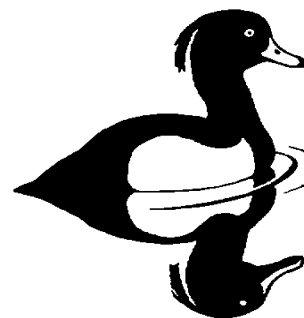


READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

ROC Newsletter

Winter 2002/2003

No 20



Introduction

The winter newsletter is a little delayed this year, so it is a slightly belated Happy New Year that I wish you all. I could make the excuse that I have been too busy birdwatching to find the time, but with the apparently endless wet weather that we have been having I don't suppose that you will believe me.

In truth I was away over Christmas, staying with relatives in Northern Ireland, which has made it difficult to find the time for the newsletter. It did however allow me to find a little time for birdwatching, finding a short break in the weather to spend a couple of hours at the RSPB reserve on Belfast Lough. Situated within the confines of the Belfast Harbour it is not the most attractive of areas, but is very well worth a visit. The lagoon at high tide provides excellent views of feeding and roosting waders, including large numbers of lapwings, golden plover, curlew, dunlin, redshank and both species of godwit. Also, interestingly, the feeding station attracts large numbers of reed buntings – at the time of my visit there must have been about twenty, but apparently as many as sixty have been counted! Some of the male buntings had well developed breeding plumage, which seemed very early to me (maybe the birds foresee an early spring – we can only hope so!).

I hope that you have all had a very enjoyable Christmas break and I look forward to seeing you at upcoming Club events, whether it be indoor meetings or outdoor walks and trips.

The Spring newsletter should go out around the end of March, so can I ask that any contributions reach me by Friday 21st March.

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Many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter. Illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

Upcoming Events

Quiz Evening – 26th February

This year's fun quiz evening is to be held on 26th February at the Parish Rooms, St Peters, Earley, Reading. The Club will be providing some buffet food, but unfortunately there will be no licensed bar available, so **please bring along your own drinks**. Quiz master Neil Bucknell will again be in charge and Gordon Langsbury has promised some of his excellent mystery bird photographs. Further details will be available at upcoming indoor meetings or from Carole White.

Photographic Evening – 26th March

This year's Photographic Competition Evening will be on Wednesday 26th March, so don't forget to sort out your entries in good time. There is even still time to get out your cameras and take some new pictures, should the weather improve! Last year's photographic competition was much enjoyed by all who took part and attended the evening. The standard of entry last year was excellent, but don't be afraid to put in your favourite shots, at worst you will get some constructive comments from our esteemed (and I should add incorruptible) judge, Gordon Langsbury. Let's see if we can make this year's event even better.

The categories this year will be as follows, with a maximum of 3 entries per category :

Best Bird Picture
Creatures in their Habitat
Art in Nature
Worst Natural History Picture

Trips, Excursions and Mid-Week Walks

Unfortunately the January mid-week walk has been cancelled, but it is hoped that one will take place in February on the 20th of the month – please contact John Roberts (on 0118 9482137) if you are interested.

Following on from the very enjoyable trip to the West London WWT Reserve at Barnes, other upcoming trips include the Isle of Sheppey on 26th January (contact Colin Wilson on 01252 837411) and Bedgebury Pinetum on 9th February (contact John Roberts on 01189482137). The weekend trip to Norfolk in February is now fully booked.

The Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund

The profits from the sales of *The Birds of Berkshire* are held by the Club in a fund dedicated to bird conservation work. The fund now stands at £5,000 and the Club is now inviting proposals from local organisations or individuals for grants of not more than £1,500 to support bird conservation work in Berkshire in general and for projects involving wetlands in particular.

Proposals for consideration this Spring, stating the work to be done and the conservation benefits it will provide, should be sent to the Secretary (Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA; tel 0118 926 4513; email renton@righelato.net) by 15th March 2003. Applications will be judged by a committee representing the authors of *The Birds of Berkshire* and the Environment Agency, which provided support for its publication.

