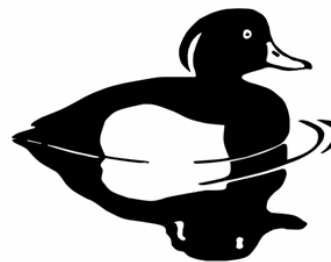


BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

BOC Newsletter

Autumn 2009

No 47



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Introduction

This newsletter comes as part of the Club’s annual membership pack and, if all goes to plan, along with items including the 2009 AGM notice, membership renewal form and 2009/10 programme card, you will be pleased to find the newly produced County Annual Report for 2005. A good time, I think, to thank all those people who have work so hard to produce these reports.

The Committee has worked hard to put together a varied and interesting calendar of events for the coming year, details being in the programme card. Hopefully there will be something of interest for everyone, whether it be an indoor talk or excursion or walk. We look forward to seeing you at these future events, and, as always, welcome any suggestions about events that you would like to see. Please talk to any Committee member about your ideas.

The membership pack also includes the recording sheets for the winter part of the Garden Bird Survey that I hope you will take part in and duly return your completed forms. I’m afraid we are well behind with some of our GBS analysis, but hopefully something should be available for publication before too long.

The next newsletter will go out around the start of next year (2010), so any items for inclusion need to be with me by Christmas.

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

Membership

Enclosed in this mailing you will find a renewal application. If you already pay by Bankers order you do not need to do anything – your bank will automatically send the notice that it has been paid to the treasurer sometime in the autumn. You will be contacted, probably in December or early January, if no payment is received. For members paying by cash or cheque, payment is due on 1st October and it is helpful if people pay promptly!

Cheques can be sent to me at my home address –it is on the bottom of the renewal form. It is helpful to have the renewal form filled in as now that the club has grown so much, we have quite a number of duplicate names, and also I like to check that we have up-to-date addresses. Payment can also be made by cash or cheque at indoor meetings and sealing the correct payment in an envelope with your name written clearly on the outside speeds up the process.

Finally, we hope you will all renew but if you decide against then a quick phone call or note direct to me saves me a lot of work of checking, re- checking and reminding! Thank you all for your cooperation.

Dot Lincoln (Membership Secretary)

John Hannan

It is with much sadness that I record the death of my friend, John Hannan. Over many years John gave his full support to our Club, being Secretary from 1986 to 1998, and Chairman from 2001 to 2003. Many will recall his secretarial roll and his writing of the minutes of indoor meetings. We no longer maintain the practice of reading such minutes, but John gave them much thought and the content always reflected his gentle humour. They usually brought a smile to the faces of those in the audience.

John and Joan's active involvement in the Club ended with their move to Yorkshire, but in our frequent contacts John always asked, "How is the Club?" We have lost a loyal supporter and one who made a major contribution to the success of the Club.

On behalf of all members I extend our deepest sympathy to Joan.

John Roberts

"Lew" Lewis

It is also sad to report the death of "Lew" Lewis, who died in February earlier this year. A member of the BOC for the best part of 50 years, among his many interests he was a keen birdwatcher and observer of the natural world and wrote a regular article for the Newbury Weekly News, along with many other articles and a number of books, based on his carefully recorded observations. The crowning piece was 'An Introduction to Landscape' in West Berkshire published in 1998.

He will be much missed by all who knew him.

Gift Aid.

It is a requirement that I explain to donors that they pay at least as much UK tax as I am claiming back. Currently you must be paying 25p tax for every £1 donated.

Gift Aid income is very important to the Club, especially at this time of low interest rates. I encourage anyone who has not already done so to sign an appropriate donor form.

John Roberts

Editor's Note: Further information about Gift Aid can be found at <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities/gift-aid.htm>

Overseas Birding – La Brenne, France

Those attending the BirdFair at Rutland Water this year will have the opportunity of hearing Tony Williams extolling the attractions of La Brenne in Central France., where he has been living for over 25 years. My wife and I have recently returned from our annual springtime visit to this 'Land of a Thousand Lakes'. Here, as elsewhere in Western Europe, there have been substantial swings in the numbers of several species. There are, for example, no longer any localities where one can see Little Bustard, Fan-tailed Warbler or Great Reed Warbler. On the other hand, there is no shortage of other specialities of the Brenne; Black-necked Grebe, Whiskered Tern, Black-winged Stilt, Bee-eaters, etc. The list of raptors includes Honey Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle, Black Kite, Booted Eagle and Hobby, while the 'heron tribe' is represented by Bittern, Little Bittern, Night Heron, Purple Heron, Great White and little Egret. The Hoopoe, Golden Oriole and Red-backed Shrike are well distributed. Middle-spotted Woodpecker and Black Woodpecker are also present, but not easy to find, as is Bonelli's Warbler. Within 50 yards of our gite in Mezieres-en-Brenne we had the constant company and musical contributions from Nightingales, Cirl Buntings, both Common and Black Redstarts, Tree Pipits, Serins etc.



