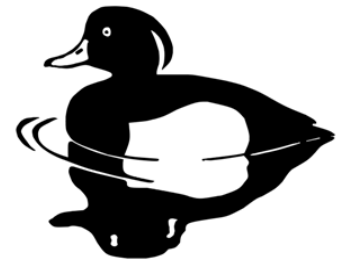


Newsletter No 85 August 2021



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Editorial

Iain Oldcorn bocmembershipsec@hotmail.co.uk

We hope you enjoy this 85th BOC Newsletter. This edition accompanies our Annual "mailing" of details of our upcoming AGM and our 2021/22 Programme card; it features a "guest" article by one of our members of 50 Years standing: Paul Goriup!

Conservation Notes August 2021

Renton Righelato

The recent introduction in the Environment Bill of a requirement for developers to provide a "net gain in biodiversity" could provide an important funding opportunity for local conservation. Developers will seek to offset biodiversity losses arising from their projects by creating gains elsewhere; so we are putting together a portfolio of potential biodiversity net gain projects for discussion with developers and local authorities. We would welcome suggestions for projects from members, preferably where the landowner is in agreement. Typically, a gain in biodiversity would be achieved through creating a more biologically diverse habitat on a site; as has been done for example, at many of our ex gravel workings. For background see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/biodiversity-net-gain-updating-planning-requirements>

Another new scheme that could become important for conservation is the creation of Nature Recovery Networks, a provision of the Environment Bill. It is still early days and it is unclear (at least to me) quite how the system will work, but Neil Bucknell, for the BOC is taking part in the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership's planning and mapping of nature recovery networks in the county (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network>).

Last year, with the help of a grant from the BOC, Little Ringed Plovers bred successfully at a new site near Bucklebury. The birds returned this year and, with the help of a second small grant, Debby Reynolds and Tim Culley were again able to get agreement with the landowner to set aside an area for them. Three chicks hatched at the end of May and were observed feeding successfully on the setaside and in the adjacent maize for several weeks. The increasing density of the vegetation prevented observation in the last week, but it is believed that they fledged successfully and left the site in the last week of June.

Winter and breeding season surveys have now been completed at Natural England's Aldermaston GPs and a report is being prepared with recommendations on site management. The site has changed dramatically since designation as a wetland SSSI many years ago and is now largely dense Willow carr with a much-reduced water inflow. There is a small heronry, breeding Little Grebes on the pools and Marsh Tits in the woodland. Restoration as an open wetland is probably impractical, though it may have value as wet woodland.

For many years of BOC outdoor and indoor events, Ray Reedman was King: devising, researching, preparing, organising the trip leaders/speakers and occasionally also striding in to deliver "plan B" himself at the last minute when an emergency arose. Two years ago, Sue Charnley stepped up to the plate and took over organising the indoor programme. Now we really need one, or possibly a group, of our members to offer to support your bird club by doing their bit taking over the planning of these outdoor activities. Ray will be very pleased to help out during a transition period; he says that one of the few benefits of coronavirus is that "it has created a break from our previous outdoor programmes and gives a great opportunity for the newcomer to revitalise this essential area of BOC activity."

If you are able to help, or have any other suggestions to make about this matter, then please contact: Robert (godden_robort@yahoo.com).

Remembering John Hobson**Robert Godden**

In April 2021 we learnt of the failing health of BOC life member, John Hobson, and subsequently of his passing on May 22nd. Although John moved to Sussex several years ago, he continued to actively support the club and he is remembered by many of the club's long-standing members.

In the early 1980s when I joined the Reading Ornithological Club (as the BOC was called in those days), John was the club's treasurer, a post he held for some 15 years from 1973, and which he executed with great attention to detail. On many occasions, John was the speaker at the club's indoor meetings when he shared his enthusiasm for the colder regions of the world. We were taken to remote places such as Spitzbergen, Greenland, Siberia, China and the southern oceans, and were treated to photographs of birds that were sought-after vagrants to our shores set in dramatic scenery. There is a story of John giving a talk on penguins while on a cruise in Antarctica, dressed as an Emperor Penguin complete with rubber mask! John was also a regular on the club's birdwatching excursions and once led a memorable winter trip to Holland, offering raptors, large numbers of geese and duck (including a flock of 300 Smew), and commensurate cold temperatures.

