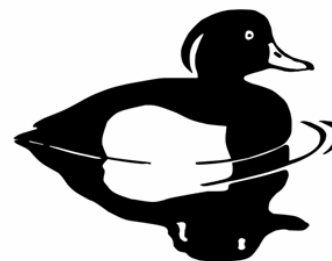


BOC Newsletter

Summer 2009

No 46



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Introduction

The recent heatwave has acted as a timely reminder to me that the Summer edition of the Club newsletter must be due. While it has been almost too hot to go out birdwatching, I still have a couple of BTO Atlas visits to make before the end of July. I personally find doing surveys very enjoyable and not too much of a chore, although it does require some concentration when undertaking the walks. I would recommend it to anyone who has a reasonable level of competence in identifying birds by their calls and songs (so much easier than actually seeing them, particularly when the leaves are on the trees!).

The highlight of my Spring was an excellent week spent birdwatching in Eilat, Israel in late March, surely the best place to see migrating birds within reasonable reach of the UK (although a lack of direct flights to Eilat does make it a bit harder to access). While we saw some 130 different species during the week, it was the sheer number of birds as much as the variety that made it so exciting. Anyway, I believe that a slot has been allocated in the upcoming indoor season so, for those who want to hear more about the trip, there will be an opportunity later in the year. Israel apart, other articles in this newsletter provide more ideas for foreign birding trips – although some might think that Australia is a bit too far to go!

For those of you who receive this newsletter electronically we obviously have a valid email address for you but, although this now covers about half of the Club membership, it would be really useful if we could collect email addresses for as many members as possible. Even if you do not want to get the Newsletter electronically, it would enable us to keep in touch with you with various Club announcements and news. A simple email to me at the address shown below will tell me all I need to know - if you would prefer to continue to receive the Newsletter by post let me know at the same time.

As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get contributions for the Autumn edition of the newsletter to me by 7th August, so it can be included in the annual membership mailshot.

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

A Few Seats Left on the Coach to the BirdFair

There are still a few places left on the Club trip to the Rutland-based British BirdFair on Saturday 22nd August and, with a very full and enjoyable day guaranteed, what better way to travel than in a relaxed, sociable way on the BOC coach. For those who don't know what's in store, the BirdFair is packed with various stalls featuring birding optics, holidays, art, photography, books and much more. There is also a programme of interesting talks and other entertainments. And if that isn't enough you can always take off for some excellent birdwatching around the area, with Ospreys and Tree Sparrows being the star attractions. For more information try <http://www.birdfair.org.uk/>.

The coach will leave Newbury (Wharfe) at 6.30am, Reading University (main gate in Shinfield Road) at 7.00am and Bray Wick, Maidenhead (Hibbert Road) at 7.20am. A price of £27 will cover the transport and a day ticket to the Fair. Contact Ray Reedman asap on 0118 986 4338 for further information and to book your place.

Bracknell Heaths Get Protection

Recently, the BOC provided records for birds seen in the area of the Transport Research Laboratories in Bracknell. This confirmed the existence of protected birds on the heathland nearby and has helped proposals to develop the TRL land to be rejected because of the lack of protection. The full story has been told by BBOWT and their Press release is as follows:

“The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has welcomed the decision by the Secretary of State to refuse the proposed redevelopment of the Transport Research Laboratories (TRL) site at Crowthorne. The application had previously been turned down by Bracknell Forest Council, but that decision had been appealed by the developers.

Mr Jackson, Head of Policy for BBOWT, said: “This is a common sense victory for wildlife in Bracknell. The Secretary of State has not said that development can’t take place in Bracknell, nor even that there could not be some development of the TRL site. What he has said though, is that any development must ensure that it properly protects the wildlife of the borough.”

The proposed redevelopment of the old TRL site included 975 houses along with a business park. The site lies very close to the Thames Basin Heaths, which are protected because of their internationally important populations of birds, including nightjars, woodlarks and Dartford warblers. These birds are particularly vulnerable to disturbance from dogs when they are walked on the heaths during the bird breeding season.

A plan to ensure that any new developments around the heaths protect the birds was drawn up by Natural England, the government’s conservation advisors. That plan requires areas where dogs can be walked safely to be created and promoted, and management of the heaths to ensure visitors are aware of the importance of the birds found there. The TRL development proposal set out dog walking land, but BBOWT, the RSPB and Natural England all gave evidence to a planning inquiry that there would, however, be insufficient protection for the heaths. The inquiry Inspector agreed with them, and recommended that the Secretary of State turn down the appeal.”

All birdwatchers are reminded of the importance of submitting records, especially for the more sensitive species. Please do not assume others are submitting them just because others go and see birds in the same place. There are many easy ways to submit you records explained on both the Club Website and on www.berksbirds.co.uk.

