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## **Introduction**

Along with one or two others fellow members I've just started to do some surveying on local heathland mainly (at this time of the year at least) for woodlarks. I can only say that, on a quiet sunny morning listening to the wonderful descending song of this normally unobtrusive but delightful, little bird takes a bit of beating. It certainly makes getting up early and putting up with the odd jogger and dog-walker (OK, I know they're not all odd!) more than worthwhile. All of which signals that Spring is very much upon us – I hope you are all enjoying the improving weather and imminent arrival of our summer migrants.

Although the Club's indoor season is coming to an end, our trips and excursions continue throughout the rest of the year - further details are shown in the item at the end of the newsletter and also in your Club programme card and on the Club Web site. Foreign trips this year will feature the last "Raptormania" in Andalucia, Spain (Ken White has no plans to run another such trip) – I'm sure that everyone going on the trip will have a great time. Also of note are the weekend trip Cornwall in October and our annual coach trip to the BirdFair in August – all are recommended - so please contact the leaders if you are interested. Of course there will be trips to sites closer to home as well, so please come along and enjoy the birds and the company of fellow Club members.

The next newsletter will go out in the summer, so please get any items to me by the end of May.  
As always many thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter.

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## **Can you help Publicise your Club?**

There are a number of people doing sterling work publicising the BOC though the media, leaflets, attending events and electronic media such as the website, Facebook and Twitter. However there are still some areas where the Club could be promoted more effectively. To do this, the committee are looking for:

- Someone who could coordinate and develop the work that is being doing to publicise the Club. This doesn't mean doing all the publicity yourself – there are others already doing a lot of the work.
- Someone to design a new publicity leaflet and poster for the Club.
- Someone to coordinate the distribution of the publicity leaflets, recruit other volunteers to help with distribution and identify new places where leaflets and posters can be displayed.
- Someone to look after the Club's display for public events.
- Any BOC members who would be interested in helping out on the Club stand, telling members of the public about birds, bird conservation and the work of the BOC.
- Any BOC members who would be able to help distribute leaflets to libraries, hides, information centres, etc. in their local area.

We'd also like to hear from anyone who has experience of the secondary school curriculum to help us develop some guidance on projects and resources for KS3/4.

If you'd like any further details, please contact Mike Turton on 07815 644385 or at secretary@berksoc.org.uk

### **Opportunity for an Archivist**

Is there anyone out there who could look after the Club archives? This currently consists of a copy of each of the Annual Reports produced by the BOC and ROC and documents held by the Treasurer and Secretary relating to the running of the Club. The archives need a home and someone who can look after them, adding documents when they become available. There may be the rare occasion when Club officers need access to the archives. Not an onerous task, but you will need suitable dry storage space. If you're able to help, please contact Mike Turton (Secretary) on 07815 644385 or at secretary@berksoc.org.uk.

### **Social Media**

If you are a user of Facebook or Twitter then you might be interested to hear that the Club now uses these to promote its activities. To find us on Facebook just search for Berkshire Ornithological Club , and on Twitter using @BerksBirdClub

### **BOC Photographic Competition 2014**

This year's competition features about 160 images, and that was after some pictures had been eliminated before the evening began, to enable the competition to fit into the tight two hour meeting time. Expert judges Dickie Duckett and David Cotteridge did the judging, providing useful feedback as they went on, while selecting the winner and runner-up in each of the three categories (Portrait, Action and Flight). The standard was universally excellent which made the judging all the more difficult – as Dickie stressed, judging this form of competition is, by its nature, somewhat subjective.

For the most part the judges were in accord, the occasional slight differences in opinion merely adding to the enjoyment of the evening. Once the winner in each category was chosen by the judges the audience were asked to vote for the overall winner, with Brian Winter's portrait of a Little Owl (the reproduction of it here doing it no justice at all!), which beautifully captured the character of the bird, convincingly winning the vote and with it the Gordon Langsbury Trophy.

The winners were as follows :-

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Portrait Category - | Winner – Brian Winter (Little Owl)<br>Runner-Up – Bill Watts (Nuthatch)          |
| Action Category -   | Winner – Josie Hewitt (Grey Phalarope)<br>Runner-Up – Marek Walford (Sanderling) |
| Flight Category -   | Winner – John Walker (Puffin)<br>Runner-Up – Ken White (Sanderlings)             |

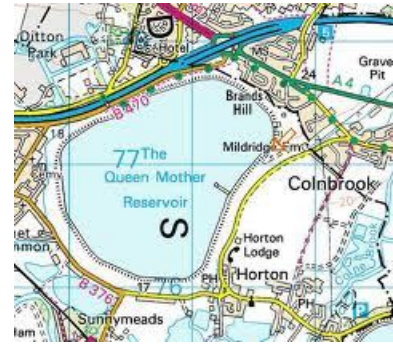
### **Overall Winner – Little Owl by Brian Winter**



**\*\*Stop Press\*\* - QMR Access Update - \*\*Stop Press\*\***

To help improve members' access to Queen Mother Reservoir I have negotiated a special deal with Datchet Water Sailing Club (DWSC). This should be of particular interest to our regular visitors to QMR.