John's passion for birds and other wildlife grew and reached new heights after his retirement from the railways. He was an active birdwatcher in the county, contributing to surveys, but not averse to twitching and searching for rarities on the Isles of Scilly. He even featured in Bryan Bland's excellent collection of cartoons in the *Old Birders Field Guide*.



by Bryan Bland, with permission

After John's move to Sussex, John maintained his connection with the BOC and supported the club by writing species accounts for the annual reports. In the words of his son Daryl, "He eventually gave up reading and writing his birding notes and surveys about four weeks before he died, finding the effort just too much, but he didn't leave anything unfinished. That was his way."

Here's another twist on an old theme, hidden words now hiding birds.

Find 18 words hidden in the grid that are anagrams of well-known birds most of which can be seen in the UK, either an individual species or a generic group name. Words run in an unbroken straight line, up/down, forwards/backwards or diagonally. Plurals are allowed. For example, the word 'scourer' might appear in the grid as being an anagram of 'courser'. (The numbers and letters round the edges are to help supply the answers in our next Newsletter.)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	A	B	E	S	E	U	G	O	R	Y
B	O	G	J	S	C	N	C	I	I	V
C	T	N	N	A	C	R	E	B	P	R
D	B	I	K	P	N	O	G	O	P	P
E	R	R	L	U	I	N	R	B	E	O
F	E	E	A	T	P	N	E	T	D	O
G	T	D	A	W	S	N	E	N	L	C
H	L	N	U	A	L	R	T	S	U	T
I	E	A	I	O	I	E	S	U	F	A
J	K	L	E	S	A	T	R	S	M	V
K	S	S	E	T	T	S	U	R	R	E
L	L	D	T	E	S	S	K	U	A	S

The lockdown restrictions have meant that it wasn't possible to conduct the club's indoor programme at our regular venue at Reading University so we have held our indoor meetings online via Zoom. The online meetings have suited some people but not everyone but it was the best that we could offer. Indeed, some members who have not been coming to indoor meetings previously have tuned in via Zoom, and this format has appealed to those who are shielding or who have moved away, while the recordings of the meetings on YouTube have benefitted those who have a clash on Wednesday evenings.

Sue Charnley, our Indoor Programme Secretary, has been contacting prospective speakers for the next season. Whereas the club sees uncertainty over whether the meetings can be held at the university, the speakers likewise face uncertainty over whether they can attend

an indoor venue to present their talk, and consequently most have a flexible attitude. We would like to offer the best of both worlds – a continuation of the online meetings via Zoom, but when the university venue becomes available the opportunity to meet in person with a speaker either present or based at their home or office (and potentially anywhere else in the world!). We understand from the university that their technology supports this, but we haven't experienced it first-hand.

The trips and excursions which are being planned by Ray Reedman, our Outdoor Programme Secretary, will feature many of the trips that could not take place this season. There will be an emphasis on local and regional destinations with travel by private car, and the trips will only go ahead if they satisfy the prevailing regulations. If you have any ideas for places to visit or would be prepared to lead a trip then please get in contact (07543 800921).

BOC Outdoor Programme 2021-22

Ray Reedman

This year may be a bit easier, but we will still need to adhere to whatever recommendations are in place. Please notify any leader at least three days in advance of your intention to attend so that they can be in control of their arrangements. We do not recommend car-sharing until conditions improve.

Common sense dictates that we will not offer any coach trip for the time-being – and in any case we have lost the valuable partnership with the now-defunct East Berks RSPB Group, which for many years has shared such trips with us. I should like to thank those concerned for enabling those arrangements. We lost two important leaders last year and I have finally been forced by wear and tear to step back. Thanks to some old hands and a couple of new volunteers, we have managed to provide a slightly-reduced programme, which consists of local walks, interspersed with some wider-ranging day trips.

One of the now-established features of the programme is the chance to find out a bit more about bats, and this year our local expert, Elaine Charlson will open our season with an easy stroll around the Maiden Erlegh reserve.

Local sites are always worth a visit with someone who knows them well, and this year we have concentrated on covering many of them. Adrian Lawson will introduce us further to the network of open land between Reading and the M4, which can hold a surprising variety of interesting species. Brian Bennett will be up early to appreciate the huge variety of spring song at Dinton Pastures, while Andy Tomczinski will take us on an evening stroll on the Berkshire Downs. David Fuller will take us through the Jubilee River reserve, and Chris Foster will treat us to both Greenham Common and his inside knowledge of Whiteknights Park, the latter an unexpected oasis. I plan to visit Little Marlow Gravel Pit, which is usually rich in breeding and passage water species. Robert Godden has both Moor Green Lakes and Wishmoor in his sights for early 2022, two very contrasting areas of wetland and heathland. Not least, Carole White, by far our most experience trip leader, will lead the Christmas walk at Hosehill and (conditions permitting) organise the Christmas lunch which follows.

