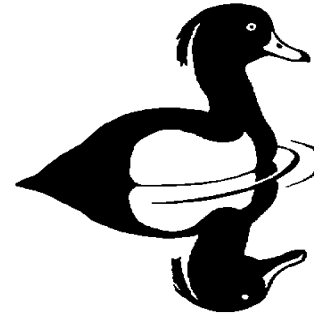


READING ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

ROC Newsletter

Summer 2006

No 34



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Introduction

While writing this item I can feel the summer heat pushing the temperature towards 30 degrees, while oddly I seem to be editing articles about winter birding – perhaps they will help to cool you down? Still, it is good to relax now that England's World Cup dream has come to nought but the usual painful exit from the competition. You can see now why the English are such good losers – plenty of practice!

I hope you have enjoyed the Spring season and had the opportunity to get to grip with our many wonderful visiting birds, like the Nightingale that remains inexplicably invisible in the middle of a thicket whilst in full voice, or the Lesser Whitethroat that always sings from the other side of the bush, regardless of which side you are standing! Such are the challenges of birdwatching.

Hopefully the Birds of Berkshire 2003 annual report will be sent out with this newsletter (for those who get the newsletter by post), while email recipients of the newsletter will get the report separately. As I write, the report is due from the printers, but should it be delayed it will be sent out as soon as possible.

The next newsletter will go out along with the new season mail shot in early September, so please get any items to me by 18th August.

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

New for 2007 – an ROC Calendar

We have produced an ROC calendar for 2007. It features Tufted Duck, Waxwing, Buzzard, Kingfisher, Willow Warbler, Lapwing, Yellowhammer, Swallow, House Sparrow, Red Kite, Barn Owl, Fieldfare and Robin. All of these are beautifully photographed and generously donated by our President, Gordon Langsbury.

The calendar is wire-bound and in a handy A4 portrait format and will be available to ROC members at just £5 at all meetings in the autumn. You may reserve any number of copies in advance (this will help to ensure adequate supplies) or, alternatively, arrange to have one or more posted to you (p&p extra).

To place an order, contact Ray Reedman on 0118 9864338
or by email at meander2@hotmail.com



Coach Trip to the Birdfair

You might still be lucky! There are still a few seats available for the coach to the Birdfair at Rutland Water on 19th August. Tickets cost £25 and include entry charges. Non-members are welcome. Starting points at Newbury, Reading and Bray Wick. Art, books, photography, optics, travel, outdoor clothing and much more - with a chance of Ospreys and a few other birds too.

Don't miss a good day out!

Details from Ray Reedman, tel. 0118 9864338/email meander2@hotmail.com

Mid-Week Walk – Thursday September 21st 2006

As last year, we shall start the autumn season with a whole-day visit to Titchfield Haven on the Solent on Thursday 21st September. With enough drivers to take people who do not drive or are no longer willing to tackle longer distances, this should be a good and not too strenuous whole-day outing. There are six hides, so those who want to sit and rest will have plenty of opportunity and there are opportunities for birdwatching along the sea front and as we walk around the reserve. There is an admission fee of £3.70 (or £3 for concessions), but the reserve centre has toilets and a good little café for drinks and cakes and also lunches (although these may need to be booked in advance). Alternatively people can take a picnic lunch and sit along the sea front, or outside the café.

I have already informed the reserve of our planned visit, but they would like an indication of numbers so it would be helpful if those likely to come would let me know, and also any offers to take passengers (sharing petrol costs of course) or any requests for a lift – as soon as possible or early in the third week of September at the latest.

Meet on the Meon sea-front near Stubbington (SZ533023) at **9.30a.m. (note the earlier time)**. Please put this into your diaries now, as the mid-week walks programme in the September Newsletter may not reach you in time!

Contact: Dot Lincoln on 0118 9427563

Kite & Buzzard Survey

A reminder that our Red Kite and Buzzard survey ends on July 31st. Please submit details of any sightings you have had of these species anywhere in Berkshire during 2006. You can find full details and a survey form on the website (under 'Surveys') or send your information to Mike Turton, 7 Fawcett Crescent, Woodley, Reading, Berkshire, RG5 3HX.

We need to know the species, the number of each, the date and the location (preferably with a grid reference) of each sighting. The more we have the better we will be able to map their territories and establish the numbers of breeding pairs, which is the main objective of the survey. Please try to get your records in by end of August. Thanks!

Chris Robinson

Our 60th Year

Your Committee continues to consider the options for celebrating our 60th anniversary in 2007, but it is likely that there will be a dinner (with speakers) at a suitable venue close to Reading in February/March 2007. Possible venues and options are currently being investigated. Your support will be needed to make this an enjoyable and successful event.

