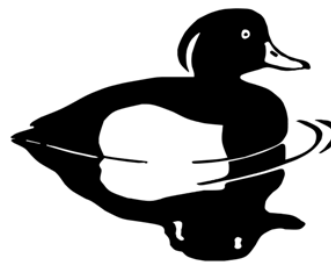


BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

# BOC Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2013

No 61



Introduction.....	1
Membership Renewals and Changes of Contact Details.....	1
“The Unfeathered Bird” – Talk at Reading Museum Saturday 28th September .....	2
Sixty years of the Eighteen bird .....	2
BOC Trip to Bury Down – 21st February 2013 .....	3
BOC Trip to Titchfield Haven - 7th April 2013 .....	3
And finally.....Young Bird finds an ideal place to rest up – between the shoulder blades of an Asiatic black bear! .....	4

## **Introduction**

This newsletter is going out with the mailshot for the new Club season, along with a number of inserts, including your membership renewal form, the new season programme card, the AGM papers and a copy of the winter garden bird survey form. The Committee has put together a varied programme of events for the new season, both indoor and outdoor – something for everyone. The indoor meetings will feature some top speakers on a variety of bird topics, with almost all meetings taking place in our usual venue at in the Palmer Building at Reading University. Unusually the first talk will be a joint venture with Reading Museum and will take place at the Museum on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> September (see below for more details, and let Ray Reedman know if you would like to attend so that seating can be planned). Outdoor excursions will take us to many fine birdwatching sites, both near to home and further afield – much further in the case of trips to Spain! Most outings are day or half day outings, but there are a few weekend options as well. All trips have named contacts so please talk to them to find out more and check that the trip is taking place as advertised, as circumstances can dictate changes to plans. For weekend and longer trips please contact the leader well in advance to book your place and allow arrangements (hotel rooms, car sharing etc) to be finalised in good time. The enclosed programme card contains information about both indoor meetings and outdoor trips so keep it handy through year as a reminder.

We are still looking for people to help out with the running of the Club, mainly with various elements of publicity. You don't need to have any particular skills, just a willingness to get a bit more involved in the Club and its activities, which we all benefit from and enjoy. So don't be afraid to put yourself forward if you have a little time to spare – further details are on the web site at [www.berksoc.org.uk](http://www.berksoc.org.uk)

All contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated – please get items for the next edition of the newsletter to me by the end of October.

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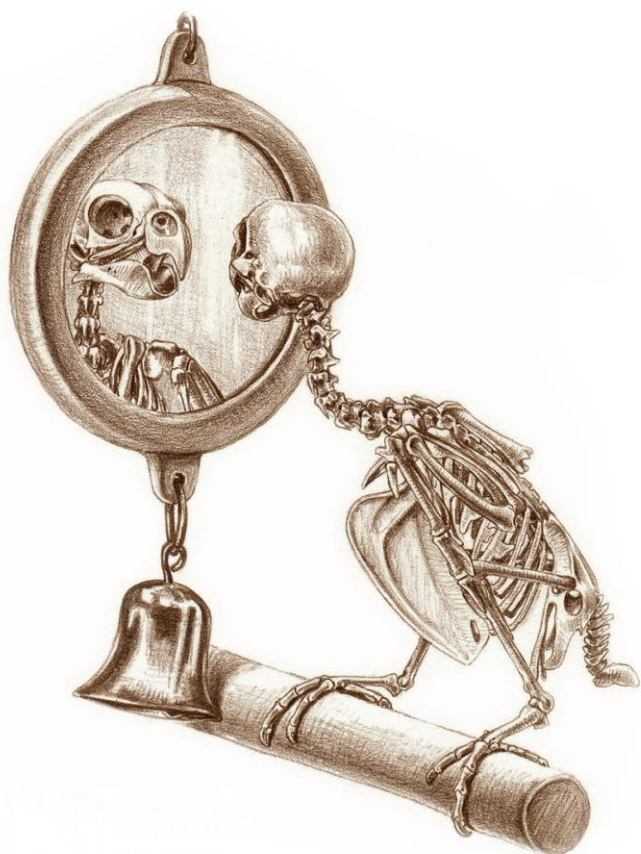
Many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter. Illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

## **Membership Renewals and Changes of Contact Details**

Enclosed with this newsletter is your annual membership renewal form. It would be really helpful and save the Membership Secretary a lot of work if you could deal with your renewal promptly. Could you please make sure that you remember to complete the form and include it with your subscription as this helps the Membership Secretary to keep the Club's records up to date.

*If you pay by standing order and you think that there are any changes to your details which you may not have told us about, could you also please also complete and return the form to the Membership Secretary.*

Mike Turton - Hon. Secretary



# THE UNFEATHERED BIRD

by Katrina van Grouw

The Berkshire Ornithological Club opens its new season of talks with a public event presented in conjunction with the Reading Museum.

