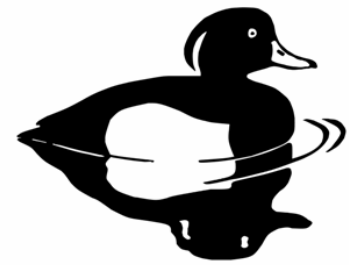


# BOC Newsletter

Winter 2008/09

No 44



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### Introduction

As I write this, here in Ascot, the snow is finally really starting to clear, helped along by persistent rain. For me one of the downsides of the recent winter weather has been the enforced closure of the golf course, but against that our garden bird feeders have been very busy and well worth watching. It makes you realise just how important garden feeding has become to our birds – it certainly appears that the feeders get emptied at a rate directly related to how cold and miserable the weather is. Notably goldcrests have become regular visitors to both the sunflower seeds and the peanut feeders, showing just how desperate these tiny birds become in harsh weather. Other hard weather visitors have included a small flock of fieldfares, these handsome thrushes only seem to appear when the countryside is covered with snow. In this case they discovered the last few garden berries. Anyway, I hope this recent weather has not inconvenienced people too much, if nothing else it gives us so much to talk about. You can even end up having conversations with neighbours who have ignored you for years!

**The next newsletter will go out in April, so please try to get any items for inclusion to me by the end of March.**

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

### Bird Atlas Update

I'm sure you all know about the new Berkshire bird atlas and Birds of Berkshire Atlas Group (BBAG) which has been created to revise the County atlas and avifauna *The Birds of Berkshire*. Surveying has been going on for just over a year now and is going really well so well BBAG have recently been focusing attention on raising the money which will be needed to produce and publish the new book once all the data has been collected.

We've been doing very well there too and from various sources we have already raised about half of the money which we estimate we will need. One of our revenue raising ideas has been for individuals or organizations to sponsor a species. BOC are supporting this project and BBAG are using the club's charitable status to claim Gift Aid on sponsorship contributions made to the Atlas project via BOC. The Club itself has already sponsored its own logo – the Tufted Duck.

You can sponsor a species for as little as £20 and for this you will get a 20% discount on the new book plus your name in it as the species sponsor! There are over 320 possible species to choose from but at the time of writing nearly 80 have already been sponsored. That of course leaves about 240 others without sponsors so if you would like to support this extremely worthwhile project please there are still plenty to choose from! You can find details of what's still available and how to sponsor a species on the Club's website or alternatively please get in touch with me (01491 671420) or any Committee member. Just to whet your appetite, among the common species still available are Blackbird, Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Magpie, Rook and Skylark. There are plenty more exotic species to choose from (and they tend to be cheaper too!) or how about going for one of the rarities you may have seen (or even found!) in the county – American Wigeon or Pink-footed Goose, to name but two topical examples?

Chris Robinson

### **BOC Photographic Competition (Wednesday 25th March) – Get Your Entries In Soon**

There is still time to get your entries in for the Club's annual Photographic Competition (the closing date is 18<sup>th</sup> March). It is worth stressing that everyone is in with a chance - past winners have not all been experienced bird photographers. Sometimes it is just getting the right shot to grab the judges' attention that can do the trick. Maybe you have recently got pictures of birds in the snow? And they don't have to be pictures of exotic birds in exotic locations either - past winning pictures have featured birds like grey herons and starlings. Also you can enter pictures that you have entered before, so if you think one didn't get the attention it deserved please feel free to try again.



There are 3 categories (you can enter up to 4 pictures in each category):-

- Best digiscoped bird (portrait or action shot)
- Best digital bird portrait
- Best digital bird action photograph

### **Photographic Competition Rules**

- Photographs will be of wild, non captive birds only
- The competition is open to paid up members of the BOC. New members may join on the night if they wish.
- No more than four entries per category per entrant.
- Entrants agree to any entered photographs being displayed by the BOC on its website and used for publicity purposes, at the Club's discretion. The BOC will make reasonable attempts to ensure acknowledgement is given to photographers whose work is used in this way.
- Photographs will be judged on all factors including exposure, colour cast, focus, composition and form. The decision of the judges is final.
- To qualify as a digiscoped picture the photograph must have been taken through a telescope.
- Limited image manipulation is permissible e.g. removal of a twig or blade of grass, but no major changes to the bird image itself. Adjustment to exposure, sharpening, colour correction, sensor dust spotting and cropping and resizing is acceptable.
- The images, regardless of file size, image size and resolution will be adapted by the BOC for presentation as they see fit but without responsibility for the results.
- Closing date for entries is 18 March 2009. Images should be emailed to [colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk) or sent on a CD to his home address: Any questions please telephone 01252 837411.

### **Queen Mother Reservoir**

Thames Water have said that they would like to provide bird-watchers with access to their reservoirs and other good bird sites, but have to balance provision of access with the water industry's need for security and ensuring personal safety. The company has given a license to the BOC for Queen Mother Reservoir that enables it to ensure that permits are provided only to *bona fide* bird-watchers who accept the conditions of controlled access. This is a trial arrangement, which, if successful, could be applied to some other sites and managed through us or other local clubs.