Needless to say, birds are not the only attraction of this Regional Park. Tree Frogs, Midwife Toad, European Pond Tortoise, Wild Boar all add their exotic touch. The area is also renowned for its abundant plant life (orchids are a speciality) and the attendant insects with 100+ species of butterfly. Also worth noting is the easy driving on quiet roads and the relative accessibility of Cross-channel ferries, some five hours drive from Caen or Le Havre. And last, but not least, substantial and varied three-course 'gourmet' menus starting at 12 or 13 Euros, as well as comfortable B-and-Bs (chambers d'hôte) at 40+ Euros per night, per room with breakfast.

I'd be happy to answer any questions about La Brenne.

Jim Walling

Birdwatching in Bulgaria - Spring 2010

If you are considering an overseas birdwatching holiday, one of the following Bulgaria trips may be of interest.

1. May 2nd – May 13th 2010

This tour will feature on the south west Bulgaria including a visit to Lake Kerkini in Greece.

2. May 26th – 6th June 2010

This tour will feature on north east Bulgaria including a visit to Sebruna Nature Reserve and the Black Sea.

For further information about these tours please contact Carol Winder (Telephone 01753 854393)

It's August - the Swifts have gone

Swifts are one of our most charismatic urban birds. There is little to beat the joy of hearing their first screams when they arrive each year – and the sadness each August when you suddenly realise that they have left is bearable only because you know they will be back. I count myself fortunate that they nest in the old Victorian houses in my street, because they are a species under threat: amber-listed because of the decline in the breeding population, thought, in part at least, to be due to loss of nest sites in old buildings.

I was fascinated by Edward Mayer's talk about Swifts to the BOC last year - those that went will recall his brilliant presentation: despite the failure of our projection system his enthusiasm and acting skills impressed on us the need for urgent conservation action. Amongst other things, he told us about the restoration of Swift towers in Italy; so, on a visit to Parma in a cold wet March week, I took the opportunity of making contact with the Italian Swift man, Mauro Ferri, who showed me some of their work. The highlight was a medieval tower at Castellano near Modena. The tower was built with rows of chambers open to the outside built into the thick walls. Harvesting and pickling the Swift *pulli* is no longer practiced (I understand that they were delicacies: fried, then pickled in oil and vinegar); this tower and many others in farmhouses in the region are now engaged in conservation of these extraordinary birds that probably spend the whole of their life away from the nest site in flight.



This 14th Century tower at Castellano has several hundred holes built into it for Swifts to nest in. It was bought and restored by Mauro Ferri and is now managed by the Parco Regionale dei Sassi di Roccamalatina.



The nest hole is a tunnel through the wall of the tower, with a cork closure on the inside, removable for inspection.

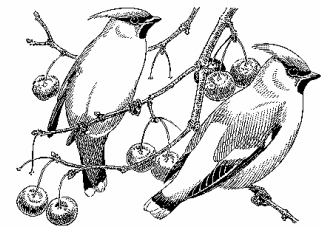
Swifts make a simple nest with bits of "aerial plankton" collected in flight; such as fragments of moss, grass and insects.

You don't need an ancient tower or 16th Century farmhouse - nest sites can be easily fitted into new buildings and can be built into existing structures: for a slide show on the work in Italy and for more information on Swift conservation, go to: <http://www.swift-conservation.org/>

Renton Righelato

BOC Trip Report - Norfolk Weekend - February 2009

Norfolk is a large county so, in order to see a bit more of it at a less hectic pace, the annual weekend visit was extended to 4 days. Once again the trip was fully subscribed, limited by the space available in the hotel at Hunstanton.



Waxwings by Robert Gillmer

On the first day we followed the well trodden route established in previous years – breakfast on the edge of Ipswich then on to Minsmere, then to Hickling Broad via Lowestoft Ness. Between Ipswich and Minsmere we stopped off near Woodbridge where we watched a very large flock of waxwings feeding on cotoneaster berries. The birds almost ignored us so we were able to watch at close range before time obliged us to move on. We spent several hours at Minsmere RSPB reserve, but the number of birds there was lower than usual and the track to some hides was flooded. Even so you never leave there without seeing something a bit different – there were 3 smew including one male on the scrape, a fortunate few saw a bittern fly over the reedbed and a large number of red-throated divers passed on the sea, some very close in (I counted 22 in one flock). Unusually, and despite the calm, mild weather no one recorded bearded tits. A brief stop at Lowestoft Ness allowed us to find the regular flock of 9 purple sandpipers – I can think of no other reason to call in at this rather depressing (and hard to reach) spot. We ended the day as usual, at Hickling Broad, where we spent an eventful hour watching many hen and marsh harriers arriving at the country's largest raptor roost (the official count was over 100, mostly marsh harriers) but we also saw a hunting barn owl and a flock of common cranes landed at their roost site in the marshes. We spent the night in Yarmouth, thereby avoiding the usual long drive over to Hunstanton in the dark, and the late arrival at our hotel.

