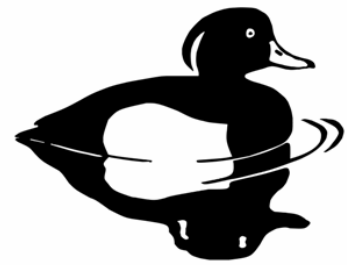


BOC Newsletter

Spring 2009

No 45



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Introduction

The spring edition of the newsletter is a little late this year, but at least the weather may have warmed up by the time you receive it! And with bird activity really getting going and summer visitors arriving in numbers, now is the time to get out there and enjoy the great outdoors. For me, a walk with accompanying birdsong on a warm spring morning takes some beating.

For those who receive their newsletter by post, included here is a copy of the Club's Summer Garden Bird Survey form (an electronic version having already been sent to all of you for whom we have email addresses). I hope will enjoy taking part and, while on the subject, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of you who take part in all the Garden Bird Surveys. As you may know I am trying to liaise with the BTO to get our data included into their database, which would then potentially allow me to use their data to do analysis on how our own county's garden birds are faring. Hopefully I will have some progress to report before too long.

Can I also put in a word for the various organisations that are registered as 'supporters' of the Club. Please make use of them if you can and mention that you are a BOC member and that is how you heard of them. Special mention should go to the London Camera Exchange, who kindly donated prizes for our Photographic Competition (see later item about this year's competition). Further details of our 'supporters' can be found on our Web site.

Although our indoor programme has finished for this season, the field trips continue (including our regular coach trip to the BirdFair). Details of the outings are shown later - why not join us on one of our trips; good company and birds are guaranteed.

As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get contributions for the Summer edition of the newsletter to me by Friday 26th June.

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

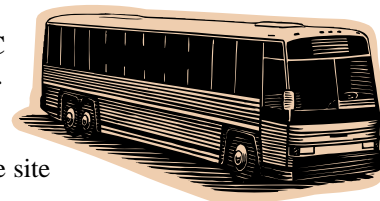
Membership - Final Reminder

A handful of members have still not renewed their membership for the 2008/9 season. All have been reminded in January or early February by phone (sometimes answer phone) or letter. This is the last reminder and if they do not pay up now their names will be removed from the membership list. You have been warned!

Dot Lincoln.
Membership Secretary

Coach Trip to the British Birdwatching Fair. Saturday 22nd August

The trip to the Birdfair at Rutland Water has now become an annual event. BOC sponsors the coach, but invites members of other birding and wildlife groups to join us. Bring friends or family. You can start from one of three pick-up points: Newbury (the Wharfe) at 6.30 a.m.; Reading (main entrance to Whiteknight's Park at 7 a.m.; Maidenhead/Bray Wick Nature Centre (Hibbert Road) at 7.30 a.m. We usually get to the site just after 10 a.m. and stay until 5 p.m.



This is an excellent day out. The fair includes a huge range of exhibits covering travel, clothing, optics, art, photography etc. In addition you can choose to attend talks and quizzes and/or to do a bit of birdwatching from the many hides. That way you can hope to find that perfect telescope or birding holiday, or to add anything from an Oddie to an Osprey to your year-list. Every single penny of the entrance fee goes to supporting major conservation projects around the world.

Bookings are now open for this event, with tickets costing £27 to cover both transport and entry charges. Go on, spoil yourself! Contact Ray Reedman, (tel 0118 9864338/ email: meander2@hotmail.com) well in advance to reserve your seat.

Photographic Competition 2009

There was a hum of expectation in Room 109 of the Palmer building on 25th March, as the two professional photographers, our president Gordon Brown and David Cromack who were to judge the entries, took their places in front of the laptop. Our usual two stalwarts who run this event each year had swanned off to Eilat, leaving the rest of us to cope as best we could. To be fair Colin Wilson had done an enormous amount of preparation to make the event run smoothly, which on the whole it did. There were 114 entries, and he had entered them on the laptop in 3 categories, each photograph had a number and a matching sealed envelope with the photographer's name inside, given to Renton for safe keeping so that the photographs remained anonymous until after the winners had been selected. He also checked that each contestant was a bona-fide and fully paid up member of the club, and the rookie scorer was given a running list. Ted Rogers gave her some valuable advice which included bringing a lamp (supplied by Renton) which certainly made it easier to write the rapidly-given scores on the space next to the right photograph! How many of us realized previously how much work in preparation goes into this event? I think we can forgive them their birdwatching holiday in Eilat, even if we are envious of them! (and maybe we can expect a presentation next season?).

