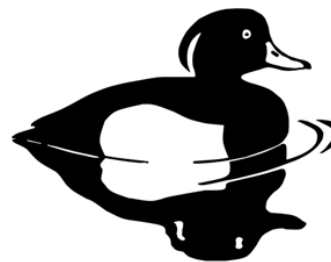


# BOC Newsletter

Summer 2017

No 72



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## **Introduction**

As the ‘summer’ nears its end the start of the new BOC season approaches, so this newsletter is part of the annual Club mailshot. Although I’m not sure that ‘summer’ is quite the right word for the weather that that we’ve been having of late – the early year heat wave now seems a distant memory and our barbecue remains in storage, although at least the grass has turned green again!

Ray Reedman has again manfully put together a fine calendar of events, in the hope that members will find things of interest, whether it’s in the indoor meetings which go on through the winter months, or the outdoor trips and excursions which take place throughout the year. Please have a good look though the programme of events and note down the dates so you don’t miss anything. I’m sure Ray would like me to pass on his thanks to all those members who have volunteered their time and efforts to lead trips or give talks to the Club. I’m also sure that you would like me to pass on your thanks to Ray for all his efforts.

Looking back it seems that I have been doing the newsletter for the best part of twenty years (this being issue number 72) and the time has come for me to pass on the baton. Iain Oldcorn has bravely volunteered to take it on and so he will be putting together the next edition. Quite how it chooses to tackle this is mainly up to him, but I wish him well in his new endeavour. And I hope that you will all support him by sending any useful items for publication – basically anything that could be of interest to other members will, I’m sure, be welcomed. Please contact Iain by email at [membership@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:membership@berksoc.org.uk)

As always, all contributions to the newsletter are much appreciated. Please send in any items for the newsletter to Iain by the start of November, to allow them to be included in the winter edition later in the year.

Ted Rogers

Illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

## **Club Publicity – Can you help?**

Club membership is on a slow decline, so the committee have a set up a sub-group to look at what we can do to reverse this trend. The group consists of myself, Jake Bishop and Adrian Hickman. If you have any comments or suggestions, please have a chat with any of us.

As part of the push to increase membership we are looking at the publicity we can give the Club through events and the media. To do this we need some help! In particular we need:

- A few members who could write brief accounts of indoor meetings and trips for the newsletter, website and the press. The accounts don’t need to be too detailed, but need to make it sound interesting so that people may be tempted to come along to future events. You won’t need to commit to attending every meeting or field trip as hopefully we will have enough people to provide sufficient coverage. You won’t need to be involved with distributing the finished article – that will be taken care of by the publicity coordinator.

- Someone with an eye for graphic design to redesign the club's publicity leaflet. The leaflet is distributed through events, libraries and local nature reserves and needs to be attractive and informative. Again you won't need to be involved with production and distribution – that will be taken care of by the publicity coordinator.
- People to join the group who run stands at public events. Display will be provided and we would not normally expect you to be on the stand on your own.

If you'd like to help or would like any further information, please contact me on 07815 644385 or [chair@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:chair@berksoc.org.uk)

Mike Turton  
Chair

### **Rare Breeding Birds in Berkshire 2016**

Each autumn County and Regional Recorders are asked to provide breeding records from the previous year to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP). The panel has been established to collate and archive records, and to report on the definitive status of the species that meet the criteria of rare breeders within the UK.

What is a "rare breeding bird"? All regularly breeding species with sustained populations estimated at fewer than 2,000 pairs in a typical year qualify for inclusion. Within this numerical limit there are other factors (a species in decline, a population in need of monitoring, a species of further international importance etc.) that support inclusion. It is, of course, the rare and exotic that attract most attention and interest – during this current year there are at least six pairs of Black-winged Stilts nesting in southeast England and Cattle Egrets are now established in two counties.

However, a close look at the criteria will reveal that several "common" species also qualify; Pochard, Dartford Warbler and Hobby to name but three. The term "breeding" is also subject to a number of qualifiers – confirmed breeding, probable breeding, possible breeding, single singers etc. So, that lone Shoveler you saw during June or that Water Rail "sharming" during July may well both qualify.