On the second day we made an early morning visit to the Breydon Estuary at Burgh Castle and also found several Mediterranean gulls on the Yarmouth sea-front. After breakfast, a few people chose to go from Yarmouth north along the coast via Cromer, finding along the way a flock of twite, a cattle egret and a rather sick glaucous gull. The majority headed west to Linford Arboretum near Brandon, where a smart male ferruginous duck was easy to see on the recently created lake west of the arboretum. We also saw some marsh tits and bullfinches in the woodland, but there was no sign of any crossbills or hawfinches. We moved on to Snettisham RSPB, north of Kings Lynn for the mid-afternoon high tide, where we witnessed some spectacular swirling flocks of waders, but as the tide did not come right in (it was a neap tide) the huge flocks of birds mostly remained on the sandbanks several hundred yards out. Late in the day a passing peregrine and another barn owl were added to the list. After checking in to our hotel we moved to the nearby Lifeboat Inn to enjoy their excellent local beer and fresh-made food, and of course the company.



Saturday started at 7am on Hunstanton seafront, where the pigeons on the cliffs look to me like fairly natural rock doves (so I count them as such). Despite good viewing conditions the best birds that most people saw were numerous red-breasted mergansers, a few rather distant common scoters, a selection of regular waders and the resident fulmars. A few people with top-notch telescopes and eagle eyes made out a very distant red-necked grebe but it was just a dot for most of us. There seems to have been a general shortage of sea ducks off Norfolk this year. After breakfast we visited Holkham and walked out beyond the salt marsh to the dune

line from where we could see a big flock of scoter (all common) on the sea. We hunted for passerines along the strand line and eventually spotted a big flock of snow buntings in the distance, but they promptly flew off and out of sight. Fortunately they soon returned and we were able to watch them at close quarters – typically of this species no two were the same, varying from almost pure black and white males to juvenile females looking a bit like pale house sparrows, with all stages of skewbald in between. There were more than 80 in the flock. On the nearby fields geese were scarce and those few brents and pink-feet that did appear were quite far off. After lunch, we moved on towards Titchwell. A brief stop in the fields along the way was rewarded with good views of grey partridges, corn buntings and yellowhammers but no tree sparrows. On the RSPB reserve at Titchwell we found over 60 ruffs, a few spotted redshanks, many sanderlings on the shore, a 1000+ flock of golden plovers but very few grey plovers. Most people had very close views of a water rail near the reserve office and a rather shy brambling made occasional visits to the seed feeders. In the evening, after another visit to the Lifeboat Inn, we enjoyed a very pleasant meal at our hotel.

On the final day we visited Dersingham bog, inland from Snettisham. We spent a few minutes on the way looking (fruitlessly) for golden pheasants in the dense rhododendrons nearby. The bog reminds me very much of a local Berkshire site, Wishmoor, and we found a very similar mix of birds, the best being a pair of crossbills – seen at very close quarters – and a great grey shrike. A distant raptor eventually went into the book as a merlin, but it was not a satisfactory view for most. From late morning we went our various ways, some back to Linford, some to Welney, others directly home. Once again the weekend was largely successful. The hotel and travel arrangements worked well, and everyone seemed to have a good time. It was considerably less rushed than in previous years, but despite an extra day we saw no more birds, though several Norfolk specialities that we usually see (e.g. shore lark and velvet scoter) were just not around. For those who measure success by numbers - the trip total was 130 species, though no one saw all of these (my own tally was 109 species, which is probably typical). Whether we keep this 4 days format next year is yet to be decided – so tell me please if you have views.

'Dragonflies and Damselflies' Talk

A public talk presented by the Friends of Emm Brook (www.emmbrook.org.uk)

All are welcome to attend this talk by Des Sussex (Ecological Advisor, Natural England), taking place from 7.30-9.30pm on Thursday September 12th 2009 at Woosehill Community Hall, Wokingham RG41 2TS



Berkshire and Oxfordshire BTO Conference

This will be held in Didcot on Saturday 6 March 2010. There will be a range of speakers and a number of stalls, including one from BOC. Please put the date in your diary and come along and support us. There will be more detailed information, including a list of speakers and an application form, in the BOC newsletter, a little nearer the time.