The categories were "Action", "Digiscoping" and "Portrait". There were 38 entries in the "action" section and the standard was extremely high with 12 receiving full marks from both judges –any thing less doesn't get considered again. 3 of the 20 entries in the "Digiscoping" category and 5 of the 58 "Portraits" also received full marks, making 20 to be seen again for final judgment. Renton had the task of getting these in a section running order, leaving out those who had lost out in any way, sometimes by as little as 1 mark.

Finally the judges selected the winners as follows: "Action": "Red-necked Phalarope" by Mike McKee, runner up "Yellow-legged Gull" also by Mike McKee. "Digiscoping" winner: "Snow Bunting" by Marek Walford, and runner up "Green Heron" – you've guessed it – also by Marek Walford. Finally "Portraits": the winner was "Arctic Redpoll" by Nick Boyes (nice to get a new contestant winning) and runner up was "Mute Swan Family" by Mike Smith. Then the audience was involved in voting for the overall winner – it was a close run thing but the wonderful picture of the Arctic Redpoll sitting on a branch covered with frost laden lichen got the prize. It only remained for the vouchers donated by London Camera Exchange and the books and mugs donated by David Cromack to be awarded and a very good evening came to an end.

David Cromack has asked for the winning and runner up photographs to be sent to him so watch out for these in "Birds Illustrated" in case he uses them.

Dot Lincoln

Editor's Notes:

1. Many thanks go to Dave Cromack and London Camera Exchange for their participation, support and prizes.
2. The winning picture is reproduced here, with apologies for the quality, but at least it gives an idea of what is a great picture!



Arctic Redpoll by Nick Boyes

Upcoming Field Trips

Sunday 3rd May 2009 - Otmoor, Oxfordshire (Morning only or full day) A good area for warblers, turtle doves and hobbies. Waders and water birds will be present among the dense vegetation. If time allows. May move to different site later. Meet at the RSPB Otmoor car park (SP570126) north of Beckley village (follow Otmoor Lane from the east side of the village) at 8:30am. Contact Martin Sell (0118 9471170)

Saturday 9th May 2009 - Dungeness, Kent (Full day coach outing sharing with East Berks RSPB) Migrants of all sorts should be moving through. Spend most of the day on the RSPB reserve, but the leader usually finds time to visit 'The Patch', where many seabirds are attracted by the warm water. Contact Ernie Allen (East Berks RSPB organiser) on 01628 625324. Pick-up at Bray Nature Centre (SU895794) at 07:00am. The trip costs £17.00 per person.

Thursday 21st May 2009 - Mid-week Walk - Langley Park, near Slough. A new venue for us: a nice area of parkland, lakes and woods with many birds. Park at the car park beside the recreation ground, George Green, off the A412 north of Slough at TQ003812. Meet 10.00am. Contact Bill Nicoll (01344 455403).

Wednesday 27th May 2009 - Nightjar Evening With a good chance of woodlark and others. Meet at 8.00pm. **Venue to be finalised. Contact Ray Reedman (0118 9864338) for details.**

Thursday 4th to Sunday 7th June 2009 - Weekend trip to Pembrokeshire. This trip has proved very popular – and has been fully booked for some time (there is even a reserve list).

Thursday 18th June 2009. Mid-week Walk - Hosehill Lake, Theale - Meet 10.00am in the Fox and Hounds car park (SU650698) at the south end of Hangar Road south of Theale. Contact Ruth Angus (0118 9894928).

Queen Mother Reservoir Update

In the last Newsletter, I wrote about the access to Queen Mother Reservoir for bird-watching that Thames Water are providing through the BOC. There is a lot of interest in this site and so far 57 permits have been issued to members. The bird highlight for March was an Avocet on 19th March.

Thames Water now have commissioned the new keypad on the entry gate and bird-watching access is permitted from dawn to one hour after sunset seven days a week. Permit holders are issued with a code for the lock. The pedestrian entry gates on the rim pathway around the reservoir have padlocks set with the same combination code.

The same code opens the hut to the right of the gate as you enter. This is the BOC hut and by the time you get this Newsletter, I hope we will have had a working party to clean it up and make it habitable. The hut has water, lighting and power and we hope to provide facilities for making tea/coffee. There will be a book for signing in and out and a log book for bird sightings, which permit holders are asked to write up before they leave.

Information on access is on the website from which you can also download an application form (http://www.berksoc.org.uk/archive/2009/access_to_qmr.shtml) or contact me (renton.righelato@berksoc.org.uk). If you do not have access to the internet, please contact me by post or phone:

Renton Righelato, 63 Hamilton Road, Reading, RG1 5RA. Telephone 0787 981 2564.