The Recorder must submit the return for 2016 by November of this year and the main sources of information are the records that you provide annually to the BOC database. If you have not yet submitted your annual spreadsheet this would be the time to do so, providing as much evidence of breeding activity as you can ([records@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:records@berksoc.org.uk)). If you submit your records via Birdtrack you will find a guide to submitting breeding records by that route and the Panel's species list on the RBBP web site.

All records of rare or unusual breeding species are important, though some will not be made public. Sensitive species will be treated with the appropriate level of confidentiality.

Richard Burness  
Berkshire County Bird Recorder  
04 July 2016

### **Trip Reports**

#### **RSPB Coach Trip to Elmley Isle of Sheppey - February 2017**

I joined the RSPB coach at Bray Wick on a damp and unpromising morning. However, Elmley on a grey, bone-chiller of a dank day is a price well worth paying for the sights it offers. The expanse of unwelcoming marshy land greeted us with an initial sense of emptiness, but slowly revealed its many and wonderful secrets during the next few hours.

The first clue was a Marsh Harrier seen soon after the coach had left the main road on the two-mile run to the centre on the winding, exposed track. We glimpsed grazing Wigeon, Coots in the gullies, and Lapwings resting among the tussocks. We were greeted by a veritable flock of House Sparrows and Goldfinches at the car park feeders. The oak trees near the visitor centre yielded a Little Owl, but we were soon distracted by the swirling panic of a sizeable flock of Lapwings, Golden Plovers and Starlings. It was hard to spot the little falcon among the swirling mass. We found it again on a fence post a few hundred yards down the track – a lovely Merlin. Marsh Harrier sightings became frequent, with several different individuals quartering the landscape. There were at least three rather lazy Buzzards too, and a couple of active Kestrels. A male Hen Harrier passed close in front of us at the central hide, but was soon lost as a silhouette in the distant landscape.



The pools were quiet, probably because the Swale Estuary was a mass of inviting mud at low tide. From the screen on the wall we could see a wide variety of waders: Dunlin, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover, Oystercatcher etc. What at first looked like a distant line of foam near the tideway turned out to be a line of hundreds of Avocets. The other white forms were Shelduck, but there were Wigeon, Teal and Pintails too.

Curiously we saw very few geese: a family of four Brent Geese was feeding in the marsh, and there was nothing of interest among the handful of Greylags and Brent Geese. The smaller birds were a bit more of a challenge in the dim light: there were a couple of Skylarks in song, and we also found a few Meadow Pipits, a pair of Reed Buntings and a Stonechat. Later, as we returned towards the farm, we watched an area of short-cropped grazing which was covered in feeding birds: among the many Lapwings, Golden Plovers and Starlings were a few Bar-tailed Godwits and a couple of Pheasants, but also a surprisingly large number of Stock Doves. A Hare decided to lope through the middle of this throng, the birds hopping aside rather indignantly as he passed. Suddenly he stopped and fixed his nose to a spot in the ground and remained that way for some time. He appeared to be testing a scent-mark. Some while later and further on I watched a pair of them, the smaller male hopefully trailing a female. Spring was clearly not far away after all.

At the edge of the yard we spent time scanning the landscape towards the road, checking for more raptor activity. Suddenly three Short-eared Owls rose up to challenge one of the harriers. We had superb views. Shortly afterwards we watched a lock of large waders approach from a great distance to land just a hundred metres from us. A flock of perhaps a hundred Curlews was not a bad finale.



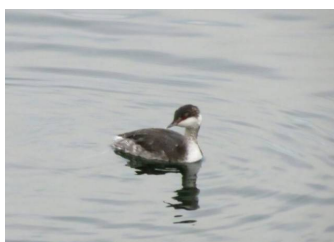
Ray Reedman

### **BOC trip to Pagham - January 2017**

A 9.30 start at Pagham in early January is a real test of enthusiasm, but 11 of us were at the rendezvous near Pagham Church well before time. I always enjoy the village side of the harbour early in the year: it never fails to produce a spectacle. The always-threatening drizzle held off and the birds performed very well.

We spent the morning along the eastern side, a little disappointed by the lack of small birds in the scrub, but completely fascinated by the crowds of wildfowl and waders out on the mud as the tide dropped. Brent Geese were in big numbers, with occasional large flocks right overhead. A great many Shelduck dotted the scene, with Teal, Wigeon, Mallard and elegant Pintails in the gullies.