The permit allows holders to walk the whole of the rim pathway and gives access from dawn to an hour after sunset, seven days a week. The full access arrangements will come into force as soon as a new combination lock has been installed on the entry gate. In the interim, the Datchet Water Sailing Club has agreed to issue exit passes to permit holders, enabling us to visit during the Club's opening hours (currently 10 am to 6 pm daily; closed Mondays).

Under the license the BOC may only issue permits to members, who have to agree to abide by a number of conditions, which are explained on the Club website. Members wanting a permit should complete and sign the agreement and bring it, together with a photo ID and separate proof of address to a BOC indoor meeting. We will then issue the permit and combination code. There is no charge for the permit. If you do not have internet access, forms can be collected at indoor meetings or you can contact me.

Thames Water have kindly offered us a small Club hut just inside the entrance where a signing in book and bird log will be kept (and which would be the nerve centre for crowd management in the event of a major "twitch"). I am trying to get together a small team of people who are reasonably local to QMR to help make this arrangement work – any volunteers please contact me.

Renton Righelato (telephone 0787 981 2564; email: [renton.righelato@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:renton.righelato@berksoc.org.uk))

### **Pembrokeshire Weekend - 4th to 7th June incl**

We now have a good number of interested parties so we will be looking at booking accommodation shortly. If anyone else is interested they should notify Colin on 01252 837411 or [colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk) and you will be included in arrangements. If you are late in requesting a place please be aware that accommodation is not easy so you may not be able to join us or may have to be in a separate place to stay. Further information about the weekend will be communicated to these interested as soon as details are available. Skomer, choughs and seabirds here we come!

Colin Wilson

### **Barn Owl Boxes in Berkshire**

The Club has used some of its conservation fund to further Barn Owl provision in Berkshire. In conjunction with the Kennet, Pang and Lambourn Project Group run by FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) based at Englefield, six Barn Owl boxes were bought. A tool kit to help put up boxes, to be housed at Englefield, is also being organised, and a course took place in December to train more people to help put them up in the future. Karen Davies of the Project helped us organise the course and led the day with the accent on health and safety aspects. And John Dellow from Kintbury, whose lot it has been to do almost all of the work with boxes up until now, led the practical side of things. The activity was well supported and a rather large group of fourteen crowded into four cars and headed to the Mortimer area to successfully erect two boxes. To avoid spoiling Oak timber a method has evolved using plastic bolts to hang tree boxes; iron stains the timber badly (it is standard practice with many farmers not to use iron on Oak). To cut a longer story short a template is used to position the bolts before the box is hauled up in place.



There were some concerns about the number of people attending, as not all could take an active part, and also that not enough would be committed to help with boxes in the future (being more interested in the monitoring side of things). However, one or two key people have emerged and it is great that everyone would like to play a further part. Of the group, five came via BOC, four from Theale area and three from the Wokingham group. There are also four likely participants who were not able to join the course.

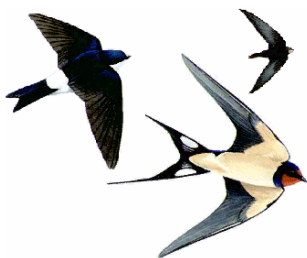
Of the boxes, as well as the two near Mortimer, one has been put up at Padworth and it is so far planned to put the next at Coley valley and the Wokingham area. Sites are chosen carefully, ideally facing good hunting territory and away from motorways and railways, and usually where Barn Owls have already been sighted. The owls need small mammals, the main prey being field vole, and they cannot support a brood without sufficient rough grassland, reed or well hedged habitat over which to hunt. Boxes are often put up in pairs as the male is not allowed into the box after the eggs have hatched and he too needs a place to shelter. They are especially susceptible to wet as their feathers are unoiled, unlike other birds, in order to ensure silent flight to listen for and to surprise prey.

Monitoring groups to keep check on the success of the projects are in place across Berkshire. Results are used by the Hawk and Owl Trust who help organise, and increasingly results will be included in the BTO Nest Record Scheme. Most of the owlets are now ringed by qualified ringers and these records are also valuable for the relatively new BTO Barn Owl Monitoring Scheme (BOMP). Monitoring requires a licence from Natural England as Barn Owls are a Schedule 1 protected species. The monitoring is done by trained volunteers, a pair looking after six to twelve boxes involving just one to three visits per year. More volunteers are always welcome.

John Lerpiniere

### **Survey of Swifts, Swallows and House Martins in Berkshire in 2007**

In 2007 NDOC and BOC (then ROC) carried out a survey of swifts, swallows and house martins in Berkshire. The aim of the study was to provide some information about the distribution and numbers these species while involving the whole bird watching community in Berkshire. No attempt was made to conduct a systematic survey, but we advertised widely so that as many volunteers as possible could be involved, and the survey ran from 15<sup>th</sup> April until 15<sup>th</sup> August 2007. Within this period there were 2 'core' periods, when any birds observed can be assumed to be breeding, i.e. not migrating. The records are spread unevenly across the county because that was where the participants lived or where they watched birds, i.e. absence of records from any area does not imply absence of birds. The data we received told us enormously more about the breeding status of all three species than the last 10 years of county records have done. We thank all who contributed.



