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Introduction

At this time last year I wrote about the snow finally clearing, but this year the winter weather has certainly gone one better, with the best part of 12 inches of snow here in Ascot. No doubt you have had your fair share of wonderful ‘winter wonderland’ conditions and hopefully are coping as best you can. If nothing else, it provides great opportunities for photography – I predict a spate of ‘birds in snow’ pictures in this year’s Photographic Competition (maybe there should be a new category?).

Unfortunately our first indoor meeting of the year had to be cancelled and we can now only hope that this cold snap does not last too long (at time of writing the Met Office is not predicting an end to the winter conditions). All of which should remind us that garden birds are probably suffering quite badly, so please try to put out what food you can to help them out, which will not only help the birds, but may also provide you with some new garden visitors. Here in Ascot we have been regularly seeing Redwings, Fieldfares, Song Thrushes, Bramblings, Siskins and Redpolls, along with numerous Blackbirds which, despite the conditions, still seem to find the energy to chase off any bird that gets too close!

Looking forward to Spring (aren’t we all?), 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.

Subscription Renewals

As always, the vast majority of members have renewed their membership well before Christmas, and mostly promptly in early October or even before. Thank you. It certainly enables the Treasurer and I to work together effectively to keep the records straight. However there are always some people who forget so here is a reminder to the 34 people who have not yet renewed, that we are now half way through the winter season and the subscription is now well overdue. Please save us the trouble and expense of having to make individual reminders by ‘phone or letter, and renew now.

Does anyone know of a member R Thomas? He/she is probably a student as £8 was received by banker’s order, but as I have not received any information as to address etc, no new member package, or newsletter has been sent. If you know anything about this person, please give me the details or ask him/her to get in touch with me.

Dot Lincoln. (Membership Secretary)

Club Accounts 2008-2009

At the AGM I presented Club Accounts which showed an excess of income of £3417, but this excess arose only because of income of £3950 which is restricted to the Atlas Group work. The Club's activities showed, therefore, a loss of £543, in a year when £3090 was spent on a Report. At 30th September Club Funds stood at £9665, but there are a number of Reports in the process of production and they will impact upon our capital. Your Committee considered an analysis of future income/costs and agreed an increase of subscriptions. The following is a statement I read to those at the AGM.

“Last year I told the AGM subscriptions had not increased since 2003 and your Committee was considering an increase and the possible removal of the 50% discount for retired members. After due consideration it was decided not to change the rates or the discount from 2009.

However, your Committee has agreed subscription increases from 1 October 2010 and the reduction of the retired discount from 50% to 25%. Such changes are necessary to maintain the standard of our speakers, to provide good accommodation (which this room is under normal circumstances) and to continue regular production of top quality Reports.

The discount rate for retired members was much discussed. At present those who pay £7.50 or £10 receive a Report, newsletters and, for some, access to Queen Mary Reservoir for a subscription which contributes little or nothing to other Club expenses. Such payments cannot be maintained.

The new rates from 1 October 2010 will be :

Single	£20	a rise from £15
Family	£25	a rise from £20
Single Retired	£15	a rise from £7.50
Family Retired	£19	a rise from £10
Country	£15	
Student	£10	

Your Committee recognises that these are quite substantial increases at a difficult time and have agreed that those who pay by Bankers Order may reduce their payment by £2. They also recognise and regret that we may lose some members because of these changes, but the continued success of the Club is dependent upon a sound financial situation.

The next Newsletter will tell all members of these changes.”

A new Bankers Order is included with this Newsletter and we ask that you place it with your Bank or Building Society as soon as possible.

In addition to the funds referred to above we have a Conservation Fund of £5192. Anyone wanting a set of Accounts should contact me on 0118 9482137.

