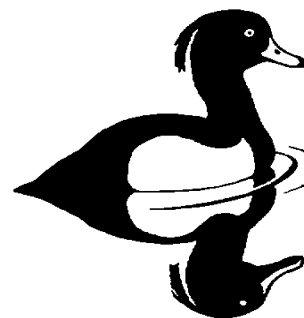


READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

ROC Newsletter

Winter 2005/2006

No 32



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Introduction

In keeping with tradition, this newsletter is being sent out a bit later than I would have liked, but I have to come clean and admit that I was away enjoying myself over New Year and have only now found time to sit at my computer and get on with it. My New Year was spent down in Devon, near the lovely Exe estuary (for those who don’t know, it is the place to see Avocets in winter - a flying flock of which is a truly wonderful sight!). Anyway, can I take this opportunity to hope that you had a good Christmas and New Year and hope that you are already enjoying 2006.

As you will know, the Club puts on a varied programme of indoor and outdoor meetings and events – I hope that you will be able to enjoy the various activities during the year. I particularly look forward to meeting new members as they become more involved in the Club’s activities (and yes, I even look forward to seeing old members again as well!) On the subject of outings, I believe that there are still some spaces on the upcoming coach trip to Slimbridge – please contact Ray Reedman quickly if you are interested.

If you have received this newsletter in paper form, but would prefer an electronic version sent via email, please let me know via an email to the address below.

Also, please don’t forget that I am always on the look out for newsletter 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 24th March. As always many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter (including Kingfisher Publications plc for some of the illustrations).

Ted Rogers (01344 883237)
8, Ranelagh Crescent
Ascot
SL5 8LW
Email: ted.rogers@theroc.org.uk



Changes to Indoor Programme

For unavoidable reasons we have had to reschedule some of this season’s indoor meetings, resulting in the talks of 11th January and 8th March being swapped. Similarly the talks of 25th January and 8th February have also had to be swapped around. Hence the early part of the year’s indoor calendar now reads.

11th JANUARY 2006 - The Blackwater Valley and its Birds – Colin Wilson

25th JANUARY 2006 - “The London Wetland Centre” – Alistair Mackay

8th FEBRUARY 2006 - “Birds of the Sacred Mountain” – Dave Cotteridge

22nd FEBRUARY 2006 (Unchanged) - Annual Photographic Competition

8th MARCH 2006 - “Silent Spring” – Conservation in the UK – Ken Norris

Annual Photographic Competition – 22 February 2006

In acknowledgement of the number of photographers now using digital cameras we are adjusting the categories for the competition in 2006. There will be four categories:

- Best slide photograph of a bird (this can be a portrait or action shot)
- Best digiscoped bird in Berkshire
- Best digital bird portrait
- Best digital bird action photograph

The rules will be almost the same as last year but the main change is that the limit for entries to each category is now limited to 5 instead of 3, so up to 20 photographs may be submitted by participants. Following his retirement from the competition, Dickie Duckett will join Gordon Langsbury as a second judge in 2006. The rules and methods of submitting photographs are detailed on the website www.theroc.org.uk via the events page. If you need a paper copy please ring Colin Wilson on 01252 837411 and he'll send you one.

We would like as many entries as possible and the digiscoping category should open up the field for quite a few more members to take part. Another excellent competition is in prospect.

Midweek Walks Winter/Spring 2006

All walks take place on the 3rd Thursday of the month and start at 10 a.m..

It would be appreciated if you would let the contact person know if you plan to come.

Lifts to the venue can often be arranged. If you need this, let the contact person know several days in advance if you can.

19th January - Twyford Lakes. Most years we have seen smew here, and there's a good chance of siskin and redpoll in the trees. Meet in the car park at the rear of the Lands End pub SU 781748 and have lunch or a drink afterwards if you wish.

