



# Berkshire Ornithological Club



## 2023-24 Report of Chair and Officers to BOC AGM

### 1. Chair's Report

My second year as Chair has been as demanding as my first. As with any organisation staffed solely by volunteers, there is more to do than time available, but between us, the committee manages to keep the Club running.

One major improvement this year is that Peter Driver has taken on the role of Publicity Officer. A very welcome change after many years of this post being vacant.

We are always looking for volunteers to help run the Club; we have a range of tasks that need doing, so any help is welcome, from a few hours to taking on a specific role.

### 2. Membership

As usual, Iain Oldcorn, our Membership Secretary, has been busy with admin throughout the year.

The gradual decline of BOC membership numbers has continued, but the good news is that there has been an increase, albeit modest, in University of Reading members. We welcome them to the Club.

Iain continued to invite other local birding and conservation groups to our indoor meetings, and we have been delighted to welcome some of their members.

An effort has been made to clarify and improve the wording on our website about how to join the Club and renew membership. We have not been able to improve how well the CAF Donate system works with our website, due to technical issues. There is further work to be done to improve our dual purpose membership application and renewal form, and to provide a mechanism to allow members to tell us about any changes in their contact details. If this applies to you, please continue to use email to inform the Membership Secretary.

We are currently reviewing the admin process for granting permits to visit Queen Mother Reservoir, and expect any changes to be minor.

A minority of members still receive our mailings by post. If this applies to you and you do have an email address, please tell Iain, as this helps reduce our costs.

### 3. Programme

#### The Indoor Programme

We successfully changed the start time from 8 pm to 7:30pm, after having consulted members during the preceding season.

The 2023-24 season kicked off with a wonderfully illustrated talk 'Peregrine Monograph' with Steve Watson and Richard Sale. It was well attended with 21 members and 10 visitors in person, and 20 on Zoom. The AGM was quorate and was followed by a terrific talk on Saving the Stone Curlew by Keith Betton followed the meeting.

The Christmas Social was disappointingly attended but very intimate with 15 members and 4 on Zoom. We had two short talks from Committee members, one of Neil Bucknells's entertaining quizzes and a light-hearted 'Name that Bird' quiz. Plus, of course, Sue's excellent Christmas food and drink.

People 'flocked' to see Jono Forgham's talk on Birds of Portugal (27 attendees and 25 on Zoom) - he is always an entertaining speaker and will return in 2025. Paul Goriup gave us a very memorable talk on the Houbara Bustard which proved to be very poignant and attracted 21 members with 17 on Zoom. Kevin Cox's talk on How Science Can Support Declining and Endangered Species brought in 11 members and 30 online. The photographic competition drew the usual fantastic images of what our talented members have been snapping.

Sue Charnley, our Indoor Programme Secretary, continued to provide free refreshments which are clearly popular and encourage members to mingle. Numbers of members returning to the University were slightly better than the previous two years, which is good but we would like to see even more people!

Since the last AGM, Sue has expressed her desire to cease being the Indoor Programme Secretary due to personal circumstances. However, no-one has come forward to take her place so she feels that she cannot let the club down and has agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to do it for one more season. After that, she will not continue to fulfil the role. If anyone may be interested in getting involved with organising the Indoor Programme, please do let us know; we would welcome someone to work with Sue during the next year with a view to taking over after that.

### **The Outdoor Programme**

There was a full programme of local and regional walks last season, mostly well attended.

The 'star' birds seen included Stone-curlew, Short-eared Owl, Spoonbill, Scaup, Spotted Redshank, Water and Scandinavian Rock Pipits, and Little Bunting.

We attempted to conduct three outings by minibus but we were let down by the organisation which was due to provide the minibus. Two of the trips went ahead by private car; thanks to all those who drove. We managed to hire a minibus owned by the Boys Brigade for the last one, at very short notice, and one of our members kindly drove it to the Birdfair.

The RSPB Wokingham & Bracknell group organised a coach trip to Slimbridge and invited our members to join them. It was well-attended so this season we are reciprocating.

The new programme for 2024-25 is similar to last season, including both Peter Driver's monthly local walks for beginners and more excursions shared with NDOC.

We are still seeking someone to take on the role of Outdoor Programme Secretary. This is currently being done by the Committee (in reality, that means Robert Godden!), but we cannot sustain that. Please consider volunteering, as this is not an onerous role, but one that would allow you to combine helping run the Club with birding trips. It is primarily a planning role, and does not require you to lead trips if you do not want to.

### **4. Publicity**

Peter Driver took over as publicity officer in April 2024. His priorities are to help increase the Club's membership and promote public awareness of our activities.

We promote our indoor meetings through our website and social media outlets, as well as through regular mailings from our Membership Secretary. Peter is now also promoting the talks programme through the Reading Arts and Culture website *WhatsOnReading*, in order to reach new audiences. Johana Simonova has been a great help with poster design this year.