Gift Aid Tax Refund

Those who have signed Gift Aid declarations will be pleased to know that their tax is now in Club funds. I reclaimed £822, an important income for our Club, but it is only earning interest of 0.2%. Our income from interest in 08/09 will be much less than the £521 earned in 07/08, so tax refunds become even more important. If you pay tax and have not already signed a Gift Aid declaration please consider doing so now. You sign the form and I reclaim the money; it is as simple as that. I have also reclaimed £496 against donations paid to the Atlas Group.

John Roberts

Book Review

After a few years' birding, it's easy to forget how little you knew when you first got the itch to 'twitch'. At the outset, you probably couldn't tell a house sparrow from a hedge sparrow and certainly hadn't a clue that they didn't even belong to the same family. A thrush was a brown bird, the size of a blackbird, with spots on its chest. There was no debate about it being a song thrush or a mistle thrush – or, indeed, a redwing or fieldfare.

The more these fundamental distinctions became apparent, the more you needed a simple, straightforward portable guide to point you in the right direction. The RSPB's *Pocket Garden Birdwatch*, recently expanded and updated by Mark Ward and published by Dorling Kindersley Ltd (£5.99), is designed to fulfil that function.

Teaching grandmothers to suck eggs is not its purpose. It's there to answer the most frequent questions new enthusiasts have about birdsong, breeding, nest-building, migration and, most important of all, which species they can hope to see in their own gardens through the seasons. Practical tips on where to locate feeders, bird baths and nest boxes are also covered as well as advice on the kind of food to put out. The rudiments of identification – plumage, bill size, wing shape etc – are explained and profiles of the most common birds are included too. The weakness here is a reliance on enhanced photographs which can be deceptive as birds in the field are often seen in indifferent light and conditions and sometimes only fleetingly.

The same problem arises with another RSPB revised edition published by DK – *Pocket Birds of Britain and Europe*, compiled by Jonathan Elphick and John Woodward (£8.99). Its claim to use 'the highest quality close-up photography to bring over 300 species to life on the page' is a bold one but a glossy full frontal view of a bittern, for example, doesn't necessarily make it any easier to pick out that elusive statuesque bird as it skulks chin-up in the reeds at dusk.

Nevertheless, both these books are brightly presented, easy to carry and probably as good a stepping stone as any to more detailed field guides.

Steve Thomson

BOC Trip Report – 7th October 2008 - Hengistbury Head and Stanpit Marsh

When outdoor excursions are planned we always try to take into account a number of factors – time of year, likely birds, tide times etc, but the great unknown factor is always the weather. So it was, with an ever-worsening weather forecast, that I awaited calls about last October's upcoming trip to Hengistbury and Christchurch Harbour. It was no real surprise that my answer phone was kept busy recording a number of excuses about why people would no longer be coming along, or even in some cases messages saying they were coming, followed by another saying they weren't (presumably having checked the weather forecast!).

However, some of us are made of sterner stuff (or failed to check the forecast?) and so a small select band of stalwart members gathered in the driving wind and rain in the car park at Hengistbury Head, Bournemouth. The leader dutifully arrived a bit late (very sorry about that) and quickly declared that a meeting was needed to plan the day and that the conveniently placed café would be the ideal venue. After a number of cups of coffee (to boost flagging caffeine levels) the meeting eventually came to the conclusion that we should brave the elements and we duly left the shelter of the café and set off along the track to the Head. Our bravery was rewarded as the rain chose that moment to ease off and we had only a near gale force wind to hamper our progress.

Unfortunately our bravery was not echoed by the local birds, who for the most part remained hidden out of the wind, although a few ducks (Mallard, Teal and Wigeon mainly) and the expected Little Egrets were out and about. As were a few martins and swallows who seemed to have chosen a bad day for heading south. More notable was a passing Merlin, which sadly was not seen by those members of the group who were probably too busy trying to stop their hats flying off!

Returning to the cars, refreshed by our walk, we moved over to the other side of the Harbour to Stanpit Marsh, where we grabbed lunch huddled in the lee of the cars. We then set off towards the brand new reserve centre (architecturally elegant it could be said, but unmanned and definitely closed on the day of our visit!)

At this point our continued bravery was rewarded with a sudden rain squall, which, along with the high wind, caused a few of us to question why we were not somewhere else. However, having got thus far, we decided to continue our walk across the Marsh and were eventually rewarded when the rain stopped and the wind eased, allowing us to get decent views of a good variety of waders along the shoreline, including Black Tailed Godwit, Curlew, Dunlin, Knot and a typically pale looking winter plumage Spotted Redshank. Along with the gulls, a small party of late-departing Sandwich Terns livened up events – a decent reward at last for all who manfully (and womanfully!) braved the elements.



Ted Rogers

Editor's Note : Please be assured that not all of our trips are plagued by bad weather – in fact some are very pleasant indeed , and a mixture of good birds and good company make them very worthwhile. All are welcome!