Increased Subscriptions

Those who attended the AGM will know that the Committee has agreed that subscriptions will be increased from 1st October 2003. The new rates will be :

Ordinary Member - £15, Family Membership - £20, Students/Juniors - £8 (With half rates for retired members) Subscriptions were last increased in 1992, but we have increased the capital since then mainly because only two Reports have been issued. Additionally we have had extra income from Gift Aid subscriptions, and for several years had good income from the sale of bird food. However, our capital will be eroded when Reports are produced to bring issues up to date and to maintain regular issues; this will commence during our 2002/03 season.

For our money we now have eleven indoor meetings, numerous field trips, newsletters, an annual report (even if they are running late) and occasional subsidies for such as the coach trip to Slimbridge. Your committee believes that these increases are necessary to maintain ROC standards and they look forward to your continued support.

Those who pay by standing order will have an appropriate form sent to them before 1st October 2003.

John Roberts

Membership Reminder

Please note that subscriptions for the 2002/2003 Club year are now long overdue. If you wish to keep up your membership, but have not yet paid your subscription for the year please send your payment to the Membership Secretary or see her at an indoor meeting. If you don't wish to keep up your membership a note or call to the Membership Secretary would be much appreciated.

Dot Lincoln (Membership Secretary) - 0118 9427563

Berkshire and Oxfordshire

BTO Members and Bird Clubs Conference

- "Migrants, Migration and Foreign Invaders"

To be held at the Civic Centre, Britwell Rd., Didcot, Oxfordshire on **Saturday 22nd February 2003 at 10 a.m.**, cost is £10 per person (includes lunch and refreshments)

Speakers :

Jeremy Greenwood (Director, BTO) - "*Woodlands and Migrants*"

Stephen Browne (Game Conservancy Trust) - "*Turtle Dove Migration*"

Malcolm Walker (Royal Meteorological Society) - "*Weather and Bird Migration*"

Dawn Balmer (BTO) - "*Migration Watch*"

Chris Butler (Edward Grey Institute, University of Oxford) - "*An overview of some recent research on Rose-ringed Parakeets in the UK*"

Baz Hughes (WWT) - "*White-headed Duck conservation and the threat from the North American Ruddy Duck*".

Yes, this date clashes with the ROC weekend away in Norfolk but if you're not going to that, this event is not to be missed! ROC will be supporting it by having a display stand and donating a raffle prize. The conference, which is open to anyone, provides an opportunity to meet other bird watchers and learn about a number of recent bird study projects. The conference commences at **9.30 a.m.** with the registration of participants, tea/coffee and an early opportunity to look round display stands, buy from commercial stalls and enter the competition. The main programme starts at **10.00 a.m.** and continues, with a short break, until an extended lunchtime, which provides a further opportunity to meet people and to browse the stalls. The afternoon session includes further talks, a break for tea and the announcement of raffle and competition winners. The day will end at approximately **5.00p.m.**

Tickets **MUST** be booked in advance, it will not be possible to accept bookings on the door. Application forms will be available at ROC meetings or please contact Chris Robinson (Berks BTO Rep.) on 01491-671420

ROC Exe Estuary Trip, 7th-8th December, 2002

Imagine the scene: a reed-fringed pool on a still morning. In front of us, one Glossy Ibis, four Spoonbills and two Little Egrets – and a lot more besides. And where were the intrepid members of the ROC expedition? In deepest Devon, of course, and on a December weekend at that!

Mary and I had joined our fourth ROC weekend outing and were clearly very impressed by the quality of this scene that was enacted at Bowling Green Marsh. The evening before Colin, Bill, Harry and Lin had introduced us to this unprepossessing site at Topsham, where we had sat in the failing light to watch for the arrival of the now-famous immature Glossy Ibis. While waiting we had been

entertained by an assortment of duck species and a few waders, these often flushed and panicked by a lurking Peregrine that finally perched in full view on a tree to one side. Eventually, with the last fading light, an almost imperceptible dark shadow had slipped into the pool to be seen reflected against the dark water as it probed the mud. Even in that light it was recognisably different in size and habit from the Coots and wildfowl scattered around. So by teatime on Saturday we had seen the main target bird and everything was to be an anticlimax thereafter... Not so!

