

Berkshire Ornithological Club Conservation Subcommittee

23 November 2021 7.30pm - on Zoom

Minutes

1. **Present:** Neil Bucknell, Patrick Crowley, Chris Foster, Roger Frankum, Renton Righelato, Marek Walford. **Apologies:** Ken Moore, Fraser Cottington, Des Sussex.
2. **Minutes** of meeting of 27th April 2021 – approved.
3. **Matter arising not covered elsewhere**
 - a. TVERC request for bird data on Ufton Bridge Meadow and West Hogmoor Meadow. Marek and Renton had looked at Ufton Bridge Meadow during the summer and seen nothing noteworthy. It is a small meadow, uncut and ungrazed when visited, and it unlikely to hold either Skylarks or waders. Renton to pass this and John Lerpiniere's note to TVERC.
4. **Summary of main actions since the last meeting**
 - a. By email: BBOWT request for £500 towards boat and trailer approved. BBOWT agreed that the boat could be made available for use at other, non-BBOWT, reserves in Berkshire.
 - b. By email: Request for contribution to setaside area for LRPs at Bucklebury Ford; £500 approved. Breeding was again successful in 2021 (one pair, three young). [note from Marek subsequent to the meeting: In 2020, five confirmed pairs at four sites in Berkshire, 11 young fledged. Two of the pairs and six of young were at Bucklebury Ford.]
5. **Nature Recovery Networks and report from LNP meeting.** At the LNP meeting in May, it was learnt that some preliminary mapping of Nature Recovery Networks had been done, but the local authorities were unwilling to share it yet with the LNP.

Neil has joined a working group set up to rejuvenate the Berkshire LNP. The group is to complete its proposals early in the New Year. A key initial need is for the LAs to commit funds for an LNP coordinator. Renton raised a concern that without the new LNP having some powers, it would not attract the attention and participation of decision makers. Cllr Chris Foster noted that elected members rarely discuss biodiversity issues and asked that Neil brief him on points that might be raised.
6. **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) projects.** Neil and Renton had had a meeting with Dan Carpenter on potential BNG projects (note previously circulated). As this is likely to be an important source funds for conservation, the committee felt it should understand better the biodiversity offset assessment: Renton to circulate the DEFRA tools and explanatory notes.

7. **Aldermaston GPs.** A draft report to Natural England on the bird status at Aldermaston GPs had been prepared by Bob Lyle and Renton and the recommendations were discussed. Ken Moore had asked that an option of raising water levels on the site and more extensive woodland clearance be considered. It was noted that this was just a report on birds and that other taxa should also be considered by NE. Renton to amend the report with these points.

8. **Peregrines 2021 survey and nesting platform proposals:** Patrick Crowley reported on the year's survey of nesting Peregrines. There were at least seven sites with established pairs (report attached) and at least three breeding attempts appear to have been successful. Patrick proposed that a nestbox be provided for the Fujitsu building in Bracknell and there may be opportunities to provide boxes elsewhere. Chris Foster, who chairs the University of Reading Biodiversity committee, offered to help in discussions on installation of a nesting platform on the Whiteknights campus. The committee approved a proposal that the Conservation Fund pay for two nest boxes to be made by Ken White – approximate cost £600.

9. **Surveying**
 - a. **Farm surveys:** Neil reported that there had been good coverage of the Beeswax sites in the Compton area and the East Ilsley sites in 2021. A report is in preparation. Neil is also in discussion with a new Lower Pang cluster of farmers that is asking for surveys. It is likely that more surveyors will be needed.
 - b. **Reading House Martin survey 2021** The RDNHS survey of nesting House Martins organised by Sarah White had been disappointing: of the 12 1km squares covered, only one had any evidence of birds breeding in 2021 (a well-established site in Crescent Road that this year had only a few birds and no proof of breeding). [Additional information from Sarah White: 11 of the 12 squares had had HM nesting in a survey in 1988. The remaining square had not been surveyed in 19988, but from my (RR) observations has been occupied since 1985 at least. 2021 was a poor year for HM and a further survey will probably be organised shortly.]

10. **Lower Farm, Newbury:** Roger Frankum reported that it was still not clear what the owners, Rivar, intend for the site. However, for the time being, they are happy for NDOC to continue looking after the hide and carry out habitat management.

11. **Padworth Lane GPs:** Harleyfords, who have yet to put forward a restoration plan, informed us that they would be coming forward with a proposal shortly.

12. **AOB:** Renton said that, for health reasons, he would be unable to continue as Chair of the Conservation subcommittee. With the committee's agreement, Neil Bucknell agreed to take over the role. Renton and Neil to liaise on handover.

13. **Date of next meeting:** Thursday 24th February 2022.

Distribution: Neil Bucknell, Fraser Cottingham, Chris Foster, Roger Frankum, John Lerpiniere, Renton Righelato, Des Sussex, Marek Walford, Patrick Crowley.

Berkshire Peregrine Survey (Patrick Crowley)

Since the last meeting in April, I have been keeping in contact with various observers who are monitoring peregrines in Berkshire. In 2021 it appears that three pairs have bred.