The sailing club will provide members with a DWSC swipe card for use with the automatic barrier at the exit from the site. Each swipe card will be valid for up to one year and expire on 31 Dec each year. The swipe card will cost £5 per annum. The £5 payment is a nominal charge to cover the administration costs of issuing the card.



The swipe card will activate the automatic barrier for exiting QMR. Entry is gained by driving up close to the barrier. A traffic light signal at the barrier indicates when it is safe to cross. The swipe card is for the use of the named member only and may not be used to let other vehicles out of the site. Even if you have one of these swipe cards, you must still sign in and out at the BOC hut adjacent to the gates, carry your permit and photo id with you and follow all the other regulations as printed on your permit card.

I will be administering this new deal and so if you want a swipe card please email me at [mckee.michael@gmail.com](mailto:mckee.michael@gmail.com) as soon as possible but by 30 April at the latest. (Alternatively leave a message on 01753 865798). When I have a complete list of members who want cards I will arrange for DWSC to produce the cards and they will then be available for collection from the sailing club by BOC members on presentation of their BOC QMR permit, photo id and payment of £5. I will advise members when the cards are ready for collection.

Please note that once you order a swipe card from me it must be collected and paid for. DWSC will be preparing all the swipe cards in advance so if a card is ordered but not collected the sailing club will not produce another one for that member in the future! If your swipe card is ever lost or stolen you will need to advise me immediately so that it can be deactivated. A replacement card will incur a new fee.

Good birding

Michael McKee

**Reading takes on the University BirdWatch Challenge**

Anyone visiting the University of Reading's Whiteknights campus recently may have come across some of our staff and students with binoculars in one hand and a smartphone (or notepad and pen!) in the other. Our competitive natures have kicked in as we have entered the University BirdWatch Challenge, a national birdwatching competition run by the organisation A Focus on Nature.



Since the 1<sup>st</sup> January we have been busy submitting records to the BTO's fantastic BirdTrack website, and we have until Friday 4<sup>th</sup> July to find as many birds and submit as many records as we can. The idea has really taken off, and so far our team of 136 have seen 59 species, with more to find when the migrants start coming in. Some highlights have included great views of our resident pair of little owl, the pair of goosander which spent a few weeks on the lake, sightings of hunting peregrine and our displaying great crested grebes. With such a wealth of bird diversity on Whiteknights, how could we not be in with a chance of winning?!

The aims of the competition are to help encourage students to take an active interest in identifying and recording their local wildlife, and already we are beginning to achieve this with the newly formed Reading University Ornithological Society being set up by some of our team members. This new student group will be affiliated with the BOC and will be a fantastic way for the BOC to interact with and support young birders on campus.

The organisers of the competition are soon to be releasing some interim results, so we are keeping our fingers crossed that we are doing well in the rankings. Get in touch if you want to find out more about the competition (Dr Becky Thomas: [rebecca.thomas@reading.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.thomas@reading.ac.uk); Chris Foster: [c.w.foster@reading.ac.uk](mailto:c.w.foster@reading.ac.uk)).

Becky Thomas and Chris Foster

## **Kerala – the Place for Curry and Birds**

It wasn't supposed to be a birding trip. We were in Kerala because of Rick Stein and his search for the perfect curry. The programmes on tv had enthralled us and so our first ever trip to India was booked.

The itinerary looked enticing: a trek in the jungle, a trip to an elephant orphanage, visiting a spice plantation, staying on a houseboat on the backwaters, and that visit to the Thattakad Bird Sanctuary. It was recommended that we take binoculars for the birds and wildlife that we might see. In the event we saw no wild elephant or tigers, just tantalising elephant footprints in the jungle.

But the bird life was incredible. In Cochin on our first day we saw lots of eagle-like birds fishing in the harbour. We learnt later that they were Brahminy Kites. We saw them again in the backwaters and over the sea. In a spice plantation, on the ground, we saw a Coucal which reminded us of the Pheasants that strut around our garden at home. We saw Oriental White-Eye and Nilgiri Pied Flycatcher in a national park.



Staying in the foothills of the Western Ghats, amongst plantations of cardamom, we were woken by a man whistling a tune as he worked. Next day – same tune. Of course it wasn't a man at all, it was the Malabar Whistling Thrush. Although not a remarkable bird to look at, one we shall always remember for that tune. A much more striking bird, dark-blue-black with long tail streamers, was the Greater Racquet-Tailed Drongo perched on a wire not far off our hotel balcony. From the same vantage point, among the trees a flash of gold – and there was the beautiful Black-Hooded Oriole. Rufous Treepies, like large caramel-and-white Magpies, hopped from branch to branch. That hotel with its memorable name of “Bracknell Forest” was a brilliant bird-watching location.