Contact John Roberts on 0118 948 2137

16th February - Lavell's Lake and area. Plenty of wintering ducks on the lakes and finches in the trees. Meet in the car park (unmarked) in Sandford Lane, entrance opposite the Golf and Sailing club entrance. SU786727. Contact Ray Reedman on 0118 986 4338

16th March - Greenham Common. Winter visitors may still be around and some early summer visitors may have arrived – at any rate the resident Dartford warblers should be active, and also the woodlarks. Meet in the Control Tower car park off Bury Banks Road, SU499651. Contact Pat Marshall on 01635 866206

20th April - Frimley Gravel Pits and River Blackwater. A new area for many of us but Colin will show us the delights of his local patch. Summer visitor warblers should be plentiful. Meet at The Quays pub, Coleford Bridge Road, Mytchett SU882562 and have a pub lunch there afterwards if you like. Leave the A331 south at Coleford Bridges, take left turn and almost immediately right where pub is signposted. Contact Colin Wilson on 01252 837 411.

18th May - Searle's Lane. A woodland walk by the lake and return along the canal. Waterside and woodland birds and summer warblers are all likely. Group parking not possible here so we shall meet in the Cunning Man car park SU 608 706 and return there for lunch or at least a drink afterwards. This venue entails a bit of a walk along roads before the start of the birding.

Contact John Lerpiniere on 0118 942 6225

Lake District Trip 19th to 21st May 2006 – Alternative option

This trip, a repeat of a successful visit some years ago, to be lead by Colin Wilson, is being extended for those who wish to spend one more day birdwatching in the Lake District. This will mean travelling to the Lake District on Thursday 18th May. For those travelling on Friday a suggested itinerary for the journey up will be provided and both parties will meet in the hotel in the evening. The main itinerary has not been finally settled but the intention is to visit Leighton Moss (RSPB), St Bees Head (RSPB), the Bassenthwaite Osprey viewpoint and to seek other local specialities like Ring Ouzels, Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers etc. Also, if time allows we may visit the Haweswater where Golden Eagles may still be seen.

As bookings for hotels need to be arranged and negotiated members interested should please contact Colin as soon as possible on 01252 837411 so he can assess the numbers and rooms required. The weekend will involve a fair amount of walking (many reserve viewpoints are at least a mile over uneven terrain from car parks) so wet weather gear and walking boots are recommended.

Supporting Bird Conservation Work

The committee of The Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund has agreed that the fund be merged with the ROC's Conservation Fund and managed by the ROC. The fund will continue to be called "The Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund" and Peter Standley and Neil Bucknell will continue as review committee members, with Renton Righelato as convenor. John Lerpiniere agreed to join the review committee. The Environment Agency, through Malcolm Schofield, will be kept informed of the Fund's work and their advice sought, particularly of wetland-related projects.

The Birds of Berkshire Fund has given £3,200 in grants over the last three years and the combined fund currently has £3,500 available. See the Club's website for application details or contact Renton Righelato.

Updating the ROC's Constitution

A number of changes to the Club's constitution were approved at the Club's AGM held on 7th December, before the Christmas Social (the AGM had been adjourned from 9th November, when a quorum was not present). The changes were necessary to bring the constitution in line with the Club's aims and practices as they have evolved and with equal rights practice. The main points are:

- The area of activity of the Club now includes the whole of Berkshire. We produce The Birds of Berkshire Report, organise recording and support bird conservation on a county-wide basis. Thus the previous restriction to the Reading area (Reading is only one of the six unitary authorities in Berkshire) was inconsistent with the Club's activities.
- Unambiguous inclusion of conservation in our objects as this is a growing part of the Club's work.
- Replacement of "Family" membership with "Joint" membership.
- Removal of the Librarian from the list of Non-executive Officers required. The Club has not had a Librarian for many years: the Secretary maintains the Club's archive of reports. The Committee has the power to appoint an officer to a new archival role, if required.
- Clarification of Committee voting rights to ensure democratic governance.
- Removing the limit on the number of guests a member may introduce.

The proposed changes have been accepted by the Charity Commission and can now take effect.

Renton Righelato

New Survey - Red Kites and Buzzards in Berkshire 2006

The ROC and NDOC invite all members, other birdwatchers and the public to help track Red Kites and Buzzards in Berkshire in 2006. Both birds are spreading rapidly and we would like to know how many breeding pairs we now have in the county and how far east they've got. Our request is simple; when you see either of these birds anywhere in the county just send a brief record of the details as described below and we will compile a report based on the sightings. If you send a record we will send you a report at the end of the survey period.