John Roberts

BOC Photographic Competition – 17th March 2010

We are now inviting entries for the 2010 Competition and the Gordon Langsbury Cup. The maximum entries you can submit will be four in each category and they must be sent, preferably by email, to the Organiser, Colin Wilson by 10th March at the latest. The categories will be Digiscoped, Portrait and Action. This year there will be no Digiscoped competition unless we receive a total of more than 20 entries from a minimum of six people so do please send them in if you use this method of photography. To enter Digiscoped the photograph must have been taken using a camera through a telescope. Portrait is a picture taken by any camera or method demonstrating a bird clearly, preferably in its natural habitat. Action is a photograph of the bird in movement which may be flying, feeding, preening or any other activity. No photographs of captive birds will be acceptable.

Prizes will be given for the winners and runners-up in each category. The overall winner wins the Gordon Langsbury Cup for 2010. For more information see

http://www.berksoc.org.uk/photographic_competition/2009/photo_comp_2009_rules.shtml or call Colin Wilson on 01252 837411 or email at colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk

This year we hope will match or surpass last year's competition so get out the cameras and get shooting! And don't think the competition is sown up before you join in – in the last seven years there has been a different winner of the Gordon Langsbury Cup every time!

Colin Wilson

Latest Swarovski EL Binoculars Available at LCE

The London Camera Exchange (LCE) in Reading (one of the Club's loyal supporters) has let us know that they are expecting to have a regular supply of the latest Swarovski EL binoculars, coming in on a weekly basis. They are available at a discount to BOC members (not quite the standard 10%, but the best they can offer at present), priced as follows:-

EL 8.5x42 at £1645 (normal price is £1745)
EL 10x42 at £1700 (normal price £1815)

If you are interested and would like to have a look at them please ring the shop before travelling to ensure that they have the required model.

Bird Atlas News

No doubt the winter weather is limiting surveying somewhat, but it is still worth keeping an eye on the Web site for up to date news and tips. For instance, there is now a species by species update on results for the first two winters and summers and also other advice and guidance for observers to work through. Please go to <http://www.berksoc.org.uk/atlas/index.shtml>

Birds of Berkshire – Making our book a success

Records needed from your garden

The new Atlas surveying is doing well but we still need a lot of help. We lack records of breeding birds, including the most common species. For example, if you get Great Tits or Blue Tits in a nest box in your garden, or have seen Blackbirds or Song Thrushes with beaks full of worms for young, or have House Sparrows or Starlings in your eaves you have important information we could use. If you see newly fledged birds, find any nests or remains of eggs we need to know. Surveying is difficult without access to gardens but that is where so many common birds breed and feed their young.

Please help us by filling in the form at the end of this Newsletter or send an email to colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk .

Help us to raise the money

The other way to help is financially by sponsoring a species – we have to raise almost £50,000 for this project. The price ranges from £20 to £50 and we still have many to offer, or you can just make a donation, they will all be acknowledged in the book. Details are on the BOC website at http://www.berksoc.org.uk/atlas/sponsor_a_species.shtml where you can also find a sponsor form. We try to keep the list updated but if you want to check the species or get more information contact Brian Clews at brian.clews@btconnect.com or phone Colin Wilson on 01252 837411.

Many thanks for your help.

Colin Wilson

BOC Outing to Otmoor – May 3rd 2009

The group assembled in the car park of the RSPB's reserve at Otmoor, east of Oxford. Although the weather was fine and sunny, there was a cold westerly wind, which reduced bird activity.

Nevertheless, both Reed and Sedge Warblers were in evidence along the dykes and the occasional Whitethroat was seen in song flight, but there were not the numbers of migrants one would have been led to expect.

At the far hide as few Swifts were out and about and then two Little Egrets flew over. Up to four Hobbies were in the area catching insects, but despite our efforts no one heard or saw any Turtle Doves or Grasshopper Warblers, for which this Reserve is renowned – it may have been just too early in the year!

However this Reserve should not be dismissed too easily – it is improving every year – the whole area is very rural and the RSPB has purchased two further large fields, which are being turned unto wet grassland, and further scrapes have been hollowed out for Redshank and Lapwing. Bittern and Purple Heron have been recorded recently and, who knows - I think that it looks ideal for breeding Cranes!

