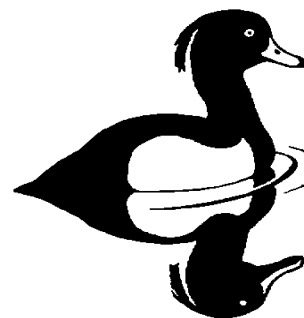


READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

# ROC Newsletter

Winter 2003/2004

No 24



## Introduction

Having failed in my plan to get the newsletter out by early January I can only wish you all a belated happy new year and hope that you all had a good festive season. As we move into 2004 the most notable change in the ROC has been the appointment of Colin Wilson as Chairman, following the departure of John Hannan. Colin (along with the rest of the Committee) is keen to see the club flourish well into the future and to that end Colin has published his visions for the Club in this newsletter, along with various ways that all members can help out. I am sure that you will find his views of interest.

Please don't forget that the newsletter also depends on your support, I am always on the look out for items that will be of interest to other club members. The Spring newsletter should go out around the end of March, so can I ask that any contributions reach me by Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March.

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

## Message from the New Chairman

Firstly, my apologies for my absence and late coming to meetings since you elected me to be Chairman of the ROC. Unfortunately, work circumstances have not helped me but I hope to do better in the future! Many thanks to Carol who has stood in for me and, of course, many times in the past when needed.

I said at the AGM that I think we need to do a bit more to straighten our finances and strengthen the Club in a number of ways. After all, this Club has given many enjoyable times to us all over the years and I am sure we all want that to go on as long as possible. I have come up with a few ideas on the attached pages 'How you can help the ROC' and I invite you to read through them and see if you could help in some way. Our finances are not yet critical but we have to look ahead so some, but not all of the ideas are about money. The other angle to helping the

Club is to undertake a small task to relieve the pressure on some of the officers or Committee members. Again, a few ideas are shown on the note and you might just think you could help us with one of them. I bet there is something for everyone on the list!

The ROC has given me many pleasurable times in the 17 years since I moved to the Reading area and I know many others have been members for much longer. If we can all pull together and 'do our bit' now to make our future more secure I am sure that is our combined wish.

Next time I write a note for this excellent Newsletter, I hope to be able to say something about conservation activity where I am sure the ROC can make a bigger impact on our local environment. Please let me or any of the Committee or Officers know of any issues you think we can help with, no matter how small. Together we have the strength of around 200 members and we have to make that count when it comes to protecting our local birds and environments.

Finally, and most important of all, may I wish you all a very happy and successful 2004!

Colin Wilson, Chairman

## Photographic Evening – 3<sup>rd</sup> March

This year's Photographic Competition Evening will take place on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March, so now is the time to start picking out your best shots. There might still be a chance to take some new ones, in the few hours of daylight that we get at this time of the year. All who came along to last years event will know what an enjoyable evening it was and how excellent the entries were, although no one should be put off from taking part. Gordon Langsbury will be casting his expert eye over the entries and judging the best in category pictures, although the audience gets to choose the overall winner. The winning entry will featured on the Club's WEB site (currently at <http://www.roc.care4free.net/>)

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

### **Membership Reminder**

Please note that subscriptions for the 2003/2004 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

### **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. After making grants in 2002/3 of c £1,700, the fund available now stands at approximately £3,700. The Club is now inviting proposals for 2004 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 will be judged against the following criteria:

- Is the site within Berkshire (essential) and does it contain wetland or have relevance to wetland or wetland species (desirable)?
- Will the project help locally threatened species to breed or winter more successfully?
- Will the project have long term benefits for wildlife and/or habitat, based on (i) the expected life of the work done or purchases made, (ii) the extent to which they can be subsequently protected and (iii) the level of support the project will receive and that required to secure a reasonable life expectancy?
- Will the grant result in increased benefit to users of the site?
- Has applicant the agreement of site owner to carry out the work to be funded and to maintain the project thereafter?
- How important is the grant to the success of the project (what other funding is available or being sought; what will happen if a *Birds of Berkshire* grant is not awarded)?
- Project management: will grant money be "well spent".

Proposals for consideration in Spring 2004, stating the work to be done and the conservation benefits it will provide and addressing the above criteria, should be sent to the Secretary (Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA; tel 0118 926 4513; email [renton@righelato.net](mailto:renton@righelato.net)) by 28<sup>th</sup> February 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.

### **Letter Received**

This is an extract from a letter sent to the Club by Arthur Keel, one of our 'more senior' members (I hope he won't mind me saying that!). Another reminder of how things have changed over the years.

