

Editorial

Iain Oldcorn (bocmembershipsec@gmail.com)

Welcome to our 95th BOC Newsletter. Neil again starts us off with our latest local Conservation news while Sean follows with a BTO update. Elaine whets our appetite for Robert's February BOC trip by describing her May Somerset Birding sojourn. Peter Driver advises us of his moves to extend our Social Media presence. Jane reminds us of the answer to Ralph Watts' Dingbatz quiz from last year's Christmas Social. Ray Reedman reminisces about a snowy trip to Otmoor. Jane comes back to remind us about our 2025 Photographic Competition and its revised "Rules"; before Sally summarises our Dec 4th Indoor Meeting. Peter returns to tell us about his new publishing venture and Katie Jenks reminds us about the planned Tilehurst Community Nature Fare; before finally, another selection of Andy's excellent photos!

News from the Conservation Sub-committee

Neil Bucknell

1 – Grants and Donations

Lavell's Wetland Trust has been awarded two grants from the Conservation Fund recently and have reported how they have been used in their recent newsletter.

The first was a grant towards the extension of their Sand Martin nesting bank by adding another 63 nest cavities, also adding a new green roof, and two boxes for House Martins. This was a project nominated to be designated in memory of Dot Lincoln, who will be remembered by some members as our former (and long standing) membership secretary, whose family asked for donations to the Club after she died in 2023. The Trust has supplied these pictures, showing the twelve volunteers carrying out the work, the enlarged nesting bank with its new storey of boxes and roof and the plaque recognising Dot's contribution.





The second grant was to fund a fenced compound (one of two) to protect a newly-planted reedbed from grazing by geese. In previous years, the Trust had put hours of labour into planting one, only to find that it was grazed out by grateful geese! In early November, a work party went to work planting a replacement reedbed in the new compounds partly funded by the grant we awarded. Here is a picture from the Trust showing the party at work.

We are also grateful to the Sulham Estate, who have donated £1500 to the club for the conservation fund. This is in gratitude for surveys that we have undertaken for them to provide a baseline for assessing the impact of two habitat creation projects they are undertaking. The first is creating a wetland in a field south of the railway line just east of Pangbourne. This area was already one of the few Lapwing breeding sites in Central Berkshire away from the gravel pit complexes, and since the work to construct it and secure it from unauthorised disturbance, there have been several interesting records from the site, including Pintail, Little Egret and Merlin. The project was funded by a grant from the "Mend the Gap" fund, and was featured in the latest North Wessex Downs National Landscape newsletter that some members may have already seen. The second project is the conversion of unproductive arable land at Stoneham and Sadler's Farms to low intensity pasture and restoring hedges.

Thanks are due to Andrew Taylor and Andy Tomczynski for their work carrying out the surveys.

2 – Other matters

Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Plan – a draft has been sent to the six Berkshire unitary authorities for approval to proceed to a further round of public consultation in the New Year. However, the statutory agencies (including English Nature and Environment Agency) have made a few comments on the draft, so changes are being considered, and it is likely that the next stage of the consultation will be delayed a little.

Fobney Meadow – it has come to our attention that this site, next to the Fobney Island reserve, has been put up for sale. There have been a number of good records from the area (including Avocet this autumn) and management work has been undertaken on an informal basis to improve the site for wildlife. We will monitor this and report further.

Heron Lake, Wraysbury – Rob Curtis at TVERC has asked us to pass on thanks to the surveyors and recorders who have collected and submitted records for Heron Lake, including the person who did the WeBS counts there. This will be instrumental in getting the site redesignated officially as a Local Wildlife Site, bringing with it additional planning protection. The previous counter has now retired, so if you are able to help continue monitoring the site, please contact our BTO rep. Sean Murphy (s.murphy@cabi.org).

BTO Updates: Early results from the BBS, Heathland Birds and Bird Atlas 2027-31!
Sean T Murphy (s.murphy@cabi.org)

First, many thanks to all those who contributed to the BTO Berkshire surveys this year; whether it was one of the core general surveys (Breeding Bird Survey, Wetland Bird Survey), species specific surveys (Woodcock, Winter Gull), Garden Bird Watch or even logging sightings on Bird Track, it all represents a massive joint effort which is so important for underpinning conservation initiatives. For example, for the **BBS** alone, volunteers in this county jointly walked 224km to record breeding bird species! On that note, we do have the early results from BTO for that survey for each BTO region. So, in Berkshire, no less than 58 of the 1km squares across the county were covered for the early and late surveys.