Martin Sell

BOC Weekend in Pembrokeshire: 4th to 7th June 2009

How did we get on? Well how long is a piece of string? It really depends on who you were and which options you took. With a group of close on 20, we needed some variants in the plan, so this really tells only our part of the story. I can only say that Mary and I came home tired, with a sightings list in excess of 100, and with experience of some wonderful sites which we had never visited previously. We had visited a wide range of habitats – wetlands, mixed woodlands and sea-cliffs in particular – and the weather had treated us not too badly compared with England that weekend.

On Thursday, a perfect morning saw us at the scrapes at Goldcliff, near Newport, by 9 a.m. Here we found a few wader species and a surprising range of ducks. A Garganey and a Curlew Sandpiper were the highlights there - even if I did miss the latter! (See what I meant about choices? Some of us were at the “wrong” viewing screen!) News of Spoonbills raised our hopes, but they were absent that morning. By mid-morning we were at the Newport Wetlands proper, where we encountered a whole range of warblers and water birds, and no small spectacle of wild-flowers. Some of us were lucky with the odd glimpse of a Bearded Tit. During the afternoon, we drove up to the Gelli Aur Country Park near Llandeilo. Colin took inspiration from the obligatory ice-cream and led us smartly to two active nest-boxes of Pied Flycatchers. We all had great views of both males and females as they returned often with food. This was a species which had always escaped me to date, so I had no qualms about accepting those birds as a gift on a platter!

Our hotel and base for the next three nights was in a quiet spot on the main street in Pembroke and dinner was most welcome after a long day. But orders were out for a speedy departure the next morning...

Martin’s Haven, the ferry-point for Skomer, is one of those tiny places which make no sense until you find it, but we were all there early and near the front of the queue. Conditions were perfect, with hazy sunshine, balmy air and a glassy sea. Then we received the news that there would be no landings that day because of an imminent change in the weather. Incredulity all round! We had two choices: one was to wait for the 10.30 round-the-island boat-trip; the other was to decamp and drive up to Ramsey Island, where a landing would happen. And that is where the group split neatly into two. I can only say that our choice to stay with Skomer and the local headlands for the day was perfect for us, but later reports made it clear that the other group had also done well.

The defile where we waited was lively with warblers, Linnets and Swallows, but we killed some of the wait up on the cliffs, where we immediately encountered several other species, including our first Chough – another latecomer to my experience – and a pair of Ravens. But the real spectacle started when we eventually approached the island. Guillemots, Razorbills, and literally thousands of Puffins, were on the rocks, over our heads and in the water. It was amazing that, in all the hubbub, the numerous Grey Seals on the rocks could even pretend to sleep; a few opened their eyes just long enough to register us in their world of jagged rocks, sea-swell and bladder-wrack. As we progressed, Fulmars swept by on stiff wings, and Kittiwakes called from echoing recesses in the cliffs.



Magnificently threatening, Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls patrolled for pirated sand-eels, a fluffy-chick takeaway, or Puffin kebab. Only the Shags and Cormorants seemed immune or indifferent, while the magnificent Gannets which passed from time to time were regally impartial. Not so the Peregrine perched high on a rocky vantage point with an eye on the main chance! With the sea still deceptively smooth in general, we slipped through the brisk tide-race and returned to the mainland after an hour of superb spectacle. The salty tang of seaweed and guano seems still to linger in the nostrils.



Our return to the cliffs brought us superb close-up views of a number of Choughs and Ravens, as well as Rock Pipits, and Wheatears. Finally, we located a pair of nesting Peregrines, she guarding two grey chicks, and the tiercel posing on the rocks a bit above her. It all made a fine spectacle for the class of primary school children who came over to share our scopes. The gasps of amazement from some reminded me of my own crucial encounter with a Barn Owl at the age of eight. I dare hope that a few future birders were converted by those falcons...

Late afternoon started to bring cooler weather, so we moved to the more sheltered area of the sea inlet at Dale. The highlight here was a trio of Whimbrel, but hunger and the promise of a special dinner lured us back for a pleasant social evening.