We had a wonderful guide for our trip to Thattakad Bird Sanctuary. Our first stop was a lagoon where he pointed out Lesser Whistling-Duck and Common Kingfisher. On a wire over a river we saw little grey groups of Ashy Swallow-Shrike. Once in the forest a raucous squawking alerted him to Lesser Hill Myna. We saw Heart-Spotted Woodpecker and Lesser Golden-Backed Woodpecker; Purple-Rumped Sunbird and Loten's Sunbird with their curved bills; Grey-Headed Bulbul, Red-Whiskered Bulbul and Flame-Throated Bulbul; fork-tailed Bronzed Drongo and Ashy Drongo; Green Imperial Pigeon and Spotted Dove; Plum-Headed Parakeet and Blue-Tailed Bee-Eater. We were lucky to see Malabar Grey Hornbill. The list had grown to about 30 different species by the time we got back to the car, tired, hot and sweaty but elated!

Like Jackdaws in our beech trees at home, the coconut palms were full of Little Cormorants. On Periyar Lake there were Great Cormorants, Intermediate Egret, White-Throated Kingfisher and the strange black-and-white Pied Kingfisher. We saw Grey Heron and White-Throated Stork. In the river margins we were fascinated by Indian Pond Heron, small stocky brown-striped birds that were transformed when they flew by their white wings. They seemed to change colour as we watched.

The birds were wonderful, the people were lovely and the scenery was stunning, and we had some excellent food too. If anyone is thinking of visiting Kerala we can recommend the Kerala Travel Centre who organised our trip faultlessly.

Sheila Chatten

## **Birdwatching Trip - Spring 2015 - Bulgaria, Macedonia & Greece**

And while we're on the subject of foreign birdwatching trips, if you are interested in a trip in the spring of next year to some of the wonderful birdwatching sites of these countries this could be your chance, with an expert local guide ensuring a great trip. Precise dates have yet to be fixed but will be around late April or early May. At this stage costs are still an estimate but flights (Heathrow to Sofia) are expected to be around £250 and transport and accommodation costs approximately £900.

For further details contact Club Members Carol Winder (on 01753 854393) or Brian Watts (on 0118 9482843).

## **The BOC Bird-Watching Code**

The BOC committee has recently approved a bird-watching code as a way of advising both members and non-members of appropriate ways of behaving whilst out birding. This code is based on the RSPB's official code with some important but relatively small modifications.

The three alterations cover:

- 1) The use of playing recordings of song or calls to encourage a bird to respond. Bird Ringers are only allowed to use tapes in the breeding season if they have a species specific addition to their license and even then the rules that must be followed cover the length of time, frequency and volume of playback. These rules cover all species and are in recognition of the effect such disturbance can have – if these rules aren't followed closely it can result in desertion or abandonment of territories. It would seem sensible to adopt a similar approach in all situations with breeding or potentially breeding birds.
- 2) Informing the BOC if you find a rare bird potentially breeding – this has been added because in some circumstances it may be wise to inform the land owner and sort out ways they can continue to use the area without threatening the breeding birds. Some of our conservation sub-committee have experience of working with landowners and companies to allow them to keep operating in areas where Schedule 1 species are breeding and licensed nest monitoring has shown this to be successful.
- 3) Deliberately flushing birds so they can be seen. The explicit consideration of other birds present in the area where the bird you want to see is, has been added to try and ensure that less rare species aren't disturbed unnecessarily. Obviously this should cover all wildlife not just birds.

We have approved and published this code as an encouragement to all members and birders to act responsibly when bird watching. At all times remember to think about a bird's welfare together with the welfare of other wildlife in the same area.

## **THE BIRD-WATCHING CODE**

### ***The interests of the bird come first.***

Birds respond to people in many ways, depending on the species, location and time of year. Disturbance can keep birds from their nests, leaving chicks hungry or enabling predators to take eggs or young. During cold weather or when migrants have just made a long flight, repeatedly flushing birds can mean they use up vital energy that they need for feeding. Intentional or reckless disturbance of some species at or near the nest is illegal in Britain.

Whether your particular interest is photography, ringing, sound-recording or birdwatching, remember that the interests of the bird must always come first.

- Avoid going too close to birds or disturbing their habitats – if a bird flies away or makes repeated alarm calls, you are too close. And if it leaves, you won't get a good view.
- Stay on roads and paths where they exist and avoid disturbing habitat used by birds.
- Think about your fieldcraft. Disturbance is not just about going too close – a flock of wading birds on the foreshore can be disturbed from a mile away if you stand on the seawall.
- Repeatedly playing a recording of birdsong or calls to encourage a bird to respond can divert a territorial bird from other important duties, such as feeding its young. Never use playback to attract a species during its breeding season, even if it isn't a normal breeder in the area as this could prevent potential colonisation.