Identifying Red Kites and Buzzards

Superficially both these large birds of prey look similar but if you look carefully they are quite easy to tell apart. The best way is by their flight shape. You are most likely to see these birds in the air, often at some height soaring in circular flight. Even at a distance it is easy to discern the diagnostic feature of the Red Kite which is its forked tail (which it frequently twists in flight); Buzzards do not have this feature; their tails are shorter and much broader. Buzzards also have much broader wings while Kites have longer, narrower ones. In soaring flight Buzzard's wings are nearly always held in a shallow V compared to the Kite's which are held flat or slightly drooped. Closer views of Red Kites in a good light should reveal the reddish plumage of much of the body (particularly noticeable if seen from above) and the large white patches near the tips of the underwing. Buzzards have essentially brown plumage but this is quite variable in shade ranging from creamy to almost black but is never red. Most Buzzards you will see however are a medium brown and have contrasting white and brown patches on the underwing, often with a distinctive dark "eye spot" midway along the leading edge.

Your sightings

Our request is very simple. If you see either of these birds anywhere in Berkshire between 1st January and 31st July tell us :-

What bird(s) you saw

Where you saw them (a map reference would be really helpful)

The date

The number of Kites and/or Buzzards seen

Any comments on what they were doing (e.g carrying food, at nest, feeding young etc)

Your name and address (or email address) if you would like a copy of the report at the end of the survey

Records should be sent either by mail to Mike Turton, 7, Fawcett Crescent, Woodley, Reading, Berkshire RG5 3HX

OR by email (preferred) to kiteandbuzzardsurvey@theroc.org.uk

News from the TABCG

At Hosehill, conservation work has continued throughout the year, with regular work parties tackling jobs like haymaking in September (with some areas left to grow and piles of cut hay left as habitat piles), nest box cleaning and replacing (a better year for breeding birds was noted) and pond clearance (the whole pond has now been cleared over the last three years).

The 2005 Bird Race raised some £1600 for local conservation work. After some debate, funds will be provided to Lavells Lake, Moor Green and BBOWT.

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). The TABCG also meet on the first Tuesday of every month at the Englefield Social Club, a chance to meet other club members and listen to guest speakers.

The Group now has its own Web site, which can be visited at <http://tabcg.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk>.

Information courtesy of TABCG (with thanks to Cathy McEwan)

Moor Green Lakes Group

The Group needs a Membership Secretary as the current person is unable to continue due to commitments to travel frequently and lengthily to New Zealand. It is not a massively onerous job but it does take a bit of time, mainly processing renewals, stuffing envelopes and producing membership cards etc and maintaining the lists of members. There are four committee meetings a year but attendance is not essential (the current incumbent does not attend them). You will need a computer with a rudimentary understanding of common MS software packages. If you're possibly interested in helping please contact Colin Wilson on 01252 837411 who will answer any questions and put you in the picture.

BBOWT Reserves - Bird Surveyors Needed

Over the past few years the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust has been carrying out extensive surveying on its reserves, in order to try and establish exactly what wildlife we have out there and how strong the populations are. A dedicated team of volunteers mainly carries out the survey work, and BBOWT is looking for more keen birders to help with this important project. Most sites need two visits during the breeding season, with the survey visits taking place in the surveyors' own time. A set transect route through the site is walked and numbers of birds both seen and heard are recorded. A few sites need specific species surveys, such as for nightjars. The information received will then be recorded on BBOWT's database and results are fed back into site management to ensure that our reserves support healthy bird populations.

If you would be interested in helping or would like some more information please contact Debbie Lewis at BBOWT on 01865 775476, or write to 1 Armstrong Road, Littlemore, Oxford, OX4 4AT.

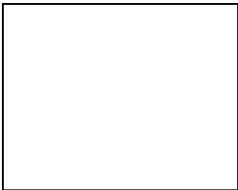
Alternatively, if you feel you cannot commit the time to help with a full survey, you can still help by collecting ad hoc records whilst out and about on BBOWT's reserves. Please send in any records made on BBOWT's reserves, all records are useful.

Trip Report – Norfolk Weekend February 2005

I guess the clues were obvious. Our previous winter trips to East Anglia have invariably enjoyed fairly dry and settled weather, but when there are birds like Arctic Redpoll, Iceland Gull and Snow Goose being reported we should have known that this weekend was going to be a little different.