Saturday morning saw a keen nucleus of us out at 6.30 to explore the fine little reserve on the outskirts of town. Reed-beds and woodland gave us a variety of birds, with a pair of Bullfinches to crown the pre-breakfast list. With breakfast over, we set off in our two parties to different areas. While Colin's party set off for the southern shore, Bill's group went a short way out to the woodland area of Blackpool Mill. It took only a few minutes to find our first Dipper on the fast, shallow river and thereafter a number of Grey Wagtails and a Kingfisher. The mixed woodland was rich with birds, as our first walk brought us such as Bullfinches, Marsh Tits and several Spotted Flycatchers. As we started the second walk into an area more dominated by broad-leaved trees, the rain started, hard enough to drive a few back to the cars. Thankfully for those who persisted, we were rewarded with the song of a Wood Warbler and eventual glimpses of the bird in the dripping canopy. The two groups swapped territories for the afternoon. Suffice it to say that our visit to the Stacks near Castle Martin was blustery and wet, with optics of reduced value, but the spectacle of the thousands of sea-birds on the towering rocks was still superb. Bill watched with awe as a cruising Great Black-back neatly grabbed the wing of a roosting Guillemot and snatched the chick it was sheltering. Meanwhile, between squalls, I had managed to spot a Manx Shearwater over the sea. The last part of the wet afternoon brought few birds – most notably hirundines dipping insects from the floating vegetation of the Lily Ponds at Bosherton, and a Rock Pipit at the beach there, but the wild-flower crop on the rocks near the beach was a real bonus.



The rain was still falling heavily on Sunday morning and we all agreed to make our way home individually, choosing such stops as weather permitted. In the event six of us decided to stop at Llanelli National Wetlands Centre. On the way up, a Red Kite near Carmarthen was probably one of the remnant native birds. By then the rain was easing and our arrival at Llanelli was only marred by a few puddles and the odd threatening cloud. To our joy there was still a Spoonbill to be found on a marshy scrape, where it was surrounded by dozens of Shelduck. As we watched, it was joined first by a Little Egret and then by a young Heron. Close-up views of Black-headed Gull chicks on the Lagoon, a small breeding flock of Black-tailed Godwits, and assorted warblers in the new extension, all added to the quality of an interesting visit. We tore ourselves away some time in the afternoon.

The weekend had been superbly organised by Colin Wilson, whose extensive research and preparations had made it all run very smoothly. Thanks, Colin! And thanks to Bill Nicholl too, for his part as second-leader. It had been all go, and wall-to wall birds. You might say that we came home puffin, and a bit raven-mad, but well-choughed!

Ray Reedman

Review of Bird Sightings in Berkshire – 2008-2009

This review covers the period from November last year until the early November 2009. Overall, some superb birds occurred during this period, but this short review can only cover the most notable.

Arriving late last year at QMR ,a Great Northern Diver stayed until the 1st of January .Two more juvenile Great Northern Divers arrived together in Mid February , one being very distinctive with overgrown mandibles – just like a Crossbill.

The usual annual visits by both Slavonian and Black Necked Grebes were fine and normal, but the pair of summer Black Necked Grebes which arrived on the 25th April , certainly had other ideas. An obvious pair, their courtship display was brilliant, unfortunately they moved on after only a few days.

An immature Gannet visited most of the Wraysbury Lakes and QMR before disappearing South, early in October. We had just two one-day visits from European Shags , one in January, the other, a 1st year ,in September.



Possibly 6 Bitterns were present during January-mostly in the Lavells Lake/Dinton Pastures area, they remained until early March.

On the 30th July , Berkshire's second Cattle Egret was found at Padworth Lane Gp. Luckily it stayed for another day , enabling most to see it , including a certain Mr Tony Croucher, one of Berkshire's, and the UK's best bird photographers from the Eighties.

A Great White Egret seen, in flight, flying from Stockcross towards Kintbury may prove to be another headache for the Rarities Committee. However, another in early November 2009 in the Lavells area may be a little easier due to its closeness to the observer.

Review of Bird Sightings in Berkshire continued...

