarity and attention to detail. The author shrugs off the effect of taxonomic changes on a number of scientific names that are now in general use elsewhere and that aspect feels rather out-dated. I do applaud his decision to bracket the daft book-names that have officially replaced Olivaceous and Isabelline Warblers in the vernacular forms.

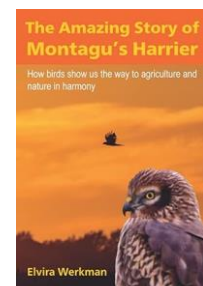


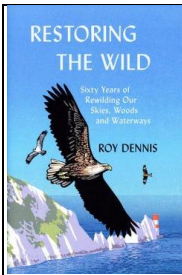
Mike Toms: Owls. The New Naturalists Library

The covers of this series were long the work of our own Robert Gillmor and this one has a beautiful Barn Owl to draw us into a text that covers the main British species and a few relevant others. A very accessible text provides a huge amount of information on each species. Like all the series, it is beautifully illustrated and presented. A lot of us are fascinated by this enigmatic family because we don't see them often, though a close encounter with a Barn Owl at the age of eight got me started in bird watching.

Elvira Werkman: The Amazing Story of the Montagu's Harrier. International Harrier Conservation

This is a utility paperback written by a Dutch researcher, who looks at the status of the species in the Netherlands. Werkman tells of its winter in sub-Saharan Africa and of its spring-time stop in North Africa. For those of us lucky enough to have seen the birds winging over the Straits of Gibraltar, or hunting over the Downs, the picture is now a rounded one. There are some useful insights too into the Pallid Harrier, hinting at why we now see more of them in Britain.



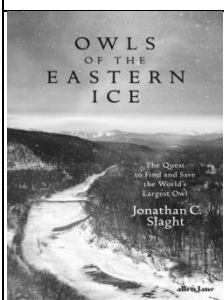
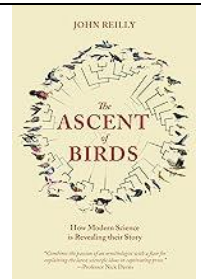


Roy Dennis. Restoring the Wild - Sixty years of rewilding our skies, woods and waterways. William Collins

This is a memoir of the work done to bring back or boost a number of iconic species, of which the Red Kite is now a local commonplace. The author discusses the difficulties, frustrations, challenge and triumphs of the work to restore much threatened wildlife. It is an easy read that reveals a very humble side to a man who has done so much for our wildlife.

John Reilly. The Ascent of Birds - How modern science is revealing their story. Pelagic Press

The author is a cancer specialist who is also a well-travelled ornithologist and bird guide. In this book he sets out to translate the content of many specialist scientific papers into a form that is accessible to the layman birdwatcher – and his vehicles are a number of key species which each exemplify one of a range of evolutionary forces. These collectively sum up the spectrum of this complicated but fascinating subject.

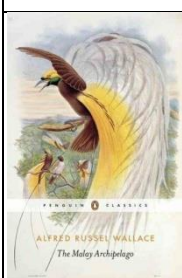
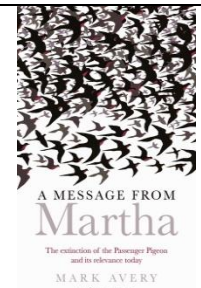


Jonathan C.Slight: The Owls of the Eastern Ice - The quest to find and save the world's largest owl. Allen Lane

This unusual book first came to my attention in a newspaper review rather than in the birding press. It is the unlikely story of an American conservationist living and working in the far east of Siberia while single-mindedly searching for, and studying, Blakiston's Fish Owl. The situation is odd to say the least, but the reader is soon engaged in a very other-wordly experience and begins to really care about this unheard of owl and its eccentric champion. Wrap up well!

Mark Avery: A Message from Martha - The extinction of the passenger pigeon and its relevance today. Bloomsbury

The author, who is well known as a vigorous campaigner for conservation, spends a good part of the book in telling how a truly abundant species was brought to extinction in a very short time by human greed. We watch spellbound as the destruction unfurls. All of that is a precursor to a discussion of conservation blindness in modern Britain. Whoops! There goes the Turtle Dove! There is a mix of brutal fact and controlled exasperation in the presentation of the message.



Alfred Russell Wallace: The Malay Archipelago - The land of the orang-utan and the bird of paradise. Penguin Classics

This is a modern reprint of an 1869 work. While working as a commercial collector and naturalist in South-East Asia, Wallace formulated a theory of evolution that scared the wits out of a dithering Darwin, who did acknowledge his rôle. This is an account of those formative years. It was not all derring-do, and often very hard work, but the memoir provides a close insight into Victorian attitudes towards wildlife and towards other races. You might not enjoy the 'collection' part, but there is a lot else too.

Jon Dunn: The Glitter in the Green - In search of hummingbirds. Bloomsbury

Few of us are not overawed by the first sight of a tiny hummingbird. That was the case for the English author, who tells of his journeys from Alaska down to Patagonia to seek out these little miracles in a huge range of climates and conditions. On the way, he tells of their tragic Victorian history, which reminded me that, even in the fifties, my grandparents still had a small glass dome over half a dozen stuffed but fading beauties. My first live one was a surprising find in Nova Scotia.





**Grey Plover: Padworth Lane Floods;
15May2023**



Black Redstart: Reading; 10July2023



Green Sandpiper: Lea Farm Lake; 16June2023



Black-Tailed Godwit: Abbots Farm; 24July2023



Oystercatcher: Lea Farm Lake; 27June2023



**Sparrowhawk: Queen Mother Reservoir;
18July2023**

(Disclaimer: The views expressed in articles in this Newsletter are those of their respective authors and may not be representative of those of the BOC or of any of its Committee.)

And lastly, a message from your committee: we hope that you will enjoy the Christmas break and we look forward to seeing you in the New Year.