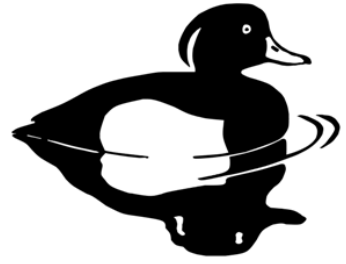


BOC Newsletter

Summer 2015

No 67



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Introduction

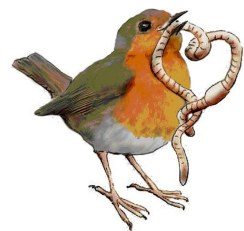
This newsletter is going out with the mailshot for the new Club season, along with all the usual inserts. The Committee (with special mention of Ray Reedman for his unstinting efforts) has, as always, put together a varied and interesting calendar of indoor and outdoor events for the coming year. Most indoor meetings will take place on Wednesday evenings in the Palmer Building at the University of Reading, featuring some top speakers on a variety of bird topics – something for everyone we hope. It is worth making special mention of our more social events (but all our meetings are social events I hear you rightly say!) – the Christmas Social Evening on December 16th and our new Social Afternoon on April 16th next year. Both promise to be very enjoyable and provide a good opportunity to meet other members of the Club. And please bring along a friend (or friends!) to any of our indoor meetings this year, as we'll be waiving our usual non-member's fee for first-time guests in a bid to boost membership (see item below).

Outdoor excursions will take us to many fine birdwatching sites, both near to home and further afield – some by car and others using a shared coach. Most outings are day or half day outings, but there are a few weekend trips 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. **For weekend and longer trips please contact the leader well in advance to allow all the arrangements to be made.**

And for those of you who might have missed the result (no, not the General Election or the Ashes!) the vote for UK's National Bird, ended with the Robin as the winner. Not sure the vote it will make much difference to the species but I can add that, if my garden is anything to go by at least, they seem to be having a good breeding season, with a succession of young birds spotted (forgive the pun!) around the area over the last few months.

As always, 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.

Please let us know if your Contact Details Change

Just a plea to all members to let the Club know if your contact details change (e.g. postal address, email address and telephone number). It is easy to forget to tell everybody when things change, particularly when changing email provider, but it is really helpful if you could let Iain Oldcorn (bocmembershipsec@hotmail.co.uk) when things change. If you have stopped receiving things from us, or you are not sure, you can always drop Iain a quick email just to check that we have the right details. It will allow us to keep in contact with you, makes our lives easier and you might never know what you are missing if you don't let us know!

BOC Membership Drive

The club has started a drive to recruit new members so we are asking existing BOC members to 'bring a friend' to BOC evening talks during 2015/2016. As an incentive for non-members to come along, the club will waive the entrance fee for people attending for the first time. We have also assembled some materials such as posters, membership forms and a presentation about the Club.

If anyone would like to help with this publicity work please get in touch with Richard Stansfield at richard.stansfield53@gmail.com

Auction of Birds of Berkshire Artwork



Two of Robert Gillmor's excellent Birds of Berkshire cover artworks will be put up for auction in the autumn (Red Footed Falcons 2008 & Bluethroat 2009). As with previous auctions it will take the form of sealed bids to the Secretary.

Watch out for further details via email, the web site and at indoor meetings



Seeing Green

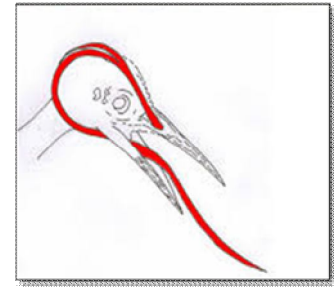
It was mid-March on Crookham Common on a bright and sunny morning. Adrian Brown, Gray Burfoot and I were enjoying our weekly outing. It had been quiet for a time when Adrian spotted two Green Woodpeckers sitting together on the close-cropped grass near some gorse. This was unusual, as this is usually a solitary bird. However, this was the start of the mating season, so the natural assumption was that these were a pair. They sat upright, face to face and just a few inches apart. Suddenly, one of them jerked its body to the right at an angle, with his head and bill pointing right. The second bird mirrored that movement. The stylised movements continued in that vein for some three or four minutes, sometimes perfectly coordinated and sometimes out of synch, rather like a comedy mirror-mime, but made slightly surreal by the stern masks of the birds. In many ways it was as beautiful and as fascinating as the mating rituals of the Great Crested Grebes, but there was no contact between these birds. This was in fact the ritual sparring of two rivals for the rights to a feeding territory. Their bills are designed to drill into a tree-trunk or to delve into the crust of an ants' nest, so both wielded a daunting weapon and they might have done each-other considerable harm. Instead, they performed a beautiful, stylised, non-contact demonstration, a sort of avian tai chi, which served to satisfy honour and to warn an adversary in a fairly pointed way that this territory "is not big enough for both us!" The climax seemed to come when one "mantled" like a bird of prey over its kill, at which point the other conceded gracefully and flew back into Bowdown Wood.