Travelling up to Norfolk on the Friday started in calm conditions, with the first meeting point at Minsmere RSPB reserve. Early birds included Avocet and Ruff on the scrapes and Red Throated Divers on the sea while some lucky members spotted Bittern and Bearded Tits. Our route up the Suffolk coast took us close to the coastal village of Kessingland where, after a patient wait everyone got good views of the reported Dusky Warbler (a Chiffchaff-like Siberian vagrant). Back on the road, under darkening skies, we moved on to the Ness at Lowestoft, where among the concrete and rock sea defences (and in the shadow of a huge wind turbine) we located several Purple Sandpipers, Turnstones, Rock Pipits and a Mediterranean Gull. (For the trivia fans it is worth knowing that the Ness at Lowestoft is the most easterly point in Britain, which is probably the only reason, birds apart, that anyone would contemplate a visit!)

Our last visit of the day took us to Stubbs Mill near Horsey Mere, but not before a stop by the roadside gave us a chance to compare Bewicks and Whooper Swans, alongside a few of the Common Cranes which are resident in the area. As we began our walk from the reserve car park to the roost viewpoint, the rain started and continued for some time (as always with winter birding, having the right clothing is key to the enjoyment – or even survival!). Unperturbed we were rewarded with views of hunting Barn Owl and numerous Marsh Harriers as they came to the roost. Difficult to positively identify in the gloom was a Merlin as it darted around the bushes among the reeds.



With the weather looking even more threatening, Saturday began quietly with an uneventful sea watch at Hunstanton, but spirits were lifted by breakfast, despite the sight of snowflakes drifting past the dining room windows. A roadside stop on the A149 failed to turn up the reported Snow Goose, but, with the snow now being driven by the wind, we did find a good number of Bean Geese among the many Pink Footed Geese. The distant Spoonbill on the marsh was visible to all, but only when the snow eased off (spotting an all-white bird in a snow storm is a little tricky – an artist's impression of the scene can be seen here !).

We pondered the sanity of undertaking the planned walk out to Holkham Gap, but as the snow had eased somewhat we braved the elements and undertook our annual pilgrimage across the windy snow-swept wastes in search of Shore Larks and Snow Buntings. Bravery was rewarded as we found flocks of both species before we returned to the cars and headed east to Stiffkey to see the long-staying Lesser Yellowlegs, which was found actively feeding in the channel behind the sea wall. At the same site most of the party were privileged to see a hunting male Hen Harrier, before a mixture of rain and snow forced a quick retreat. The return trip along the A149 allowed some to locate the immature Snow Goose near Holkham.

The rest of the day was spent at Titchwell, which, as always, was well worth the visit. The promised Redpolls were found feeding on the alders near the reserve centre, with Arctic, Mealy and Common all being seen, while waders on the reserve included Avocet, Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Sanderling, Godwits and, of course, Black Winged Stilt. Some of us also were fortunate to have close up views of an energetic Water Rail in the channel by the main footpath. An all-to-brief visit to the Lifeboat Inn enabled us to further support the local economy before returning to the hotel for a well-earned dinner.

The early Sunday walk around Gore Point, near Holme, provided few birds, but the wind and snow flurries sharpened our appetites for breakfast, before checking out of the hotel and heading south.

The traditional slow promenade around the Wolferton triangle gave some good views of a couple of gaudy male Golden Pheasants, before regrouping at Harpley Dams where a Great Grey Shrike had been reported. In this part of Norfolk there had been an appreciable amount of snow and, with the clouds temporarily clearing and blue skies appearing we were treated to the sight of the shrike sitting on top of the hedge in something of a “winter wonderland” setting. The nearby Black Redstart, which had taken up residence in a barn full of long horned cattle, along with the local Tree Sparrows added to the experience. A stop en route to Linford Arboretum took us to Blackborough End, where the local tip had both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. The Glaucous treated us by flying over our heads allowing a clear sight of its all pale wings and huge, vicious beak, while the Iceland was eventually located with other gulls on a nearby field. Linford Arboretum did not disappoint either, with Hawfinch, Crossbills, Siskin and Marsh Tit all added to the list, bringing the trip total to 137 species (an exceptionally high number). With time getting on, another excellent weekend in East Anglia came to an end and was hopefully enjoyed by all, despite the “interesting” weather (or maybe because of it?).