By 7.30 a.m., and in spite of a splendid communal dinner the evening before, we arrived back in the hide with the first light of Sunday, only to be greeted by the solid bulk of four roosting Spoonbills, a mass of ducks and a whole wedge of waders. As the light strengthened, there was our Glossy Ibis by the reeds and this time we could see it well. The two Little Egrets dropped in as the grey mass of waders resolved into Black-tailed Godwits, Redshanks, Curlews, Dunlins, Lapwings and Golden Plovers. A couple of Snipe showed by the reeds. Wigeon, Shelduck, Teal, Pochard, a Tufted or two, the odd Pintail, a female Goldeneye, all were virtually ignored, as a Spoonbill unveiled its spatula to preen, or as the Glossy Ibis played "now you see me" in the edge of the reeds.



That is until a Buzzard decided to panic the whole lot. He in turn was forced to seek hasty refuge in a tree as a covetous Peregrine attacked him with spectacular stoops.

Later in the morning, when Brian had arrived from Bristol, but sadly too late for the star bird, we picked out Red-breasted Mergansers on the estuary and watched flight after flight of beautiful Pintails pass over from the Axminster marshes. The Avocet flock was eventually spotted - some 350-400 of them, so Bill estimated, and a sight not to be missed. By Topsham quays a Common Sandpiper showed up unexpectedly, as we watched two Redshanks performing phalarope-like dances on the still water.

The shore at Powderham proved inaccessible, so we moved straight down to Dawlish Warren for the afternoon, passing a field full of grazing Brent Geese as we went. At the coast the highlight was a spell of sea watching, when several Slavonian Grebes were soon spotted inside the surf line. The water beyond the breakers gave greater challenges: Brian picked up two distant Gannets, Bill came up with a Razorbill that was skimming the breakers in the estuary, and then I spotted two black ducks flying across our line of vision.

Fortunately Bill got onto them before they settled near a third one. He identified them with great confidence as Velvet Scoters. Next time I shall



know the significance of the white wing patches that were so diagnostic.

A few passerines – Stonechat and Chiffchaff among them – in the scrub at the reserve, and then it was time to head for home. What a good twenty-four hours it had been! I had added several birds to my year list and two to my life list, but the sheer quality of the birding in general had been wonderful. To Colin, who had organised our hotel and meals, as well as coordinating the programme, our grateful thanks.

Ray Reedman

News from the TABCG

At Hosehill work around the area has been disrupted by variable water levels, with earlier low levels making access to the artificial island impossible. More recently heavy rains have caused flooding on the road on the west side. The council sent in workmen who cleared the ditches on the reserve side of the hedge, managing to break all the culverts in the process, and churning up the paths. This did not solve the problem, as the cause was a fallen branch blocking the ditch on the road side of the hedge, which was subsequently removed by members on a work party and the drainage returned to normal! Other work has included the building and siting of nestboxes, including owl boxes and a box designed specifically for Willow Tits.

The spider survey went ahead as planned at the end of August, conducted by Imogen Wilde, a professional Ecologist, who also does survey work for the British Arachnological Society. Those who attended were amazed to find that a whole day could have been spent on the bramble bushes beside the boat ! In some four hours the area from the boat to the information board beside the pond was covered. The sampling techniques varied from using a "pooter" to a tuning fork. A full species list is still awaited, as many can only be identified under a microscope, but initial findings indicate a list of about 40 species, while the total for the whole site may be nearer 200. The ecologists who helped with this survey are keen to come back and do more work, eventually getting around all the habitats on site.

Prudential have released details of a proposal to develop the Kennet Meadows. The plan encompasses all the land between the end of the Green Park Site and the M4 at Junction 12 from the existing building line to the M4 to include 7,5000 houses and associated infrastructure. Much of this land is flood plain. You can get more information from the website at www.kennetvalleypark.com or phone 0118 975 3040 to request a leaflet.