Bewick and Whooper Swans are no longer definite annual visitors. However on the last day of December a single observer got lucky, 4 Bewick Swans flew low over the hide at Lower Farm. Another fortunate observer had 3 Whooper Swans flying over Maidenhead on the 26th January. Whilst the two Whooper Swans at Lower Farm during the afternoon of the 7th October, and stayed until late the next morning, were not generally known about until too late. Brent Geese were represented by 3 dark bellied adults, all at QMR.

A drake American Wigeon at Lower Farm GP, identified on the 19th November, was the first in Berkshire for nearly 15 years. Initially very elusive, the bird became easier to view before it departed at January's end.

Berkshire had the usual Garganey spring records, but one, earlier, at Lower Farm in Mid December was certainly not an early Spring record. In the second half of 2009, only two more in August and September, but last week, one, probably two, were on view. How close are we to Garganey over wintering?

Scaup were represented by a group of 6, which arrived in November, and stayed around the East of the County for 4 months. A female in August, and a drake last week at Burghfield Mill Pit were 2 additional. Only one report of Long Tailed Duck, a juvenile at Wraysbury for an hour at the end on November. Common Scoter, a total of 30 individuals for the year. But only one Velvet Scoter, a female/immature, visited QMR briefly early December.

Two Honey Buzzards only, one, over Earley on 19th April. The second flying over Greenham Common on the 23rd May. Marsh Harriers were prolific, three in Spring, and then an incredible five in August, and another in September. Six individual Hen Harriers during the first winter, but just a single so far this winter. The only Rough Legged Buzzard of the year is thanks to one of Berkshires best active photographers, Jerry was not exactly sure what he had photographed as it flew high overhead, but it was soon sorted out that same evening, the 14th February. This bird crisscrossed the Berkshire/Hampshire border until the 13th March. The Spring season of Osprey visits saw a total of six, strangely enough the return period had the same again. Merlin always make such fleeting appearances, 8 in December, another 10 January/February, but just 3 in March then singles in August and October.

The Resident winter waders viz Snipe, Jack Snipe, Green Sandpiper & Common Sandpiper had all returned to winter last November, but both wintering Common Sandpipers had gone by early January. Notably there were two Avocets, in March, plus 10 Whimbrel in April. During May, wader highlights were a partial summer Grey Plover, 5 Sanderling, a single Ruff and two Turnstone. June had a summer plumaged Curlew Sandpiper and another Avocet. 2 more Sanderling, Little Stint, and a Wood Sandpiper for July. 2 flyover Dotterel at Sheep Down were seen in August which had 2 more Sanderling, another Little Stint, 2 Ruff, a Wood Sandpiper and a Turnstone.

The only skua, an Arctic Skua, was briefly over QMR on the 25th August. Little Gulls were in short supply, just groups of 3 and 6 during April, with, in August, another. A single May Kittiwake at QMR was the only record. Sandwich Terns - the first one in May, second in June - for a total of 6 minutes, the third in August and then two in September - all at QMR.

Arctic Terns were memorable for a flock of 62 at QMR in August. A single Whiskered Tern was an early morning visitor only to Colebrook Lake, Eversley one day in May. Black Terns - the first a group of 3 at Lavells Lake in late April, then 20 more in May, followed by a single group of 54 at QMR on the 6th August.

The Short Eared Owl winter roost, up on the Ridgeway, commenced during November, but had less Owls than normal, no doubt due to the amount of disturbance. Can we ask that this year visits are kept to an absolute minimum, and viewed only at the extreme edges.

QMR is the place to be for Rock Pipit, out of eight reported, only one was elsewhere. But for Water Pipit, flooded paddocks are useful, as two demonstrated in late March.

Waxwings have done better in Berkshire before this year, only a total of 25 this year, so far.



The third Bluethroat for Berkshire walked into telescope view late morning of the 9th April at Woolhampton. A superb male, this Bluethroat was very elusive, and in a very difficult viewing area. So difficult, that on occasions, two people could be standing side by side and only one person could see it, when it showed. It had gone the next morning. A migrant Black Redstart visited QMR for 3 days in Mid October.