"Although my active bird-watching days are past, my bird table still provides interest and surprises. A song thrush has just departed and before him a male blackcap. I look forward to receiving the ROC Newsletter and consider my membership well worth the money. It's a long time since my boyhood days when I would see flocks of 50 or so turtle doves in the Autumn, stone curlews bred on the nearby downs, a red-backed shrike nested a few hundred yards from my house and a wryneck nested in a hole in an apple tree in a friend's garden. There were skylarks in every meadow and we had to be careful not to tread on the young lapwings as we crossed the boggy fields"

### **News from the TABCG**

At Hosehill major work parties mowed the East Meadow and cleaned out the dragonfly pond, some of the grass being left on site as habitat piles. Encroaching vegetation and silt was removed from one end, silt removed from the dipping platform area, as well as dead vegetation and Willow saplings removed from the banks. Also at Hosehill the sand in the Sand Martin bank has been dug out, cleaned and replaced. The holes have been sealed and the roof has been put back on. It is now planned that viewing screens will be erected to protect the site. The adjacent area has also been cleared, where it looks as if Kingfishers attempted to build, but abandoned it as it became overgrown. The major work party to clear ash scrub was poorly attended, probably because of the pouring rain, but a substantial area was cleared. Some of the wood will go as stakes for hedge laying and some will be sold as bean poles at the next sale at Prospect Park.

Sadly vandals have stuck again, with the notice board by the gap in the hedge and the record book being targeted. Someone also cut through some branches and pulled them over blocking the gap in the hedge.

Hosehill is to be surveyed as part of a survey into Wildlife Heritage Sites. The work will start in mid December and continue on a monthly basis until April.

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)

### **Christmas Social Evening Raffle**

Those who bought tickets for the raffle in advance of the social evening will be disappointed to know that all the prizes went to tickets sold on the night. However they will, I'm sure, be pleased to know that the winning ticket was held by Carole white, who did so much to make the social evening such a success.

John Roberts

### **Upcoming Events**

#### **Indoor Meetings**

##### **Wednesday 14th January**

*"Namibia, land of sand dunes, salt pans and the Skeleton coast"* - Member Alistair Mackay recounts two weeks travelling though Namibia, encountering large game herds in the vast salt pans of Etosha, Cape Fur Seals on the Skeleton coast and the immense panoramas of the Kalahari and Namib deserts.

*"The World Land Trust - Conservation projects in South America"* - Secretary Renton Righelato gives some examples of the trust's projects in Ecuador and Patagonia involving newly discovered species and some of the world's rarest birds.

##### **Wednesday 28th January**

*"The President's Evening - High on the Hardangervidd"*

Birding in Norway in Europe's largest national park.

##### **Wednesday 11th February**

Ruth Tingay - "Conservation of the Madagascan Fish Eagle"

Ruth is studying for her PhD on the subject, this eagle is critically endangered and a Madagascan endemic, only 63 breeding pairs remain.

##### **Wednesday 25th February**

Dave Cottridge, natural history photographer - *"Spring in Shetland"*

The most northerly of all the British Islands, its tundra-like landscape and steep cliffs provide breeding habitat for a wide range of waders and seabirds.

##### **Wednesday 3rd March**

*"Annual Photographic Competition"*

Once again Gordon Langsbury presides over the annual competition.

Details available from the Hon. Secretary and at previous meetings.

##### **Wednesday 17th March**

Fraser Cottington, Chairman and Bird Recorder of the Friends of Lavell's Lake - *"The History and Future of Lavell's Lake"*

FoLL are the first recipients of a grant from the Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund

### **Mid Week Walks**

Recent walks have been poorly attended, but Dot, Harry and John will continue to organize local walks at 10am on the third Thursday of each month.

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> January** – Meet at the Lands End pub car park near Twyford (SU781748) for a walk which will hopefully produce some Smew. John Roberts (0118 9482137)

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> February** – Join us at Moor Green where we will look for Goosander, finches and winter ducks. Meet at Moor Green Farm car park (SU806628). Dot Lincoln (0118 9427563)

**Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> March** – Wishmoor Bottom provided a worthwhile walk at this time last year, so we will try it again hoping to see Dartford Warbler. Meet at Kings Ride, Camberly (SU875622). Dot Lincoln (0118 9427563)

### **Excursions**

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> January** – The promised follow up to our successful gull identification evening will start with a meet at the Dix Pit, near Oxford. Hopefully our gull experts will be on hand to help us to remember what they told us in December.