Anyone with records of any wildlife in this area which have not been supplied to the appropriate recorder should do so urgently as the consultation process has started and the planning application is likely early in 2004.

The Theale Area Bird Conservation Group always welcomes new members and anybody who can help out at work parties - please contact Brian Uttley for further info. (tel. Work - 01189 783783, Home - 01189 832894)

Information courtesy of TABCG (with thanks to Cathy McEwan)

Observations of a Sparrowhawk

About 3pm on a dull January afternoon, a thump on the window brought me rapidly to it and there, a few feet away was a female sparrowhawk perched on the body of a collared dove. Agitated by my presence the sparrowhawk made several unsuccessful attempts to lift its kill and carry it away, but settled instead for dragging it across the path and into the comparative shelter of the border, where it proceeded to start plucking and devouring it. An hour later – I was watching transfixed – with one wing and half the tail removed, and a considerable portion of flesh consumed, the sparrowhawk managed to lift the corpse in two stages, up to a trellis archway about 30 feet away across the width of the garden. The hawk, having deposited the kill in a reasonable secure place, flew away low down the length of our neighbour’s garden – presumably to roost somewhere nearby, for at 7.50 the next morning it returned to finish its feeding. Alternately it plucked and fed for a further twenty five minutes, by which time the second wing, remains of the tail and feet were removed. Then it picked up the carcass and flew off with it.



I found this a fascinating experience, not just because of being so close to the hawk and able to see all its markings, but also being able to observe its strategy for conserving its kill.

Dot Lincoln

BTO Survey News - Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows

A fantastic response (but bad news for waders)

I had excellent support to my telephone and other requests for help with this survey. Because it was a comparatively straightforward one, many of the people I approached were ones who had not done survey work before but nearly

everybody I asked was keen to have a go and, better still, all but two of them completed their surveys in full!

The aim of the survey, which was a national one carried out by the BTO on behalf of DEFRA, was to resurvey all the wet meadow areas covered in the last survey carried out in 1982. Although the survey was relatively simple to do, there was potentially quite a lot of walking to be done and as several of the areas were extremely large (277 Ha being the largest!) I decided to split some of them into two or even three sections. This, of course, meant finding even more surveyors than the 28 areas on the Berkshire list, although a few areas were small enough and close enough to be done by one person. Nonetheless, an amazing 32 people took part in this survey including 14 who had never done any surveying before (or at least, not for me).

The method was quite straightforward – walk to within 100m of all points in your allocated area and locate and count any breeding wader, any duck (apart from Mallard) and two passerines; Yellow Wagtail and Meadow Pipit. Nearly all Berkshire areas were situated beside water courses such as the Rivers Kennet, Loddon, Thames, etc. so I was hopeful that despite the changes in agricultural practice that must have occurred in the last 20 years, most people might find at least one of the target species.

At the time of writing it is too soon to have any meaningful national results but BTO has told me that it would appear that Snipe numbers are very substantially down and Lapwing slightly down. On that simplistic evidence I can tell you that sadly, but perhaps predictably, Berkshire appears to have followed the national trend. Here’s a comparison using data from the 24 areas in Berkshire which were surveyed in both 1982 and 2002 :-

Waders

Species	Total number of pairs recorded		Number of area occupied	
	1982	2002	1982	2002
Lapwing	59	30	16	10
Snipe	10	0	4	0
Redshank	15	2	9	5

Passerines

Species	Total number recorded		Number of area occupied	
	1982	2002	1982	2002
Yellow Wagtail	19	22	7	6
Meadow Pipit	31	1	4	1

The one beacon appears to be Yellow Wagtail (let’s hope it’s not just a one-off annual surge) and possibly the decline in Redshank numbers may, in Berkshire at least, reflect their move to the gravel pits.

Chris Robinson (Berks BTO Rep.)