Newbury Peregrines (Ken White)

The pair have bred in 2020 and 2021 on the old BT building in the centre of Newbury. The male bird has a ring (black 69), having been ringed on Chichester Cathedral in 2016. In 2020 they managed to raise three young from eggs laid on the floor on the top of the building. One was ringed (blue YL) when it fell off the building. A nest box was installed in the following winter and in 2021 the pair raised three young successfully, which were all ringed at about 3 weeks old. The breeding progress was followed throughout from a camera which took motion activated stills. The young have all dispersed and the adults are now roosting on two local churches. The pair are still around.

Reading Peregrines (Richard Price)

Through the winter of 2020-2021 a pair of Peregrines were being seen on pylons at Fobney, but they disappeared in late winter, and were then being seen in Reading, often roosting on the church of St Giles. They then took up residence on the gasometer. It looked a difficult place for the birds to breed, and the gasometer was due to be dismantled, although the presence of the birds did mean that this couldn't happen until the breeding season was over.

Thanks to Richard Price, it was then found that the birds were flying to and from the Verto building in central Reading. We know that at least two eggs were laid on a ledge outside patio doors of an unoccupied flat high up on the building, but unfortunately no juveniles were seen. This was probably due to the bad weather in late May, and the birds returned to the gasometer.

They have now been roosting on St Giles since at least September 2021. For the future, there is a nestbox on the Blade, which the Peregrines briefly looked at in the spring of 2021. The box faces the wrong way (south), but Richard has met the manager of the Blade and Keith Betton (chairman of the Hampshire Ornithological Society) and the box will be re-sited.

Peregrines in Bracknell (Patrick Crowley)

The pair that raised one juvenile in 2019 and two juveniles in 2020 on the Fujitsu building, spent last winter almost exclusively on the Grange Hotel in the centre of Bracknell. The female was ringed in Ipswich docks in 2017.

In April the birds appeared to be breeding on the adjacent and empty Atrium Court building, but by the last week of May, after a spell of heavy rain, it appeared that they had failed. The birds had probably laid eggs on the floor, with no protection. However, in late July, an injured juvenile was found on the ground next to St Joseph's Church, right next to the Grange, which was presumably the result of a second attempt. The pair are still there, and have not been on the Fujitsu building since early April.

The Grange Hotel has been empty for a year and a half or more, and its future is unknown. The Atrium Court has a planning application for conversion into 100 one-bedroom flats, so that long term the birds may not be able to stay on these buildings. It is possible that they might go back to the Fujitsu building, and we are trying to get a new nest box installed, to replace the old one.

Peregrines in Slough (David Fuller)

Peregrines have been seen on the power station in Slough Trading Estate for many years, but proving breeding has always been difficult. David Fuller has been to Slough regularly this year and has seen the pair on most visits, usually with one in the box. The pair seem well settled, and the SSE people are happy for us to visit and watch the birds.

The box is right on the edge of the roof, but has an open space in front of it as part of the design, which hangs over the edge. We are worried that juveniles will fall off more easily, so we have asked the manager of the power station to move the box in a few feet away from the edge. This has not happened yet. When the rebuilding has finished, they will put the camera back on the box.

Pylon Peregrines (David Glover)

For some years David Glover has been watching a pair of Peregrines on a corner pylon in central Berkshire, where a pair has bred in recent years, and which appeared to be breeding this year. Unfortunately, after the heavy rain at the end of May, the birds disappeared. Since then, a single bird has re-appeared, but no juveniles have been seen. The male has a ring (Orange LB), and was ringed in Aylesbury in 2012.

Pylon Peregrines (Peter Hickman), Ufton Nervet/Sulhampstead Abbots

Over several weeks in July, Peter had a juvenile Peregrine calling from pylons close to his house in Ufton Nervet, as well as an adult bird often close by, which was once seen feeding the juvenile. Neither bird was ringed and there are no clues as to where the nest was, but it cannot have been very far away. The juvenile was last seen at the end of July.

Pylon Peregrines (various observers) Hosehill Area

The pylons at Hosehill have always been popular spots for Peregrines to hunt from, and a number of sightings have been made this year. Peregrines have also been seen on the next but one pylon to the east, up the hill, and may have made a breeding attempt, but again nothing happened. A juvenile was seen a number of times in July and August, which was probably the bird seen by Peter Hickman.

Peregrines in Maidenhead (David Fuller)

Birds were seen regularly by David Fuller and others on St Luke's church s last winter, and have been seen regularly there since mid-summer, including a pair which we believe, bred at Marlow this year. A Marlow juvenile ringed this year was seen several times, and the ringed juvenile (blue YL) from the 2020 Newbury nest was seen once.

Unfortunately, there is nowhere on the church to put a nest box, and the vicar is fed up with their gutters blocking up with bits of dead bird. Occasionally birds have been seen on the old BT building in Maidenhead, but it is due to be knocked down. In the long term, there will be new tall buildings in Maidenheads for Peregrines to use.

Reading University Peregrines

In mid-October a male Peregrine was seen on an empty building in Reading University and was last seen in mid-November. A female was seen several times, with distinctive chest markings. It remains to be seen if they come back.