For those who like to venture a bit further and thus widen the range of birds seen, we have car visits to the South Coast. Chris Foster kicks off with a visit to Titchfield Haven, while Robert Godden will take us on separate days to Keyhaven/Pennington and Stanpit Marshes. Robert is also venturing into the New Forest, while Gray Burfoot will take on Blashford Lakes at the western side of the forest.

What the leaders need more than anything else is your support: we try to offer a selection of sites which will interest both inexperienced and experienced bird-watchers and which will represent a range of species and habitats. One of the great benefits of group activity is that we share and learn as we go - and that is far more effective than any amount of books and other aids.

In my 2016 book, *Lapwings, Loons and Lousy Jacks: the How and Why of Bird Names*. I described the list of bird species published by the International Ornithologists' Union as 'ever-changing'. In fact, the organisation itself speaks of 'the active industry of taxonomic revision'. So, five years on I decided to have a closer look at the changes which have occurred between version 6.1, when the book was published, and the current version of their list, which is now at version 11.1.

Those five years have certainly seen some changes, since the 'taxonomic industry' has been crunching DNA data at an enormous rate. It seems likely that the 2017 decision by the BOU to fall in line with IOC listings was mainly about streamlining their decision-making while so much was being refashioned. The closer collaboration eventually removed any doubts about the recognition of the Northern Harrier as a separate species from Hen Harrier, and of the Hudsonian Whimbrel from the Eurasian Whimbrel.

There have also been a good many taxonomic decisions which will affect the naming of birds in future field guides, and not least those of Britain and Europe. Here are just a few items which you may not have spotted creeping in...

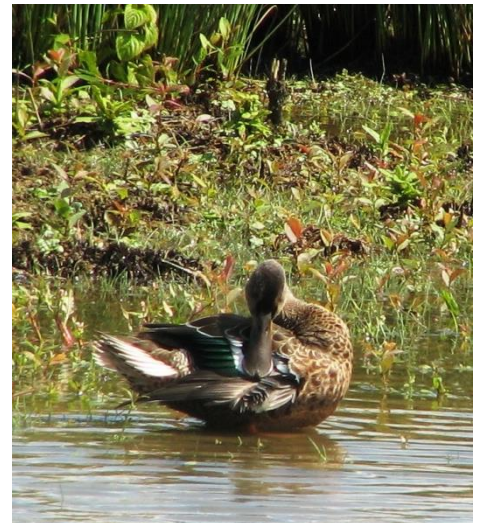
For example, the genus *Anas* has long served for all of our native dabbling ducks, but now such as Gadwall and Wigeon appear under the revived genus, *Mareca*, while such as Shoveler and Garganey revert to another old form, *Spatula*. While the latter name is pretty obvious for the shape of the bill (*right*) the former comes via Brazilian Portuguese, from *Marica*, a Roman water-nymph.

Waders have had a thorough going over... In 2016 I noted that the American Willet and the two tattlers had recently been 'tidied away' in the genus *Tringa*, but it didn't stop there. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper has since lost its unique genus, *Tryngites*, but has been placed in the genus *Calidris* rather than *Tringa*. It is more surprising that both Ruff, with its extreme sexual dimorphism, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper, with its distinctive appendage, have also each lost their unique status and have also been shuffled into the genus *Calidris*. And, by the way, the Aussies also won back their right to the name Pied Stilt, so the artificially-imposed construction, *White-necked Stilt*, has now been discarded.

A couple of quiet adjustments to the woodpeckers place: Lesser Spotted in the genus *Dryobates* and Middle Spotted in *Dendrocoptes*.

As anticipated, the name *Northern Grey Shrike* (*Lanius borealis*) at last goes exclusively to the formally-split North American form, leaving Great Grey (*L. excubitor*) unchallenged for the northern Eurasian form. At the same time, the name *Iberian Grey Shrike* (*L. meridionalis*) replaces *Southern Grey Shrike*; presumably because *Northern* and *Southern* have no geographical relationship in that context. Even so, *Iberian* is not strictly accurate, as the bird is also found in Mediterranean France.