### ***Know the rules for visiting the countryside, and follow them.***

Respect the wishes of local residents and landowners, and don't enter private land without permission unless it is open for public access on foot. Follow the codes on access and the countryside for the place you're walking in.

Irresponsible behaviour may cause a land manager to deny access to others (eg for necessary survey work). It may also disturb the bird or give birdwatching bad coverage in the media.

Legislation provides access for walkers to open country in Britain, and includes measures to protect wildlife. In England and Wales, access is to land mapped as mountain, moor, heath and down, and to registered common land. However, local restrictions may be in force, so follow the Countryside Code and plan your visit. In England, the Countryside Code and maps showing areas for public access are at [www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk](http://www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk).

### ***Know the law***

In England, Scotland and Wales, it is a criminal offence to disturb, intentionally or recklessly, at or near the nest, a species listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. Disturbance could include playback of songs and calls. The courts can impose fines of up to £5,000 and/or a prison sentence of up to six months for each offence. In Scotland, disturbance of capercaillie and ruffs at leks is also an offence.

The government can, for particular reasons such as scientific study, issue licences to individuals that permit limited disturbance, including monitoring of nests and ringing.

It is a criminal offence to destroy or damage, intentionally or recklessly, a special interest feature of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or to disturb the wildlife for which the site was notified. In England, Wales, a fine of up to £20,000 may be imposed by the Magistrates' Court, or an unlimited fine by the Crown Court. In Scotland, the maximum fine on summary conviction is £40,000, or an unlimited fine on conviction on indictment.

If you witness anyone who you suspect may be illegally disturbing or destroying wildlife or habitat, phone the police immediately (ideally, with a six-figure map reference) and report it to the RSPB.

***If you discover a rare bird, please bear the following in mind:***

- Consider the potential impact of spreading the news and make an effort to inform the landowner (or, on a nature reserve, the warden) first. Think about whether the site can cope with a large number of visitors and whether sensitive species might be at risk, such as breeding terns, flocks of wading birds or rare plants.
- On private land, always talk to the landowner first. With a little planning, access can often be arranged.
- Rare breeding birds are at risk from egg-collectors and some birds of prey from persecution. If you discover a rare breeding species that you think is vulnerable and under any circumstances report it to the County Recorder (for Berkshire: email records@berksoc.org.uk) as a matter of urgency or the RSPB if it's outside the county. The County Recorder will consider telling the landowner of the bird's presence and legal obligations in most cases, and this will help ensure that the nest is not disturbed accidentally.

***If you have the opportunity to see a rare bird, enjoy it, but don't let your enthusiasm override common sense. In addition to the guidelines above:***

- If you go to see a rare bird, park sensibly, follow instructions and consider making a donation if requested.
- Don't get too close for a photograph – you'll earn the wrath of everyone else if you flush the bird out of sight.
- Be patient if the viewing is limited, talk quietly and give others a chance to see the bird too.
- Do not enter private areas without permission.
- Birds should not be flushed more frequently than every two hours nor within two hours of sunrise or sunset, so that the bird has chance to feed and rest. Birds should never be flushed in important wildlife habitats or where there are other nesting or roosting birds nearby. In the breeding season flushing rare visitors can be very disruptive at any time to both the rarity and other species that are breeding in the area.

Tim Ball (BOC Chairman)

### **Upcoming Club Trips and Excursions**

**Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2014 - Cholsey Marsh, Oxfordshire** (*Mid-week walk*)

Contact Martin Sell 0118 9471170

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2014 - Coach Trip to Rutland Water with East Berks RSPB** (*Full day*) Cost £18.

Book with Ernie Allen 01628 625324

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014 - Selsey Bill sea-watch and Pagham Harbour, West Sussex** (*Full day by car*)

Contact Carole White 01344 452058

**Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014 - Fobney Marsh** (*Mid-week walk*)

Contact Renton Righelato 0118 9264513

**Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014 - Berkshire Downs** (*Evening Mid-week walk*)

Contact Robert Godden 07543 800921

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014 - Pirbright, Surrey** (*Evening Mid-week walk*)

Contact Colin Wilson 01252 837411

**Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2014 - BOC Coach to British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland**

Book with Ray Reedman 0118 9864338

**30<sup>th</sup> August to 5<sup>th</sup> September 2014 - Raptomania in Andalucia** (*7-day trip to Spain by air and minibus*)

Tel 01635 268442 or email white.zoothera@gmail.com

**Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014 - Cornwall** (*Long weekend by private car*)

Email colin.wilson@berksoc.org.uk for details or to reserve your place.