Such a show was new to me, so I made an effort to find out more. I discovered that this is an infrequently-recorded scene. According to observations reported in the *Birds of the Western Palearctic*, these might have been birds of either sex, though they were most probably males. It seems that the tension might well have been greater had it concerned breeding and nesting territory, when real fights do occur, often in trees. Bizarrely, one observer quoted in BWP recorded an open-bill conflict in which tongues became entwined. As might be predicted with such a strong bill, mortality has been recorded.

The fact that these woodpeckers spend a lot of time on the ground and in grassland is not always appreciated. Like their cousins, the Greater and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, they do drill holes in trees for nesting, but they spend far less time feeding aloft. Although winter weather may force them to forage for a wide diet of grubs, beetles, millipedes, earthworms and the like, or even certain berries and fruit, their favourite food by far is the humble ant. The bill serves as a pickaxe to hollow out the ant-hill and to expose the chambers inside. On such occasions, as with trails of foraging ants, the long, flickering, sticky tongue comes into play to scoop up the exposed ants and their grubs.

That tongue is a truly remarkable instrument, since, to allow for its tremendous extension, the tongue is anchored in the bird's upper mandible and passes round the back of the skull before emerging in the lower mandible, where it becomes a long, supple and pointed anti-gatherer.



Knowing that the bird carries a formidable bill, I have been surprised on more than one occasion by the apparent cowardice of the Green Woodpecker. It is a vocal bird at the best of times, but it screeches one of the most panicky alerts in the bird world. The first time I heard it was at Lavell's Lake when a screaming green streak hurtled across the Loddon to plunge headlong into a clump of ivy. Hot on its heels was a female Sparrowhawk. The same sort of scene was repeated a few years later in a hedgerow at Farlington Marshes and again the woodpecker screamed blue murder. Each time the outcome was not visible, but in thick cover the odds are that the woodpecker has an advantage over the grappling hooks of the hawk.

By curious coincidence, Ancient Greek legend provides a different sort of link between those two birds and the clue is to be found in their respective scientific names, *Picus viridus*, the Green Woodpecker, and *Accipiter nisus*, the Sparrowhawk. Poor old King Picus of Latium, rejected the advances of the witch Circe and instead married a wood nymph. In the flash of her fury he was transformed into a woodpecker. King Nisus was betrayed to the enemy by a love-struck daughter and, in the kerfuffle of his vengeful wrath, the gods turned him into a hawk. Such avian transmutations were not uncommon in these legends and their metaphor is closely linked with the concepts of life after death and of winged angels.



So returning once again to the image of our two posing Green Woodpeckers, it seems that their mimed joust and the discreet retreat of one of the protagonists suggests that Green Woodpeckers have evolved the capacity to weigh up the odds and to know when discretion is the better part of valour. A crop-full of ants weighed against the loss of an eye? No contest! But if the stakes are higher there might well be some blood on the branches. These characteristics are not unique in Nature, of course, but it is not every day that they are so beautifully demonstrated.

Ray Reedman, March 2015
Pictures by Adrian Brown

BOC Norfolk Weekend - February 2015

The Club weekend in Norfolk has been running every year for 20 or more years, in more or less its present form, so although the plan might be much the same from year to year, the birds we find and the ease of finding them varies quite a bit. This year twites were quite easy to find but snow buntings were not, while short-eared owls were almost abundant but shore larks were very thin on the ground. But I am getting ahead of myself – read on and events will be presented in the proper order.