Contact – Ted Rogers (01344 883237).

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> February** – Come for the whole day or just the afternoon. Meet at Pennington Marsh car park (SZ318927) at 10am or at Blackwater Enclosure, in the New Forest (SU267047) at 2.30pm. The marshes should provide a variety of ducks and waders, while the forest is good for finches and other woodland species.

Leader – Martin Sell (0118 9471170).

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March** – Join us for a morning walk around Thursley Common, well known for its regular wintering Great Grey Shrike. Meet at the Moat Car Park at 9 am (SU8994166).

Leader – Brian Bennett (0118 9696507).

### **Report to 2003 AGM by the Recorder**

The last year has been a particularly exciting one with a number of scarce birds being reported and some interesting surveys carried out. To put these records into a wider context I propose on this occasion to supplement the traditional annual summary of records for the past year with a comparison with the records submitted by observers in my first year as County Recorder, 1966.

### **Divers to Ducks**

Although the only diver reported in winter was a Red-throated at Woolhampton GP, which was to remain there into the summer, all five species of grebe were seen, Bean Geese were again reported (including a party of 17) and there were at least six Bitterns in the county. Among rarer ducks were Scaup, Ferruginous, several Common Scoter and several Red-breasted Mergansers, there was an Eider in the Dinton Pastures area in Apr and late Great Northern Divers at both Theale GPs and Queen Mother Res in May.

Two Spoonbills seen over Finchampstead, also in May, were our 12th occurrence of the species and a Fulmar found dead at Newbury in July was only our fourth. Even rarer was a Great White Egret seen at Theale GP on 25th Feb, a first ever for Berkshire. Pintail also registered a first, the flock on floods at Rose Kiln Lane Reading reaching 78 at one point in February.

Whilst 1966 had a scattering of rarities (eg Black-throated Diver and Ferruginous Duck) the only feral geese reported were a few Grey-lags, Little Egrets had still to be recorded, there had only been one record of Ruddy Duck, there were just a few wintering Gadwall and just six sightings of Cormorant involving 18 birds. Contrast this with 2003, when there were numerous parties of 20 to 60 Cormorants, peak counts of 100 Grey-lag, 200 Barnacle, 12 Snow and 22 Egyptian Geese, gatherings of over 80 Gadwall, a new county high of 33 Ruddy Ducks and a scattering of Little Egrets. Interestingly though, in 1966 there were breeding records of Wigeon (2 pairs), Shoveler (1 pair) and Pochard (7 pairs) none of which have been recorded breeding in recent years.



Whilst Shelduck was only an occasional visitor in 1966, this year there were about 15 pairs in the county in March, some of which remained to breed. 2003 also recorded its first summering Bittern for well over a century, probably two centuries, one summering at Dinton Pastures.

#### Raptors to Waders

There were several records of both Hen Harrier and Merlin in the last year, 4 or 5 sightings of Osprey and in August a Marsh Harrier and probable Honey Buzzard. Pride of place goes to Red-footed Falcon, however, with one at Burnthouse Lane GP in July only our sixth (and still to be recorded in 1966). One or two Peregrines were seen throughout the year, there were numerous Red Kite records (including a new county high of 27 coming to a roost on the downs) and of course Buzzards "were everywhere". In contrast neither Red Kite or Peregrine were seen in 1966 (or indeed Osprey) and there was only a handful of Buzzard records. It was a moderate year for Quail in both 2003 and 1966 but in 2003 we had additionally a party of 9 Cranes reported from the Berks/Bucks border.

Since 1966 gravel pits and Queen Mother reservoir have replaced the old style sewage farms so attractive to waders. Remember Manor Farm and Early Sewage Farm? In 2003 wader passage included Avocet (in February, March and August), Temminck's Stint and Spotted Redshank in April, Knot, Little Stint and Black-tailed Godwit in May, Spotted Redshank again and Wood Sandpiper in August and, coming up to date, there was a Pectoral Sandpiper at Eversley GP this week.

#### Skuas, Gulls and Terns

What a year for Skuas at Queen Mother Res! After only 3 Pomarine Skuas in 200 years, Chris Heard had to pinch himself when on 25 April a party of 13, yes 13, arrived over the reservoir. Not only was this unprecedented for Berkshire it is probably unprecedented for any inland county. This was followed in August by only our second Long tailed Skua and in October by an Arctic Skua.