In terms of the total number of individuals recorded, the most numerous species in descending order were: Woodpigeon, Jackdaw, Blackbird, Wren, Robin and Blue Tit. So, again, a similar pattern to the last few years. The first two species together with the Robin and Great Tit were the most widespread species across the county (measured as the number of 1 km survey squares in which a species was recorded). Also, widespread was the Red Kite, recorded from 93% of the squares; and, again like last year, Chiffchaff and Blackcap were also widespread.

Now news about two new surveys. The first, to be launched in either December this year or early January next year is the national **Heathland Bird Survey**. The focus of this survey is to assess the current relative population incidence and distribution of three target species: Dartford Warbler, Woodlark and Nightjar. The last national survey for these species was almost 20 years ago so new assessment of their status is very important; in particular, to see how they are fairing on protected heathland sites. In Berkshire, heathland is a very important part of the landscape in the south of the county, so this survey is very relevant to us. The survey, based on 1 km squares, aims to cover all the main occupied sites based on records from the previous national survey and subsequent records from Bird Track, ebird etc. In addition, further random 1 km squares will be selected in surrounding suitable habitats into which these species may have expanded since the last survey. BTO will also be asking volunteers to record the presence in these squares of another 12 bird species such as the Hobby, Long-eared Owl, Cuckoo, Wheatear etc. The full list, plus other preliminary information about the survey, can be found at <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/heathland-birds-survey>

The other new survey just announced is mega! This is for the next **Bird Atlas, 2027 – 31**, for Britain and Ireland. The last one, in 2007-11, involved 40,000 volunteers from across the countries and resulted in something like 216 million records of birds! Planning is at a very early stage, but I expect there be increasing news items over the next few years!

Finally, if you are taking part in the Winter Gull Roost Survey for this second (and last) winter for the survey, the priority survey date is on January 19th, 2025, but there is a leeway of plus or minus one week for records to be acceptable. More details, including how you can get involved, as participation even at this stage would be really helpful, can be found at www.bto.org/wings This site also includes a link to a map that shows where the Key and Sample sites are located.

A Somerset Birdwatching Holiday, May 2024

Elaine Charlson

In May this year I went on another trip with [Somerset Birdwatching Holidays](#), led by Graeme Mitchell and Stephen Moss who are both extremely knowledgeable (as you might expect), friendly and encouraging.

The first afternoon we started at Tealham Moor, where it was chilly with blustery winds and most small birds were hiding out of sight; but we did see Meadow Pipit, a Linnet, and a sky-climbing Skylark. On a flooded field nearby there were a few Cattle Egret. Continuing to SWT Westhay Moor we heard a Whitethroat in the car park, then saw Reed Warblers, Swifts, House Martins, and a brief view of Hobby on the way to the Island Hide. From the hide we saw several male and female Marsh Harriers hunting over the reedbeds, and could hear the boom of a distant Bittern. On to the Tower Hide where, among the Cetti's and Reed Warblers, a family of Bearded Reedlings were flitting through the reeds. Another Hobby and two Great White Egret gave us excellent views as we walked back to the van.

The next morning, our first full day, dawned bright, but breezy, with brief showers of rain, and we went back to Tealham Moor hoping for Yellow Wagtails, which unfortunately did not show. However, there were Skylarks, Linnets, Meadow Pipits, a Reed Bunting, Kestrel, Raven and Cattle Egret. The next stop was RSPB Ham Wall where the highlights were Hobby, Marsh Harriers, Sparrowhawk, Garganey, and Willow Warblers. We also had the opportunity to compare the songs of a Garden Warbler and Blackcap who were on opposite sides of the path. Before lunch we paid a quick visit to RSPB Greylake where a Montagu's Harrier had been for most of the week, but we could not convince ourselves that either of the harriers we saw there was the Monty's. The afternoon was spent at RSPB Swell Wood, with views of a single Crane in the distance, and a Marsh Tit, among other woodland birds.



The weather on the second full day was much improved, and we started at a heronry which, apart from Grey Herons, also included Little and Cattle Egret, together with several fluffy chicks. Then on to Hodder's Combe in the Quantocks where our target birds were Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, and Redstart. Well, two out of three "aint bad", the missing one being Wood Warbler, although I had seen one a few days earlier in the same area while staying with friends. After lunch we went to WWT Steart Marshes in search of waders, and were amply rewarded by spotting: Oystercatchers,

Little Ringed Plovers, a Ringed Plover (which allowed us to do a useful comparison), Avocets, and four Spoonbill.