In many ways, though, this was 'wader day', since we enjoyed large numbers of them at great leisure, with the opportunity to concentrate on comparisons and identification details. In all we noted some 14 species of wader, including Knot, Spotted Redshank and Greenshank.



The village lagoon held a female Goldeneye, a couple of Pochards and some Little Grebes, but the big moment of the day came when we reached the shingle ridge above the beach. As we scanned a calm but misty sea, Gray spotted a distant trio of small grebes. This is a hot-spot for Slavonians, and while this trio was a bit unconvincing for some, the flock of twelve that I found just over the harbour bar was much more viewable. As the group absorbed that sight, I found four more fishing in the channel exit at the surf line. Like many birders I am usually happy to see the odd one or two a year, so that was an exceptional experience for us all. (*The photograph was taken at Farmoor*).

With a Stonechat in a bush behind the beach, and a distant Ringed Plover added to our tally, we walked back to the cars for lunch and then spent an hour or so checking out the area from the North Wall. A Kingfisher is often seen near the sluice, and one performed to order. With waders and wildfowl still dominating the harbour mud, we scoured the inland meadows, bushes and scrub. Most unusually there were few raptors and no owls. We found just two Buzzards, but that search drew our attention to just how many Curlews (picture) and Black-tailed Godwits were feeding in the damp spots of the rough meadows inland.



On the way home we took a short diversion to Warblington, to look for Cattle Egrets. The first people to arrive had views of one, but that flew off before the last two cars arrived. Three Little Egrets raised hopes, but were little consolation. This has been an exceptional winter for sightings of a species which may be on the cusp of joining Little Egret, Spoonbill and Great Egret as regulars here.

Ray Reedman

## **BOC Coach Trip to WWT Slimbridge - January 2017**

By leaving Whiteknights at 7.30 a.m. we were able to arrive at opening time and to maximise our time at the reserve.

We were in the middle of a cold spell, so conditions were not ideal for either birds or birders. Ice and frost were significant factors, since large areas of open grass, creeks and pools, where so many waders and wildfowl normally feed, were largely empty - and it didn't help that the tide was out. Rooks and Jackdaws seemed by far the most numerous species in those areas.

However there were plenty of consolations, with a Bittern showing at one hide, a Water Rail in the open in front of another and a small flock of European White-fronted Geese moderately close, though not quite close enough to be sure whether there were any of the Greenland race among them. When we saw a much larger flock on the Dumbles later, they were even further away, as was the large flock of Barnacle Geese.



The news of recent sightings proved to be important, because one report posed a real moral dilemma for the 'listers'. When we found the reported 'wild' female Ruddy Shelduck flirting with the captive males, right in the middle of the collection area, it was clear that she was un-ringed, but to tick or not to tick was the awkward question. Less so, perhaps, with the ten Cranes we saw later on the Tack Piece, but this reintroduced population is now wilding up nicely and maturing too, with some evidence of them linking up with the Norfolk population. They certainly make a magnificent addition to the scene as they return to winter close to their *alma mater*.

A lot of the wild ducks were to be found on South Lake, which they were keeping ice-free by their sheer numbers and movement. There was an impressive mass of swirling Shovelers, but Pintails and others were in good numbers too.

The wader population seemed to be sparsely represented, with just a couple of Oystercatchers and a Snipe at various points. A brave Little Stint had taken refuge on a shingle island in Rushy Pool among the comparative giants of swans, geese and ducks resting and feeding there.

There were a few Bewick's Swans there too, but the rest were way out of sight for most of the day. As always it was the twilight feed which brought in many more, as well as masses of Canada Geese, Greylags and wild ducks. I have watched that spectacle many times since first visiting Slimbridge fifty plus years ago, but I never tire of it.

Thanks to the support of the East Berks and Maidenhead/Bracknell RSPB groups, we were able to break even with the coach costs. There are several more trips during the year, so I hope that BOC members will repay the compliment when the opportunity arises. In any case, all the trips visit major sites - and it is so nice to sit back and doze on the way home!



Ray Reedman