A new publicity leaflet was produced in August for distribution at BOC events. A stock of the leaflets has been placed in local libraries, Ron's hide at LWT and the hides at Moor Green Lakes.

Four committee members helped run the BOC stand at Earley Green Fair in August. They distributed 40 membership leaflets, had several productive conversations and sold some BOC publications, raising a total of £62.50

In addition to the website, BOC has an online presence on Facebook, Instagram and 'X'. More regular posting has included

- members' photos and artworks
- group-shot photos from outings
- promoting the new season of indoor meetings
- promoting the Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund, with website and social media posts about grants given for conservation projects.

This has led to more online interactions, which puts BOC into more people's newsfeeds. This activity has led to a modest increase in followers since April.

Please remember to tag BOC or @BerksBirdClub in any of your bird-related posts on social media so we can share and repost where appropriate.

We also publicise the club's activities through the popular Berkshire Birds Facebook group. Our future plans include a BOC stand at Wild Tilehurst Nature Fair in January and developing plans for a public event at a local site.

## **5. Editorial Board**

Early in the year, we published the 2019 Birds of Berkshire report and it was distributed to members. Since then we have prepared and published the 2020 report, which, at the time of this AGM, Jane is distributing.

Robert Godden, the scientific editor, has also made good progress with the systematic list and articles for the 2021 report, which should soon be ready for proofing.

We have continued to increase the number of photographs in the reports. Andy Tomczynski, the photographic editor, is keen to receive more photos of birds taken in Berkshire that may be suitable for future reports. As well as pictures of rare and scarce birds recorded during the year, we also want good quality photos of common species to show the wide diversity of birds in the county. We want to encourage more photographers to contribute their photos – please dig out your good photos from 2021, 2022, 2023 and, of course, 2024, and send them to Andy or me.

## **6. Conservation Sub-committee**

There has been considerable activity this year in relation to the preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategy by the six Berkshire local authorities as required by the Environment Act 2021. The Club made submissions to the lead authority (Windsor and Maidenhead) at the outset of the initial consultation process, and we have been represented on the working group involved with preparing the list of priority species and the measures to be promoted under the strategy. A draft strategy is now with the six authorities for approval as a draft for circulation for a further round of public consultation later this year. We intend to make further representations once this begins, but preliminary indications are that a number of our initial comments have been taken into account.

There have been developments on the Padworth Lane project. After some pressure from the site's owners, Canal and Rivers Trust, and the planning authority to start restoration works, the mineral company that extracted the gravel has indicated that it does not want to progress the plans discussed for many years with the club and others. They are carrying out new surveys, and we await their revised proposals for the restoration of the site for nature. All indications are that

these will not be as extensive as before, but will still require approval from the council and the owner.

Elsewhere, our discussions with the Environment Agency about the condition of the Dorney Wetlands, which were created as mitigation measures as part of the Jubilee River scheme, have come to a halt due to lack of resources on their part. We have however been involved with a possible new scheme for a small wetland at Streatley, but this is in early stages at present.

Patrick Crowley has continued co-ordinating efforts to monitor Peregrine breeding sites and liaison with their owners. As with last year, although birds have been present at least at nine sites, again a number of pairs failed to raise young at sites where successful breeding occurred in previous years. Results from Curlew surveys in the Downs were also poor, with no birds recorded during the standard recording visits, although there were casual breeding season records from the two sites covered.

We have completed a further round of farm surveys for the Sulham Estate, helping them to establish baseline information in connection with wilding and biodiversity net gain projects on the estate. One of these is the creation of a new wetland by the railway just outside Pangbourne funded by "Mend the Gap" funding from Network Rail. The site holds breeding Lapwings, and is now producing other interesting records following completion of excavations and fencing at the end of the summer. The Estate has made a £1,500 donation to the Conservation Fund for our help.

We have approved two applications for grants from the Conservation Fund, for the provision of Barn Owl nestboxes in Mortimer and safeguarding nesting Little Ringed Plovers and Lapwings in the Pang Valley.

Although we are still safeguarding funds in the hope that the Padworth Lane project will proceed, we do have funds available for small grants so please contact us if you have a suitable project seeking support.

## **7. Thanks**

As I said last year, I am only able to fulfil my role as Chair with the support of our committee. I would like to thank all the committee members for their hard work and contributions over the last year. We are unfortunately losing Bob Lyles and Anna Mortimer from the committee at this AGM. Many thanks to them both for their work on the committee.

Although I find that the Club takes up a lot of my time, it is mostly rewarding work. Not everyone has the time to volunteer to help run the Club, but please do consider putting yourself forward. Your Club needs you!

Sally Wearing

Chair

November 2024