The final, sunny, morning was spent on the coast at the confluence of the Huntspill, Parrett, and Brue rivers. Plenty of warbler species included Cetti's, both Common and Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, and a Chiffchaff, with other passerines such as Greenfinch, Dunnock, and Song Thrush. The tide was very low, so few waterbirds were about, just some gulls, Oystercatchers, Curlews, and Shelduck; although a Little Egret and a pair of Spoonbills did fly overhead.

A special mention must be made of Kay, Graeme's wife, who prepares the magnificent suppers each evening, and who cooks some of the best food that I have ever tasted! (Photos © E Charlson.)

BOC Opens Bluesky Social Media Account

Peter Driver

BOC has joined *Bluesky*, a relatively new social media platform that is being seen by some as a less-toxic alternative to 'X'. Many birders and birding organisations are migrating to the platform, and several have already started following our account.

While social media is not everyone's cup-of-tea, if you are the sort of person who likes to share bird news, photos and chat online, please consider following the BerksBirdClub.bsky.social account, as well as @BerksBirdClub on Instagram, and the Berkshire Ornithological Club group on Facebook.

Using the hashtags #ukbirding and #berksbirds in the text of your posts will help other birders find you and increase the visibility of your posts, particularly on Bluesky and Instagram.

Dingbatz

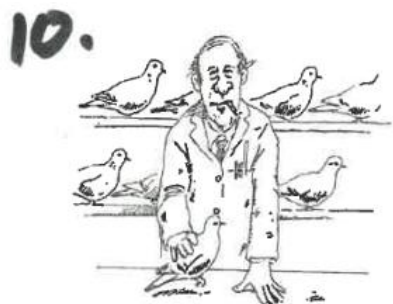
Jane Campbell

Not everyone made it to our 2023 Christmas Social and so will have missed this zany piece of Birding humour there and in our last Newsletter. Our thanks again to Ralph Watts for collating the originals for presentation of this quiz at the Social. The answers are: 1) Razorbill, 2) Robin, 3) Wheatear, 4) Corn Bunting, 5) Sardinian Warbler, 6) Rock Bunting, 7) Sooty Tern, 8) Goosander, 9) Kittiwake, 10) Stock Dove, 11) Pied-billed Grebe, 12) Carrion Crow.

And to get you in the mood, below right is the starter for which the answer is "Kingfisher".

And to remind you of the questions - they are on the next page!





(Ed. Don't forget to join us soon in room G44 of the Edith Morley Building at Reading Uni campus for this year's Christmas Social, including another Quiz, on December 18th at 7.30pm)

The Introduction to Berkshire Birding walks series began in March 2023, taking place more or less monthly ever since. These events are not solely for new birders - people of all ages and levels of experience take part. The main purpose is to provide an accessible and inclusive way to discover local sites and birds in the company of other birders. Developing observation skills and bird knowledge is a lifelong endeavour - we can always learn something new from each other in the field, however long we have been birding.

We usually have between 6 and 12 people each month, some dip-in once or twice while others are faithful attenders. All sorts are welcome! We generally meet at 9am and finish around 12 or 12.30. Wherever possible we end at a pub for a convivial coffee or hot chocolate.



Sites visited so far on the monthly walks include Padworth Lane GP, Hosehill Lake and Bottom Lane, Theale Main Pit and Moatlands GP, Fobney Meadow, Woolhampton GP and Coombe Gibbet. We have had some memorable encounters with birds during these trips - everyone will have their own favourites but the showy Cetti's Warbler at Burghfield Mill and the Great White Egrets at Hosehill and Padworth Lane were great to see.

If you are new to the Club, or would just like to familiarise yourself with some of the local birding sites, you would be welcome to attend any of the walks. Almost all the sites are accessible by public transport. Travel details and joining instructions are included in the programme details listed on the [website](#). As always, please remember to contact the organiser three days beforehand if you plan to attend.

Gray had invited me to join him for a run to Otmoor. It was a challenge, but I had not been there for some time, so I pocketed doubts about my match fitness and accepted. The occasion was a joint NDOC/BOC walk led by Debby Reynolds. On the morning, I woke to a very wet scene. As we drove northwards, rain turned to sleet, then snow. Parts of the lane down to the reserve were flooded and the whole expedition looked increasingly challenging. Despite that, several other cars had made it to the car park and there were about ten people present.