Ted Rogers

Trip Report – Pembrokeshire Visit May 2005

Nine of us met up at the campsite at Broadhaven, where everyone was very impressed with the standard of the accommodation in the mobile homes. We had a quick cup of tea and then John Roberts took us off to explore, straight out of the campsite and very quickly up a steep cliff, rather testing for some of the group. However we were rewarded with a glorious view - headlands awash with golden gorse jutting out into the blue sea, blue sky overhead, and gulls wheeling over the cliffs. Before long we saw a buzzard being harassed by a croaking raven, linnets over the scrub, a close in view of a gannet and our first sighting of tumbling choughs. The cliff paths were pretty with pink thrift and white sea campion and scurvy grass. A good pub meal completed the day.

Friday was sunny at first, but with a stiff north westerly wind. We walked along a sheltered cove at Dale and had views of whimbrel and other waders. They were difficult to see well, silhouetted against the strong sun, but a little later in the other direction we had a very good view of a whimbrel revealing all its features and when it flew of it called for good measure. Further along the shore there were a number of wheatear flying from one vantage point to another. Gordon wanted one to perch on a gorse bush in flower as this would make a good photograph, but deemed this to be unlikely. However the welsh birds are well trained, and Gordon very patient, so eventually one obliged.. During the day the weather deteriorated,. The plan was to take the evening boat trip around the island of Skomer, but right until the last moment it was not certain that the trip would run. With a choppy sea and rain imminent, four of the group decided to opt out, but five of us made the venture and was it worth while! Because of the strength of the wind and its northerly direction the skipper did not take the boat right round the island, but only to south haven and north haven where the sea birds had congregated in vast numbers in the shelter of the island. Before we got there we saw gannets plummeting into the sea. When we were closer to the island we had amazing views of literally thousands of puffins skittering across the water out of the path of the boat, guillemots and razorbills swimming on the sea, vast colonies of guillemots on the cliffs, and smaller colonies of razorbills, with fulmars and kittiwakes in their separate nesting places along the cliffs. As the boat progressed parallel with the coast from South Haven to North Haven we had splendid views of grey seals(atlantic I think) resting on the rocks and out to sea good glimpses of porpoises leaping out of the water. Then we headed out into rougher water and open sea for sighting of rafts of manx shearwater, and again were able to see these in motion as they took flight to avoid the boat.

Strong winds continued to be a feature of the weekend, so we were unable to take the trip to land on Skomer. Instead we did an inland walk along the old railway line at Neyland (brief sighting of an otter in the small river at the far end) and watched the gulls along the Milford Haven estuary. Then we walked on the cliffs again and were rewarded with superb views of ravens, choughs, and peregrine falcons both buzzing a buzzard and perched on a tall rock very close to the cliff. Watch out for Gordon’s photographs of the perched peregrine and the wheatear on the gorse. Another highlight was Lynn getting a bloody nosed beetle to spit out its red liquid.! Altogether a satisfying weekend and many thanks to John for hosting and leading it.

Dot Lincoln.

Trip to Titchwell with the East Berks RSPB

Several members of the ROC joined the coach trip to Titchwell in Norfolk on 10th September. It was long day, and wet in North Norfolk, but the birds more than made up for that, with many species on show. Most notable were many passage waders: Curlew Sandpipers, a few Ruffs, a lot of Avocets, several Black-tailed Godwits, the odd Greenshank, Spotted Redshank and many more common species. A solitary Knot stood out for the very fact of being alone. A couple of Little Stints were present, one of which, a juvenile, paraded close to the path to provide unsurpassable views (*though I seemed only to get a clear picture when it had its head hidden!*). In the absence of Sammy, the Black-winged Stilt, an escaped Cattle Egret was a less-exciting special act as it consorted with Little Egrets.



Bearded Tits were keeping well down, but even so a few of us were lucky to find them at the edge of reed-beds. Apparently there was an early flock of Twites and one Wheatear, though reports of both flycatcher species were not verified by our group. Sea-watching was tricky, though Common Scoter, Red-throated Divers, Red-necked Grebe, Great and Arctic Skuas, Fulmar etc. were all noted by the most-dogged observers.

For just three of us, the appearance of a golden-brown amphibian at the edge of the main pool proved to be a surprise and then a highlight: it was a rare Natterjack Toad, a species that has a stronghold in that corner of England.