Artist and author Katrina van Grouw will talk about her sensational new book *The Unfeathered Bird*, in which she illustrates the anatomical wonders of birds from around the world and discusses their features in a lucid and accessible style. You do not need to be a bird-lover, scientist or artist to appreciate the merits of this work: it is unique and startling, with many of the birds depicted as if in action, but with muscle and skeleton exposed. The work has been compared to that of Leonardo - and that is no great exaggeration!

Saturday 28th September 2.00-3.30 p.m.  
Entry £2 (BOC members free)

(for further BOC events, see leaflet or visit [www.berksoc.org.uk](http://www.berksoc.org.uk))



## Sixty years of the Eighteen bird

1953. Coronation and all that. Sixty years ago... But that was also the year in which people started to confirm that the Collared Dove had arrived in Britain. It was not recorded in Berkshire until 1960 and first bred here in 1964. Today it seems hard to remember that we were ever without them.



The influx was described by James Fisher, in *British Birds*, May 1953, as a “colonisation more spectacular than that of any other known land bird”. In truth it was no surprise, as this attractive bird had been spreading inexorably westwards from Asia for some centuries. In his article, Fisher charted the bird’s historical range- expansion, showing that by the time it was described and named in 1838 it was still something of a novelty in Eastern Europe: by that time, the bird’s westwards spread had only reached as far as Greece. Curiously it had barely crossed the Balkans by 1940, but eventual progress towards the English Channel took little more than a decade, once the birds had crossed the main mountain ranges. In 1952 Fisher had observed the first known occurrence of breeding in this country. The next phase is now familiar to all of us,

since Fisher points out that the species everywhere clings to Man and to his habitations. Whereas the Fulmar had already spread with equal panache to the coasts of Britain, few were really aware of it, but the Collared Dove decided that our gardens and parks were just what it needed. It was hard to ignore: *Streptopelia decaocto* just moved in!

It was not until 1855 that Charles-Lucien Bonaparte created the generic name *Streptopelia*, (meaning collared dove), but the specific name chosen in 1838 by the Hungarian naturalist, Frivaldszky has a curious story...

Frivaldszky had received a skin collected in Philippopolis (now Plovdiv, Bulgaria) by one C. Hinke. He named the species *S. decaocto*, which is simply the Latin for “eighteen”. So why not twenty, or twenty-five or ninety-nine? Well the simple truth is that a serving girl in Ancient Greece could apparently earn no more! James Fisher explains that the legend had been recounted by the same Hinke to J.F. Naumann in 1837, in the following way:

*“A poor maid was servant to a hard –hearted mistress, who gave her as wages no more than eighteen pieces a year. The maid prayed to the Gods that she would like it to be known to the world how miserably she was paid by her mistress. Thereupon, Zeus created this Dove, which proclaims an audible deca-octo to all the world to this very day.”*

Fisher quite rightly points out that Zeus did not do his job very well. To put it another way, the four-syllables of the name fit badly with the repetitive three-syllable song. I surmise that there was possibly a local shortening of the second vowel to *dec’octo* to allow the tale to work, but in any case such legends cannot be taken too literally. So it is the “Eighteen bird” rather than the ninety-nine bird!

Given that Europe has so few representatives of the family, it is ironic that the numbers of Turtle Dove have started to dive so spectacularly in the years since the Collared Dove’s arrival. So, instead of ignoring the now commonplace Collared Dove, count your blessings. And if the song drives you to distraction, count to eighteen, and then to sixty – and then contemplate the value of a true winner.

Ray Reedman, June 2013

### **BOC Trip to Bury Down – 21st February 2013**

Like you I’ve done my fair share of birdwatching through our English winters at some very exposed sites - Blakeney Point, Snettisham and the Isle of Sheppey come to mind. But the bitter cold is always compensated for by some special birds. I didn’t expect Twite or Snow Bunting at Bury Down but the BOC programme promised a good selection of birds including Corn Bunting and Grey Partridge – both Red List species – and the site is well-known for its Short-eared Owls. I listened to the lunch-time weather forecast and the Met Office promised a bitterly cold afternoon, due primarily they said, to the very low temperature - no, really?

The previous BOC trip to Bury Down took place in incessant rain and barely half a dozen of us found the target owls, buntings and partridges. So with 18 in the group this year and despite the cold surely we could do as well or better. But never in the field of BOC excursions was so much effort expended by so many people on so few species.

The Owls are often to be seen roosting in bushes to the side of the Ridgeway. So this area was raked by binoculars and stringiform-shaped branches were drilled into optically. Horizons were scanned but every large bird of prey had a forked tail. No owls were found. And with small passerines and game birds the story was the same. The best we got were two Fieldfares who can never have received so much attention. The desperation of the group was summed up as a flock of Woodpigeons was greeted with great enthusiasm and the sighting of Blackbird was announced with pride. We returned to the waiting cars with just one thing of note – the unfailing good spirits of BOC members.