Little Gulls were seen in both winter and on spring and autumn passage (in good numbers) and there were several records of Mediterranean Gull (including 5 together in November). There were sightings of both Iceland and Glaucous Gull, at least 5 reports of Caspian Gull and a new county high for Yellow-legged Gull of 70 in August. Caspian and Yellow-legged Gulls were not even listed in 1966. Another change since 1966 is that we now have breeding Black-headed Gulls (colonies at Theale and Eversley gravel pits) and several breeding sites for Common Terns.



#### Doves to Buntings

In 1966 Collared Doves were confined to Reading and Wraybury and Ring-necked Parakeets had still to arrive and Red-backed Shrikes were still breeding in south Bucks. To remind us of birds that used to breed regularly in the county there were records in 2003 of Wryneck at Bray in September and Red-backed Shrike at Greenham Common in August. Earlier in the year there had also been records of Great Grey Shrike, at Brightwalton in February, and Hoopoe, at Lambourn in May.

Other passerines that have also declined most notably since 1966 are Wood Warbler (2 passage records 2003 but 6 pairs and 12 singing males in 1966), Hawfinch (breeding in Leighton Park Reading, Windsor Great Park, Maidenhead and Hermitage in 1966 but no summer records in 2003) and Cirl Bunting (long since gone at any time of year). On the other hand some small birds have done well. In 1966 there were no records of Woodlark (Derek Barker located about 30 territories in E Berks in 2003), Cetti's Warbler (16 at Thatcham April 2003), Dartford Warbler (now up to about 30 territories), and Firecrest (Derek finding a massive 70 territories this summer). Among the crow family, in 1966 Hooded Crows were visiting Berkshire in winter but no longer do so, and Raven, not recorded then, is now seen in increasing numbers and may have attempted to breed in 2003, the first time for nearly 150 years).

A possible indication of changes in our climate in that there were no records of wintering Blackcaps or Chiffchaffs in 1966 but in January 2003 both species were reported from some 15-20 locations.

Finally to round off an interesting year there were records in October of Yellow-browed Warbler (only our 2nd, or possibly 3rd) and Lapland Bunting.

Peter Standley

## AGM Highlights

The Club's Annual General Meeting was held on 5<sup>th</sup> November with a third of our 170 or so members taking part. With John Hannan's move to Yorkshire, a new Chairman was elected – Colin Wilson, an active member of the Club since 1986 and a member of the Committee for many years. Elsewhere in this Newsletter, Colin explains his vision for the ROC. Two new members join the Committee: Robert Godden and John Lerpiniere, who bring strong links with local conservation groups to help the Club develop its conservation activities.

The main discussion at the meeting was about the Club's finances. Last year, we made a substantial loss: expenditure (£3,976) being £1,859 over income (£2,117). Result, not quite the misery predicted by Mr Micawber – yet. A large part of the loss arose from the cost of publishing the 1996/7 Birds of Berkshire Report, for which the Club's reserve, accumulated largely because no reports had been published for several years, had fallen as a result to £4,716 (much of which will be needed to complete publication of the backlog of annual reports). John Roberts, our Honorary Treasurer, explained that this had been foreseen and it was for this reason that he had proposed an increase in subscriptions starting in the current year. The increased subscription income, however, is insufficient alone to cover the recurring costs of our indoor meetings and reports and John Roberts led a helpful discussion of options for making end meet.

Although we must seek cost savings where practicable, there was a clear consensus among those present that the quality of the Club's superbly renovated venue, the meetings and the reports should not be prejudiced. Thus the emphasis of the meeting was on measures to increase income. The Committee was asked to look at a range of options including sponsorship, meetings charges, raffles, sales of bird food. Some of these measures are already being followed up and, on behalf of the whole membership, I would like to thank those members who have generously given donations to the Club funds.

Renton Righelato

## How can you help the ROC?

*The ROC needs your help to strengthen its finances and rebuild its membership for the longer term. There are many ways this can be done and we set out a few below. Our challenge is to encourage everyone to do at least one of these. Please help us to succeed.*

*(We know not everyone can afford to help financially so all we ask is that you look at all the shaded options as they don't mean paying more – some ask for just a little help or effort which, if possible, would be gratefully appreciated.) Phone numbers and contact details are below.*

**Idea 1** Could you afford to increase your subscription? You may be able to afford to give up your retirement discount and pay the full rate or possibly increase a single subscription to a family rate? Or, if you think your membership is good value just pay a little more each year.