There was no rush of information about the list of founder members published in the last Newsletter, but we know that B.T.Parsons and C.C.Balch remain members. Does anyone know if Mrs M.J. and Miss M.M. were Dans or Davis?

If you have been a member for 50 years or more please let me know. At present I am only aware of Messrs Parsons, Balch and Gillmor.

John Roberts (0118 9482137)

Social Event – Golf

This became a non-event as only four people registered an interest.

John Roberts (0118 9482137)

Editor's Note: I'm sure that, if some more people are interested and contact John, this could still happen.



Kennet Valley Park – the real threat to a crucial Berkshire ornithological site

Those of you who attended the exhibition at Calcot Hotel on 2nd, 3rd and 4th of July will know that Prudential and the consortium will be submitting their planning application by the end of this month. The area under development threat is roughly from south of the Kennet and Avon Canal to the motorway, land and lakes east of Moatlands and limited in the west by the Reading to Basingstoke railway line. Generally the area is what we know as Burghfield Gravel Pits including Searles Lane farm area but much more land and lakes are affected right from the Bottom Lane area in the west. This application follows the main approach of the previous proposal but more detail has been fleshed out including some relating to the protection of the 'meadows' area between Reading and the Kennet and Avon canal. I spent almost two hours in meetings with the Prudential's ecological consultants discussing their work and ideas during the exhibition. There are two things we need to understand in particular:

The planning application and its merits or otherwise

While we probably all object to this application on ornithological or wildlife grounds, there are other aspects that may deserve concern. The proposal may have merit, given the need for housing in the area, particularly for young people, but if we support this point we need to be comfortable it is not ultimately developed as an exclusive waterside development aimed at providing premium price properties. We believe the Environment Agency is opposed to the development as it lies in the flood plain and while the Pru's team have developed counter measures (mainly removing islands in and deepening Theale Main and developing high banks to retain deep water as a reservoir in times of flood) it is expected the EA's opposition will lead to this arriving on the Environment Secretary's desk for a decision after a Public Appeal Hearing.

Some sources suggest West Berks Council will also oppose the development, it is largely within their boundary, on the grounds that such a large scale development is not required under the plans for the Authority. Part of the development, closest to the railway line, mainly east of Cottage Lane, is Reading Borough Council land and will constitute the first phase. Martin Salter, Reading's MP is opposed to the development while the EA opposes it.

Concern will be expressed about basic services, some have been addressed in the short term by the developers with schools and a station being planned but the long term cost of bus and transport systems, the impact on hospitals (the Royal Berks is hardly the most expandable hospital), water supplies, local roads etc have not been fully presented yet. A particular concern is the impact on Burghfield Road where the development proposal includes no upgrading of the bridge and while the aim is to divert traffic to other routes via existing motorway junctions and connections it seems likely this shortest route into Reading will be swamped.

Ornithology and wildlife

I have had meetings with BBOWT and am in dialogue with RSPB about the area. The key ornithological concern is the regionally important Nightingale population and the RSPB supports us on this aspect. The area is a Wildlife Heritage site designated by West Berks Council but this is not sufficient designation to offer strong protection on its own. Burghfield gravel pits contains Berkshire's largest heronry and nationally important numbers of Gadwall in winter. Our arguments will be based on the breadth and density of birdlife in the area although the developers have a thorough and detailed Environmental Impact Assessment which contains a deal of detailed data. They propose to try some relocation of species by habitat creation which will have a positive impact, if successful but this is not a proven approach.

The 'meadows' will be developed in a trust and the aim would be to create wet areas and scrapes etc with banks and ditches to border them so wildlife can be protected from the influx of people. Whether this can work is open to conjecture and the details of the management and financial funding of the trust are still unclear. A reserve centre is catered for. The ROC has been offered input to this but at present we have other concerns to address including any impact on Hosehill Lake, whether the removal of the islands for terns will be addressed, the impact on Moatlands of the road across the south east corner, the affect of housing on the Field Farm infill site on this area, the impact on Bottom lane floods etc, etc.

Summary

These comments barely scratch the surface of the issues to be addressed. While the ROC will try to stay engaged we urge those who agree with our stance to object on whatever grounds they feel are important. We believe there is a case to object on the grounds of the irreparable damage to wildlife, especially birds, in the area.

If any members or birdwatchers feel they can help us in tackling the issues through their experience or are willing to offer time for meetings and to help fight the proposal please make your name known to us as soon as possible.