Sarah Priest and Ken White (Berkshire BTO Reps)

Berkshire's BeWild Project

For some time there has been concern that our ancient and semi-natural woodlands are under managed leading to degradation of woodlands that have supported our traditional flora and fauna for hundreds of years. Woodlands throughout history have been a major source of essential products sometimes outweighing farmland in importance with large labour forces acquiring a huge variety of products.

Management has virtually halted over several decades and woodlands have been left to succeed into climax forest with dark closed canopies useful only to a very limited range of species. They have lost many of their open rides, glades, coppice plots and shrubby woodland edges so important for our biodiversity, including many species of birds and butterflies. Examples include Spotted Flycatcher, Bullfinch, Nightingale and warblers that need these open areas with thickets for nesting and food in the form of invertebrates that thrive on flowery margins and bramble patches. Butterflies have suffered severely with several species now absent from Berkshire such as High Brown Fritillary and Duke of Burgundy now restricted to a few small areas of the country, isolated and vulnerable. Nearly half of our once familiar butterflies are now on the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) list and most of them were perfectly at home in well managed woodland. Unfortunately current opinion by the general public is that trees should not be cut down and that woods should be left to their own devices, many are ignorant of the damage to biodiversity. This perception needs to be reversed before further damage is done.

BeWild is a woodlands project organised by the West Berkshire arm of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC). It aims to restore management of ancient woodland in Berkshire and has been busy in its first year with a wide range of courses and other initiatives aimed mainly at farmers and landowners.

The BOC Conservation Fund provided £1,000 to help fund the project ring-fenced to help birds. In its first year the project ran various courses on management for biodiversity and for use of woodland products. These included installation of wood chip boilers by farmers and landowners encouraging the use of woodland products with resulting woodland management. A lot more is planned. The project is looking for landowners and farmers who would be amenable to such initiatives especially to the east of Reading as the west is better catered for. It includes ancient or semi-natural woodland including those around heathland but not, for example, MOD property or Crown Estates. Please let me know if you can think of suitable woodland owners to approach.

Current plans for management include:

- Coppicing, and ride and glade creation to help bring back the mosaic that has traditionally supported our flora and fauna including birds *e.g. Spotted Flycatcher, Lesser Whitethroat.*
- Hedge laying and planting where these adjoin woodland. This provides corridors for fauna to spread and provides nest sites for birds *e.g. Bullfinch, Linnet, Yellowhammer.*
- Ring barking trees and encouraging plenty of dead wood to help invertebrates (bird food) and provide nest sites *e.g. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Marsh Tit, Willow Tit.*
- Provision of bird, bat and dormouse boxes.

Conservation groups are involved in this work, particularly CROW (Conserve Reading on Wednesdays) and the Kennet, Pang and Lambourn Project Group. If you are interested in such rewarding activity try the ECONET website at www.econetreading.org.uk for the CROW programme. The group works every Wednesday of the year, more around, than in, Reading. A few BOC members are regular participants. Or try the links for more local groups. Other groups conserving with birds particularly in mind include Theale Area Bird Conservation Group, Lavells Lake at Twyford and Moor Green lakes, all weekend groups.

John Lerpiniere

Please help the Berkshire Bird Atlas team! It's simple!

Despite many members and keen birdwatchers helping with records for the new Atlas project the team still needs more help. If you submit all your records via the berkbirds website, Birdtrack or as a Roving Recorder for the BTO Atlas then your records will be used but if you don't use these routes you can still help!

At this time of year Tawny Owls are noisy at night and the increase in Barn Owls from the breeding season helps seeing or hearing them easier. Most Atlas workers are limited in the nocturnal surveying they can achieve (without being locked up!). So what we want from you is a record(s) of when you hear or see any species of owl over the next few months. A simple form is attached for you to send in with your sightings, if possible by 31 December.

One more thing, if you had birds breeding in your garden or locality this year, please tell us because we may easily miss breeding evidence when doing surveys. So, if you knew of a breeding bird (any species no matter how common) please add details below. A date is needed and a comment why you know it bred. Birds we especially want to know about are owls, Swifts, House Martins but also all common or rarer birds in or close to Berkshire.

Thanks for your help.

Birds of Berkshire Atlas Recording Form

Send to Colin Wilson, Blakeney, St Catherine's Road, Camberley, Surrey GU16 9NP preferably by 31 December 2009. Tel 01252 837411 if you have a question or more copies are needed)

| Species (Owls just tell us of presence. Breeding records wanted for all species) | Location (a six fig map ref or postcode would be most helpful or use your tetrad if you know it) | Date (Essential we have a date for each sighting) | Comments (What the bird was doing e.g an owl calling, bird carrying nest material, visiting an occupied nest, carrying food for young, feeding young etc) |
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Your name

Address.....

Postcode

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Telephone number (for queries)