Three spring male Ring Ouzels were located late April, but a Redwing discovered on the Bird Race by one of the Green Teams was quite exceptional.

Two Wood Warblers, the first at Whiteknights Lake in Reading showed and sang very well for its day visit in April, the other was at Greenham Common, another one day bird.

Review of Bird Sightings in Berkshire continued...

We do not seem to get many records from the West of the County, so that of two Bearded Tits was most welcome ,at Hungerford Marsh in November.

A Great Grey Shrike which arrived in October last year , finally departed on April FoolsDay from Wishmoor Bottom in Swinley Forest.



Two small flocks of Mealy Redpolls, both in February, were the main examples of this delightful bird.

Tree Sparrow has become a very scarce bird for Berkshire, so the individual who managed to photograph a single Tree Sparrow at Sonning Farm in September is envied by many Berkshire birders.

Thanks to the Rough Legged Buzzard, a regular site for Hawfinch was discovered , with up to 4 around Combe Church for three weeks or so from the end of February. Let's hope they return for 2010.

And finally, Sunday(8th November) was one of the better Berkshire Birding days of the year-with Whooper Swan and Greenshank at Lower Farm , Slavonian Grebe and probable Yellow Browed Warbler at the Wraysbury complex ,and Red Necked Grebe on QMR.

Membership Renewal – Banker's Order Form

BANKER'S ORDER

To: The Manager (<i>Name & address of your Bank</i>)	
Postcode:	
Sort Code:	Account No.
Account Name:	

Please pay (<i>amount in words</i>)	£
the first payment to made on (<i>date</i>) _____ and thereafter on 1st October annually until further notice to the account of BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB, Account no. 09138608, at Alliance & Leicester plc (72-00-05), Bootle, Merseyside, GIR 0AA.	
Signed:	Date:

Out of Africa: For how much longer?

The news that the Cuckoo has been added to the red list of Birds of Conservation Concern was widely broadcast, but the British Trust for Ornithology are concerned about declines in many of our other African migrants. The Wood Warbler and Pied Flycatchers have undergone declines of 60% since 1994, Nightingales, Spotted Flycatchers and Garden Warblers also seem to be in trouble and even the Willow Warbler is close to being red-listed. This is an international problem clearly noticeable at a national level, and with worrying changes in distribution appearing in the 2007 -2011 Atlas maps, something is clearly causing a problem for our migrants.

To investigate the possible causes, the BTO has launched their 'Out of Africa' Appeal, to raise funds for projects to gather basic information, much of which is still unknown, such as when birds arrive in Africa, the habitats they use and how they move around within this vast continent. Even the key wintering grounds for several of our declining species remains a bit of a mystery and despite over 300,000 birds having been ringed, we still have no mid-winter recovery of a British or Irish bird.

Some of this information will be gathered through transect work in Africa, as part of a joint BTO/ RSPB collaboration, but the BTO will also be working with other European NGOs and with African BirdLife partners and local conservation groups. A number of smaller more species-specific projects will also be undertaken and closer to home, the data gathered via the BTO Nest Records and Ringing Schemes in the UK will be analysed.

Some of the questions we will be trying to answer are:

Is the decline in Spotted Flycatchers warning us of major changes in insect numbers?

Are female Cuckoos out of synch with their key host species?

Is it harder for Swifts to find suitable nesting sites?

Is agricultural intensification in countries south of the Sahara having an effect on Turtle Doves?

Where do Wood Warblers, our archetypal birds of oak woodland, spend the winter?

One of the species-specific projects will use tiny geo-locators on a handful of Nightingales from East Anglia. Information from their routes and locations, once they have departed from England, will then be downloaded once the birds are caught again the next spring on return to their favourite haunts.

Projects like these will help revolutionise our understanding of migration and, as part of a wider project with Birdlife partners in Europe and Africa, help to target effective, informed conservation action. To support the appeal or for more information, please visit our website www.bto.org or you can send a cheque (made out to "BTO") to BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU with a note explaining which appeal it is for or phone us on 01842 750050 to pay by card over the phone.

Rachel Irvine, BTO