To record the birds seen that day, a trip check-list circulated in the coach: we had in fact just reached three figures. Not a bad result for a rainy day's birding!

Ray Reedman

The Berkshire Kingfisher Survey 2005

Note: This is a shortened version of the report, which is reproduced in full on the Club website (www.theroc.org.uk) or can be obtained on request from Chris Robinson.



Background

The last survey of Kingfishers in Berkshire (1987-1989) showed 81 confirmed or probably breeding pairs, so this recent survey was undertaken to update our knowledge of the species in the county. Also, due to the easy recognition of the species, it was also seen as a good opportunity to involve general members of the public, as well as a useful publicity exercise for the ROC and NDOC.

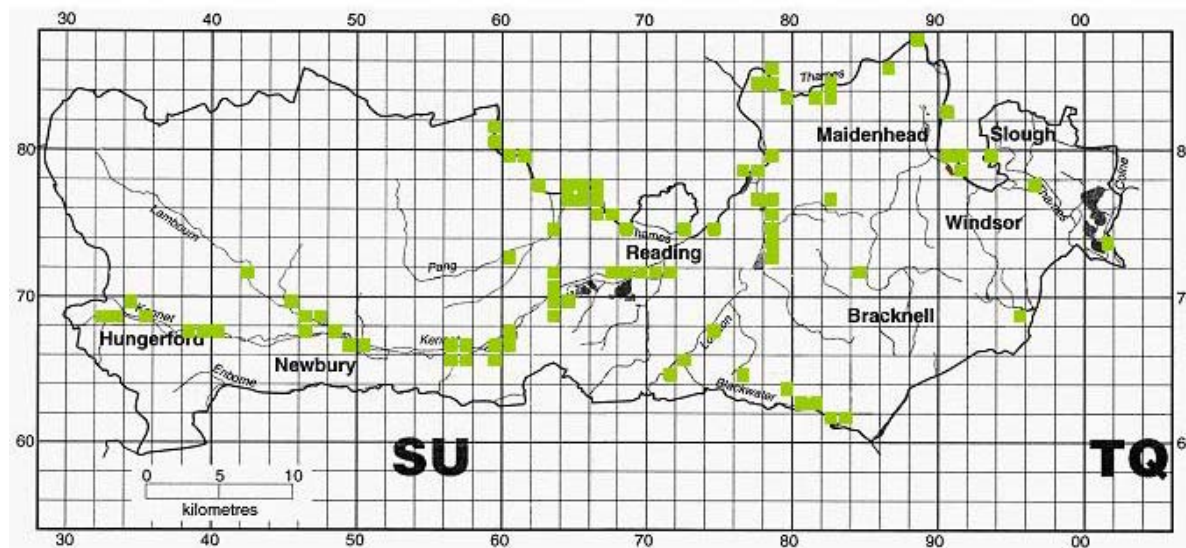
Methodology

The survey period was from the start of January to the end of July, providing the best chance of recording the birds at their breeding sites and avoiding confusion caused by juvenile birds. Observers were asked to simply record where and when the birds were seen, as well as adding any notes of interesting activity or behaviour.

Results and Analysis

Various recording options were allowed, which did mean that any possible duplications of records had to be eliminated. Early analysis showed there to be some 543 unique submitted records. We are grateful for all those people who took part, providing simple records and good amounts of other useful information.

After checking for accuracy, the records were fed into MapMate, allowing further analysis and production of maps (with distribution to be shown in terms of 1km squares). This early analysis showed that there were 152 squares with at least one sighting – certainly an overestimate of breeding birds, with some presumably being from winter-only quarters (e.g. areas like Theale, Wrybury and Dinton produced several winter records, but virtually none later in the period). While some records indicated clear evidence of breeding, this only confirmed 62 probably breeding pairs, a figure which is almost certainly too low. Further analysis of the winter and spring/summer sightings led to the conclusion that there were some 89 1km squares occupied during the breeding season (as shown on the map below).



Conclusion

A number of factors and considerations were taken into account (see main report for further details), with the conclusion being that there were a minimum of 78 occupied territories in Berkshire, with 6 other areas which might have held breeding birds. Hence the probable number of breeding Kingfishers in Berkshire in 2005 was between 78 and 84.