An Australian Spring: September 2008

Part 1

Our base for much of the month was to be the home by the Hawkesbury River of my sister and brother-in-law. We had planned to be there for the Australian spring, with the added bonus of a visit to the Northern Territories. In the event, the trip provided a sightings list as long as your arm, a stack of photos, and a heap of new experiences...

The Hawkesbury location proved to be perfect for birds, being in a wooded area with a rocky gully to access the riverside. All I had to do was to get out of bed and walk outdoors to start the bird-watching day. The lawns and feeders were a magnet to a variety of wonderful birds, many of them brilliantly coloured: four parrot species, cockatoos, butcherbirds, currawongs, miners, magpies and two pigeon species just for starters.



At dawn, the woodland around and away from the house was full of singing honeyeaters of at least five species, as well as tiny thornbills, pardelotes, fairy-wrens, robins (these were yellow!), cuckoo-shrikes, shrike-thrushes, cuckoos, bowerbirds, finches, whistlers, whipbirds, orioles – the list seemed endless, with more cockatoo species and the shy Wonga Pigeon as well. I was a bit surprised by the chill of dawn during the first week, when my thermal gloves would have been useful! And then we had two days of non-stop rain.

In the nearby landscape, the Hawkesbury wetlands and farmland waterholes held several species of duck, cormorant, egret, heron, waterfowl, ibis, spoonbill and even some Pied Stilts. There were Pelicans too, not forgetting a Baillon's Crake, which we saw beautifully! Several raptors included a Grey Falcon and two Black-shouldered Kites. A large feral flock of Long-billed Corellas was a bit of a surprise. We also saw two species of wallaby in the area.

The second week of our trip took us up to Darwin, where we had booked a three-day birding safari into Kakadu. After our arrival, in the last hour of daylight, we found ten new species just round the hotel, including three honeyeaters. Dawn to dusk birding in many a billabong and in many an arid rocky outcrop or savannah piled on the birds. A stop at Fogg Dam showed us what to expect, with masses of egrets, pratincoles, jacanas, and a veritable mob of Brolga Cranes among other things. Travelling with two Dutch companions and our guide, Luke Pattison, we camped for two nights at one of the remotest billabongs on the Jim-Jim River, where huge Black Flying Foxes flew in to feed on trees around us, and where the night sky was unbelievably massive! At dawn we found a rare Great-billed Heron within 300 metres of our tents. As we drove in and out of the site, we stopped to watch such as Gouldian Finch, Red-winged Parrot, Partridge Pigeon, Rainbow Bee-eater, Brown Quail, a pair of nesting Black-breasted Buzzards, a herd of wild horses, and even a Dingo. In the rocks of Nourlangie, and between visiting the amazing array of Aboriginal Rock Art in the sheltered overhangs, we picked up some of the rare species indigenous to this special terrain: White-lined Honeyeater and Banded Fruit-Dove among others. At Barramundi Creek later the same day, we saw a Black Bittern and a Rainbow Pitta within the same minute. That particular day's birding made even the experienced Luke drool! Boat trips on the Mary River and at Yellow Waters provided spectacular numbers and varieties. We saw distant Australian Bustards and close-up White-bellied Sea-Eagles, Jabirus, three kingfisher species, and some very impressive Freshwater and Estuarine crocodiles. Dry savannahs produced such as Bush Stone-Curlew, Cockatiel, Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, Northern Rosella, some dramatic lizards, and two more species of wallaby – not to mention a small herd of wild Asian Buffaloes. That last encounter was one time where we didn't get out of the Land-cruiser to take the pictures!



Left to our own devices, we spent further time exploring the shore and parks at Darwin, adding several waders to our list, as well as an Eastern Reef Egret and Brahminy Kite. The land birds were plentiful and sometimes easy to see well. But it was the last day, and a dawn sortie to a waterhole just off the main highway into Kakadu, which gave us the best three hours of all. Luke had invited us to join him on a private trip. The three of us set up canvas chairs just back from the water, and then just watched in awe as hundreds of small birds (mainly of several honeyeater and finch species), and no small number of larger birds, came down to drink and bathe. The memory of that session replays like one of the best David Attenborough films - sheer magic! There was nothing quite like being trusted by the two Agile Wallabies which came to drink just thirty feet from us - though we were glad that the buffalo wallow behind us was dry. Several new species showed up, including Pheasant Coucal. On the road back, we found our first Red-backed Kingfisher, and then stopped to find a pair of Barking Owls at a known roost. That afternoon, after five long days of excitement in temperatures of about 35C, I was beginning to flag to the point where Mary described me as "birded out". But I would readily have started the tour all over again!

Ray Reedman

Editor's Note: Part 2 of Ray's account will be in the next newsletter