**How?** Simply change your standing order at the bank (we have forms if you need one) and tell Dot Lincoln what you have done or hand her a cheque payable to Reading Ornithological Club for the extra amount.

**Idea 2** Have you Gift Aided your subscription? If you are a taxpayer, you can increase the amount the club earns from your subscription by 22% without paying a single penny more yourself!

**How?** Just fill in a form available from Dot Lincoln or John Roberts or just ask any of the Committee to send you one.

**Idea 3** Maybe, like the Committee you think the subscription is good value for the whole Indoor Programme, the Field Meetings Programme, the local walks and your Newsletters. For £15 at the full rate for one person or £20 for two it is good value and even more so at our retirement rates. In addition to this you are entitled to the Birds of Berkshire Annual Bird report completely free. So how about donating the cost of this to the Club? At £4.50 is this not a bargain?

**How?** Just send a cheque payable to the Reading Ornithological Club to Renton Righelato for your copy **OR** how about persuading someone else to buy the next one?

**Idea 4**

Many companies in Reading and Berkshire provide services to people like us. They might sell binoculars and telescopes or outdoor clothing or footwear. Maybe they sell books or birdfood? Or, just services we as householders might like to use, gardening, house repairs or maintenance, financial services, decorating and cleaning etc. All these people could be asked to help support our club by advertising in our Annual Bird report, sponsoring a newsletter or even sponsoring a club meeting. Do you have a friend or know someone who might be willing to do this or maybe you are also in business and able to help?

**How?** All we need is a name and phone number and we will be glad to approach them, although if you could use your personal charm to 'warm them up' first that would be a great help. Just give the details to Renton Righelato or to Colin Wilson and we will do the rest.

**Idea 5**

Give a gift of ROC membership to someone for a birthday or Christmas. If you know someone who is interested in birds why not invite them along and gift them membership of the Club? They can come along to an evening meeting to try it for the usual £2 which we will gladly refund against their first years subscription.

**How?** You need no help from us on this. Just fill in one of our application forms and send it to Dot Lincoln with the appropriate cheque.

**Idea 6**

From time to time we have raffles and events for which we need prizes. Small gifts for this purpose would always be very welcome. The AGM and Christmas social are the obvious occasions when a little help would be appreciated. Bottles, chocolates, books or maybe more imaginative, but unwanted gifts would always be welcome.

**How?** If you would like to help just inform John Roberts and bring the gift on the night.

**Idea 7**

There are a number of tasks where a little help could go a long way. For example, the club can earn some worthwhile income from selling peanuts and seed to members during the winter but we have no-one available to help sell them on the night, apart from those who already have jobs to do for the Club.

**How?** Speak to John Roberts or Renton at any meeting and we will explain what is involved (really very little) and you can decide if you wish to help.

**Idea 8**

Do you have access to a photocopier you could use for low or no cost (with the owner's permission of course)! If so, our costs for the newsletter and other paperwork could be usefully reduced. Obviously we would need the help to be reliable and access to a computer with email would be very useful.

**How?**

Just let Renton know and he can explain the main tasks and timescales for doing the copying.

**Idea 9**

Do you visit any of our local nature reserves on a regular basis? We would like to make sure the ROC is known by everybody who uses the reserves and enjoys birds in Berkshire. We can arrange for our publicity and leaflets to be placed in hides and leaflet holders in most places but need people to make sure they are replenished from time to time.

**How?** Let Renton know where you visit and we will make sure permission is agreed and will give you have a supply of the leaflets.

**Idea 10**

Can you help us by telling local newspapers about our programme of events regularly? It only takes a few phone calls or occasional form filling and will help people become aware of us and hopefully attract new members. Even someone who is unable to get out a great deal can help with this.

**How?** We can provide a list of contacts for you and armed with our programme card you have all you need. Let Colin or Renton know if you can do this.

If you have any ideas or feel you can help with any of these things or in any other way we will be very grateful. Our contact details are normally on the programme card but we set them out below to help you.

**Dr Renton Righelato**, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA Tel. 0118 926 4513

**Colin Wilson**, Blakeney, St Catherine's Road, Frimley Green, Camberley, Surrey, GU16 9NP. Tel. 01252 837411

**Mrs Dot Lincoln**, 43 Brooksby Road, Tilehurst, Reading, RG31 6LZ Tel. 0118 942 7563

**John Roberts**, 71 Kidmore Road, Reading, RG4 7NQ, Tel. 0118 948 2137