While we are discussing Iberia, you might like to note that the Lesser Short-toed Lark (recorded on a BOC trip to Andalucia in 2011) has now been split geographically across its Eurasian range. The Mediterranean forms have logically become the *Mediterranean Short-toed Lark*, but I can't help feeling that a simple *Mediterranean Lark* might have allowed *Greater Short-toed* to reclaim its earlier and simpler name as *the Short-toed Lark*. How many qualifiers are needed after all? 'Splitting' is good news for listers, but it has done little for the succinctness of the English-language names of some species.



The real shock is what has happened to our warblers... The once-overarching genus, *Sylvia*, has recently been reduced to a rump of just seven species, with only Blackcap and Garden Warbler remaining as the British representatives alongside five resident African species. All the rest of the former *Sylvia* warblers (27 species) are 'deeply divergent' and now find themselves in the new genus, *Curruca*, which just happens to be the specific name of the Lesser Whitethroat. That might seem to be an odd choice, but it is indirectly Linnaeus's fault: his notes on the Common Whitethroat contained some confusion, so in 1915, the BOU preferred *S. curruca* as the type species for the Sylvia Warblers. It seems an unusual move to create a new genus in that way, but that has been done; and we now have *Curruca curruca* for the Lesser Whitethroat (*right*), *Curruca communis*, for the Common Whitethroat and *Curruca undata* for the Dartford Warbler; while all those Sardinians, Barred, Marmora's, etc, follow suit.



So, what is still to come? There are a few clues to suggest how the naming of British species may be affected in the future: the redpolls have long been in a sort of limbo and may yet be adjusted, and it will pay to keep an eye on Horned/Shore-larks and on the crossbill complex too. It is possible that the North American and Eurasian Merlins may be split, in which case ours will be the one to change its specific name simply because the nominate form is American. However, it will be some time before the gene-crunchers get through the entire catalogue, so updates of such issues may yet be some way down the line.

The truth is that, in real life and in the field, we are unlikely to be bothered by many of the name changes discussed here, but if you like to keep accurate records, there may be work to do. I realise that listing is an optional feature of bird-watching, but a lot of us do it. At the worst, it can be an acquisitive habit, and I freely admit that I accept the occasional 'armchair tick' with a degree of pleasure. On the other hand, I find that changes often elicit the question: 'Why?' and that is where the fun can start, because I am then tempted into areas of ornithology which I might otherwise not explore.

Meanwhile, here is the vital link: [Master Lists – IOC World Bird List \(worldbirdnames.org\)](http://worldbirdnames.org)

Evening Walk on Compton Downs, 2nd June 2021

Andy Tomczynski

After a hot humid day and some rain in the afternoon, a small group of us met at the top of Churn Road, Compton at 19:00hrs and walked east towards Roden Downs on an overcast evening. We were fortunate to see a Grey Partridge in the field adjacent to our parked cars, a bird not easy to come across nowadays on the Berkshire downs. Our tally for the evening was only 19 species. We saw the expected corvids: Rook, Jackdaw and Crow, and Corn Buntings, Yellowhammers, Skylarks, Chaffinch, Whitethroat and Goldfinches. We managed to pick out a family of Stone Curlews from the Ridgeway path, although the birds were nearly a kilometer away on a "Stone Curlew plot"! Patient scanning through the scope at maximum magnification of x60 was required. Further on, we found another Stone Curlew which was mostly obscured in an overgrown plot. From what we could see of the bird we thought it a juvenile.

Our walk was punctuated by occasional stops to scan and listen, and whilst doing this on Roden Downs we were delighted to hear a Quail singing its characteristic trisyllabic "wet-my-lips" in the field adjacent to the Ridgeway. Another was heard in the field behind us and one much further away in Oxfordshire. Of course, the chances of actually seeing one were nil. Further up the track at the plantation we heard and saw Willow Warbler. Over the years this has been a regular spot for this species, which is less common in the south nowadays. In fact, this bird was in exactly the same tree I photographed it last year



We lingered in the area for some time as dusk fell. We saw some Lapwing on the bare areas of Roden Downs. Then we heard an owl calling, but it was not immediately obvious to us, what species. Then we realized it was a Long-eared owl calling, something I haven't heard before. I am more familiar with the early spring adult hoots or the juvenile "squeaky gates" call of the youngsters at this time of the year. It was probably a female calling. One of our party saw it flying from one wood to another and we managed to pick it up as it mostly glided across the open field in the near darkness. At this point on the Ridgeway, we were hearing Quail, Stone Curlews and Long-eared Owls calling; not an everyday occurrence. Just before we started to make our way-back we picked up an adult Stone Curlew, which must have flown in, at much closer range on a bare chalk area and had good scope views albeit in low light conditions. It was a bit of a trudge back to the cars, with a few bats to accompany us.