Colin Wilson
Chairman
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Colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk

Moor Green Lakes – Proposed Extension of Gravel Workings

CEMEX (formerly RMC) held an exhibition on 5 July as a preliminary to applying for planning permission to extract gravel from land west of Longwater Road and north of the River Blackwater at Eversley. At present, Moor Green Lakes reserve consists of the Colebrook Lakes and Grove Lake with Horseshoe Lake, the water sports centre, to the east, but work is already underway on the area called Manor Farm to the west of Moor Green Lakes which goes as far as the Longwater Road. This area is earmarked for nature conservation and reinstatement of the first section is already underway. Moor Green Lakes group is heavily involved in this.

The proposed new workings would not be deep, the gravel is in a thin seam, and the existing plant would be used to make it financially viable. Rules concerning traffic flows for lorries would remain the same as now. This means the gravel would pass on a conveyor under or over Longwater Road. Several reinstatement options were exhibited on 5 July and all of them offered a combination of wet grassland, reedbed, woodland and open water in various shapes and sizes. We have made a few preliminary observations about facilities, including paths, hides, linking of habitats with Manor Farm and a car park.

Taken together with Moor Green Lakes and Manor Farm we feel this extension of gravel workings would enhance an area becoming very attractive for birds and create a linkage of nature reserves of exciting proportions. Although local residents are likely to have many concerns about the extension of gravel digging the end result of the work is likely to be a much enhanced area for nature lovers and for peaceful recreation. Further details on the plans can be obtained from CEMEX and comments on the proposals are invited by emailing or writing to Ian Southcott, CEMEX UK Materials, CEMEX House, Rugby, Warwickshire, CV21 2DT or ian.southcott@cemex.co.uk

Colin Wilson

News from the TABCG

At Hosehill the electro fishing disappointingly only caught 5 pike and one tench, not the result everyone had been hoping for, but the Lake will be monitored over the summer and if necessary another electro fish will take place later in the year. Also, disappointingly, there appear to be no Sand Martins using the wall again this year, but on the plus side 6 pairs of Terns are nesting on the Island. Other work on the site has seen the viewing platform by the West gate being removed and replaced by a bench donated by a group member.

Meanwhile, at Main Pit, some 25 – 30 pairs of terns are on the small island, although 1 tern was seen to be taken by the Peregrine. Hopefully this year, the chicks will not become prey for local herring gulls.

The annual Berkshire Bird Race took place in early May. Another successful event, the results were as follows :-

1. Fraser Cottington, Adam Bassett, Andy Johnson 119
2. Marek Walford, Mike McKee, Chris Turner 113
3. Hugh Netley, Nigel Rampton, Steve Ricks 110
4. Paul Cropper, Sue Charnley, Robin Dryden 109
5. Andy Horscroft, Roger Stansfield, Gordon Wilson 106
6. Bruce Archer, Tim Ball, Robert Godden 105
7. John Andrews, Pete Hickman, Andy Tomczynski 102
8. John Lerpiniere, Ruth Angus, James Hitchcock 101
9. Richard Crawford, Ken Moore, Ken Spring 100
10. Cathy McEwan, Derek McEwan, Ashley Stow 96
11. Chris Robinson, Jim Burnett, Renton Righelato 95 * (completed on bikes)

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 has its own Web site, at <http://tabcg.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk>

Information courtesy of TABCG (with thanks to Cathy McEwan)

Berkshire Bird Sightings:
(courtesy of Marek Walford and Berksbirds)



April

The last Bittern of the winter was seen at Dinton Pastures on 1st. Little Egrets were at Dinton Pastures on 9th and 10th and Theale GP on 18th and 29th. A Brent Goose was at Dorney Wetlands on 19th. The Ring-necked Duck was last seen at Theale GP on 1st. A run of Osprey sightings started with one over Combe Wood on 2nd, followed by singles over Lower Farm GP on 8th, Theale GP on 12th and Englefield on 17th. A Merlin was at Pingewood GP on 18th. Notable waders included Oystercatchers at Dinton Pastures on 18th and 27th and possibly the same bird at Twyford GP on 20th; Black-tailed Godwit at Slough SF on 27th; Bar-tailed Godwit at Moor Green Lakes on 24th and 25th; Whimbrel at Moor Green Lakes on 19th and 24th, Woolhampton GP on 21st, Lower Farm GP on 23rd and Greenham Common on 24th; Curlew at Lower Farm GP on 1st, Moor Green Lakes on 2nd and 29th and Theale GP on 26th with two there on 29th and six on 30th, and at Woolhampton GP and Greenham Common on 10th.