The light was awful and it was still snowing heavily as we puddled up the first track, which was frequently flooded right across with 2-3 inches of water. At the feeder station there were only Blue Tits, Great Tits and Chaffinches, but underneath were the inevitable Pheasants, Moorhens, squirrels and a couple of rats

At the main path we stopped to scan the vista, but it was bleak and murky and we had only a few Carrion Crows in view. We spent time looking for a Water Rail that had squealed, but a sighting had to wait until later in the morning, when one clambered over weeds in a ditch. There was virtually nothing on the move, apart from a few Mallards and a Heron. A Cetti's Warbler called, but nobody saw it. About half way along, the snow suddenly ceased, but by this stage there was plenty of white to outline the landscape features.

Among the vegetation on Big Otmoor we could discern several Lapwings and Golden Plovers. During the day some spectacular flocks went up in the distance, sometimes unnerved by Red Kites and at others by unseen threats. At such times it was clear that there were relatively few of the smaller plovers. Snipe too were more easily spotted on the wing. Shoveler, Gadwall and Teal were noted, but they were not numerous. In the distance a large white bird flew ponderously across the scene, and later those who had been to the far screen reported better sightings of a Great Egret. The arrival of a couple of Little Egrets caused me to reflect that I had never previously watched white egrets in the snow!

We had by that stage pushed along the path westwards, with good views of two Redwings, two Fieldfares and a Blackbird feeding on the path and more in the hedgerows, as well as a small flock of Long-tailed Tits. With the muddy track becoming more and more treacherous, I elected to stay put at a convenient viewpoint. My reward was a distant sighting of two Marsh Harriers.

We went next to the hide, where several birds and squirrels were feeding on the track. These included the odd Song Thrush and several Moorhens; but Reed Buntings, and Chaffinches were plentiful and there were several Robins, the odd Goldfinch and Dunnock and a couple of loitering Magpies.

I elected to stay put there, while the others continued up toward the screens. I spent my time trying to pick up anything different among the feeding birds. At one point a Kestrel flew past, low, and very direct. As I checked the open marsh and fields to the west, I could only find a very distant flock of Canada Geese. I was enjoying the solitude and the unusual scenery and just drifting into a very comfortable mood, when a prolonged, blood-curdling squeal brought me back to earth with a bump. Like a naughty schoolboy, the Water Rail stayed well out of sight; I have heard a good many, but that one was an expert spook! Gray arrived back soon afterwards. We had finished lunch at the car park by the time the others returned.

In retrospect, I was glad that I had accepted the challenge. I had really enjoyed a bit of discomfort. Amazingly my feet were still dry, I was warm, and my body felt properly exercised. In many ways I would have gone just for the pleasure of seeing the vista from the hide window: but that is maybe because I grew up very close to Constable Country and have a soft spot for a marshy landscape, no matter how soggy!

Thanks to Gray, and to Debby *et al*, for a good day out.



This popular event will be held on **Wednesday, March 5th 2025** at Reading University and on Zoom.

After positive feedback from members, the committee has invited Derek Gale, last year's judge, to return. Once again you can enter photos in three categories: Portrait; Flight and Action; Birds in Berkshire. The number you can enter is fewer this year to give the judge time to comment on every image. You can enter up to **three** photographs with a maximum of two in any one category. (Tip: there are always fewer entries in the Birds of Berkshire category).

Details and rules can be found here: <http://berksoc.org.uk/club-news/photo-competition/>

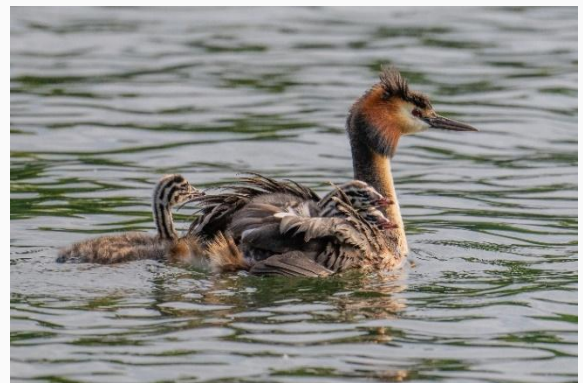
Here are the winning pictures from 2024:



Sue Truby
Cattle Egret



Bryan Hutchings
Green Backed Hillstar



Dave Rimes
Great Crested Grebe

BOC AGM 2024 & "The Vanishing Mew Gull"**Sally Wearing**

The AGM was due to be held on November 20th, but, unfortunately, we were not quorate that evening. Our constitution requires us to have at least 40 members present to hold the AGM. The meeting was re-arranged for December 4th. Then the quorum was easily achieved, as we had an excellent turnout for Ray Reedman's talk about his book: *The Vanishing Mew Gull*.