The weekend began early on Thursday morning, at 5:30 am or earlier for most of us, so that we could make our way by car to Ipswich for a group breakfast before moving on via several good bird watching spots to finish up around dusk at Stubb Mill, near Hickling Broad. A small group went off in to look for (and find) a surf scoter near Felixstowe while the main party went north stopping at various points north of Ipswich. After a failed search for a waxwing flock at Kesgrave we called in at Minsmere RSPB, partly for a coffee and comfort break, but also to spend a couple of hours viewing the birds on the scrapes. Unfortunately, because we had a lot of ground to cover, we soon had to move on towards the Yarmouth area so there was not enough time to complete the circuit of all the hides. Even so, we saw dozens of red-throated divers and a great-northern diver off the coast, and a large number of small birds, including marsh tits, on the feeders, though there was not much to be seen on the scrapes other than lots of teal and wigeon and a few common waders. At Lowestoft, we visited Britain's most easterly point at Lowestoft Ness, an exposed promontory set in the unattractive industrial area near Lowestoft harbour, but the purple sandpipers that came almost close enough to touch did not seem to mind the unattractive scenery.

By the time we got to the view point at Stubb Mill, an elevated bank from which about 30 people can scan the marshes, it was about 4pm on a very dull evening, so the light was not good, but at least it was fairly mild by Norfolk standards. Despite the dimness, we got fairly good views of a barn owl hunting in the fields to our right and watched many marsh harriers and a few hen harriers, including a nice male, coming in to their roosting place far out in the marsh. We could hear common cranes calling quite near to us behind some trees but we had only a couple of brief and distant views of small parties flying to the roost site, though a few lucky people who arrived late saw a group of 4 feeding in a field beside the lane leading to the car park. We walked back to the cars in near darkness before making our way to our hotel in Yarmouth for the night.



We had an early(ish) breakfast on Friday and then paid a fairly brief visit to the adjacent beach to see the flock of Mediterranean gulls that can always be found here (on this occasion about 10 birds just coming into breeding plumage), after which we headed for the superstore on the edge of town, where we picked up a pocket-sized lunch, before moving to the Breydon Estuary only a couple of hundred yards away. Unfortunately the tide was low so the vast flocks of waders, mainly lapwing and golden plover, were quite far off but we did find our first flock of twite, numbering about a dozen, which landed close by allowing us to see them very well in our telescopes. Our main venue for the day was the RSPB complex of reserves around Buckenham Marsh in the Yare valley, but along the way we stopped at a spot that regularly holds wintering rough-legged buzzards and then at another site that is favoured by flocks of northern swans. The buzzard was not to be found but, purely by chance, while walking back to the cars, we came across a group of 6 short eared owls at a roost site that were clearly seen by all. At the next place we called at, many swans of all three species found naturally in Britain were spread out over quite a big area, a group of 10 or so whoopers being easily visible from the road, but 90 plus bewicks were distant and harder to see, though a lucky few, armed with a spot of local knowledge, got quite close to the main herd.

Next, we shivered at the viewpoint in Buckenham Marsh where there was relatively little bird activity (and not many birds at all except for 1000s of wigeon). We were pleased to find a peregrine perching not far away but, apart from two bean geese, three greylags and one pink foot, there were no other geese to be found. To warm up, we passed a bit of time in the comfort of at the (heated!) Strumpshaw Fen reserve centre watching the reedbeds and sipping a very welcome hot drink. Our final visit of the day was to Roydon Common near Kings Lynn where we spent a fruitless hour in woodland trying without success to find the path into the heathland area. We saw almost no birds and the best I can say about this adventure was that Roydon Common was right on our route so at least we didn't drive miles out of our way. That night we stayed in Hunstanton at the comfortable small hotel that we stay at every year. In the evening after dinner we gathered in the lounge so that our scribe for the weekend (many thanks to John Lerpiniere) could prepare a combined group list of the bird species we had seen, which was already, even after only two days, approaching 100.

On day 3, Saturday, we did a short sea-watch from the cliffs in Hunstanton near the hotel, finding a mixture of common waders on the beach, the resident fulmars and feral rock doves on the cliffs, but little other than brent geese on the sea. After breakfast came the main event of the weekend – Titchwell RSPB, probably the best reserve in Britain in terms of variety of species. As we walked slowly through the reserve towards the sea, traversing increasingly saline marsh as we went, we accumulated a long list of waders, including avocets, spotted redshanks and ruffs, saw most of the 'fresh' ducks and found a few of the hardier passerines such as meadow pipits and reed buntings. In the distance a peregrine sat on the old wartime blockhouse. On the sea shore the usual grey plovers, sanderlings and bar-tailed godwits were present, though unusually it was the godwits not the sanderlings that were most numerous. On the fairly calm sea we could see a raft of a couple of hundred common scoter but we saw none of the white wing flashes that would indicate a velvet scoter. Careful scanning revealed a distant group of goldeneye and on extended examination some of these turned out to be not goldeneye but long tailed ducks, hard to make out at such long range especially as they dived frequently or were hidden in troughs when they surfaced. I myself saw only two of them but someone said there were seven! As we wandered slowly back to the centre we added water rail, water pipit and knot to the list and a few pink footed geese flew over. Before leaving the Titchwell area we made a short stop near the hamlet of Cholesley to look for a regular winter flock of corn buntings, which we found sitting in an oak tree, and we also found a yellowhammer, a stonechat and a few red-legged partridges. While we were looking for the buntings we saw groups of geese, which we quickly identified as pink-footed, landing at the other end of the field. At first there was a small flock, maybe 100 of them, but they kept coming for several minutes in groups of 50 or so until there were probably between 1500 and 2000 on the ground. I could not see what had attracted them though the field was recently ploughed and I think there might have been crop residue near the surface. In mid afternoon we went east along the coast towards Salthouse (where we found very little) and from a pull-in by the road near Burnham Ovary Staithe we had a panoramic view of the Holkham marshes where we soon found an immature rough-legged buzzard that displayed all its features both perched and in flight and, as a bonus, it put up a short eared owl.