Although we hadn't seen so many species, we were satisfied with the birds we did see and hear.

Birds and Their Habitats – a Post-Brexit View

Paul Goriup

Following Brexit, a generational change in government support for farming is coming. The former system of pillars and payments under the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will soon be replaced in England by our own Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS). This is planned to take place between 2022 and 2024 while Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are developing separate schemes.

ELMS comprises three new grants that reward environmental land management: a Sustainable Farming Incentive; Local Nature Recovery; and Landscape Recovery. Unlike the CAP, which largely incentivised intensive industrial investment-led agricultural production and led to a huge loss of semi-natural habitat across the UK, ELMS is intended to make farm payments in exchange for delivery of public goods, such as: improved biodiversity, better soils and water quality. This approach builds on the many examples of small-scale habitat recovery carried out over past decades by: government agencies, voluntary bodies and private landowners; including: Natural England, Forestry Commission, RSPB, National Trust, Wildlife Trusts, Game Conservancy and the Knepp Estate in Sussex.

The story of the conversion of the Knepp Estate from high input agriculture to nearly laissez-faire work-with-nature land use has been eloquently told by Isabella Tree in her best-selling book, "Wilding" (Ed: Picador, 2018, pb £9.99). Among the many inspiring results was the colonisation of the area by nightingales and turtle doves which are in steep decline elsewhere. As the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) begins, and as ELMS gains traction and Defra's 25 Year Environmental Plan proceeds, many hope we will see a great acceleration of such habitat restoration efforts and with that a post-Brexit rebound of biodiversity, including bird populations. Well, maybe - perhaps even probably - but there are caveats.

First, there is the human dimension. In a country like Britain – which has been subject to continuous human land use since the last Ice Age receded – we now live in a largely cultural landscape. What constitutes “biodiversity” is now largely a matter of societal choice and chiefly focuses on visible organisms... orchids, butterflies, hedgehogs and notably of course, birds. Through our legislative corpus we decide: what gets to be conserved and where, what is treated as a pest, what is or is not native or invasive, what should or should not be reintroduced and so on. Just think of common cranes, great bustards, red kites, white-tailed eagles, eagle owls, ring-necked parakeets and ruddy ducks as recent examples of public debate. Inevitably, there are conflicts of interest and compromises made or decisions imposed that affect the expected outcomes. Over time, these outcomes may or may not be acceptable to future generations and a new cycle of interventions either starts to preserve the status quo or attempts to change it.

Second, there is the nature of nature itself. It is constantly changing over time and space. Some processes, like evolution, tend to occur over geological time scales, while habitat succession and development occurs over decades or centuries; others are sudden and often unpredictable (“stochastic events” in the jargon) like floods and fires. Some processes are driven by the interaction of living organisms with their physical environment, including the carbon cycle, soil formation and latterly human-induced climate change. As a consequence, setting targets for and then maintaining certain levels of species populations or areas of habitats is fraught with difficulty – how many stone curlew plots should there be, should gulls be culled to save terns?

Conservation interventions can end up being akin to ranching or gardening with open-ended resource commitments. For example, there are many definitions of “habitat” but they are all essentially subjective; they are human constructs based on human perceptions and classification systems. The EU Habitats Directive of 1992 tried to unite various habitat classification systems across all member states; let’s just say that it is still a work in progress. Yet, billions are being spent to conserve habitats of “European importance” according to legislated definitions. Moreover, most birds have scant regard for the botanical minutiae of different types of grasslands, woodlands or heaths – they have broader requirements based on food availability, shelter and breeding places.

In the face of these challenges, the idea of “Rewilding” is taking hold among conservationists. The term evokes earlier concepts such as wilderness, space for nature and the catch phrase of the 2010 nature conservation review headed by Prof. Sir John Lawton – “bigger, better, more joined up”. In practice rewilding requires space, patience and an acceptance of outcomes, both welcome and less welcome, and some of which were never predicted. The flourishing of turtle doves at Knepp being one welcome example, the surge in ragwort and the disfavour this has generated amongst neighbouring farmers perhaps another.