Colin Wilson

Kennet Valley Park - Burghfield Gravel Pits

It has been confirmed that the Prudential proposals to develop Kennet Valley Park have not been included in the South East Plan following our representations after the draft plan was tabled. This means that while there is no block on proposals being resubmitted, now the Secretary of State has rejected the idea it is unlikely to be approved in the short term. I would like to thank all the people who supported the battle against this development. Action is continuing to secure the area as a wildlife reserve but there is much work to do before that can happen. The main message for us to take away is that action can be effective and it is worth fighting to keep our wildlife safe.

Colin Wilson

Help Needed with a “Prickly Problem”

Members of the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Reading are setting up a project to look into the reasons for the decline in the number of road-killed hedgehogs. In order to further their study they need to get their hands on the bodies of hedgehogs killed on the road around Reading and a large tract of the West Berkshire and **they have asked for our help**. There are apparently no data on the dynamics of any hedgehog populations in the UK, in part because of the problems associated with quantifying survival and productivity rates. However, such data can easily be obtained from animals recovered dead. For example, annual growth rings in the bones and teeth can be used to age individuals, and these can then be used to construct a life table from which age-specific survival and mortality rates can be estimated. The problem with such projects in general is getting hold of enough carcasses for examination - for hedgehogs however this (unfortunately) should not be especially difficult as many are killed on the roads each year.



They are particularly keen to get hold of carcasses from the town of Reading itself as well as a large part of rural West Berkshire (the area they are interested in is outlined at: www.reading.ac.uk/hedgehogs, where additional information about the project can also be found).

Volunteers are asked either to :-

- (i) report dead animals for collection OR
- (ii) pick up the animals on their behalf and complete a simple form outlining where it was collected from and (optionally) some information about the road-side characteristics.

While this clearly has little to do with birds, I am sure that many of you will be keen to help this project to learn more about what is happening to one of our best loved mammals.

Ted Rogers

Bird Watching in Italy

Where? But they shoot them all there don't they? Well. No they don't any longer, at least not everywhere and not in the breeding season in Emilia Romagna, where for the most part we were. LIPU (the Italian equivalent of the RSPB) has with the help of our organisation made great strides in both protection of habitat and in education. Some of the traditional older men in the south still do shoot the migrating raptors, but LIPU volunteer camps have been successful in reducing this considerably. Anyway Ruth and I went in May, last year to stay for a week at Modena, N of Bologna, and valiant Ruth was prepared to drive all over the surrounding area. Lucky me!



As in the previous year we spent some time in the Po Delta, in and around the lagoons N of Ravenna. There at Ca' Vecchia we had excellent views of little bittern, both flying in and climbing up the reeds, and of singing reed warblers and great reed warblers; and in the lagoon area, whiskered and black and white winged terns. At Commachio, San Alberto we had turtle dove purring, marsh harrier, flamingo, black winged stilt, garganey, montagues harrier, spotted redshank, hoopoe and many other species. In most of the wetlands here, purple heron, squacco and night heron and of course grey heron and little egret are common and also one or two great white heron. We had these at Punte Albereto too, and also pygmy cormorant.

However this time Ruth drove to new places. At Torrile, N of Parma we visited a LIPU reserve where there were 5 hides, a bit dilapidated now but they have been there for 25 years! And there is a very new smart visitor centre with facilities. There is a charge but we were happy to support them. Having seen most of the above mentioned herons and a big flock of feeding ruff, wood sandpipers and perched cuckoo, we spoke to what we thought was the receptionist and praised LIPU's efforts (it is useful to have a bit of Italian and they are always happy to practice their English). It turned out that he had been responsible for getting this area designated as a conservation area in the early 1980's and still had the responsibility for monitoring not just the reserve but the surrounding area, and had published articles and videos of his research. Any way, later he took us out and showed us the various nesting areas of montague's harriers, red footed falcons and lesser kestrel, and we had good views of all of these. He was worried because the lesser grey shrike had not returned from migration. On his recommendation, we went another day S of Parma to the Taro river area SW of Collachio where there are a number of small reserves, unfortunately not open on weekdays as they are manned by volunteers. However we did manage to see a black kite.

At Oppiano (I think) we walked on a very hot day near the Taro river but there were areas where we were not allowed to enter because they were the protected breeding area of stone curlew and little ringed plover. See - the Italians are conservationists! Here we saw golden oriole, first alerted by their alarm squaw and later one was obligingly perched on a bare tree. Other days we walked on the slopes of the Appenines where the wild flowers were glorious, and especially above Firenze, there were lots of warblers.

So if you have never considered birdwatching in Italy, this account might make you think again.

Dot Lincoln

An Australian Spring: September 2008

Part 2

We had spent the first week of September 2008 in New South Wales and the second at the Top End in Darwin and Kakadu. There were still over two weeks to go...

Back in New South Wales on our return from Darwin, we had one day to regroup before setting off again with my sister and brother-in-law. This time we crossed the then wet and cold Blue Mountains and aimed inland into farming territory near Grenfell, where they had first settled in 1964. This new region threw up more wonders, including Superb Parrots and Blue Bonnets. Two nights later, we were onwards to the outskirts of Canberra to visit the younger family members. Sessions at the vast Googong Reservoir and in the Botanical Gardens reunited us with local species such as White-plumed Honeyeater and Red-rumped Parrot which were familiar from our 2000 stay there. With a prolonged drought in place, Grey Kangaroos could be seen in urban parks.