The Laughing Gull was last seen at Reading Gate Retail Park on the 1st. Little Gull passage was unimpressive with one adult at Moor Green lakes on 21st and up to five at Theale GP from 1st to 4th and another two there on 21st. Tern passage was also light with single Arctics at Theale GP on 9th and 23rd with three there on 28th and two at Moor Green Lakes on 23rd. Two Sandwich Tern were at Lower Farm GP on 23rd and a Black Tern was at Theale GP on 16th.

Highlight of the month was an Alpine Swift that lingered over north Maidenhead from 15th to 18th. Possibly the same bird was seen briefly at Greenham Common on 23rd. These are the first records since 1983 when one was at Waysbury GP from 9th to 25th May. The only other record is of one at Silwood on 7th June 1975.

Water Pipits were at Burnthouse Lane on 1st and Midgham GP on 2nd. A Black Redstart was at Greenham Common on 10th. Two Ring Ouzel were at Streatley Warren from 13th to 17th. With four individuals it was a good April for Pied Flycatchers; two were at Dinton Pastures on 17th and singles were at Greenham Common on 19th and Eling on 23rd.

May

After a no-show for Garganey in April several made an appearance in May: a pair were at Midgham GP from 2nd to 7th and singles were at Lower Farm GP on 4th and 20th and at Dorney Wetlands on 5th, 21st and 23rd. A red-head Goosander that flew over Brimpton GP on 13th was an unusual May record.

May was a good month for scarce raptors. The first good bird of the month was a Honey Buzzard that flew over Caversham Heights on the 1st. The following day a Marsh Harrier flew over Theale GP, followed by two over Thatcham Marsh on the 7th and another over Maidenhead on 8th. Continuing a good spring for Ospreys, one flew over Newbury and Woolhampton GP on the 12th. A Merlin near Streatley on 13th was an unusual May record.

Notable waders included Oystercatchers at Dinton Pastures on 3rd and 4th, Lower Farm GP on 16th, two at Theale GP on 23rd and one at Twyford GP on 25th; Sanderling at Theale GP on 9th and Moor Green Lakes on 18th; Bar-tailed Godwit at Moor Green Lakes from 12th to 15th; Whimbrel at Lower Farm GP on 24th; two Curlew at Theale GP on 28th; Greenshank at Lower Farm GP on 6th, Bury Down on 7th, Theale GP on 7th, Padworth Lane GP on 7th and 14th, and Moor Green Lakes on 15th; Wood Sandpiper at Slough SF on 1st and Lower Farm GP on 11th and 12th; Turnstone at Moor Green Lakes on 17th.

Terns trickled through in very small numbers with an Arctic at Moor Green Lakes and two at Theale GP on 1st and a second-Summer bird at Theale GP on 26th. A very brief Little Tern was at Moor Green Lakes for a few minutes on 8th. Black Terns were at Moor Green Lakes on 12th and two at Theale GP on 4th, six there on 8th and nine on 12th.

An unusual bird for May was a Short-eared Owl at Moor Green Lakes on 12th and 14th.

A Ring Ouzel at Combe Gibbet was an excellent find for one Bird Race team on 13th.

In a poor year for the species a reeling Grasshopper Warbler at Thatcham Marsh on 6th was notable.

Ravens were seen at Coldharbour on 9th and Aldworth on 13th.

June

A Little Egret was at Pingewood GP on 3rd and another was at Dorney Wetlands from 14th to 16th. A Garganey was at Dorney Wetlands on 6th. The only waders of note were an Oystercatcher at Dorney Wetlands on 1st and a Greenshank at Pingewood GP on 2nd and 4th. A Little Gull was at Theale GP on 3rd. A Raven that flew over Dinton Pastures on 4th was only the second Park record.

TRIP REPORTS :

Trip to Keyhaven Marshes & New Forest – March 5th 2006

It was pleasing to see that some members had seen past the misinformation on the programme card and met up at Keyhaven on a chilly, but bright morning. The named leader had made “alternative” arrangements requiring his presence overseas and to add to the challenge the map reference on the card was different to the named meeting place – apologies go to all for the confusion, hopefully no one missed the walk as a result.

The first part of the day was spent doing a circular walk of the Keyhaven Marshes, a fine wetland area to the south of the New Forest. Early birds around the harbour area included a variety of waders including Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and

Black Tailed Godwit, while the reedbed gave us good views of a feeding Water Rail and the characteristic blue flash of a flying Kingfisher.