With many people having departed, but with a few of us waiting on John Roberts brewing us a cup of tea, a flock of Golden Plover flashed low over the car park. It’s not over until the fat lady sings, but it wasn’t much of an opera. The trip can though go into the BOC record books as being the only occasion when the number of members was twice the number of species seen!

Peter Burden

Editor’s Note: It is worth saying that the vast majority of BOC trips are much more productive, but, if all else fails (as Peter says), there is always the company of like-minded fellow members to enjoy!

### **BOC Trip to Titchfield Haven - 7th April 2013**

A previous plan to visit Pagham a few weeks before had been scuttled by a late winter storm, with snow and black ice making the run too hazardous. The vicious north-easterly wind, which had prevailed since then, swung to a kinder, south-easterly quarter just in time for the BOC trip to Titchfield Haven on the Solent. Ten of us took advantage of the improvement to enjoy a cool day by the sea.

While the group assembled, a scan of the sea found only Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes and one Red-breasted Merganser – and even that flew off before I could get anyone else onto it!

However, the big news of the morning was of six Spoonbills on the inner part of the reserve. Sadly only one was still visible when we arrived at the furthest hide. Carole, however, managed to find the whole flock later in the day, when she walked up the Meon Canal path.



The real spectacle on the site was really something of a sensation: from the Meon Shore Hide we could see maybe a thousand Black-headed Gulls and well over two hundred Mediterranean Gulls all settling in on the islets for the breeding season. The cacophony was intense, to say the least, and the courtship intense. I think there can be few such spectacles so readily available in the South of England. Last year's breeding there had been a disaster, due mainly to the persistent wet weather and flooding, but here were all those birds anxious to make a new start. The real puzzle would be for the late-returning Common Terns which usually nest there, but they were still somewhere to the south. Two pairs of Avocets seemed to be making an effort to get ahead, mating between feeding bouts, while a small contingent of the usual Black-tailed Godwits, an assortment of dabbling ducks, and others, such as Redshank, Snipe and Moorhen, fed on the pools. It was then high tide, which meant that Oystercatchers and several clusters of Bar-tailed Godwits were resting quietly, as were a few Great Black-backed and Common Gulls. *(The photograph shows Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls and both godwits, the one Black-tailed already showing breeding colours and the diagnostic white wing-bar as it preens. One Oystercatcher helps to emphasize the smaller size of the two clusters of Bar-tailed.)*



As the tide dropped during the afternoon there was more activity on the shore-line, with a flock of forty or so Brent Geese, a number of Herring Gulls, and several waders, including Ringed Plovers, Turnstones, Dunlin and Curlews. And for the three of us who had lingered for a warm drink at the cafe, a last scan of the beach found us a nice Greenshank just as we were due to leave.

Ray Reedman

**And finally.....Young Bird finds an ideal place to rest up – between the shoulder blades of an Asiatic black bear!**

Life in Animals Asia's moon bear rescue sanctuary in Chengdu, China, is never dull. The sanctuary is home to 147 bears, living in 14 "houses" and enclosures. These animals are the lucky ones – just a small percentage of over 10,000 bears trapped in horrendous conditions on China's bear bile farms. They have been rescued by the animal welfare charity, Animals Asia, working in conjunction with Chinese government authorities. Together, they have closed down 43 farms and delivered a total of 277 bears to Animals Asia's sanctuary where, after months of remedial surgery, those that survive are free to roam the beautiful semi-natural enclosures of the centre.



However, in August, the bear care team, who thought they had seen most things in the 12 years since the sanctuary's opening, noticed an extraordinary event in one of the bear enclosures.

The 13 bears living in that enclosure were, as usual, involved in their daily routine of climbing, swimming and foraging for food. However, on that day, one of the bears was joined by a new visitor to the enclosure – a tiny, young tree sparrow.

Earlier, whilst the bear team had been busy enriching the enclosure with food and new treats for the bears, they had noticed the little bird fluttering around the log pile. It flew off quite happily when the team approached it but when the bears were let out of their dens, the little bird flew straight back and made a bee-line for one of the female bears, Mutzi. It perched on her back and, as Mutzi carried on her way, gobbling up whatever treats she could find and seemingly unconcerned by her passenger, the little bird started nestling into her fur. As Mutzi moved around, the sparrow would continually flutter up to reposition itself in the thickest fur near Mutzi's shoulder blades. It carried on doing this for a good thirty minutes before it finally flew away.

One of the charity's ex Bear Managers and keen birder, Falk, gave his own explanation of why Mutzi was so attractive to this member of the avian species.

*"It is not unusual for adult birds to use animal hair for nest building. What is interesting here is that the bird is a juvenile tree sparrow. This bird is definitely not intending to build any nests any time soon but indeed was just enjoying a nice place to rest. It's certainly one of the safer places as long as it stays away from the bear's teeth and paws. Maybe it was raised in a nest made of bear fur, and just daydreams a bit?! Who knows..."*

For further information on the work of Animals Asia, please visit [www.animalsasia.org](http://www.animalsasia.org)