On the final day, Sunday, I was determined to find snow buntings which had eluded us at all the usual spots so we went for an early morning walk along the dunes at Holme. We split into two groups to increase our chances and went east and west hoping to find the flock that had been reported there, but we failed though we did find another flock of twites, a rock pipit, yet another short eared owl (the 8th of the trip) and several knots. The two groups had joined up and were heading for the cars when a single finch-like bird flew over looking suspiciously like a snow bunting so we did an about turn and went to find it. We found it quickly (fortunately as we were going to be late for breakfast at the hotel). It was running around on the shingle between the dunes and was identified as a female snow bunting. The bird was very confiding, as this species often is, so the photographers in the group were able to get good pictures, and we were only 10 minutes late getting back.

Our return journey was broken by several short (i.e. one hour) stops at three places, Flitcham Abbey, Roydon Common (second attempt) and Lynford Arboretum. These stops proved to be amazingly productive of new and uncommon species, and we added tree sparrow, brambling, little owl, great grey shrike and hawfinch to the trip list, all these birds giving everyone a view of some kind, though the shrike was distant and the hawfinches elusive in thick cover.



As is usual on a winter trip to Norfolk we amassed a huge list of species (139 in all) but because we were a bit spread out at times no one saw all of them, but those who stayed with the main group all saw well over 100 different species. More importantly, most of these birds, many of which are generally absent from Berkshire, were seen well, not just distant dots, so that people could be sure of what they saw and the more experienced members of the group were able to point out the salient features to the less knowledgeable people. The weather was very good too; it didn't rain except for a brief period of light drizzle at Minsmere, it was not really cold for February and the wind was light or almost absent. In every important respect this was a good weekend.

Bill Nicoll

And finally - The NZ Duck Story

A big city lawyer went duck hunting in rural North Wairarapa. He shot and dropped a duck, but it fell into a farmer's field on the other side of a fence. As the lawyer climbed over the fence, an elderly farmer drove up on his tractor and asked him what he was doing.

The litigator responded, "I shot a duck and it fell in this field, and now I'm going to retrieve it."

The old farmer replied, "This is my property, and you are not coming over here."

The indignant lawyer said, "I am one of the best trial attorneys in New Zealand and, if you don't let me get that duck, I'll sue you and take everything you own."

The old farmer smiled and said, "Apparently, you don't know how we settle disputes in North Wairarapa. We settle small disagreements like this with the 'Three Kick Rule.'"

The lawyer asked, "What is the 'Three Kick Rule'?"

The Farmer replied, "Well, because the dispute occurs on my land, I get to go first. I kick you three times and then you kick me three times and so on back and forth until someone gives up."

The attorney quickly thought about the proposed contest and decided that he could easily take the old codger, so he agreed to abide by the local custom.

The old farmer slowly climbed down from the tractor and walked up to the attorney.

His first kick planted the toe of his heavy steel toed work boot into the lawyer's groin and dropped him to his knees!

His second kick to the midriff sent the lawyer's last meal gushing from his mouth.

The lawyer was on all fours when the farmer's third kick to his rear end, sent him face-first into a fresh cow pie.

The lawyer summoned every bit of his will and remaining strength and very slowly managed to get to his feet.

Wiping his face with the arm of his jacket, he said, "Okay, you old fool. Now it's my turn."

(I love this part)

The old farmer smiled and said, "Nah, I give up. You can have the duck.!!!_"



Editor's Note : Funny? Possibly, but surely not half as funny as Australian ducks!