As we continued our walk the wet areas held a good number of water fowl including Brent Geese, Pintail, Shoveler, Wigeon and Teal while the most notable birds on the sea were numerous Red Breasted Mergansers. Towards the end of the loop a bird of prey was seen flying low to land on a post in a flooded area, not far from the path. From an identification perspective the bird made the mistake of giving us good views as it at first sat and then flew around the marsh, at times landing on the grass before flying again, at times landing in the shallow water, before eventually flying away and out of sight. Very odd behaviour indeed for a falcon (the group was agreed on that part of the identification), with the eventual consensus being that it was a large female Merlin. I'm sure that if it had done the more usual rapid fly past we would have reached the conclusion much more quickly!

Several gull species were also seen along the way including Great and Lesser Black Backed Gulls and a single Mediterranean Gull spotted among a small flock of Black Headed Gulls.

After a break for lunch at the car park in Keyhaven (feeding the incredibly friendly Rock Pipits on the harbour wall) we walked down to the shingle spit that leads out to Hurst Castle. Two waders flushed from the waterside vegetation, one clearly a Common Snipe, while the other had a much shorter bill and was probably (although not conclusively) a Jack Snipe. Moving on, the roadside field held good numbers of Reed Buntings along with Meadow Pipits among the Rock Pipits.

Returning to the cars we travelled back through the Forest to Blackwater Enclosure in search of winter finches. The small arboretum there is known as a winter roost site for Hawfinches and after a short wait we were rewarded with decent views of these large, stocky finches as they sat atop the tall conifer trees. A good end to a thoroughly enjoyable day, for all those who managed to decipher the meeting instructions.

Ted Rogers

Weekend Trip to Norfolk – February 2006

Our traditional annual trip to Norfolk last winter was as well attended as always - in fact, it was even better attended than ever with over 20 people making the trip. Having this number does create some problems, making arrangements (our usual hotel can only take 18) and communication more difficult and it is proposed that in future years the trip will be limited to the number the hotel can handle.

The weekend started early on the Friday with a meet-up and walk around the excellent Minsmere Reserve on the Suffolk coast, but not before most people had managed an even earlier breakfast stop (an essential element of winter birdwatching) and a quick visit to the village of Rendlesham where a mixed flock of Redpolls were being reported on a piece of waste ground. We could usefully have spent more time at Minsmere, but nevertheless a walk around part of the reserve gave us Red Throated Divers on the sea, a variety of waders including Avocet, Ruff and Bar Tailed Godwit as well as a solitary Shore Lark on the main scrape area. Some lucky members of the party were also able add Bittern and Water Pipit to their lists, while beside the road we found a small herd of Bewicks Swans.

A brief visit to the Ness at Lowestoft gave us good view of a small flock of Purple Sandpipers, while the traditional flying visit to the beach at Great Yarmouth revealed the expected Mediterranean Gulls. The day ended at Stubbs Mill, Hickling with numerous Marsh Harriers coming into the reedbed roost at dusk, along with brief views of a dashing Merlin and the local Cranes and Barn Owls.

After breakfast on the Saturday, en route to Titchwell, most of the group stopped at Thornham (with apologies to all those who got missed out of the communication loop) to see the good sized flock of Twite as they flew around the inlet channel. Added excitement came in the form of a Merlin which first flushed some Snipe from the saltmarsh and then efficiently snatched one of them before sitting to pluck and eat its prey. The rest of the morning was spent at the ever-excellent Titchwell reserve, with its usual fine selection of waders and (for this visit at least) its superb rafts of sea duck, including Long Tailed and, for those with patience and good eyesight, Velvet Scoter. A visit to Choseley gave us Corn Buntings and Yellowhammer, but not the promised Lapland Buntings or Tree Sparrows.

Holkham is another traditional part of the weekend and it rarely disappoints, this trip giving us a fine flock of Snow Buntings, along with the a good selection of wintering geese, included White Fronted, Pink Footed, Brent and Black Brant. The day ended with another ROC tradition i.e. a couple of well earned pints at the Lifeboat Inn at Thornham.

In an effort to try somewhere different, the early morning walk around on Sunday took us to Ken Hill Wood – a pleasant woodland walk, but, on a dull morning, we saw little of real note. After breakfast, once the hotel bills were paid, we started our journey home. Although we were disappointed by some of the birds en route (no Black Redstarts at Heacham, no Rough Legged Buzzard at Massingham Heath and no Hawfinch at Linford Arboretum) hopefully no one was disappointed with the weekend as a whole and no doubt this trip will continue to feature on the calendar for years to come.

Ted Rogers