A more complete record of the survey will soon be available on the BOC website (<http://www.berksoc.org.uk/>).

**Swifts:** We received data from 10 towns and villages, namely (with approximate number of nests in brackets) Kintbury (12), Pangbourne (6), Bracknell (6), Newbury (5), greater Reading (5), Wokingham (3), Finchampstead (3), Maidenhead (3), Sandhurst (2) and Hungerford Newton (1). We received very few reports of swifts visiting nests (swifts are notoriously difficult to observe in this respect) so the numbers of nests are estimates based on the numbers of birds. Nest sites all referred to the use of buildings, included swifts going into thatch, under tiles, behind fascia and into holes in brickwork. No 'natural' sites were reported. The survey did not provide enough data to allow a confident estimate of the county population but there is enough data to suggest (but not prove) that numbers have declined in the last 20 years, perhaps to less than half of what they were.

**Swallows:** During the core survey period, reports of swallows were received from 35 sites all over the county, mostly farms and stables. At 18 sites breeding was confirmed (occupied nests) and at a further 8 it was probable (birds building nests etc). There were 115 nests at the 18 sites where they could be counted. Average colony size was about 6 pairs but ranged from 42 nests to one. All the nests were in buildings, usually barns (14) or stables (16) or unspecified farm buildings (15), but an occupied dog kennel, a garden shed, a shepherd's hut, a saw-mill, an old coach house and a bus shelter were also used. Most of the buildings were in current use by cows or horses. There were 3 reports of predation of nestlings by sparrowhawks. The data on swallows from this survey is not sufficient to allow a reliable estimate of the Berkshire swallow population in 2007 to be made but there is enough information to suggest that numbers have fallen, possibly by a factor of about 2, from the numbers estimated during the 1980s.

**House Martins:** Breeding behaviour of house martins was recorded from 46 distinct sites, mostly in towns or villages, between 21<sup>st</sup> April and 16<sup>th</sup> August 2007. Breeding was confirmed at 17 of these sites by the presence of occupied nests and probable at 6 more (nest building etc). At a further 8 sites birds were present during the core breeding season (mid May to Mid June) and flying among buildings but no nests could be seen (usually due to lack of access to the site). Where nests could be counted, colony sizes were larger than those of swallows, averaging 12 nests. There is some evidence that house martin colonies are smaller than they used to be, but we do not know if there are more or fewer colonies. Certainly there were no reports of the large colonies that were recorded in earlier decades, e.g. colonies of 200+ at Greenham Common airbase and 115 at Basildon House were recorded in the 1970s and 1980s. Also the colony at Jeallott's Hill has declined year by year from 105 nests in 2000, to 74 in 2004, 58 in 2005, 51 in 2006 and 24 in 2007. The colony at Riseley was predated by magpies. 9 of the nests were destroyed and only 1 was rebuilt, but even so 21 were successful. We have too little data to make a confident estimate of the county population. However there was enough information to suggest that, although there might have been some reductions in numbers, the total county population may not have declined as much as that of swifts or swallows since the last BTO Atlas was published, despite the reduction in size of some big colonies.

Bill Nicoll

### **Berkshire Bird Bulletin**

Every month since October 1986, a bulletin of birds seen in the county in that period has been produced. Initially it was issued on specific sites that at that time were being underwatched and for which insufficient historic data was available to defend any inappropriate development. These sites were mainly in the East of the county. Gradually, more observers in that sector were encouraged to submit their sightings and the project grew. After a few years, the ROC asked if sightings in the rest of the county could be incorporated and since that time, birdwatchers of all abilities have been submitting records from gardens, walks and favourite patches. As soon as it was possible, compilation converted to electronic means in order that the submissions, whether by written lists, cards or Excel format could be compiled in a method compatible with the needs of the county database. This enables those deterred by the task of completing a full annual record for the county report to instead send in their sightings a month at a time, knowing they will also find their way onto the main database.

Today, the Bulletin has expanded to typically a 20 – 25 page document, together with a summary editorial and a number of colour pictures from local photographers of some of the specific birds mentioned in the report. Most people now submit records via an Excel format sent to new subscribers. Every species is dealt with, including all the common ones, so it is not just a list of scarcities.

Obtainable by subscription, the e-mail version is £3 per annum, the posted version £10. Please send a cheque made out to 'COS' to Brian Clews, Berkshire Bird Bulletin, PO Box 680, Maidenhead, Berks, SL6 9ST, including your name, address, telephone number and (if relevant) your e-mail address. A sample can be sent first if required."

### **And Finally**

John Hard reports that an email from a friend, sent during the recent Garden Bird Survey, was blocked by his Internet Service Provider because it contained "salacious content".

Apparently it contained a reference to Long Tailed Tits !!

(Editor's Note: In retrospect, perhaps I should have put this item on Page 3)