The road back up to Sydney was notable for our stop at Lake George, which in 2000 had been an immense stretch of water with Brolga Cranes flying from it. Now it was a huge paddock with grazing sheep, so severe had been the drought of recent years. A few other stops found yet more new birds, including Dusky Woodswallow at Mount Annan Botanical Gardens. A little further on, and within twenty miles of Sydney's suburbs, we saw our only Emus of the trip.

Another short stopover back at the Hawkesbury, and then we were off to Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, where we had arranged an early-morning tour with a local professional guide, Carol Proberts. The afternoon before, this time in near-perfect weather, we had enjoyed a few hours at the Three Sisters viewpoint before finding the excellent motel of the same name. Carol picked us up at dawn the next day.

Before setting out, she looked through my sightings list – already well over 200 species - and made a brief game plan. Visiting several sites in that most beautiful of areas, she found us a number of new species, which included Rock Warbler, Painted Button-Quail and Shining Bronze Cuckoo.

A short run down to the sewage beds at Lithgow found us Pink-eared and Blue-billed Ducks, as well as Hoary-headed Grebes. More forest species on the way back up, and then a nesting Tawny Frogmouth in a Katoomba Park as a finale! In all, Carol had found us 14 new species - even though we failed to see the Lyrebird which we had heard singing. After this session, I only added one more new sighting to my list, which finally totalled 225 species, with a few additional sub-species.



The weather had really warmed up by this stage: dawns were summer-like and balmy, so the pre-breakfast routine was a two-hour session of sitting in the woodland gully by the river. That was when the small birds would sometimes perch or feed within feet of me. I have never had such quality bird-watching anywhere. I was able to spot nesting sites and observe behaviour in detail and in ideal conditions. With a Golden Whistler singing just above my head, the fly-catching ballet of a pair of Grey Fantails remains an image of sheer wonder! Some afternoons were too warm to do anything but sit on the veranda to read or watch the Kookaburras catch worms. We did go down to Sydney to visit the Botanical Gardens and see the Grey-headed Flying Foxes among other things. Another time, a ferry trip from Paramatta took us down the river, where such as Striated Heron, Darter and even Common Sandpiper frequented the mangrove fringe. But mostly I reverted to being a true bird *watcher* around the house and woodland, with many hours spent sitting, absorbing the sights and sounds. With the warmth, the woodland and clearings took on new life: flowers were emerging in the shrubs and trees; butterflies were on the wing, Imperial Jezebel, Grey Ringlet, Australian Painted Lady among them; lizards were mobile; dragonflies hawked along the lane.

Some of the birds which we had seen in the Top End started to turn up, including a Rainbow Bee-eater which hunted round a clearing. It is one thing to have east and west back-to-front in relation to the sun, but it is very strange to witness *southward* migration in spring. It had been almost as odd to see northern waders arriving on the shore at Darwin to “winter” in Australia. As spring rose to a crescendo, I would have loved to stay and watch some more and learn some more, but you have to come home some time!

Ray Reedman

For reference,

1. The Kakadu 4WD Safari was with Connections Safaris (www.connections.travel)
2. The Katoomba morning was with Carol Proberts (www.bmbirding.com.au), who also does tours to the Hawkesbury Wetlands and the Capertee Valley.
3. The Three Sisters Motel at Katoomba is highly recommended. (www.3sistersmotel.com.au)

And Finally - From our Recently-Departed County BTO Rep

Dear Friends and Fellow Birders,

Rock Cottage, Newton St. Margarets,
Herefordshire, HR2 0QW

As most of you know, I have now deserted Berkshire and moved to Herefordshire so, with the Editor’s permission, I would like to take this opportunity to say goodbye to anyone I missed before I left and to thank those of you who attended the farewell party kindly organised by Renton.. Many thanks also, to anyone who subscribed to my leaving present – a most undeserved bonus but nonetheless much appreciated.

My successors as Berkshire BTO Rep are Sarah Priest and Ken White (they are partners), both very keen and experienced birders, who I am certain will make an excellent team. Please give them as much support (if not more!) as you gave me during my 16-year tenure.

We have only been in Herefordshire for just over three weeks so I have not had much time to investigate the local birding scene yet, although the dog has given me an excellent pretext for exploring the local area! My main observations so far are that Ravens replace Kites (not one of the latter seen here yet), Wood Pigeons are in (mercifully) short supply, Chiffchaffs are super abundant (and sing all day even in July!) and Bullfinches should not be Red Listed!

Hopefully I will be keeping in touch with Berkshire birding as I still have various family members in the county and, at least for the time being, I will continue to lead the Berkshire Bird Atlas Group. So maybe this is not the last you’ve heard of me!

Thanks for your support and good birding.

Chris Robinson
(now ex-BTO Rep ☺)