The formal business of the AGM was quickly finished; this included re-electing the three Executive Officers and electing two new Ordinary Committee Members. We welcomed Ken Moore and Sue Charnley to the committee, to replace Bob Lyle and Anna Mortimer, who both retired. Our thanks go to our President, Debby Reynolds, for chairing, to Edwin Bruce-Gardner for presenting the accounts and to Jane Campbell for organising the meeting.

(Ed. And Debby thanked the three Executive Officers – Sally, Jane and Edwin – for their hard work and on being re-elected for a further three-year term.)

The AGM was followed by Ray's engaging and informative talk. The subtitle of his book, "A Guide to the Bird Names of the Western palaeartic", gives you some idea of its contents but it is hard to sum it up in a few sentences. It includes all of the almost 1,100 birds recorded in the Western Palearctic, giving the origins of both the scientific and common names for each species. It contains a wealth of information, which both educates and entertains. For instance, did you know that Heron and Egret are really the same word? Or that *Stercorarius* (skuas) means "dung eater"?

If you missed Ray's talk, the recording will be available in the future. And you can buy Ray's book online. It'd make a great Christmas present for anyone who has ever asked "I wonder where that bird name came from?".

(Ed. I will separately email supporting BOC members with some further details about Ray's book.)

BOC member Peter Driver is shortly to publish a book he has written and illustrated with fellow Reading-based artist Geoff Sawers.

Widdershins Walk: round the edge of Reading recounts their experience of finding their way, through the seasons of 2024, round the outer edge of Reading. With observations on the route, flora and fauna, local history and geographical features of the area, the book will be richly illustrated with paintings, woodcuts, drawings, photographs, and lots of quirky details you probably never knew about the edge-places of Reading.



Figure 1 Lesser Black-backed Gulls - by Geoff Sawers

Widdershins Walk will list the 73 bird species encountered on the walks, with notes on some of them along with details of: ground flora, invertebrates, and ancient woodland fragments. One interesting passage relates to the arrival dates of summer migrants, comparing records from the Newbury Field Club in 1871

with dates for those species in recent years from Berkshire Bird Reports, highlighting a significant shift to earlier arrival dates and, sadly, a few local extinctions. But it is also crammed with historical titbits, toponymy and topography so should have something of interest for a wide audience.

The book will be published by Berkshire-based publisher Peculiarity Press in Spring 2025 and can be pre-ordered here: <https://www.peculiaritypress.co.uk/>

Pre-orders received by 31 December will be listed as project supporters in the back of the book.



Figure 2: Wood Melick, woodcut by Peter Driver

Wild Tilehurst

Katie Jenks

Wild Tilehurst are holding a Community Nature Fair on Saturday, 11 January 2025, 2-4pm at Tilehurst United Reformed Church Hall, Armour Road, RG31 6HN. The BOC will have a stand at the Fair so please pop in and see us if you are in the area. This free event is a great opportunity to meet other local groups connected with nature and find out more about them. It will be attended by Reading & District Natural History Society as well as Econet and Wild about Reading. Various groups supporting bats, birds, bees, and geology will also be there. There will be some children's activities on the day including making animal masks and leaf art. Tea and coffee available to purchase (cash only).

Stop Press

Iain Oldcorn

Not received a copy of the 2020 edition of our Annual Report "The Birds of Berkshire"? Maybe you have not made any supporting payment to us for the season that started on 1st October 2024!

I will shortly issue all current members with a separate email repeating Elaine Charlson's: An "Ancient" Bird Quiz from our last Newsletter and revealing the answers to it.



Sedge Warbler: Speen Moor; 5Jun2024



Ruddy Shelduck: QMR; 30Jly2024



**Marsh Harrier: Chamber House Marsh;
7Jly2024**



Arctic Skua: QMR; 6Sep2024



Whitethroat: Emmer Green Garden; 27Jly2024



Common Scoter: Lower Farm GP; 8Sep2024

(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.)

And lastly, a message from your committee: We hope that you are enjoying our Winter Programme and are looking forward to Christmas and the New Year.