However, no sooner had rewilding been promoted by writers like George Monbiot than it became mired in controversy. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature states that “rewilding aims to restore healthy ecosystems by creating wild, biodiverse spaces. It rebuilds ecosystems that have previously been modified by human disturbance, using the plant and animal life that would have been present had the disturbance never occurred. In doing so rewilding restores the natural processes that provide humanity with clean air, water, food, shelter and medicine.” But this definition overlooks the fact that in cultural landscapes the starting conditions are so very different from those in the past. New, well-functioning ecosystems and clean water - yes; rebuilding ecosystems characteristic of past conditions - almost certainly not. Allowing ecosystems to recover and rebuild will mean very different species compositions from how they were assembled in the past. Nor is this going to happen at scale in Britain any time soon not least because the human population is unprepared for having apex predators like bears, wolves and lynx at large. Moreover, people love and cherish their historic and familiar landscapes.

For the time being then, ELMS seems the best way forward for improving natural ecosystem functions in most of England. It is certainly more ambitious than the reformed CAP. How ELMS will affect bird populations is extremely difficult to predict but it seems likely that a

substantial amount of intensive arable land will revert to moor, heath, pasture and meadows, especially on poorer soils and steeper slopes. More ponds, lakes and marshes will be developed (particularly as flood alleviation schemes in floodplains), along with increased tree and hedge planting. This clearly bodes well for a wide range of species from lapwings to linnets, curlews to corn buntings and hopefully turtle doves and tree sparrows. We could even see the return of corncrakes to the Thames Valley. What is sure is that whatever we think may happen over the next few decades in our countryside, we are going to have a lot of surprises, good and bad, expected and unexpected, like them or not!



(PG: With special thanks to Jonathan Spencer for commenting on the draft.)

(Ed: Paul is a member of the Knepp Wildland Advisory Board.)

Committee Notes

Jane Campbell

Our indoor programme secretary, Sue Charnley, has organised a varied set of talks for the next season (See Programme Card). We hope to hold these at Reading University and are investigating whether the talks can also be provided on Zoom for those not attending in person.

Ray Reedman's outdoor programme looks good with many events organised. The committee is very grateful to all those who have offered to lead events. Ray is standing down from this role so once again we are asking if anyone can take over this important position (Ed: see above). If you can help please contact me at:

secretary@berksoc.org.uk<<mailto:secretary@berksoc.org.uk>>

Robert Godden and Sally Wearing are working hard on the bird reports and hope to have one ready soon.

The AGM notice is included with this newsletter, please do put the date (which is Wednesday 17th November) in your diaries now!

Coming Soon to a Computer Near You

Iain Oldcorn

Don't know your Spotted Flycatcher from a Tree Pipit? Then what you need is another dose of Ray Reedman's excellent tuition. Some of you will know that, apparently, in an earlier incarnation, Ray ran many Further Education courses in basic ornithology at Reading University. During these he developed a series of bird identification 'workshop' talks, many of which were later given to the BOC and other groups.

Designed for people with a range of skills and experience, they are just what I need.

Ray has generously decided to make the slide material from these talks available more widely and he is working with Jane and Sally to convert them for our use.

There are ten "sessions" in all; starting with waders, running through ducks, geese, gulls, terns etc and going "off piste" at the end on the whys and wherefores of migration.

We will bring you more news as soon as possible.

If you change your postal or email address, please remember to advise me so that we can maintain contact with you; e.g., to email links to recordings of our Zoom presentations.

At the time of writing (15 July 2021) we have 275 members – which by coincidence is exactly the same as at this time last year!

Good News; our annual subscription rates remain unchanged for a further year!

(Disclaimer: The views expressed in articles in this Newsletter are those of their respective authors and may not be representative of those of the BOC or of any of its Committee.)

Gallery**All photos © Andy Tomczynski****Spoonbill; Lea Farm Lake; 28June2021****Spotted Flycatcher; Streatley; 23June2021****Tree Pipit; Swinley Forest; 27May2021****Black Redstart; Warfield; 5June2021****Stop Press**

Roadkill placed on 'sky tables' to lure rare birds of prey; farmers are laying out carcasses to tempt vultures and eagles back to the UK countryside. [Check this link.](#)

And look out for announcements in the media in the next few weeks of a crane chick hatching at RSPB Otmoor reserve. But please leave them alone as they feed up for their short migration to Somerset.